

The dance was the only time I was free. Regardless of how many people were dancing around me, I was free. Cedar Butte was where it all started...

I have always been afraid of the people crowding around me. I remember nothing of my childhood, but the fear. I would wake up every day to people--all sorts of people. All of them crowding around me, looking down at the small child. What were they all thinking? I couldn't tell, but I didn't care. I just wanted them gone. I would cry, but that only drew them to touch me. I couldn't understand why they would do that. Didn't they understand how much pain I was in? Didn't they know I was afraid? Of course they did. How couldn't they realize that the child seizing on the floor was doing so out of fear stronger than she could handle? Then why did they continue to torture me?

As I grew up, I started to watch them carefully. More with interest, now, than fear. I saw them touch each other. Why didn't it scare them as much as it did me? They seemed to enjoy these horrible things called hugs! I started to understand that they thought I did, too. I understood, then, that I was the one that wasn't normal; I was the one with the problem.

My parents, I finally understood, needed to be touched. By me, by each other: it didn't matter, it simply made them happy. I wanted to make them happy. After all those nights I heard them crying and talking about me, I wanted them not to worry: to think I was o.k. So, no matter how much panic rose up in me as I did so, I gave my parents hugs every night before bed.

Each night, I could tell they were happier; the joy inside them radiated out, calming me down. Before I left the main room to go to my bed, I would look back and see them smiling at me, and I would dance. It was the one thing I found fascinating in all the books I read during my inevitable home schooling. I spent hours reading books about dancing, learning about form. My parents soon saw that dancing made me as happy as I could ever be.

I was twelve the first day I walked into the studio. My father wanted to hold my hand because he thought I was nervous. I was ecstatic that I would be able to dance! That is, until I walked in. Inside, the room started spinning as I saw how crowded it was. There were so many people! All of them were dressed similarly, and I could see more than just one girl that looked like a duplicate of another. At least, I thought so. My father saw me start to worry, start to break. He tried to touch me to help me calm down until I started crying loudly.

“So many! Why so many?!” I started chanting it, rocking myself in the fetal position outside the building. My hands covered my ears and my eyes were slammed shut to block out any memory of what I had just witnessed.

As I calmed down my chant to a whisper, my father came to squat down in front of me. “What’s wrong, my dear Francesca?”

“So many. Why so many?” I kept at my chant.

“There weren’t but seven girls in there. Your mother and I made sure of that before we signed you up.”

I looked at him dumbly. I knew I had seen many more than seven. “What?”

“I know you don’t like very many people around you, Chess, but you’ve been fine with seven before.”

The reality of what he said to me sunk in. I felt stupid. “Oh.” Was all I could manage.

I had been to doctors, and they had told me that I had an irrational fear that caused my ‘panic attacks’. They termed this fear of many people around me “Socioclaustrophobia” and my fear of touching “Aphenphosmophobia”. These words meant lack of control to me. What could I possibly do to stop it if they had such words making my fears sound like incurable fatal diseases?

I walked back into the building with my father standing just far enough away to make me comfortable, and saw what he had pointed out. In the room full of mirrors, I had seen more than just

the seven girls my age there. They were no longer touching each other, but stretching at the bars at the front of the room. I felt calmer, but still quite embarrassed of my outburst and wary of the teacher going over to each girl and touching her to fix her position. When she saw us, she came over.

“Good Afternoon! I am Ms. Nasira Lang. May I help you with something?”

“Yes,” my father started. “My wife and I signed up our daughter for classes.”

“Oh! Then you must be Mr. Farraday, and you” turning to me. “must be Little Miss Francesca Farraday.”

I tried to smile. “Yes, Ms. Lang”

I tried to ignore what my father said to her when he took her off to the side.

“Ms. Lang, I must tell you, Francesca is a very fearful little girl, and if you decide you cannot teach her after today, I will understand. Ever since she was born, there has been fear in her eyes whenever we touch her or too many people get too close. I want to apologize for her outburst earlier; it seems...she saw more children than there were.”

My cheeks flushed crimson at the fact that my father was sharing my embarrassment with someone neither of us even knew.

When father and Ms. Lang returned, he bid me, “Be good,” and Ms. Lang turned to me.

“Well, Miss Farraday, why don’t we get started? You may go into that room there,” gesturing gracefully to a door in the right wall of mirrors “and get changed. Then come on out and we will get you started on some basic stretches.”

“Yes, Ms. Lang.” I said, trying to avoid the stares from the other girls in the room. I made myself walk with confidence over to the door and go in without looking over my shoulder. I changed quickly, and walked back out into the room of mirrors. Ms. Lang came over.

“Alright then, Miss Farraday, let’s go get you set up at the bar.”

“Yes, Ms. Lang.” I walked over to a spot about four feet from everyone else and tried to follow their movements.

“Miss Farraday, very good form!”

“Thank you very much, Ms. Lang.” I blushed at the compliment.

“All right girls, let’s talk. Come sit down on the floor.”

I sat in the back,

“Ok everyone, since you are all new today, I will need to see what you can do. I will call you up one by one. When you come up, I will change the music track and you will show us all your interpretation of the music. Got it? Alright, Miss Sanchez, you will be first.”

I watched the girls go up and dance beautifully each time. Ms. Lang would give them wonderful compliments but also a few things they could work on. She called them up in order of who was sitting closest: I was last.

“Miss Farraday, it is your turn.”

My heart leaped up into my throat, but I went up confidently. When she started the music, I closed my eyes and pictured my parents smiling at me. When I opened my eyes, the music was gone and everyone was staring at me. Ms. Lang was beaming at me.

“That was excellent, Miss Farraday! I see you love to dance more than anything else. You have great soul and precise form.” She turned to the rest of the class. “Alright, class, I will see you in two days.”

I went to go get my things from a nearby corner. I could not understand why Ms. Lang did not give me anything to work on. Did she not want to teach me anymore?

“Miss Farraday, may I speak with you?”

This is it, I thought, she can’t deal with a freak like me. But when I walked over to her, she was smiling.

“Where did you learn to dance like that? I thought your father said you had never taken classes before?”

Confused, I answered. “I read books. I haven’t ever taken classes.”

“Amazing. You learned all your form from books?”

“Isn’t that what everyone does before they come here?”

“Not everyone. Half of these girls have been taking classes since they could walk, and still don’t have the skill—or passion—you have. Your dancing is flawless. I can’t teach you anything that you don’t know in this class. I have a style class that meets on Saturdays and Wednesdays. I can squeeze you in that class if you’d like.”

“Squeeze? How many people are in that class?”

“Oh my heart! I forgot! . . . I have very little spare time, as I keep up my own dancing career, but I think, . . . after seeing you today, I think it is time to let the new talent have a chance. I can teach you during the time I would usually practice and we can put you in our program at the recital as the special performance. I will make sure that there are some talent scouts to kick start your career.”

I was speechless; she was giving up her joy for mine: no one had ever done anything like that for me before.

“Will that be alright with you, Miss Farraday? Or is that not what you want?” She began asking me questions as I started tearing up. “I’m sorry, I just. . . I saw you today and I really think you have what it takes. But if that is not something you think you can handle. . . Miss Farraday, what do you want to do?”

I looked up at Ms. Lang with tears in my eyes. All I could manage was, “Call me Chess, please.”

She smiled and seemed to understand. “Alright Chess, meet me here every day at 3:30 p.m. I will teach you for one hour.”

“Thank you so much, Ms. Lang. I’ll be here.”

I could barely contain my excitement as I told my parents when I got home. I was dancing like crazy the entire time I told them about my day.

For the next few days, I went faithfully at exactly 3:30 every afternoon. Ms. Lang taught me so many new things that I had never read in any books.

With all the beautiful things I was learning, I could barely concentrate on my courses. The Geometry I had breezed through before became like a foreign language to me. French only made me think more of my dancing. English seemed too boring compared to the words I was learning to make with my movements.

One day, I couldn’t wait. It was three weeks before the recital, and I was too antsy. I rushed through my lessons and rushed to the studio. I heard music playing, and I didn’t want to interrupt her classes, so I opened the door quietly.

*I entered a world of beauty. I saw Ms. Lang dancing! I had never seen her dance before. She had shown me specific styles and stances, but I had never seen her really **dance**. While she was dancing, she was the most beautiful thing in the world. Her body moved gracefully with the music, never seeming tired, never looking out of step.*

When she saw me, she stopped. She walked smoothly over to the player and turned off the music. “I’m sorry Chess, I had a cancellation. I know I said I would help you in my free time, but I thought you would be in school.” She glanced at the clock. “Why aren’t you in school?”

“I’m homeschooled.” I replied, barely hearing the question. “Ms. Lang, that was beautiful! I had no idea. . . I’d never seen you. . . I can’t believe I’m depriving the world of your wonderful dancing!”

She laughed. "Don't you dare worry about that, my dear Chess. After the world sees Miss Francesca Farraday, they won't be missing me too much. Shall we get started? You only have three weeks until the recital, and we still don't have a set routine for you."

"Ok, Ms. Lang, I have some more ideas for the B section of the song, I can show..." Then another idea struck me. "Ms. Lang! Will you be my dance partner for the recital?"

"Oh no, Chess, I couldn't. This will be your time to shine. Now let's see your ide—..."

"Please, Ms. Lang? You are a beautiful dancer, and I can't imagine a world that wouldn't miss you. If you really are giving up your career for mine, think of it as your goodbye."

I waited for her answer with a look saying that I wouldn't give up until I got a yes. Finally she gave me a resigned look. "Ok, Chess, I'll do it." I danced around the room with joy. I grabbed her to dance along with me. She shrieked with delight. "Chess! What are you doing? You never touch anyone. Aren't you scared?"

I realized I wasn't. I wasn't scared of touching her, I just wanted to dance, and I wanted her to have her moment. "No, Ms. Lang, I'm not scared! You and I are going to dance together. My first recital will be spectacular!" I calmed myself down and let go of her hands. "We can start now."

"No my dear Chess, we can't. There is one more thing." She looked at me, smiling. "Since we are going to be dance partners, I would love you to call me Nasira."

For the next three weeks, Nasira and I practiced non-stop. On the night of the recital, I couldn't stop jittering. My insides were churning. Since she knew it was my first and biggest performance for an audience much larger than eight, Nasira made it a point to make special trips over to my spot backstage to calm me down. When it was time for our performance at the end of the recital, she looked over at me, and I knew it would be wonderful.

When the music started, Nasira and I dashed out fearlessly into the stagelights. I was smiling the entire time. Although this would be the last time she danced in her career, I was determined to

make it the most special recital she had ever danced in. We pulled off our routine perfectly. But more importantly, we danced with passion. We were both right where we always wanted to be. It was as if we were one soul thrown into different spots across the stage, then coming back together. We dazzled the audience with our dance.

*When it was over, I took her hand, and together, we bowed. I looked over to her looking back at me as the curtain closed, and I knew: we were **free**.*

Chess' Freedom

A Short Story By

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