



the
HalfWAY
GIRL

A
STORY BY
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SHARP

IN small Utah towns, the sun presses against the streets and buildings with an intimacy hard to find in places less exposed. Usually nothing is hotter than the single, paved street running both ways out of town. Odelle, Utah, though, had its own particular hotspot: the only greenhouse for miles around.

Full of sensual blooms and small green slips, the greenhouse should have been a place of wonder. Yet even the school children, bursting into three free months of exploring, left it alone. It was no challenge, just a steaming building which left even the most intrepid child limp as the garden flowers his mother babied all through the summer.

The old men and women who worked there, their droop caused from time as much as place, liked seeing the heat smother younger planters, liked watching young hands slow to a senile pace. Even the migrants, who swaggered in every morning, charged by the pace of their transient lives, even they soon lost their volatile edge. By noon they were as lifeless as the regulars who planted at the opposite end of the table. By noon there was no difference, save a little skin tone, between one sweating group and the other. For most, the greenhouse was just a place to earn a paycheck to spend in the bigger towns north along the mountains.

The only exception to the rule of swelter and slowdown was the new girl. She stood apart, midway between the regulars and the migrants, which was the reason for her nickname. She was quiet, too, so reserved that one old man wondered if she was only halfway there. He repeated the thought out loud, drawing snickers from both ends of the table. Not that there was anything halfway about her work; she transplanted faster than any of the other women (who were all faster than the men). Neither the heat nor the envious mutterings slowed her down.

No one guessed that the halfway girl had dreams. Though most of the women who fingered dirt five days a week had dreams, they were different dreams—of men or drink or eternal salvation. The halfway girl dreamed of movement. She cherished her speed at planting, thought it indicative of some greater talent. While the other women just shook their heads and remarked at such a diligent worker, she plucked her plants from the seed flats with a speed and economy of movement that attracted jealousy even in the hottest hours.

"I don't know how you do that without breaking the root," one of the women would observe, watching the halfway girl press the roots straightway into the dirt with her forefinger, then filling the ensuing hole with a quick pressure of her thumb.

Another woman would counsel: "I make the hole with one hand and put the plant in with the other; then I pat the dirt around it. That way I'm sure nothing breaks or wilts up and dies. Why don't you try it my way?"

Always the halfway girl seemed to consider the advice of others and always she kept her own way. Her rate was up to five dollars an hour, but to her, it wasn't the money that signified, just the skill, just the movement.

The girl stayed all day in the greenhouse, and when the others left for lunch, she was alone. She valued this time more than any other, anticipating the moment when the dirt maker ground to a halt and all the other workers shuffled out. The dirt maker was an old cement mixer, standing at the end of the table. Compost and soil were loaded into it, and all day it grumbled and ground out "Grade A Dirt." "Hardly government inspected," said the boys who shoveled in manure. When the machine was turned off, the halfway girl felt her soul turn back on. And during this in-between time, the end of morning, not yet afternoon, the halfway girl could hear herself breathe.

When she walked to the refrigerator, tucked between the pansies and the cash register, she heard her shoes spread the gravel with each step. The grunt of the refrigerator door as it gave way to her firm tug sounded clearly in the building full of quiet things—the plants, the moisture, and the halfway girl.

On the refrigerator door some long-gone planter had pasted a poem. She liked the poem, though it made her uneasy. Like sacrament meetings when the bishop caught the spirit of exhortation and rebuked their frailties—commending their energies to a finer cause. If the babies didn't cry or the air conditioner turn on, it could be an inspiring experience. Yet more often she felt confused, unsure of the first step up. She wished she knew whether the flowers in the poem were a good or a bad thing.

The Production Planter's Song

It could smother
someone in an instant,
all that dirt
that fills our flats.
(Each flat—twelve cups
each cup—eight plants
ninety-six plants—hands
must be fast).

Jack be nimble,
Jack be quick,
thirty-five cents
is all you get.
But hands get old,
too stiff to be sold.
The fingers break
and will not hold
newborn plants.
They wilt, they fold.

Ashes to ashes,
the planter is still
dust to dust.
The dirt will spill,
and only the grave
and the earth will know
the flowers that fall
and root and grow.

As the halfway girl ate her sandwich, she wandered through the greenhouse, stroking the plants and listening to the quietness. Sometimes she fancied she could hear the leaves twisting as they followed the sun. Or sometimes she imagined the roots exploring the

limits of their pots, searching through the rich dirt like her own fingers. When the lunch hour was up, she turned back to her job, trying to ignore the grumble of the dirt maker.

The work day ended at four, though some left earlier. The halfway girl always brushed her section of the table off, reported her number of transplanted flats to the skeptical boss, then gathered her purse, and stepped outside. And she was always surprised that the outdoors was cooler than indoors.

The walk to the bus stop was another good part of the day. She enjoyed stretching her heels forward, feeling the whole back of her leg lengthen until the power from her hips thrust foot after foot down in a long, hungry stride. Someone once had accused her of eating up the space when she walked, and she liked to think it was true.

Every day she paid her fare just as the bus began to move. She was always in control, the backs of her legs straining as she leaned slightly forward to avoid lurching. As she turned to find her seat, she kept her knees slightly relaxed, ready to adjust her balance with the most subtle shift of the bus. She never clutched at the backs of seats as she made her way down the aisle. Her control would have graced a dancer.

To dance was the halfway girl's most secret dream, one that had begun to grow at the beginning of the summer when she saw a dance concert on television. Even through the warped picture of her old black and white, she could tell that here was something wonderful.

The dancers' feet moved with surety at any speed. Their arms could float with the fluid carelessness of a dream or capture lines as stark and unyielding as the edges of the mountains surrounding her valley. She thought it must be one of the bishop's "finer causes."

Yet she had not looked for a dance class and probably never would have if it hadn't been for a conversation she'd overheard at the greenhouse. It had been early, before the heat and noise of the dirt maker conspired to still the flamboyant character of the migrants.

"Oh, don't kill them leetle flowers," sang one young Mexican. "Pretty as a leetle butterfly with petal wings. Oh, don't kill them butterflowers, them flowerflies all grown up from a leetle caterpillar seed."

"Listen to that nonsense," said one of the regulars. "Butterflowers and flowerflies, hmmph," the woman snorted, nearly crushing the plant she thrust into the dirt.

"At least he's enjoying himself," quibbled an old man who disliked busybody women. "Gives us old folks something to listen to, eh?"

The woman, who did not consider herself old, glared, but the man continued. "Perks me up to listen to their nonsense—they have so much energy and hope. Why maybe someday," he paused, glancing down at his arthritic legs, "someday, I'll race the friskiest boy to the edge of town where the tall trees wait, and I'll shinny up higher even than the church. And maybe someday," he

glanced down the table to where the halfway girl worked at a furious pace, "someday that little girl down there will realize that all that dirt she hustles her life around is just dirt."

The halfway girl was angry. "Who is that old man to judge me?" she thought. She shook her head, trying to clear his words out of her mind. Only her fingers marked her agitation, and that day she transplanted flowers faster than ever before.

Even she was a little awed by her speed, but the old man's words returned, diminishing her achievement. "Just dirt, just dirt." And her thoughts expanded the refrigerator poem: "Sixteen flats an hour? So what? So what? Jack be nimble, Jack be quick; dirty fingers is all you get. So what? So what?" Suddenly the halfway girl knew she wanted to do something impressive. Something which people would applaud. When the home teachers made their monthly call they'd be more interested in her talents, less in the status of her social life. The bishop would see her from the podium and be reminded of her achievements, overlooking the fact that she sat alone.

"But there's nothing I can do," she thought. "Nothing I want to do. Except . . . ?" She stared at her hands, trying to deny the unspoken words that would commit her dreams. But the hands themselves betrayed her as she watched them dart among the plants. They were aware. They gauged the strength of the roots, the weight of the dirt, and coupled roots and dirt with quick, sure movements that stood out clearly in the lazy room. "Nothing I want to do. Except . . ." She admitted it now. "Except, maybe I want to dance." She felt then the excitement that sent her pulse throbbing through her body. "Maybe," she thought, "maybe I ought to take a dance class." Suddenly she knew it was the right thing to do, knew it as well as if she had received revelation.

As she waited for the work day to end, the halfway girl noticed a lift in the energy level around her. A cool draft blew through an open door. The heat stood still. A storm was coming.

The people in the bus that afternoon chattered more than usual, as though the rising wind enticed the words, one right after another, from their mouths. The halfway girl hardly noticed though, her own excitement blowing her home without a glance at the gathering clouds.

There was only one ballet studio in town, so she called there and asked about classes.

"The one class we have for adults meets tonight at seven. They've already had a month though, so you'd have to be willing to do some catching up."

"That's okay," said the halfway girl. "What do I need?"

"Well, leotard and tights and shoes. We sell shoes here, if you need them."

"Oh, good. Well, I'll see you tonight then." The halfway girl hung up the phone, then dropped onto her bed, hugging her knees. It had been so easy. Now she had only to wait until time to catch the bus. She could see herself turning and leaping. She could see the old man at the greenhouse envying her every move. She

straightened her bedspread, then watered her plants. Finally, she grabbed a sweater, turned out the lights, and stepped outside.

Usually she could look down her street and see clear to the end of town. Not that the town was especially small; instead it was as carefully planned as any Utah community. No winding river disturbed the precision of the streets, and the trees were never full enough to blur the view. That night, however, rain clouds had crept down the mountains, slipping into the valley and replacing the heat with a heavy layer of grey.

The ballet studio was downtown, above a hardware store, in one of those narrow two-story buildings with long, rectangular windows. The girl found a door that opened onto a long flight of stairs. Pulling the door tightly shut against the wind, she began to climb. Because the light was bad, she went slowly until she reached the top. Several women sat in what served as the waiting room and office. They stared at her as she entered.

"Are you new?" demanded a girl sitting at a desk.

"Yes."

"I thought so," said the secretary, a note of satisfaction in her voice. "Knew I hadn't seen you around before. You the one that called?"

"Yes."

"Do you still need some shoes?"

The halfway girl nodded.

"Come over here then." The secretary pointed to a stool next to a bookshelf stacked with shoe boxes. "What street size do you wear?"

"Seven."

"Okay." The secretary pulled a box out of the shelves. "Now these fit tight at first, but they stretch a half-size, and you don't want them sloppy. When you get home, you'll have to sew the elastic across the top to hold them on. Tonight you can wear just your socks. You can dress in there."

The halfway girl pulled aside a stained green curtain and stepped into a dingy cubicle full of clothes. She hung her coat on a hook and shoved her new shoes on a shelf. She sat down in a chair in the corner of the dressing room, not wanting to wait in the office with all those women who stared.

Suddenly a door banged open, and a wave of noisy, little girls rushed into the room. They paused for a moment as they saw the halfway girl in the dressing room, and then they scrambled for their clothes.

"Have you seen my other green tennis shoe?" A girl of about ten or eleven dangled a shoe in the halfway girl's face.

"No, I'm sorry."

"Well maybe I'll wait until everybody leaves, and then it will be there, in the middle of the floor—it always is. Hey," exclaimed the young girl, noticing that the halfway girl was dressed for class. "Are you going to dance here?"

The halfway girl nodded.

"Oh, well, you know what? Hooper's loony. And the roof's leaking tonight; she's always worse when the roof's leaking. Think she'd get it fixed, huh? But no, that leak's been here for ages. Know how I know?" A long face full of braces leaned over the halfway girl. "Because

my sister used to take here a long time ago. And she says the leak was here then too. Oops, there's my shoe." The young girl shoved her foot into the shoe, bending the back under her heel. "Well, I've got to go now. My mom's waiting. Bye."

"Bye." The halfway girl slipped through the curtain when things were quiet again.

"That way." The secretary pointed to another door that opened into a large, bare room. "I told Mrs. Hooper you were here."

When the halfway girl stepped into the studio, she nearly tripped over a large bucket which stood by the door.

"Just walk around it," an irritated voice advised. "You won't be dancing over there anyway."

The halfway girl looked up, surprised to see the room empty except for herself and a middle-aged woman, standing by a brown, plastic phonograph. The woman did not look like a dancer. Mrs. Hooper wore an olive green tee shirt and blue polyester pants that were short and too tight around hips which were neither small nor firm. And she wore thick white socks with pointed blue Keds.

As the halfway girl watched, the woman pulled her ponytail tighter and tighter until every hair was flat and her forehead was stretched and gleaming. Her eyebrows and lashes were so blond they faded into the broad, white surface of her face. Her eyes were the one remarkable feature of her face. They, too, were light, light blue, but they were so intense that the halfway girl dropped her gaze.

"My name is Mrs. Hooper. I'm your teacher." A crust of lipstick clung to her lips, bobbing up and down as she spoke. "I don't know why no one else is here. Adult classes are so unreliable. Diane will be here, of course, but then, she's always late. We'll wait for her."

The halfway girl nodded. She felt embarrassed standing in the empty room with almost no clothes on and nothing to do. Mrs. Hooper turned away, fiddling with the record player, and the halfway girl retreated to the back of the room where the windows looked out on the street below. It was raining heavily. She saw a fat woman squeeze out of her car and run along the sidewalk, slipping as she came directly beneath the window; then the halfway girl could no longer see her. She heard a clatter as someone clambered awkwardly up the stairs. Mrs. Hooper heard it too and turned around. "Diane's here."

Diane burst into the studio, dumping her wet coat and boots by the rain bucket. "Hello, Mrs. H. Am I the only one ag . . . ?" She stopped abruptly and followed the teacher's gaze to the slender, long-legged girl in the corner.

"We have a new student, Diane. You'll need to do well so she can follow you in the exercises." Mrs. Hooper motioned them to the side of the room closest to the record player. A thick metal rod protruded a few inches from the wall about rib height.

"All ballet classes begin at the barre. The barre is used

to assist balance. Just follow Diane. Begin by facing me with your left hand on the barre. I would like to see two demi's and one grand plie in first, second, and third positions."

The record was scratched and sluggish, but the halfway girl didn't notice at first. She was too intent on capturing the essence of the movement Diane was working at. When the exercises were completed, the two turned around, putting their right hands on the barre. The halfway girl was in front now, but confident she knew the exercise well enough to repeat it on her own. This time she noticed the scratchy music and hoped the other bands would be better. When the exercise was over, she remembered to hold the last pose.

"Have you ever danced before?" The question lashed out at the halfway girl, and she jumped, turning to face Mrs. Hooper.

"No, I never have."

"That's hard to believe. Well, let's continue." The teacher dropped the needle on the record, and the next exercise began. There were about ten barre exercises, both left and right sides. They were not difficult for the halfway girl, but neither were they exciting. They involved primarily the feet and lower legs.

"Okay, come center," said Mrs. Hooper, moving a stool towards the middle of the room where she could sit and watch them. "You have a very good body for dance, you know." The words seemed to come reluctantly as the teacher stared at the halfway girl.

"Oh, thank you." The halfway girl was embarrassed and disturbed by the antagonism she sensed in the compliment.

"But not many talented people get good." Mrs. Hooper exchanged a knowing glance at Diane. "They think they're too good for me, too much pride. They didn't get anywhere. In fact, I told them to leave."

The halfway girl shot a sideways glance at Diane, who wouldn't look at her.

The teacher surveyed the silence in front of her, then, seemingly satisfied, turned back to the record player.

"We'll do an arm exercise before we finish."

The halfway girl enjoyed the arm exercise, enjoyed the shapes she created and brushed away. She followed Diane in a little bow, then stood, bewildered, as the teacher turned off the record player. She watched as Diane picked up her clothes, then ran over to her.

"Isn't there any more?" she asked, incredulously. "Don't you ever dance, I mean?"

Diane kept her eyes on the floor. The halfway girl felt a hand clutching at her shoulder.

"What did you say?" The halfway girl found herself facing the teacher.

"I just wondered. . . ."

"What did you just wonder?"

"I just wondered if we ever got to move. Use the whole room ever?" The halfway girl winced under the pressure of the woman's hand.

"I knew you were like that," said the teacher, staring at her. "Your kind always think you know better than me. Well, you can just leave." Mrs. Hooper dropped her hand. "I don't need to take that from students. You can just leave." Her voice fell to a whisper. "Leave and don't come back—leave."

The halfway girl fled into the dressing room. She was shaking. She pulled her clothes on, hearing Diane stumble down the stairs. Not wanting to be left alone with Mrs. Hooper, the halfway girl hurried out.

She was nearly down the stairs when she remembered her new dance shoes, tucked on the shelf in the dressing room. Turning, she ran back up the stairs and into the dressing room. As she grabbed her shoes, she heard a loud thumping in the studio. She stepped back into the darkened office then hesitated at the top of the stairs. Slowly she turned back to look in the studio.

Mrs. Hooper held a mop up to the ceiling where a dirty, brown stain spread out from the leak. As the girl watched, the teacher thrust up the end of the mop, then stumbled back as a shower of rotten plaster fell to her feet. Mrs. Hooper stared at the ragged hole in her ceiling for several seconds before she noticed the halfway girl.

"I thought I told you to leave," Mrs. Hooper spat out, her blue eyes blazing. The girl turned and ran.



As the halfway girl rode the bus home, she found it hard to push the dance teacher from her mind. Hard because the strongest emotion she'd ever left behind her was indifference. But now the teacher sat immobile in the girl's mind, staring out with light, blue eyes. The halfway girl pulled her sweater closer around her.

When she got home, the halfway girl put the dance shoes away with her winter clothes. Then she brushed her teeth, read her scriptures, and set the alarm for morning. She never missed a day of work.

The next morning was cool, the rain still drizzling. The lukewarm air of the greenhouse was welcome for a change. The old man stood next to her at the planting table and smiled when she joined the regulars at noon. She chatted through the afternoon and at the end of the day when she tallied up her number of flats, it was much the same as everybody else's. That day the planters stopped calling her the halfway girl. She supposed the hometeachers would be pleased. Her name was Jane, just Jane. And she stumbled as she left the bus.

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