

Dependence on Dance

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Throughout the past fourteen years I have taken over fifty dance classes at eight different dance studios. These dance schools have ranged from the local YMCA to prestigious ballet schools such as Boston Ballet. Classes have included: ballet, pointe, modern, tap, jazz, hip-hop, lyrical, and ballroom. Dance has slowly consumed my entire life. Dancing has always come naturally to me; it is not something that I have to think about constantly, or put tons of effort into; I just do it. My body has slowly become dependent on dancing. When I hear a song, I automatically start thinking of new choreography to go along with the music. If I already know a dance to that song, I will dance the choreography in my head. When music comes on, it is almost as if I go into a trance. When I hear music, my first reaction is to dance. I do not care if people can see me or not. All I care about is that I listen to the urge that is inside my mind and body. It is like a different person takes control of me, and my love of dance comes out. It is amazing to know that I can dance away my sorrows and make myself happy. When I cannot dance, I become stir crazy. There have only been a few times in my life that I have not been able to dance; these are some of the hardest times that I have even been through. The memories that fill my head of dance consume the majority of my brain when the sound of music is heard...

It is about two weeks into December of freshman year. In about an hour I will be performing in front of an audience of about fifty to one-hundred people. Performing five different numbers. My company and I will be performing an abridged version of *Sleeping Beauty*, and an abridged version of Tchaikovsky's *Nutcracker*. Walking in the back door to the green room. Picking which spot to set up camp: costumes laid out in order of the show, pointe shoes ready with my toe pads already inside, and my make-up and hair products ready for emergency use. I am sitting in a straddle on the stage, behind the large red curtain, stretching and getting ready for the first number—the “Coda” from Don Quixote—wearing my pink tights, pink canvas ballet shoes, and my black and red costume. I hear my ballet teacher on the other side of the curtain introducing the company. The heavy red curtain opens, the stage is black, we are all in place. I hear the familiar music, and my body takes over. I am no longer thinking about the steps, my body just does them. My muscles have memorized the choreography and my nerves are gone. I have a smile plastered on my face because I know that the entire audience is there to see the six of us dance. My body has full control of me. The only thing that I have to worry about is remembering to breathe. As the number finishes my mind begins to take control of my muscles, and I catch my breath as I ballet run, elegantly, off the stage.

My love for dance started at age three. I was terrified, walking up the steep steps, into the classroom that had mirrors all along one wall. This was the last place that I wanted to be. I just wanted to go home and hide away in my bedroom, where I felt safe, with my stuffed animals and dolls surrounding me. I could cuddle with my cat Frosty, and my dog Jake. I could be in my backyard playing with my imaginary friend. But instead I was being pulled up those steep stairs, to that room that surrounded me with mirrors. Everyone else saw everything that I did; I could not even take two steps without someone seeing me. Little did I know, this was the beginning of my love/hate relationship with dance. By the end of the class I walked out with a gigantic smile on my face, and I would not want to leave. I hated the idea of talking a class and leaving my mother for that short period of time, but once I got past that fear, I loved every minute of being there. I fully immersed myself into the class and I never wanted to leave. I put my heart and soul into the class. If only my mother knew what she was getting herself into.

The next dance recollection stored in my bank of memories is from Robin Adair Studio of Dance, in downtown Manchester-by-the-Sea, Massachusetts. The smell of low tide in the air. Church parking lot, playground, and basement. Dance studios to me seem to always have a

stairway, going up or down steps. Cold wet basements, with snow and rain leaks, to hot second floors of an apartment building in the city. Walking down the steps to the dance studio where I really learned ballet. Where I first learned tap and jazz. Where I developed all my fundamental techniques, and lost the old bad habits. Miss Robin's dance recital was the highlight of my year. No matter what the dance was or who was in my class, I always loved it. One of my first years in her class I spent the entire recital nodding my head to the beat. From this point on, my mom knew I loved dance, and going to recitals was something she should get used to. At the end of the recital, we all helped put the chairs away. Then, we got homemade punch with mini colored marshmallows in it and a small gift. These gifts ranged from a keychain that had the word "dancer" on it, to a pointe shoe ornament. This was the best part of the recital. We all crowded around Miss Robin to receive these gifts. Once she handed them to all of us we had the biggest smile on our faces as we opened them together and saw what we got. It was as if we had taken dance classes for an entire year and then put on this amazing recital, yet the only thing that seemed to matter to us was the silly little gift at the end. This recital was a magical experience for everyone that watched or participated in it. This is because every girl put her heart and soul into their dance. Also, the recital always began with the class lined up at the ballet bar at the back of the stage, and performing our warm up we had learned that year. This was right around the time that my parents realized I was not just one of those little girls who took ballet because everyone else did, but I was going to be a dancer.

Robin Adair Studio of Dance was the place where I truly fell in love with dance. The distinct classical music. The classic ballet look; pink seamless tights, pink ballet shoes, leotard, and skirt. These have been the staples in my life for over twelve years. Spending hundreds of dollars a year on dance classes and supplies. Wearing stage make-up since a very young age. Learning to put on my make-up better than my mother at the age of ten. Putting on ballet tights, pulling my hair back up into a bun, pulling on my leotard, and slipping on my ballet shoes. Stretching at the beginning of class, doing plies at the bar, pique turns and grand jetes across the floor. This all reminds me of the ballet class that I have grown up taking. Everything goes perfectly with the music, and flows exceptionally. This has been all I have known. From kindergarten to the end of fourth grade, the only class that I took was ballet.

Throughout the fourteen years of my dance career there has not been one specific person who inspired me. But there were some experiences that inspired me. One event that really inspired me was a field-trip that I went on with my class at Miss Robin's studio. We went to see Boson Ballet's production of *The Nutcracker*. After the performance we went on a tour backstage. The performance was always held at the Wang Theater in Boston. This theater has always amazed me. But seeing behind the scenes was another story. They showed us how the Christmas tree grew in the party scene, and some of the ballerina's dressing rooms. This experience made all of this real to me. It made me realize that the people that I had just seen dancing on that stage, were real people, and that they had started off in ballet classes just like me. This inspired me to become a better dancer, and to dance in *The Nutcracker* when I was older. The other experience that really inspired me was actually participating in *The Nutcracker* as a company apprentice. My inspiration and influences from this experience was the company members. Especially the women that were in their forties or fifties, for I could see their love for dance in their eyes. Before this I had always taken being a dancer for granted, and I never really appreciated what it took to get to be that senior company member. These women made me want to strive to be a better dancer, to be the best that I could be.

During all these years another big part of my ballet career was Boston Dance Company's production of *The Nutcracker*. In second grade, I found out about this production from my dance teacher. I went to the auditions that were held at Chiampa Dance and Performing Arts Center. At this point in time I was seven years old. I received the role of Polichinelle. I played the same role the next year as well. By the time I was in fourth grade, my ballet skills were much better, and I landed the roles of a soldier in the battle scene, and an angel in the beginning of the second act. This was a large accomplishment for me. It meant that I was getting to be one of the big kids. By the end of this show, I was extremely close with all of the girls; we had been performing together for three years now. The next year I got cast in the party scene. This was the dream of all the girls that I had been performing with for the past three years, and I was one of the few who made it. I then took the bump from being a party girl, to being a party boy. I made the decision to do this, because it meant that I would get to be in the party scene the next year as well as a party girl. The party scene was the opening scene of the show and it was over twenty minutes long. This meant that I was on stage the longest that I could have been, besides being Clara. When I was in sixth grade I was a party girl and a Candy Cane. But because some of the girls were not strong enough on pointe we were required to do the dance on flat. Being a Candy Cane meant that I got to wear the fancy costumes, and that I was part of the closing number. The closing number meant that I was required to attend rehearsals on some Sundays at Boston Dance Company in Cambridge, Massachusetts, with the Company members. This was extremely exciting. I got to take the company class with all the amazing dancers, and we got to be in our own dressing room, especially for Candy Canes. My last and final year dancing in Boston Dance Company's production of *The Nutcracker*, I was in seventh grade. At this point in time, I was considered a company apprentice. This meant that I very rarely had rehearsals at Chiampa Dance and Performing arts center. We spent most of our Sundays for all of December on the second floor of a city building. This year we performed the same Candy Cane dance, but on pointe this time. As well as Chinese on pointe. We got to travel with the company and perform in a few different locations. I performed Chinese as a duet in the Worcester show. At this point in time, my mother and I made the decision that I was to be done with Boston Dance Company, and their performance of *The Nutcracker*. If I was to continue with them, I would have been required to be in all of the shows, and I would have had to miss many days of school. My mother was not willing to let me do this. So I had to say goodbye to the familiar music of *The Nutcracker* that I knew oh so well.

This was the end of ballet, as I knew it. I made the decision to move on with my dance career, and to go to a more demanding dance school, Chiampa Dance and Performing Arts Center. At first I was only going to take ballet and pointe while I was there, but after seeing other classes, I wanted to take more. By the next week I was signed up for tap and jazz as well. I had not taken a tap or jazz class in three years, so this was going to prove itself to be very interesting. Jazz came easily to me. All I had to think was "Ballet, but with sharper movements." But tap was a whole other story. Everyone else in this class had been taking tap their entire lives. It seemed as if I was taking a class in another language, but after some practice I proved to be pretty good at it. Chiampa held lots of interesting experiences for me as well as memories. This was my first time performing in a recital that was larger than one class, my first time for many new things. My first time taking a pointe class. My first time taking a class that was larger than ten people. My first time having real costumes for a recital. The costumes were magnificent. I had worn costumes in *The Nutcracker* for many years, but before this day, I never had costumes that were mine to wear and to have. Within the next few years I was on the

competition team, and in the company. While I was in the company, I decided that no longer wanted to take ballet and pointe at Chiampa. I auditioned and enrolled at Hamilton-Wenham School of Dance. I began taking ballet and pointe at Hamilton, and continued with my tap, jazz, and company classes at Chiampa. By the time my recitals came around, I was performing over twelve different dances and had over five different costumes. Trying to remember every single step, to the correct songs. Not confusing the choreography of two different songs. This is when I was most challenged by dance; I was at my peak in my career. I was at the point in time where everything felt perfect. I was taking the right amount of dance classes at all the right studios. And I got to experience the amazingly wonderful feeling of being on stage and my body taking over in more than one recital. Little did I know, this would all end soon.

The next summer proved to be a hard one for me. I was at Camp Merrowvista for a three-week adventure program. This consisted of a one-night canoe trip, and a two-night hiking trip. While on the hiking trip I noticed that my knees were hurting. I had never had this problem before; the pain was new and foreign to me. I kept on getting the feeling that my knees were locking up randomly. I was in pain, but I did not think anything of it. I thought that it was normal to have knee pain while hiking. When I got home from camp I found out that I had a growth spurt in the three weeks that I was away from home. For the rest of the summer, my knees only bothered me when I was running or dancing.

Once the school year started, so did my physical therapy appointments. Three days a week. I was told that I had Patella Tendonitis. This was not the correct diagnosis. About three months later, I transferred to a new physical therapist. This time, he had more experience and I had hope for my knees. My left knee stopped bothering me, but my right knee kept on pushing on. After a few x-rays and an MRI, the doctors decided that the only way to figure out what was wrong with my knee was to perform surgery. Three weeks later I was in Beverly Hospital, preparing for my surgery. When I woke up about two hours later, my knee was swollen to about twice its size and four stitches that were covering up the two incisions from the knife. The doctor then told me that he had performed an arthroscopic surgery. He had made two very small incisions, and had inserted a camera into one, and surgical tools into the other. He told me that he removed an extra tissue from my right knee called Plica. I was pain free for about three months, and I have not experienced that since then. The surgery did not solve any of my knee issues; it just created scar tissue, which has led to more problems. In June of 2008, not only did my knee pain in my right knee come back, but the pain in my left knee returned as well.

From this point on I had to cut down on my dance classes and the list of things that I could physically do just kept on getting shorter and shorter. And now I have gotten to the point that I cannot even sit, let alone walk or dance, without being in pain. But I try not to let this severe pain stop me from doing the things that I really love and that I really want to do. I continued to push through rigorous dance classes, and just tried to cope with the pain. Freshman year I decided to join the wrestling team. This was the worst decision that I could have made for my body, because two weeks into the season I injured my left foot. My friend landed on it weirdly during practice while we were doing wrestling drills. The next week I went to the doctor, after two MRI's and an x-ray, I found out that I had severely bruised almost every bone in my left foot, and sprained almost every ligament in the mid section of my foot. This was absolutely devastating. This meant that I was going to be put into a boot, and that I would not be able to dance, or ski for at least the next six weeks. Even though I was in the boot, I did not completely follow all the rules. I performed in my dance company's winter show. I performed in five dances, two of which were solos, and another two were over seven minutes long. Because

of this decision, I had to stay in the boot for an extra five weeks. This meant that I missed two ski trips and over two months of dance. Injuring my foot was the end of my pointe career. This was the hardest part of my injury for me to deal with. This is because for the past five years pointe had always been my favorite dance class. When I was a little girl I remember going to see *The Nutcracker* and different ballets. They were always the most exciting events in my year. How magical the prima ballerina's looked up there on the stage. It all amazed me. The way that they glided across the stage almost effortlessly. The perfect costumes. How they were the one in the spotlight. The most amazing part was that they danced the entire ballet on their toes. When I learned that I could dance like them it was surreal to me. Dancing on pointe has been one of the most painful and tiring things that I have ever done in my dance career, but every minute of it was worth it. Pointe looks absolutely amazing from the audience. It is not only exhilarating to watch, but also to do. Since I got this injury I have been in severe pain twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

This was just the beginning of my ridiculously long struggle with my knees, and my left foot. So far I have learned how to deal with them in my every day life. But I can no longer do what I love and have become dependent on. I cannot run, which means no sports. When I dance or ski, I am in severe pain. Even when I walk I am in pain. My pain never leaves me; it will be within my knees and foot forever. Some days they are worse than others, such as when it is rainy or cold outside. But the worst thing about all of this is that there is a way for me to fix my knees. But what sounds to be so simple proves to be much bigger than a simple little fix. This would involve cutting my tibias, moving them, and then reattaching them with screws. It would involve moving around muscles and ligaments. But most of all it would involve giving up dance for six months to eighteen months. I am not willing to do this. I love dance with every fiber in my soul, if I had to give it up for even three more months I would go crazy. My body needs to dance. Dance is how I express myself. It is what my body needs to do in order for my mind to be satisfied.

This decision would be a major decision in my life. It would be life-changing. This surgery would mean that I would be pain free in my knees. It would mean that I could dance all that I want. It would mean that I would be able to ski a full day without being in severe pain the entire time. It would mean that I could live the life I used to live. But in order to get this perfect life, I would have to give up everything that I have worked for my entire life, for at least eight months. Even if I did decide to have this major surgery, I would still be in pain one hundred percent of the time. There is no way to fix my left foot or to cure the pain. It is something that I will have to live with forever. It is a chronic injury.

Even though I am in severe pain all the time, I do not let that stop me from doing what I love and what my body needs to do. This past fall I took an advanced dance class at Mariana's Dancing in Ipswich, Massachusetts. The recital will be one that I will never forget....

I am walking into the gym of the Ipswich Town Hall, about to perform in front of a completely sold out show. Not only will I do this tonight, I will do this again tomorrow night. This is exactly what I need right now. I love everyone that I dance with and I cannot wait to be able to do my first performance with them. Not only am I with these amazing dancers, but two of my cousins are also in the recital. Lots of my family members are here to see this show. So I must put on a really great performance. Our first two numbers are both lyrical numbers, and they go really well. We work great together as a group. It is not time for the last number of the show, the closing piece. Kill the Lights. "Our very own pop princess, and now queen has a special announcement she would like to make." Britney Spears fills the room. My hair is down

and straight; I have lots of stage make-up on; black romper with gold piping. And the dance begins. My body takes control over my mind. “Mr. Photographer, I think I’m ready for my close-up, Tonight, make sure you catch me from my good side.” The room is filled with the music, lights, and the seven members of level five dancing on the stage. I am barefoot, yet I am doing a hip-hop dance. This is strange to me, but I like it. I love it. I am dancing across the stage, body over mind. My love for dance is overpowering the severe pain that I am feeling in my left foot and both of my knees. The dance is over, and the crowd breaks out in applause.

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