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 my mother's lips
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 They've been
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 about **me** again.

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My mother says I'm beautiful. My father says I'll "knock 'em dead." They always say that. But sometimes their faces are taut, and my mother's lips are pale. It means they've been fighting again. All winter, I heard them in the kitchen, my father's voice low and drumming. "She just turned thirteen, Margaret! Don't even think about sending her off to New York. Understand?" My father had stuffed his arms into his gray woolen coat. I could hear little threads snapping inside the sleeves.

"Shhh. She can hear you! Listen to me, Fred. Wait," my mother had whispered, closing the door. It was November, and Tatiana, my ballet mistress, had just told me that I'd been offered a scholarship to dance with the New York City Ballet. I was the youngest dancer chosen. I'd been dancing since I was three; it was my life. "This is her *chance*. This is her big chance," my mother pleaded. "Please, Fred, listen to me."

"No. She's just a kid. A kid. And she's not going to live your life for you." I heard my mother's sharp intake of breath. I heard the door slam. Snow blew into the hallway like dandelion fluff, like wishes, and melted.

But it's summer, and I lie in the wonderful, narrow little bed under the upstairs window of the cabin, the window that faces the woods. Light comes slowly out of the woods, green-gold, until it clears the trees and becomes the nearly white-yellow light of northern mornings. Summer after summer, I've woken in this bed, under this blue blanket, this nubby bedspread with patterns of geometric stars. I've woken to the smell of *ebel skeevers*, a puffy German pancake, bubbling in the skillet, and to the sound of the Canada geese paddling up to the shore of Lake Michigan. There's always a moment of shivering when I wake; either it's cold, or I've woken happy. This morning it's happiness. I hear my mother humming in the kitchen and my father laugh.

My mother's black hair is freshly braided and falls in one smooth tassel down the back of her lavender terrycloth robe. She has the sleeves rolled up past her elbows, and her forearms are speckled with flour. She's humming "The Dance of the Sugarplum Fairy." Before I know it, I pirouette, bumping into my father's shoulder.

"Sorry, Daddy," I say and kiss him on his whiskered cheek. I love how he looks during summer vacations. His hair is uncut, tousled, and he's often unshaven. Still, he's so handsome, he looks like a king on vaca-

tion.

“Hey, Kat,” he says, pulling me down into his lap. “How about a dozen *ebel skeevers*? You look like a starved kitten.”

“No, I don’t,” I say and pull a big pout. He reaches for my lower lip but I leap away. Then I do a small *tour de jeté* toward my mother. She’s filling a plate with another batch of *skeevers*. She smells like blueberries and soap. I lean into her side. Her body is lean and supple still. Even as she turns from the stove to the table, I can see her grace. I can’t believe she ever quit dancing. I can’t believe she thought she wasn’t good enough.

“Mmmmm, Katherine. Morning, beautiful,” she murmurs. She takes my two hands and I go up into an *arabesque*. She studies my face a moment and then lets go. I wobble a little, but then come down in *plié*. I lean over toward the yellow china plate heaped with *ebel skeevers* and pluck one up. I hold it over my head, the way Clara held the nutcracker over her head in Act I. I eat, and *bourrée* around the kitchen.

“Margaret, baby, I think I’ll head out fishing. Get us some whitefish for supper,” my father says to my mother and then yawns.

“I hate fish!” I interrupt. “Besides, how can you stand to see that hook all caught in their mouths and have them bleed all over you? Then how can you eat ’em?” I say. He just looks at me.

“Fried,” he says.

My mother sighs. She is lifting a cup of flour. I turn from my father. I leap, and my outstretched right hand jars my mother’s elbow. The flour flies

from her hand and cascades over all of us. For a moment I have the crazy memory of my friend Anna and me when we were about eight years old. We

were baking strawberry-rhubarb pie. We decided we didn’t look like cooks, so we dumped flour over our heads.

I am about to laugh when my father shouts, “That’s it! That is *it!*” He stands up and makes himself look huge. “She dances day and night. She eats nothing. She looks sick. She just dances. And Margaret, if you think she’s ever going to New York to dance, you’re crazy.”

“Fred. Oh, Fred. Please,” my mother says. She trips over a peeling square of faded burgundy lino-

leum, recovers, and puts her hand on his shoulder. Then my father is shaking himself free and shouting some more, but, strangely, I don’t hear him. It is as if he is speaking underwater. My mother’s arms seem to float. I back toward the door.

I’ve heard this argument too many times before. I remember the first time I heard them fighting about me, my mother wanting me to dance, my father wanting me to be a kid. I hadn’t heard them fight like that before. Now, it seems that it is a sound I’ve heard forever, like the sound of cicadas at dusk.

It’s ironic how beautiful the morning still is, though. I see a seagull tilting in the wind. The sun turns the wet backs of boulders gold. I turn to take a last look at my parents through the window. My mother’s arm is raised, and her black hair has become unbraided. It’s tossing about, and, topped by the flour, it looks like whitecaps on the lake in a storm.

I begin to run. I leap stones, dodge tall stands of beach grass, until I am down at the sandy shore of the lake. My father’s blue kayak, beached and overturned, is in my path. I stop. He used to take me out in this kayak when I was younger. He held me in his lap and swept across the water, whooping like an Indian. I bend down and flip the kayak in the sand. I feel the muscles in my shoulders burn. He always wanted me to lift and push, use up energy, run, feel the kind of endless energy he felt in his own body. Dancing was a slow lethargy to him. He lost patience with my *adagios* in the sand. I push the kayak toward the water. I am not thinking; I am pushing hard, using my muscles.

At last, I slide it onto the glassy blue surface of the lake. The water is cool and murky. I climb into the slim blue of the kayak. The damp, sandy feel of the canvas cover on my bare legs reminds me of other summers when my mother waved from the shore and my father made ever-wilder turns. I grasp the rough oak paddle and plunge it fiercely into the water. The boat glides swiftly forward. I whisk along the shore, occasionally beaching myself.

I dig the paddle into the sand and shallow waters with quick, angry stabs. With each thrust, I hear my own terrible and sweet response to them whenever they order me to do what they want: “Fine.” Deadly sweet. “Fine. Fine. Just fine.” It gets me beyond the breakers.

The water is the color of my mother’s ring: a deep sapphire. It ripples around the kayak and spreads around the paddle in ever-widening rings. A seagull bobs on the swells like a stick of sun-bleached driftwood. I stare down into the dark water. It is pierced by shafts of uncertain sunlight. I can almost see my mother and father under the water, still fight-

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ing.

“She’s going to be a regular kid—eat hot dogs, fish with the old man. Just because you couldn’t be a dancer, you want to force her to do it for you!” My father shows his teeth as he shouts.

“Fred,” my mother is saying. “You know she loves it. She loves to dance. She’s good. She’s very, very good.” A wavelet twists like her hands. “Let her go. Stop being selfish, and let her go to New York.”

My father sputters back, “*Selfish!* Who’s *really* the selfish one, Margaret?”

I plunge the paddle
fiercely into the
water and **whisk**
along with quick,
angry stabs.

I turn away from the water,
from their
darkening
faces, and
watch the
horizon. A
cormorant
drifts across the
sky, black wings
outstretched. A
feather falls, spiraling

down in geometric curves. Sprays of water arc up from my paddle. The sun, high in the sky, is a bowl of pears.

I can see myself in New York, dancing in the pear-colored light that falls between tall buildings. When I got the scholarship to the New York City Ballet, I felt a light around my body, a palpable light that touched my skin. Of course I’d go. I’d lean exhausted against the bar in torn tights and frayed ballet shoes along with the best dancers in the world. Of course I’d go. Of course. The paddle dips again and again. Of course. Of course.

The sound of water droplets hitting the kayak seems like the ticking of a clock. I think of my favorite time on the digital clock: 12:34. I love precision, the precision of dance. Holding the paddle straight across my lap, I lean backwards and stretch. My vertebrae grate against each other. The displacement of my weight tips the kayak. It rocks. My hand pushes out and plunges into water as I drive in my paddle. The kayak pauses, then rights itself. I close my eyes in relief.

When I open my eyes again, everything seems different. A far-off rock, carved by the wind and tide, looks like my father’s face. I can nearly hear it speak.

“Hey, Kat. Hey, Kat, Kat, Kat, at, at, t, t,” it echoes. The trees seem to float at the edge of the horizon. “Hey, Kat. Kat!” The voice still echoes.

“Be quiet!” I scream. I close my eyes and shake my head from side to side. The trees are gone, as is the voice. I’m still trembling. To calm myself, I recite the body positions. *Écarté, à la seconde . . .* When I

look up, I see a cloud, sinewy and coiling like a snow leopard. I love the jungle cats, their grace and reserve. Balanchine, the famous master of the ballet, was known as The Cat Man. *Pas de chat. Pas de chat.*

I realize there is no longer the rhythm of waves against the kayak. I look up and see the sky gone a flat, sunless gray. Everything is ominously calm. There’s a storm coming. I breathe deeply and tell myself, “It’s all right. It’s all right, Kat. Just paddle back to shore. It’ll be all right.” But I can’t see the shore. A fog is rolling toward me. I begin to paddle in a panic. I turn in circles. Now I’ve lost all sense of direction. The clouds grow darker. A wind begins to blow, buffeting the kayak. Waves rise up. To go parallel to the waves, I know from my father’s countless warnings, means death. So I rise and fall in the same place, wave after gray wave, iron horses galloping, galloping, going nowhere.

I look around, desperate. In the distance, I see a pale light. It’s the lighthouse! It’s the lighthouse on Gull Island. I vaguely remember my father saying Gull Island was about three miles out. I could go there. I could go there and . . . but I can’t think further than simply getting there. On clear, sunny days I could see the tall rock lighthouse, like a solitary skyscraper. I’d look there and dream of New York.

My head **fills** with
colors. I can’t **breathe!**
Water is holding
me **down.**

Rain begins to fall, fat, heavy drops. Everything becomes a terrifying medley of rain and waves and wind. Squinting, I see the light again. It seems icy and clear, like the windows in my mother’s bedroom on winter mornings. Between the two windows there’s a framed sepia portrait of Isadora Duncan. Beneath it, in Gothic calligraphy, is inscribed, “I’ve found the secret of life in dance. Follow me, and no one shall ever die again.”

I’ve lost control of the kayak, and the prow bucks. I spin wildly. A huge parallel wave rides toward me. I hold my breath, and I’m under. I’m under the wave or the whole surface of the water, and my paddle is being wrenched from me. I am overwhelmed by a blind, slow panic. My head fills with spreading colors, blues, greens, and an awful iridescent yellow: grotesque dancers in acrid costumes. I can’t breathe. *I can’t breathe!* I am fighting, my parents are fighting, and there is only the black-green water holding me down. I desperately push my pad-

dle, and, with a sickening lurch, the kayak rights itself. I am panting, limp, and the rain comes on.

Wearily, I begin to paddle again. Right, left, and right again. A combination: *chassé, glissade, ensemble*; and to the left, *chassé, glissade, ensemble*. Lightning momentarily bathes everything in an incandescent blue, and thunder breaks. Applause, or disap-

approval? My dark hair hangs across my face in lank swathes. Once, there was a shadow slicing the living room floor, and my mother stood to the right side, my

father, to the other. And now I look neither left nor right. My mother wants me to live. My father wants me to live. I paddle on.

My mother gave up ballet because she thought she would never be good enough. Each day, I've seen her trying to be good enough. Strong enough. Loving enough. It's as if giving up dance made her have to do everything else better. I'm not giving up. I'm pad-

dling, and I'm not giving up. There's the light on Gull Island. It seems to flicker through the rain and then grow dim. I squint my eyes and aim the kayak toward it. The cold is making me numb, but I'm paddling. My arms ache, and I'm paddling. Daddy, I'm paddling. Light, Mother, dance, I'm paddling.

Suddenly the rain stops. This is one of the quick summer squalls that pass over Lake Michigan. The air is the strange greenish color that comes after a storm. Light begins to diffuse through the sky, like a flashlight under a blanket. And there, standing tall before me, is the lighthouse on the small rocky island named for the gulls that are its only inhabitants. One gull cries from the shore, lifting his long throat, "Kat! Kat!"

My paddle hits sand. With one last push, the kayak scrapes onto the shore. My shoulders slump. I let my head hang down, and my breath leaves me in one slow sigh. The beach is pocked by rain, and sodden feathers are clumped at the tideline. Up close, the lighthouse is crude and crumbling. I take off my wet shoes and watch the sky clear. A sepia light spreads across the sand. On the horizon, I can see my father's speedboat sending out its white wake. I do the only thing I can: I stand, I open my arms, and I dance. ★

**My mother wants
me to live.** My
father wants me to live.
I paddle on.



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Autumn Song

A splash of color on the trees
A gay ballet of swirling leaves
The sky a deeper shade of blue
Mornings cool and drenched with dew
A golden glaze on the countryside
Big pumpkins in the cornfields hide
Bright crimson sumac sway and nod
To yellow waves of goldenrod
Weather refreshing, crisp and cool
Children marching off to school
The crickets' symphony up all night
A harvest moon, stars shining bright
Bonfires flicker, shorter days
Nature speaks in countless ways
To tell us summertime is o'er
Lovely autumn's here once more!

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