

FINDING HOPE

by Emma Carlyle

© 2012 Lois Winston

The Christmas I turned six I watched *The Nutcracker Suite* on television. During a commercial break, I bounced off the sofa, lifted my hands over my head, and twirled to a chorus of *plop-plop, fizz-fizz, oh what a relief it is*. “I want to be a ballerina,” I announced loud enough to drown out the sonorous voice-over that followed the jingle.

My father snorted behind his newspaper.

“Short, chubby, pigeon-toed girls with sway backs and no rhythm don’t grow up to become ballerinas,” said my mother, never one to mince words or mollycoddle her offspring. The clickety-clack of her knitting needles emphasized each blunt word.

I thrust my hands onto my hips. “Mrs. Cullpepper said if we work hard enough, we can grow up to be anything we want.”

My father lowered his paper. “Someone needs to give Mrs. Cullpepper a remedial course in genetics.”

“What’s *netics*?” I asked.

“A subject your teacher didn’t pay enough attention to when she was in school. She’s got no right filling your head with such nonsense.”

I stamped my foot. “It’s not nonsense. I’m going to be a ballerina. You’ll see.”

“So will you,” he said, turning his attention back to the sports section. “You’ll be a secretary like your mother until you get married and have babies.”

Refusing to give up on my new dream, I pestered my parents for weeks. I whined. I pleaded. I cried. To no avail.

“Enough!” said my mother one night. “We’re not made of money, and I’m certainly not wasting any on something as foolish as dance lessons. I don’t want to hear another word about it.”

So I never took ballet lessons at Madame Verushka’s School of Dance, I never wore a frilly pink tutu and matching satin toe shoes, and I never danced the role of The Sugar Plum Fairy.

When I was nine years old, I came home from school one day and announced, “We’re having a talent show, and I’m going to sing the song from *Annie*.”

My mother laughed. “You can’t carry a tune. You’ll make a fool of yourself.”

The next day I climbed the steps to the auditorium stage and belted out what the music teacher announced was the most off-key rendition of *Tomorrow* she’d ever heard.

“I told you so,” said my mother when I arrived home in tears. “You set unrealistic goals for yourself, Hope. Then you fall apart when you fail. When will you learn?”

Apparently not by the time I was eleven. That was the year I decided I'd become an astronaut. Until my father took me to Kennywood and plunked me on the roller coaster -- the big one.

"NASA doesn't accept astronauts prone to motion sickness," he said as I set foot on terra firma and proceeded to hurl my cookies. "You'll be a secretary, Hope. Like your mother. Stop wasting time on daydreams." And just to make sure, for my birthday that year he bought me a reconditioned computer and a touch-typing tutorial.

Forget women's lib. Forget college. We were a meat-and-potatoes working class family descended from a meat-and-potatoes working class family. While college kids were burning their bras and draft cards and discovering the joys of sex and raw veggies, my mother had been in the kitchen, learning to cook the life out of the string beans.

Mom and Dad reasoned that what was good enough for them was good enough for us. They had lived through the Age of Aquarius unscathed by free love and flower power. Dylan could sing his gravelly lungs out, but the times weren't a changin' any time soon in our little corner of America where the Rust Belt merged with the Bible Belt.

Charley, Jr. would follow Dad and countless generations of Morgan men into the steel mills of western Pennsylvania. Faith and I (and yes, had Charley arrived as a girl, we would have been Faith, Hope, and Charity) were expected to master nothing more complicated than the intricacies of short-hand and land ourselves husbands prior to our twenty-first birthdays. Once married, we would have babies and cook mushy string beans in a kitchen spotless enough to eat off the floor, continuing in the time-honored tradition of Morgan women.

We were the product of low expectations, and none of us had enough backbone to buck the Morgan philosophy of How-It's-Supposed-To-Be-In-The-World-No-Matter-What-Those-Damn-Liberals-In-Washington-New-York-And-Hollywood-Say because Dad was a firm believer in Man-of-the-House Mentality. Or so he and Mom constantly told us.

Which is why for my first twenty-odd years I lived the life mapped out for me by others. And why now at the age of nearly thirty-four, I was in the middle of my first job interview that required a hell of a lot more than the ability to take dictation and type sixty words a minute.