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Autobiographical Essay

It had been a grueling three weeks, and I thought that this particular day would be no different. It was the highly prestigious Joffrey South Ballet Intensive, and in two days, every one of us twenty-two dancers, from all over the world, would be heading our separate ways. For now though, all of our energy was focused on the upcoming performance and technique class, but my energy would soon be challenged in an unforeseen way.

As for this particular morning, July 5th, my walk to the sunlight-filled, high-ceilinged studio (complete with ipod and banana in hand) was particularly hot and humid. The twenty-one of us slender girls, and one not-yet-hit-maturity boy, found our energy dwindling, and no amount of coffee could cure our tired and aching bodies. The eight-hour dancing days had caught up with us, but no one could have been happier; the improvement in one's mind, work, and body was all the reward needed. Whenever someone reminded us that it was our beloved teacher, Roberto Campanella's last day, we all groaned and simply told him to "shut up." The conversation was repeated over and over again throughout the morning, but once we arrived at the studio, all was forgotten and the work ahead became our sole priority.

Our 9:30 a.m. class began with the ever-inspirational Valerie Madonia, former star at all the national and world-renowned ballet companies. This kind and gentle woman was the dictionary definition of ballerina -- composure, grace, and perfectly sculpted ballet body. The aura she gives out causes the sweat to flow more profusely, and

the simplest combination turns into a performance. As class began, and my muscles began to oil and organize, Roberto entered the studio predictably with coffee and a baseball cap. He sat down not but a few feet from me and began to watch. The former National Ballet of Canada dancer, and current director of ProArte Danza in Toronto, consistently smelled of tobacco, and the smell that hovered around him was no different on this day, but he did hold a different air of mystery. He noticed that I was aware of him sitting there and quietly asked if he could speak to me after class. I immediately turned on the switch in my brain and body to performance mode. I did not know what he wanted to speak to me about, but if a company director asks to speak with you, it is normally of great consequence, whether it is good or bad, and only time will tell the outcome.

The next two hours in class were both a blessing and a curse. The rest of technique class and the partnering class (where a man and woman dance together) were pure hard work – but pure joy. As I was working and wracking my brain to concentrate, the billboard in my head kept flashing with the question, “What does he want to speak to ME for?” The combinations kept coming, one after another, causing my impatient self to want to explode. The classes were an adventure, and basically I think God wanted to put me through pure torture by making those two hours pass by painfully slowly.

Unsure of how to approach Roberto, I waited for everyone to leave the studio and head to lunch. A little embarrassed at telling my friends to go ahead without me, I stuck back and quietly approached him. He pulled me outside the studio and began his speech. A cloud began to form in my brain, and I felt like I could not grasp his words. While you would think that it was the Italian accent that was throwing me off, it was merely the words that were coming out of his mouth. My brain was playing tricks on me. I was

dreaming. All I could catch of these stunning words were “Toronto. ProArte Danza. Today is Thursday, rehearsals start on Monday, and we want you to be there.”

As the cloud in my brain began to diffuse, the words finally hit me like a ton of bricks: I was being invited to work with a company! I felt like my life had changed in this one instant. I was no longer just a student dreaming of one day being offered a chance to work with a company, now I had finally had an offer! It would only be three weeks long, but it would give me exposure to the dance world on a whole new level. So many things flashed through my brain at that one moment, and all I wanted to do was jump for joy, cry out of happiness, and scream with delight. I tried to hold all of it in and act as composed as I could while Roberto finished telling me all the details of the program. Any amount of exhaustion that I had been feeling earlier in the day was now completely gone, and the strength that it took me to stand on the cold cement almost knocked me over.

After we finished talking, I quickly gathered my sweaty warm-ups, broken down pointe shoes, and tattered old dance bag, and jogged towards the coffee shop where I was supposed to meet one of my fellow dancers. As I headed toward the shop, I called home and explained everything to my mom. I could hear the cracking in her proud voice, telling me that she was crying out of pure joy and sadness, for this was her little girl growing up. She immediately called my dad and gave me the okay to go. Everything seemed to line up perfectly. I would finish the end of my three weeks at the Joffrey and start a whole new experience in Toronto. It was literally too good to be true.

After everything seemed to be squared away, we noticed the small glitch in the plan, a glitch that would quickly blow out the candle of these dreams. I had no passport. The opportunity was a no go. It was just that simple. It was too short notice to get one in

time, even with my brother's pull as a worker for the government. It was impossible. We tried to find every way around it possible, but it was no good. The realization of my dreams would have to wait awhile longer.

After lunch, we all headed to the theater to get ready for rehearsal. Being dancers, we all got there incredibly early to stretch and let our muscles rest before the next body-abusing hours. I was feeling incredibly drained and disappointed. I sat in the dark musty smelling theater and tried so incredibly hard not to cry. I distracted myself by sewing the ribbons and elastics onto my new pointe shoes, but it was hard to even get the needle threaded because of the puddles forming in my eyes, blurring all possible vision. The sewing was not necessary, I already had a perfect pair of sewn shoes ready to wear, but I needed a distraction. My diversion worked for while, but the disappointment was too strong to keep stored inside of me. I did not want all the girls to see me as "weak," and I tried to put on a good face, but there was nothing stopping the flow of tears. I quickly excused myself to the bathroom where I tried, with no avail, to look "normal." I splashed the cold water on my face, and put on a happy facade.

I quickly resumed my position in the theater, on the floor with the soles of my feet together, pointe shoes in hand to once again, trying to sew. My crutch and partner in crime over the weeks, Ashton, immediately noticed the tension I was holding back, and tried with admirable effort to console me. It was no use though. The idea of going home and giving up this opportunity nearly broke my heart. Some would say that other opportunities will present themselves, but I just did not understand why this one had to be taken away before it had even started.

As everyone began to get in the final stages of re-warming up and stretching, Valerie arrived at the theater, and being the friend and mentor that she is to me, she quickly noticed the tears welling up and pulled me aside.

I have known Valerie for nearly five years now, and we have become quite close. She understands my way of working, and seems to understand my dancing more than I do. If anyone could inspire me and bring me to terms with reality, it would be this wise woman.

“Do you need to talk?”

She forced nothing out of me. She simply invited the opportunity and let me know she was there to listen. Of course she already knew about Roberto asking me to go to Canada, but I filled her in on the restriction and disappointment. I was a little embarrassed at first, as it was hard to get any words out through the gasping in my throat, but she simply offered her solace and a shoulder to cry on. The conversation was, and will forever, remain vivid and dear to my heart.

“Be thankful that it happened. It was a great opportunity and a compliment to even be asked. “

She helped me come to terms with my own disappointment and see the good in the situation. I felt that composure was no longer such a struggle, but my energy level was down, and I still had three hours of rehearsal to go.

I could tell that Valerie felt my anguish, but she knew the remedy better than I did. She had the rehearsal begin with my solo. It was a variation that she had created for herself and later staged it on me. Not only is it like a little gift; I feel that that solo has captured a little piece of me. I was empty and spent, with seemingly nothing left to give,

but there was the solo waiting for me. I was able to stop crying but still felt a pang of disappointment hovering in my chest, and here I was faced with the struggle of performing a four-minute whirlwind of coyness and wit. I had never felt further from coyness and wit.

I assumed my position on the tree-lighted stage and took a deep breath. The task seemed impossible, but then the music began.

The Bach violin sounded throughout the theater and the dance took over me. I felt completely in and out of my body at the same time. It was as if I could hear a voice in my head saying “Here I am, and this is what I do. I may not be able to go to Canada, but I am on this stage where no one can touch me.” The four minutes flew by and were pure pleasure. My feet were moving in tune with the music, quick and youthful, and my upper body seemed as if it were in Heaven. I felt like myself again, and I could not stop smiling. My energy came to me in a quick burst, and I finished the solo. I had accomplished it. I had conquered my feelings and returned to what was truly important to me. All the dancers’ eyes were fixed on me, and I felt as if I were a child, pleasing its mother with a newly painted picture.

I quietly bowed and ran offstage. There was Valerie waiting for me, calm and still. She was satisfied. She did not say a word, just a smile and it was back to business. She gave me my corrections and we moved on to the next dances. I knew she was pleased and proud, but there was no need to say it. She had helped me find myself and that was enough.

Though the solo was over, the air around me had changed and there was an understanding. Only a few of the girls who had just watched knew anything about my

struggle that day, but they all saw a difference in me. Their smiles of encouragement and love showed that they had enjoyed what I had just “created.” Dancing was not meant for Canada. It was meant for myself and now, and if I can share that with people, that is all that matters.

I went to bed that night, more tired than I had any other day of my life, but also more fulfilled. Now, months later, I no longer just see the accomplishment of pushing through disappointment and succeeding, but I see it as a day that I can be proud of. Not only was I given a great opportunity, I became fully aware that it is possible to achieve your dreams. Things will happen when the time is right, but that does not mean you cannot be given a taste of accomplishment.

A taste can turn into a mouthful before you know it, and often unexpectedly. About two months after this crazy day, I received an email from Roberto, stating that another opportunity may present itself, soon. And this time...I will have a passport.