

The Last Dance

When I first saw them, they were sitting in the window of an old thrift store, tucked between a chipped porcelain doll and a tarnished silver frame: a pair of pale pink ballet slippers. The ribbons were frayed but still attached, as if someone had slipped them off a dancer's feet just moments ago. I wasn't even looking for shoes. I don't dance. Yet something about those pretty little things made me go inside the store.

The lady behind the counter barely glanced at me as I brought the slippers to the counter. She put them in a box, slid them across to me and said something about no refunds. In retrospect, she watched me leave with a relieved sort of expression that should have clued me in that something was weird about those shoes. At the time, I barely paid her much attention. My gaze was completely taken up with the loveliness of the ballet slippers.

At home, I set them on my dresser and just stood there for a while, staring at them. That was when the strangeness of it hit me. The slippers were so tiny that they were clearly meant for a child. I'm a grown woman. Plus, I've never danced a step in my life. So why had I felt that tug outside the thrift shop? Why had I felt compelled to buy them? Why had I *wanted* these things so badly?

Up close, they looked even older. The satin had dulled to the colour of meat left out in the sun and the ribbons ragged in places where little fingers had clearly tugged them too tight once upon a time. A faint smell clung to them that I could not put a name to but which reminded me of the old folks' home my grandma went into at the end of her life: boiled cabbage, sweat and rosewater to try to cover up the smell.

I shook my head. "This is ridiculous. Clearly, I've had a small psychotic break or something." I had been under a lot of pressure at work lately – we had secured a high-profile contract and I was primed to be named team leader for it. The pressure was high and I had been pulling a lot of late nights. "Yeah, that's probably it. I should take a vacation when the contract is over."

I put the slippers back in the box and pushed it to the back of my closet where I wouldn't have to look at them and be reminded of my own folly. I told myself I'd just forget about the stupid purchase.

But that night, I dreamed of the slippers.

I was on a stage I had never seen before. The boards under my feet were buffed smooth from the tread of many feet. Out beyond the footlights, an audience sat in silence, their faces lost to the darkness. I started to panic – I didn't know the steps! Everyone was going to laugh at me! Then I felt the slippers cinch tighter on my feet, pulling my toes into unnatural pointes. They led me through the routine. With their help, I didn't miss a step. Gradually, the rhythm took me, pushing me faster and harder. I danced like I had never danced before. My ankles ached. My hands whirled. The stage-lights above burned hotter, searing my skin. My chest filled with something sharp-edged and unfamiliar: terror, perhaps, but shot through with an awful, giddy kind of joy that was not my own. Thoughts crowded my mind that I had not summoned. I was doing it! I was dancing! Momma would be so proud of me when I won first prize –

I jumped, landed and slewed hard to one side, feet skidding out from under me. I cried out as I fell, tumbling right over the edge of the stage. My head struck the ground first. I felt a sharp pain in my neck and heard a wet cracking noise. Then darkness swept over me.

I woke up with my sheets twisted around me. My chest heaved. My feet throbbed dully. I raised a hand instinctively to my neck, then wondered what I expected to feel there. It had just been a dream. Just a frighteningly realistic nightmare.

"I definitely need a vacation."

The next night, the dream came again. The stage was smaller this time, the shadows of the audience closer. The music pushed me into movements I didn't know, my body bending in ways that felt both graceful and wrong. I wanted to stop. The slippers' ribbons dug into my skin. I knew what was coming before it happened. When I fell off the stage, I closed my eyes in anticipation of the pain and sound of my own snapping neck.

By the third night, I didn't want to sleep at all. I stayed awake as long as I could, plying myself with strong coffee and energy drinks. I managed to stave off sleep until 4am, whereupon I crashed hard and fell asleep on the couch with Game of Thrones playing on the TV.

In the dream, I found myself already mid-performance. The slippers burned against the soles of my feet. I had more of a sense of self than I had the other times I had dreamed this nightmare, probably owing to all the caffeine in my system. I managed to stumble to a stop mid-pirouette and stood, legs akimbo, juddering with the effort it took not to segue into the next step of the routine. The slippers *pulsed* with the desire to continue.

"No," I gritted. "I won't do it again. I won't dance this way again. You can't make me."

You have to finish it. You have to.

A sudden flutter of white fabric in my peripheral vision broke my concentration long enough for the slippers to wrench my feet and send me over the edge of the stage. I thought I saw a pale face watching me fall.

I woke up screaming. Lord knows why my neighbours didn't call the cops. I live in a pretty nice neighbourhood but apparently even here nobody cares if a woman screams in the early hours of the morning. I leapt off the couch and immediately toppled onto my knees at the jolt of electric pain that ran from my feet up to my hips.

That's when I realised that the old pink ballet slippers weren't in my closet where I had left them. Somehow, impossibly, they were on my feet. My soles were bent in unnatural angles, my toes crunched together to fit into the pointes. The ribbons were tied so tight that the flesh of my calves bulged around them. My poor abused feet were bleeding through the satin. When I tried to stand, I couldn't. The slippers wouldn't let me.

I crawled toward the kitchen, nails scraping the floorboards, every movement sending sparks of agony through my legs. The slippers resisted, pulling my feet into agonisingly unnatural poses even as I fought to straighten them. It was like being puppeteered by something that didn't care about the actual capabilities of tendons or bone, only about the perfect shape. I felt something snap in my left foot and shrieked but the slippers did not relent.

By the time I reached the counter, my vision had started to swim. I clawed my way up, using drawer handles like I was a rock climber, and grabbed a knife from the butcher block. Blade acquired, I started sawing at the ribbons. The blade skidded over them like they were made of wire, instead slicing into my exposed and bulging calves. More of my own blood spilled onto the floor. Tears streaked down my face.

“What do you want from me? *What do you want from me?*”

I want to finish the dance. Then I can rest.

The knife slipped, plunging into my thigh. Red liquid spurted. I stared at it sticking out of me like the world’s worst plant-the-flag. I was dimly aware that you’re not supposed to pull knives out of deep wounds to stop yourself from bleeding out.

My vision dimmed. My nerveless fingers released the knife handle. The air around me shifted.

It was as if the kitchen ceiling peeled away and I was back on the stage from my dreams. The smell of dust and rosin filled my lungs. The audience was closer now, their pale faces gleaming in the dark, mouths slightly open, as if they were all holding the same slow breath. Maybe they knew what was coming too.

The slippers yanked me upright. I screamed as my ankles twisted under the force but my body obeyed. I was dancing again, faster this time. Every spin blurred the watchers into a ring of ivory masks. Their hands twitched in unison, fingers curling, flexing, almost clapping but not quite. Nobody applauds the death of the performer they’re watching.

I tried to stop like I did last time but the slippers wouldn’t let me. My body kept going long after the pain in my joints had faded into hollow numbness. My body was not my own anymore. My feet were wet inside the satin. Blood streaked from the wounds in my legs. The stage was slippery with it, yet I did not miss a step.

When the routine reached its peak, the audience leaned forward. All at once, they inhaled. It was a sound I felt more than heard, like the wind being pulled from the world itself. They waited to see whether I would make the jump this time or screw it up again. My sight blurred, probably from blood loss, but I could still see the outline of the stage edge rushing toward me.

The slippers dragged me into the final leap. I knew what came next. I’d lived it in the dreams. I’d die it for real this time. The stage skidded beneath my feet when I landed. There was the same dizzy weightlessness as before and the sick twist of the world turning sideways, then the inevitable tumble over the edge.

I hit the boards below with a bone-jarring crack.

Except ... it wasn’t my neck that broke.

I blinked from my seat in the front row of the audience. I had a perfect view of the body sprawled in front of me: a girl no older than eleven or twelve, her white dress bunched up where she had fallen. Her hair was pinned back in the severe style of a competition dancer. Her neck twisted at an impossible angle. The pink ballet slippers gleamed on her feet, shiny and new.

Her eyes met mine for a moment. Even though I knew she was dead, I somehow also knew that she could see me. She looked so sad that it made me want to rush to her side.

The stage lights went out.

I woke in a hospital bed. Paramedics had managed to save me from the self-inflicted wound in my thigh. Apparently, I had not hit the femoral artery but it had been close. One of my neighbours had heard me screaming and thought I was being attacked by a burglar, so he had come running and found me collapsed in my kitchen covered in blood. I was put on a psych hold for attempted suicide. Given the circumstances, I couldn't exactly argue. What was I going to say: *it wasn't me, it was the haunted ballet slippers trying to force me to finish the dance their previous owner never got to because she fucking died?* As if.

The slippers were missing from my apartment when I finally got out. I told myself they were gone for good. I didn't have to tell myself I was glad they were gone.

Life stumbled on: therapy appointments, grocery runs, polite smiles to neighbours who still looked at me a beat too long, as if wondering when I'd break and try to kill myself again. I didn't get made team lead on the big contract at work. I tried not to let it bother me. I tried to tell myself everyone was right and I had just had a real psychotic break from overwork, but I was all better now.

Heh. Yeah right.

A month later, I passed by the thrift store. The chipped porcelain doll and the tarnished silver frame were still in the window. Between them sat the slippers. The satin looked a little brighter now, the bows tied neatly, as though waiting for the next pair of feet.

I froze on the pavement, my chest tight. In the glass, I thought I saw, just for a heartbeat, a slim figure in a white dress, hair pulled back, chin lifted in perfect form. She looked so proud, so young - and so terribly alone.

I want to finish the dance. Then I can rest.

I almost went inside. Not because I wanted the slippers back – holy fuck *no* – but because, for that moment, I felt the ache behind her gaze. She hadn't been trying to kill me. She had just wanted to finish her dance and take her bow at last.

I blinked and the figure was gone. Only the slippers remained, still and patient under the dusty glass.

I walked away without looking back.

If you see a pair of old pink ballet slippers in a thrift store window? You'd better do the same.