

Pas de Deux

I had a feeling Mossy would rise above herself and achieve greatness, but had no idea her path to acclaim would begin the day we accidentally left her at the rest stop. In fairness to our parents, they had overbred.

There were eight of us jammed into a Town and Country, the kind of station wagon with faux wood panels on the doors and a seat in the back that flipped down into a three-seat space when we weren't picking up groceries. We never had enough money for loads of groceries, so I never remember the seat being down. I do remember Mossy sitting beside me and singing to a wilted dandelion she picked off the grassy median between the pumps and the highway.

By the time I noticed Mossy was missing, we'd covered at least a hundred miles. I didn't have the heart to tell Dad that one of us got left behind. He'd been a Marine and although the phrase was coined by the Navy Seals, he appropriated it for his own purposes: no one gets left behind. Instead of telling everyone about Mossy's absence, I took her dandelion and pressed it between the pages of a book about Dreadnoughts I'd found in the neighbour's garbage. I wanted to go to sea someday in a mighty battleship, but by the time I grew up, battleships were history. Five days, in fact, passed before our Mom asked what Mossy was up to. We all shrugged. Our Mom was cool about Mossy's absence. She didn't panic. She just continued making dinner though Mossy usually helped with the Shake N Bake.

Over dinner Dad said they ought to do something. What if Mossy had been abducted by pedophiles, although he didn't use that word in front of us. He used the word "strangers." Then he went back to eating. Nine mouths saves money. Mossy would have been one mouth more. I often lay awake at night and worried about Mossy, but I kept having the strange feeling she was okay, that she was still alive, and people, maybe a kind couple, were raising her as their own and giving her the love and attention she would never have found in our brood.

My suspicions were correct. A kind couple did, in fact, find her. They lived in the city. They had connections to a ballet school. What I considered to be underfed and malnourished, the ballet school decided were the perfect proportions for a budding prima. And though I wouldn't know Mossy's true story until years later when she appeared in the *Time* magazine I was reading while waiting for dental work—the bad mouth was a gift from my early years—I felt as if Mossy was narrating my thoughts about her. I could hear her voice. I would open my relic of childhood, the book about huge grey battlewagons, and stare at the brown withered stem and the curled, slightly yellow flower Mossy had left behind.

"Dear Bernard," she would always begin, as if my thoughts about her were letters I was receiving and she was the pen pal I always wanted but never wrote to, "I am having a wonderful time. The Gellers who found me at the gas station after you and the family drove away have been very kind. In fact, they have showered me with attention, gifts, and the education in the arts I always dreamed of having when I stared for hours at the flowers I'd pick.

The petals of those flowers reminded me of tutus, and I knew I never wanted to return to my old life the first time I heard Tchaikovsky's *The Nutcracker* where, in the final act, the flowers come out and dance and leap in the air. I read later that the Waltz of the Flowers in a local radio broadcast interrupted the count-down of the test site for the Manhattan Project. The first mushroom cloud bloomed to the sound of flora leaping across the stage. I am fine. Think of me again, soon, your sister, Mossy."

A few nights later when I thought of her again, beginning my thoughts with "Dear Mossy, I'm sorry we screwed up but I am glad you are well," I found I didn't have anything to say to her. What could I say? Yep, we drove away. Yep, I noticed you were gone but I didn't want to get in trouble, so I simply let Dad keep driving. Yep, I bet you were petrified. Petrified is too weak a word. Crazy with horrible pangs of abandonment? And I imagine Mrs. Geller, she of the kind face and perfect couture mauve silk summer Chanel suit like something Jackie Kennedy might have worn, walking up to you, bending over and saying 'Don't cry little girl. Tell me what is wrong.'

The way I see it Mrs. Geller is as much to blame as me or Mom and Dad or our six siblings. The woman could have done something. She could have alerted the Highway Patrol or the State Police, and an all-points-bulletin would have blared from trooper radios up and down the eastern seaboard, and if they figured out where we were, if you'd done as you were told and memorized the town our farm was near, then maybe justice, the big J justice, would have been served, but the small J justice of a little girl's life would

have simply tottered along until you befell a fate worse than death, the fate of dying of unrealized potential. But Mrs. Geller had one thing going for her everyone else didn't: she wanted you. I stopped the letter in my mind. I couldn't sign it. I pictured the piece of paper and crumpled it up and tossed it in my imaginary waste paper basket.

Mossy must have known I was thinking about her because her voice appeared in my head like those disembodied voices that introduce old movies but abruptly disappear. "Dear Bernard: You shouldn't waste a lot of time thinking about me. I'm fine. I don't expend a lot of time or energy thinking about you or the other kids—Flo, Gare, Zane, Gimpsie, Cranleigh, or Melton. I hope you won't take this the wrong way, but they mean absolutely nothing to me now. I am now officially Mossinda Geller, the junior female dancer of the Eastern City Ballet. I danced the part of Marie, though in some productions I am her doll, Clara, and in other productions I am the eleven-year-old girl Clara. Clara Stahlbaum. I am conveniently eleven, very slender, very light on my feet. Madam Karznikova has advised me to stay off pointe. Every now and then she picks up my leg, usually my right, draws her finger along the calf muscles and says 'You have all the makings of a prima, my dear. Build those legs. Stay off pointe. *Pliés* to your heart's content. *Tendu* so you feel like a willow in the wind. The more *Rond du Jambe* the better. But stay off pointe until you are seventeen'. Most people suggest pointe far earlier but those dancers end their careers far earlier. Does any of this matter to you? Am I boring you? Such things may not be, nor may never be, part of your world. Best for now, your sister, Mossy."

I imagined being glad Mossy was getting good advice. I had no idea what she was talking about, but by then, Dad never got out of his chair. Mom stayed up in the bedroom all day and smoked, which eventually burned the house down taking with it Gimpsie and Melton. Cranleigh ran away from home. ‘One less mouth to feed,’ Dad muttered as he burned the Shake N Bake. I was old enough to walk to town and get a library card, so without anyone noticing, after I had discretely checked out the book, I would slip a volume on ballet under my shirt and read it in the barn. No one went into the barn except Flo who had a home business on the side on Friday nights and weekends. If Flo found my book she never let on. She had other things to do.

When no one was looking, I would practice the various poses, the bends, the stretches. I learned the art and the benefits of standing up straight, and I figured that even if I amounted to nothing else I could always get work as a posture coach. One night as I was trying to write to Mossy in my head, I got the strangest idea that I should walk into town, withdraw all I had secretly saved in my meager bank account, and hop the next bus to the city. I mean, why not? I wasn’t going anywhere standing still.

When I arrived, I tore a leaf out of the Yellow Pages in the bus station. I’d seen that late one night in an old movie and figured everyone tore a page from a telephone directory. A woman saw me and yelled that I was vandalizing public property. I wasn’t vandalizing it. I was putting the information printed on the page to good use. The page contained a list of dance academies. There was one, Gerald Graham’s School of Dance that was only a few blocks

away. His sign had dropped the Gerald portion to make passersby think the academy had something to do with Marth Graham for whom Aaron Copland composed “Appalachian Spring.”

“Dear Mossy: This will probably never reach you, but I have a secret to tell you. I used to stay up all night and listen to a classical music station through the static of the old Bakelite radio Gramps used to use in the kitchen, and I learned a helluva lot about symphonies and dance suites and chamber music, quintets, and quartets. I didn’t dare let Gare hear me. He’d gone kind of rough. He beat up a kid at school for reading poetry. When I was about fourteen I concluded that Gare was going to rob a bank or kill someone someday and as the overachiever in the family he did both. By the time I left home, he had left home, and I didn’t expect to see him again.

Mr. Graham agreed to interview me for his academy. He moved about the parquet floor like a tissue caught in a windstorm. He was okay. ‘Yes,’ he said, ‘you have raw talent but it is very raw and I see something in you beyond what I see in the raw,’ so with that he gave me a room atop the building, a broom of my very own, and told me that after I cleaned I should dance with the broom. Brooms aren’t bad as partners, but they tend to stay in one place.

After five months of constant practice and continual cleaning, the Graham Academy presented its annual recital. Most of the dancers were little kids. The company was lacking in mature bodies, especially men, though Mr. Graham often auditioned lithe males he met on his nightly strolls through the city when he said it

was good to get out and walk and clear the cobwebs from his head after a long day. So, Mossy, I have some news for you.

“Dear Mossy: It’s been a long time. I haven’t forgotten you. You wouldn’t know me now. I quit the farm. There wasn’t any future there, and not a lot of past. Our brothers and sisters, when left to their own devices, didn’t cope very well with their imaginations. You could say most of them hit brick walls. I left. I’m in the city now. You inspired me to learn more about dance, even though in reality we haven’t shared a word since the day we drove away at the gas station. I still have your flower. I have the *Time* magazine clipping beside it, the book I pressed it in, and the book on ballet that I took out on loan from the town library and promise to return someday though I suspect the overdue fine will be enormous. I am learning to dance. We had our recital. I was spinning in a *tarantella*, which you’re probably aware is a kind of whirling Dervish dance of death. As I left the stage there was a Miss Parry who came up to me. One minute I was wiping my face on a dirty towel and the next minute there she was, shaking my hand, and she asked me to join her troupe. The troupe, though I’m not sure you know it, is the East Side Étage. I rehearsed with them for six weeks when Miss Parry told me that Bernie Crank wasn’t a suitable name for a ballet dancer. I replied without thinking that all my family were Cranks, and she threw back her head and laughed and I laughed when I realized that, yes, my name was funny. ‘Why not try Bernard Loiseau?’ which means Bernie Bird, which is almost as bad as Bernie Crank, but saying something in French makes it more dramatic. Saying anything in French adds an air of class to the thing. So, that is how my career as a male principal began. You

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don't need to write back, but you should know that I have seen you dance as close as can be. You are exquisite. You didn't even know it was me.

Just before Christmas—do you recall the day your male principal fell and broke his ankle and then the understudy threw up from the flu? All those kids were waiting in the audience, children who belonged to parents who loved them enough to pay a hundred dollars or more a seat to let them see *The Nutcracker*. I happened to be walking along the street across from the theatre after Miss Parry took me to dinner at a very nice bistro.

Your Madam Karznikova came running out of your theatre. I could see the panic in her face. She recognized Miss Parry and looked me up and down and the next thing I knew I was waiting stage left for you to enter from stage right so we could dance the opening *pas de deux*, the “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairies.” I was Prince Coqueluche and you were the Sugar Plum Fairy.

Fate has a strange way of blinding us to everything but our training and our instincts in those moments when we pour our hearts into what we love to do. And there you were, on pointe, making your way to me, and I gathered you by your waist and after the entrée, the adagio, the variations, and the climax, I raised you high above my shoulders, turning round and round as if you were the sun, and your tutu reminded me of a dandelion blossom, its petals smiling at the evening light, as the world passed by oblivious to what it left behind.