

The Girl sits at her desk after dinner, staring at the eggshell white wall. Her parents have more important things to do than match colors, so the house remains void of expression. The Calculus textbook remains open, taunting her with problems filled with more letters than numbers. Her right hand aimlessly twirls her pencil, as she forces her feet not to take the fifth position. The pencil drops. She picks it up.

"How was your day, sweetie?"

"Fine." She snorts, remembering her mother's inane questions. What's there to be curious about?

"Did you learn anything interesting?"

"Yeah. We learned that light has properties of both waves and particles."

"Fascinating."

Yes, Physics can be a lovely distraction. But its allure is short-lived. As soon as each period of brain-cramming is over the pressure returns, ever so politely crushing her heart and thickening her throat. Each day, she must force her confine to the slow, forward tread that seems normal to most people. Hah! They find it normal to have toes facing front, not the side, without the countless blisters, bruises, and callouses that are the marks of a dancer. Battle scars. Hers are faint now.

In gym class, the teacher screams, "Pick up the pace! Push through the pain!" as the class now slogs around another track. This she knows. How many times as she forced sore muscles to perform impossible feats, to squeeze one last inch of turnout from aching hips? This is easy. Running = extreme lack of artistry, methodical repeated movement. But it'll do. She would go crazy if she couldn't exercise. Only problem is the generous amount of brain space left for thinking. In dance, you can't think about anything else. It is all-consuming. It pulls you under and lifts you up. You become the music. You can't fight it. Your soul doesn't belong to you anymore.

One day, as calmly as if they were chopping carrots, her parents delivered the news that she was to quit dance. Cold turkey, no argument. Ballet, jazz, tap, modern, swing, ballroom. It all had to go. School was 'too important' for her to be distracted.

"You're bright. We're proud of you. That's why we want you to do this. We think you might be able to get a scholarship if you worked a little harder." Apparently hours in a dance studio, sweating profusely, and the fact that her grades were still decent, didn't count.

She had nothing to say to that. She still doesn't.

She sits at a table at lunch, with her friends. She is almost normal here, smiling and laughing, trying to scarf down some food in the insanely short lunch period. The girl next to her offers an earbud. She accepts warily. Music can be dangerous, but then again she can't let anyone know that. Amy Lee's aching croon fills her ear. *This is not good.* This music is all kinds of dangerous, the very worst. It worms its way into her gut, casting a net of hurt around her heart. "And all I feel is this cruel wanting"

A twisted, ugly smirk that bears little resemblance to her true smile appears. Why, yes, that perfectly describes the agony piercing her soul. She files the song, "Lost in Paradise" away into her head as one to avoid. Some reminders she can deal with. Others consume her.

For instance, she lets the music from the band room, the break dancers on the street, even the aerobics classes she passes on the way to school reach her. She needs reminders like these. Much as the ache is slowly killing her, she needs it. Without it, what is there to remind her of dance?

And so she doesn't run away, doesn't push down the hurt, and simply lets it fill her. *I hope one day it crushes me, and it will end.*

After her homework is finished, she sits on the beige couch. The TV looks inviting, and so she grabs the remote and presses the green button. The image is sharp and clear, until she sees the subject. Figure skating. 2014 Sochi Olympics. She forgot. Tears blur her vision. Even here, it attacks. The girl glides and twirls on-screen, arms moving in a mock semblance of dancing. Up, turn thrice, and land on a skinny metal blade. Dress almost without a skirt hugs her figure, sleeves wafting as she moves.

She takes a deep breath. *Look at the dress, look at the dress.* It's rather pretty, actually. The color of bluebells, cut high in front with a low back. The bottom of the 'skirt' is darker, and

it lightens up to almost white at her throat. The music is standard, Tchaikovsky. Oh. This isn't dancing. At least, she's doing a very poor job of it if she's trying to convey even a speck of emotion. The main point of this is the spins and jumps and tricks. It's completely physical, not emotional.

She settles back, finding she can bear to watch this. When the routine ends, she claps mockingly. "Brava." Without her noticing, her legs have folded, knees splayed past the ranges of normal flexibility. Fists clenched, she precisely extends them and conforms them into the standard ninety-degree angle. Without a sound, her chest spasms. She's gone for the next two hours.

When she wakes, her mother is asking her about the next school dance. Of course, these are still allowed. Her parents deem that 'part of the necessary high school experiences' list. These offer scant relief. Jumping up and down isn't dancing. It is expressionless, these people are robots, *what am I doing here, I am trapped...trapped....*

I can't do this any more. Something inside snaps. Put on the sparkly purple tank top from two birthdays ago. Slide leggings, soft and flexible onto legs that tingle with familiarity. Loose pajamas go over. Be careful to cover the sparkles. Walk down the stairs, forcing feet on fire to amble with the laziness of a cool stream. Say goodnight. At least I don't have to fake the smile. Go back up the stairs with the same torturous slowness. Sneak out the window, down the fire escape. Start running.

The one underage club I know, heard about from parties at school, is a short tube ride away, or a twenty-minute run. I don't have the time to run.

Ease the window-pane open, and when I jump over toes point deliciously-- oh how *good* this feels!-- anticipating the landing and cushioning it with a *plié*. The rusty metal looks somewhat precarious, but I don't care. Sneak down--be careful! Lets GO!

The club is crowded. Splendid, no one will see. The music thuds, pounding in my head, in the floor, everywhere. I let it call me home.

The Girl is lost among sweaty, gyrating bodies. Her soul is swept away on the swell of

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sound. Her heart is filled with an incredible pleasure bordering on pain, threatening to burst it.
She dances.