

## Encore of a Ballerina

Kathleen Wood

Today, I am celebrating. The field spreads before me, a sea of vast green, blowing slightly in the wind, rolling over the contour of the land. Flowers sway, causing different colors to twinkle in and out of existence as I stare out. In the middle of the meadow, massive ancient oaks tower silently, like sentinel guardians. As I turn my head, a leaf drifts near my face, gliding slowly across the field. The wind stirs it and the different colors of green and yellow flicker as it turns in the air. It reminds me of my past—of times when I floated across the stage like a flower in the wind.

Five years ago, I was studying at Julliard, working day in and out towards my dream of being a dancer at a prestigious ballet company. I loved to feel the power in my legs,

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knowing my movements looked effortless. I prided myself in making my burning muscles, sweat, and ripped toe nails look beautiful and elegant. I danced daily with my class and then spent additional hours practicing in front of the mirror. I was one of the top dancers at my school, chasing my wildest dream.

Things came to a crashing halt. With one misstep my dreams shattered. I was on pointe and doing a jump that should have been easy, but it wasn't. It took all my strength and I came down wrong. Everyone heard the pop. Then, flashing lights. I found myself in the ER. Things happened in a blur, one after another, people filed in—registration, nurse, doctor, x-ray tech—then hours of waiting. I was counting the seconds, terrified of the coming news. Would this change everything? Finally, the doctor came in to speak to me. He explained that I had a common fracture that dancers get and that it would heal pretty quickly. Relief was palpable,

but only lasted minutes. His eyes locked onto my arm and I had no idea why. I self-consciously cradled it; it had no bruises or breaks, only an annoying rash that my dance instructor had given me cream for. Why was he looking at it? I thought my biggest problem was the few weeks I would have to stay off my ankle, but the look in his eyes caused me to fill with dread. I could tell that he suspected something much worse.

The clues quickly fell into place—the fatigue, the “rash” on my arm, they all fit. I had advanced stage skin cancer. I was forced to drop out of my dance program and move back home with my parents. I had surgery, and then was started on aggressive chemo and radiation. I lived on the couch, languid and weak. I spent too much time crouched over a toilet, my head spinning, my stomach rejecting all sustenance. My mom was there with me through it all, holding my hair, delicately stroking my back. I was in a dark place; my once strong body seemed to cave in. I had always been thin, but the pounds fell away and I looked sickly. My beautiful hair thinned. And through it all I felt the hole in my chest ache as I thought of my classmates gliding across wooden floorboards, floating on stage. How I yearned to be with them, how I ached for my dream.

Once I finished my chemo treatments, I started volunteering at a local dance studio, helping with the beginner's classes. It was encouraging to feel my strength building back up. Slowly but surely, I even felt strong enough to enroll in some classes of my own. It was like finding my old best friend again, to be going back through my familiar movements. I continued to help with the beginners classes and was swiftly offered a paid position to teach. A new passion began to emerge as I spent my evenings helping five-year-olds with their pirouettes. I felt their joy for dance grow with each class. I also finally had time for things other than chasing perfection and found that I quite liked it.

I met him in a coffee shop. Michael. We bumped into each other in line, and with our simple conversation, began to fall for each other. He had big blue eyes and a shy smile. We sat together and ended up talking for hours. The next day we went for lunch. From then on, we saw each other almost every day. It was my first time having a real boyfriend. Before, I was too wrapped up in chasing my dreams, sacrificing all other areas of my life. Experiencing love for the first time was such an unimaginable treat. I found myself going to the movies or visiting museums with Michael, when before I would have spent this time dancing for hours, alone, in front of a mirror. Sunny afternoons with sundrenched kisses and lazy picnics thawed out a consuming competitive core I'd had all my life. We stayed up all night, talking and enjoying each

other. All of it was new for me, and I wanted more. As time progressed, I realized that I did not want to let go of my new life, my new love. I was not ready to move back to Julliard and resume the competitive, cut throat life I had always imagined. So I stayed in my hometown, lived life, and loved it.

Today, five years later, I am still cancer free. Five years cancer free. I love the sound of it in my ears, it feels like victory. The path was long and hard, and today my life is so far removed from where I thought I'd be, I could never have imagined it possible. I remember the start of the difficult journey, when I learned that I, a normal young person, had cancer and could possibly die. I remember the dread, the struggle, the pain.

But now, standing in this field, I am a survivor. Spinning across this stage of wild grasses and flowers, with the wind blowing around me, I understand what has brought me to this new and amazing place. In the leaves, I see my mother who rubbed my back when I was sick from chemo. My newfound strength is the wind, pushing me onward, gathering everything around me. My evenings teaching children ballet—something I never thought I would do—is my hair, wild and free, flowing down my back,

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finally grown back. The petals that adorn my skin are the soft caresses of my newfound love. As I extend my arm and leap forward, all the painful memories like my feverish raking nights and my broken dream of being a star dancer in a company roll off my back. The wild grass I land on is my future, cushioned with my friends and family. I am a survivor. I am cancer free. And I have my whole life in front of me. This is my encore, this is my ultimate applaud to myself. And in this meadow, I hear a standing ovation.

*This story is not based on personal experience, rather it is a creative work of art hoping to reflect the spirit of survivorship and victory.*

■ **Kathleen Wood** is a first year medical student. Katy started writing when she was 18. She has completed a novel, two children's books, and several short stories. In college she majored in Spanish (with an emphasis in Spanish Literature). Now, she combines her two major passions, literature and medicine, as she attends medical school and continues writing.



Round Marsh  
Ryan Humphries