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Burden

Ashley Wurzbacher

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BURDEN

38 For Laura, Little Bean would have been a burden too heavy to bear. If she had been allowed to grow, she (because Bean would've been a she, Laura was sure) would not have stayed a bean forever. She would have blown Laura up like a balloon and weighed her down. She would have kept Laura off the stage, probably forever. She would have tied Laura down—Laura who, since first leaving her home in southern Maine, had lived in four cities and danced professionally with three companies, and who meant to go on floating. Bean would have relegated Laura from the blue glow of center-stage spotlights to the fluorescent smog of grocery-store lighting, demoted her movements from the studied grace of Giselle to the shuffling of flip-flops down Wal-Mart aisles in a quest for those materials necessary for tending to another's most inglorious bodily functions. Laura's own body existed continually under so much stress that it was eleven weeks before she realized Bean was part of it at all, twelve before she'd had her syringed away. The decision was quick—a reflex, really: spare herself a burden, spare the bean a body and a name.

What was a body, anyway? Little Bean would have grown tall and lanky, like Laura. She would have grown dull rainwater hair and tripped over her own feet. It would have taken years of cursing her gangly form and training it—begging it—to grow out of its long-limbed awkwardness. If she were lucky, she would've learned, like Laura, how to move her body thoughtfully and deliberately, as if she were writing poems in the air. Only if she were lucky would she have learned, eventually, where to be stiff and where to be loose, when to harden, when to soften. It would have taken time and practice and pain, a bit of instinct coupled with a stroke of good luck, for her to have mastered the movement of her limbs, down to her pointed toes, through to the tips of her fingers.

But Laura knew the odds were against such mastery. Such luck. Everyone was hurt, everyone fat, everyone crippled, heavy, unbalanced. Even Laura was too often tired and stretched and sore to see her body as anything more than an encumbrance. The price of elegance was high: Laura's skin was callused and her toes were infected, bloody sometimes after dancing, their nails ingrown. Her back was sore—interspinous sprain, lower lumbar verte-

brae. Pain when overarching. Sometimes it was shin splints, a snapping hip, Achilles tendonitis. And sometimes, Laura was just plain tired.

Of course, the audiences who admired her night after night knew none of this. Instead, at the end of a performance, their willing disbelief in the reality of her body extended into the encore and beyond. They did not distinguish Laura the dancer, with the lonely sixth-story studio apartment and one-eyed cat and back problems, from Odette the swan-maiden, or Giselle gone back to the grave. They weren't supposed to. Because the audience didn't want to know about the bunions on the dancer called Laura's feet, or the way that her toes, permanently distorted, curled in odd directions, nails discolored, skin raw, red and hard. They wanted to believe in magic. In their minds, they made her superhuman.

But Laura knew the cramps and the stress fractures, even if the audience didn't, and she couldn't pretend that one day soon she wouldn't age, slouch, fail. Costumed and made-up, yet still conscious of this inevitable fact, Laura occasionally felt a twinge of shame under the hot lights while the audience admired her arms and her legs, which were chiseled and defined like Michelangelo marble. It seemed, sometimes, as if she were telling a lie. While they gaped at her gracefulness and shoved roses into the angles of her arms, she would often think with something like embarrassment how, for all her performing, she was just like them. Nothing really distinguished her from the people who crammed into theaters in their finest evening clothes to let themselves believe, for a little while at least, in fantasy. In reality, Laura was mortal. She was breakable. It was a secret she kept well. It was part of why she loved to dance. It was exhilarating, telling that lie. And so much depended on it: if she flinched, if she wobbled even a little, the illusion was shattered.

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It was the same cruel fate of curved spines and pulled muscles that had planted the bean in Laura's body. It was just a little bean in there, she told herself. That was all. A simple bean that could be simply removed. A problem that could go away. It seemed completely logical and completely right to take the small step that would rid her of the bean, rid the bean of the curse of flawed, fleeting corporeality, and preserve Laura's own momentary beauty and agility just a little, little longer.

Before she called the clinic, Laura Googled keywords. It bothered her to think of hurting Little Bean. In its roundabout way, Google said, *I can not promise that Little Bean will not feel pain*. Experts disagreed. After all, they

couldn't *ask*. And even if they could, Bean, whose vocal cords, at week twelve, were just beginning to form, would not have answered. One week earlier, Laura read, Little Bean's toes had separated and the webbing between her fingers had vanished, fingerprint swirls like Van Gogh stars already evident on their tips. Laura didn't ask Google any more questions, then. Instead, she dialed the clinic's number.

On the phone, she said, "I don't want it to hurt. It. I don't want to hurt it."

When Laura bought a new pair of pointe shoes, she broke them in the old-fashioned way. She grabbed them by their shiny satin heels and slammed their tips, hard masses of layered glue and burlap, against cement sidewalks and the brick walls of the studio. She wet the boxes in the tips of the toes with hot paper towels to weaken them, to soften their hardness; she danced in them to mold them to her form and then shellacked the boxes to keep them dry and tailored to her feet like fossils. Sometimes she bent them on door frames. If she was angry she would shut them in the closet door with more force than was perhaps necessary, because whether they were new or old, their damage could only help her dance with less pain.

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When it hurt—or when she was unable to forget that it hurt—she would line the tips of the shoes with lamb's wool or gel or plastic bags or wadded-up pairs of old tights to pad her muddled toes. She'd tried painkillers, but her body grew too smart for them. She jumped from brand to brand for a while, until she grew used to each and immune to its effects. Finally, she gave them up altogether. She dealt with the pains just the way they were, because the dancing was worth it. She took a strange sort of pride in the knowledge that she iced her own sore muscles, dealt with her wounds on her own, and managed it all just fine.

A few days after Laura's appointment at the clinic, she wore new shoes to the studio and began the ritual breaking-in. She would autograph the old shoes and toss them into a basket at a kiosk in the theater lobby, where they would be sold to young girls at intermission. She went to the barre and stretched and pointed, flexed. She danced for a long time, then took off the shoes and sat down on the hardwood floor beneath the barre. She continued to bend their stiff fabric, pointing and flexing the shoes long after her feet had been released from their insides, which were still firm and oppressive.

Little Bean had been removed. Discontinued. She was elsewhere. Physically, Laura was just plain Laura again.

She hadn't thought much about the clinic and its pastel papered walls, or about Bean and the way she would be sent to a lab for pathology, then "properly disposed of," as Laura had been assured when she'd asked the doctor exactly where Bean would go. Sitting alone in the studio, though, Laura was surprised at how hard she had to fight not to think and not to cry. As she pressed her eyes shut and breathed deep breaths, she thought about how strange it was that she should try so hard to keep some things, like tears, inside, and yet send other things, certain things, so decisively out and away.

Laura went home to her apartment and her one-eyed cat. She reclined on the couch under a blanket and switched on the TV. She tried not to think.

But thinking is as natural and automatic as breathing—more natural and more automatic than dancing, even for Laura. And somehow Little Bean made it out of the pathology lab and away from her proper disposal and out into the city and in through Laura's slightly open window on the back of a fly that flew in and around the house, buzzing. She had acquired the ability to move on her own three weeks ago, during week nine: tiny joints capable of bending.

Inside the house, Bean played among the skin cells that made up Laura's household dust. Bean never had skin. Not normal skin, anyway—only a transparent film through which her veins and insides would have been visible like plants under greenhouse glass.

Laura sat up and watched her twirling and somersaulting in the dust.

"Go away, Bean-ghost," she said. She kept her voice low, barely a whisper. "Go away, spirit." She lay back down, pulled the blanket tight around her, and turned away. In time Bean floated over to Laura's body and in through a hole in the old fleece blanket in which it was wrapped. She nestled into the arch of a foot, warm and snug. Laura pointed, then flexed her away.

"Go away, figment. Figment of my imagination."

She thought about calling Liz, her sister, but Liz never picked up the phone. Since their father's funeral, Liz and their mother had been more distant from Laura than ever. Laura had been her father's girl. In the end, it wasn't because he never failed to bring her roses after every childhood recital, or because he never missed a performance, that she loved him the most. It was because he let her go. He let her be volatile when her mother and Liz would not.

In middle school, when Laura was teased for her height, her father bought her a punching bag. He drove her, at age seventeen, from their home in Maine

all the way to New York City to audition for the Ailey School. And when she was accepted and announced, five days before her senior year would have begun, that she wouldn't be going back to her old high school, he'd kissed her forehead, helped her pack her things, and set her up with a New York roommate through an old high-school friend. He didn't make a fuss about her refusal to "just be normal," as her mother and Liz, then a sophomore at the local community college, had.

Laura's absence from her father's funeral solidified her mother's and Liz's disapproval of her. Her father's parents had been Russian immigrants, but, born on American soil, her father had never seen their mother country. The day he died, Laura bought a plane ticket—not back to Maine, but to Moscow. It seemed more fitting, like what he would have wanted. She took herself to the Bolshoi Theater, where *Swan Lake* had first premiered in 1877, and let herself heal in her own way. Alone in her father's land, she returned his favor to her; she let him go.

42 Now, with Little Bean still floating in the room, disobedient, Laura picked up the phone and held it in her hand, listened to the dial tone for a while, and then hung up. She breathed in deeply and blew at the dust on her end table, blew her baby ghost away. She slumped back down onto the cushions, curled up, pulled the blanket over her head.

Oh, you little bean, she thought. If only you could have stayed forever small, a secret in a hidden place inside my body, we could have been something, you and me.

Laura had not mentioned the whole Bean affair to Gary. She never would.

When he woke in the mornings, Gary looked at himself in the mirror, flexed his biceps, and smiled a superstar smile. He examined his features and his smile from a variety of angles. He always flossed twice a day. He performed these rituals with the bathroom door open just a crack, thinking Laura couldn't see. She'd observed his vanity like this, while she lay in bed in the mornings, until she couldn't stand it anymore.

When Laura first met him, he had recently completed his Accelerated Freefall training and earned his skydiving instructor certification. She'd been dancing the part of the Lilac Fairy in *Sleeping Beauty*. They'd both been standing in a long line at Starbucks; she wore a loose T-shirt, its collar torn off so that the cotton fabric draped over the edges of her shoulders and left her neck and collarbone and the top of her back exposed. She'd just come from

the studio, had been sweating, and a few strands of loose hair still clung to the side of her neck. Gary had made his move without first seeing her face.

He leaned forward and muttered into her neck, “Ever done flips in the air at twelve thousand feet?”

Laura turned around. “No,” she said.

He was overconfident in a way that provoked her, and so she went on. “I like to do mine at about two feet. There’s a lot less room for error, then.”

Gary laughed. Laura didn’t. A few minutes later she was setting her Skinny Hazelnut Latte on the sidewalk and tucking in her shirt, betraying some reserve even in the middle of her show of self-confidence. She turned a front aerial, picked up the Skinny Hazelnut Latte, said, “You have a great afternoon,” and turned to walk home. Gary followed.

He’d always seemed like the type who would cheat. Laura had thought so right from the moment she met him. Now, when she thought about her past with him, she figured this was a large part of the reason why she let him stick around: he didn’t need her. He kept her company without requiring her to make promises or sign contracts. She always imagined herself knocking on his door some afternoon and finding it answered by some inane blonde who’d never met anybody who did flips in the air at twelve thousand feet before. But oddly enough, Gary didn’t cheat. He stuck around.

She guessed she should have been happy that he wanted to be with her. But she found his loyalty oppressive, his presence tiring, his vanity insufferable. He was too in love with both of their bodies. At first his attention to hers had been flattering, and even his unselfconscious preoccupation with his own had been endearing in its own way. It just got to be too much.

Months after the Starbucks meeting, it was Laura who broke it off. It made no sense to go on with a trust fund kid who threw himself out of airplanes and coaxed others to do the same, for what he called “a living.” She had enough to worry about. Besides, the last thing she wanted, at the end of a long day, was to come home from the studio or the stage only to be asked to dance some more, this time for an audience of one. Meanwhile her back was sore, her feet were tired, and her bed seemed far too small with Gary in it next to her, going on about body awareness and altitude awareness and how everyone started out jumping tandem, hooked up to an instructor (like him), and then eventually—if they persevered—ended up falling alone. Free, he said. *Free-fallin’*. He sang Tom Petty, propped up against a pillow.

Laura cut him off. “Do you think,” she asked, “you could leave?”

So Gary left.

What a family they'd have made, Laura thought. Always in the air, always tumbling.

It was *Swan Lake* season, Laura's favorite. There had always been something about that ballet that had spoken to her. It would be her second time dancing the part of Odette, her favorite role: half human, half bird. Under the spell of a sorcerer, Odette lives as a swan by day and as a woman by night, residing in a forest by a lake formed out of the tears of her grief-stricken parents, from whom she was stolen. The spell isn't broken in the end. She and her lover both drown.

With opening night just a few evenings away, Laura took her Odette costume home and hung it on the inside of her door, because it was beautiful. She admired its feathers and rhinestones, its shiny thread and intricate embroidery.

44 Laura called Liz and was not surprised when Liz didn't answer. Laura left a voicemail. "Hi," she said. "Liz. It's...your sister, wondering if maybe you'd like to take a break for the weekend and come see the opening of *Swan Lake*? It would be nice. To have you."

As soon as she said it, she realized how true it was, and she dusted her apartment that night in anticipation of a guest.

In addition to performing, Laura taught beginner ballet once a week on Wednesdays to girls whose parents could afford to send them to classes with the Company. Her students would perform with the Company in the winter, as the children under Mother Ginger's giant skirt in *The Nutcracker*. Last Wednesday, right after finding out about the little bean that had intruded upon her, Laura had been distracted. She'd ended her instruction early and told the girls to play dance freeze-tag for the entire second half of class. Megan and Jill took turns pushing each other across the floor, each counting the number of shoves it took to force the other from one wall to the opposite. Julie stood on her head. Lexie and Abby played wheelbarrow. Molly hung from the barre, which was not allowed. Kaylee tickled Julie, who still stood on her head. Julie squealed. Jessie said, "Miss Laura, I have to pee. Miss Laura, I have to pee." When Laura, in her distraction, didn't hear her, she made a run for the door. Through it all, Laura had stood by the stereo, switching the music on and off, muttering "Freeze" at intervals. "Freeze,"

she said, and paused Tchaikovsky. The room erupted into giggles, and Jessie, mid-dash to the bathroom, froze, obedient, and cringed.

“Miss Laura!” The insides of Jessie’s light pink tights turned dark. She started to cry. Laura called the janitor, dismissed the girls, and walked zombie-like all the way home.

This week, Laura told herself as she entered the studio, would be different.

She sat on the floor and stretched, facing the mirror, and watched twelve small bodies follow hers. The front and one of the side walls of the studio were completely lined with mirrors, so that the girls’ movements were reflected both from the front and from the side. When Laura turned at a slight angle, she could see the girls multiply around her. There were the actual, tangible bodies (twelve), there were the bodies with faces in the front mirror (twenty-four), and then there were their profiles, with ponytails swinging, in the side mirror (thirty-six). Thirty-six daughters. Other people’s daughters. They chattered as they stretched, and their soprano voices ricocheted off the glass.

To keep her students from being sloppy, Laura taught them to envision pearls rolling from their shoulders, down their arms, accelerating around the curves of their elbows, rolling off their fingertips like tiny ski jumpers. The technique did not always work. Her students were always dropping imaginary pearls, swearing they heard them hitting the floor like hailstones.

Bean, too, had she had the chance, would have one day moved as if she were balancing invisible pearls on her contours. She would have been one of the girls who now moved from one corner of the room to the opposite, leaping and turning across the floor in pairs. Instead, Bean was in the pearls. She was balled up inside them as they dropped from clumsy arms and bounced against the wood and rolled under the stereo where they caught in cobwebs and gathered in piles. Laura could feel her in the room and struggled to ignore her. She could sense her in the girls, all thirty-six of them with their healthy bodies and bottomless reserves of energy. She was curled up round and shiny, glowing in the pupils of their eyes. She was in their energy; it made her wild. She moved her little see-through fingers to the music, kicked her see-through feet in harmony. She tumbled in the dust that the girls kicked up with their chaînés turns and chassés and grand jetés, the dust that clumped in the corners along with gold hairs and black hairs and dirt, to be swept away later.

Liz didn't come to see the ballet. She left a voicemail on Laura's phone saying she was sorry, she was busy. Laura knew Liz was thinking of their father's funeral as she recorded the message. She could hear it in her voice.

Laura told herself she didn't care. It was what she had expected.

When she crawled under the covers in the bed where she slept alone, Bean sat sentinel on the windowsill looking out over the lights of the city.

Laura watched her rocking on the windowsill, slow and sad, back and forth.

"You hate me, don't you," Laura said, and paused. "Do you hate me?"

Of course, there was no answer. There never would be. Laura closed her eyes.

On the opening night of *Swan Lake*, every seat was full. The audience draped themselves in diamonds, buttoned themselves into suits, and left their children at home with sitters who cooked them macaroni and cheese and let them watch forbidden shows on MTV. They laid aside their worries for the evening, left their loads at the theater door. To them, Laura was far more swan than woman. She was part of the music, surreal.

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But Bean remembered the thump of her heartbeat, knew the warm walls of her insides.

Bean watched the dance from a post on the tarnished gold of a chandelier. Laura sensed her there. She wondered if anyone in the crowd had looked up in Bean's direction; if they had seen her, too. Were they aware of her secret, perched above their heads? As always, as she danced she thought of the lie she was telling, up there in her feathers and gems. She was not a swan. Her feet burned. She forced the pain out of her mind.

Under the lights Laura wondered how many had danced the part of Odette before her, from unknown women in other companies to the great Pierina Legnani and other masters now long dead. How many would dance it after she was gone. How long it would be before she was thrown out, cast off the stage and out of the spotlight and replaced by someone younger, stronger. She would not be allowed to go on there forever. Yet when she was gone, her role filled, her body replaced with another, the choreography would change little, the music not at all, and the dance would go on, on, on, without her. She had given herself completely to dance, but she had surely not been the first to do so, and she would not be the last. She had given herself to it exclusively, and it would never—*could* never—return that commitment. Laura's

breath caught in her throat. She felt the lake she kept dammed behind her eyes pushing hard at their lenses.

This room is full of ghosts, she thought. They were rustling in velvet curtains, they were sliding down banisters, they were dancing in dust, all day, all night, forever. She thought, *When I am a ghost, I'll live here, too*. There would be no one for her to follow, nothing to haunt but the performance to which she had devoted her entire living self. She would live as a swan and fool the world for as long as her body allowed it, until the end of the day, when night fell and she was just a woman, worn out and no longer beautiful.

There had almost been a person who would have loved her then, too. Almost. But she'd sent her away. And even in her costume, then, even mid-air, leaping, Laura was sorry for the both of them. She was so sorry it hurt—a hurt that was more than physical and that she couldn't ignore—like an incessant ringing in the ears, or an unquenchable thirst; the hurt was a sound, a feeling, a nagging thought. It was a vision of herself and her Little Bean, two ghosts veiled in the unseen corners and shadows of a dim theater, watching the dance of the centuries, watching each other in silence from opposite ends of a room crowded with bodies, and never, ever touching.

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When the dance was over, the cries of the audience rose to the ceiling where Bean sat perched alone, curled close to a lightbulb, soaking up its heat in a place only Laura could see. She tried to clap with her gummy baby palms, to make a noise like the rest of the crowd for her almost-mother, to feel the sting of flesh slapping flesh, substance striking substance. She kicked her feet against the gold in frustration at her incapability. She wanted to cry out in a real, recognizable voice, crystal clear and loud, and send Laura's name bouncing off every wall and surface. She wanted to make a noise for Laura, a noise that only she could make but that all the world would hear: a noise that would alleviate both of their burdens.