

## Fissure

By Mona Leigh Rose

“Gotta brush my teeth!” Didi shouts through the door.

“Go away.” I dip a foot into the hot bath, hold it under as long as I can stand, then pull it back. I do the same with the other foot.

“Lemme in!” *Bam bam*. “I’m gonna tell Mom!”

“Go. A. Way.” I force myself to stand in the tub until the color drains from my legs, numb to the assault. Eight years I’ve pointed, plie’d, jeté’d across brightly-lit stages, labored every afternoon in the steamy studios. Warm water won’t do. The water must be hot, too hot, to make any difference. I lower my body by inches until only my head floats above the surface.

“Mom!” Didi says, voice fading down the hall. “Carrie’s hogging the bathroom again!”

“Again!” Madame D had said, her voice echoing through the theater.

Fouetté - attitude derriere - ballonné - ballonné - ballonné - entrechat - glissade - step - step - grand jeté.

Her cane struck the floor. “Again!”

Fouetté - attitude derriere - ballonné - ballonné - ballonné - entrechat - glissade - step - step - grand jeté.

The pianist stopped, the cane thrashed. “When, Caroleena? When do you stop dancing with that,” she jabbed a knobby finger at my temple, “and start dancing with this.” Her chin jutted toward the rigging above, the finger moved to her chest.

Friday night. My joints creak like an old woman, muscles ache like a marathon runner. Daily classes and rehearsals, en pointe, arms and legs sweeping gracefully but powerfully beyond their range of motion. Grace and power. Madame D demands it. Always, grace and power.

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The veins in Madame D’s neck strained against her ashy skin. “Damn it, girl! Stop thinking!”

The other dancers smiled into their shoulders. A few months ago they wouldn’t dare. Madame D plucked me out of another teacher’s class one day, presented me as her discovery. “My vunderkind,” she would say. A twelve year old with perfect technique, an object lesson in long limbs and sharp collarbones. A source of shame to the older girls, their dreams of dancing lead receded in direct proportion to the praise heaped upon my thin shoulders.

Now they can openly despise me. They gather in knots outside the rehearsal rooms, exclude me from their Diet Coke and rice cake lunches, turn their pale cheeks when I pass. In a stage voice -- always on stage these girls -- they whisper: “Vunderkind ain’t so vunderful.”

My toes float to the surface. Bloated, they look more like Easter hams than human digits. Forever raw, stripped of their nails, bitter. I trace a scratch in the porcelain tub with my big toe.

Madame D's cane lashed the sweaty air. "Again!"

Fouetté - attitude derriere - ballonné - ballonné - ballonné - entrechat - glissade - step- step - grand jeté.

"Angelah!" The older girl stepped to center stage. "You show her."

Angela swept across the floor. Her point was soft on the fouetté, her elbow bent on the glissade, her grand jeté fell short of the soaring music. But her soul melded into the notes, her passion filled the stage.

"Do you see? Sloppy, yes, but dance."

My toe catches in the porcelain, now more of a cleft than a scratch. I try to wedge it into the opening.

The pianist poised his fingers above the keys. With a nod he began. I closed my eyes, let the opening notes penetrate my skin, strike muscle, bounce off bone.

Fouetté - attitude derriere - ballonné - ballonné - ballonné - entrechat - glissade - step- step - grand jeté.

Silence. Madame D glared at me. I wiped the sweat from my eyes, shifted my weight left to right, left to right.

A fist pounds the door. "Carrie? Doubrovskia called. You lost the lead in Giselle?"

*Bam.* "Do you have any idea how much those lessons cost? The sacrifices I've made?"

My toe finds its grip, the cleft grows wider. I imagine the cool earth below. The darkness, the damp air, the quiet. The promise of rest.

“Carrie?” *Bam.* “Answer me!”

My head slips below the surface. I claw at the fissure with both hands.