



Swan Lake's Got Nothing on this Suicide

SADIE WRIGHT

In this impassioned personal narrative, Sadie Wright reflects on the bitter disappointment of a dancing career cut short by injury and abuse. She implores other aspiring ballet dancers to stand up for their rights as students and performers. This essay was written for Writing I with Dr. Ben Wetherbee.

I WAS THREE WHEN MY MOM signed me up for my first ballet lesson. We lived in Chickasha, a small town in southwest Oklahoma, which had only one of every business: one hardware store, one diner, one bowling alley, and one dance studio. I don't remember much of the studio beyond it being small, with green trim and a barre we never used. After each recital, we'd start thinking about the next one, or if we were doing a holiday dance, we'd focus on that first. I never had any complaints, but my mom did. A year before we moved, she started complaining that none of the older kids had their recital dances memorized. She had other things to complain about, too: Why weren't we being taught on the barre during ballet? Why aren't we being taught how to stretch? And so on. And now that I look back, she was right. The more I learned about a real ballet class, the more I learned I was missing out on.

This whole thing wouldn't have happened if my uncle hadn't drunk himself into a coma. I won't go into much detail beyond that. My family consisted of me, Mom, Gramma, my aunt, her husband, their two sons, and my uncle, who was now in the hospital. Supposedly, he had married a woman from Russia and had a son with her, but I don't remember much of them. The divorce happened and she took off, taking the kid with her. I guess that's what started the drinking, and since my family was so small, my mom decided we'd move across the state to be with them and help. We figured we'd move into his condo until he was released and look after his cats, and with the move came a new dance studio.

The only reason I was put into Advanced Ballet for Teens was the experience I had. I believe it was upwards of seven years at that point. There was no audition to see my talent. No interviews. This was simply a small suburb studio focused on grilling dancers, actors, and singers into tip-top shape to produce talents like Miss Oklahoma, Miss Teen Oklahoma, and several famous ballerinas and Broadway stars. My teacher for this class was just a retired dancer. I didn't learn too much about her previous careers. She had me come into class the first day and put me right on the barre, expecting two things out of me: one, that I knew what barre was, and two, that I knew left from right. She was very, very wrong. And she continued to be wrong for that whole season. It wasn't until the next season, after a recital that proved that I was willing to learn and progress (specifically on the difference of left from right), that I was put into Intermediate Ballet. The dress code became stricter.

The two teachers I had both came from Tulsa Ballet. One was retired and, during her career, had also danced in the Royal Opera House, the New York City Ballet, the American Ballet Theatre, and several Russian companies I forget the names of. She specialized in the Bolshoi style, a type of midcentury ballet developed and popularized in the early twentieth century by a Russian company that focused on the line of the dancer's body from the audience's perspective. Her name was Sher'ron, and she was probably the best

ballet master I ever had. She was loving, but she knew when to push us to our limits. Then she pushed us further, like she saw us as her babies and wanted us to swim in the slightly deeper side of the pool.

My other teacher was a man. I had never had a male teacher before, so it was odd at first. He currently worked at Tulsa Ballet, and expected that level of quality out of us. Even I expected that kind of quality out of us, but for some reason I had been stuck in the class full of the competitive team members. We, as a whole, did not put out that kind of quality. I assume, however, that he saw something different from me. He always seemed to smile slightly at me when he taught, whereas he hardly even gave a sniff to the other dancers. Strangely enough, as little as he liked my fellow classmates, they hated him more. They complained about what they saw as physical abuse: the times where he'd hold dancers' knees out to make them turn out more, the way he'd abruptly push our butts in to align our cores, the way he'd push on our arms to see if we were engaging our biceps. I only saw it as what a dance teacher does. We were moving up into the big leagues, anyway. We had connections to some of the biggest companies in the world. If this is what they did in the Tulsa Ballet, we should be thankful that he's giving us this experience. And I continued to think like that for three more years, all the way up into my freshman year of high school. But after what happened that year, the more I tell this story and hear similar ones to it, the more I realize my classmates were right. There were warning signs, red flags even, that should have told me I was a target, not a star pupil. My classmates said he was rude, but I was so stubborn in my plan to climb to the top that I ignored them straight to my own demise.

I had decided I wanted to work at Tulsa Ballet for my career. I had progressed so much since I joined the company that I had found new love for ballet. After consulting with my teachers, I decided that the only thing stopping me from acing an audition was my lack of flexibility. So, I stretched and stretched, progressed and progressed, and eventually plateaued hard.

One night, we were at the barre, and it was late. Or at least it felt late. I remember that it was winter, and we were mostly through barre, so it was dark. There was no more sunset shining through the glass door to the studio. We were with the male teacher again, and he had recently earned himself an injury in the studio, so he wasn't in a good mood. He yelled at us excessively that night, which weighed on the class's conscience and worsened our performance. This, of course, earned us more yelling. He showed us the next combination, which included some slow extensions of the legs and some funky half-turns at the barre. I specifically remember him saying we had to hold our legs up at least ninety degrees. "Great," I thought. "I can definitely do that now, even though I'm sore." And I did; I struggled, but I did, in fact, hold my legs up at ninety degrees—even my left leg, which I had struggled with my whole career. But it was those final eight counts on the left side that ended everything.

I don't remember it clearly because it hurt. He was walking around the class critiquing harshly, per the norm. When he reached my spot at the barre, he stopped, looked at me in what I can only describe as disappointed disgust, and asked, "Why can't you get your leg up any higher? I've seen you do it before." Then he grabbed my ankle and yanked my leg up. Now, in ballet, there is a specific way you stretch a dancer's leg; the easiest way to describe it is out and over, like you're drawing an arch in the air with her toes. The way my teacher stretched my leg was in a straight-up motion from the bottom of my ankle towards the ceiling, like an elevator. He held my ankle by my ear, and the force of his shove threw my core off center. I stumbled and ungracefully gripped the barre as he held my leg. My knee popped out of place, and my hamstring gave out. I stood there for those final eight counts in pain, with a dislocated knee and a torn hamstring. Then he dropped my leg carelessly, as if he couldn't care less about the new popping my knee made as it relocated back together.

I wish I had more details beyond that. I really don't; it all passed in a blur of key points. I sat out center that class. Sher'ron noticed

loud pops from my left knee in otherwise routine movements. I wasn't as flexible anymore. I started using momentum to get the injured leg up by my ear in that year's recital piece. My doctor told me that I must have torn my meniscus. Somehow, I ended up in physical therapy. After that, I tried to dance again for a month or so in the summer like normal, but it didn't happen. The next school year I started using the elevator at school. My mom withdrew me from dance classes. I gained weight and developed depression, and sometime later, I found myself in painting classes. Eventually I decided to go to college for art education.

But here's the thing: I've settled for a second-rate career because I can't afford the surgery I need to continue dancing. If I was so set on getting into the ballet world, why didn't I sue him? Everyone I tell this story to says I should have. A meniscus doesn't heal; once it's torn, it's torn, and the only full recovery you can get is having a synthetic one put in. I could have used that money for the surgery I needed and still be scraping up money and coupons for pointe shoes. The simple answer is because I was depressed. I had my identity taken from me. College wasn't an option when the money everyone else was saving for it was going towards my pointe shoes, toe tape, and anything besides pedicures. Sadly, this is common in the dance world. If you are a dancer and you feel a connection to what you've read, know that you don't have to take the abuse. Know that you have the right, as a student, to speak up and say that you fear for your safety as a dancer. You are the future of ballet. If we let this keep happening, there will be no more *Nutcracker* at Christmas. No more *Swan Lake* for your wedding anniversary. No more *Don Quixote* for your son's sixteenth birthday. The living arts will simply die ironically, ungracefully, in a performance so grotesque that it puts the suicide of Odette to shame. ►►