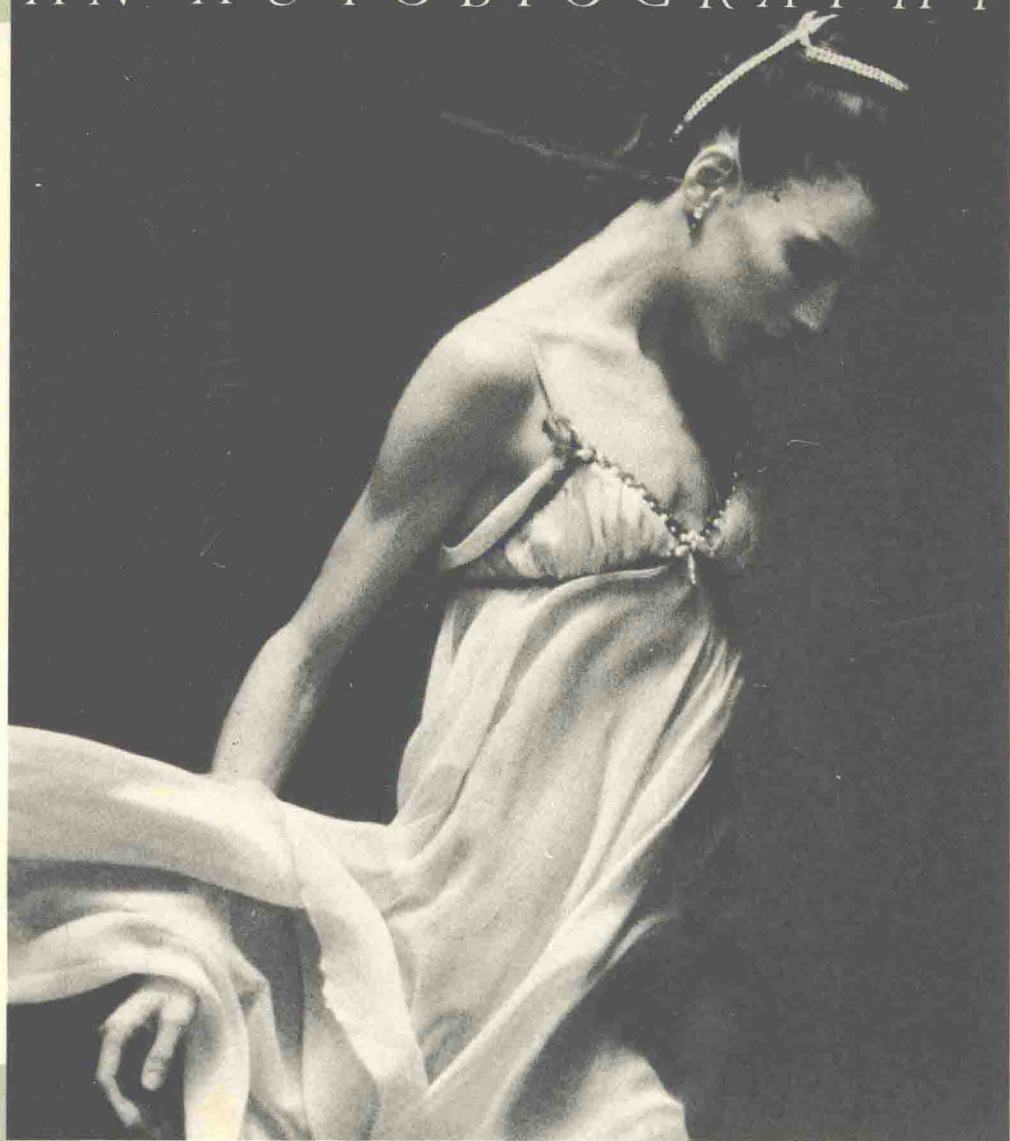


DANCING ON MY GRAVE

AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY



GELSEY KIRKLAND

DANCING ON MY GRAVE

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AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY BY
Gelsey Kirkland

WITH
Greg Lawrence

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*In memory of Joseph Duell, 1956–1986,
that the cry for help might yet be heard.*

NOTE: A few of the names have been changed for the usual literary or legal reasons and are introduced with quotation marks on first appearance. My efforts to render foreign accents are not intended to ridicule any person or national group, but to lend authenticity to the voices as I heard them. Some of the individuals recalled in this book have in fact won acclaim on the stage or in films, for those readers who might wish to hear the real voices for themselves.

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Hence it is from the representation of things spoken
by means of posture and gesture that the whole of the art
of dance has been elaborated.

—PLATO

All the dancer's gestures are signs of things, and the
dance is called rational, because it aptly signifies and
displays something over and above the pleasure of the senses.

—ST. AUGUSTINE

Genuine art . . . does not have as its object a mere
transitory game. Its serious purpose is not merely
to translate the human being into a momentary dream
of freedom, but actually to MAKE him free.

—FRIEDRICH SCHILLER

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DANCING ON MY GRAVE

Chapter One

SEEN BUT NOT HEARD

 I was not born a ballerina. I did not emerge from the womb on pointe, nor did I wear a tutu instead of diapers. I was a baby pudgeball, with a head like a tulip bulb and a belly to match. I came into the world December 29, 1952, in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. My crib soon became the center of attention in my family's homestead in Bucks County. I played the game of being seen but not heard to the hilt, giving everyone the silent treatment. My parents worried that I might be mute, or that I was deliberately refusing to speak.

I remained speechless for months after my second birthday. When a friend of the family prepared to leave after a visit, she heard a little voice cry out, "Please don't go." The startled visitor, who still delights in telling the story, exclaimed, "Why, you little fraud. You can talk!" Little did anyone suspect that someday I would speak with silence—that I would make a career out of being seen but not heard.

When I was still young enough to catch fireflies and collect them in a jar, I already possessed my own inner world of dancing lights and fantastic creatures, an imaginary world where dreams were kindled. Like the character of Clara whom I would later portray in the ballet *The Nutcracker*, I fell for the beauties of night. I experienced dreams as if they were real, unable to distinguish them from the world outside my mind.

I was frequently carried away. A flying horse once saved me from the monster in the lake on our land. I traveled through water and air in my sleep. During my waking hours, I roamed and played from room to room in our enormous house. One summer day in my third year, I crawled out from under the dining room table and told my father that I saw Mommy in the water. He laughed and lifted me into the air.

I had seen my mother at the edge of the lake. I remember her braided hair and sparkling eyes. The image was only a reflection shimmering on the surface, but I insisted that Mommy was in the water.

In crossing the border between the real and imaginary, I discovered a

secret place where some measure of tenderness might prevail. I was fiercely protective of my private world. Though somewhat sheltered, I was as daring as I was delicate. I was not reluctant to display my feelings. If I tied a bow within my breast, it was sure to unravel at the slightest touch. I had an endless ribbon of laughter and tears.

My parents, both artists themselves, bestowed certain intangible gifts. One was their love. Another was an active sense of wonder. It might be said that as an inquisitive and oversensitive child, I was predisposed to develop an artistic sensibility. But there was a darker side to this inclination, as there was a darker side to my dreams, a tragic undercurrent which almost prevented me from realizing the value of my inheritance. The transition from dreamer to artist involved years of intensive study and passionate struggle, difficult lessons which had to be learned before I could accept my legacy.

In recollecting that vanished time during the fifties when we lived on the family farm, I hold a picture framed by a little girl's innocent hands. Those years left their mark, like a smudged fingerprint on the heart. Each fragmentary image is a clue to the mysterious continuity of love. The line of devotion can be traced back in our family to the romance that brought my father and mother together.

During the violent decade before I was born, they met in a theatrical production of *Tobacco Road*. My father, Jack Kirkland, had adapted the story by Erskine Caldwell for the Broadway stage; my mother, Nancy Hoadley, was an actress who played one of the leads in the touring company. They lived outside of New York entirely, where my father, like many successful writers at the time, had acquired property. He liked the idea of raising a family in the country, a setting that he used to advantage in his writing and a refuge where his privacy would not be invaded.

My older sister, Johnna, my younger brother, Marshall, and I took our places in the family portrait, along with our half brother, Christopher, and two half sisters, Robin and Patricia, who was almost my mother's age and had children of her own. I hated having my picture taken—I wanted to be invisible.

Our extended family made for a busy household. The children from my father's previous marriages were often with us, as were a couple of his former wives. The women in my father's life remained devoted to him. The friendships survived even after the marriages broke apart. The farm was a gathering place for the social set to which my parents belonged. My mother had friends from her college days and, like my father, friends from the theatre.

The actor, Yul Brynner, boarded with us for a while. He was down and out in those days. During an ice storm, he almost burned down our house. It was an accident. According to family legend, he tried to make a fire in the nursery where he was keeping one of his children. The flames leaped from the fireplace. The room filled with smoke. Buckets of water were carried

from one side of the house to the other. After the actor moved out and became famous, my father called him cheap and ungrateful. They were no longer friends.

Adults made me wary. I tested any prospective lap before sitting upon it. At the urging of my parents, I imitated a snowflake and performed bits of mimicry. I was the only one who took my act seriously, much to the glee of my grown-up audience. Vulnerable to ridicule and confused by those who towered over me, I went through a phase of withdrawal quite early in the game.

It must have been my father who first taught me about the holiness of life, and the adversities. He was something of a gentleman farmer. As a thinker, he expressed his ideas in his writing and sought to apply them in the world. As a sportsman, he hunted the lands and fished the waters. Involving himself in the business of agriculture, he ran a dairy farm. He was the provider, though my mother recalls having to milk the cows.

My father had his eccentricities and expectations, in which we children figured prominently, though sometimes imperfectly. When my sister had reached the age of six, my father decided that she was old enough to see a chicken beheaded. Johnna was about three years older than I was. Marshall was a year my junior. My sister confided to me how Daddy had to drag her out of the house to witness the bloody ritual. She had been in tears, bewildered at seeing the headless chicken perform its dance of death, leaving its tracks in the yard. The trauma obscured whatever lesson or rite of passage had been intended.

There is no question of my father's affection, the pride he took in raising his children. He wrote in a letter to us, while he was in Hollywood working on a screenplay, "Won't it be wonderful to think back someday to when you three were ittsy-wittsies too small to paddle in the pool." And so it is. Elsewhere he advised us, "Take this to heart, that things are not what they seem." And so I did. Distrusting appearances, I would learn to look and listen for a deeper truth.

Father taught us to sound out the syllables of our words in order to spell them. One of those words was "perfection," which became a guiding principle for me. He praised us, but always qualified his approval, as if deliberately preparing us for a world that would make impossible demands for excellence. With my father, communication was difficult, especially when he attempted to communicate his love.

I had no understanding of adult communication problems. When I was three, a friend of the family took me for a walk on Halloween, alternately humoring me with talk of ghosts and goblins and muttering about the pagantry of autumn. Holding me by the hand, he led me through the woods near our house, and I waddled beside him, the tiniest of ugly ducklings. He repeated himself, and I lost my patience. With my childhood lisp, I scolded

him, "You thet it, and you thet it, and you thet it . . . and don't thay it again."

The anecdote has been repeated by my family for years as evidence of how cute I was. I recoil now when adults talk down to children, or when dancers use baby talk to speak to each other. I have always been touchy that way.

I was more interested in my horse than in the superstitions of the harvest season. I had a blind horse by the name of Sugar, to me a winged Pegasus. With a child's infinite compassion for animals, I worried over his useless eyes. I was sorry that I could not grant him vision, that he would spend his entire life bumping into things.

I was not old enough to see why my horse had to be left behind when we sold the farm. Who would lead him on his dark and lonely trail? Who would fill his pail with oats when we were gone? In this time of crisis, Mother was the one who broke the bad news to us and did her best to answer our impossible questions, questions which my father could not bear from his children. The move depleted his spirit. In planning his autobiography, my father intended to use this disruption of our lives as the end of his story. Giving up the farm meant giving up his life, a fact which the notes he left behind make clear enough:

Indeed, even when that loved farm, that tie with my heritage, went on the block and a dream of aging squirehood exploded—even that shattering occasion, with which I plan appropriately to end my story for it likely was the end of me, can be said to carry the woof of ironic comment: the man who bought it, swept along by the mesmerizing threnody of the auctioneer's chant, bid more than \$100,000 for the place and didn't even want it.

My mother shielded us from the truth. She did not tell us that a combination of my father's extravagant generosity and waning literary fortunes had driven us from our country home. She made vague promises about the paradise we were about to enter. Her gentle assurances prevailed over our pouts and tantrums. In the end we were forced to trade our pastoral horizons for the urban skyline of Manhattan. Fortunately for children, the uncertainties of the present always give way to the enchanted possibilities of the future.

When I was almost four, my family trooped into New York City to take up residence on Central Park West. That was the middle of the decade, around the time that Elvis Presley sang, "You ain't nothin' but a hound dog . . ." My brother and sister and I were small enough for our father to catch us in his arms, like a midget acrobatic team, jumping from the top of the bunkbed we two sisters shared. On one occasion, Daddy was so tipsy that we managed to throw him off balance and tumble with him onto the floor.

As suddenly as a dream can turn into a nightmare, he split his forehead