

## The Sister Dance

Dressed in hues of a gathering storm, my daughters, Pam, Lisa, and Jennifer, sat in their childhood bedroom like wallflowers at a high school dance.

Forty years earlier, Jack and I nestled two white nightstands between three twin beds. We hung my first painting in oil. The large, sad eyes took months to get right.

My girls, now women, gazed at those three doe-eyed ballerinas dressed in pink leotards.

“I couldn’t sleep that first month in college,” Pam dabbed at her nose, “without them.” She tucked the tissue into her sleeve, a habit she inherited from me.

A tear trickled down Lisa’s cheek. “I prayed they would pirouette out of the canvas.”

Painted before I had children, those two-dimensional ballerinas watched three-dimensional sisters dress for proms, fight over boyfriends, and sob as each left the shared bedroom.

Jennifer kicked off her heels. “You’re kidding! Their gigantic eyes gave me nightmares.”

Pam separated her thick thighs from the sagging mattress. “I loved each girl.” She stroked a blonde painted braid. “If I had a daughter...”

Jennifer plopped a faded pink pillow onto her Saint Laurent slacks and glanced at Lisa.

Pam’s single-minded wish for a baby left no room to nurture her artistic ability. She pined after elusive dreams of binkies and bottles. I tried to explain that child rearing was not for everyone.

Lisa wriggled her fingers. “I’ll hang it in Amy and Allison’s room.”

I winced. Lisa’s babies had come fast and furious.

“What?” Pam exclaimed. “Birthing a chorus line of girls does not entitle you to *my* childhood!”

I wanted to wrap my arms around Pam and make the years of trial and loss, disappear. Now I understood the saying, ‘Life goes on’. Even on this burial day.

People urged Jack and I to have a fourth child. “Three’s not company when speaking of children,” said Ida, my blonde, Barbie-like sister, “the girls will be in competition for the rest of their lives.” Ida wasn’t a prophetess. She reminded me of *our* life: Willful Ida, our rowdy baby sister, and myself.

Lisa threw up her nail-bitten hands. “Fine. We’ll let Jennifer decide.”

Jennifer’s plum-colored eyelids snapped open like broken window shades.

Pam shot her plump finger in Jennifer’s direction. “Over my dead body!” The unfortunate phrase made Pam’s face flush.

Mothers often exaggerated relationships with their daughters. I bragged that Jennifer called daily. Although true, we discussed hem lengths and haircuts. She knew I didn’t approve of her latest partner.

Through the years, I couldn’t choreograph their every move or force them to be friends. I chanted clichés—my favorite—blood is thicker than water. Alice Walker said, “Is solace anywhere more comforting than in the arms of a sister.”

“That painting belongs in my house.” Pam pounded her fist to her chest. “Even without children I’m the one who loves it most.” She wiped the sweat from a hot flash that formed on the back of her neck.

Lisa turned toward Jennifer. “What now?”

Jennifer examined a freshly manicured nail. “I hate that thing.” She shrugged her shoulders. “Maybe you should sell it.”

Although art is subjective, I flinched at Jennifer’s open hostility toward the ballerina girls. Now I know why she slept with her head at the foot of the bed, avoiding the girl’s never-ending gazes.

“Is money all that matters?” Pam shook her head.

Gestures to calm or console were futile. I missed the feel of my daughter’s soft hair, their warm hands clasped in mine, and the comfort of double knit polyester.

Jennifer tossed her pillow. A musty odor filled the air and mingled with particles of dust. “There’s nothing wrong with having a few dollars in my purse.”

“Make that a Gucci.” Pam pointed to the bag.

Jennifer twisted her diamond and ruby ring. “Luxury and I are good friends.”

Lisa tugged on the Dollar Store necklace her nine-year-old presented on Mother’s Day. She eyed her Mickey Mouse watch. “Dick will look after the kids until six, no later.”

Jennifer ran fingers through her blow-dried auburn locks. “We still have an entire house of junk to sort.”

Pam grunted as she lifted the ballerina painting off the wall. “Mother’s artwork is not junk!”

She lost her grip on the heavy frame. The painting landed on the spiked heel of Jennifer's shoe. It poked through the brittle, fragile canvas.

Still as statues for several seconds, Jennifer finally picked up the painting. The shoe dangled from the middle ballerina's belly. "Look what you've done!"

Pam grabbed the edge of the frame. "Me? These aren't *my* hooker heels!"

Barefooted, Jennifer placed hands on bony hips. "Take that back!"

She looked six-years-old.

Lisa picked up the other shoe. "Unacceptable for a funeral."

From the back of the painting, Lisa grasped a miniature envelope: the size found tucked in floral arrangements.

Ten years earlier, long after my nest had emptied, I sat at the girl's vacant desk and wrote the letter. I turned an entire ream of stationary into paper snowballs. Simple words could not take the place of life experience. Dispensing advice was not my forte. I usually kept silent during maddening moments of motherhood.

The envelope fell from the brown paper backing of the painting, the double-stick tape, yellowed and stick-free. Lisa opened the flap.

I held my breath but found it wasn't there.

"What's that?" Pam peered at the envelope while Jennifer disentangled her shoe.

Lisa unfolded my letter, written in microscopic script. "Mom wrote it. To us."

Jennifer propped the painting on the dresser. The sisters looked at the torn canvas, then each other.

I surveyed the damage. This was not exactly the plan. I crossed my shadowy fingers.

Lisa read: "Dear girls, dismantling memories is difficult. I never had the heart to redecorate. If you found this, you are probably discussing the painting, or more like, arguing about it."

"Argue?" Pam's double chin danced. "Why would she say that?"

Jennifer hooted.

Lisa continued. "Your Aunt Ida begged me to have more children. Not for lack of trying, (Your father and I had loads of fun!) a fourth child was not our family's destiny."

"Our parents liked sex?" Jennifer put fingers in her ears. "Too much information, Mom."

"Mom had trouble getting pregnant?" Pam clutched her stomach.

"The Ballerina Girls was my first painting in oil. I'm sure you recognize the ballerina seated

in the middle.”

Jennifer pulled hair into a tortoiseshell clip. “Mom said it was me.”

Pam forced a laugh. “You’re not blond.”

“Neither are you. And Lisa’s hair is the color of a penny.”

Pam tugged at her tight cotton top. “Mom helped me buy my first bra when I was nine-years-old. I was a freak. In the dressing room she told me *I* was the girl in the middle.”

I cringed.

“Oh, my gosh.” Lisa crumpled the letter as she brought hands to her face. “At least you had boobs. In fourth grade I was all nose and teeth. Mom said the girl in the middle was me.”

Three white lies to boost egos seemed like a good idea at the time.

“Keep reading.” Jennifer put an arm around both sisters.

“I painted the ballerinas before we started a family. The confident one in the middle was my hoped-for daughter. And then I was blessed with three.”

Jennifer’s chin quivered. Pam wiped dripping mascara.

“I created special paintings for each of you. Pam’s Ocean, on the living room wall—”

“The ocean scene?”

The girls ran through me before trampling the staircase.

Lisa continued, “. . . painted when Pam was ten. After Dad’s death I worked at night, avoiding the empty bed.” Lisa cleared her throat. “As a single parent, I was a child swimming far from the shore. You were my anchor, Pam. The ocean is a symbol of stability—like you. But small boats on vast bodies of water can lose their way. Put my brushes and paints to good use.”

Pam’s face was slick with tears. Jennifer held her eldest sister’s hand.

“I miss painting.” Pam caressed the sunshine on the water.

Jennifer put her hand over Pam’s. “It will look stunning over your fireplace.”

She took the letter from Lisa. “In the family room is Lisa’s Forest, painted when you were twelve.”

The girls tangoed into the dark paneled room. Had they ever embraced as adults?

Lisa ran her hand along the dusty frame. “I remember Mom’s last brush stroke. The branches on the trees looked so real I wanted to touch them. But Mom said it took days for oils to dry.”

“You gave birth to your first child when you were still a child. The menagerie of stray animals you brought home taught you well. You are a tree rooted in mother earth, giving shade,

food, and shelter to so many.”

Lisa collapsed onto the leather sofa. “When did Mom write this?”

Jennifer scanned the paper. “Twenty years after Dad died.”

“How did Mom manage? I never thought of her as a single mother, or grandmother. She must have felt so alone.”

Jennifer patted Pam’s back. “Our big sis here, helped.”

“What did Mom leave *baby* sister” Pam tussled Jennifer’s eighty-dollar-do.

Pam read as they walked. “In Dad’s office, another room I never had the courage to change...”

Jennifer giggled. “The entire house is stuck in a time warp.”

Pam continued, “...is Jennifer’s Mountain. Terrified of Kindergarten, I painted you a mountain, one I hoped you’d climb. The first day of school, I imagined coercing a tearful child to the car. Instead, you were in my studio, dressed and ready to face your fears.”

Jennifer sniffled. “Mom said that going to school was easier than climbing a mountain.”

“My darling daughters, as you navigate oceans and climb mountains, remember to dig deep roots and find strength in each other. Love, Mom. P.S. Please have the ballerina painting cleaned.”

“Needs more than a cleaning.” The sister’s burst into laughter.

“Wait, there’s more.” Pam straightened the paper. “P.P.S. Send it to Aunt Ida. She’s the girl in the middle.”

When it was time to leave, I heard Jennifer make arrangements for canvas restoration while Lisa invited her sisters for dinner. Pam offered to babysit the next week. I thought I heard plans for a road trip to visit Aunt Ida.

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