

The Performance

God, why did I ever agree to do this? I think to myself. The bottom of my stomach feels like it has dropped out of my legs, I feel sick, and I can't control my shaking body. The fear has made my vision go blurry and I'm having trouble focusing on the open stage stretched out in front of me.

When I was first asked to do a ballet solo, I was thrilled. It's a great honour to be selected from a school of 500 dancers for a purposefully choreographed piece. But now, faced with a brightly lit stage, a large, black, gaping auditorium filled with people, and my ballet mistress sat in the wings noting down all the mistakes for corrections later, I suddenly wish more than anything that I could swap with someone else. Anyone else. Any one of the 50 girls looking at me sideways in the wings, whispering, willing me to fall and break my ankle just so they can take my spot. The smell of rosin and hairspray fills the air as I move through my pointe shoes, testing first the right, then the left to keep them limber, and because I'm too nervous to stand still. I go through the dance in my mind for the millionth time, marking out the steps with my hands at double speed. *I know* I know it inside out, but that moment where you step out onstage and you're blinded by the lights, completely disorientated, and all the familiarity of the studio is gone can really erase all memories of the hundreds of rehearsals and hours of practise you put in beforehand to perfecting every step, every placement of every fingertip.

I watch the dancers on stage, trying to take my mind off my sickening nerves and to try to calm my rapid, shallow breathing. Why is every second going so slowly? Please let it be OK, please let me remember the steps, please let my pirouettes come off, I plead with some unknown God that I don't believe in.

The music on stage builds threateningly, rising to a crescendo and any moment now the piece will finish. Suddenly I am not wishing the time to go faster, I'm wishing it would stop altogether and that the next five minutes would never come. But the sooner I get on with it, the sooner it will be over, I reason with myself. Drum rolls, symbols, and crash, it's over and the stage is plunged into darkness. Taking a deep breath as my stomach backflips, I run lightly to my start position, the applause masking the sound of my pointe shoes on the hard, wooden stage.

This is the opening night of our new show. We're at a tiny venue in Slapton-on-Sea, and the theatre here is an old one. The smell of wood and musty fabric seats meets me as I settle in to position. This stage is going to be particularly difficult to dance on because it is raked, meaning it slopes down towards to audience at an unnervingly steep angle. The idea is that rather than creating a steep incline of seating, the stage instead is tilted so that people at the back of the auditorium can see everyone on stage. Which is fine if you're in an opera or panto, but trying to hold an arabesque on pointe, or pirouette on an incline is quite a different matter. It's hard enough to find your balance in a brightly lit, perfectly level studio,

and after practising the entire piece in those conditions for months, the last thing you want to do is have to readjust your balance and find your centre all over again whilst simultaneously contending with opening night nerves.

There is a lot riding on this performance. It's the first solo I've been given, and if I screw it up the Director won't hesitate to give it to someone else tomorrow. This kind of pressure and cut-throat competition can turn even the nicest, most normal person into a paranoid wreck. I should know; I used to be that normal girl, with a great group of friends at school, happy to spend my lunchtimes playing cards and going out to the cinema at the weekend. Now my peers are my competition, my ballet mistress is my critic, and all my Director cares about is the perfect body and longest legs.

You might wonder why I still do this if I hate it so much. And that's a reasonable question that I ask myself on a daily basis. But I didn't always hate it. When I first started, I fell in love with ballet. I loved the beautiful, soulful music, the elegance of the steps, the stunning lines created by the dancers I so admired. And I enjoyed pushing myself, stretching my body beyond its limits, working harder every day to improve my technique. But gradually, somehow, this joy of striving turned into an obsessive pursuit of perfection, consuming my every waking thought and taunting my dreams. Every second I wasn't training or working was a second I was wasting. Everything I put in my mouth had to contain a certain amount of protein or fibre; fat was the enemy of my success.

And so here I stood, the culmination of all those years of work, about to make my solo debut. I should be proud, excited, but all I want is for it to be over. But I must focus now; I must block out the audience, the other dancers, the Ballet mistress. I must put all thoughts of failure out of my mind and focus only on the steps, channelling the music through my body, telling the story through my movements. And so the music starts, the lights finally come up, and I start to move – tentatively at first, but then more confidently as my body automatically takes over the steps I've seared into my muscle memory over the last two months of rehearsals. And so I can concentrate on performing, drawing out every last note into a perfect balance, an effortless line, moving fluidly back and forth across the stage. Building up slowly to my own crescendo as the music quickens, I come to the hardest part of the piece, the part I dread the most. The part that comes off well on a good day, but can just as easily go horribly wrong if my balance is slightly off. A triple pirouette in attitude, finishing in attitude and extending out into arabesque before tilting into a penché. I bourrée across the stage and place myself in preparation for the pirouette. Breathe. Everything slows down, my focus becomes razor sharp, and my vision is reduced to the one spot in front of me that I will fix with my eyes as I turn. The music pauses and there's a moment of silence as the audience seems to hold its breath for me. Then as I push off, my leg instinctively going to its place, I make the turn and land exactly on the beat; now I can breathe as I extend my leg out to a long arabesque, and slowly tilt towards the floor into 180 degree splits, with my right leg turned out to 90 degrees below me and my left leg pointed in the air, balancing precariously until the end of the bar. Hold, hold, hold, hold on to the position for everything I've got. I've done it, it's over. Oh the relief! I smile widely as I draw out the last steps languorously, and move into my finishing position. The audience erupts

into applause, and I count out three seconds before moving to the centre for the low, elongated curtsey, and running off lightly into the wings. Everyone is there to congratulate me - the other dancers, my ballet mistress - even the Director comes over to say well done. It's nice to have earned their praise and their respect, but more than anything the sense of relief that I've done it washes over me, heightened by the joy that it went well and the satisfaction that I've done my best. The adrenaline coarses through me as I ride the feeling of achievement. I realise now why I keep coming back every day, flogging my body until I'm so tired I can barely stand. It's for this moment, the thrill of the nerves and the overwhelming extasy when it's all over. Some days you may not get it right, and you leave feeling frustrated; a dark lonely place as you flagellate yourself for being useless, worthless. But those rare few times when you come off stage feeling like rays of light area actually emanating out of your inner soul - they remind you of what it's all for and leave you hungry for more, to find the next wave. Some people sky dive, or race, or abseil down 100 ft cliffs, all driven by the same feeling. The same need to experience the addictive sense of perfection again and again. For me it's ballet, and that's why I'll be in the studio again at 9 am tomorrow, practising harder, forcing my legs higher, my turns faster and my jumps stronger. For the pursuit of perfection isn't static, it demands constant attention every single day. And every day you get closer, it moves a fraction further away, ever just out of reach.