

Swiftly

Ten seconds. Teresa could imagine the kernels, each golden pearl sitting amidst the wax-covered interior of the paper bag, each awaiting the seconds before they would burst with the fullness of their regal white clouds, emerging from the rigid casings into which they had been trapped for the entirety of their existence. She thought about the heat, about how the gradually growing sensation tickled their skins like they did her own.

Buzz! Teresa quickly opened the microwave and reached her hand up to grab at the handle, gingerly removed the scalding hot bag. Carefully tearing the corner, she spilled the golden morsels into a colorful plastic bowl. The kernels steamed and shook with the heat and the sudden intensity of their release, and as Teresa caught a whiff of the buttery scent that emanated from their presence, she felt a sudden longing sensation.

Grabbing the bowl, she walked out of the kitchen, fully knowing where she wanted to go, and yet still unable to bring herself to consciously make the decision to travel to the room. As she took brisk steps down the hall, she marveled at her body's ability to simply obey her command. It took almost no thought to move her legs forward, to compel them to action from rest, and to note their final placing in perfect linear motion, sweeping against gravity and back towards the

ground. It was a fascinating study to consider, how she was simply able to dance with her feet even as she didn't think about the actions themselves.

She had once been a dancer. It seemed like a while ago, but she recalled the colorful dresses, the flowing fans, the props, and the lights always shining too bright on her face, too hot for her skin. She could recall the long hours of practice, bruises across her limbs, and the constant voices, always angry, reminding her of why she wasn't good enough or why she couldn't look like the other girls in her troupe. It wasn't always the best environment growing up, but she could certainly appreciate the beauty of fluid motion so much more given her past experience working within the art form. It seemed a natural extension of what she already knew simply applied to a more domestic setting.

Along the way, she picked up her phone and noticed a notification appear on the screen. Before she could even read what it said, she swiped it away. No need for that sort of nonsense at this time. Instead, she continued along to the living room. Her television was off, so she figured it was as good a time as any to watch some old tapes her parents had kept around the house. She set the bowl of popcorn down on the side of the couch and riffled through the DVDs along the stack – all of them labeled in the same messy script her father had. She wondered what they meant – most of them were written in a language she could not recognize, but she figured they had to be listed by age if not chronologically.

Selecting one that seemed appropriate for the moment, she sat herself down on the velvet green couch in the middle of her living room and placed her popcorn on top of her lap, pressing on the remote to start the tape. It flashed with the blurred screen of the production company before switching to the colorful scenery of the first movement of the performance. The corner of Teresa's mouth turned up in a small smile, and she brought her legs up onto the couch as the dancers began to stream out to the melody of the violas.

The sudden nostalgia was almost surprising, but Teresa admittedly had not reflected on this notion for quite some time. It was thoroughly against her intentions to conjure back the memories of her childhood. Despite how much she had loved the art, the beauty, and the simple majesty of the movement she could

perform, dance eroded from a passion into her parent's desires and dreams. She loathed herself for thinking this way, but each time she thought about her father's demands, how he constantly forced her to practice for hours simply because she couldn't pass her adjudication, how she hated how they had to pay for lessons when dance would never become a conscious part of her future anyway, how they seemed so intent on manipulating her success, she could only remember the dreadful day when she finally pushed them out of her life.

The notification popped up on her phone once again. She thought about it for a second, about the last time she had called home. She first moved away in high school, choosing to live with her grandparents in the city near home just to stay away from the pain. Then in college, once again, she moved hundreds of miles away. Even when her dormmate would welcome back her mother or father during the holidays, Teresa could only remember the long hours spent in the library, or with her friends, never the smiles of her parents.

She reached her hand into the bowl that she now had nestled between her legs and was pleased to find that it had cooled to a more comfortable temperature. The feeling of the popcorn gently chaffing her hand reminded her of the first time she had helped to string popcorn with her father. There was simply so much going on nowadays that it didn't make sense to celebrate as much as she once had, but the holidays were always a grand time to let go of worries.

The phone rang again, this time chiming the song of the Sugar Plum Fairies as it buzzed about on the side of the couch. Teresa sighed and looked at the caller's name, recognizing her father's face in the icon that popped up. She swiftly swiped to the left, ignoring the call and finally placing her phone on silent. As she tossed it aside, hearing it land with a thud on the carpeted ground of her living room, she faced her eyes towards the screen of the television. The children were now lining up in a circular fashion, curtsying on both sides as they followed one another into the next formation of the movement.

As she peered at her clock, drowsiness overcame her senses. The music from the television faded away, replaced with the sensations of movement - her limbs dancing in the stillness of the stage, the bright lights overhead. As Teresa

danced, she heard her parent's voices surround her. They praised her, and she saw herself growing, larger and larger, but as she did the voices grew harsher and harsher, until she tumbled away and the stage disappeared. The moments started to blur together, and Teresa saw only herself, lost in time, a bodiless mind floating above the world.

She envied and loathed this version of herself, and wondered whether she would ever be able to return to the world she knew. Even so, as she continued along, floating throughout the vast expanse, she felt alone and vulnerable. She saw the faces of the people she knew float along and yet there was nothing she could do but watch as they disappeared behind her. Finally, the faces of her parents appeared, but as she started forward to greet them, they too dissolved into the darkness. A buzzing filled her ears, and as she covered them to block away the noise, the vast darkness disappeared.

Teresa opened her eyes, her mind still hazy from the dream. The buzzing continued, and she momentarily realized that her doorbell had been rung. Without a second thought, she jumped up from the couch and strode towards the door, opening it to see the face of her father staring back at her. Her voice caught in her throat.

"Merry Christmas, Tree!" her father said, almost hesitantly, as he burst through the door with an armful of bags, her mother trailing closely behind. "We didn't hear from you - we thought you weren't home for a while."

"Merry Christmas, Daddy," she said softly before stepping aside to embrace him.