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Mary Jean Henke

A Tunnel's Light

Enclosed from every direction except straight ahead, she huddled in the dark, man-made escape tunnel beneath the theater's stage. Hugging her knees close against her pounding chest, she shivered as the trickle of a single tear left its mark in her heavy makeup. Ready to explode, yet empty inside, confused emotions danced nervously from sob to sob, unable to find their place. Aside from her uneven, choppy breathing, it was silent. The rest of the dancers and crew had gone home, for it was late and time to rest. She was a dancer, but it was not time for her to go. Most of all, she had nowhere to go. She was a lost soul playing the part of a likable, energetic entertainer; a stereotyped "happy, successful performer" who secretly slipped this stereotype on and off like a mask. She pondered who she was, unable to grasp the answer. One fact, however, which she indeed knew was that this dark, restricting tunnel under the stage would be her bed for the night. This cold, tight crypt, only high enough to crawl, and only wide enough to cough would serve as home until dawn.

Satisfied with her decision, her thoughts raced back to her evening's performance. It was a symbolic yet demented drama—avant-garde at its finest.

Center stage she balances with ease a difficult, uncentered position, as the intense heat of the spotlight glitters on beads of sweat across her skin. Feeling as one with the low-key lethargic music, her body pours from each controlled movement as the audience gazes, entranced. Cradling their applause within her frail and graceful arms, she gladly accepts their love, their

Oh, the stage is deceitful if you do not know who you are! With a blink she was crouched once again in the confined tunnel, soon forgetting her daydream of the evening's show. She began to notice a numbness in her legs, but refused to recognize it. Examining more closely her surroundings, she softly ran her fingertips along the securely constructed wooden sides and ceiling of her dark cave, realizing they were splintered. She frequently stumbled across a sharp nail protruding in from the outside. Ironically, she was not threatened, but sensed a security about her confined aloneness.

She lived her life the same way—alone. Always choosing routes which separated herself from others, she felt terrible pain, but was afraid to open the doors. An incredibly strong person was chained to an awesome, weak spirit. Desperately, she sought to find herself, yet did not know where to look. Perhaps here she would discover the answer to weave a magical cure over the dark, impending shadow hanging upon her soul.

In everyone else's eyes she was a pillar—a free spirit—a talented dancer in the arts. She was one to depend on—to put the pressure on—to respect—to give the lead to. She was expected to be behind the driver's wheel, at the head of the race. Why, then, did she feel lost?

Her thoughts dashed once again to the performance that night.

It is the final scene of the show—a sad, thoughtful scene. In the script, the dancers are to act as if they will never see each other again, and they hold a staged going away party. Amidst the punch and gala, the melancholy is unavoidable. The dancers each take a colorful balloon with a string attached. Stumped for the perfect words, they nervously swing their lifeless balloons from their strings and watch, with glazed eyes, the soft bounces as the balloons sink tiredly to the floor. One dancer approaches another and soon all join arms in a circle harnessing one last moment together. One by one they toss their lifeless balloons out of the circle and rejoin arms. Finally, when the star dancer raises her arm to toss her balloon to the floor, it floats, rather, and soars slowly up, out of the circle. All of the surprised dancers watching, their eyes following the floating free spirit until it is out of sight—and the curtain closes.

She, this huddled human mass— she, this pitifully depressed person, was the star dancer that night who brought a symbolic ray of hope to the audience with her floating balloon. Clenching her fists with frustration, she felt infuriated with the other cast members for not reaching out to her and befriending her. How could they? They idolized her too much to be close to her, and she hated them for that.

She felt an eternity pass while curled in her little ball under the stage. The night was no longer young—it was late—bewitching hour late. The numbness in her legs could not be ignored. Releasing her arms from their clenched state around her legs, she stretched them forward, towards the opening of the tunnel. Still not allowing herself to leave this place, she lay down and decided to sleep. Feeling exhausted and unable to cry another tear— she fell into a deep unconsciousness.

Dreams of peace and relaxation embraced her. For once in a very long time, a warm sensation of friendship swept over her. Unsure of whose friendship, she searched deeper to find a dim light shining at the end of the tunnel in which she hid. No longer dark, the light grew and filled the coffin-like place with a glowing brightness. She dreamt of floating towards this light— accepting its warmth just as she had accepted the warmth of her beloved audience. Leaving her body behind in the tunnel, her soul danced with the bright light that tickled her. She dreamt of not pausing to look back, but focusing forward with an unbearable desire.

Morning light soon arose and the doors to the theater snapped open with a click. A hush of voices sounded low and then grew into regular conversations as the dancers and stage crew entered the theater for practice. There was a concerned question in the air of where the star dancer was and why she was late. One young man from the stage crew checked the props and hidden tunnel as routine before practice. Casually opening the trapdoor, he paused, wide-eyed, then yelled for others to come. The dancers circled around the trapdoor— only this time their focus was not up at a floating balloon, but down below. There she lay, sickly. Her graceful arms were stiff and cold beside her statuesque frame. The beautiful olive skin that covered her body with a warm glow now appeared corpse white and aged. Horrified, the dancers wept over the suffocated body that she left behind in her tunnel, unknowing of the soul that was set free to the light at the other end.