

January 25, 2016

The Ballet Shoes

There are these two little slippers that sit in my bag. Off pink, greyed with age, from dust, from use. With holes the size of the quarters that paid for them, strings fraying at the edges as if threatening to unravel into an incomprehensible mess. The elastic bands no longer hold their shape as strongly as they once did. The one sided string sits idly in the toe, shoved down after many practices, sweat reforming the material to stay.

I pick them up for the first time in five years surprised to find them in this already-knowing state. Had they always been this way? Or by routinely putting them on day in and day out they became a forgotten detail: just my shoes. Just for ballet.

Memories come floating back as I remember that they feel the same. Worn pieces of canvas cloth, smooth in some areas, rougher in others. Some areas even are smoothed so much as if they've become solidified, melted from turning so fast so many times in the same small specific spot under the pad of my foot. They're dusty. Not so much from being kept in my bag as much as they scraped up the floor's dust with every single *chassé* or *chaîné*. Wood dust that fell from the rafters. Dust that was found in the alcove around the floor where I used to stash them that could be anywhere from moments to thirty-years-old. Dust created by sweat and grime and hair and blood and tears and muscle memory and too many "again"s and "one last time"s.

And the smell. At once both disgusting and comforting. It brings about hair spray and wrapping hair into buns. The stagnant smell of sweat at once created from bar exercises and center exercises and across the floor exercises. Memory and routine. *Plié*. *Tendue*. *Degage*. *Frappé*. *Ronds de jambes*. *Now en l'air*. *Grand battement*. *Now center*. Routine and memory. Feet turned out. Butt tucked. Stomach in. Back straight. Chest up. Head high. Back strong. Arm graceful. Smile. Routinely without a thought. Every single day for thirteen years.

I sit and pull the shoes on. I forgot the hole was there. I'll need some tape. At once the memorial music comes wafting back to me. As I stand body's muscles pull in ways that they remember more than my thoughts. I'm taller, stronger.

I head over to the barre with fellow college students. The teacher enquires about all of us if it has been long since we've danced. Many say a few months, before summer. Others smugly say a few weeks. I say five years and I feel the eyes of nonchalance pity glance over my way.

It's a \$20 drop-in class.

But once the music truly begins and the barre routine commences, my brain stops thinking and my body starts flowing. Arm placement and leg placement beat my thoughts to it. I fully let go, trusting my body to take me where it needs me to.

Memories pour in like a faucet and I'm the fish, ravishing to quench my thirst.

I remember for three of those thirteen years it took me thirty minutes to drive there and thirty minutes to get back. I remember running to the car meeting my best friend and another girl, cold to us beyond the nonchalant "hello" as her mother turned the car back on and soon drove us out of the car line. It was just as much of a routine as the rest of it: one of the three mothers driving us to downtown Jacksonville five or six days a week. Putting our hair into buns

in the car. Rapidly changing into tights and leotards immediately as we get there. The ballet, pointe, modern, and Pilates classes. My dad picking us up at the end to drive us home. Cooking something fast to eat for dinner. Sitting at the table doing homework usually until at least two in the morning.

I remember my friends in my classes and how most of them hung out with the other magnet school kids. I remember the excitement of *Nutcracker* auditions and how we all looked forward to receiving our favorite parts. Practicing with other kids from the city and making new friends. Bloody toes and blisters popping. Shoes breaking. Boxes dying. The excitement of performance day where we would all pack into two dressing rooms, one for just the company's students and a few others who received the coveted Waltz of the Flowers, Marzipan, or Snow parts. Some of us would dance to the music someone played on a portable speaker, others would gossip about the summer production when many of us would come back together for six weeks. Our artistic director would announce on the radio that the show would soon start and we got dressed and in formation.

I remember how being on that stage thrilled me. If I were a chocoholic, performing would be my chocolate. I tried to audition or try for as many performances I could and picking up some of the better roles as I went along mostly due to my dedication than my physique. My favorite was the cygnets in *Swan Lake* as it was a challenging and fun variation and it was nice that my short stature actually worked in my favor for once.

But then there were times that even my dedication couldn't take me as far as I wish it could have. Whereas most of my friends—then best friend included—were able to learn variations for the Youth American Grand Prix, I was deemed too old to start by my artistic director. I was fourteen. Being invited to its workshop was my consolation prize.

I sigh.

My hips crack. My back bends. My muscles ache. My extensions aren't the same. I wobble a bit. There are blisters on the back of my heels, the sides of my toes. Lord, planter's warts. No, they're not there. But I can feel them all the same.

I remember by the time I turned sixteen I knew I wasn't able to continue for long. My high school decided to shorten the school year by two weeks, lengthening the school day by a half hour each day. After a trial run my spring semester of my sophomore year, I knew I wasn't going to make my four o'clock classes by leaving school at quarter 'til. But my viewpoint on the professional ballet world was changing, too. By this time the weight of feeling like most of my hard work received consolation prizes made me feel jealous of my friends who seemed not to appreciate their favorable positions. I was frustrated with my height and body composition that by this time was barely receiving little more than one meal a day due to wanting to sleep instead of eating, being a picky eater, and running around doing errands for clubs I wasn't able to do after school instead of eating lunch. A sense of conflicting self-loathing started to brew as I felt I was not appreciating what I was receiving and the doubt in the back of my mind which was constantly nagging at me that I wasn't working hard enough in appreciation for all my parents put into my dance education. Lastly, I was just tired. I was so tired of it all. I loved performing, but I knew that I was slowly coming to an end.

But still, somehow this class called back to that old love like a siren to a lover.

Pirouettes now. My favorite. And somehow I surprise the class, the teacher, and myself with a triple. How did that occur? My memory has been etched into my bones. My artistic director would be proud and automatically I say a prayer of thanks to her, adrenaline racing.

But now the class comes to an end and a feeling I forgot about comes back racing fresh and anew: exasperation. Desperation. Addiction. Sorrow. Oh, the sorrow. As if once again I face the deed that I have to stop again. So suddenly again: the change of time. Will it be five years again to taste this golden sunlight and this sweet sorrow? Am I hyperventilating to calm down from the exercise or the wonderment of reality?

I sit down and linger at taking the shoes off. My thumb rubs over them, the now slightly damp material. I sadly stuff them back into my bag as if being once again separated from a friend. I stand and grab my bag, a one last look around the room before I leave. I'm pulled away from the sea and the thirst comes back. But it will soon numb and also become no more than a fading memory.