

The Last Class

The pain was excruciating. I dropped to the floor and untied the long satin ribbons of my pointe shoes. The toes of my pale pink tights were stained with blood. I massaged the joints, avoiding the just-healing blisters from last class.

'Jack-kew-liiiiiiiin!' Miss Millicent shrieked, ending the word on a piercing note. I vowed to shorten my name. 'Get up! Get back there!' she commanded.

I looked at the shoes I used to love so much. The flesh-pink satin stared back cruelly. Treacherously, it seemed now. The shoes had lost the enchanting sheen that caused me to spend hours daydreaming, trying them on, lost in their perfection as I admired my rather large feet in the mirror, transformed into magical creatures that promised to perform the ballet movements with grace. My mother had darned the toes so carefully, sewing till two in the morning with her glasses on the end of her nose, scrutinizing her work, making sure each stitch was perfect. I fought back tears and put them on again, crisscrossing the ribbons with slow deliberation.

Miss Millicent made her way towards me, shaking the floor with each heavy step. Years later, when I read the word 'blowsy' somewhere, I thought of her. Middle-aged and lumpily overweight, she had hastily applied red lipstick, Gary Larson-style winged glasses, permed hair that always seemed to make its wispy way wherever it liked, and always a shapeless floral frock in some nondescript pattern. She was the antithesis of the elegance and beauty I longed to find in ballet. As I pulled myself up with the help of the *barre* I watched with relief as she detoured. The music seemed deafening, the smell of face powder and floral scent nauseating.

Every part of my psyche yearned to pirouette smoothly, my tiny waist accented by a tutu with a beaded bodice. But the other girls, petite and rounded, had feet that curved naturally into the graceful shape I admired so much in *Princess* magazine. Mine stretched out too straight, obstinately angular. Together with my knobby knees and tall gawkiness they conspired against my dreams of ethereal beauty. Instead, I was always a boy in end-of-year recitals.

Six years later I'd be proud of the long legs, the cheekbones that began a modelling career. But the mirrored walls mocked me now with the sight of a bony adolescent, tears streaking her face with newly discovered mascara.

I never imagined this torture when the renowned ballet school accepted me. Every Saturday I caught two trains to class, swinging my ballet case as I walked the last stretch. I'd practise twice a week at home, catching glimpses of my little sisters hovering behind the curtains.

That was all forgotten now as I gingerly placed my feet in position and willed myself onto the points of my toes. Then, suddenly... nothing. I came to on the cold wooden floor, the other girls clustered round and Miss Millicent commanding them to give me air.

I half crawled, half hobbled to the change room and packed the shoes carefully into the ballet case. The tights and leotard, the headband, into the compartments for the last time. As I clipped the lid of the case shut, its ballerina transfer seemed to glisten, grinning in triumph.

I limped up Chapel Street, onto the train, and buried my humiliation in a book.

When I got home I covered the ballerina with a Beatles transfer. The magenta and black rectangle left no trace of the dainty figure. My passion for fairy tales - gone. Now it was time for the real world, the sweat and exuberance of rock'n'roll.

