

## ONE

I'm twenty-one years old. For the past three years I've been a member of the New York City Ballet, a company revered by audiences, critics and dancers.

Tonight I'm in a brand-new ballet, *Les Petits Riens*, dancing a leading role, choreographed especially for me by the company's ballet-master-in-chief, Peter Martins. The ballet's premiere performance will be given at the New York State Theater at Lincoln Center before an audience of 2,700 people.

For days I've been feeling that special, nervous anticipation that always precedes a premiere. This role is a tremendous step up in my career, an incredible honor.

Even though I'm excited, the truth is, I'm completely exhausted. Burned out. I'm trying not to complain because I figure that the other hundred dancers in the company are equally tired. We're at the end of a grueling four-month season. We've danced eight shows a week, and between performances we're taking class and rehearsing constantly.

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I'm starting to wonder what's wrong with me. Lately, I'm always thirsty, I'm dizzy a lot, and I need to pee all the time. I've convinced myself it's because of my exhaustion, but that doesn't explain all these symptoms or account for the awful, oozing sores under my arms. They're getting worse, and the worse they get, the more they freak me out. When I raise my arms, the ripping and burning is almost intolerable, and dancers have to raise their arms a lot. I'm used to having minor irritations under my arms because, as a member of the corps de ballet, I wear a different costume every night and none of them was originally made to fit me. My shoulders are sloped, which means that the bodice is often too long and the stiff material rubs against my armpits as I dance. But the irritations have never developed into sores like the ones I have now.

Two weeks ago, during a break in rehearsals, I ran to the Urgent Care Center on West Seventy-second Street to see what I could do to get rid of the sores. The doctor there gave me a massive shot of antibiotics and sent me on my way. One week later, I had ten times the number of sores. After that, Peter Martins's secretary gave me the phone number of a dermatologist, who put me on a different antibiotic. Neither of the doctors had given me any explanation as to why they'd been getting worse instead of better.

A week later, I phoned the dermatologist to let him know the new antibiotic wasn't working. "Isn't there anything you can do to help me?" I begged. "Next week I'm dancing the most important performance of my life. I have to be able to lift my arms."

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“I’m just a dermatologist,” he said. “If you want more answers, you’ve got to get some blood work done.” I didn’t have time for all these doctors, and I didn’t understand what was so difficult about getting those sores to heal. It never occurred to me that this was anything more than a minor—albeit unsightly and painful—problem. But if I was going to dance, I needed to lift my arms. I had to do *something*. So, with the greatest reluctance, I took his advice, went to an internist and had blood work done.

Now another week has gone by and I’ve put the blood test out of my mind. I’ve calmed down about the sores. They’re still there, but I’m not feeling the pain. I’m actually more concerned with how they look than how they feel, so I’ve been covering them with thick layers of pancake makeup. The sores make me feel like a fraud. Ballerinas are supposed to be delicate, ethereal creatures, and in some ways I still look the part: I have large dark eyes, a small head on a long neck, a slender, elongated body and expressive feet. But these days I feel more like a toad than a princess.

Sitting at my dressing table an hour before my premier performance in *Les Riens*, I look at my hands. It doesn’t surprise me that they’re shaking. Luckily, the dancer at the dressing table next to mine is my younger sister Romy, who joined the company this year. Even though we look a lot alike, she is now taller than I am. We’re best friends, and in a tense situation like this she always knows exactly how I feel. I know how she feels, too; she’s even more nervous for me than I am for myself.

We decide that I should wear a pair of her rhinestone earrings

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onstage for good luck. That way she'll be with me—in a sense—when I'm dancing. This makes both of us feel better. It's time to put on my costume. It's gorgeous. Yellow silk trimmed in lace and pearls, with a tight, corset-like bodice, sleeves that come to just above the elbows, and a short, starched peplum skirt. Except for the fact that the skirt ends at the top of my thigh, it's made to look like what a lady would have worn in the time of Mozart. The only problem is that it's way too tight. My appetite is driving me crazy. I'm hungry all the time and I can't stop eating. It's got to be nerves. I hope that's all it is.

But now, with the premiere less than an hour away, I have to find a pair of pointe shoes—a perfect pair. The shoes I need tonight have to be soft enough to conform to my feet, but not too soft. I must have a pair like that somewhere, but where? I rifle through the ever-present tangle of items on my dressing room floor: worn-out tights, practice clothes, a mass of pointe shoes, some stiff and new, others danced ragged. Without the right pointe shoes, I won't be able to do the first turn of my solo; it's incredibly difficult and if it isn't perfect, my entire performance will be sunk.

The right shoes can make the difference between a good and bad performance. I put on pair after pair and try them out by rising up on the tips of my toes. At last, a pair I can use. Finally.

I lace up the shoes, crossing their pink-satin ribbons in front of my ankle. I wrap the ribbons one time around, then tie them in a tight knot toward the inside of my ankle. I look in the mirror: hair looks fine, makeup looks good.

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I squeeze my false eyelashes between my thumb and index finger to make sure they'll stay glued when the sweat starts pouring.

With less than a half hour to go before the performance, I'm worn out by my own emotions: I'm jittery and excited at one moment, frozen in panic the next. I have to dance better than I've ever danced. *Les Petits Riens* is a great chance for me, but it could be my last chance if I don't keep up with the other dancers.

As a dancer, I've always been passionate and expressive. My challenge is technical strength. I'm more colt than thoroughbred, and my current physical condition is making my footwork shaky. It may be perfectly precise one moment, and then suddenly, for no apparent reason, I fall off my pointes. Dancers need to be in control of every part of their body, from their fingers to the tips of their toes. That connection is essential, and lately, I don't have it. No wonder I've lost the confidence I've struggled so hard to attain.

Confidence can make the difference between just dancing and dancing well. It's what allows a ballerina to weather the vulnerabilities of being barely clothed onstage, of risking falling down or looking ridiculous with every leap or turn. Confidence propels a performance. It allows you to manage the dichotomies that come with ballet: trying to make impossibly difficult moves look easy; having to be the embodiment of femininity as you execute steps that require an athlete's strength and stamina.

The combined loss of confidence and physical ability explains why I've been getting fewer good parts lately. It hurts to be excluded from ballets I love, especially those choreographed by

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Jerome Robbins, who has singled me out in the past and given me the honor of dancing leading roles in his works.

Outside the ballet world, Robbins is best known as the director and choreographer of hit Broadway musicals like *West Side Story* and *Fiddler on the Roof*. But he would tell you that his most substantive and significant career has been with New York City Ballet. Jerry is NYCB's resident genius, the only person gifted enough to assume the mantle of George Balanchine, who was the co-founder of NYCB and generally recognized as the greatest choreographer of the twentieth century.

When Balanchine was alive, every dancer in the company had the same dream: that Mr. B, as he was known, would choose him or her to dance one of his new works. In the three years since his death, we've all come to dream of being chosen by Jerry. In my view, working with Jerry, being nurtured by his genius, would lead me on the path to realizing my dream of becoming a great dancer. This is the dream I've nurtured since I was fifteen, when I moved to New York to study at the School of American Ballet, the school that Balanchine established as a training ground for his company. It was there that I discovered the world of Balanchine, and came to dream that my dancing might make me a small part of his legacy. If I dreamed bigger, it would be to someday become a soloist, one of the rare and special dancers who are featured in leading roles, an experience that allows the ultimate freedom of expression.

It's been exactly one year since Jerry chose me to dance the

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role he created for the great Gelsey Kirkland in *The Goldberg Variations*, his masterpiece. At NYCB, it is customary to give big chances to young dancers. Balanchine loved to single out future stars from the corps de ballet and thrust them into the limelight. Peter Martins followed suit, and it was he who picked me, during my second year with the company, to be the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker*. Jerry had his eye on me, as well, and a few weeks after I danced Sugar Plum he cast me in Kirkland's role.

I put my entire being into it, and I did well.  
For a time.

Minutes before the curtain goes up, the phone in the hallway rings. It's the only phone for the thirty-five female corps dancers who share a huge dressing room on the fourth floor. I don't have time to answer it, but I hear another dancer calling, "It's for you, Zippora."

Who could be calling me? Reluctantly, I head down the hall. It's the switchboard operator.

"Your doctor called again today," he says. "She said it was urgent."

Damn. She's called every day this week, sometimes twice a day. I'm rehearsing all the time and keep forgetting to call her back. What could possibly be so urgent?

It's now five minutes before the performance. The eight dancers in *Riens* are onstage. Even as the audience enters the theater we're behind the heavy curtain, still practicing, still trying to perfect intricacies of partnering and footwork. My reviews last year for *The Nutcracker* were nothing less than spec-

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tacular. In the *New York Times*, Jennifer Dunning wrote that my Sugar Plum was “a smooth blend of regal ballerina manners and the coltish classical purity of a student.” In the *New York Post*, Clive Barnes hailed me as a “potential star.” Now I’m on the stage with seven other potential stars. As in every company, there are more dancers than leading roles, so we’re all competing for a slice of a very small pie.

“What’s the matter?” one of the dancers asks me.

“I can hardly breathe,” I say. “My costume’s too tight.”

Another dancer overhears me. “Oh, really?” she says, “Mine’s too loose.”

*You bitch*, I think, but say nothing.

Moments before the performance begins, I give my partner, Peter Boal, a quick hug. “*Merde*,” all eight of us call out to one another, our voices overlapping. *Merde* means “shit” in French. Before a show, it’s our way of saying “break a leg” or “good luck.”

It’s bad luck to say “thank you.” Dancers are nothing if not superstitious. If someone tells you “*Merde*,” you just smile and say “*Merde*” back.

The stage manager calls out, “Dancers, stand by.” The house lights dim. The excited murmuring of the audience gives way to silence. For the next few moments there will be darkness both in the house, where the audience sits waiting, and on the stage, where the dancers are poised to begin. I take my pose. Slowly, inexorably, the heavy curtain rises. Suddenly, the stage is bathed in light. I feel a chill as cold air from the house washes over me. I look at the conductor. He raises his baton. When the baton

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sweeps downward the orchestra explodes in sound as the Mozart score begins.

We start to move. I think about how much I love dancing with my peers. Once a performance starts, all feelings of competition are set aside. I love the secret looks we give one another; I love the way we urge one another on with our eyes. The opening section finishes. I'm breathing heavily as I bow to the audience. Six dancers leave the stage. Only Peter and I remain to dance a pas de deux, followed by our solos.

The stage is eerily silent as I walk across it, soundless in my pointe shoes. I take my pose opposite Peter. The audience is hushed, expectant. The music begins softly. It is sweet, loving, innocent. I love this music, I love these steps, I love the way Peter and I play together onstage. Too soon, it ends. We bow; the audience applauds.

I run offstage utterly exhausted. Mercifully, Peter's solo is first.

While he's onstage, I'm supposed to be resting, but that's out of the question. My solo comes next and I'm totally intimidated by the very first step, that incredibly difficult turn—harder than any turn I've ever had to do—that turn for which I needed the perfect pair of shoes. When Peter Martins choreographed that turn, he and I were both shocked at how perfectly I did it the very first time out. But it was a fluke, and every day since then I've had to re-create that fluke in rehearsals. Tonight I have to nail it. I take a practice turn and fall off my toe. Now I'm terrified.

Suddenly Jerome Robbins appears backstage. He steps out of the darkness into the first wing, the very place from which Balan-

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chine used to watch every performance. I shouldn't notice. I'm supposed to be focused on my steps. But all I can think of is how he replaced me with a younger dancer in *The Goldberg Variations*.

Jerry has an animal-like sixth sense. He can smell fear, and even if he likes you, your fear can drive him crazy or drive him away. He's remote, grand, known to be cruel. And he's known for his temper. I want him to see me dance. I want him to love me. I want him to ask me to dance *Goldberg* again.

Onstage, Peter finishes his solo with a flourish. Backstage, we hear the explosive applause. It trails off. Now it's my turn to dance. I run onto the stage and stand in fifth position. I watch the conductor. His hand goes up, then comes down. The music starts and I begin. I sail around on my toe. I don't fall off. Amazing. It's as if all the years of training have been preparing me for this single moment.

After one revolution, I slow my momentum to a full stop. Still on pointe, I balance on my left toe while my right leg extends to the side. Then I bend my left knee, as my right leg bends and comes to rest behind my ankle in the position called *coupe*. I have never done it so perfectly. "Don't relax yet, you have to do it one more time," I tell myself. The second turn goes just as well. Now I am free to dance my heart out.

I chassé and bourrée all over the stage. It's as if I'm skipping through a meadow on a sunny day. Jerry has to see my talent. He has to love me again. Still, while Jerry chose me for my dancing, I realize that something else drew him, as well. After all, everyone at City Ballet can dance. Everyone is special. Everyone sparkles.

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But what Jerry saw in me was an extra sparkle. Maybe it's not possible to shine when your body is struggling as mine is.

Have I lost my sparkle in his eyes?

At the end of my solo I have a series of turns on the diagonal. I'm supposed to end up right at the wing where Jerry's standing. I run across the stage. Just as I begin turning toward him, I see him walking away while I'm still dancing. I'm performing for more than two thousand people, but the only one I can think of is Jerry. I'm smiling for the audience, but my heart is sinking.

I try not to think about Jerry as I take my curtain call with the rest of the cast to enthusiastic applause.

An hour later, the stage is bare, the audience has long since gone home, and I'm leaving the theatre with Romy, cradling a bouquet of roses from Peter Martins. As we're walking out, I notice a message tacked to the bulletin board: "Zippora, urgent. Call your doctor."

I know I should call her, and I promise myself that I will—just as soon as the season is over, which is in just three weeks. I get through the remaining five performances of *Les Petits Riens* on sheer strength of will. But a few days later I receive an unexpected wake-up call in the form of a dream.

I've always believed in the significance of dreams, and this one is particularly frightening. I dream that I'm in a car. The car isn't moving and the windows and the doors are open, but the engine is running. Suddenly, the windows roll up and the doors lock shut. Then the fumes from the exhaust start coming through the

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vents in the dashboard and filling the car. I can't breathe and I can't get out. I wake up just before I suffocate.

As I lie there, trying to catch my breath, the dream seems to me like a portent. The car is my body and the exhaust is something happening inside me that is life-threatening. I realize that something is not right.

That afternoon I phone the doctor during a five-minute rehearsal break, and she tells me I have to come in immediately. A few hours later, I'm in her waiting room. It's cold and sterile. It gives me the creeps. It's six-twenty and I've been waiting for an hour. To get there, I had to skip my final rehearsal of the day for a ballet I was scheduled to dance the following week. Now I have to get back to the theater by seven-thirty to put on my makeup and get ready for this evening's performance. I don't have time to sit here, but I need to know what's so urgent and she wouldn't tell me over the phone.

Finally, the door to her office opens. She invites me in. She's a tall, thin, attractive woman in a tailored white doctor's coat. She's smiling, but I see pity in that smile and it puts me on edge. She looks as if she's about to tell me she ran over my dog. She studies my chart for a moment, then tells me that my blood sugar levels are 350. Normal levels, she says, are 120 or under. I ask what this means. She says it means that I have diabetes.

Diabetes? I've heard of it. It's one of those charity diseases, the kind they raise money for. She hands me four pamphlets that describe what may happen to me: heart disease, stroke, blindness, kidney failure, foot and/or leg amputations.

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I can't take it in. I refuse to take it in. Instead, I try to figure out how long it will take me to get back to the theater. If I get out of here soon I can make it. Even if I don't get a cab, I can walk it in twenty minutes.

She says we can discuss a treatment plan during our next appointment. Another appointment? Why can't we discuss it now? I want to know what to do. I want everything to go back to being the way it was. But all she will say is that she doesn't want me to feel deprived of food; that feeling deprived could cause me to go overboard eating the wrong thing. She says it's not okay to eat a whole cake—as if I don't know that—but it's all right to have a little piece of cake. What is she talking about? I'm a dancer. I'm disciplined. I wouldn't eat a bite of cake if I'm not supposed to. Anyway, I don't eat cake. Period.

I hate this doctor. She's talking to me as if I'm a child or an idiot or both. I don't trust her. She has no idea whom she's dealing with. She doesn't know me. I'm in her office no more than fifteen minutes, and I'm so turned off by her condescending attitude that I don't even bother to make another appointment.

Finally, I get back to the theater. Now I can focus on the ballet I'm dancing tonight, Balanchine's *Piano Concerto No. 2*. For dancers in the corps it's one of the most demanding ballets. Even the strongest corps dancers have problems getting through it.

The section that worries me most comes in the third movement. It's tired me so much in rehearsal that I've wanted to run off stage and fall to the ground in an exhausted heap. Instead, I have to execute one of the most difficult and controlled se-

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quences of steps. How I am going to manage it, especially now? Losing limbs.... going blind...I hate that doctor's voice. I want it out of my head.

As terrified as I am to dance tonight, I need the stage right now. Onstage, I feel alive. I feel safe. What happens onstage isn't real, of course, but it's where I can enact, experience and connect to the grandest human emotions, from exultation to despair. In that sense, being on-stage often feels more real and immediate than life.

There are just twenty minutes until the performance, and I have to warm up my muscles. But the more I try to get warm, the colder and clammy I feel. Backstage, I put resin on the heels of my tights and the heels of my pointe shoes so they won't slip off. Next to the resin box there's a big bucket of water. I've dipped my heels in this water hundreds of times to keep my shoes from coming off. Now I can't. The water's too cold. I'm too cold.

I've got to calm down.

I sit in a corner and, as dancers do before a performance, take a few minutes to sew my toe shoe ribbons together so they don't unravel. The wardrobe mistress helps me hook up my costume. I look in the mirror to make sure the picture is complete: costume, shoes, hair, makeup.

"Dancers, the call is onstage," says the stage manager, his voice booming through the loudspeaker. Oh, no. I have to pee! How is this possible? I went to the bathroom less than half an hour ago. But I have to go again. And I really have to, because when you need to pee there's no way you can dance for thirty-five minutes.

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I have just a few minutes until the overture starts. I race to the bathroom closest to the stage followed by the wardrobe lady, who has to unhook my entire costume and then hook it all back up again.

Thank God the overture for Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 2 is long. The orchestra will play for several minutes before the curtain is raised. I'm back onstage, going over the sequence that has me so worried. I do it over and over, reminding myself to hold my stomach tight. The overture becomes louder, stronger, fiercer.

Three more minutes until the curtain goes up. I take my place. I love dancing to Tchaikovsky's music. It's passionate and bold. It always awakens my deepest feelings.

Suddenly, I begin to shake. To my horror, I start to cry. I try to stop, but I can't. I hate public displays of emotion. I don't cry easily, but I can't help crying now. One of the male dancers hurries over and puts his arm around me. He asks what's wrong. I'm sobbing uncontrollably as other dancers gather around me. I have to pull myself together. I need to lighten the tension. "It's a good thing my makeup is waterproof," I say. The others exchange looks.

I know what they're thinking, "Why is she freaking out?"

I wipe my cheeks and pinch my false lashes to be sure they've weathered the storm. The curtain rises. The ballet begins with a line of eight corps de ballet women positioned in a diagonal line facing the audience. We wear blue costumes with flowing chiffon skirts and sparkles across the neckline. Facing us are eight corps de ballet men. Their backs are slightly to the audience. The music becomes gentle and soft. The men walk toward the ladies.

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The dancing begins. Tears flow down my cheeks throughout the entire performance.

As I dance, my mind is racing...losing limbs, kidney failure, heart disease, stroke, going blind.

I just need rest, I tell myself, and my blood sugar levels will go back to normal. The long winter season has been too demanding. It'll be over in two weeks. Then I'll have three weeks to recover before the spring season begins. Anyway, I'll bet the diagnosis is just a lab error. There's no way I can have diabetes. I'm a twenty-one-year-old dancer with the New York City Ballet. Things like that don't happen to people like me.