

## THE BUTTERFLY DANCER

The palm trees swayed in the breeze; the desert disrupted by a lazy city. She drove with the top down, not by choice though. The mechanism broke a few weeks ago and she can't afford to fix it. Good thing that it's seventy-five degrees and sunny every day. The stagnant weather irritates people sometimes. They feel trapped in the monotony of endless sunshine. Not her though, she always felt at home. She grew up here, so the weather never bothered her. Rose-tinted cat eye sunglasses shielded her eyes, and made the landscape feel like a sweet dream. She would make it far, she knew. She had the talent to be a star dancer. Her friends and family told her so. Even casual observers who watched her practicing in the studio agreed. Everyone believed she was magnificent, a timeless classic waiting to be discovered. She was lucky, frankly, to be here. The company watched her a month or two ago and enjoyed her performance. They invited her to train with them, seeing the potential that everyone else saw. She joined of course, never ignoring a prestigious opportunity. Young, about sixteen or so, and thrilled to have her first shot at a career, she would cherish this forever.

She, Abby, always wanted to be a dancer ever since she was a child. At about seven years old, her family lived in a little house right outside the city. Her parents made decent money and made sure she got a quality education, no matter the circumstances. Haruto, her father, worked in the marketing department of an ad agency. Abby playfully mocked him for being a heartless salesman, which he kindly reminded her was untrue. But he loved that she cracked jokes with him, even if he was the victim of her humor. He was always well dressed, no hair or fiber unkempt. Projecting strength and confidence to the world were imperative to him. He wanted to display his evolution from his turbulent past. One day, Haruto rolled up on the driveway, the car door softly clicking closed. He always bought a Japanese car to embrace his heritage, to show the

world what they could really accomplish. He took great care of the ocean blue sedan, and always maintained it along with washing it often, sometimes to Yuki's irritation. He straightened his tie while looking into his driver's side mirror, then waved to Abby who sat by the window. He walked to the front door with dignity and erect posture, his chestnut briefcase in hand. When he opened the door, Abby rushed up and hugged his legs, he set his briefcase down and picked her up.

“Ah, my wonderful little *chou*, how was your day today? What great new things did you learn at school?”

“We learned about addition and other subjects, papa.”

“My, addition. Well, that's a *very* important skill to have, Abby. I know that it helps me every day and I know for sure your mother. Where is she by the way?”

“She's in the backyard working on the gardening. She's planting roses, papa!”

He set her down and took off his shoes, then squatted down to her eye level. “I'll get changed quickly and go surprise her. I suggest that *you* get nicely dressed young lady, because tonight will be an event to remember.”

She smiled with her little kid grin and gave her father a hug around his legs. Her young face stroked his soft wool trousers. He picked her up and she squealed a little, excitedly. Her mother Yuki came back into the house, whipping her gardening gloves off as she stepped in. She looked around, confused that the house was silent and sauntered back to the main bathroom. Startled by Haruto, she started to inquire about his day.

“Hey *amai*, how was your day today?”

“Good actually. I’ve got a surprise for the whole family.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, check my jacket’s chest pocket. You’ll see.”

She reached in and found three tickets for that night’s performance of *Swan Lake*.

“Haruto, how did you get these? They must’ve cost a fortune.”

“A coworker, actually. He was going to go with his family, but something came up and he gave the tickets to me. He thought that we would enjoy them. He’s just a nice man. I’m hoping that Abby will like it. Surprise, love!”

She smiled with her hand over her mouth, delightfully shocked by Haruto’s surprise. “I’m sure that Abby will love it.”

“She’s already getting dressed up. I haven’t told her what it is yet.”

Once they were dressed, everyone gathered in the living room. Haruto and Yuki dressed in their nicest clothes, same for Abby. Yuki bent down to look at Abby eye to eye. “Abby, we’re going to see *Swan Lake* tonight. That’s what all the excitement is about.”

Abby yelped a little since she told Haruto constantly how much she loved the ballerinas in their local company and how wonderful it would be to see them. They all piled into the car, the finely sculpted yet simple lines of the doors falling into place. Abby sat in the back, tapping her feet in anticipation, her unbridled joy flooding the atmosphere. Yuki looked back, smiling at Abby while chuckling softly. When they arrived, Abby’s excitement overflowed, her uncontrollable pure love expressed by her giddy laughter. They took their seats and the curtain rose, the dancers taking the stage to manifest beauty in front of the awestruck audience.

“I’m glad you got tickets, Haruto. You really made her day today.”

“Yuki, I want you to know that I’ll always love you and Abby.” He tenderly clasped her hand in his, conveying his undying love for her and everything she was. A little tear rolled down her cheek and Haruto tapped it off with his middle and ring fingers, his touch gentle and sensitive. Looking into his eyes, the unconditional love emanated from his soul. Oblivious to their conversation, Abby sat in the plush theater seat with eyes agape. She admired the grace and ease with which the dancers moved. The mystical aura of that moment welcomed Abby into the realm of dance.

She pulled up to the studio, the other dancers sauntering in before her, clutching their foam rollers and bags, their feet turned out. Abby pulled down the vanity mirror and checked her bun, making sure everything was in place. She smashed it back up, then grabbed her bag containing a large assortment of shoes and recovery equipment. The sun’s simmering heat beaming down like it always does, she leapt out of the car, full of vigor and vivacity. Her parents always supported her dreams, Haruto especially. She wondered why he always called her *chou*, or butterfly. It makes sense though; she thought while she walked towards the studio door. The son of immigrants, his father Akio a successful physician back home. At the time, Akio and Haruto’s mother, Akemi, felt their children deserved something else, and sacrificed their nice lives. They took minimum wage jobs and endured discrimination from every neighbor and stranger. Haruto came home one day and asked his father, “Why do we live here, Akio? Why do we torture ourselves with this?”

“Haruto, it’s because you have hope, a future here in this country. I know right now that it seems impossible, but I need you to believe in something better than what currently exists. Can

you dream with me, Haruto? Can you imagine a world where you and I can be viewed fairly, be respected by our neighbors?”

“Fine, I will try to imagine it.”

Akio grabbed his shoulders and stared into his soul. “*No!* You *need* to imagine it. Hold on to the hope that it will get better, that this country will see you for who you are, Haruto, a proud and sophisticated man. You are not race or a stereotype, you are a person, a man no different than anyone else. Will you promise to hold on to this dream, Haruto?”

“I *will* hold on to this dream.”

And Haruto held on to this, putting himself through college and earning his bachelor’s degree in marketing, the thing that always yielded him results and respect from his peers. They might have discriminated against him, figured out ways to break his spirit, but he persevered, clenching that dream of the country that he wanted to live in tightly in his hand and heart. That dream and imagination made him the man he was and is, something that he fostered in Abby. That’s why he’s always well dressed, his tie straight and lapels laying crisply and neatly, expressing his own inner pride and aspirations to the world around him. He always told Abby that she should pursue her dreams, whatever she wanted to do that he and Yuki would support her in whatever way they could. Just this morning he told her before she left the house.

“Abby, I want you to know that I love you, and you’re going to do great. Do you have everything you need for today, foam roller or anything else?”

“Yes, Haruto, I do. I’ll see you tonight.”

“Oh, Abby, don’t forget to finish your essay tonight and make sure to do your SAT studying.”

“I’ll try, dad.”

She opened the door, the sounds of classical music and instruction echoing through the halls. She walked to her specific studio space and warmed up, preparing for the big day. Today was truly important since the artistic director would watch their class and hold a masterclass with the best three. She had practiced hard to get here, to make her dreams come to fruition. The lucky one that the artistic director liked would become a star, spending countless hours practicing, becoming something truly spectacular. While stretching, she saw a figure in the doorway, the infamous artistic director Leonardo, his reputation and career revered by many. He lowered himself onto a humble chair in the corner, making his presence obscure to the unobservant. Abby focused her mind and body, knowing that *this* was the most important moment of her life thus far. The instructor clapped her hands, beginning the class. Abby followed the barre work, impressing the instructor with the precision of her toes and fingers, each one a delicately carved moment screaming with emotion. After barre, they continued with floorwork, Leonardo analyzing with a watchful eye, knowing only to himself who stood a chance or deserved the opportunity. He only did this once a year, completely random to everyone else.

They finished the class, some panting from exhaustion, others smiling through the pain and suffering weakening their muscles. Leonardo stood up proudly and with grace, his past greatness in dance murmuring even in his advancing age. He approached the center of the room, his posture impressive and unwavering, his gaze cold yet inspiring. He looked carefully, his eyes piercing the souls of the women in front of him, seeing if they matched his dedication. “You, you, and...” he waited for a while, finally staring into Abby’s face, her gaze firm and strong,

clenching her dream in her heart and mind. “You,” he said, pointing to her with a straight unwavering finger. “The rest of you may watch, but step aside.”

The lucky three dancers advanced to the center, Leonardo selecting which one went first. He chose the second one, her trial painful. Abby and the other dancer watched, witnessing a slaughtering of confidence and self-esteem. The dancer pushed herself further than she ever had, but it was not enough, and Leonardo told her in his own way. He ended her time early, calling on the first dancer to take her place. The disgraced dancer took her place amongst the rest of the company, crying softly in her hands. Abby watched, gulping softly. She analyzed the new dancer’s form, her body taut with restraint and precision. Leonardo was impressed, his praise a lack of ridicule and anger. When she finished, he asked for Abby, her eyes veiling her terror and turbulent mind. She replayed her father’s image in her head, his strength and grittiness instilled in her by Yuki. She approached the center, her core tight and posture erect.

“What is your name?”

“Abby, sir.”

“Well Abby, let’s see what you are, shall we?” he flicked his hand, her music beginning. She started to dance, knowing her opportunity was now, right here facing her. She danced her hardest, her arms and every appendage painting a masterpiece meant to be admired in esteemed galleries. She almost finished, but Leonardo shook his head and stopped the music by making a fist. He approached her, tugging his chin.

“Your legs aren’t straight enough. You need to lift them more when you jump to create a seamless line. You need to stop what *you’re* doing, ok?”

“Yes sir.”

He cued the music on again for that section, she tried once more.

“Stop! Don’t *ever* do that again. Who do you think you are? Look, it should look like this.” He defied others’ perceptions and executed the movement perfectly, and after landing looked over his shoulder at Abby. “It needs to look like *that*. Think you could do that, because you *should* be able to.” He cued the music again, she resumed her position and attempted it, falling short once again.

“You’re *done!* We’re done now! Everyone, leave.”

The company made their way out the door, Abby compiling her things before she left. Once she was the last one in the room, Leonardo came over to her.

“Look, you are good, understand that. I took a shot with you because I saw something in you. I still do, but you won’t be the great ballerina you expect to be. You can live that life, struggling for mediocrity, or you can be something else. I have seen you outside of classes, studying and talking brilliantly about math and science to the other dancers. You have a chance to achieve something else Abby. Leave this life because you have a chance to escape it. How many of these young dancers do you think have other choices? I’m asking you honestly.”

“I’m sure they have something else.”

“They *don’t*, Abby, they don’t. They never will have anything other than this reality to hold on to. When all their family leaves them, when they’re all alone every night for a decade practicing, they have nothing else. They can’t go to college and have normal lives, support a family, or foster healthy relationships. Do you think that you’ll have that pursuing this? If you do, then I am sorry for you because you’ll *never* see it or taste it.”



Abby stood still, her mind ruminating on Leonardo's remarks. All her life she wanted to be a ballerina, trained for hours and sacrificed relationships. Her mother though made sure she had an education, never sacrificing it for dance. Yuki saw that Abby loved math and science, making sure that Abby always had both in her life, grooming her intelligence and aptitude. Leonardo looked at her with desperate eyes, yearning for Abby to see reality.

"I like you Abby, as a person. You remind me of my daughter for some reason, and that's why I'm telling you this. You have other gifts. Your mind is brilliant and naturally excels at algebra and chemistry. Just take my advice, Abby. Escape it now. It is all I have, it's all that these poor young and naïve dancers have now. Escape it while you still can Abby. You'll thank yourself later, not right now or in the next few years, but you'll thank yourself eventually." He turned his back towards her and walked away, his shoulders heavy with the burden of her decision and his own personal prison.

She looked up at the window, watching the light wash over her face and her reflection in the mirror. She stared at herself, specifically her face, to find meaning and decision. Whether to loosen the grip on her dream or to clench tighter, the conundrum grave. Her eyes transfixed her mind, her visage hollow and lifeless like a corpse. The woman staring back at her exhibited immense regret. She looked away, back at the light shining at the doorway from the far window. She grabbed her bag and left, closing the studio door behind her. Throwing her bag into the back, she slinked into the driver's seat and started up the car, the sun shining down like it always had. She drove off, forgetting her sunglasses inside the studio but only remembered it too late. She didn't mind though and shrugged it off. There was more time to get another pair.

When she got home, she saw Haruto opening his car door, the very same one from that fateful night. He turned and adjusted his tie in the driver's side mirror. Abby walked up behind

him. Startled, he stood up quickly, his tie loosened and askew. He saw the pain in her eyes and spoke.

“What happened today, *chou*?”

“I saw the real world, papa. The dream I thought was real was only a myth.”

“Come here, Abby.” He held out his arms, waiting for her to approach. She hugged him, tears rolling down her cheeks. He stroked her head, comforting her with silence and understanding.

“I want you to know a little something Abby. No matter what you do, I will be right here with Yuki to support you along the way. This dream might have died, but that is ok because you have options, you have other things that define you besides dance. I love you, *chou*. Do you know why I call you that, Abby?” She shook her head no and rested it on his shoulder, his grey hair tickling her ear. “I call you my little butterfly because you will become something beautiful. Butterflies are not limited by their initial appearance as caterpillars and work hard to grow and change. They eat, then rest in their cocoons, leaving the realm of caterpillars behind. Even though it might be painful to rest and wait, they flourish into something beautiful that can fly away to distant places. They can escape unlike caterpillars and worms. *You* are a butterfly, Abby. That’s why I call you *chou*. No matter the pain you experience, it’s all leading to you flourishing into the bright young woman that I’m proud of everyday. I love you, Abby. I always will.”

She collected herself and hugged her father tightly, knowing in her heart that he always loved her not for what she did, but for who she was. They closed their eyes and embraced the moment, their souls consoling each other and marking the beginning of a new chapter, a metamorphosis.