

Breaking up, breaking down

I'm staring at the ceiling. There's a spider there, crawling, legs slow and spindly. A thin gossamer thread slides behind it, shining silver as it catches the light. The spider pauses. My blanket feels heavy and suffocating; I can't breathe.

I push it off and roll out of bed.

Marks from last night's fight are still scattered around the living room. The lamp is toppled over, cobweb cracks stretching along the wall. A picture lies on the ground, from when I had won my first competition: I'm wearing a tutu and holding a trophy, staring solemnly into the camera; my mother is beaming, her hand placed possessively on my shoulder. The frame is broken, glass cracked right over her smile. The distortion makes her look like she's frowning. My bad ankle twinges; I ignore it.

My mother had always been like that photo: somehow larger than life, unquestionable, all-knowing. But she seems small now, curled up on the couch, eyes damp with tears. Her mouth is no longer coloured that violent red, her eyebrows soft instead of a fierce downward line. It was as if yesterday I had peeled back her skin, like she was some sort of human onion, to reveal her soft fleshy inside; and in reality, she was just as small and scared and unsure as I was.

I didn't know that she had stayed out here even after I had gone. She's still wearing a sleeveless beige top and the cold air has raised goosebumps on her arms; it makes her seem strangely revealed, like a bird plucked of its feathers. I watch her shiver for a while, then pull out a blanket and place it over her; her eyelashes flutter but she doesn't wake up.

There's a bag in my hand when I reach the door. I open it, letting it close with a soft click.

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The streets are empty, the air silent save for the soft chirping of birds and cicadas. I'm driving; it doesn't matter where. All that matters is the dull hum of the car engine; the smooth leather

against the palms of my hands; the small bumps of the road echoing up the soles of my feet. I can feel my heartbeat start to slow, my muscles start to loosen.

Somehow, I'm at the dance studio. The floor is streaked with powdered resin, the room filled with the sharp scent of sandalwood and musty, lingering sweat. My eyes drift to the wall. There's a crack there, from when a girl had fallen when doing fouettes years ago. They still haven't fixed it.

I had watched it happen; I still remember it, sometimes. Her cry as she slipped. The dull thud of her body hitting the ground. The sharp snap of her ankle and the way it dangled, so wrong that I couldn't look away, like a marionette cut of its strings. A dreaded career-ending injury. What is a dancer without her legs? Back then I had never not danced before, so I didn't know.

I pull on my pointe shoes, twist the ribbon across my feet and tuck the knot out of sight. The shiny satin is soft with wear, muted by smudges of gray dust. And then my legs are stretching themselves, head bowing down to place itself over my knees. It feels familiar, right, like something slotting into place. It's strange, having my body want to dance instead of my mind forcing it to; I think I prefer it this way.

There's a large mirror covering the wall. It's peculiar, seeing myself here without a leotard. For a second, a mirror image of a younger me overlays on top, eyes dark, surrounded by a roomful of identical girls who lift their legs in unison like toy soldiers standing in line. And then there is spittle landing on my cheek, angry faces screaming; a scale, its screen abyss-like gray, with black numbers blinking like the eyes of a shadowy monster; the floor opening up beneath me and a white hot pain echoing up the side of my leg. I flinch. Then the girls are gone and it's just me in my baggy sweater and three-quarter leggings. I'm pale and trembling; I look like I've seen a ghost.

I wonder when dance became like that. When it started to feel so horrible, a stone lodged in my heart, a steady beat, beat, beat, of *I'm not enough*.

I go to the record player, slot in a vinyl. As the clinking piano notes fill the room and the familiar notes wash through my body, I take my place in the centre of the room. I lift my arm above my head, gaze down the length of it while tucking my pointed foot behind me. A step, an attitude turn; it's hard. The pain in my toes is sharper than I remember, and my arch feels stiff, like I can't balance properly. My technique is horrible. If I danced like this before – my teacher

would have shouted herself hoarse. But it doesn't matter, because I don't need to worry about that anymore. The knowledge gathers in my lungs, swirling out like a joyous cry with every breath I take. For one deranged, wild moment, I want to laugh.

I wonder what my mother will think when she wakes up and realises I'm not home. The awful things I said last night sit, like plump little buddhas, chanting at how awful I am to make her worry. But I can't change for her, not this time, not again.

I turn, chaine after chaine, my head whipping around faster and faster until I'm dizzy. My legs aren't straight. My arms aren't strong. It feels wrong; it feels freeing.

Maybe I was doomed to fail from the very beginning, when Mother had taken me to my first class when I was three, asking me if I would be a beautiful little ballerina swan. Of course I would, since it made her smile so prettily. She had watched that day, as the teacher praised me, saying I was a natural, I was talented, and I shouldn't waste it. And then later, I pushed, or was pushed but what does it matter, to be faster, tighter, stronger, higher, sharper, better – until somehow, without my noticing, the flame inside me that shone so blindingly had burnt out. The wick turned to smoky ash, nothing left but a puddle of glistening, waxen tears.

I stretch my legs, point my toes, push up and lift myself into the perfect arabesque. I haven't danced like this in months. It's overwhelming: the stretch of my ankle and the reach of my arm and my heart feeling like it is beating out of my chest. I float there, perfectly balanced, and bask in this burning, desperate serenity. Then the music draws to a close; the air stills. I lower my leg. My breath is coming fast.

For the first time in what seems like forever, I feel alive.

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My mother is calling me. I watch the flashing screen of the phone for a while, take a deep breath, and pick up. She sounds calm.

'Where are you?'

I tell her.

'Then –' she pauses, and I can imagine her now, back rigid and mouth twisted to the side, 'that means you still love ballet, right?'

'Of course I love it,' I say softly.

Because ballet is the warm glow of satisfaction after perfecting a dance; it is the desperate burst of desire that sits in my chest when I stare into the dark expanse of an audience; it is the applause that rushes up like a delirious, intoxicating wave.

‘Then why wouldn’t you want to be a ballerina?’

She doesn’t understand. Love isn’t enough.

Because ballet is also everyone fighting against time and their bodies and each other just for the chance to be seen; there are too many dancers and so few opportunities. Imagine starving lions eyes red hearts bright clawing at each other to pry dripping, bloody steak from the other’s rigid grasp. Imagine girls, so many beautiful, wonderful girls, practicing until they throw up, heart breaking bones cracking colour fading just for bruised feet and the most beautiful, elegant arc of their instep.

She starts crying again. She tries to hide it, but I can hear her soft sobs. There would have been a time where I would have done anything so my mother wouldn’t cry. Maybe I’m being selfish; I made the wrong choice; I should keep dancing, but I don’t want to, I really don’t. I’m so tired.

‘But,’ her voice is shaky, ‘what would you do without ballet?’

And for a while, I don’t reply. Instead, I pull off my pointe shoes and socks, pad outside barefoot, and feel the damp blades of grass against my feet. The sun is rising, cars driving on the streets, occasional peals of faraway laughter piercing the air. The world seems clearer now, as if the light has brought it into focus. It is dawn.

There was a time when I would have been scared of this question. But I’m not. Instead I feel reborn, like a drop of condensed dew melting back into the sun warmed air.

‘I don’t know.’