To all ballerinas and dancers of the world.
Our art is vital. Let’s keep it alive, growing, and expanding!

Prologue

It’s morning. Eight A.M., to be exact. My alarm goes off for no more than five seconds before I sit up to stop the nagging sound.

As I stretch my arms, I realize how achy my body is. Still, it’s a wonderful aching every dancer knows.

As many busy New Yorkers do, I click a few buttons on my computer and order my morning coffee—black, no sugar—and blueberry muffin from the corner deli to be delivered to the door of my Upper West Side apartment. Class starts at ten thirty at the Met.

The ordinary rituals of my day belie what will be an extraordinary evening. I’m eager for this day to start so that, later, I can rise again, this time on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House.

Tonight, I will become the first black woman to star in Igor Stravinsky’s iconic role for American Ballet Theatre, one of the most prestigious dance companies in the world.

As the Firebird.

This is for the little brown girls.
My barre warm-up this morning would be familiar to any ballet dancer, whether she’s an apprentice in Moscow or a seven-year-old taking his first ballet class in Detroit. It’s slow structured yet fragmentary—perfectly designed to bring me to center, where I can dance freely without the barre, each motion a broken-down version of what tonight’s solos will be. I start with pliés, increasingly deeper bends of the knee which warm up my legs while still allowing them the support that they need. I transition to larger movements of the leg, circling them in my ronds de jambe, and bending them in fondu, gradually stretching my hips and knees. I finish with a port de bras, stretching my torso forward and from side to side.

I move to center, where each aerobic exercise moves more fluidly to the next without the barre’s strictures. I know that each graceful glissade—where I jump in first position with both legs flicking to a dagger before closing into fifth—stems from that disengaged brush of the leg where my foot leaves the floor, which stems from a tendu, a single pointed toe that I’ve extended while maintaining contact with the floor.

Ballets are just stylized versions of these seemingly basic movements on a grand scale. If the basic strength and elegance of a barre class is like slipping on a little black dress, the challenge of dancing a full three-act ballet is like learning to accessorize for any occasion. I have to think about whether I want to add sass or longing or, as I will tonight, the exotic, otherworldly energy of the mythical Firebird. You have to know the appropriate way to adorn each story and character with your body. Sleeping Beauty, for example, is very elegant and regal; its movements are fluid, with few accents. There are certain ways you have to hold your torso, position your head, and use your arms as a certain character that can differ from what I rehearse in class. The difference between being an amazing technician and being a soloist or principal is mastering those interpretive flourishes to tell the best story. Otherwise you aren’t a ballerina—you’re just another dancer.

No matter how old you are or how long you’ve been dancing, ballet professionals know that we have to repeat these steps in class every day to maintain the strength and the clean positioning that’s so essential to dancers. I’m constantly working on my technique. Even a single day off can cause my muscles to forget what my mind knows by heart. I take class seven days a week, even though the company only works five days each week.

I know that I’ll never perfect the ballet technique—ever. That’s why I love it so much. It never becomes boring, even though I’ve done all these movements in this very studio a million times over thirteen years. It’s my safe place, where I can experiment. I sweat, grunt, and make faces that would never pass on the Metropolitan Opera House stage. It’s the time to push myself beyond my limits so that my performances can feel effortless, fresh.
Not everyone wants to push themselves to that brink of breaking, but it’s what you commit to when you’re a professional—the very present reality that you may break instead of bend.

Today, I don’t jump. My left shin has been hurting, and I don’t want to risk straining it before tonight’s performance.

I have always been known as a jumper, able to soar to great heights and land like a feather on the stage. The Firebird flutters and flies. But it has been difficult to practice her grand jumps the past several weeks. The pain in my leg has been intense, and I’ve had to save every bit of my strength for the actual performances.

By now, I am as familiar with the feral gestures of the Firebird as I am with my own breath, my own heartbeat. American Ballet Theatre’s spring season has been under way for six weeks, with two more to go, and I’ve previously performed as the Firebird twice in Southern California, barely an hour away from my hometown.

I have a light rehearsal around noon at the Met, to space the choreography and get the feel of the stage. I want to be sure that I hit all of my marks, that I’m always in the right place so I don’t collide with the corps de ballet during my variations or move out of sync with my partner when we dance our pas de deux.

When the public walks into the hallowed space of the Metropolitan Opera, it sees its gilded foyer, its luxe patron boxes, and its grand stage. But behind the scenes there are studio spaces where performers can hone their magic, eking out a final practice before the show begins.

I spend part of the afternoon in one of those rooms for a private rehearsal with Alexei Ratmansky, Firebird’s choreographer.

Alexei, ever the visionary and perfectionist, is changing the choreography up until the last minute. He tweaks a leap here, a twist there. We go through all my solos to ensure that the counts are exactly right.

Beat one. On my toes.
Beat two. Dart to the right.
Beat three. Bound through the air.

Alexei changes my entrance to the stage several times before we finally agree on the steps that best suit me. There are two other casts, and the Firebird’s entrance in each is different, difficult, unique. I feel energized. I feel ready.

This is for the little brown girls.

I walk home to my apartment, a dozen blocks from the Met. I shower and flip to the Food Network just to have some background noise as I try to relax my mind, wind down my body.

A couple hours later, I’m back at the Met. The curtain won’t go up until seven thirty p.m., and I won’t take the stage until nine, but I want to be early, to not have to rush.

It is a special evening, and not just for me. Kevin McKenzie, ABT’s artistic director, is also being honored. It is his twentieth anniversary in that role, and in celebration there will be speeches, a video tribute featuring congratulations from the
artistic directors of nearly every major classical company in the world, and performances by all of ABT’s principal dancers.

It’s getting close to showtime. I have been a soloist for five years, and the eleven of us have a dressing room all to ourselves. But I have never used it. I prefer the comforting camaraderie of the dressing area shared by the corps. I spent six years as part of the corps de ballet, and with them I want to remain, preparing for my first principal role in a classical ballet surrounded by loving friends. Nothing feels different between us, even though I’ll dance the lead. That, at least, provides normalcy on this extraordinary night.

I have my own corner of the dressing room, claimed long ago. The table is so crowded with flowers and chocolates and photographs that there is barely room for me to squeeze my cell phone. There are bouquets of orchids, my favorite, and dozens of roses. Arthur Mitchell, the founder of Dance Theatre of Harlem, has left me a voice mail, wishing me luck. There are dozens more e-mails, texts, and cards—from friends, family, and fans all over the country—wishing me well.

Looking at the beautiful bounty, I start to get emotional. But I can’t be distracted. I can’t be overwhelmed.

This is for the little brown girls.

I go into hair and makeup about a half hour after the evening performance starts. In the mirror, Misty disappears and a mystical creature takes her place, its face dusted with red glitter and painted with dazzling red spirals that shoot from the corners of its eyes. Even my inch-long false lashes are colored red. One of the company’s dressers slicks back my hair into a smooth swirl to better attach my red and gold plume.

“Good luck, Misty,” a dancer hollers at me with a smile.

“Merde!” one yells.

“Enjoy it!” says another.

I know that they wholeheartedly mean what they say. But those are everyday salutations that can be tossed out before any night’s performance. They don’t reflect the monumental nature of this evening, what it means to me and the rest of the African American community.

Maybe no words could.

Fifteen minutes.

I plop down on the floor of the dressing area’s lounge, stretching, flexing, staring at myself in the mirror. I stamp that thought down as quickly as it emerges. I think to myself, This is it, this is my moment. Finally, the moment to shine, to prove myself, to represent black dancers at the highest level of ballet.

This is for the little brown girls.

But my shin is throbbing uncontrollably.

I know deep down that I can’t go on much longer with such pain. Tonight will be the first time I perform as the Firebird in New York, and I pray it won’t be my last. By
the time *Firebird* is up, ABT has performed several other pieces and two intermissions have paused the program.

I make my way toward the stage. Kevin McKenzie, the conductor, and the rest of ABT’s artistic staff are standing there, behind the curtain, wishing me luck.

I remember the first time I stood on the stage at the Metropolitan Opera House. I was nineteen years old, still struggling to find my place in ABT’s corps de ballet. I traced the marley floor with my pointe shoes and imagined myself on the stage, not as a member of the corps, but as a principal dancer. It felt right. It felt like a promise: someday, somehow, it was going to happen for me.

A decade later, I am here, waiting for the moment when I will explode onto the stage in a burst of red and gold.

Outside, the largest crowd I have ever seen waits. Prominent members of the African American community and trailblazers in the world of dance who have seldom received their due are here tonight: Arthur Mitchell, Debra Lee, Star Jones, Nelson George . . . but I know I will also dance for those who aren’t here, who have never seen a ballet, who pass the Metropolitan Opera House but cannot imagine what goes on inside. They may be poor, like I have been; insecure, like I have been; misunderstood, like I have been. I will be dancing for them, too. *Especially* for them.

*This is for the little brown girls.*

I stand in the farthest upstage wing when the curtain rises. There are a flock of “Firebirds” who enter the stage first after Ivan, the prince. I can feel the anticipation rolling off the crowd as they pose and preen. They expect me to be among them. I take a deep breath. The music starts, and with it comes the cheers, a great roar of love from the audience.

I realize in that moment that it doesn’t matter what I do on the stage tonight. They are all here for me, *with me*, here for who I am and what tonight represents. I run onto the stage and feel myself transform. As I approach center, my flock parts, leaving me to stand alone. There’s a brief second of silence before the audience erupts into applause once more, clapping so loudly I can barely hear the music.

And so it begins.

**Chapter 1**

FROM THE TIME I turned two, my life was in constant motion.

That’s how old I was when my mother loaded me, my sister, and my brothers onto a Greyhound bus in Kansas City and we left my father.

I was the youngest then, with lips and a nose like his, but I wouldn’t know that for many years. I had no memories of him or photographs to remind me, and the next time I saw him, I would be twenty-two years old, traveling the world as a dancer with American Ballet Theatre, and Doug Copeland was just a middle-aged man whose temples had turned gray.
I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, my mother’s second baby girl, and her fourth child. Two husbands later, our number would swell to six. When my mom squeezed our lives onto a bus headed west, our family began a pattern that would define my siblings’ and my childhood: packing, scrambling, leaving—often barely surviving.

I don’t remember the ride, but it took two days. Our final stop was the city of Bellflower, a working-class suburb of Los Angeles. We started anew there, and for a time that would turn out to be too brief, we had a home full of comfort and warmth, along with a new father.

His name was Harold. A childhood friend of my mother’s, he met us at the bus station, and a little over a year later, he became her third husband. Harold was a sales executive for the Santa Fe Railroad, but his personality didn’t match the stiffness of his title. He looked like the baseball player Darryl Strawberry in his home run—hitting prime—tall, muscular, and chestnut brown. Until my sister Lindsey was born three years later, I was the family’s baby and tiny for my age. Harold would scoop me up in his strong arms and tickle me until I dissolved into tears of laughter.

Most of my earliest memories aren’t of my mother, but of him. We kids were practically spilling out the front door and windows of our small apartment, but if our home sometimes resembled a three-ring circus, Harold was more the ringmaster than a parental figure committed to reining us in. He was a prankster with an infectious laugh. When my mother wanted him to discipline us kids, he would turn even that into a game.

“I’m not really going to spank you, but holler like I am,” he’d whisper as he corralled us in the bedroom and shut the door. Then he’d take his broad palm and loudly slap the bed. “No, Daddy, no,” we’d scream, choking down giggles as we put on a performance we thought worthy of an Oscar. Mommy, satisfied and sitting in the living room, was none the wiser.

Despite there being so many of us, Harold would carve out moments that made each of us feel like his only child. I remember loving sunflower seeds so much that my sisters and brothers took to calling me Bird. I trace my obsession to the times I would sit with Harold on the couch, the two of us alone together, popping seeds in our mouths and cracking the salty shells. Mommy hated it because the shells would fall between the cushions, making a mess. But memories of those afternoons remain precious to me.

That was the side of Harold we kids saw: cheerful, comforting, kind. But behind that facade of laughter and fun, my mother saw something entirely different. Harold was an alcoholic. We caught only glimpses of it, out the corners of our eyes, like the ever-present beer can on my parents’ nightstand. But I later found out that what was mostly invisible to us was in Mommy’s plain sight.
When I was eight or nine and we had a new home and a new daddy, Mommy would tell us stories of Harold not being in his right mind because of liquor, and how it sometimes frightened her.

When I was in middle school, Lindsey, his biological daughter, would often stay with him, and I would join them a few nights a week. By then, I had a best friend, Jackie Phillips. We were inseparable. I thought she was beautiful—lean with dark brown skin, she towered over me. We had most of our school activities in common.

Jackie lived right around the corner from our middle school, so Mommy didn’t mind me staying there a couple of nights a week before Harold would come back to pick me up.

One night, Jackie and I were cracking up, blasting TLC’s *CrazySexyCool* while we did our homework. The phone rang. Jackie’s mom yelled that it was for me. Lindsey was on the line, crying.

―Daddy’s drunk,‖ she said through her tears. “I told him that he shouldn’t drive. Can you find another way home?”

I hung up the phone feeling sick to my stomach, not sure whether to tell Jackie’s mother what was going on or to call Mommy.

I went back into Jackie’s room. Time ticked by as I tried to figure out what to do. Too much time, as it turned out. The doorbell rang. It was Lindsey. Harold was waiting in the car.

I guess he knew better than to come to the door in his condition in front of Mrs. Phillips. When I got to the car, it reeked of cigarette smoke and beer. Harold put the key in the ignition and his foot on the gas, and we sped off over the Long Beach Bridge. My heart was pounding as the streetlights streaked by.

Lindsey and I sat in the backseat holding each other’s hands tightly. This was truly the first time we understood the condition Mommy spoke of so often. We wove in and out of the lanes on the bridge that night at high speed, so close to the side rails hundreds of feet above the ocean. We feared for our lives. Yet there was something inside me and Lindsey that had such a strong image of Harold’s warmth and gentleness that we did our best to never show him that we knew he was drunk or that it changed our perception of him.

The next time Lindsey called to tell me Harold was drunk, I asked to speak to him and told him that I would just spend the night at Jackie’s, that he didn’t have to pick me up.

I never loved Harold any less. To me, he remains one of the best parts of my childhood, the daddy who’d cook Lindsey and me waffles and serve them to us on plastic trays while we watched cartoons in our pajamas on Saturday mornings. I remember him sitting in the bathroom with me when I was four, holding my hand while I cried, straining from a stomachache. Memories of Harold are never cloudy, only clear and bright. And he’s now been in recovery for fifteen years.
But five years after we’d arrived at Harold’s apartment, Mommy decided that, once again, it was time to pick up and go.

Mommy strapped Lindsey into her car seat in the blue Mercedes station wagon while the rest of us squeezed in around her, finding space wherever we could. As we drove to God knew where, there was no tussling, no yelling. We were too confused to laugh, too scared to play around.

Our leaving was always like that—dramatic, hurried, and ragged.

Slender, not quite five feet six, until Mommy reached middle age she looked more like somebody’s cool and sultry big sister than a mother of six. Mommy retired her Kansas City Chiefs pom-poms after only one season, but she carried a cheerleader’s exuberance throughout her life, rooting for her children and always smiling, despite too many marriages gone wrong and, at times, bill collectors on our trail.