

A NIGHT AT THE NUTCRACKER

By

Janine Kovac

You start out in the audience. We all do. You wear your frilliest dress or the one that gets the most air when you twirl. Your hair is perfect, and your face is shiny. You are glowing from the inside out.

You clutch your tickets or your program—whichever you have been allowed to hold—and move at a snail’s pace toward tonight’s seats. The lobby is bursting with patrons: blue-haired ladies with canes and slick-looking gentlemen and little girls who look just like you. There’s a bottleneck at the entrance to the house as the black pantsuit at the door examines each ticket as if there might be a winning lottery number on it, and then directs you to the left or to the right.

You find your row and you find your seat and you sit on the edge of it, not just because you are too excited to sit all the way back, but because you are too small. You are like Lewis Carroll’s shrunken Alice in those plush, red velvet seats.

The chatter of the people in the rows around you is a dull roar and you can hear the orchestra warming up above the din. More black pantsuits down there, more important ones. If your seat is close enough, maybe your mother will let you walk—don’t run!—to the orchestra pit to see the musicians practice bits and pieces. There’s always the trumpet from the Spanish variation playing the first eight bars over and over. The harpist practices her waterfall of notes from “Waltz of the Flowers” and the celesta skitters through the last *ménage* of the Sugar Plum’s solo.

Years later, you are the mother whispering, “Don’t run!” as your daughter scampers toward the orchestra pit. No one here knows that you too were once a ballet dancer, in this very opera house. You danced as a determined warrior mouse, a snowflake shimmering in the lightest possible shade of blue, as a flower waltzing in pastels of layered tulle, and in the final years before retirement, a candy soloist in the Land of the Sweets.

You know exactly what’s happening on the other side of that curtain. The stage has shrunk because the party scene furniture takes up half the square footage. The Spanish girls dance with the trumpet’s opening bars, but he never plays the part they actually need to rehearse. In the dressing room, dancers are sewing shoes and applying finishing touches of makeup to their faces, carrying out their

superstitious rituals. They are in various stages of stretching and smoking and praying. *Please let these shoes/this costume/my ankle last one more show.*

Some of those dancers you will see tonight will be better than you were. Some of them not as good. But all of them are younger and healthier. They will be on stage, and you will be sitting here, reliving each pique arabesque, every grand jeté. Your legs will twitch. Your heart will flutter. Your body will remember all of the criticisms but none of the blisters. An old lament will resurface and echo like a motif from the Battle Scene. *If only I'd had more time.*

At 8:03, the stage manager clears the area with a heavy whisper and a wave of his hand. The dancers scurry off into the wings and back to their dressing rooms. The soloist who thinks the rules don't apply to him flitters off one more series of turns.

Meanwhile, it is twilight in the theater, the brief stretch of time between waking and dreaming. The lights are lowered. The first violinist finds middle C. The musicians tune their instruments to match hers. In the audience, the last of the cherry cough drops are opened and dispensed to stave off dry throats. The conductor raises his baton. The orchestra stands at attention.

Just like that, it is Christmas Eve on stage.

Your daughter's eyes are wide, sparkling with excitement and anticipation. You know exactly what she is thinking.

If only I could be one of them.

Author's Note

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Janine Kovac is a writer and interdisciplinary artist living in the San Francisco Bay Area. She draws on her experience as a professional ballet dancer to explore the intersection between art and empathy as expressed through the constraints of the physical body. Her memoir *Spinning: Choreography for Coming Home* was a semifinalist for *Publishers Weekly's* BookLife Prize and a winner of the 2019 National Indie Excellence Awards. Janine is a MacDowell Fellow and an alumna of Hedgebrook. Her awards include the Elizabeth George Foundation Fellowship, the San Francisco Foundation/Nomadic Press Literary Award for Nonfiction, and UC Berkeley's Glushko Prize.