

A Dance from the Heart

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Natchez, Mississippi

"I am NOT angry," said Marie. "Besides, 'The Nutcracker' is a stupid play. Whoever heard of dancing snowflakes, mice and stuff like that?"

Marie's mother could see her daughter's face in the rear view mirror. The more Marie talked about not getting the lead in the upcoming holiday dance, the redder Marie's face became.

A good dancer, Marie had hoped that this year she finally would be chosen for the lead role. Instead, another girl won the part of Clara. Marie had a cold the day of auditions and wasn't dancing her best. She wanted a second chance, but the dance instructor said there wasn't enough time for another tryout.

Normally a bubbly, happy child, Marie fell into a slump, one that seemed impossible to break.

"Now, Marie, it's okay to be disappointed for a while, but it's been two weeks and you'll have to let it go," her mom said as she drove down Main Street passing the Christmas lights and decorated windows.

"Look over there at that stuffed Santa in the window. Isn't it cute?"

Marie turned her head in the opposite direction. "Santa isn't cute ... I know all about Santa."

Her mother sighed.

"Dear, the rehearsals start tomorrow, please try to look forward to the play. I know how much you love dancing and 'The Nutcracker' has been your favorite," her mother said.

"Well, I don't know if I want to dance in that play. Besides, I'm thinking of quitting dancing altogether."

"Oh dear," her mother said. "Your father loves to see you dance ... he tells everyone you look like a star on stage."

Her mother's attempt to cheer up Marie didn't work.

"I bought something for you," her mother said. "Here, it's a Rudolph Beanie Baby for your collection. It was the only one in the store."

She passed the Beanie Baby back to Marie, who simply stuffed it in her pocket.

"Listen, I have to stop by the hospital to drop off some presents. It'll take only a few minutes. You can come in with me."

Marie and her mother walked down the hallway of the pediatric ward where her mother worked. As they went by one room, Marie saw a boy sitting in a wheelchair in the shadow.

"Who's that?" Marie asked.