Pretty Ballerina

KERRY JONES

It's just one of those things that sometimes happens to me: I'll find myself walking by a playground, or I'll be walking through the mall, and I'll see a little girl about eleven or so, and that's when my mind takes on a life of its own. It's nothing I can control. I don't force myself to remember, I'd never do that to myself, but when it happens, I can't stop it. I'll see a little girl on the cusp of adolescence and think, *I wonder if she's anything like me. I wonder if she has any secrets she'd never share with anyone else. I wonder if she loves her father so much that, like me, she'd do that for him. She'd never tell. And he never even had to ask her not to tell, because he knew how much she loved him.*

And then the thought leaves me. It's a truly fleeting moment, and I'm grateful it's that way. Otherwise, I might never leave the house. It's there, it's gone, and I'm just one more 33-year-old woman walking into Bloomingdale's to do her shopping. I'm one more 33-year-old woman on a quest for a simple black dress to wear to her husband's company's summer party, or something festive but not ostentatious for the annual Christmas party. I'll find the right dress eventually. Then I'll buy some black control-top pantyhose, even though my husband tells me I don't need control-tops: *Why do you buy that silly shit? Your stomach's as flat as a board. You're beautiful.*

And that's partly because we don't have children. That's because I'd never have a child. Andrew would like at least one, but I can't risk it, and he knows why, and he always says the same thing: *I'm not the one on trial here. I'm not the guilty party. How did I become a suspect in this?*

He doesn't understand the simplicity of the facts: once you're like me, once you've gone through what I've gone through, everyone is suspect. That can't change, at least not for me. I don't like it, not one bit. I don't like taking unnecessary precautionary measures, but that's what happens.

At Bloomingdale's, I'll also buy a nice new pair of black pumps, something a little flashy to accentuate the dress. At the register, I'll pay for everything with my Platinum Visa. Then I'll take my bags, leave the store, make my way back through the mall to the main mall entrance. I'll put the bags in the trunk, get into our car, and drive home.

When those moments happen, when I remember everything, when I wonder what other girl could possibly be a shadow of myself, then I do have to think, and that's bad. So I turn on the radio in the car and fill my mind with a gentle hush-hum of white noise that I could never really describe for anyone, and if I do have a coherent thought, it's simply this: *don't think, don't think, don't think. You're just like everyone else. Don't think, don't think, don't think.*

If you're like me, life is all about precautionary measures. No one else is going to do it for you. That doesn't make you anything special, it doesn't make you a survivor, and it doesn't mean someone should come up and pat you on the back. It's practical and it's necessary. Expecting kudos would be the same as expecting a cheering crowd every time you took a breath. What happened happened, and sometimes, I swear to God, I think I'm as guilty as anyone.

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When I was ten my mother decided, for reasons that are still beyond me, that I needed tap and ballet lessons. She was always worried that she was somehow inadequate, both as a wife and as a mother, and

I suppose I can understand a little of where that comes from for her. She was the youngest of six children, and her father was a drunk. My mother is an alcoholic, which is something my father and I never discuss, but my grandfather was a drunk, and believe me, there's a difference. She grew up in one of those small mining towns that dot the whole northeastern portion of Pennsylvania, and her father worked for the railroad. At least once a month on payday he wouldn't come home, and aside from drinking away the rent, which forced my grandmother to clean other people's homes, he also managed to drink away the money that could have provided new clothes, and my grandmother never forgave him for drinking away my mother's first Holy Communion dress. He also drank away other things that weren't quite so obvious to the neighbors. My mother actually slept in a crib until she was ten, and all six children shared a single toothbrush.

The only time my mother ever revealed such stories was when she herself was drunk, something that became more and more common as I got older. After she graduated from high school, she took a job at a country club as a receptionist, and that's where she met my father, who had recently joined a law firm in Philadelphia. All she wanted was to marry him, whether she loved him or not, and when he got around to asking her after just two months, she accepted and never went home again.

But she was unprepared for being the wife of a young and successful lawyer, unprepared for life in a well-to-do suburb just outside of the city where people had large, old homes and where I could attend a private school. When my parents had parties, she always looked uncomfortable, even after one or two drinks. My mother had a confident and beautiful smile (my father paid for extensive dental work to rid the years of that

shared toothbrush and missing back teeth that my grandmother pulled out of my mother's mouth because there was no sense in going to a dentist to fix what couldn't be seen anyway) but if you looked into her eyes, those sparkling baby-blues, as my father called them, you could see the eyes of a feral cat that's been cornered by someone trying to pet it, someone who has all the best intentions in the world. She never got drunk at those parties, or at the parties thrown by friends of my father's; after the party or after they got home, my mother would simply retreat into my father's study, where he kept a steady supply of bourbon and 18-year-old scotch, and she'd shut the door. My father never said anything about it. He just let her be, and retreated to their bedroom. She'd fall asleep on the living room couch half-dressed, and in the morning my father would get up early enough so he could put her to bed. That way I wouldn't see her and figure out what had happened, what my mother had become.

That was before he stared getting careless, before cleaning her up and putting her to bed became my job. And perhaps he wasn't careless at all. Perhaps it was all one more calculated move. Perhaps he wanted to make it easier for me to forgive him.

After I'd come home from a friend's house, all I had to do was wait a little while for the questions to begin: *What is Stacey Cameron's house like? Is it neater than ours? Do they have a maid? They don't? Well, I bet her mother is a better housekeeper than I am. I can never seem to keep everything straight. Is she a good cook? The inside of our house is the worst in the neighborhood, isn't it? You can tell me, Naomi. You won't hurt my feelings.*

A few years ago I went to church with her one Saturday evening, and at some point during mass I sneezed.

"Do you have a tissue?" I whispered.

She immediately looked troubled. "Oh," she said as she fumbled through her purse. "I don't. I never carry tissues. Never."

I sniffled and rubbed my nose on my finger. "Don't worry about it. Just allergies. I don't keep tissues in my purse, either. It's no big deal. I'll live."

My mother turned to me, her eyes already welling up. "You learned that from me. A woman should *always* keep tissues in her purse, especially if you're a mother. I never even carried tissues in my purse when you were a little girl. Never. What kind of mother was I?"

In the fifth grade, the mothers of Ashley Mason, Courtney Smythe, and Stephanie Burke signed them up for tap and ballet lessons at our local community theater, and my mother must have gotten wind of it. I had none of their grace or finesse, and I just as easily tripped over my own feet as I did uneven portions of the sidewalk.

I came home from school one afternoon and there, on the pink ruffled bedspread that I hated, was a pair of black patent leather shoes and a beautiful light blue tutu. Blue was my favorite color. At least she had had the sense to try to win me over that way.

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For the next several months I endured lessons every Tuesday and Thursday night, although I was slightly dismayed to learn we didn't wear our tutus during Tuesday night ballet practice. We wore the same black tights and leotards we wore every Tuesday and Thursday nights. I endured the lessons, which inspired neither grace nor finesse,

but by the beginning of December our teacher, who, most evenings, seemed more exasperated by us than encouraged, decided we had hit a level where we were ready to give a Christmas season recital. I was just happy that, at last, I could wear the light blue tutu.

There isn't much about that evening to remember, except that we did our little ballet performance as the second half of the program. That afternoon my mother had taken me to her hairdresser to have my hair curled and given an up-do, and when we got home my mother put little fake blue forget-me-nots in my hair and allowed me to wear makeup, which she did herself.

I wasn't much of a dancer or a ballerina, but I did look the part, and even I was surprised at my physical transformation. At the end of the evening all the parents, of course, applauded, and my parents couldn't wait to hand their camera off to someone else to take pictures of the three of us.

In one of them, my father sat down on one of the radiators and pulled me onto his lap. He wrapped his arms around me and whispered, "I'm so proud of you, Naomi. So very, very proud." He kissed my cheek. "Pretty ballerina," he whispered.

My mother stood beside us and placed her hand on my shoulder, and I remember the white flash of the camera, and being surprised later on that none of us has bright red devil eyes. My mother often wonders what happened to the photo, and I never tell her that I'm the one who took it out one of the cigar boxes where she kept photos she always said she was going to put into photo albums. I'm the one who spirited it away right before I left for college, kept it safe, someplace where it would never be forgotten. When she and my father visit, I always take it off my dresser and stow it away in my nightstand.

We look perfect and happy in that photo, and some days I can stare at it for hours. We're all smiling, as though nothing in our lives is anything but good. My mother is not an alcoholic; my father is not disillusioned by the woman he chose to be his wife nor concerned that she is beyond his help, anyone's help, or willing to walk out and somehow save himself; and I am not in the least concerned in the fissures I detect in the place I call home. Home is still a safe word, a word I want to believe in.

I look at that photo often, because there's no trace of a fractured fairytale. Even now, when I look at it, I can see a world I might still believe in, a world and a life I want to exist, even though I know it's impossible. My husband tells me it's dangerous to pretend, but I have to. In some small way, it saves me.

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Christmas came and went that same year, as memorable and forgettable as all Christmases are, but in the spring my father announced one evening that he had bought a pop-up camper, and he wanted to take us all camping and fishing in the Poconos. I'd always suspected, in some small way, that my father had hoped I'd be a boy. My mother had three miscarriages after I was born, and at some point they had determined that enough was enough, especially since my mother's drinking escalated after the second one.

My mother would have nothing to do with the small camper, or camping and fishing in general in part, I believe, because it was yet one more reminder of the life she'd tried so hard to leave behind. But me, I was game. I was starting to let go of any illusions I had about my mother, and if I couldn't get the right affection from her, I knew

I could win my father over, and I knew he needed consolation. When he could, we started going camping that April, when I was still eleven.

It didn't begin right away. First, he had to teach me how to fish. How to judge the depth of water without wading in. How to bait a worm on a hook. How not to be squeamish about it. How to keep it controlled when a too-live worm wriggled too much and just keep going, keep getting its body looped on that hook no matter what. How to keep in mind the final outcome and ignore the fact that you're really hurting a living thing. How to outsmart a fish. How to judge the layout of a lake and its inlets. How to cast. How to be patient. What to do when you're impatient. How to release a caught fish, since we never kept them, just threw them back for someone else. How to make fishing somehow spiritual, because you never know what can happen, what you'll see. How, in the end, it's all worth it. Worth the fight. Worth the struggle. Worth coming back for more.

He did a lot of this by impersonating Strother Martin in *Cool Hand Luke*, a movie we both loved: "You've got to get your mind *straight*."

After an unsuccessful fishing morning or evening, he'd say, "What we had here is failure to *communicate*. Better luck tomorrow, kiddo."

He made me laugh. He made me forget, as we fished side-by-side, as he told me what kinds of birds we heard just by their calls, as he told me stories of himself growing up, what we were going back home to. I loved him even more for just that.

It started about two months after our first trip, right after school let out. I'd gone to bed and left my father drinking beer by the fire. His drinking never bothered me, although that night he seemed to drink more heavily than usual, and he'd grown quieter and quieter as the

evening wore on. I assumed he was thinking about my mother, and since I didn't want to talk about her, I figured it was easier to leave him to his own thoughts and not bother him.

What I remember the most, at least it's what I think I remember, I have no way of really knowing if this is the truth, is waking up and seeing him standing beside my bunk.

"Hi, Daddy," I said.

He didn't say anything. He had a sheet, and he simply draped it over my face and put his hand over my mouth, and I don't remember much after that, and very little of what he did. I closed my eyes, and I didn't struggle. Putting that sheet over my head was the most compassionate thing he ever did, and I think it worked for both of us. I didn't actually have to look at the man that was doing this, my father, and he didn't have to look at me, his daughter. I felt something inside my mind and chest shift, and I thought, *I am never going to be the same again.*

After it was over, my father simply left me and went back to his bunk on the other side of the camper. When I heard his slow, easy breathing, his soft snoring, I pulled the sheet from my face and breathed the fresh air coming in from the screened window at my feet. Then I rolled over and went to sleep. That way, everything could just be a dream.

In the morning, my father smiled at me as I emerged from the camper. He was cooking breakfast over the remnants of the fire.

"Morning, sleepyhead!" he said. "Ready to get some fish?"

It was so easy to pretend, to just keep going. And that night, when it happened again, we pretended again. I told myself it didn't matter. It wasn't like what you see in movies; there wasn't any *Something About Amelia* bullshit. He never once told me not to tell my mother. He

never once apologized. I didn't go Sylvia Plath on him and pull some justifiable daughterly rage.

We just kept going. I loved him. I never doubted he loved me. If he took advantage of me once in a while, well, why not? I told myself he was entitled to his own personal flaws just like anyone else. We all have them.

When we got home, it was always the same routine. My mother would stand outside the house as my father backed the pickup truck my mother hated into the driveway, then watched as he expertly navigated the pop-up she hated into the garage, where nobody could see it.

"I have a good time?" she'd ask, fortified by scotch; she thought she fooled everyone. The fucking glass was in her hand.

"Had a great time!" my father would always say, and tousle my hair as I hopped out of the pickup.

That was when she would half-run, half-stumble down the driveway and grab me in a bear-hug. "Oh, you!" she'd say. "Did you have a good time, too? How's my baby?"

"The best," I always said, and I never met her eyes when I said it. I never met his eyes, either. When I finally did look at her, she was looking at me like I could possibly save her. My father, meanwhile, was busy parking the evidence, and it wouldn't have done any good to look at him. He knew I couldn't save either of us, couldn't save anyone. Not anymore.

When it was all said and done, all the evidence put away, all the bags taken in the house, we were all one big, happy family. The neighbors couldn't say a word about us. We were perfect. I was everyone's idea of a pretty ballerina. No damaged goods here. We came home to a nice, home-cooked meal. Afterward, I excused myself and

did any homework I had to. Later, my mother stumbled into my room and kissed me goodnight. Soon after, my father walked into my room and kissed me goodnight. That was all. By then, I was under the covers. No funny business. Never on home territory.

That was an unspoken rule.

And there were rules, and somehow, we both knew what they were, and we both knew we had to play them in order to keep going, in order to survive. If my mother suspected the rules, what they really were, she played them, too. And whether she's known them as well as my father, it hasn't made a difference, because there's always been me for the two of them. It didn't take long for the lessons, the real ones, to fall away, but there was always a hope for both of them: I could be whatever they wanted, and somehow, I loved them both enough to be that. As long as there was me, we'd all survive.

I was their pretty ballerina.

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It went on like that for a few years, until I was fifteen and started dating Ian. To my surprise, both my father and mother liked him, but there wasn't much not to like. He was good-looking and had sandy hair and soft, brown eyes, and when he looked at me, I knew I was his whole world. One night we went for a walk and ended up in a little park just outside our development, a dilapidated old park that hadn't changed since it was built in the late sixties. We had sex behind a small, secluded grove, and I had my wits about me enough to act naive and pretend it hurt at first. After that, I just lay there on the ground and let myself drift to someplace else where I wouldn't feel anything. It wasn't that difficult: there were the stars to look at, the

gentle hum of cicadas in the trees to listen to. A plane came in for a landing at the Philadelphia airport, and I watched the lights on its wings and undercarriage, wondered how many people were on the plane and where they were coming from. How many of them were coming to the safe haven of home?

"Are you okay?" Ian asked afterward, and I took him lightly by the neck and lowered him to my lips.

"I'm fine," I whispered. "Just fine. Don't worry about me."

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Not long after that, Dad decided it was time for a camping trip. I thought about asking him if we could invite Ian along, but then thought the better of it. That night, as we sat around the fire, my father turned to me.

"This Ian guy," he said. "He seems nice."

"He is nice."

He nodded and looked away and said, "Do you love him?"

"I don't know. I think I might."

"Does he treat you right? When you're away from home and he doesn't have to worry about what your mother or I might think, is he good to you?"

"Yes," I said. "He doesn't put on an act."

"That's all I wanted to know."

We went to bed at the same time that night, and I lay on my side of the camper and waited. My head hurt. I wanted to say something to him. I wanted him to leave me alone. But since we never acknowledged what took place between us, I didn't know what to say. I didn't

have the words. And I didn't even hear him as he came over to me. I heard a ruffle and the sheet was tossed over my head. I closed my eyes and tried not to think, but the old tricks weren't working. My body felt like it was sinking into someplace cold and dark, and I felt as though part of me was really dying this time.

Or maybe I was already dead, because I did something I'd never had the courage to do before. Slowly, so he wouldn't notice what I was doing, I reached up and pulled the sheet away from my face and looked at him. He was so lost he didn't even notice at first, and then he looked down at me and panicked, tried to grab the sheet from my hand.

But I held fast. I didn't say anything; I just stared at him. Finally he sighed.

"All right," he said. "I'll go away. At least have the decency to turn your head away."

I did, and strangely, part of me actually felt bad for the guy, and that's never been an easy thing to come to terms with. The only person I've ever told is Andrew, and he thought that was the craziest thing he'd ever heard. *How could you feel bad for him? he said. Look at what he did to you. He destroyed part of you. Does he ever feel bad for you? Does he even think about it? Does he remember?*

But it was my father who sounded hurt that night, as though I'd wounded him in some unforgivable way. The thing of it is, that was the last night he ever tried anything. It was over. We never went camping again, and I could belong to Ian for the rest of my high school years. But I always made sure there was some man in my life. I never wanted to take the chance of being caught alone.

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I told Andrew about it right after we got engaged. We'd been out that night and were both a little drunk, and it was one of those nights when we decided to continue the party at my apartment. I was living in a complex called The Chocolate Works, after the factory it once was. I had windows that overlooked the Delaware River and the Ben Franklin Bridge, and sometimes at night I'd turn off all the lights in the living room and just stare out at the view, which sometimes comforted me and other times made me feel small, lonely, lost in the vastness of place.

We tumbled into the apartment and I lit some candles as Andrew opened a bottle of port. He handed me my glass and ran his fingers down my spine, and I stiffened.

"Why do you do that?" he said.

"Do what?"

"Whenever I initially touch you, you tense up for a second or two. How come?"

"I never noticed I did it."

"I never told you before."

I could feel it coming, welling up from that strange dark dead place inside of me, and I didn't make a sound. The tears just flowed down both cheeks, and it occurred to me that I never made a sound when I cried. It was a revelation of yet one more oddity that made up the life I led.

Even Andrew didn't realize I was crying at first, but then he wrapped his arms around me and whispered into my hair, "Hey. Hey. What's going on? What's all this about?"

"Dammit, I shouldn't drink. I should know better. After all those years with my mother, I should fucking know better. I'm so fucking stupid."

"Talk to me," he said, and suddenly there was no stopping it. Everything just plopped out in a big, ugly blob, and when it was over, when I'd told him just about everything I could muster, I didn't feel one bit relieved. It was why I stopped going to A.A. meetings with my mother and Al-Anon meetings by myself. I never felt better, I never felt like I wasn't alone, I never felt like there was that good old support system out there. I just looked around and listened to the same shitty stories about shitty lives and stared at other broken people and left feeling like someone had hit me over the head with a railroad tie. It works if you work it my ass.

I wanted to crawl out of his arms and into the shower, but instead I refilled my glass and tossed it back in one swallow. *Fuck it,* I thought. *Fuck everything. Everyone can just go the fuck to hell.*

"Thank you," Andrew said quietly.

"For what?" I said. "Dumping an outboard of shit on you?"

"Don't be like that. Come here. I want to hold you."

As he held me, I whispered, "You have to be like me, now. You have to pretend I never told you. You can never let him know you know, because then I can't stay with you any more."

We got married a year later, in May. Shortly before that, I read somewhere that May was an unlucky month to tie the knot in, but since I didn't believe in superstitions or luck, I really didn't care.

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My mother's been off the wagon for a few months, so on Thanksgiving morning I have no idea what to expect, what shape she'll show up in when they arrive or what shape she'll be in when they leave. And I hate the way Andrew's parents will look at each

other telepathically, because I know what they're thinking: *She's in rough shape again. Won't she ever learn?*

Like their lives are so damn perfect. Like Stan hasn't been sleeping around for years and banging his secretaries. Like Evelyn thinks I have no idea how much Valium and Xanax she totes around in her dainty Saks purse. They're a Mainline cliche themselves.

But I don't want to be angry or bitter today. I just want to have a perfect turkey and all the trimmings so we can pretend, once again, that's a Donna Reed holiday with Mr. and Mrs. Andrew Thompson. So I have a few glasses of wine starting at eleven, and by one, everyone's arrival time, I won't be sloshed, but I won't have the urge to shove a turkey leg up Evelyn's ass when she complains about a lack of grandchildren. I can laugh at her and say, *Oh not this again. I'm not the breeding type.*

"Take it easy," Andrew says at noon, so I put the Chardonnay back in the fridge and go to the cellar for a fresh bottle. That's when I hear the doorbell ring and Andrew's voice as he ushers in my parents. My legs become wobbly and fluidy, and I grasp the wine rack and hold on for all I'm worth. *It will pass*, I tell myself. *It will pass and everything will be just fine. Just don't think, don't think.*

Which is impossible, because I hear footsteps coming down the stairs, and the sound of my father's voice.

"Naomi? Do you need anything? Do you need any help?"

My father has aged more quickly than most of his friends, but, like so many older men, he does in fact look distinguished, and the gray mixed in with his strawberry blonde hair suits him. He smiles at me from the shadows, and a deep chill pools in the center of my chest. For just a moment, I'm afraid I'll stop breathing. As I look at him, standing

there, my father, my father's kind smile, I can't tell whether the chill, the struggle to breathe, is fear, or something else: sorrow, grief.

I want so much to love this man standing in the shadows of my cellar. I want to love him so much it really does hurt, and it hurts so much that it's almost possible to forget. I want to put my arms around him and hold him, have him hold me, but that would be just too much to ask from me.

"Here," he says, and takes the bottle from my hand. "What do we have here? Since there's six of us, why don't we grab two? I'll keep an eye on your mother as much as I can. At least she hasn't been at it this morning."

He sets the bottle down on the floor and pulls me to him, kisses my cheek. "Happy Thanksgiving," he whispers into my hair. He does not say anything about the fact that I do not hug him back. Then again, I haven't hugged him back in nearly twenty years. Not even on my wedding day.

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After dinner, a perfect dinner where everyone seemed so happy it might actually have been true if only it wasn't, everyone retreats to the television room to drink coffee. I load up the dishwasher with what I can and rinse the china and stack it, another Anderson Family tradition: I do most of the cooking, the men get to wash the dishes and the crystal. I kick off my heels and tiptoe to the hall closet, find Mrs. Anderson's purse, help myself to a few Valiums. If she discovers that any are missing, she just blame my mother. I am never a suspect.

I pour a large glass of wine, take two of the Valium, and go out back to enjoy my rare cigarette. The sky is heavy and gray as lead.

It might snow. Perhaps I can convince Andrew to light the fireplace. It won't take much. I can convince him to do almost anything. It's always been that way. He loves me that much. Some days it's dangerous. Some days it's thrilling.

Some days, I think, *I just don't know who I am anymore and never have and never will. Maybe I never will. Ain't life a sonofabitch that way?*

Like a good poker player, like any good card player, I never question what the dealer gives me. You just can't do that. You've got to keep playing the game. Ask too many questions and the game's over, you've spent your time, you're done at the table. I don't think I'm done yet. I want to be Robert Redford. I want to be the Sundance Kid. I don't want anyone to know who I am until they have to. And if Butch Cassidy happens to let it slide who I really am, I want to have the first draw. I want to fire before anyone else can. I want to believe the other guy will think he's dead before I make him dead. I want to believe in that kind of power even if it doesn't really exist. That. That. That, my friend, all my friends who might be listening, is living. That's life. That's being alive when in your darkest moments you think you're dead.

I hear laughter and squealing. My head is already fuzzy, not my own, and that's okay. I step further into the yard and see the neighbors' two girls and two other girls I don't recognize running around their own yard in their holiday dresses. They're not playing tag, just being what they are: little girls. One does a cartwheel. Another spins around and around until she's so dizzy she lands in a heap. The other girls try to pull her up. I smile, drink more of my wine, and watch them tumble and twirl, and soon I feel so light and so innocent and so loved that my own feet almost feel as though they could leave the ground, too, if I let them. □