

My First Ballet

“Do I *have* to wear a tie?” I asked.

“For the *last time*, yes, T.J., you have to wear a tie,” mom answered.

“But *why*? They’re so *irritating*,” I said, trying to adjust it, to make it less uncomfortable.

“Because we want to look nice,” mom answered.

“For *whom*?” I asked.

“For *us*,” mom answered.

“But I don’t *care* if I look good,” I pouted.

“Well, then I guess it’s a good thing that *I* do,” mom said, fixing my shirt collar. “Plus, everyone else is going to be dressed up, too.”

“If everyone jumped off a cliff, would you jump, too?” I asked mom, repeating something that she had told me *plenty* of times.

“Seeing as how I’m always prepared, yes,” she answered.

“What!” I said, not getting the answer I was looking for.

“I would have a parachute, so I would be fine,” she said, grabbing the hair above my left ear and giving it a little tug.

“Ow!” I exclaimed.

“That’s for trying to use my own words against me,” she said, smiling. “Now get in the car.”

I knew when I was beaten, so I obeyed.

When we got to the auditorium, Marcus and his mom were already there. I don’t know why we didn’t just go together. It would have saved our moms gas money.

“Can you believe my mom made me wear a tie?” I asked Marcus, as our mothers greeted each other and started discussing the last time either of them had been to a ballet.

“I quite like them,” Marcus commented.

“But you’re not even *wearing* a tie!” I disputed.

“Am so!” he argued, adjusting his coat.

“Bow ties don’t count!” I countered, a bit more loudly than I realized.

“T.J.!” my mom whispered loudly, pulling the hair above my ear again.

“Ow!” I whispered loudly back.

“Maybe we should be getting to our seats,” Marcus’ mom suggested.

“But what about the rest of the guys?” I asked, wondering if we were going to wait for Justin, Paul and Sammy.

“Aren’t their seats right next to ours?” my mom asked.

“That’s what Erick told us,” I answered.

“Then we can wait inside. The lobby is going to get crowded,” mom commented.

“Let’s go,” Marcus’ mom told him, holding out her arm.

Marcus wrapped his arm in hers and walked toward the nearest auditorium entrance. Mom then held out her arm in the same fashion, expecting me to follow suit. But of course, since she made me wear a tie, I decided to be a bit difficult. Instead of wrapping my arm in hers, I took her arm pulled it around my shoulder and put *my* arm around her back. She shook her head and gave me a ‘why couldn’t you just go along with it’ look, with a smile that said, ‘you’re lucky I love you.’

A woman handed us a program as we entered and asked us if we needed help finding our seats. Mom pointed at Marcus and his mom and informed her that we were with them. Luckily, Marcus’ mom had accepted when the other woman passing out programs had offered, because I’ve never been here before, and this auditorium is *huge!*

Now, I’m not sure how much our mothers paid for our seats, but the lady is leading Marcus and his mom past all these seats in the back *and* these seats in the middle. Oh, man. I hope we’re not all the way in the front! I *hate*

sitting all the way in the front. It makes it hard to see everything that's going on. You know, like when you're at the movie theater, and the only seats left are in the first three rows, so you have to slouch in your seat to try and see everything, but you can't? Or you tilt your head backwards, which ends up making your neck hurt and wish you had bought your tickets sooner? I hope it's not like that.

The closer the lady got to the front, the more worried I became. Thankfully, she stopped about ten rows back. Yes! No having to slouch to see the whole stage. No aching, neck. And no wishing we had better seats. But wait. Why are we so far to the left? It's going to be hard to see what's happening on the other side of the stage.

"Mom?" I said, as we reached the row that Marcus and his mom were now scooting down.

"Yes, T.J.?" she answered.

"Why are we way over here? Won't it be hard to see what's going on over there?" I stated, pointing to the other side of the stage.

“It might be,” she agreed, “but Erick’s mom said that he spends most of his time on this side of the stage, so we decided to get tickets for this side. You know, that way you guys have a better chance to see him!”

“Oh! Makes sense, I guess,” I said, shrugging my shoulders and sitting next to Marcus. “So how much longer until the show starts?”

As I looked behind me, not too many people were sitting in their seats, and the balcony was almost completely empty.

“The show doesn’t start for about another half hour,” mom answered.

“Thirty minutes!” I exclaimed.

Mom reached for the hair above my ear, but I dodged, so she went for her back up punishment, a pinch on my arm.

“Ow!” I whispered shouted, as Marcus laughed.

I don’t know *why* he’s laughing. Then again, I don’t think I’ve *ever* seen his mom smack him, pinch him, *or* pull his hair. The most she’s ever done is say his first *and* second name. At least that’s the worst she’s ever done while *I* was around. Maybe she does those other

things when I'm *not* around. Then again, maybe not. Only Marcus knows!

As we waited for Justin, Paul and Sammy to arrive, Marcus and I looked through the program. It was full of advertisements from local businesses, well wishes from family and friends, but best of all, group pictures of the cast. Erick hadn't told us what part he was playing, so we played a 'who could find Erick faster' game.

Marcus ended up finding him first. He was in a group picture with four boys, and just one girl. Erick was dressed in what seemed like a one piece, *thing*. I don't know what to call it. It's kind of like what surfers or Scooba divers wear. Just one piece of clothing. I'm not even sure what color it is, because all of the pictures are in black and white. I think it might be pink. But that's only because him, the girl, and two of the other boys have pig noses. The fourth boy has a wolf nose.

While I was scanning the picture to see if I recognized the three boys or the girl, Marcus gently nudged me with his elbow.

"What?" I asked.

Marcus pointed at *another* picture of Erick.

“That’s two for me!” he whispered, loudly, with a big grin.

“That’s not fair! I didn’t know he was playing more than one part!” I contested.

“Neither did I! I was just looking through the rest of the pictures,” Marcus explained.

In this picture, there were four boys. That’s it. Just four boys. Once again, Erick was wearing a one-piece suit, thingy, only this time he had large ears and some funky face paint. Or was it makeup? Or are they the same thing? Whatever. It doesn’t matter. I decided to look at what the other boys were wearing to try and figure out what part Erick was playing. The other boys had horns and what looked like those leg warmers that women in eighties movies wear when they were exercising. Except the ones that the other boys were wearing, were hairy. Or were they furry? Either way, I don’t exactly know what they are, but the backdrop has an old timey looking brick bridge and river painted on it.

Marcus nudged me again.

“Don’t tell me you’ve found him in *another* picture,” I begged.

“No, look!” he said, excitedly, pointing behind me.

It was Justin and his mom. They were being led down the aisle by the same woman that had offered mom and I help to find our seats. Marcus and I waved at Justin, who waved back, with equal enthusiasm. I squeezed past my mom to greet Justin, and so did Marcus.

“You had to wear a tie, too!” were Justin’s first words.

“Right!” I responded.

I asked mom if the T.J. League could all sit together, but she said that she was sure we would survive not sitting together for *one* whole show. When Marcus looked at his mom for support, she shook her head in agreement. Before Justin could ask *his* mom to back us up, Sammy flicked my ear to let us know she had arrived.

“Are you wearing—a *dress*?” Justin asked.

“Yeah, yeah. Take it in,” Sammy ordered. “It’s probably the first and last time you’ll ever see me in one.”

“I take it back. Wearing a tie’s not *that* bad,” Justin commented, quickly dodging a swing that Sammy took at him.

“Samantha!” Sammy’s mom scolded.

I know her mom didn’t say her middle name, but calling her by her *real* first name sounded just as bad.

Paul’s mom texted Justin’s mom that they were running late. Her car was at the mechanic’s and Paul’s dad had gotten home from work a little late. Even though his seats were the closest to the middle of the row, we all scooted down so that he and his mom could have the aisle seats. You know, so that they wouldn’t have to climb over everyone when they arrived. Fortunately, Paul and his mom ended up arriving *just* before the show started.

A woman, wearing an elegant dress, like people in movies wear to special dinners, welcomed us to *An Afternoon of Animal Antics*. She explained that there was no flash photography, as it could disrupt the dancers. She also informed us that a professionally recorded performance was available for sale in the lobby, during intermission and after the show. After a few more announcements, like where the emergency exits are, she concluded with ‘and we hope you enjoy the show.’

The first group to perform was mostly made up of little kids that looked like they were in kindergarten, first

or second grade, and they were all dressed up like sheep. There were also two older kids, probably my age, that acted as lead dancers. The little kids mainly copied what the bigger kids did.

Normally, when I go to Xochitl's dance recitals, it's *all* little kids. And they're mainly just following each other, or their instructor. This was *much* different. Not only was there *no* instructor on stage, there were professional lights and beautiful backdrops. It was actually kind of cute. The littlest kid, a boy, kept hiding behind one of the older kids. The more she tried to encourage him to dance *beside* her, the more he hid. She eventually left him alone and he eventually stood beside her on his own. Of course, when a boy, dressed as a wolf, dressed as a sheep, came onto the stage, the little boy hid behind the older girl again. Only this time, I think he was supposed to.

Without a pause in the show, when the first group finished their performance, they exited the stage and a single person entered. It was an older boy, probably in high school, dressed like a lion. After getting something 'caught' in his paw, he silently called out for help. At

first, it seemed like no one would come to his rescue, until a smaller boy, dressed as mouse entered. I didn't notice him at first, but after another nudge from Marcus, I recognized the boy as Erick.

Erick scurried across the stage, then did continuous turns, from one side of the stage to the other. They weren't like the stand in place pirouettes he had taught us during lunch recess. These were different. I don't know how to explain them, exactly. All I know, is that if *I* had to do what he just did, I probably would have crashed into the wall because I wouldn't have been able to stop, or I would have probably fallen off the stage. Yeah, probably one of the two.

After begging Erick to remove whatever was stuck in his paw, Erick did some more acrobatic dance moves, that somehow made me understand his feelings towards the lion. Feelings of fear. Uncertainty. And finally, compliance with the lion's request. I don't know *how* he communicated them through his dance moves, but he did!

Erick ended up dancing in one more piece before the intermission, which means there are still two more for

him to perform. At least that's what I *think*. I mean, he was in *four* different group pictures!

"So, how do you like it so far?" mom asked, as we stayed in our seats, waiting for the show to continue.

"It's pretty cool," I answered.

"Really? What do you like the most?" she inquired.

"I like how, even though there aren't any words in the music, and no one is narrating the show, I can still tell what's going on. Like I know what story they're doing. It's so weird!" I commented.

"Different," mom corrected.

"Huh?" I asked.

"Different. It's so *different*. You said weird, but I think you meant different," mom explained.

"Oh. Yeah. It's so *different*," I agreed.

"Hey, T.J.!" Justin called, as he rushed down the aisle.

"Yes?" I asked, standing up from my seat.

"Come on! They have Shout Outs that we can buy for the performers! My mom's going to buy one for all of us so we can send them to Erick!" he said, excitedly.

“Mom, may I go?” I asked.

She nodded with a smile on her face, while adjusting herself so that I could easily pass by her.

“No running!” mom ordered, as soon as I reached the aisle.

Justin and I speed walked as quickly as we could, all the way to the lobby, where Marcus, Sammy and Paul were already filling out a Shout Out.

“They have blank Shout Outs, where you could write down anything you want,” Justin explained.

They also offered some pre-prepared Shout Outs, where all you had to do was fill in the name of the performer and your own name. I was looking at the pre-prepared shout outs when the lights in the lobby dimmed and got bright again. *Twice!*

“What was *that* for?” I thought aloud.

“That means there’s only two more minutes before the show starts again,” Sammy explained.

Of *course*, she would know.

I grabbed a pre-prepared Shout Out, wrote Erick’s name at the top and my name at the bottom and handed it to the nice gentleman who was collecting them. Then the

guys and I hurried back to our seats so we wouldn't miss Erick's other performances.

Two other groups performed before Erick showed up on stage again, in a completely different costume and makeup. Uh, I mean face paint. He *looked* different! Man, I'm *definitely* asking him what it's called once this show is over.

When his group finished their performance, another group performed before Erick entered the stage again. And once again, he was in a different costume with a matching face. How did he change so fast? He was only off stage for like ten or twelve minutes!

Two more groups performed before the *entire* cast came on stage for a final group performance, and guess what? Erick was in an *entirely* new costume! Come to think of it, there have been *lots* of people who were in two or more performances. They must have *lots* of people backstage to help with costume changes and makeup. I'm starting to think that ballet take *lots* of work. *Lots* of coordination. *Lots* of practice. Ballet is *definitely* more complicated *and* enjoyable than I originally thought.

After a standing ovation, that lasted longer than any ovation I've ever been a part of, we waited outside of the auditorium with Erick's mom so that we could congratulate him on a job well done.

"Dude! Erick is a better dancer than I ever thought!" Justin exclaimed, unable to contain his excitement. "I mean, I have *no* idea how he did *half* the stuff he did!"

"I would presume that he regularly attends practice at a studio where a rigorous regiment of stretches and proper technique are the primary focus so that their athletes are in pique condition for a successful public and or competitive performance," Sammy stated.

"How in the world did you say that without taking a breath?" I asked.

"Forget *that*. The *real* question is, what in the world did she just say!" Paul asked.

"Everything she said *was* in the English language," Marcus pointed out.

"Then perhaps you would like to *translate*," Justin offered.

“She basically said that Erick practices a lot, with instructors that prepare him, *and* his peers, to be great ballet dancers,” he explained.

“Then why didn’t she just say it like that?” Paul asked.

“Perhaps I’m trying to expand your vocabulary and syntax,” Sammy said, sarcastically.

“Look! There’s Erick!” Justin shouted, waving his hands above his head for Erick to notice.

“Erick!”

“Over here!”

“We’re right here!”

Erick gave a few of his ballet friends a final hug goodbye, and signed a couple of programs from fans, before making it over to us.

“So, what did you guys think?” Erick asked.

“It was okay,” Justin answered, in his ‘eh’ voice.

Sammy shoved him and gave him a ‘wanna try that again?’ look, which caused all of us to laugh. Except for Sammy’s mom. She gave Sammy an ‘apologize for what you just did’ look but Sammy responded with a ‘why? what did I do wrong?’ look.

“Okay. Okay,” Justin tried again, “it was actually pretty cool.”

“But how in the world did you *change* so fast!” I asked, still imagining a *huge* space backstage with a personal helper for every performer. Even though I’m pretty sure that would be impossible.

“Can’t tell you,” Erick answered.

“What!”

“Why not!”

“Not cool, dude!”

“C’mon! You *have* to tell us!”

“I was wondering the same thing, too!”

“Sorry. I signed a non-disclosure agreement,” Erick explained, with a crooked smile.

“A *what*!” Justin asked.

“A non-disclosure agreement,” Sammy answered, for him. “It means that he’s not allowed to talk about certain aspects of the production, or he could face legal action.”

Most of us shared confused looks with each other, and then with Erick’s mom, who just held her hands up and a ‘don’t look at me’ expression on her face.

“Even if that’s *true*,” Paul said, breaking the awkward silence, “why wouldn’t they want you to tell us how it’s done?”

“For a *very* good reason,” was Erick’s simple answer.

“And what reason would *that* be?” Justin asked.

Erick didn’t respond right away. He just stared off into the distance and scratched his chin.

“*Well!* What reason would *that* be!” Justin repeated, a little bit stronger this time.

“It’s simple,” Erick answered, taking another pause for dramatic effect, while taking slow, ballet-like steps out of our little huddle.

I can tell that Justin and Paul are *not* enjoying this at *all*. At least that’s what the looks on their faces and body posture are saying.

“Would you care to elaborate?” Sammy asked, calmly.

Erick took one last step before grinning at us, from over his right shoulder.

“If I told you how everything was done, it would ruin the magic,” he clarified, before continuing his slow, dramatic walk away from the group.

“O-kay.”

“If you say so.”

“I could see that.”

“Understandable.”

“Why didn’t you just say that in the *first* place!”