

ballet school

Instead of pirouettes and arabesques, I wrote a list

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I was 11. The muscles of my thighs popped through my tights. My stomach was flat with youth and work, and my arms were spindled twigs and yet held together with the twisted bark of muscles that were in a constant state of flex. My body was still a child's, hormonally becoming a woman's, but with the physique of an athlete. I was like a bird just spat out of its parents' nest - wings to fly, but covered in down.

"Rachel, can you wait behind?" my ballet teacher commanded after class one day, with a smile. She was a third grandmother to me - she wanted the very best, but I remained scared of her. I took the leaflet she handed me, recognising the crest, the font, and the red of the velvet curtains collected by gold tasselled rope...

"The Royal Ballet School?" my mum asked. "So, you'd go to school there? Have ballet lessons there?"

"Uh huh."

"And," she swallowed, "...you'd board? You'd stay there all term?"

I swallowed.

"Uh huh."

"Well, what do you think?"

I looked up into my mum's eyes.

"Can I think about it?"

"Of course, darling."

In so many ways, this should have been the beginning. I was the kid who jeté'd down the road instead of walked, who would do the splits in the kitchen while my mum was trying to serve steamed pudding. Those pink T-shirts for were made for kids like me - I really did live to dance, and danced to live. I was restless, and I loved making my body do what I told it to, whilst others said it looked correct and beautiful.

But I've never understood songs that call youth carefree - the idea of being without care has always felt like being without air. If this had been a film, my character would have needed to make a different decision

for the plot to work. If I was the simplified version of myself, with all the contradictions and inconveniences removed, the story would have ended in pirouettes.

As it was, instead of the montage of me running upstairs to practice, swivelling en pointe, picking out which leotard to wear, and perfecting my bun, all set to '80s classics *Billy Elliot* style, I wrote a list of pros and cons. It went something like this:

Pros:

1. *Dancing every day*
2. *Best dance training in the world*
3. *More likely to dance professionally*

Cons:

1. *Don't want to leave home yet*
2. *Money - we can't afford it*
3. *Other girls might be mean*
4. *Teachers might be mean*
5. *Body changes - kick me out if I get big?*
6. *What about school work?*
7. *What if I don't become a professional?*
8. *What if it all goes wrong?*
9. *What if there's something else?*

So, I told my parents, age 11, with assurance and courage of my convictions, that I didn't want to audition. I didn't want to go. I didn't want to leave home yet. It was too much of a risk. There were too many unknowns.

Sometimes when I walk past the Royal Opera House, where the Royal Ballet Company resides in Covent Garden, I see the echo of a different version of me. She's laughing with her friends from the company, opening the stage door, greeting the doorman by name, and unpinning her hair. She's wearing skinny jeans which are baggy, Converse, a cashmere grey jumper, and a single diamond hanging by a link chain at her bony clavicle. She's poised, subconsciously happy. She's as familiar as my own smell, and yet so foreign that I feel

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she should have a different name to mine.

But what else can I see in this echo? She's kept the muscle tone, the sculptured physique, the athleticism. Walking looks to her like sleeping does to most. But she winces when she *pliés* to tie the lace of her high-tops. Is that an old injury she's never quite fought? Perhaps a surgery scar? Her elbows bow outwards with hypermobility, just like mine, but more so. Is her body still correct and beautiful, aged 30? She watches a toddler pass by, fingers stuck together by jam. She smiles. Has she had hers yet? Is she worried her body won't come back if she does?

Then, there's a momentary pause in the orchestration, and I meet my echo's eyes. My partial reflection. My twin, separated by the fork in the road. She holds her pose,

*"My partial reflection. My twin,
separated by the fork in the road"*

recognising me and yet scanning my face for answers. I know what she's asking. *Is it really her? The version that didn't audition? Where is she now? She looks happy...*

Sometimes I want to know which version of spinning around would have been better – hers, or mine. I'll never know, of course. This isn't *Sliding Doors*. But I am proud of my 11-year-old self. Making an analytical decision isn't the stuff of films. But it's the echo of the 30-year-old I actually became. Plus, I can still pirouette. On a good day. ♦