



Transman in a Ballet Studio: The Weirdest Job Ever Seen

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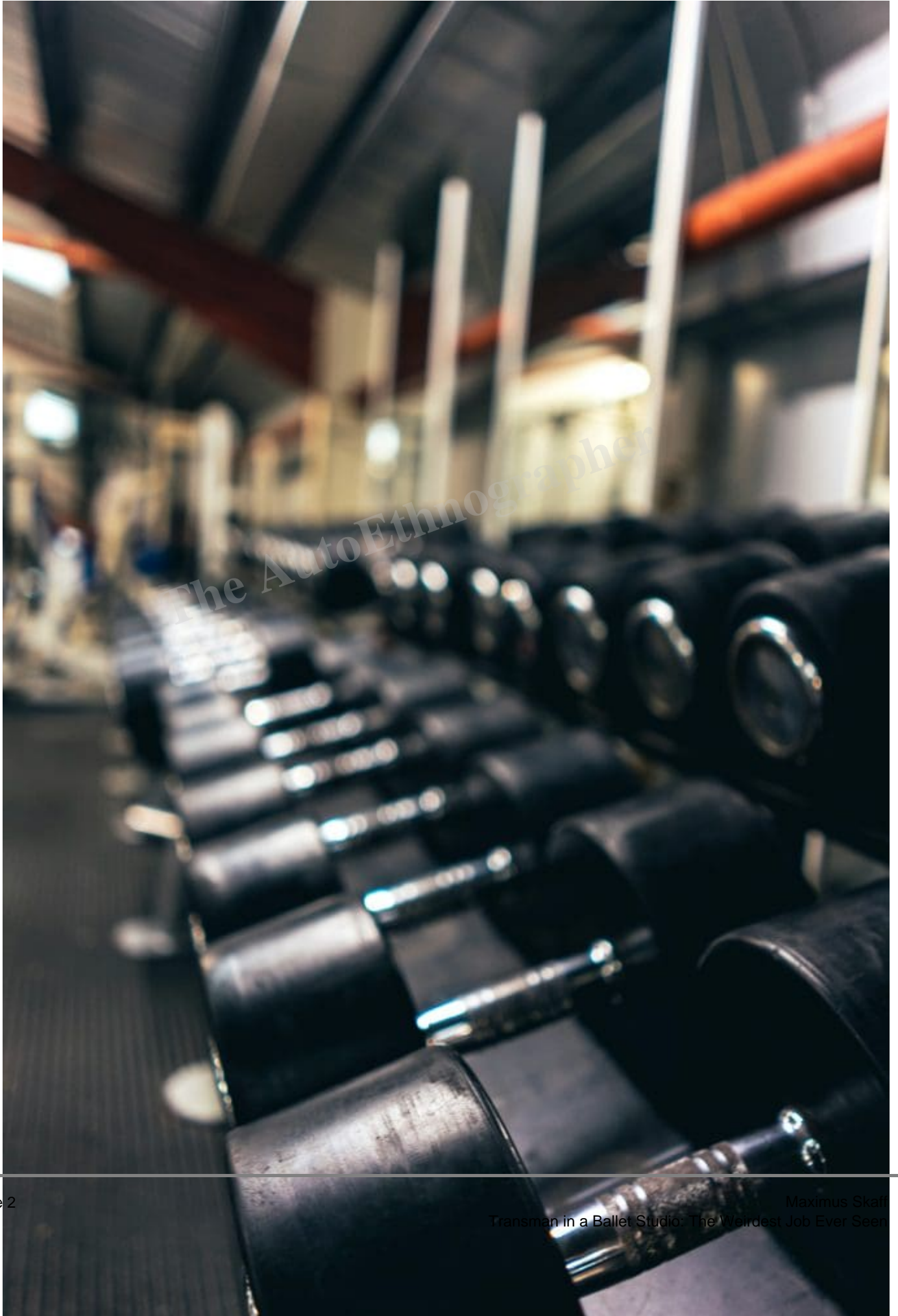
Transman in a Ballet Studio: The Weirdest Job Ever Seen

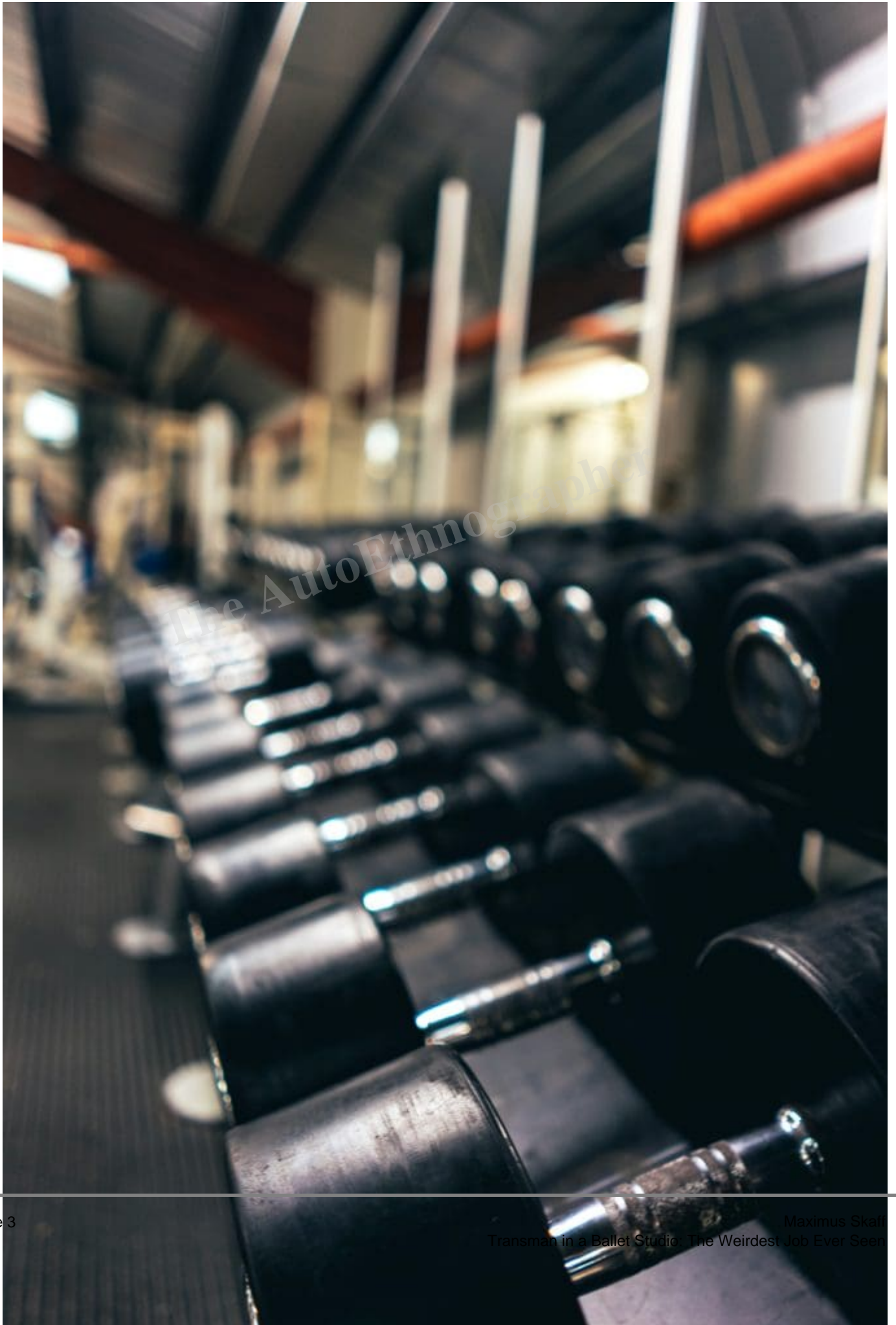
Author's Memo

This essay is a humorous narrative nonfiction account of the strangest job that I ever had working for a kooky fitness guru in downtown Manhattan for six years. This piece profiles my perspectives and experiences as a queer transgender artist from Brooklyn who found himself spying on the world of New York City's elite. Although many of my experiences with the celebrity trainer, Giselle Willis, were anxiety provoking and made me feel like a dirty tattooed punk, with time I began to feel gratitude for the job and what surprised me was that I even began to find the woman I had disliked the most, charming.

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I went from Giselle Willis accusing me of stealing her shitty camera to gaining her trust and I was handed my own set of keys to the immaculate studio with the white painted hardwood floors. But after feeling the power of the metal keys in my hand and the looney-tune things I did when I was alone in the studio, I knew she probably shouldn't have given them to me at all.





by Samuel Girven for Unsplash

I had never met anyone quite like Giselle Willis, my new boss at the fancy celebrity ballet studio, Ballet For Life. She was a fitness guru with international success after being a principal dancer in the New York City Ballet for ten years and I was the video director and editor for her ballet inspired workout videos. She had long, thick brown hair like a horse's mane and translucent skin that she wanted to be a spooky white on camera.

It was the only footage in my career that I was able to overexpose the shit out of and they praised me for it. She only wore ballet exercise clothing and her voice was high pitched and baby doll-like and called everything, "cute", even the time when her hair got stuck inside of the subway car door while the train was still moving and she threw orange peels and snotty tissues all over the ground that she left for the girls downstairs to clean up.

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She spilled coffee all over her leotards every day, but she didn't bother to wash the expensive Italian made ballet gear, she just threw the clothes into the trash and went to her Ballet For Life clothing line and grabbed something else. During important marketing meetings, she would pretend to take notes, but the only thing left on the paper by the end of the meeting would be heart shapes and stars.

It hurt my heart when Giselle accused me of stealing her stupid Canon 7D after I had placed it in the wrong room, but I let it slide and decided to keep taking her riches. I don't know why she was so distrustful of me, but I figured that maybe it was my tattoos or my sexuality. As a transmasculine person, she made me do all of the manly things like carrying packages up the five flights of steep wooden stairs or building 24' long ballet barres or catching cockroaches and putting them outside. I was the only one who ever used the toolbox and I changed lightbulbs and worked with the breaker boxes of the historical building's faulty electrical system.

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She talked to her fans about listening to your body while she was unaware of her own habits and slept only four hours a night because she kept popping out babies every year and a half and she was unaware of when she needed to sleep, eat, or when she was menstruating. Sometimes she brought her infants into the studio and then forgot where she put them.

"Is Chee-Chee up there with you?" she would yell upstairs and we would search the ground for the baby until we found it.

Ballet For Life's 5th Floor Classic SoHo studio was immaculate, with white painted hardwood floors and strange antiques like the creepy baby stroller. But even the creepy baby stroller had decorations on it in a purposeful, curated fashion.

I couldn't quite figure out Giselle, and she couldn't quite figure me out either, but I think she tried anyway to connect with me as best as she could by asking me about my girlfriend or asking questions such as, "How many cat tattoos do you have?", I felt like my black sheep presence stunk up the whole studio with my Queerness, but I was grateful for the steady flow of permalance money and tried to keep to myself as much as I could in my tiny dusty office hidden upstairs next to a random mattress and scattered tutus made in Italy and I made an effort not to cause any distractions or attention to myself as the Victoria's Secret models and blockbuster actresses had private training with Giselle below me.

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I listened to their conversations anyway. The clients for me were off-limits and I felt forbidden to interact with them in my old dyke clothes, although I did give the woman from "The Mummy" the WiFi password and I slipped a doctor from "Grey's Anatomy" an Advil.

My headphones stayed in my head all day as I edited the exercise videos, unless Giselle or someone else needed to talk to me about something and my favorite part of the work day was leaving for lunch so that I could run down the five flights of steep wooden stairs and listen to the elite of SoHo shop for their designer items on the cobblestone streets. I listened to their pointless conversations about their vitamin infusions and what Gigi had told Blair about Sebastian and I wondered how I had ended up in one of the richest neighborhoods in Manhattan three days a week.

Giselle Willis was on her best behavior on shoot days. I think it was because everyone was paying attention to her and attending to her every need. She could also finally have her cheese burger or slice of pizza after working out for eight hours a day, four days in a row. It was a conveyor belt of mass production of boring ballet workout videos. At night I heard her voice in my head, "One, two, three, good, four, five, almost there, six, seven."

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Most of my job consisted of pushing the record button on the camera and disassociating from the unstimulating workouts that made my eyeballs start to blur. I made sure to throw in a couple critiques on her body throughout the day because that's what she requested. It made her feel better that we were all making sure she was skinny and that her lunch hadn't made her "puffy" yet. Even though she always looked bony to me I would usually throw in a "suck it in" after lunch, by turning my body sideways and patting my stomach.

Our other catchphrase was, "If you see something, say something", which was in reference to if one of the cameras was catching her pussy too much or you could see cellulite on the close-up angle.

She took me to the side one time and had me examine her public hair to make sure they weren't showing and I transported her breast milk down the stairs to her husband several times, something also outside of my job description.

On set, the crew spent most of the day just waiting around for her to appear again after her 15 outfit changes or her hour-long breast pumping sessions. Breastfeeding and breast pumping were her favorite things in the world because it made her skinny quickly and she ate up the compliments of the rich Upper East Side mothers who praised her postpartum model body. In the afternoons you would either hear her pumping her breasts in the machine that sounded like someone was printing out an entire manuscript or the wrenching of her puke in the toilet.

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I enjoyed Giselle's personality on shoot days and even though she was prim and proper when the camera was rolling, when we cut, the true, silly side of her personality came out. We began to joke together, which was refreshing after being paranoid around her for the first six months of the job. By the end of the work day, she would be so exhausted that she would turn straight foolish, and she knew it too. She ate it up when we joined in together on her laughter at herself.

• Listen to the birdie outside, do you hear it? • she giggled like a child in the Swiss Alps.
• Yes, we hear it, • we would say.

After six years of working at Ballet for Life, the pandemic attacked New York City and Giselle decided to close down the SoHo studio. According to the state law, Ballet for Life fell under the category of a • gymnasium • and Giselle found it impractical to pay \$12,000 a month in rent for an empty space. The moving out process coincided right when the Black Lives Matter protests began and SoHo had been looted. All of the other employees had fled the city, so I was the one she called on when the riot happened and I was handed my own set of keys for the first time. I never drove to Manhattan, but I hopped into my busted Subaru Forester and drove over the Williamsburg Bridge.

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The cobblestone streets of SoHo were empty and I was fueled with adrenaline when I saw the way the Louis Vuitton store was boarded up after having their windows smashed to pieces, or the way the fresh pair of Uggs hung outside of the glass shards of the display window. I heard that my ex-girlfriend with the teardrop tattoo on her face had stolen three iMacs from the Apple Store and because there were no cars or street rules in effect, the streets gave me full access to a VIP spot right outside of the building. It was stunning the way the door to the stairwell was boarded up and I felt like a responsible secret agent on a strange mission.

When I opened the door to the studio, everything was fine, and I figured why the big deal anyways if the rest of items left were soon to be trashed by a third party company. I wanted to stay there for as

long as I could because I knew that it would be my last time, texted Giselle that nothing in the studio was damaged and when I hung up, I was The Buttcracker King of Ballet for Life. I took my time, surveying all of the left behind items from the antique glassware in the kitchen to the Italian made leotards and tutus in the back. Giselle had taken the bed in the attic that my coworkers and I napped and cried on, but there were plenty of other items available.

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I began to make a pile of random shit that I wanted to stuff into my car and then I texted two friends to come over to the studio and take whatever they wanted. They both had worked as crew members for Ballet for Life during our shoots, so they knew Giselle and the company well. We used that night to give the studio an unforgettable goodbye. We smoked inside of the studio and it made me laugh uncontrollably as I grabbed the velvet ottoman with one arm like The Hulk and carried it to my pile. I heard them upstairs in the office fighting over iMacs and it made me dance with joy.

“My wife needs this computer Bro, please! She needs it!” one of them said to the other.

I was the most hyper I had been in decades as I slid with infinite energy and footwork across the studio’s white wooden floors, making my pile larger and I reached a point where I knew that I needed to stop, but free everything felt so good to me, so I took a whole collection of tutus, leotards, slippers, and water bottles. I couldn’t stop and my sticky hands grabbed Giselle’s designer perfume with her initials engraved into a gold plate on the bottle and decided to take a break and watch my boys have fun instead and my smile was like Santa’s on Christmas morning.

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After my friends left, I went up to the roof and sat on one of the neighbor’s lounge chairs that I used to curl up into a ball and cry on. I felt sprinkles of warm summer rain tickle my bare arms and legs and I looked up at the dark clouds. The rain was refreshing after a roasting July day in New York City and I didn’t want to leave because the roof and the studio had finally become a safe friend.

I was damp when I drove home that night. It felt like I had peed myself and I couldn’t see anything out of the rearview mirror because I had stuffed too many items in the trunk of the car. I wondered what I was going to do with it all, so I made a mental list, starting with the obvious; the yoga mats, velvet ottomans, antique glassware. They were all keepers, but what the fuck was I going to do with seven multicolored tutus and ten pairs of silk ballet slippers?

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I didn't have room for all of it in my apartment, so I kept the fashion line in a huge plastic container in the trunk of my car. I tried to sell the ballet gear, but nobody wanted to buy it, so I gave the tutus to all of the pretty girls that I liked to kiss and I gave my sweet elderly Puerto Rican neighbor, Ana, the custom engraved perfume of Giselle Willis.

Credits

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