



# Grounding the Tutu Girl

By Gretchen S. Sween

**B**ack then, Maggie didn't mind so much that she couldn't explain where her daddy had gone or how her mama had so many boyfriends with funny accents who gave her and her brother coins from foreign lands. And she didn't dwell on life's wanton blows — as when their two turtles mysteriously expired right after she'd refused to trade them to the kid next door for his Erector Set. She didn't even mind all that moving they did — sometimes unceremoniously at odd hours of the night.



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Maggie didn't mind because she had it on good authority (namely, her own infallible imagination) that she possessed a secret gift. And that knowledge kept her from caring, or even noticing, that she looked like a wild, impish gypsy next to the coordinated OshKosh B'goshness of her first-grade peers. Maybe gnarled old Mrs. Stevens was fond of making a public example of her lousy penmanship. But that didn't keep Maggie down for long. She knew she was destined to dazzle the world some day, thanks to her secret gift.

For a while, she only exercised that gift in the room she shared with her kid brother — and only when she was sure he was off exploring some creek bed in hot pursuit of frogs or snakes. Alone — but always mindful of a future audience in the great wide world beyond — she would leap about ecstatically to the tunes of Simon & Garfunkel, bedecked in jewels and a red-and-gold tutu that her mama had bought at a garage sale. It was a steal at 25 cents, discounted since the red netting had a rip in the back. But Maggie didn't mind that either. All she had to do was drape her favorite purple scarf, a gift from Mama's friend at The XXX Tropicana, so it hung around her neck like a princess cape. That pulled everything together.

And so Maggie wiled away many hours, dreaming of the day when she would be revealed to the world in all her majesty.

One afternoon during recess, Maggie was approached by fellow first-grader Rosemary Robinson. Rosemary was something else. Her hair was always brushed and adorned with ribbons that didn't fall out while climbing around on the jungle gym. Rosemary wore neatly pressed, first-hand clothes and shiny black patent leather shoes. Although Maggie fiercely coveted those shoes, she liked Rosemary all right. So when Rosemary mentioned something about the ballet lessons she was taking, Maggie smiled politely and nodded. Then she casually let it slip that she too was a dancer.

"You wanna come with me some time?" Rosemary asked.

Instantly, Maggie realized: *This* was it. The big moment had come at last! But not wanting to alarm Rosemary, who had no way of knowing that her casual invitation was about to launch the career of an unprecedented artistic genius, Maggie maintained an appearance of calm. She replied simply, "I wouldn't mind."

Arrangements were made. And one evening later that week, Rosemary's mom came by in their station wagon to pick her up. When Maggie emerged from the brick duplex, part of which had been painted lime green before their hippie neighbors had abandoned the job, she bounded down the front steps,

buoyed by the magnificence of the spectacle she was about to unleash upon the world.

Maybe she construed their silence as reverential awe. For as they drove, neither Rosemary nor her mother said a word. Maggie was, however, content to sing along with the radio as she bounced excitedly in the backseat.

Her conviction was only slightly shaken when they reached their destination a few miles away. The stark classroom in the nondescript strip shopping center was such a far cry from the scene she'd envisioned for her big debut. Where were the red velvet curtains? The crystal chandeliers? The scads of glistening roses? The elegant musicians and the hordes of admirers awaiting her every move with bated breath?

One wall was lined with cold, intimidating mirrors. The opposite wall had a heavy, black metal bar mounted horizontally at waist height. The ceiling was low. The hardwoods were full of scuffmarks. To make matters worse, the place seemed populated solely by other 7-year-olds. And as she looked at them more carefully, she noticed something even more odd. They were all wearing exactly the same thing: flesh-colored tights, black leotards, basic pink ballet slippers. There wasn't a single scarf or tutu or jeweled tiara on anyone else. And her hair. Maggie had done her best to tame her long, frizzy, tangerine mane. But in the end, she'd decided to leave it hanging loose, better for swirling it around as she made her patented moves. By contrast, the other girls all had their hair pulled into prim, stiff buns mounted firmly on the tops of well-scrubbed heads.

Then again, maybe this wasn't so odd. Maybe they were supposed to be her attendants, and this was just a dress rehearsal for the grand opening.

*Time to liven up this place*, Maggie concluded and commenced twirling across the length of the room.

To her dismay, no one was interested in bearing witness to her unique interpretations.

"Little girl — you, in the crazy get-up. Find yourself a place at the bar with the others. Stop that nonsense right this instant. This is a ballet class, not a three-ring circus."

This woman then insisted that they get their feet into some ridiculous contortion she called "the first position." And while another woman pounded out mind-numbing chords on a battered piano that stood in a corner of the room, the instructor barked out orders in an alien tongue at war with her West Texas twang.

As the class dragged on, Maggie found it harder and harder to breathe. Each time she caught sight of the other girls in the

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mirror, smirking at the red netting, gold sequins, and the ever so slightly frayed purple scarf, she felt an invisible hand smacking her across the face. She could feel her world and this bleak alternate reality poised to collide. Then shards of glass, glitter, and mutilated petals began to rain down upon her, pounding against her skin, piercing her heart, and burying her beneath a mountain of undulating doubt. Even so, she struggled mightily to comply with the instructor's absurd demand for endless repetitions of "plié" and "relevé."

At the conclusion of the hour-long calvary, Maggie was eager to flee the scene. But that woman had to land a parting shot.

"Hey, little tutu girl, is your mother here?"

Maggie shook her head.

"Well, you tell her this is a serious ballet school. If you plan to continue, you need to come next time wearing the proper attire. You understand me?"

*Next time?! Was she crazy?*

"Ask at the front desk. They'll give you a piece of paper that explains all about it."

But Maggie had no interest in her damn piece of paper. Or in those five unbearable positions. She just hoped the torrents pouring from her eyes would transport her quickly to a distant land where truly beautiful things like gold sequins, red netting, and silky scarves were hardly out of place.

"I'm sorry, but you need to understand this: Our goal here is to teach young girls the value of *rules*."



Eventually, Maggie did come to see the value of knowing and playing by the rules. In time, she even embraced a métier that did not hinge on nurturing some secret gift. She steadily exchanged fanciful dreams of arousing euphoric adulation from indistinct masses for the promise of reliable remuneration and legitimate social clout.

As a respected litigator, she would never dream of filing a brief without first consulting the binding substantive authorities, as well as the court's local rules and *The Bluebook: A Uniform System of Citation*. Indeed, her professional prowess derived from a strict commitment to rational analysis and a gift for harmonizing the facts of a given case with the governing standard. Indeed, she commanded respect and a handsome hourly rate precisely because she had learned that the rules are what give structure, and, thus, meaning to civil society. Respect for the rules is what allowed a person to anticipate issues and preserve errors and, thereby, be of service to entities in troubled times. In fact, she recognized that the most effective way to set one's self apart was to know the rules better than any adversary, and then, like a chess master, use that knowledge to outmaneuver a course to the ultimate end game — extricating the client from the judicial maze altogether. She knew that only then was she able to give clients what they want most: a return to equilibrium.

Over the years, as she'd learned the difference between unfiltered emotion and meaningful expression, Maggie had thrown out the tawdry contents of her dress-up box. Now her tailored suits were always tasteful, understated even. Only her basic black pumps shined. Her fit figure suggested adherence to a rigorous exercise regimen. And her hair, maintained in a conservative bob, projected both confidence and self-discipline.

Maggie knew that wearing camouflage was not necessarily the same as hiding, just as a fear of falling is not a fear of flying.

But every once in a while, when she'd had that second glass of Cabernet, and some random strain from an old Simon & Garfunkel tune pierced her consciousness, something strange stirred within. A peculiar sensation — of elation, shame, and impudence all mixed up. It didn't last long. But when it came, it was almost enough to topple her, triggering as it did an inexplicable longing to twirl around in silk and sequins in defiance of all the rules.



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