Sketch

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Stages

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Dance, when you’re broken open.
Dance, if you’ve torn the bandage off.
Dance in the middle of the fighting.
Dance in your blood.
Dance, when you are perfectly free.

-Rumi

I slid pale pink tights over my pure white legs. Another day at work, with a matinee performance of *Swan Lake*, was about to begin. The dressing rooms were lush at the Opera House Theatre. The mirrors, above the individual dressing tables, were lined with hundreds of rose-colored bulbs. The beige carpet beneath our feet was soft and thick. Plush burgundy wing backed chairs made us feel like princesses even though we were only corps de ballet members, the peasants of the ballet world. Immaculately clean showers, stocked with floral scented soaps and shampoos, waited for the end of the show to soothe our exhausted bodies. Twenty-four dancers lined the room in various states of undress and mood. The heavy air smelled of stale sweat, hair spray, and baby powder. Voices were hushed and low. Everyone deals with pre performance jitters differently. It is best just to stay out of each other’s way.

I rewrapped the heating pad around my right calf muscle. Just a slight strain. I went through my checklist of “before show musts.” My waist length ebony hair was slicked back with gobs of hair gel into a tight bun held together with a myriad of bobby pins. Each of my ten toes was wrapped up with masking tape to prevent further blisters to my already, calloused and battered feet. I penciled in my right eyebrow, in a careful attempt to match it with its partner on the other side. Long false eyelashes underscored heavily plum shaded lids. I checked for lipstick on the teeth. It’s my pet peeve. A monotone voice announced over the speaker, “Thirty minutes ‘til curtain, dancers, thirty minutes.”

Better go to the bathroom. I always have to pee right before a show. Nerves. I headed for the toilet, cautiously avoiding the sea of shapeless black dance bags that spilled over with hairbrushes, Advil Bottles, granola bars, and holey legwarmers. I caught my reflection in the wall of mirrors, naked to the waist and tights down to my toes. Whoa, there goes one shockingly white, tit-less, skinny chick, I thought. These attributes are actually considered
very desirable in a ballet dancer; but every so often, I would like to look like a woman, you know, voluptuous and curvy. Today, however, I was to be an enchanted swan maiden. Gotta love those fairy tales.

In the stall next to me, as I tinkled away, I heard retching and dry heaving. Must be Miranda. “Hey, Miranda, are you okay?” I asked.

“I…I think I ate some bad sushi last night,” she croaked.

Whatever, I thought. She was just purging away the bagel of sin she ate for breakfast. Anorexics and bulimics are rampant in this business, like starved wildcats clawing their way up through the ranks. In my experience, pursuing that route only leads to extinction.

“Do you want a sip of soda?” I offered.

“No, I’m cool. Be out in a minute,” she said as I heard the sound of bile plopping into the toilet water. I flushed and got out of there.

The costume ladies were flitting around trying to get every girl in her costume and ready to go. These old biddies clucked like mother hens tending their chicks.

“There you are, Cecily! Come here and let me hook you in,” Miss Bea exclaimed, frantically waving her plump arms. She was wearing a billowing muumuu in an attempt to conceal her obesity. She had seven different muumuus, one for each day of the week, with a headscarf to match. Today was lime green Sunday. The skin on her round face reminded me of rising pizza dough, overtaking her pug nose and beady brown eyes.

“Let’s see how this fits today,” she said as I stepped into the long white tutu, easing the elastic straps over my shoulders. Miss Bea has worked for the company for thirty-one years and takes her job very seriously. She gets upset if a dancer gains or loses even one pound, because then the costume will not fit like a glove. I heard the wheezing of her asthmatic breath behind me as she placed each little hook into its own eyelet. She put her hands on my shoulders and turned me around, inspecting the costume as if it were crime scene evidence. “Will do,” Miss Bea declared and waddled off to help another girl.

I carefully sat down in my chair, as to not wrinkle the tulle of my skirt, and fished pointe shoes out of my bag. My feet were still really swollen from last night’s show; I hoped I could get my feet into them. I wrapped a folded brown paper towel around my toes, for extra “protection”, and shoved my right foot into the stiff shoe. I wrestled with it for a while, like the stepsisters from Cinderella. Triumphantlly, I got it on. My foot puffed out like a stuffed sausage. Ow. My big toenail was bruised black and blue, almost ready to fall off. Maybe I will have the doctor cut it off after the performance. The left shoe went on easier. I tied the ribbons in a knot,
tucked them in, and sprayed them with hairspray so they would not come out. We were fined fifty dollars if they did. Thou shall not have loose ribbons! I threw on my favorite zip up hooded sweatshirt, fleece sweatpants; thick woolen socks over my feet, and headed toward backstage where it was usually meat locker cold.

I shoved open the heavy metal door. Brrr! I put my hood on, carefully to not “ruffle the feathers” of my headpiece, and made my way to the barres which were set up in the corner so we could do our exercises and keep our muscles warm. One of the passing stage hands noticed my goose bumps and said, “Don’t worry, hon, we just turned the heat on.” Great, the theatre will be nice and toasty by the end of the show.

I sat down and began to stretch out, observing the familiar activities that were going on. Grey haired, pot bellied stage hands loafed around waiting for their cue to fly the backdrops in and out. Musicians, decked out in their performance black, made their way to the pit. The principle dancers, Yuri and Nina, were practicing some lifts and partnered pirouettes on the curtain drawn stage. They were the Russian married couple that joined the company the previous year. I have to say I really liked them. They led fairly normal lives—they had a little daughter, were grossly in love, and didn’t have huge egos like most of the Russian dancers do. Plus, technically what they could do with their bodies was phenomenal. The height Yuri can reach in his jumps is, well, watch out Michael Jordan! Nina is incredibly strong and can whip off seven clean pirouettes on pointe, no problem. Maybe someday…

My best friend and roommate, Beth, joined me on the floor. She looks just like a fairy out of a childhood storybook. She is tiny, only four feet, eleven and a half inches tall (that half inch means a lot to her!), making her the smallest girl in the company. Beth’s hair is that “almost white” blond and her eyes are a sparkling blue. “How’s your calf muscle?” she asked in her wispy voice.

“OK,” I answered, giving my leg a little rub. I just love this girl. Beth is so real, not caught up in all the ballet drama and BS. She is going to school to be a patent lawyer. She loves to dance, but it is not her life. Beth can take it or leave it, despite that fact that she is extremely talented. Plus, she is loyal; she won’t run me over in the parking lot if I get a better part than her, like most other female dancers would (or would at least fantasize about).

I enjoyed getting backstage way before a performance started, to immerse myself in the magic of it all. Contagious anticipation and adrenaline were pumping through the dancers, musicians, and technical staff, all prepared due to countless hours of planning, preparation, and effort to
produce one matchless moment in time.

Wallace, our anal stage manager, held up his stop watch and called out, “Places.” I was ready to rock and roll.

The quiet rumble of the audience hushed as the house lights went to black. A moment of reverence before the conductor took his stand, and then the eruption of applause. The orchestra tuned itself to the oboe’s sweet familiar A note. Silence. Then Tchaikovsky’s overture began to unfold—haunting and passionate, foreshadowing a tale of forbidden love, treachery, and loss. I closed my eyes, as if in prayer, allowing the music to wash over me, to move me.

I then quickly shed my excess layers of clothing and tossed them far away from the wings. I dipped my shoes into the wooden rosin box smashing the little golden nuggets into a fine powder to prevent me from slipping on stage. I took my place towards the end of the line of the twenty-four dancers; some counting music, some saying a quick prayer, some reviewing steps. I shook my head energetically from side to side to hear and feel the sharp snaps of tendons over neck bones. Deep breath in and slow exhale out. I jumped up and down and side to side like a boxer entering the ring. Behind me I saw the stagehands pulling down on the ropes to bring up the curtain. Here we go.

The blackness of the wings gave way to the blue-gelled overhead and footlights framing the audience wrapped in their blanket of darkness. My arms, arced in the shape of swan’s wings, joined my feet in a fleeting run, following my flock in its formation onto the stage. Muscle memory took over as each step, head placement, and body position came naturally, one flowing into the next, a river rushing over rocks. Drops of sweat rolled down my forehead and onto the long lashes, as my muscles began to feel the exertion of their effort. I heard my breathing pick up its pace along with the music’s tempo. Yes, I was dancing for myself, but I progressed with the others; as each movement, down to each finger, was precisely identical through much meticulous practice. This experience produces a sense of communion, which (for me) is highly more addictive than any drug on the planet. On the stage there is no pain, no past, no future, just one ecstatic moment of wholeness that cannot be captured, only reveled in.

The roar of the applause was deafening as the entire cast took their final bow. I glanced up to observe the curtain’s slow descent, muffling the noise, and bringing to close another fairytale. My heart ached. I craved more.

“Giiirrrrl, are you workin’ tonight?” asked Alejandro, as I came out of
the dressing room showered smelling flowery.

“Unfortunately, yes,” I answered our companies’ most flamboyant gay member from Venezuela. He so wanted to be a woman, it was kind of sad. Give him a week of PMS and I think he would change his mind. He came up behind me and wrapped his arms around my flat chest and crooned in my ear with his deeply accented voice, “Call me and tell me what you are wearing. You know, if you were a man, I would ask you to marry me.”

Gee, thanks.

He kissed my neck then sauntered down the corridor, pulling up his designer jeans, his hips swaying like the pageant contestant he was (first runner up Miss Gay Illinois last year).

“You know, you are my inspiration! I will come see you tonight,” Alejandro exclaimed. He turned around waved goodbye with one hand, rubbed his left nipple through his thick sweater with the other, while his tongue seductively licked his lips. He winked and walked out the door.

I have to say, my job is never dull.

I hung around in the hallway waiting for Beth to get her stuff together. I was going to drop her off at her favorite coffee shop where she liked to study and go over notes with her fellow law students. After that I was headed for my favorite place to drown out my post performance blues, Ralph’s Greet and Eat Diner, where they served the best burgers in the city. I guess I was a little biased; my mother used to work there. Dancers poured out of the dressing rooms with each group going to their favorite post performance destinations. The Russians were headed to their apartment building to eat some rare steak, toss back a couple of vodka shots, and smoke unfiltered cigarettes. The druggies were off to somewhere (I don’t want to know where) to do some speed, or whatever was available, to keep the high going. The “bunheads” were going home to eat sprouts, tofu cheese, and diet sodas, resting until tomorrow. The straight and gay couples paired off hand in hand to just be together. I dreaded having to work tonight.

“Cecily, I am impressed with you,” voiced the ballet mistress, Fiona Mercer. “You have improved every single performance this run. Keep it up.”

I straightened up like a girl in Catholic grade school, nodded, and thanked her sincerely. She pursed her lips into a tight smile and brusquely walked away; her high heels click-clicking down the hallway. You would have thought that I had just won the Publisher’s Clearinghouse Sweepstakes, I was so thrilled! The Ice Queen doesn’t hand out compliments like that every day. Dancers are starved for positive feedback, so that any given is like gold. I would hold it close. I would thrive on this one for a long time. I have
been in the corps de ballet for three years. Maybe if I kept busting my butt I could work my way up to demi soloist, the next rung on the ladder of ballet hierarchy. And maybe I wouldn’t have to sleep with the director to do it, like quite a few members (both male and female) have done.

Beth finally emerged bundled up in her huge ski jacket, looking like the Michelin tire man. She was always last. She had this obsessive-compulsive thing going on with her dance bag. Every item had to be placed in it a certain way. Then rechecked. It was quite maddening actually, but hey, if that was the worst of her vices, bring it on. She caught me beaming.

“You are never this happy when you have to work nights. What happened?” she questioned.

“I’ll tell you in the car. Let’s go. I’m starving,” I said, digging the keys out of my pocket.

Frigid February wind whipped against our bodies as we hurried to the parking lot. We loaded all of our stuff into my ragged black Toyota Camry, which I lovingly named Lizzie. This car was one of the few items my mother had left for me to inherit when she died two years ago. It didn’t look so hot, but it kept running. She turned over with ease. Good girl. Beth took out her clove cigarettes and lit one up. I cranked the heat, cracked the windows, and told her what Ms. Mercer had said.

“See?” she exclaimed encouragingly while carefully directing the smoke out her window. “I told you that you wouldn’t have to work your night job much longer. You are good and getting better! People do notice.”

I nodded. Too much hope can be a bad thing.

I pulled in front of the coffee shop and let Beth out. “Have fun studying,” I said.

Shoving the door shut with her little body she gave me a sympathetic smile, then ran to the entrance to beat the cold.

Fortunately, I found a parking space right across from Ralph’s. The rush of warm air comforted me as I stepped into the small diner that was more a home to me than any other. Familiar smells of strong coffee, apple pie, and spicy chili evoked memories of my mother who was a waitress here for all of my twenty-one years.

“Hey, darlin,” called out Mildred from behind the counter, “I’ve missed your face! The usual?”

“But of course!” I replied, dropping myself onto the swivel chair, shedding my coat and hat. My mouth watered instantly at the thought of my meal: a greasy quarter pound burger loaded with onions, pickles, jalapeno peppers, double the cheese, onion rings, tall glass of cold milk, and
a slab of chocolate cake. Paradise on a plate.

“I swear you get skinnier every time I see you! Are you taking care of yourself?” demanded Mildred.

“As much as I know how,” I answered, wrapping my ice cold hands around the mug of steaming coffee she placed before me.

“Look at me, Cess,” Mildred said in her raspy voice. I peered into her soft green eyes. “You call me if you need anything. I worry, you know. Your mama wanted me to look after you and I mean to do just that.” She tapped me on the head with her order pad for emphasis and turned to answer the ding of the pick up bell.

Mildred was my mother’s best friend and coworker who had to be pushing eighty or so, because Ralph, her son and diner owner, just celebrated his sixtieth. Ralph was a reformed Hell’s Angels biker, who joined Bikers for Christ. The hole-in-the-wall diner was decorated with posters of vintage Harleys and pictures of Jesus. His clientele was an odd mixture of both bikers and born agains. I watched Mildred zip around the diner with grace and ease. She could run this place blind if she had to. Her hair, dyed a garish red, escaped her loose topknot in wild ringlets. Her face looked like an overripe apple, lined with scores of wrinkles, a product of her love affair with her tanning bed. Mildred wore her signature Pepto-Bismol pink lipstick, light blue waitress uniform, and white support hose. She brought me my food and left me alone to enjoy it.

My right big toe began to throb. Damn. I suppose I should go to my apartment and take care of it before this evening. I finished off the last of the cake crumbs and put my coat on. The place was starting to fill up with the dinner crowd, their coats dusted with new snowflakes. I found Mildred and gave her a big hug, “Tell Ralph I said ‘Hello’!” He was off delivering some lunch leftovers to the Salvation Army soup kitchen.

“I will, dear. Come by and see us more often. We miss you,” she replied, dangling a peppermint in front of my face and smiling. My onion breath was that bad, huh? I guess so.

The temperature was dropping. Snowflakes sparkled and swirled in the streetlights. It took me ten minutes to get to the ancient brownstone apartment building Beth and I called home. I decided to take the elevator instead of hiking up five flights of stairs. I unlocked the heavy wooden door to apartment number 502, closed it immediately and engaged the two deadbolt locks. We have some seedy neighbors. I flipped on the light switch and thought it would be best to keep my coat on. The radiator hissed away, but it didn’t feel very warm in there. What century were we living
in anyway? I plopped myself into the pink and green floral sofa, courtesy of the Goodwill Store on Division Street, and kicked off my wet boots. My mother’s cat, Horatio, a big fat black and white fellow, appeared from nowhere and took his rightful place on my lap and purred emphatically. Nice leg warmer. My mother always wanted a rat terrier because of their “smarts and zest for life,” but our building didn’t allow dogs, so she settled for Horatio.

My mom, she was something. If I had to sum her up in one word it would be eccentric. My eyes filled with hot tears, yet my mouth couldn’t resist breaking into a quivering smile, when I thought of her. Guinevere Marie Hawkins was born in the village of Brighton, on the southern coast of England, an only child. Her father was abusive and her mother submissive so she escaped into stories of Camelot, the Canterbury Tales, and eventually into (the love of her life) Shakespeare. At age fourteen she took a job cleaning fish at a local market so she could save enough money to escape to the United States and become a stage actress. “Guinney” was not what you would call a pretty girl. She was tall, big boned, and had mousy brown hair, and pasty white skin. But, as she would say, “I had moxie!” After she finished high school, she bought a plane ticket to Chicago and stayed with a female cousin she had never met. She got a job at the Greet and Eat and performed at local dinner theatres. One day she met a Vietnamese businessman who stopped in the diner to ask for directions to his hotel. They fell immediately in lust and (voila!) I was born, Cecily Lin Hawkins, her little British spring roll. Apparently mother picked out my name just about as crazily as everything else she did. My first name was after the character of her favorite British soap star, and she chose my middle name because it sounded “nice and Asian.” Fu Tran was married with five children back in his home country. He returned there never knowing I existed.

Life was interesting with Guinney. She enrolled me, her shy, grey-eyed child in ballet lessons at age three, so I would never feel awkward and clumsy like she did when she was young. Fortunately for her I loved it. By the time I was eleven years old I was dancing six days a week, thoroughly obsessed. That gave her nights free to perform in mediocre versions of *Our Town* at whatever dinner theatre that would take her. Growing up was like one big Shakespeare festival; I was constantly pummeled with facts and quotes about The Bard. A few of mom’s favorite quotes were, “Sweet are the uses of adversity,” from *As You Like It*, and “Nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so,” from her beloved *Hamlet*. She used to declare, “Who needs the Bible? The world has Shakespeare!” We even celebrated William’s birthday, April 23rd. So there you have it.
My mom was a chatterbox, could talk to anyone, about anything; people loved listening to her British accent. I guess that’s why she was such a great waitress. She asked too many questions of my few friends, so I rarely brought them over to our apartment. Plus the place always smelled like fried fish (which I was surprised she still liked after working in a fish market) and this patchouli/cedar incense she burned to mask Horatio’s litter box, which she swore only needed to be scooped once a week. Mom and Mildred had this side business going on during the holiday season knitting Christmas sweaters for cats and dogs. They monogrammed the outfits and decorated them with lots of jingle bells. Believe it or not, people actually bought those gaudy things. During the months of November and December the Greet and Eat doubled as a doggie/kitty fashion boutique. I cleaned the dance studio and washed dishes at the diner to cover my dance tuition. Eventually we saved up enough money to buy the used Camry, so we didn’t have to take the bus or the El all the time. That was a grand day.

When I was little, I used to lie in bed at night wondering about my father, like what kind of man her was, if he was still alive, what he did in his spare time. Mom used to say that I inherited his quiet nature, fine bone structure, and passion for peppery foods. From her side of the family I acquired my stubbornness, tall stature, and love for fantasy and the theatre. I have never met my mother’s parents; they were closed subjects. Being alone now, I plan to visit every single one of them and piece together the fragments of the chapters of my mother’s life. Mom died two years ago on the street, the day after New Year’s. Massive heart failure. No one from her family came to the funeral. I’m sure that was fine with her. I found my father’s address written on a piece of notebook paper, in my mother’s stage makeup case, rolled up inside a plastic toothbrush holder. I am saving money (thus my night job) to buy plane tickets to Vietnam and England when we are off this summer; and while I am in Europe I plan to audition for as many ballet companies as I can. Maybe I will get lucky.

A slam of a door down the hallway shook me into reality. “You bastard! Get out and don’t come back!” a lady screamed. Yep, apartment 507. Unfortunately for us he would be. I had to hurry. My costume bag was already packed and I Naired all the hair off of my lower body last night. I put some food in Horatio’s bowl, grabbed a Diet Coke out of the fridge, and found some Ambesol I would have to put on my big toe when I got there. The flurries of snow had turned into the large fluffy sort. At least three inches covered my car. Who in the hell wants to patron the Xotika Bar and Lounge in this kind of weather? You would be surprised. I only worked there every two or three weeks. My “regulars” liked it; as the old saying goes,
absence makes the heart grow fonder.

I had to drive slowly, visibility was pretty bad. I pulled into the narrow alleyway reserved for the dancers, and put Lizzie into park. I rang the doorbell, experienced a full body shiver, and waited for Brian to open the door. He swung it open for me, finally, and flashed his brilliant smile.

“Hello, Butterfly. Your wings ready to freeze off?”

“Ha, ha, ha,” I answered, returning his smile. “It’s good to see you.”

Brian was the security guard/bouncer for the club. He was an ex Marine, with a buzz cut and buff body to prove it. He was going to Northwestern to be a radiologist; this job and his GI bill paid the way.

“Here, let me take your bag,” he offered. Brian was originally from Mobile, Alabama and had that Southern charm and hospitality thing going on. He walked me down the dank hallway to the dressing room. I followed; my calf muscle began to seize up.

“You OK?” asked Brian, his sharp blue eyes looked down at mine.

“Yeah, I had a performance this afternoon and my body hurts. Would you get me three aspirin and one shot? Please?” I asked.

“For you Butterfly, yes,” he replied, handing me my bag. Off he went on his mission. Brian was a good guy: polite, kind, and sincere. He knew my story, my real name, and was a person I felt I could confide in. We dated briefly. One night he broke down and confessed that he was confused about his sexuality. That kind of doused any flame I had for him, but I do consider him a good friend. As good a one you can have in a place like this. He’s got my back, and for that I am grateful. I pushed on the dressing room door.

“Hey, don’t track all that wet snow in here! It’s making the floor all slippery. Do you want us all to fall down and get hurt?!” spat Roxy, who sat naked in a plastic chair, her tits sagged down to her protruding belly.

Actually, the thought had crossed my mind on occasion. She was five months pregnant with her fourth child. Tie the tubes and put some clothes on. I sat down in the only available seat next to her. The club crammed six people into this little room that smelled of mold. A rickety clothes rack stood in one corner packed full of various costumes, next to an old porcelain sink that always dripped. A row of mirrors was duct taped to the grimy white wall above the long dressing table and was lit with fluorescent lights that flickered on and off erratically.

Sherry came out the small closet bathroom wearing only her cut off navy sweatpants, took her seat to my left, and admired her implanted double Ds in the mirror. She was our Pamela Anderson wanna be with bleach blond hair, an obnoxiously deep tan, and curvy figure. Sherry appealed to a whole different crowd than I did, so she did not consider me much of a threat. Her
type attracted the frat boys, the bachelor party men, and the middle aged married. My more eclectic followers ranged from those who dug the Kate Moss type, to the Goths, to those with a fetish for Asians, to the pedophiles.

“Hey, hon, how are you doin’?” she asked, while applying fuchsia lipstick to her pouting lips, never once removing her eyes from the mirror.

“Fine,” I murmured placing my makeup case on the counter. As if you care. I kept pretty much to myself here; I didn’t get involved. I think Brian spread some rumor about me having a black belt in karate, or something crazy like that, so they all leave me alone.

“Oh girls, what shall I wear tonight? What’ll make them cum right in their pants?” cooed Sherry, as she lazily spread open her legs and propped them up on the dressing table. I

Isis, this new girl from Mozambique, strode over and crouched down behind Sherry’s chair, reached around and began fondling Sherry’s breasts with her long, dark fingers. Poor girl doesn’t know what she is in for. Isis has only worked here for two weeks; sported a lean, athletic physique and had smooth skin the color of dark chocolate. Sherry loved playing with the fresh ones and has worked here ever since graduating as cheer captain from high school six years ago. She lives this.

“Come on,” purred Isis, “I have something that will make tonight more fun.” Sherry stood up and ran her fuchsia colored nail down Isis’ bare back.

“I’m in. Anyone else” asked Sherry, scanning the room for takers. When no one answered she said, “Losers,” and went to Isis’ corner to do a line of coke off of a make up mirror.

I pulled out all the jars of makeup I needed and arranged them in front of me. I began with a black eyebrow pencil drawing a curved line on my right cheek close to my nose, up to my eye, onto my forehead, then in to my hairline. I was going to complete and fill in an outline of a butterfly wing that covered the majority of the right side of my face. It was my signature, my gimmick. My stage name here was Madame Butterfly, from the opera by Puccini. I carefully colored it the outline with scarlet, black, and gold face paint. I applied foundation to the rest of my face, put on gold eye shadow, my fake lashes, and painted on crimson red lipstick. I brushed through my hair, freeing it off of tangles, and unzipped my costume bag.

“Hey, is Roxy in there? Babe, you’re up. Get a move on! Ginger is almost done and I don’t want the boys getting soft. Ya hear me?” yelled Scott the manager, banging on the door.

“Jesus, I’m going as fast as I can! Be out in a sec,” Roxy belted back. “Asshole,’ she muttered under her breath. She had on her signature S&M pleather number. The straps of material that criss crossed her round stomach
looked almost comical. He had shoved her boobs into a Madonna type bustier, literally on the verge of bursting out. Roxy picked up her whip and fluffed out her brunette bob. Her large thighs were mottled with cellulite that reminded me of cheese curds. There should be some kind of law against this.

I took off my sweater, boots, and jeans. I slipped on a red G-string that contrasted with my pale skin. I put on a sheer, sleeveless white kimono and over it, a black silk kimono. Both were cut short, just enough to cover my derriere. I look down at my toenail pathetically holding on by the cuticle. I pulled it back like a soda can tab, squeezed Ambesol over the raw nail bed to numb the pain, pressed it back down, and taped it up. There. My calf muscle screamed at me for yanking on my thigh high black leather boots with five-inch stiletto heels. Where was Brian? I sprayed my entire body with the perfumed oil I always use here, a combination of jasmine and Egyptian musk. They say our sense of smell triggers memory responses quicker, more vividly, than the other four. Tools of the trade.

Sherry bounced out the door sporting her fuchsia lace teddy. She throws it all out there right away, hard-core T and A. I don’t reveal everything too soon; it ruins the mystery, the fantasy. I made them work for it. Opening the dressing room door, I almost ran into Brian.

“Here you are. Sorry, I took so long. Some idiot decided it would be a good idea to smash his buddy’s head open with a beer bottle,” he explained handing me an exceptionally large shot of Jamaican rum and aspirin per request. “They’re rowdy tonight. Must be the weather.”

I normally don’t drink except for an occasional glass of merlot. But in this place, a little haze is welcome. Cheers.

“Thanks,” I said handing him the empty glass. “Tell Morris I want to use “When Doves Cry, okay?”

“Sure,” answered Brian who paused before saying, “I know it doesn’t mean much coming from me, but you look incredibly beautiful tonight. Take ‘em for all they’re worth.”

I stood in the dim, cramped area behind the stage while Sherry finished her tease to “Paradise City” by Guns ‘n Roses. I used to love that band until she got a hold of them. I warmed up my muscles and stretched out. It would be pretty sad if I got injured doing this crap. I heard their hooting and yelling, “Yeah, baby, grind it!” and all sorts of comments I have learned to tune out ninety nine percent of the time.

Sherry came offstage grinning ecstatically, a big wad of bills in each hand.

“Score! Chalk up some points for number one!,” she squealed, prancing off towards the dressing room.
My turn. Let’s get this over with. For my first dance of the night I always have Scott dim the lights to near black every where in the establishment: the bar, runway, stage, even the bathrooms. Those who knew me knew I was next. Those who didn’t, well, I got their attention.

I took my place on the performance area, stood facing the audience in the dark. This really doesn’t deserve to be called a stage. It’s a 12x12 wooden platform connected to a runway that had the cliché stripper pole in the middle of it. Lighting consisted of white strobe lights, their beams always swirling with cigarette smoke, and a few cheap colored ones. Scott turned on the slowest strobe that illuminated me center stage in blips of light. My Prince song blasted out of the speakers. I slid down deliberately into the splits, my arms outstretched to my sides. With each pulse of the strobe I eased lower until reaching the ground. The patrons went wild. Apparently extreme flexibility is a requirement for the male sex fantasy. Works every time.

Scott brought the lights back up, so the guys could buy more drinks and get a better look. I let the music and its lyrics dictate my movements: the leisurely removal of the black kimono, the spiraling of my hips, and my hands that I used to caress my breasts and belly like a skilled lover. Like the one in my dreams who would someday take me away from all of this. I never looked at them, never made eye contact, refusing to allow their ogling stares, crude words, and lewd actions to break my trance, my invisible wall.

As the end of the song neared, I tore off the sheer white kimono; my bare nipples reacted instinctively to cool air, exposed. Sensations of empowerment, and at the same time self-repulsion, surged through my body. Did a part of me enjoy being some sick, get off fantasy for these perverts? Did I feel I deserved no better? Did I just take pleasure in dancing no matter where, even here?

I grasped the pole with my right hand, and with my ankles locked around the base for support, I swung myself into whirling circles. The lights blurred into colorful strokes on a canvas of black. My left arm reached out, catching the wind my momentum produced. A hysterical laugh formed deep in my belly. I contracted my stomach muscles to end the spinning and pulled my left hand in abruptly to meet the right at the pole, my back faced the crowd. I lifted my right knee high to the side and stretched my leg the rest of the way up, so that it almost touched my ear. I wrapped that leg and then the other around the pole. I let go with both hands and arched my torso into a full backbend. My long black hair fanned out on the wooden stage floor. My arms dangled.

I was level with dozens of faces, their drunken grins turned upside
down into contorted grimaces. The combined smells of sour body odor, stale cigarettes, and cheap cologne assaulted my nose. I wanted to gag. On the song’s last note, I wrenched myself to standing, heart pounding, and rested my damp forehead on my hot hands. What in the hell am I doing? Not now. No curtains here to make them disappear.

“Madame Butterfly is in rare form tonight! Men show her some appreciation!” shouted Morris into the microphone over the raucous crowd.

I retrieved my kimonos off of the stage and draped them around my body. Now for the most degrading part of this gig. I walked back to collect the crumpled bills littering the runway accompanied by shrill whistles and vulgar comments. Brian stood guard on the main floor; no one was allowed to touch the dancers. Lap dances were banned completely when one girl got stabbed in the stomach by some whack job. I took my time, picked the dollars up, straightened them out, and neatly tucked the pile of bills into my boot. A good three to four hundred dollars here. By the end of the night I will have earned more than I do in several months with the ballet.

“Next up, Xotika’s new African beauty, Isis, who is ready to rock the Windy City!” announced Morris. That was my cue to leave. Good riddance. I needed some air. My legs started shaking as I walked back to the dressing room. I put on my long wool coat and covered my head with red and green scarf, a Christmas present from my mother when I was ten. I snatched a Pall Mall cig and lighter out of Roxy’s purse. Again, I normally don’t smoke, but this place kinda brings out the debauchery in me.

I pressed open the alleyway door. It had stopped snowing. The few dim lights in the alley illuminated the blanket of bluish white snow that covered the ground, my car, and the skeletal fire escape that crawled up the building across the way. I lit up, inhaled deeply, feeling the initial sting in my lungs then the lofty sensation in my head. I leaned against the frozen brick wall and watched my boots sink with a soft crunch, into the snow. Past tears. The first night I worked this job I left the stage sobbing, ashamed and disgusted with myself. Then I found my character, my mask to hide behind, and things became tolerable. Or I just became numb. Everything in this life is temporary anyway. Right? I watch the combination of my breath and smoke stream out of my mouth like ghost clouds disappearing up into the night sky.

The things we do for dreams. Spending our lives chasing those fairytale moments that are over almost as soon as we realize them. Was it worth it for mom, her trip to America, only to slave away at a diner and perform minor roles at the community theatre? I guess we are cut out of the same cloth to a degree. I snuffed out my cigarette in the snow and listened to
its muffled hiss. Time to go back in. Three more sets and I’d be done for the night. A few steps closer.

Before every performance mom used to say, “‘All the world’s a stage, and all the men and women merely players.’ That’s what life is all about, lovey. Don’t ever forget it.”

True, but for me, what stage I am on makes all the difference.
For my next dance I think I will use, “Dream On” by Aerosmith, because I will continue to do so. Here’s to you, Guinney.