Miss the Mirrors

I started dance class when I was three years old. My mom thought it would be the perfect past time for a little girl in the South. And she was right. I was trained in ballet, tap, and jazz, contemporary and lyrical were added on with age. Some of my first memories are attempting shuffles, holding onto the barre, feeling vulnerable in my metal-clad toes and heels. The classrooms were empty except for a pile of pastel dance bags huddled in the back-left corner and a stereo system in the front right. The clacks of a dozen pairs of first tap shoes reverberated through the room, and occasionally the clacks would turn into a slide followed by a thud. The room felt stale after years of sweat and bare feet running across the room. It was the kind of stale where the beams of sunlight coming through the windows showed every tiny piece of dust suspended in the air. It was the kind of stale that felt comforting, like an antique store or great-grandma's house.

Dance never felt like a choice. I adored my ballet slippers dragging across barley dance floors and imagining holding a beach ball to perfect first position. The studio walls were lined in floor length mirrors, no blind spots in any room of the small brick building. As children in dance class, we'd stand inches away from our reflections, sticking out tongues and making silly faces at each other. Mimicking Ms. Christy's "potty-boo-rays" and leaping over dance bags.

I remember the first time getting ready for a recital. The tight low bun, bobby pins scraping my scalp as Momma only pushed harder, suffocating inside a cloud of extra-strength hairspray. I remember her brushing too much blush across my cheeks and painting pink lipstick on my puckered lips. This was always one of my favorite parts of the process- it made me feel special and *fancy.* With my hair pulled back and my makeup on, I felt pretty and older. I always wanted to be older. I admired the older girls at the studio who looked so confident and could

stretch their legs to their ears. I wanted their glitter eyeshadow and satin ballet shoes that had blocks at the toes and strings that tied around the ankles. Older meant better. Older meant more.

I remember the mint-colored leotard and the feeling of white tulle at my fingertips. The blush pink pantyhose sliding up my legs and the pale ballet slippers pushed onto my feet. Feeling warm under the stage lights. Looking for my mom and dad in the faceless crowd and failing to find them. I never panicked like the other girls on the stage; I watched our teacher at the front left corner of the stage and followed her movements. Hearing parents laugh at their smiling children, while others winced at their child scream-crying in a pile on the floor. I never once felt the urge to walk towards the edge of the stage, like so many other girls did. The front row waiting with extended arms. I loved the feeling of the barley underneath my feet from my very first time on stage, until there was nothing left to love.

I was extremely aware of my body at a very young age. To dance well is to dance perfectly. There is no room for an out-of-place finger or an un-pointed toe. Pull your shoulders back to show off your collar bone. I mistook "engage your core" for "suck in your gut." Push your heels together and your toes out for first position. Pretend you're holding a beach ball above your head for fifth position. Hold them up strong but make them look soft. Keep your chin up. Eyes forward. Smile.

The only wall of the class room not lined in mirrors was the back wall with barres bolted in at waist-height. During every ballet class we would stand beside and rest one hand on the barre, the other extended past our shoulder in second position. We'd go through sets of pliés and tendus with our eyes fixed on ourselves. We were taught to use the mirrors as a tool for improvement, to scour our reflections, searching for a crooked elbow or an unengaged core. I spent hours every week staring into those mirrors looking for any imperfection I could find. Even

at home I couldn't escape. Before showers I'd stand in front of the bathroom mirror, listening to the water run while I combed my body for new stretch marks or ingrown hairs. Or stare into the magnifying mirror I used to do my makeup, squeezing every clogged pore or slightly inflamed blemish on my cheeks. Those damn mirrors.

As I got older, I got bigger. I was tall and awkward but I didn't have the skinny frame to match. I had inner thighs that were striped with stretch marks for as long as I could remember and my stomach poked out further than my chest. My ribs and hips were nestled in more flesh than skin. I blamed my parents for the way I looked a lot of the time. They were overweight and never let me or my brother forget it. Momma still says, "I just don't want you to end up like me". She never saw herself as beautiful as a bigger woman, and she still doesn't.

I stood out in group routines and I lived in the back row. I was okay with that. I enjoyed the act of dance itself more than I ever cared for the recognition that came along with it for so many others.

I began to resent the petite bodies surrounding me while being willing to do anything to have one of my own. The girls beside me didn't feel the prickly tears in their eyes when they tried on costumes or the lumps that form in the throat when they hear the word "fat". Most weeks I spent more time with these girls and my teachers than I did with my own family. I never allowed myself to fully open up or speak without being spoken to. I was afraid I was the fat girl. That my body took up so much space there was no room for any more of me. Even though I would condition, stretch, and run routines for hours several days a week, my thighs still jiggled and my gut still protruded from the rest of my body. I would pray every night to wake up smaller. Repentance for a flat stomach and toned arms. I would cry and beg God for *just this one*

thing. Offering my life and devotion to wake up in a different body. I never woke up skinny. I don't pray anymore.

By the time I was thirteen, I had fallen victim to Pinterest. I would scour my feed for ab workouts and hidden gem diets and cleanses. Apple cider vinegar and planks became my best friends. This is also when I found *less conventional* solutions to my problem. I started to lather my stomach in lotion then wrap myself in layers of saran wrap nightly in an attempt to lose water weight. It was likely a women's health magazine that gave me this idea.

I started high school a year later and auditioned for my first school play. Hairspray. From my first day in class, I felt welcomed. My classmates were from different backgrounds. I was surrounded by bodies that looked like mine along with those that didn't. These people weren't all women, all white, all privileged. I learned more from them in a few months than I did in a decade from my friends at dance. My director was just as intense my dance teachers, but more forgiving and sensitive to the issues for students in a musical theater class at a public high school in rural Georgia. I didn't feel the same pit in my stomach walking into the classroom that I felt every time I stepped foot in the dance studio. I balanced the two for a bit, but I was finding a family in my theater troupe and becoming more frustrated with dance. The dance family my teachers tried so hard to create in the studio just wasn't for me. I felt the pitiful glances from the mothers and disappointment from the teachers. I had to choose.

I quit dance when I was fifteen at the end of my freshman year. I still miss it sometimes. I miss the bass vibrating the floors beneath my feet and the sweat dripping down my chest. I miss letting my head drop back and closing my eyes while I just felt the music. I miss the few friends I had who made me feel loved when I felt unworthy of it. I miss the rides home at night with momma, playing her my "emo" songs and laughing at her not-so-silent judgement. I miss that

wonder I felt the first time I stood up in my tap shoes, reveling in the noise I created. Being afraid to fall. I miss feeling so cathartic, tears would fall to the ground before I could stop them. I miss the memories I made in those theaters and auditoriums. *I don't miss the mirrors.*