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The Eight-Year-Old, Part 1

The New York School of Ballet

The noise and rushing current of Broadway disappear instantly once the old wooden door with its rattly glass window slams shut, sealing out the brilliantly sunny Saturday morning and crowds of Upper West Siders bustling about on their weekend errands. Inside, everything is gray-scale, muted, dusty, and chilly. A wide staircase leads straight up, enormously high and steep. At the top, far above the comforting familiarity of the sidewalk below, there's faded lettering on the door to the right: New York School of Ballet.

Through that door, a long hallway lined with pew-like wooden benches is softened by a big fluffy white dog lying in a pile on the bare floor, acting as foot rest and greeter. The air is hazy and musty, carrying a cold, sweaty stale smell, possibly left over from the generations of dancers before. Rows of ancient metal lockers fill a dressing room that is unlit, unkempt, uncleaned—and unused? Three doors along the hall open to cavernous studios with ceilings two stories high, so big their corners disappear into shadows, empty and forgotten. Rosin dust covers everything. Young children, talking excitedly, bring life to this museum that is the space itself. Their purple leotards are the only color in this movie.

To an eight-year-old, especially one there for the first time, the New York School of Ballet was confusing. Crowded into the big hallway cum lobby, there were certainly a lot of young children who looked like they were there for ballet class, but then there were also all these adults around—clearly dancers, real ones—who looked as old as parents, though they were, probably, late teenagers.

The procedures and expectations were confusing, too, especially to a timid, play-by-the-rules little girl, self-conscious, and terrified of doing something wrong. The laid-back attitude of the friendly (and gorgeously tall and glamorous) woman behind the front desk made it all more stressful, not less—was the handwritten ledger book an attendance sheet? If each page was a class, where was the eight-year-old's name? Why did the glamorous woman say it didn't matter and to go in anyway? The butterflies in the young girl's stomach made her yearn to follow her parents' shadows back down to the comforting warmth of their weekend routine of coffee and the newspaper in a nearby diner.

Most confusing of all was where to go and what to do. Nobody pointed the new student to the right studio. Wanting to get away from the crowd of loud grown-ups milling about by the entrance, she wandered down the hall to an almost-hidden studio that felt the safest—the most private, way down there almost out the back door. She could slip in unnoticed and blend in with the bunch of kids already there. *Just pretend to know where you belong*, she thought to herself.

Pretending soon became everything. Pretend to know where to stand, since the other children were already confidently lined up at the barre (which, she came to learn, was the proper name for the wooden railing bracketed to the walls), and obviously she should fit in there somehow, too. A woman strolled in with coffee cup in hand, her casualness only adding to the eight-year-old's anxiety: was this the teacher? Apparently so, since suddenly, without preface or introduction, or recognition of the terrified little mouse squeezed into line, she began to call out the names of steps and cued the music to begin. Pretend to know what the words mean, what the steps are; copy the girls on either side, mimic and shadow whatever they do. Play follow-along, but never think of speaking up—don't ask a question; they'll know you made a mistake—just stay quiet

and hope no one notices. Blend in so you won't stand out, even though, as usual, trying to blend in makes you noticeable.

No one's being mean, so why so intimidated? Why so scared? Scared of what? Scared of being wrong, even if only because of others' benign oversights.

An hour of confused stumbling passed, and abruptly, class was over. The teacher caught the young little mouse, hanging back from the crowd of veteran ballet students rushing in a flurry for the door, finally allowed to resume their chatter. *How old are you? Eight. Aha—I think you're in the wrong class—have you ever taken ballet before? No. Oh, no wonder! But you know, it's fine—you kept up so well, and you'll catch up to everyone else quickly. Just stay here in this class, and come again next week.*

What? I kept up well? How is that possible? All I did was flail and vaguely mimic the fast-moving girls around me! How can I catch up to the middle when I don't even know where the beginning was?

So it began. A lifetime—a ballet lifetime—that started off without a beginning but with a mandate to pretend that there had been one. Entering the race two laps past the starting line, hoping no one would notice.

Could it be done?