

Final Bows

By

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Carolina Hart has become an expert in the art of making teenage girls *almost* cry. There really is a science, she thinks while observing her student's eyes fill with tears, in striking that balance between somewhat sad and fully devastated. She watches Elena, who is new to the studio, and therefore more sensitive than the others to correction, struggling to raise her leg in arabesque, her watering eyes pathetically flicking back and forth to the mirror, as if by seeing herself she could somehow improve her form. The other students have finished the exercise and they watch Carolina and the new girl with sympathy or mirthful *schadenfreude*, depending on how well they know Elena and whether her role in *Nutcracker* is bigger or smaller than theirs. At this point Elena's face is red with exertion and embarrassment, but her breathing hasn't yet reached that labored, hysterical quality that so many of the other girls can achieve, so Carolina reasons that she can push her just a bit further before she actually starts to cry.

"90 degrees," Carolina repeats, striking a more patient tone than she feels, "Do not put down your leg until it is at least at 90 degrees."

Elena nods her head, and a tiny droplet of sweat rolls down her neck and into the pinched neckline of her leotard. Her leg is shaking but it isn't going anywhere. Carolina sighs, grabs it by the ankle, and hoists it up to the desired height.

"*There*," she whispers, "hold it there for four counts and we can be done."

Carolina releases her grip and the leg immediately drops 7 inches. She pretends not to notice. “One-two-three, two-two-three, three-two-three, four-two-thr—”

Before she finishes the last count Elena has lowered her leg to the floor, looking nervously to Carolina, for approval or criticism, through tear-saturated eyes. Carolina simply nods her head and turns back to the rest of the class.

“Alright, ladies,” she announces, her voice signaling the aged pianist to stop his playing, “stretch.”

They look at her with a combination of gratitude and suspicion; Carolina has never let them finish their barre work without at least one grueling *developpé* combination. She does it tonight partly because she senses they need a morale boost with their show looming only a few days away, but also she is absolutely itching for a cigarette. Before walking out of the studio she grabs her purse and calls from the doorway, “Norm!”

The hunched-over man at the piano shakes awake, his disheveled gray hair flopping haphazardly over his glasses. Norman has been working at this studio since Carolina herself was a little girl in a leotard stifling tears, though back then, she recalled, he was quite handsome. All those years ago she and her friends used to try to flirt with him between rehearsals, but he was always too respectful to reciprocate. With a blush, she recalls giggling in front of a mirror in the bathroom with her friends, applying lipstick stolen from one of their mothers. They had all walked out and gathered around Norm and the piano before class, trying to get his attention, but he had kept his eyes on the keys. She wonders if he remembers her from back then, or if the years have worn away his memories the way they have his good looks.

Norm is still watching Carolina, his tired eyes expectant behind their tortoiseshell frames, and she smiles his way, “Play something cheery, Norm—it’s dreadful outside.”

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In the back alley behind the dance studio, Carolina hugs her arms around her narrow torso for protection against the relentless December wind. Leaning against the brick wall of the building, she fishes in her purse for a cigarette and lighter. It's dark out, but enough illumination pours in from the streets on either side that she can still recognize the familiar shape of that blessed cardboard camel. Holding a cigarette between her lips, she places her lighter against its tip and pulls her thumb across its ridged metal wheel. A tiny flame flickers to life but before it can accomplish anything a gust of wind blows it away.

"Are you fucking kidding me," Carolina grumbles to herself. She tries again, but the puny little flame is no match for the wind. "Come *on!*"

She cups her free hand around the lighter and flicks it over and over and over, growing more frustrated with each failed spark. In her 25 years as a smoker she has never had so much trouble completing this task. She is considering giving up when she hears laughter down the alley. "You need some help?" a male voice asks.

Carolina glances up from her futile exercise to see a tall man, probably in his early 50s, walking over to her, carrying his own lighter. She looks at him guiltily. He's probably one of her students' fathers, and none of them know she smokes. She's supposed to be a role model, and smoking is decidedly not what any parent wants their teenage daughter to aspire to do.

"Here," the man says, his body only a foot away from hers now, "let me try." Carolina is so petite that he has to bend down a little to reach her, but in one flick of his lighter her cigarette catches and he steps back, satisfied. Carolina takes a nervous puff but relaxes when she sees him light one of his own. They stand there quietly for a moment, side by side now, she focusing on the smoke leaving her mouth, he on the smoke leaving his nostrils. Finally he turns to face her, a smile reaching his lips.

"So, you're the infamous Miss Carolina, then?"

Carolina nods and pushes a short lock of hair across her forehead. “That’s what the students call me at least.” She frowns a little, suddenly self-conscious that at forty-five years old she’s still a Miss. “I’m sorry if we’ve already met, but you are—”

“We haven’t,” he interrupts. “And it’s Michael,” he extends his hand to shake hers, “I’m Tiffany’s dad.”

Carolina takes his hand and strains her dainty little muscles into the firmest grip she can muster. Shaking it, she suspects he’s purposefully weakened his grip for her. They pump their hands in the air like that a few more times before growing still again, leaving their hands suspended across the space between their bodies like a rope bridge, neither one letting go. Finally Carolina slips hers out of the embrace.

“Ahhh, I can see the similarity,” she says, and she actually can: he and his daughter really do have the same warm brown eyes, the same dusting of freckles across their noses. He smiles at this and takes a drag on his cigarette.

“Tiffany is one of my best students,” Carolina says, honestly. “Her technique has really grown since she’s taken on Sugar Plum, and her footwork has just...” Michael is watching her talk, but she can tell he isn’t interested. Even the mothers who never danced usually enjoy hearing about how special and talented their offspring are, but she realizes now that the fathers probably don’t care. She shuts up.

A moment of silence passes and Carolina grows uncomfortable, remembering again that she’s made herself into less of a role model for the child this man pays her to teach. Of course smoking is practically a requirement of professional ballet dancing, but there’s no way Michael would know this, and even if he did she doubts he would approve of Tiffany doing it.

“I uh, I just wanted to let you know...” Her eyes search the pavement desperately for an alibi but all they find is a few abandoned bobby pins lodged into the cracks, “Ahh, I don’t

usually smoke.” The lie sounds tinny and tight leaving her throat, and she becomes aware for the first time, listening to the huskiness of her words, that she has finally acquired a smoker’s voice.

Michael raises his eyebrow in a mischievous grin. “And neither do I,” he winks. He takes a last puff of his cigarette then drops it to the pavement, rubbing the hot Styrofoam nub under his leather loafer.

“Well, it was lovely meeting you, *Miss Carolina*,” Michael says, starting to walk out the alley in the direction of the ballet’s parking lot. He’s almost gone when then he stops and turns around to look at her. “Tiffany was right in what she said about you.”

“What did she say about me?” Carolina asks, rubbing her cigarette out under the heel of her soft pink teaching slippers.

He grins. “That you’re beautiful.”

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Carolina ends *Nutcracker* rehearsal fifteen minutes early that night. None of her students can understand it. They know that they were off the counts during the “Waltz of the Snowflakes,” and that they completely butchered the port de bras in the “Dance of the Reed Flutes.” One girl fell right onto her ass during a pirouette, and yet, after they’d finished dancing, instead of barking at them to clean up their technique, or to think harder about the choreography, Miss Carolina clapped.

“Beautiful,” she beamed, “you were all beautiful.”

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The night of the show, Carolina knows to not shout out any corrections. She gives her dancers a warm-up on stage, deliberately light so they won’t sweat off their makeup, and sends them off with a smile and “*Merde!*” The girls don’t know that it means “Shit!” in French, nor did she at their age, but it is a balletic good-luck tradition and she feels good

inducting them into its select sorority. She has left them the perfect amount of time before the show starts that their muscles won't get cold but they'll still have a few moments to go over any last-minute confusions in the choreography, to touch up their lipstick, to hug each other in anxiety. She does stop a few of the younger girls to fix their buns, pinning back the wispy hairs at the napes of their necks. Careful not to swallow the hairpins held between her lips, she explains to them that though they are barely perceptible now, those little hairs will make bright fuzzy halos under the stage lights.

Carolina remembers having long hair like theirs that she pulled into a bun, brown and thick and shiny, but she cut it all off after she stopped dancing. She didn't know how to style it into anything besides a bun anyways. Men used to always tell her to unpin it, "Your hair looks so beautiful down," they'd purr, tucking a lock of it behind her ear. She couldn't have known then that she would miss hearing it.

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Watching her dancers perform, Carolina is proud—her hard work teaching them and their hard work learning has paid off in a show that is nearly flawless. Of course they do make countless little errors, but it's nothing that the audience will notice, nothing that a non-dancer would pick up. The small number of them who will go on to dance professionally—the best and most hard-working of the group, the most self-sacrificing—will spend the rest of their careers focused on those tiny imperfections. Of course it will never be enough; they'll never be satisfied. They'll never be perfect. Watching them take their bows, Carolina envies those adolescent dancers, grinning through teeth bound by braces, because they don't know any of this yet. They all still think they can succeed. Watching them take their bows Carolina can almost remember the feeling, back home on that black Marley stage performing for an audience so deeply shrouded in the darkness she couldn't even see them, though she

loved all of them, each and every single one of them there. She doesn't tell her students what she knows, because they'll discover it for themselves later.

An audience can never love back.

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After the show Carolina makes her usual rounds through the theater lobby. Her students have switched out of their costumes and back into their warm-up clothes, making them easy to identify among the crowds of people in dresses and heels and suits. She herself wears a black cocktail dress, simple yet elegant, and she can feel the eyes of her students' parents following her through the room. The mothers gaze with jealousy at being unable to retain a figure like hers; the fathers gaze with longing, wishing they had. She gives out the prescribed hugs to her students, telling them how great they did, how lovely they were. She shakes the hands of their proud parents, assuring them of the same. Her smile, just another muscle trained in endurance from all those years performing, doesn't waver once. No one suspects how exhausting it is.

As the friends and families and dancers finally start to trickle out of the lobby, Tiffany walks up to her, cheerfully awaiting her turn for praise. Even though Carolina is in heels, Tiffany has to bend down a little to receive her hug. "Tiffany, you were shining tonight," Carolina begins, grateful that it's actually the truth. From behind Tiffany she can see Michael and the plump woman she assumes must be his wife walking forward.

"I don't think I heard a single person *breathing* when you reached the chainné turns toward the end." They are now standing behind their daughter, sharing in her praise. Carolina switches her focus to include them.

Tiffany's mom thrusts her fleshy hand out with a smile, "We've met before but it's been ages, Carolina-- I'm Rachel."

Carolina shakes it daintily. "Of course, I remember you, Rachel," she lies.

Rachel's smile widens at the recognition, her full cheeks pushing little lines into the corners of her eyes to accommodate it. "Well, we just wanted to tell you, we *so* enjoyed the show! And not just Tiffany's part! We really—oh, I'm so sorry, I didn't introduce you to my husband! Michael!" she nudges him forward, "This is Tiffany's teacher, Carolina."

"Pleasure," he says, but his eyes don't leave the ground.

"Anyways," Rachel continues, "it was just such a delight. You know, I used to dance too, back in the day!"

"Oh, really?" Carolina is surprised; she doesn't look like a former dancer.

Rachel nods her head. "Mhmm! I was in the corps at Pennsylvania Ballet but then I..." she takes a breath, "...well, I got injured."

Carolina suppresses a grimace and instead shapes her face into an expression of sympathy, letting her eyebrows pinch in the middle even though she knows it emphasizes the wrinkles starting to form there.

Rachel shrugs, then smiles, "But, it all worked out in the end! I got to do other things." She turns to Tiffany at this, and brushes a wayward hair back into her bun. Carolina watches her student smile at the gesture. She tries to remember what those dancers had done a few hours ago when she'd fixed their hair backstage. They'd said "Thank you," she recalls. But, no, she realizes, they hadn't smiled.

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The dancers get two weeks off for Christmas break before they're back in the studio, taking class and rehearsing for their next show. Carolina goes easy on them their first day back because she knows how quickly one's muscles lose their flexibility, how soon one's mind loses its sharpness. They'll need a few days before they're really on their legs again. Instead of jumping from exercise to exercise, leaving her dancers only enough time to wipe the sweat off their brows, Carolina slows down. She talks more. She lets them drink water.

Their adagio combination reminds her of a piece of choreography she'd once performed, and so she lets them catch their breath while listening.

“When I was a prima,” she begins, “I danced something almost just like this.” She holds her left hand at the barre as she speaks, her feet turned out in perfect terpsichorean posture, but somehow, her students suddenly realize, she's no longer there. Her eyes still look at her class, but they know it's not them she's seeing. No, she's back home on the stage, turning through space and leaping through air, a vision of power and grace. Her students wait patiently and watch her, longing to be her, longing to be Clara or Giselle or Odile and leap across the stage and know that all those people out there, all those people standing and clapping—they're standing and clapping for her, and for her alone! But then, before they can take their bows, Carolina's eyes re-focus, and she begins teaching again. And now her students aren't using enough turn-out, and their legs should be at 90 degrees, and their buns are too loose on their heads. And they sigh, and go back to the barre, and Carolina, the dancer who doesn't dance, stands away and watches them watching her in the mirror.