



# My Mentor

It was Lissa Curtis's dream to perform on stages beyond New England. So when the gifted dancer met one of the Boston area's most prominent ballet masters, she accompanied him to a prestigious competition in Romania. But that's only the beginning of her story.

*By* **Julie Dugdale**

*Photographs by* Christopher Churchill



The first time Lissa Curtis met ballet teacher Cosmin Marculetiu, she was nervous and wanted to impress. He was standing outside his studio in Burlington, smoking a cigarette before class. At 44, Marculetiu was fairly fit, clean-shaven, and had a full head of wild, curly hair. Once praised by the *Boston Globe* for his “rakish charm” on stage, the former professional dancer from Romania had a well-known reputation around Boston: an old-world master who issued instructions in French and could develop ambitious dancers with dreams of becoming stars in Europe. If all went well, Curtis hoped he would pair her with one of his dancers, which could lead to coveted roles in upcoming productions.

At 5-foot-8 with raven hair and ivory skin, Curtis, 23 at the time, started performing at

breast cancer after three family members succumbed to the disease. When someone who'd been texting behind the wheel drove into and seriously injured her mother, Curtis turned her sorrow into positive action by campaigning for greater awareness about distracted driving, even posing for a photograph with the governor. As a ballerina, she turned professional at 14 and grew into the kind of performer you couldn't tear your eyes from: regal without being haughty, with a poise undoubtedly honed during her pageant days.

Minutes into the class, Curtis's nerves began to settle. She remembers Marculetiu giving corrections—*ribs in, more turnout, hips under!*—to the room full of dancers. When he praised her well-executed movements, she beamed inside. Elite dancers, Curtis says, crave that attention from artistic directors and instructors—it means they see something special in you. Still, she was

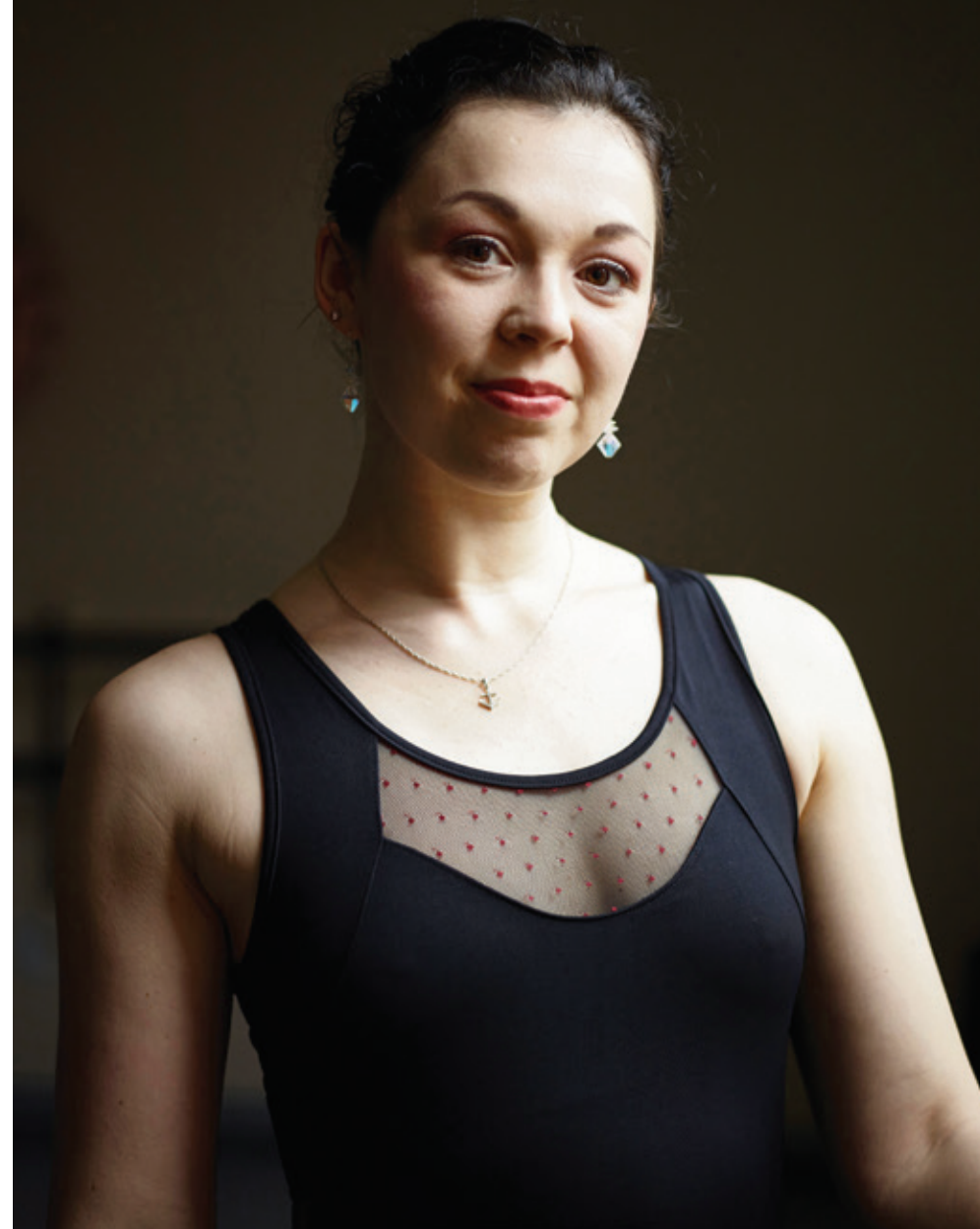
as his wife, Melinda, a former professional dancer and cofounder of both NEMA and the couple's other dance institution, International Ballet Academy of Norwell. Marculetiu “was extremely charming,” Curtis says. “Every morning was a huge hug, kiss-kiss, ‘Oh, how are you, baby doll? So good to see you.’ Just over-the-top interested, always giving hugs to people. I blew that off because I figured, Oh, he's Eastern European, that's kind of what they do.”

After the holidays that season, Curtis says, Marculetiu announced he would be judging a prestigious international ballet competition in Sibiu, Romania, and invited more than a dozen dancers to enter. The event would showcase artists of all ages as they competed for cash prizes, valuable industry connections, and coveted company contracts. When Curtis expressed interest, she says, Marculetiu told her he could introduce her to colleagues from all over the world and help land her guest-artist appearances at whatever company she wanted. Curtis was excited. A star in the Seacoast ballet world, she now had the chance to take her talents to the next level. Never having danced in an international competition, though, she asked performers who'd previously traveled to the event with Marculetiu about their experiences. Everyone seemed to agree: It was a great opportunity.

Weeks later, on March 18, 2014, Curtis kissed her husband, Phillip, goodbye in Terminal E at Logan. The two had been married for just over a year, and flying overseas for the first time felt like a big trip to take without him. A math teacher at the time, Phillip was in the middle of the school year, so Curtis had planned to go with a fellow dancer instead. She was disappointed when he backed out at the last moment. Curtis was jittery as she headed toward the departure gate, but was glad she was traveling with Marculetiu and his college-age son, Alex, who worked for NEMA as a handyman and stage manager. It was reassuring that they were so familiar with a country she knew nothing about.

At first, the three were seated in separate rows. Partway through the flight, though, Curtis says Marculetiu beckoned her to take the open seat next to him. They discussed the competition, Curtis says, and the cabin lights dimmed for the overnight flight. Curtis pulled a blanket over her before falling asleep with her head on her coach's shoulder.

Anyone following Curtis on Twitter or Instagram over the next week saw a dancer



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Like many dancers, Curtis has always been hard on herself. Growing up in the ballet world brings with it a set of pressures—to look a certain way, have the ideal body, be the director's favorite—that can wreak havoc on any psyche. Although most dancers will say that Hollywood's *Black Swan* characters are overblown stereotypes, elements of the script certainly echoed Curtis's life. She freely admits that she's suffered body-image issues and struggled with eating disorders in the past, and she credits her family for pulling her through those times. Attracted to the rigorous demands of the art and the discipline it takes to meet those demands, Curtis never tired of sore muscles or from peeling her satin pointe shoes from her bloody, battered feet at the end of an exhausting class. When you train as a dancer, you learn to embrace those painful moments, or to compartmentalize when necessary to do your job and play a part. “At the end of class you always give a *révérence*, which is a bow to the teacher,” Curtis says. “It's an art form that's built on extreme respect and discipline. And it's shaped a large part of who I am.”

In ballet, the master-student relationship is unlike any so-called normal relationship—foreign territory to everyone outside that cloistered world. It is a complex and multi-layered connection that few people will likely ever experience, often matching an older teacher with a younger pupil working together

toward a common goal: making the dancer the best she can be. The hours are grueling, the physical demands are punishing, and the unique intimacy that develops can—if history is any indicator—blur the line between intensity and passion, complicate the learning process, and upset the highly charged dynamics between the ingénue and the master.

Take, for instance, George Balanchine, the brilliant Russian choreographer, artistic director, and founder of the New York City Ballet. Known as the 20th century's “father of American ballet,” he was prone to fixating, obsessively and romantically, on his creative muses. He married and divorced four wives, each one a dancer in his company or in a ballet that he choreographed. Although never his wife, (Continued on page 119)



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preschool age. As the oldest of three children, with a typical type-A personality, she'd always known exactly what she wanted: to dance for a living. “She was a perfectionist even before she was a ballerina,” says her mother, Barbara Silk, who homeschooled Curtis until high school, where she earned high honors at Portsmouth Christian Academy and won more than \$23,000 through the Miss New Hampshire Scholarship Program. She gained attention from local newspapers for her community service and fundraising to fight

surprised, she says, when he pulled her aside after class and told her that not only would he cast her as the lead in a production of *The Nutcracker*, he also wanted her for his new international touring ballet company. “I want you here,” she remembers him saying.

Not long after, in the fall of 2013, Curtis began training at Marculetiu's studio, New England Movement Arts (NEMA). At least twice a week, she drove from her home in Dover, New Hampshire, down to Burlington to train with her new instructor as well



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having the time of her life. She posted photos of her *Esmeralda* solo on stage and of smiling dancers awaiting the awards ceremony, all captioned with bright exclamations. “Can't believe a week has flown by in Romania,” she posted on Instagram on March 25, 2014. “Thank you so much for all the wonderful memories and experiences Cosmin and Alex! And thank you Cosmin and Melinda Marculetiu...for making me feel so confident and beautiful...I feel so blessed.” In the accompanying photo collage, Curtis and Marculetiu stand with their arms around each another's shoulders, smiling cheek to cheek.

What her followers had no way of knowing, according to Curtis, was that it was all an act—her greatest performance yet.

1. Dance instructor Cosmin Marculetiu categorically denies Lissa Curtis's allegations that he sexually assaulted her at an international ballet competition in Romania.

2. Ballerina Lissa Curtis made her private struggles public when she filed a lawsuit against her former dance teacher in a Massachusetts court.

3. Curtis has recently become a strong voice for survivors of sexual assault, launching a “Be Brave” campaign to raise awareness about speaking up.

BOSTON GLOBE/GETTY IMAGES



## My (Tor)Mentor

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Suzanne Farrell, one of the most celebrated dancers in U.S. history and now the artistic director of her own company at the Kennedy Center, admitted years later that she briefly contemplated suicide to escape what the *New York Times* called “their suffocatingly intense relationship.” Author Evan Zimroth’s *Collusion: Memoir of a Young Girl and Her Ballet Master* offers a brutally honest account of a young dancer’s narcissistic obsession with—and ultimate defiance of—her seductive and abusive Russian ballet instructor.

When it comes to the teacher-student dynamic, says Boston-based clinical sport psychologist Sharon Chirban, subordinates typically yearn for validation, approval, and praise—and when they get it, they might push themselves past a healthy point to keep it. “If you think the artistic director has a special thing for you, it’s like cocaine,” says Chirban, who has worked with clients from the Boston Ballet Health Alliance, the Boston Marathon Symposium, and the U.S. Figure Skating Association. “All you can think about is pleasing that person. You don’t want that person to fall out of interest in you.”

Even in adults, this worldview can create distortions—a blindness of sorts—that obscure what Chirban calls “micro boundary violations” committed by the person in control. On the flip side, power figures are also exposed to vulnerabilities, she says, like the unprofessional feelings that surface when you realize your protégé is idealizing you beyond the norm. This phenomenon can make either person in the relationship vulnerable, and can create conditions that are ripe for exploitation.

In a Massachusetts civil lawsuit as well as in-person, telephone, and written interviews that *Boston* conducted with Curtis and her lawyer, former New Hampshire Attorney General Michael Delaney, Curtis claims that Marculetiu repeatedly sexually assaulted and raped her during their trip to Romania. Marculetiu, who through his attorney declined to comment directly for this story, categorically denies that he ever abused or sexually violated Curtis and has filed a counter-lawsuit against her, with allegations including defamation and abuse of process. Marculetiu’s attorney says that simply because Curtis claimed something in a lawsuit doesn’t make it true. This story is based on allegations described in Curtis’s lawsuit and in interviews with her. She says that the attacks began 35,000 feet in the air, somewhere over the Atlantic Ocean.

Aboard the outbound flight from Boston, Curtis nodded off next to Marculetiu. She might have slept until it was time to land, but something suddenly jarred her awake: Marculetiu’s hands, she alleges, had crept down her pants and up her shirt while she dozed. Disoriented, she immediately froze. “I actually pretended to continue to be asleep because I didn’t know what to do,” Curtis says. “I thought I was dreaming.”

Time lost all meaning as she searched for a response. Screaming would...what? Disrupt the flight? Wake the other passengers? Make her look crazy? Before she could move, the cabin lights snapped back on, she says, and he pulled away. When she looked at him, he seemed oblivious and “started to make small talk, just stupid stuff,” she says. “And I’m sitting there, frozen.”

Curtis remembers more uncomfortable moments during a layover in Munich: Marculetiu grabbing her hand, putting an arm over her shoulder, and sliding his fingers over her inner thighs under a table while his son, Alex, sat across from them. She worried that Alex noticed. Did she *want* him to notice? Would he have questioned it? It felt like reality had shattered in her head, and she couldn’t make the pieces fit back together. As abruptly as it had begun, she says, the groping stopped when Marculetiu spotted several colleagues who were on their connecting flight to Sibiu, Romania. For the rest of the trip until they arrived at the Hotel Ibis, Curtis says he ignored her. It was like it had never happened.

THE FIRST THING THAT STRUCK CURTIS when she stepped off the airport shuttle into the hotel was the chaos. Dancers swept through the modern lobby dragging bulky bags filled with dazzling costumes and pointe shoes. Longtime friends and luminaries in the ballet world greeted one another with bursts of foreign conversation that Curtis couldn’t understand. Still wearing the clothes she’d put on at home so many hours and a continent ago, she felt alone in a place where everyone else seemed so at home.

At the front desk, Marculetiu helped fill out her hotel forms, which were all in Romanian. She claims that he kept an extra key to her room, just in case she lost hers, but she didn’t think twice about it. It was just one more detail her teacher handled in the blur of their arrival: the rooms, the schedule, the people. Because like it or not, this was definitely Marculetiu’s home turf.

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## My (Tor)Mentor

Born in the Transylvania region of Romania, Marculetiu was discovered at age nine in a countrywide talent search that led him to attend the Academy of Arts and Choreography in Cluj-Napoca. As a soloist with the Romanian National Ballet, he once told the *Globe*, he threw up after performing each scene because it was so hard on his body. As with many elite dancers, however, that intense level of discipline and commitment fulfilled him. He went on to make a name for himself as a member of several companies throughout Europe, including the Croatian National Ballet, in Zagreb (where he met and married his wife, Melinda) and a company in Dresden, Germany. Along the way, he weathered six knee surgeries, telling the *Globe* that “one of my vertebrae is gone from lifting. Ballet is a very brutal job.”

In 2002, Marculetiu and Melinda moved to the Boston area with Alex to pursue careers as ballet educators. Melinda, a U.S. citizen, had spent much of her early career dancing in Virginia. Marculetiu soon established himself as an accomplished teacher at the Boston Arts Academy, Jose Mateo Ballet Theatre, in Cambridge, and Festival Ballet Providence.

He continued to perform until 2009, when he retired after nearly three decades of professional dancing. “I want the audience to remember me on stage as I used to be,” he has said, “instead of thinking, ‘What is this old guy doing up there?’ Let the young and powerful have their turn—now I teach them how to be beautiful.”

In 2010, Marculetiu and his wife finally opened their own nonprofit school, calling it the International Ballet Academy of Norwell. They quickly attracted a cadre of loyalists on the South Shore, and the school’s reputation spread by word of mouth. The *Globe* praised Marculetiu for his Vaganova teaching methods, which prize athleticism and strength in the entire body, painting him as an old-world ballet instructor who invests in his students’ careers. “I think this place is different than most American studios,” one student told a reporter after the school opened. “They have more of a European style. They expect a lot of you, but they’re also fun and inspiring. You never forget why you are a dancer here.”

Three years later, the couple teamed up with a pair of local martial arts teachers and

founded New England Movement Arts as a nonprofit, multidisciplinary North Shore facility. Marculetiu is proud of the national talent he’s cultivated, from the Boston Ballet’s Isaac Akiba to Russell Ferguson, a winner of *So You Think You Can Dance*. Local and international colleagues, including Festival Ballet Providence artistic director Mihailo Djuric and Westchester Ballet Company artistic director Jean Logrea—also a guest ballet master at NEMA—share a respect for his teaching gifts and demeanor. “Everybody loved him,” says one former student who danced under Marculetiu for three years at Festival Ballet Providence. “He was a joy to be around. He made rehearsals fun.” Other former students agree. “I’m really close with him,” says Ricardo Rhodes, who dances with the Sarasota Ballet. “He’s always been there for me.”

Alone in her hotel room, Curtis began to unpack. She exhaled, relieved at the chance to compose her thoughts, when she heard someone at the door. Marculetiu, according to Curtis, entered her room using the spare key. “He turns me around, grabs me, grabs me hard,” Curtis says. “He pushes himself on me, pushes me on the bed, and starts assaulting me, trying

to take my clothes off. I’m begging him not to: ‘No, please don’t! Stop, I don’t want this! Do not do this!’” Moments later, Marculetiu abruptly stopped, she says, believing he did so only in order to attend a judges’ meeting.

It was late that evening when she saw him next. Curtis stood in her room preparing for bed, hoping to rest before a 9 a.m. start to the competition the next day, when she says Marculetiu used his spare key again and forced her onto the bed. “I’m screaming, begging him, ‘Please, please don’t do this,’” Curtis says. “And then he stops. Because I start having a panic attack.” She remembers shaking uncontrollably and gulping for air as tears slid down her cheek, and how Marculetiu caressed her face like a father figure and promised not to touch her, his voice full of tenderness and remorse. He told her that everything would be all right, she says, and a little after midnight finally headed out the door.

OVER THE COURSE OF THE FOUR-DAY competition, Curtis danced several pieces for the judges, going in and out of the theater next door to the hotel at least three times a day. During this period, she says, Marculetiu used the spare key to enter her hotel room whenever he pleased to assault her, though she cannot recall the number of times. He stayed by her side, she says, any time his judging duties allowed, watching her dance, taking her to lunch, and socializing at night. She believes he may have even drugged her drink one night before carrying her to her room and raping her. She wasn’t surprised when she didn’t perform well enough to advance in the competition.

Throughout the week, she says, Marculetiu changed personas like the flip of a switch: one minute acting like her coach, the next like a possessive lover. Looking back, she calls it a master manipulation that kept her in a confused and traumatized state, unsure of how to act in the presence of others. During rehearsals, he’d snap into director mode, encouraging her to “Nail this turn” and “Breathe, you’ll be fine.” Meanwhile, in public he grew bolder with his displays of affection, she says, and even laughed when his friends groped her. Curtis remembers people gathering to watch the hometown ballet hero teach a class, and how he told her he’d grown up with the president of Romania. She was afraid to go to the competition authorities because she believed Marculetiu’s friends were the authorities.

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## My (Tor)Mentor

To many people, the story doesn't add up. Couldn't Curtis have alerted the front desk and asked for a new key? Wouldn't she have picked up the phone and called her family? How hard would it have been to grab the next taxi to the airport? And why was she publicly affirming her affection for Marculetiu on social media? According to Curtis, it was all a masquerade designed to protect herself. If she angered him, Curtis feared, he would hurt her even more. "I was afraid," she says. "It was a way to keep myself safe. There was a large group of people back in the States watching our journey. Me posting on social media was all an act to keep myself safe. I wouldn't have done anything differently with that. It was all for my personal safety."

Back in her hotel room after the second day of competition, well into the pre-dawn hours, Curtis says she tried to end it once and for all, telling him she was simply pretending to go along with him in public because she was scared. "I built up the courage to confront him," she says. "I told him, 'We're done. You're done. You're never touching me again.'" Half an hour and many apologies later, after agreeing to respect her wishes, Marculetiu raped her once again, she says. Unable to get through to him, she decided to give up fighting him entirely, even in private. "All I could reason in my brain at that moment was: *I just have to get home.*"

THE BALLET COMPETITION ENDED ON A Sunday night, three days before Curtis's flight back to Boston. So Marculetiu invited her to spend the next night at the home of Ovidiu Dragoman, general manager of the Sibiu Ballet Theatre, in the village of Vale, less than an hour's drive west of Sibiu. Curtis played the part of gracious guest as the reception at Dragoman's house trailed into the night, but fatigue eventually won over. She excused herself and found an empty room upstairs where she could rest. Marculetiu, she says, followed her and beseeched her to change into a skirt for "easy access." Later that evening, she says, he attempted to assault her again but stopped when it became clear she'd begun her menstrual cycle.

The following day, Marculetiu took Curtis to his family home in a town called Seica Mare, about 40 minutes from the Sibiu airport. She was scheduled to board the 6:05 a.m. flight home the next morning. After they dined with a friend of Marculetiu's and

socialized with neighbors until well after 3 a.m., Curtis says, he sexually assaulted her again while she begged him to let her return home. She remembers how he talked during the trip about the life they could have together in Romania. With no idea where she even was, let alone how to communicate with a taxi driver, Curtis felt completely alone in this twisted would-be fairy-tale scene: a ballet master plotting a future for his unwilling student in Transylvania.

Curtis says she desperately needed Marculetiu's help to get to the airport. She reminded him she was contracted to perform in Northeastern Ballet Theatre's *Snow White* that upcoming weekend. He finally relented, she says, only after she promised that they'd see each other again when he returned to Boston. Together, she recalls, they rode to the airport in a taxi, where she says he fondled her one last time. They parted ways at security.

As she approached the gate, any relief Curtis felt immediately sank when she learned her flight was canceled. Rather than rebook for the same time the following day and have to find shelter for the night in Sibiu, she took a five-hour taxi ride to Bucharest to catch a flight to Boston via London later that day.

Looking back now, Curtis says she would have done things differently. "If I was there right now, and had full brain capacity," she says, "I'd be like, '*Lissa, why don't you just run, you know? 'Just run, girl.'*' You don't think clearly when you're traumatized. Part of your brain shuts down to protect your own self from the trauma you're experiencing."

What she's describing is known as the "freeze" response to trauma. Most people have heard of "fight or flight," but a third neurobiological response, freezing, happens when the part of the brain that considers options and weighs consequences "goes offline," says Linda Douglas, a trauma specialist at the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, and the chemicals and hormones coursing through the brain shut the body down. In sexual assault cases, this sort of "tonic immobility," or paralysis, Douglas says, isn't uncommon. Sometimes, she adds, all you can think when you're being held captive is: *What will happen if I try to escape?* That single thought can render you motionless while your mind plays it over and over again. "We *don't* know what we would do in that situation," Douglas says, "because we

don't know how our brain and body would respond to the attack. That's going to be different for everybody." According to her organization, up to 50 percent of rape victims respond with this type of freezing or paralysis.

After a hazy flight, Curtis landed at Logan, where her husband was waiting for her. As she kissed him hello, all she could think was: "*What has just happened to me?*"

CURTIS'S FAMILY SUSPECTED SOMETHING was wrong almost immediately after she returned from Romania. She slept for nearly 24 hours straight and then danced the role of the Evil Queen in *Snow White*, grinding through the performance on pure adrenaline and drawing on every ounce of discipline and training to keep her mind focused. What followed was a blur of angst, anger, confusion, and frustration.

At her parents' house, Curtis sat down with her mother and reluctantly told her she'd been raped. Afterward, her body let go, like a dam that had finally burst. She began vomiting and couldn't stop. It lasted so long that her family rushed her to Wentworth-Douglass Hospital, in Dover, where doctors admitted her overnight and examined her with a rape kit. It had been a week since her latest attack, Curtis says, and the rape-kit results came back negative. Curtis also spoke with local police and an advocate from Haven, a New Hampshire domestic and sexual violence prevention and support agency. Detectives, while sympathetic, were not equipped to pursue a case in a foreign jurisdiction, so Curtis agreed to speak with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Several weeks later, Curtis reached out to former New Hampshire Attorney General Michael Delaney, roundly praised throughout the state for his advocacy on behalf of sexual assault victims. Now in private practice, Delaney says he and Curtis worked together for more than a year before seriously discussing a lawsuit. Part of that time, Delaney says, was spent deciding whether Curtis could handle "the emotionally challenging process, and our adversarial system [that] often retraumatizes victims." Curtis, however, reached a turning point during the summer of 2015 after learning that several former dance partners, colleagues, and friends with whom she shared her story had continued working with and dancing for Marculetiu. Feeling betrayed, Curtis decided it was time to warn the world. "I

came to the decision on my own that I could easily sweep this under the rug," she says. "I could easily go along with my life and, in a sense, kind of take the easy way out. But I can't live with that."

In November 2015, Delaney filed a civil complaint on behalf of Curtis in Middlesex Superior Court against Marculetiu and his company, International Ballet Academy of Norwell. She is seeking more than \$10 million in damages, according to the lawsuit, for "injuries caused to her as a result of being repeatedly sexually assaulted and raped." She alleges that Marculetiu's company was negligent for failing to ensure her safety as a student under an employee's care.

Marculetiu denies virtually every piece of Curtis's case. In an answer filed by his attorney, James Grumbach, Marculetiu says he did not get a second key to her room at the hotel in Romania or enter her room uninvited. He did not drug her or encourage his friends to grope her. And he did not sexually assault or rape her at any point on the airplane, in the hotel, in a taxi, or at any private residences. Together with his wife and son, Marculetiu is countersuing Curtis for defa-

mation, loss of employment and education opportunities, and abuse of process. Marculetiu and Melinda were asked to step down from their positions as adjunct ballet professors with Dean College, in Franklin, while the legal process unfolds. He claims Curtis's false allegations have subjected them to hatred, contempt, ridicule, reputational damage, and severe emotional distress. Curtis fabricated the entire story, he alleges, with malicious intent. In addition, Marculetiu has filed a separate lawsuit against his business and homeowner's insurance companies for denying coverage of his and his business's legal defense costs.

*Boston* attempted to reach everyone mentioned in Curtis's lawsuit with the exception of two individuals overseas whose contact information could not be found. A judge at the ballet competition who rode to the hotel in Sibiu in an airport shuttle with Curtis, Marculetiu, and Alex says she remembers Marculetiu introducing Curtis, but nothing more. "Mr. Marculetiu was always a fair judge," she says, "and he seemed a dedicated teacher who loves ballet and cares for his students." The hotel in Sibiu declined to

comment, as did competition authorities, Melinda, and Alex. Several others, including two judges and one of Curtis's former dance colleagues, never responded to questions, or confirmed receipt of my request for comment. Ovidiu Dragoman, general manager of the Sibiu Ballet Theatre, confirmed he had hosted a reception at his home outside Sibiu following the competition, but does not specifically recall Curtis. "It is difficult to remember [every competitor] and to have an impression about each and every one of them," he wrote in an email.

Meanwhile, Marculetiu's longtime friends and colleagues were stunned by the allegations. "I see how people treat him: with respect," says Westchester Ballet Company artistic director Jean Logrea. "I don't hear anything negative...I'm surprised about the whole thing. It shocked me a little bit. I couldn't believe it." A ballerina who has worked with Marculetiu for several years says, "Cosmin and Melinda go above and beyond for their students. I would really emphasize him as someone who would not be taking advantage of the [teacher-student] dynamic." Mihailo Djuric, artistic director

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## My (Tor)Mentor

of Festival Ballet Providence, says, "It's like science fiction. People are talking, but they're not talking openly. They're discussing it because everyone is in shock. Because it's not how we know Cosmin."

Since Curtis filed her lawsuit, New Hampshire's WMUR and several other Seacoast news outlets have covered the case. Grumbach says the publicity may sway people into premature judgments before any facts have been revealed—"what I would call a trial in the press," he says. "From her standpoint, I totally understand what she's doing. Part of what I've seen in her press clips is that it's important that her view be validated, that people trust her, and that people believe in her. That's part of the healing process—if this occurred. If it didn't occur, it's a charade."

IN MAY 2014, NOT LONG AFTER RETURNING from Romania, Curtis says she spoke for several hours with FBI agents. About eight months later, the bureau notified her of her official status as the victim of a potential crime. As of the publication of this article, she had not received an update about her case, and no charges had been filed.

Curtis says she still struggles with complex posttraumatic stress disorder and sees a therapist every week. For months, she was despondent, like a light had gone out. She left Marculetiu's dance company and had trouble getting off the couch, much less back to the dance studio. At one point, she resolved to walk away from ballet for good. "When I heard that, I said absolutely not," says Edra Toth, founder and director of the Northeastern Ballet Theatre, who spent months getting Curtis back to form. "Some days, the most we accomplished was her getting into a leotard and dance shoes. Her body was so locked up." Her first role back was a defiant reprisal of the Evil Queen four months after the alleged assaults. Today, Curtis is a principal dancer and an instructor with the Northeastern Ballet.

Nights are often the hardest, when anxiety sometimes gives way to full-body shaking and flashbacks. Her body seizes up, Curtis says, as if she were there again, in the moment. Sometimes she screams, or goes mute, unable to pick herself up off the floor. Thanks to counseling, medication, and coping tools she developed through therapy, the episodes are coming less frequently. She owns two registered emotional support dogs, but says her greatest source of

anxiety relief comes from sharing her experiences. "Having everything bottled inside, as a sexual assault victim, is excruciating," she says. "All the shame, all the pain, all the memories...it has nowhere to go. Once we started vocalizing outwards, there was a big decrease in the episodes I was having."

Over the past several months, Curtis has become a strong voice for survivors of sexual assault, gaining followers through a "Be Brave" campaign she's launched partially on social media to raise awareness about speaking up. As she did after losing family members to cancer, and after her mother was struck by a driver who was texting, Curtis has taken her private struggles public. She's danced at the Music Hall, in Portsmouth, to support One Billion Rising, a global movement to end violence against women and girls, performing a piece she choreographed titled "Be Brave," set to music and lyrics written for her by her brother. Curtis has also started planning her own sexual assault awareness event, the "Be Brave Gala," set for the University of New Hampshire in September, where she hopes to feature ballet performances, martial arts, live music, and theater. She says all proceeds will go toward local crisis centers and rape-prevention programs. She even performed at a TEDx event in Portsmouth as part of her Be Brave campaign.

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By taking her story public and filing a lawsuit, Curtis knows her name is on the line and that she'll likely face a multitude of doubters. "I'm determined to do everything I can to get justice," she says, "but at the same time it is very scary." As a stark reminder of her journey over the past two years and of what still lies ahead, she's written three simple words in black ink on the insole of her pointe shoes: "No going back!" □

EVENTS AND PROMOTION

# TRENDING

**Boston**

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PHOTOS BY IVAN C. MICHANON



1. Guest on the RSM sponsored lounge 2. The Jaguar F-PACE from Jaguar Land Rover Newport 3. Whistlepig Rye Whiskey's specialty cocktails 4. Showcasing Range Rover's new Range Rover Sport 5. Performance with Marley from The Bristol Restaurant and Bar 6. The Chat Realty 7. Bill Taylor, Regional VP and General Manager of Four Seasons Hotel Boston, Michael Eisenstein, CEO of The Brigade Group, Rob Wechter, CEO of Boston Magazine, Felix Arroyo, Chief of Health and Human Services in Boston, Chris Vogel, Executive Editor of Boston Magazine, John B. Cruz, III, President and CEO of Cruz Companies, Pamela Derramus, Publisher and Editor of The Post-Courier and Chris MacGonigle, Office Managing Partner of RSM 8. Marie the DJ from Every Second Counts 9. Guest on the RSM sponsored lounge

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## My (Tor)Mentor

Born in the Transylvania region of Romania, Marculetiu was discovered at age nine in a countrywide talent search that led him to attend the Academy of Arts and Choreography in Cluj-Napoca. As a soloist with the Romanian National Ballet, he once told the *Globe*, he threw up after performing each scene because it was so hard on his body. As with many elite dancers, however, that intense level of discipline and commitment fulfilled him. He went on to make a name for himself as a member of several companies throughout Europe, including the Croatian National Ballet, in Zagreb (where he met and married his wife, Melinda) and a company in Dresden, Germany. Along the way, he weathered six knee surgeries, telling the *Globe* that “one of my vertebrae is gone from lifting. Ballet is a very brutal job.”

In 2002, Marculetiu and Melinda moved to the Boston area with Alex to pursue careers as ballet educators. Melinda, a U.S. citizen, had spent much of her early career dancing in Virginia. Marculetiu soon established himself as an accomplished teacher at the Boston Arts Academy, Jose Mateo Ballet Theatre, in Cambridge, and Festival Ballet Providence.

He continued to perform until 2009, when he retired after nearly three decades of professional dancing. “I want the audience to remember me on stage as I used to be,” he has said, “instead of thinking, ‘What is this old guy doing up there?’ Let the young and powerful have their turn—now I teach them how to be beautiful.”

In 2010, Marculetiu and his wife finally opened their own nonprofit school, calling it the International Ballet Academy of Norwell. They quickly attracted a cadre of loyalists on the South Shore, and the school’s reputation spread by word of mouth. The *Globe* praised Marculetiu for his Vaganova teaching methods, which prize athleticism and strength in the entire body, painting him as an old-world ballet instructor who invests in his students’ careers. “I think this place is different than most American studios,” one student told a reporter after the school opened. “They have more of a European style. They expect a lot of you, but they’re also fun and inspiring. You never forget why you are a dancer here.”

Three years later, the couple teamed up with a pair of local martial arts teachers and

founded New England Movement Arts as a nonprofit, multidisciplinary North Shore facility. Marculetiu is proud of the national talent he’s cultivated, from the Boston Ballet’s Isaac Akiba to Russell Ferguson, a winner of *So You Think You Can Dance*. Local and international colleagues, including Festival Ballet Providence artistic director Mihailo Djuric and Westchester Ballet Company artistic director Jean Logrea—also a guest ballet master at NEMA—share a respect for his teaching gifts and demeanor. “Everybody loved him,” says one former student who danced under Marculetiu for three years at Festival Ballet Providence. “He was a joy to be around. He made rehearsals fun.” Other former students agree. “I’m really close with him,” says Ricardo Rhodes, who dances with the Sarasota Ballet. “He’s always been there for me.”

Alone in her hotel room, Curtis began to unpack. She exhaled, relieved at the chance to compose her thoughts, when she heard someone at the door. Marculetiu, according to Curtis, entered her room using the spare key. “He turns me around, grabs me, grabs me hard,” Curtis says. “He pushes himself on me, pushes me on the bed, and starts assaulting me, trying

to take my clothes off. I’m begging him not to: ‘No, please don’t! Stop, I don’t want this! Do not do this!’” Moments later, Marculetiu abruptly stopped, she says, believing he did so only in order to attend a judges’ meeting.

It was late that evening when she saw him next. Curtis stood in her room preparing for bed, hoping to rest before a 9 a.m. start to the competition the next day, when she says Marculetiu used his spare key again and forced her onto the bed. “I’m screaming, begging him, ‘Please, please don’t do this,’” Curtis says. “And then he stops. Because I start having a panic attack.” She remembers shaking uncontrollably and gulping for air as tears slid down her cheek, and how Marculetiu caressed her face like a father figure and promised not to touch her, his voice full of tenderness and remorse. He told her that everything would be all right, she says, and a little after midnight finally headed out the door.

OVER THE COURSE OF THE FOUR-DAY competition, Curtis danced several pieces for the judges, going in and out of the theater next door to the hotel at least three times a day. During this period, she says, Marculetiu used the spare key to enter her hotel room whenever he pleased to assault her, though she cannot recall the number of times. He stayed by her side, she says, any time his judging duties allowed, watching her dance, taking her to lunch, and socializing at night. She believes he may have even drugged her drink one night before carrying her to her room and raping her. She wasn’t surprised when she didn’t perform well enough to advance in the competition.

Throughout the week, she says, Marculetiu changed personas like the flip of a switch: one minute acting like her coach, the next like a possessive lover. Looking back, she calls it a master manipulation that kept her in a confused and traumatized state, unsure of how to act in the presence of others. During rehearsals, he’d snap into director mode, encouraging her to “Nail this turn” and “Breathe, you’ll be fine.” Meanwhile, in public he grew bolder with his displays of affection, she says, and even laughed when his friends groped her. Curtis remembers people gathering to watch the hometown ballet hero teach a class, and how he told her he’d grown up with the president of Romania. She was afraid to go to the competition authorities because she believed Marculetiu’s friends were the authorities.

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ALWAYS WEAR YOUR SEAT BELT, AND PLEASE DON'T DRINK AND DRIVE.

## My (Tor)Mentor

To many people, the story doesn't add up. Couldn't Curtis have alerted the front desk and asked for a new key? Wouldn't she have picked up the phone and called her family? How hard would it have been to grab the next taxi to the airport? And why was she publicly affirming her affection for Marculetiu on social media? According to Curtis, it was all a masquerade designed to protect herself. If she angered him, Curtis feared, he would hurt her even more. "I was afraid," she says. "It was a way to keep myself safe. There was a large group of people back in the States watching our journey. Me posting on social media was all an act to keep myself safe. I wouldn't have done anything differently with that. It was all for my personal safety."

Back in her hotel room after the second day of competition, well into the pre-dawn hours, Curtis says she tried to end it once and for all, telling him she was simply pretending to go along with him in public because she was scared. "I built up the courage to confront him," she says. "I told him, 'We're done. You're done. You're never touching me again.'" Half an hour and many apologies later, after agreeing to respect her wishes, Marculetiu raped her once again, she says. Unable to get through to him, she decided to give up fighting him entirely, even in private. "All I could reason in my brain at that moment was: *I just have to get home.*"

THE BALLET COMPETITION ENDED ON A Sunday night, three days before Curtis's flight back to Boston. So Marculetiu invited her to spend the next night at the home of Ovidiu Dragoman, general manager of the Sibiu Ballet Theatre, in the village of Vale, less than an hour's drive west of Sibiu. Curtis played the part of gracious guest as the reception at Dragoman's house trailed into the night, but fatigue eventually won over. She excused herself and found an empty room upstairs where she could rest. Marculetiu, she says, followed her and beseeched her to change into a skirt for "easy access." Later that evening, she says, he attempted to assault her again but stopped when it became clear she'd begun her menstrual cycle.

The following day, Marculetiu took Curtis to his family home in a town called Seica Mare, about 40 minutes from the Sibiu airport. She was scheduled to board the 6:05 a.m. flight home the next morning. After they dined with a friend of Marculetiu's and

socialized with neighbors until well after 3 a.m., Curtis says, he sexually assaulted her again while she begged him to let her return home. She remembers how he talked during the trip about the life they could have together in Romania. With no idea where she even was, let alone how to communicate with a taxi driver, Curtis felt completely alone in this twisted would-be fairy-tale scene: a ballet master plotting a future for his unwilling student in Transylvania.

Curtis says she desperately needed Marculetiu's help to get to the airport. She reminded him she was contracted to perform in Northeastern Ballet Theatre's *Snow White* that upcoming weekend. He finally relented, she says, only after she promised that they'd see each other again when he returned to Boston. Together, she recalls, they rode to the airport in a taxi, where she says he fondled her one last time. They parted ways at security.

As she approached the gate, any relief Curtis felt immediately sank when she learned her flight was canceled. Rather than rebook for the same time the following day and have to find shelter for the night in Sibiu, she took a five-hour taxi ride to Bucharest to catch a flight to Boston via London later that day.

Looking back now, Curtis says she would have done things differently. "If I was there right now, and had full brain capacity," she says, "I'd be like, '*Lissa, why don't you just run, you know? Just run, girl.*' You don't think clearly when you're traumatized. Part of your brain shuts down to protect your own self from the trauma you're experiencing."

What she's describing is known as the "freeze" response to trauma. Most people have heard of "fight or flight," but a third neurobiological response, freezing, happens when the part of the brain that considers options and weighs consequences "goes offline," says Linda Douglas, a trauma specialist at the New Hampshire Coalition Against Domestic and Sexual Violence, and the chemicals and hormones coursing through the brain shut the body down. In sexual assault cases, this sort of "tonic immobility," or paralysis, Douglas says, isn't uncommon. Sometimes, she adds, all you can think when you're being held captive is: *What will happen if I try to escape?* That single thought can render you motionless while your mind plays it over and over again. "We *don't* know what we would do in that situation," Douglas says, "because we

don't know how our brain and body would respond to the attack. That's going to be different for everybody." According to her organization, up to 50 percent of rape victims respond with this type of freezing or paralysis.

After a hazy flight, Curtis landed at Logan, where her husband was waiting for her. As she kissed him hello, all she could think was: "*What has just happened to me?*"

CURTIS'S FAMILY SUSPECTED SOMETHING was wrong almost immediately after she returned from Romania. She slept for nearly 24 hours straight and then danced the role of the Evil Queen in *Snow White*, grinding through the performance on pure adrenaline and drawing on every ounce of discipline and training to keep her mind focused. What followed was a blur of angst, anger, confusion, and frustration.

At her parents' house, Curtis sat down with her mother and reluctantly told her she'd been raped. Afterward, her body let go, like a dam that had finally burst. She began vomiting and couldn't stop. It lasted so long that her family rushed her to Wentworth-Douglass Hospital, in Dover, where doctors admitted her overnight and examined her with a rape kit. It had been a week since her latest attack, Curtis says, and the rape-kit results came back negative. Curtis also spoke with local police and an advocate from Haven, a New Hampshire domestic and sexual violence prevention and support agency. Detectives, while sympathetic, were not equipped to pursue a case in a foreign jurisdiction, so Curtis agreed to speak with the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

Several weeks later, Curtis reached out to former New Hampshire Attorney General Michael Delaney, roundly praised throughout the state for his advocacy on behalf of sexual assault victims. Now in private practice, Delaney says he and Curtis worked together for more than a year before seriously discussing a lawsuit. Part of that time, Delaney says, was spent deciding whether Curtis could handle "the emotionally challenging process, and our adversarial system [that] often retraumatizes victims." Curtis, however, reached a turning point during the summer of 2015 after learning that several former dance partners, colleagues, and friends with whom she shared her story had continued working with and dancing for Marculetiu. Feeling betrayed, Curtis decided it was time to warn the world. "I

came to the decision on my own that I could easily sweep this under the rug," she says. "I could easily go along with my life and, in a sense, kind of take the easy way out. But I can't live with that."

In November 2015, Delaney filed a civil complaint on behalf of Curtis in Middlesex Superior Court against Marculetiu and his company, International Ballet Academy of Norwell. She is seeking more than \$10 million in damages, according to the lawsuit, for "injuries caused to her as a result of being repeatedly sexually assaulted and raped." She alleges that Marculetiu's company was negligent for failing to ensure her safety as a student under an employee's care.

Marculetiu denies virtually every piece of Curtis's case. In an answer filed by his attorney, James Grumbach, Marculetiu says he did not get a second key to her room at the hotel in Romania or enter her room uninvited. He did not drug her or encourage his friends to grope her. And he did not sexually assault or rape her at any point on the airplane, in the hotel, in a taxi, or at any private residences. Together with his wife and son, Marculetiu is countersuing Curtis for defa-

mation, loss of employment and education opportunities, and abuse of process. Marculetiu and Melinda were asked to step down from their positions as adjunct ballet professors with Dean College, in Franklin, while the legal process unfolds. He claims Curtis's false allegations have subjected them to hatred, contempt, ridicule, reputational damage, and severe emotional distress. Curtis fabricated the entire story, he alleges, with malicious intent. In addition, Marculetiu has filed a separate lawsuit against his business and homeowner's insurance companies for denying coverage of his and his business's legal defense costs.

*Boston* attempted to reach everyone mentioned in Curtis's lawsuit with the exception of two individuals overseas whose contact information could not be found. A judge at the ballet competition who rode to the hotel in Sibiu in an airport shuttle with Curtis, Marculetiu, and Alex says she remembers Marculetiu introducing Curtis, but nothing more. "Mr. Marculetiu was always a fair judge," she says, "and he seemed a dedicated teacher who loves ballet and cares for his students." The hotel in Sibiu declined to

comment, as did competition authorities, Melinda, and Alex. Several others, including two judges and one of Curtis's former dance colleagues, never responded to questions, or confirmed receipt of my request for comment. Ovidiu Dragoman, general manager of the Sibiu Ballet Theatre, confirmed he had hosted a reception at his home outside Sibiu following the competition, but does not specifically recall Curtis. "It is difficult to remember [every competitor] and to have an impression about each and every one of them," he wrote in an email.

Meanwhile, Marculetiu's longtime friends and colleagues were stunned by the allegations. "I see how people treat him: with respect," says Westchester Ballet Company artistic director Jean Logrea. "I don't hear anything negative...I'm surprised about the whole thing. It shocked me a little bit. I couldn't believe it." A ballerina who has worked with Marculetiu for several years says, "Cosmin and Melinda go above and beyond for their students. I would really emphasize him as someone who would not be taking advantage of the [teacher-student] dynamic." Mihailo Djuric, artistic director

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## My (Tor)Mentor

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**FOUR SEASONS**  
HOTELS

**Bristol**  
RESTAURANT AND BAR

**JAGUAR**  
LAND ROVER  
NEWPORT

**WHISTLEPIG**  
STRAIGHT RYE

**mh**

**ES&C**