

*A Life in Parts*

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*Summer 1968*

The glittering water is a sheer drop below me.

I cannot gauge the distance, balanced as I am on a rock not much bigger than one of my mother's best dinner plates. Who knows what hides beneath the glassy surface? The bright sunshine causes so many reflections to bounce back, it hurts. I steady my breathing, trying to restore a normal rhythm. It's not just the climb up here that has me taking juddering breaths, Maman's words have followed me as they always do.

I feel pressure expand inside me as I recall the words we flung back and forth, the pain on Papa's face as we jabbed fingers and insults at each other, Maman's ever-present cigarette dancing like a conductor's baton in her hand, a ribbon of smoke creating patterns in the gulf between us.

The day of my eighteenth birthday, during a trip to Europe auditioning for ballet companies, my mother decides to tell me I don't dance freely. That her spark, her gift has not passed on to me. I dance for all the wrong reasons, apparently. I swallow the fury down, imagining my chest deflating like a balloon, bringing my focus back to my spot on this clifftop. She will not steal this moment from me too.

The uneven stone is hot beneath my feet and I turn my face to the sun, letting it warm my skin, closing my eyes at the blaze of midday light. The sky is the purest cornflower blue I have ever seen and not one breath of a cloud is in sight. Up this high there is a whisper of breeze, and I am hungry to feel more. In one smooth movement I remove my flimsy, flowery dress and lifting it above my head, let it flutter away, hoping Maman's words do the same. I

imagine defiant new freckles appearing on my naked skin as the heat of an Italian summer beats down, making my face, shoulders and barely-there breasts feel hot and tight.

If I fell now and they found me nearly naked, would they wonder why? Would they think it an accident? Or something else? My balance on the edge of this cliff is faultless. I could stand enpointe and still be perfectly poised, like the flying lady on the nose of a Rolls Royce. I smile and stretch my arms into the same pose, nude save for my short gym-style knickers.

Should I dive? Jump? Surrender and let myself drop off the edge?

Butterflies leap inside my ribcage, my heartbeat thumps in my ears. Can it be that the only way to feel this alive, this free, is to embrace the chance, the prospect of death? Is this why explorers climb ever bigger mountains? Why sky divers dive and racing drivers drive? I feel like a god, holding a life in my hands.

I am 18 today. An adult. Yet an image of my parents comes to mind. I am still someone's child, still their daughter. Have I experienced life in all its fullness? Have I been in love or anyone in love with me? Not really. Not yet. I've barely made an imprint on life, let alone an impact. Do I want to forgo the chance of showing Maman she is wrong? That I don't dance for approval and won't dance for her anymore?

The chalk digs into the flesh on the soles of my feet, the callouses resistant and firm against the stone. I curl my toes tight around the outcrop as I lean out just a smidgen to contemplate the drop. At a certain height, even water will be like concrete. Is this high enough to be dangerous? High enough to inflict injury when I hit the water, never mind anything that may lurk beneath the surface? A small rock shifts beneath my foot and I lift my leg a little, watching as it tumbles over the edge, puffs of chalk like talcum powder appearing with each impact. It falls swiftly and is soon lost from sight. Despite squinting, I don't see any splash it may have made.