

Clara was born in mid-December on an unseasonably warm day. Rain melted the snow and flooded the side street with slush, causing a small man wearing a gray checkered suit to be drenched from head to toe by the wake of the speeding taxi cab bearing Clara's expectant mother to the hospital.

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Among the great many gifts piled upon the expectant mother and father was an illustrated copy of ETA Hoffman's *The Nutcracker*, paged through once out of curiosity by the mother only weeks prior to the birth of their second child. The likelihood of this subconsciously affecting the naming moment cannot be accurately determined, but it should be noted that none of Clara's ancestors carry the name.

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Sometime between her second and third year of life, young Clara came upon the book, opened it directly to a particularly chilling depiction of Drosselmeyer and was appropriately horrified by it for several months on end.

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Two nights prior to her third birthday, Clara and her father attended an outdoor children's festival at which a group of teenaged ballerinas with limited talent and questionable technique presented a brief showing of their classwork. Clara was transfixed and had to be dragged from the arena, to the great dismay of her father, who has always pictured her as a volleyball or basketball enthusiast. The prospect of endless future nights spent in a darkened theater surrounded by other parents convinced of the brilliance of their child did not excite him. At least, he commented later to Clara's mother, in sports there are clear winners and losers; the phrase "Better luck next time" is not often uttered within range of the young artist's ears.

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In the midsummer of her fourth year, Clara meets a boy named Jeremy at the park and they make up a song that goes like this: "Ca-Lara-Lara-Lara-Ermy." Three years later, Jeremy's face unconsciously appears out of Clara's memory as she spells, correctly, the word 'clammy' on her spelling test.

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Upon the occasion of her sixth birthday, Clara's mother throws her a grand party distinguished mostly by its lack of attendance - for a blizzard hits the city, shutting down all modes of transportation and resulting in an empty ballroom but for the caterer's son and two cousins who were staying with the family and would have been present, party or no. This trauma results in a life-long trepidation of parties on Clara's part.

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The cake however, frosted with strawberry and lemon and with the words, "Celebrate!" piped across its surface in a vivid blue font, was quite well received by a family of rats living in a dumpster wherein the mostly uneaten remains were disposed of.

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At seven, Clara auditioned for and was cast in Yorkville School for Ballet's *The Nutcracker*, which ran for three glorious performances prior the year's holiday break. Though she was not cast as young Clara, this experience of appearing on the darkened stage, surrounded by others as if in a dream, the lights and music and swirl of activity, her growing awareness of the sea of faces on the other side, the sweat from the strenuous choreography running down her neck and legs, and then the applause, had an effect on her unlike any other in her hither-to rather unremarkable childhood.

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Jeremy, Clara's childhood friend, also auditioned but was not cast. He never auditioned for anything ever again.

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Clara, during this production, fell in love for the first time, with a boy named Cyle spelled with a C, who was two years older and danced the part of one of the rats. They kiss once, backstage, his rat head pushed back over his sweaty forehead, his eyes a deep pool-like blue, fixed somewhere in the center of her forehead as their lips briefly touch.

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At the celebratory dinner following their final performance, Clara's mother and father declared they had never seen a finer production of *The Nutcracker*, a declaration they would have to convincingly update for the following nine consecutive years, a pattern broken only by Clara's decision at sixteen that she would go and study dance in Paris for the winter. Clara's father, sensing a certain emptiness in the house and in his wife's heart, took her to see a holiday themed movie that year instead, starring Robin Williams.

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Clara's time in Paris is short, swift, and fleeting. Her unvoiced motivation for signing up for the excursion is her knowledge that Cyle, now eighteen, would also be studying in the same program. On the third night at the studio she comes across him and another young dancer, half in and half out of their leotards, entwined in such a way that could not be mistaken for anything other than passion. Clara examines earlier memories and concludes that, ultimately, she shouldn't have been so surprised.

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Upon her return from Paris, Clara announces that in the future her name will no longer be pronounced Clara but *Clara*, more European, more serious. She starts pulling her hair back and tying it severely behind her head. She drinks more espresso. She frowns anytime anyone pronounces her name incorrectly, which is quite often at first.

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At age seventeen, Clara applies for and is accepted into three of her top five schools, and although she had considered Juilliard to be her make-or-break school, the fact that she is not accepted there does not deter her from presenting her deposit to Marymount Manhattan, where she will attend the dance program for two tumultuous years before transferring to Columbia in order to study American Literature instead.

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The first break in her serious pursuit of a lifetime spent as a dancer may be attributed to the dissolution of her parent's marriage during her first month at college - the realization that their collective effort to raise her was the only remaining bond holding their relationship together is both flattering and devastating. Clara, still a virgin at the time, goes on a two-week binge over Christmas break in which she consumes thirty-seven alcoholic beverages, makes out with three young college-aged men, and sleeps with two of them. She remembers little of it except for her realization that her attendance at technique classes, her turn out, the perfection of her form, all of it means something less to her than it did before.

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Clara graduates from Columbia at age twenty-three with an undergraduate degree in English. She still regularly attends ballet class twice a week while she waits tables at an Upper East Side restaurant and tries to decide what to do with her life.

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At age twenty-seven, Clara makes a grand decision. This will be her last ballet class, she tells herself. After this, it's serious living. It's traveling, leaving New York, it's something new, visiting her father where he now lives in Texas with a tennis instructor. It's open minded ness, open hearted ness, a new and carefree approach to her life, so carefully lived and with so little pleasure derived. At this class, she meets Patrick, who is on tour with a professional modern dance company, and is taking the class just to keep sharp. As she puts her pointe shoes into her dance bag ('forever!' she thinks dramatically) he surprises her by inviting her to a party that night with some of the other dancers from his company.

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At the party, to her great surprise upon someone's ironic placement of a certain and iconic Tchaikovsky record upon the spinning turntable, Clara finds herself responding by pulling her shoes back out of her bag and performing the entire *Variation de la Fee-Dragee* and parts of the *No 21 Pas de Deux* along with Patrick, who has kept himself sharp indeed.

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Later that evening, both drunker than they are willing to let on, Patrick offers to drive Clara in his car over the George Washington Bridge and into New Jersey, promising a view of the city she's never seen before from some remote place along the cliffs. He drops the keys twice trying to open the driver-side door and so Clara diplomatically offers to drive instead, with Patrick as navigator. Fuzzy with drink, unaccustomed to the vehicle and to the presence of such a talent beside her calling out jubilant left and right turns as they weave through the still-busy late-night Manhattan streets, Clara rear-ends a sudden braking gypsy cab at twenty-seven miles per hour, resulting in a collusion with enough force to propel Patrick through the windshield and to send a shard of broken plastic from the steering column directly into Clara's right eye.

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Patrick, suffering only from bumps and bruises, returns to his production only eight days later. Clara remains in the hospital for nearly a month while she undergoes two unsuccessful corneal transplants, the second of which is overseen by one of the leading ophthalmologists in the field while one of his young assistants, Brian, looks on from the periphery. Brian, despite admonishments of impropriety in the past, is unable to focus on the intricacies of the surgery, drawn instead to a close study of the features of Clara's face, her nose, her delicate eyebrows, her lower lip slightly separated from the upper as though he is lying next to her and she is not sedated but asleep.

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Brian and Clara are married two years later. They rent a one-bedroom apartment in Englewood Cliffs where they live for almost five years.

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Sometime between their third and fourth year of residency in Englewood Cliffs, Brian invites his sister and her young children over for a familial brunch. One of the children brings a pet rat in a cage. The rat, sometime between the serving of the over-cooked omelet and the completion of Clara's fourth Bloody Mary, escapes and vanishes. Brian's sister's child, despondent, cries for hours as they search the entire apartment to no avail. Three days later, Clara, upon blearily preparing her morning coffee, pulls a mug from the cupboard and finds the pet rat, quite alive, staring up at its reflection in her freshly inserted glass eye.

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It's not rats but ants that motivate Clara to summon an exterminator to the apartment. The exterminator arrives, inspects the tiny invasion, sprays here and there, and promises to return within a week to monitor the results. She calls him two days later. Brian is on a lengthy trip to give a lecture on the future of bionic optical transfusions. The exterminator's name is Randy. He spends the night three out of the seven nights that Brian is out of town. The ants do not return, but Brian does, earlier than expected.

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On Clara's thirty-third birthday, she lives alone in a studio apartment on the Lower East Side. She teaches at a dance studio in Chelsea. She has a favorite happy hour location. She does not throw a party to celebrate her birthday, but receives several phone calls from unexpected people, including Patrick, who leaves a simple message wishing her a good day and adding that he hopes she's still dancing. Clara unpacks her dance shoes, but leaves them on the counter for the next three days.

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Four days later, the phone rings. A voice on the line states that Clara's mother has died. Clara puts the dance shoes away. She flies to Maryland for the funeral.

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Six weeks later, Clara's father's girlfriend dies. She is notified of this news via a text message. Clara does not fly to Texas.

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At age thirty-seven, Clara meets a director at a social after-work mixer who is directing a new version of *The Nutcracker* for the downtown theater scene. She offers to act as a consultant on the project, to choreograph if possible and or if necessary. She waits near the phone for several days following, strangely excited by the prospect. The phone does not ring. She will not hear back.

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On her fortieth birthday, Clara receives a card in the mail, unsigned. Inside is a single ticket to the New York City Ballet's current production of *The Nutcracker*. Clara sets the envelope down. She walks around her tiny apartment. She looks out the window and sees that it is only just beginning to snow. She watches the taxis come and go on the street as it slowly turns white with precipitation. She goes to her closet. She moves her ballet shoes out of the way and finds her winter boots.

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At the ballet, the seat beside Clara is empty for the entire first act. She considers leaving at the break, but returns to see the actual dancing. Just before intermission is ended, Brian the ophthalmologist comes down the aisle. She pretends not to notice him but it becomes impossible once she realizes that the seat next to hers is his. "Hello again," he says. "Hello," she says. The lights dim and the second act begins.

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On her forty-second birthday, Brian presents her with a dog. The dog comes with a card which explains that it is a former therapy dog that once performed in an all-therapy-dog-version of *The Nutcracker*. "What shall we call him?" Brian asks.

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On her forty-seventh birthday, Harlequin the dog breaks from his leash and runs away. Clara and Brian, despondent, post flyers all over the Upper East Side, where they now live. Three days later, the phone rings. 'I have your dog,' the stranger's voice intones. Clara and Brian take a taxi uptown and are reunited with Harlequin, who is happy to see them and no worse for wear from his impromptu adventures. From this day forward, however, Harlequin never seems at ease and always sets his eyes towards the horizon, northern facing, as though something awaits him just out of the leash's reach, something he's once tasted and wants to taste again.

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Just before her fifty-seventh birthday, Brian and Clara have a fight, an epic blowout in which he claims that she allows her regrets from the past to overshadow both her present and future, and also in which she throws her glass eye at him and strikes him just above the right temple. The eye rolls under the couch. Brian leaves the apartment and does not return for five days.

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Clara watches *The Hard Nut* on a cable television channel. She hasn't found her eye and so she is wearing an eye patch. The door opens. Brian enters. 'Happy Birthday,' he says and hands her a box. As though he hasn't been away and that no fight has happened. She accepts it and opens it. Inside are a pair of pointe shoes. 'What are these for?' she asks. The box slides under the couch and strikes the glass eye, which rolls out onto the carpet, causing Harlequin to bark with excitement. 'Oh, there it is,' Clara exclaims.

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That night she wears the shoes to bed. She wakes in the morning to snowflakes. She dances down the hallway.

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On the day prior to the summer equinox, Harlequin breaks his leash and runs away once more, this time never to return. Shortly thereafter, Brian and Clara move to Westchester. She is sixty-six years old.

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The telephone never rings except with bad news. This time it's her brother Fred, who has suffered a heart attack and will not survive the week. Even though traveling is more difficult now, she packs her bag and buys the plane ticket to Florida. Without knowing why, she places the pointe shoes at the bottom of the bag.

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At the funeral, Clara notices one of Fred's granddaughters has cut her hand deeply. 'What happened there,' she asks. The girl, shy, turns away. Her sister replies, "She cut it on a cupboard. She was having a dream.' 'It weren't a dream,' the girl says. The casket lowers into the ground. 'I have something for you,' Clara says, 'But I don't know if they'll fit yet.'

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Brian dies in his sleep. She rolls over and finds him beside her, lifeless. She isn't as surprised as she thought she might be. She looks out the window. She picks up the telephone. Clara is now seventy-six years old and alone once more. Maybe I'll pick up dancing again, she thinks, and then dials the emergency numbers.

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Who is it, she says. Who is it. She goes to answer the door but it's not a door that's familiar to her. What is this, she says. Am I even speaking? Can you hear me? She opens the door and with her one good eye sees the hallway, not her hallway at all, institutional, bland pictures of flying geese on the walls. Who is out there? No one seems to notice as she wanders down the hall with her walker, searching for something but she can't really remember what.

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But there's a party and she arrives with her eye patch and all the children look at her like she's either an angel or a demon and she makes light of it in her head, knowing so much more now than she's ever known.

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Who is there, she asks again, and this time a voice responds.

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The exterminator is here. Your room needs to be serviced. Mice, I've heard them. Yes. And the droppings everywhere. Yes. M'am, is this your tree? Your christmas tree here? It's not plugged in and the star is here on the floor. Shall I help you? Oh yes my dear, please. Have you got a ladder, this is quite the tree! I haven't but Brian has in the garage. Brian? Oh my husband. I see, I see, well it turns out the facility has a ladder and so I'll just climb right up here won't I and place the star, right here on the top. What was that? What? In the corner there. Did you see a mouse? No, I suppose not, just a shadow. Look at the star, m'am. It's my birthday you know. No, I didn't know that, how old are you? What an impolite young man you are! I'm eighty-seven years old today. Happy Birthday. What a wonderful star. And look out the window, it's snowing. So it is. So it is. I used to be a dancer, you know.