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 “Pretty cool isn’t it?” I coolly say to the crowd of freshmen around me. Their eyes glaze over as they look up at curtains, as if they were sky-scrapers in the middle of Manhattan.

 “This will be your third performance here, you’re like a veteran!” freshman Rachel Simms notes. She reminds me so much of myself in my freshman year, dedicated, excited, and amazed to be standing in a world-renowned theater.

 I can’t help but think about my past performances. Junior year: a glitzy showgirl from fabulous Camelot, sophomore year: an Addams Family aviator ancestor, and freshmen year: a Transylvanian peasant girl…

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 “Did you ever think you’d find yourself up here?” Anna asks me, standing in her starting pose in our clump.

“I honestly still don’t believe I’m standing up here, it doesn’t feel real ya know?” I meekly reply.

“Well, you’re not there yet, but you’ll feel it tonight, it’s something else.” Charlotte, a sophomore said, crouching down. Even though we’re stuck in tableau, my eyes can’t help but glance out towards the grand empty house.

 I always went to the Benedum Center Theater as a child and wondered what it would be like to stand on the professional stage. What it was like to look out at thousands of seats graced in garnet, or to see the grand five-thousand-pound crystal chandelier that daintily hangs above the audience. Never in my young life would I have guessed at 15 I wouldn’t just be standing but performing up on that stage.

 I hear an echoing “Tableau! Hold tight, we’re only doing this once more so make it perfect!” from my director, Mr. Franklin. Suddenly the music begins, and my mind instantly focuses on only the “*Transylvania Mania*” …

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 “Hurry up folks we can only run this a few times with the orchestra!” I hear Mr. Franklin call.

 I look to Joe, our leading man, and wisely say, “Enjoy this, today’s going to go by right before your eyes.” His cue music starts and off and out he goes.

 “Let’s do this,” Caroline, a year below me looks to me excitedly. As ritual, I jokingly swat her behind and send her out for her cue.

 I hear my cue and out of the wings I go. The world outside of this stage suddenly disappears and I become a 1950s USO girl fabricated by a man’s impressive imagination, I march out to “*Be the Hero*”. As I march out I can’t help but remember my first rehearsal on this stage…

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 The music cuts out and there is a collective breath amongst the cast. The Producer joyfully says, “Hampton, that was excellent, I think you’ve all got this. Remember, your call time is for Act II tonight you’ll be performing last, be sure to be in the dressing rooms at intermission and when one of the Stage Managers comes up and calls for Hampton, make sure to line up quickly, we’re on a tight schedule.”

“This is professional folks, take it seriously,” Franklin adds.

 Five-year-old me, never imagined fifteen-year-old me in a professional awards show on the stage she grew up watching…

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 Minutes later we are given a five-person applause followed with a message from the Producer, “Be sure to be on time, you’re performing first in Act I.”

Mr. Franklin interjects, “We’ve already covered this, and my seniors already know, but take this professionally folks, this is a professional awards show, this is a big deal.”

 That evening I return to the dressing room, for the final time.

 “Do you need me to curl your hair?” I say walking towards Heather, a freshman. Her anxious-but-trying-to-be-calm look in the mirror mimicked the same expression I once had as I had sat where she is…

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 “Do you need someone to do your French braid love?” Isabella, an upper classman asked me. Sitting in front of the mirror in the dressing room, which was a studio temporarily converted to a dressing room for the Gene Kelly Awards. I look back at her in the mirror and nod, handing her a hair tie. “You nervous?” she asks, calmly smiling at me through the mirror.

I didn’t know how to answer the question, I was nervous, but I didn’t feel it, but I did. Everything seems eerily calm. “Have you ever done this before?” I ask.

“Yes, I have! It’s amazing, seeing all the people out there, like 3000 or something, I don’t know, but yeah it’s such a cool experience especially when…”

“They’re announcing best all-student orchestra!” Claudia, our student choreographer shouts. Isabella ties up the end of my braid and we both rush over to the little twenty some inch television set at the other end of the room. Every girl is crowded around the tiny screen.

“… and the winner is…” the whole room falls silent, “HAMPTON!” The moment of silence immediately erupts into pandemonium. Holding back tears of joy, knowing we had been on a fantastic streak of wins for the night, we all quickly finish getting ready before being summoned to the stage…

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 “Actually yes! I don’t know how all the seniors got ready so fast!” she chuckles.

I poke, “Are you nervous?”

I look at her face in the mirror, she hesitates to answer but then looks back up at me via the mirror. “Yeah, I’m a little nervous. What’s it like out there?”

I open my mouth about to explain, but nothing comes out. I smile and look down at the ringlet of hair in my palm.

“There’s no words to describe it I guess. You’re nervous and then suddenly a wave of calm washes over you. You’re performing but you don’t even realize it, you do, but it all seems surreal. I guess that’s what I’d say… It’s surreal.” I pop the bottle of hairspray and spray a Pantene scented cloud around her head.

 “Five minutes girls!” I hear an assistant call.

“Thank you, ‘five minutes’.” We robotically respond. Everyone begins to line up at the door to take the labyrinth hallway to enter the backstage…

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 We’re sent behind a black screen, on the stage. My nerves start to kick up as I keep adjusting the petticoat under my skirt and straightening my peasant top. We’re all shuffling across the stage hugging one another wishing each other a “break a leg” and sharing “I love you”.

The announcer begins to speak again, “Here are your nominees for best ensemble…” We all freeze as we await the results. “… and the winner is…” Every finger, toe, leg, arm and eye were crossed on this stage, “…HAMPTON!” We unravel ourselves and begin to excitedly jump. The audience is going wild and so are we.

 The announcer continues, “It’s our final school nominated for Best Musical, it’s Hampton, with *Young Frankenstein*.” The audience goes wild.

We rush into our clumps for tableau. “Here we go!” Luke, a junior who stood behind me exclaimed. The black screen rises before us and there we stand. A five-year-old’s dream coming true. There was a pause, the room of 3000 fell hush.

 The first note plays. My mind drifts into the world of Transylvania. I become a Romanian peasant girl whose town has been traumatized by the creations of Victor von Frankenstein…

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 “Stand here behind this line” a stage director guides me along with the cast to a section of the backstage. I get butterflies, I’m not nervous per say, I’m excited and maybe under a little pressure. My freshman year we broke a Gene Kelly and Hampton school record for number of nominations and wins. I was once part of Hampton theatre history. Tonight, I hope we can make history again. Anxiously, I adjust the lapels on my halter top and run my hands along the sides of my mini A-line skirt. I’m patriotically decked in “*Red, White and True*” … blue. I feel arms wrap around me from the back. Once again in the pitch-black wings of the theater, we exchange our fair share of “break a leg” and “I love you”.

 The announcer’s voice abruptly interrupts our moment, “Tonight, I present our first school nominated for Best Musical. Here’s Hampton with “*Big Fish*”. The audience goes crazy and then suddenly the brilliant lights flood the stage. The first music cue commences, then the second, now it’s my cue. I go out there, performing for the final time…

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 Somehow four minutes of my life passes by me without even realizing. The world was in slow motion, yet time was flying by simultaneously. I come to realization as I close my mouth, with that high B flat ringing in my mind. There’s 3000 people out there who just watched me, there’s 3000 people cheering and clapping. The black screen closes before our eyes. We erupt in excitement, seniors crying, freshmen in shock and awe, upperclassmen cheering.

 All I knew is that I wanted to do it again…

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 The last beat. I drop into a split, for the final time. My hips hit the marley vinyl floor. I look out into the audience, only hours ago I looked out to a sea of garnet, bodies absent from the vision. Now, I look out and see nothing but people. It’s the most beautiful sight, the theater as it’s supposed to be; with faces of joy, faces of envy, faces filled with an array of emotion. The sounds we make resonate out into the house and like a boomerang the sound of cheers and applause travel back to us. The intensity of the stage lights begins to dim, and suddenly we fade to black.

 We migrate back to the wings. Once again, we break out into excitement, seniors crying, freshmen in shock and awe, upperclassmen cheering.

It’s not tears of sadness or disappointment. It’s tears of pride. It’s knowing how much I, and my cast have grown over the last four years. The moments of flashback, seeing how fast it all happens, to appreciate all of these little moments and know exactly what they’re worth. It’s being proud to be a member of this family, a group of people that truly love each other and care from the bottom of their hearts. It’s knowing that four years ago, I knew that this wouldn’t be the final time I performed on this stage, I would come back again. It’s knowing that I accomplished something that as a young girl, I had dreamed of. I made my dream a reality. That’s why I’m crying.

 I took one last look out from the stage left wing. I looked up at the sky-scraper curtains in awe, I looked out at the full house of 3000 in astonishment.

 All I wish is that I could do it again.