

Nightingale Feathers

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3rd Place Winner (Grades 7-8)

I could feel the blood pumping through my body as I practiced my solo for the final time in the silent dressing room. The only sound I heard was the slight clank of my Pointe shoes on the hardwood floor, accompanied by my own breathing.

Ever since my mother died when I was three years old, I had been preparing for this night at the Beauchamp Academie de Danse in Paris. My mother, a famous French ballerina, met my American father when she was on tour in the states. He must have been special to her, I guess, because Mother sacrificed her career for marriage. A thousand times, I couldn't help but wonder if she would be pleased with my choice of solo.

Every spring, the older students all chose a ballet to showcase their talent in the Écouter Pretemps, where proud parents and talent scouts alike would congregate to watch poetry in motion. Careers were often made from this one night alone.

Each year, someone always preformed Giselle or Sleeping Beauty, and an unladylike fistfight would erupt over who would dance to Swan Lake. I, on the other hand, chose something completely different, "The Nightingale", a little-known Belarusian tale that I had adored since childhood. The story tells of a poor, ordinary girl with an awe-invoking singing voice, who was offered everything - jewels, property, even marriage – by the king of her land to become his personal singer, to be at his beck and call. She refused, knowing that her freedom was worth more than anything the king could provide her. Furious, the sovereign transformed the girl into a nightingale and locked her in his tower. However, the bars could not hold her; her voice charmed

the ivy that grew around the masonry, and it released her. I admired the spirit of the girl who chose life as a songbird, just so she could be free.

My peers and dance mistresses were shocked at my choice. My mother was a Swan Lake girl, and everyone expected me to be her carbon copy. Even though I never really knew her, I had concluded from stories and pictures of her that we were nothing alike. She was porcelain-skinned and blonde; I, on the other hand, inherited my father's dark skin and curls. My mother was a conventionalist, I, a nonconformist. I continued with my ballet education in the hopes that I would somehow feel closer to and understand more fully the woman I had never know.

As I mused, the time flew. I was making my way backstage through the swarm of conductors, soloists, and corps de ballet, the younger girls with minor parts in some selections, when I suddenly felt a strange calm cleanse me like a soft wash of rain. While other girls were showing clear signs of nausea induced by the seemingly impossible task before them, I felt collected and focused.

I found myself at the center of the darkened stage in an unbelievably short time. As the lights came up and I slid into my first cabriole, I felt something stir within me; I wasn't conscious of the two thousand spectators. All I knew was the sound of the orchestra in the pit below me and the feel of my body as I moved through the dance. No, I did more than move - I floated. I flew on imperceptible wings. From the glissade to the arabesque to my final tour en l'air, I was aware that I had unlocked some part of me that I had never known existed. At the end of my recital, there was a full heartbeat of stunned silence. Then, the theater erupted in thunderous applause. I glanced at the audience for the first time to see them giving me a standing ovation.

I received so many gifts that night that it took me nearly an hour to sort through them. When I got to the card my father sent, I felt a lump in my throat. It read: "Your mother lent you her wings tonight."

That one evening, that one concert, I finally recognized that I was my mother's daughter, and that her spirit was always within me. My mother would be a part of me forever, but I was also my own person, free to choose who I wanted to be. That night I had flown on angel wings of nightingale feathers.