

## Champions

The entire stadium roars with raucous applause. My heart thuds, and my palms are wet, hot, and shaking. I mindlessly glide off the dancefloor and back to my changeroom. Pushing the door open silently, I avoid looking back at my partner Jacob to avoid getting too flustered, collapsing dramatically into the plush velvet chair where I momentarily allow my body to rest.

Remembering where I am, I quickly compose myself and stand up, moving towards the clothes rack and peeling my burgundy leotard and chameleon chiffon skirt off, letting them both fall to the ground. Then, I tug on a coat hanger, and it releases my next outfit- an intricately sequined golden leotard with a willowy, tutu-like skirt- both of which I slip into easily. Tears form in my eyes as I realise that I'll only get to wear them once, but I wipe them away with the back of my hand and head towards the mirror.

My breath catches. I look gorgeous. I've prepared for this moment for so long now. Each competition in the past has been training for this, and that goes for backstage too. Every adult who has ever trained me has told me to treat any person backstage as if they are a client and to always be graceful and polite, yet charming and witty. Agents are always lurking backstage, and most people who make it are found by those agents in these sorts of places.

Next up is our combination dance- the dance that is required to use at least three different elements of different dance styles. The accepted styles have to be one of the dance categories that we have danced to get to this point in the competition: salsa, ballroom, ballet, jazz, hip-hop, contemporary, lyrical, swing, tango, and bachata. If we get a high score on this dance- we'll go to World Championships and be named the country's best dancers, and the world's most prestigious dance companies will be drowning us in money just to get us to dance for them.

Part of what we get judged on is outfit and makeup, which is why I take *extreme* care as I apply my gold eyeshadow, then frame it with dramatic black wings of eyeliner, thick mascara, and clear lip gloss. As soon as I go to sit down, there's a knock at my door. I sigh loudly and hesitantly open it, to see Jacob. He looks handsome in his back tights and a semi-opaque mesh pleated bodysuit to match. When he spins for me, I see my initials embroidered in gold on the back to match both the theme of the dance and my outfit. He's designed both of our outfits so well, it's insane. He's poured his heart and soul into these outfits the past few weeks, and it clearly has been worth it.

"We made it to the final level. You ready?" He asks me, his voice low and serious.

"I think so," I reply, and he takes my hand, leading me back into the arena, where Camille and Darius are performing. Camille is a wonderful dancer. Her pirouettes are gorgeous, and her turns are smooth and effortless. Darius is also a strong Latin dancer, so they had an advantage there. However, Camille fell and twisted her ankle in ballet, slicing off at least two points, and causing her smile to falter as she dances.

Nervously, Jacob wraps his arms around my waist and nuzzles my shoulder. His heart thuds against my shoulder blade as he watches Camille. They used to be partners until she sabotaged him in the team's dance, and won in solos, then ditched him and went on to a solo career with Justin's agent who picked her over him. Considering all her solo-career success, I'm surprised that she paired up with Darius for this dance.

"We'll be amazing," He sighs into my neck, "You look gorgeous."

"Thank you, you too," I murmured tiredly.

"Actually... after they've announced the winners, I think we need to talk," he tells me, and I get nervous.

"What about?" I ask, but before he can reply, our names are called. My heart sinks. This is it. The lights go low, and I grab his hand, pulling him onto the dancefloor, then taking my position- arms around Jacob's neck, staring up at him. The lights then brighten and change to a blinding white light, and the slow, delicate introduction to our song, 'Golden Hour' begins, and we start to move. My costume looks dull in this light, which is exactly what Jacob intended. When the lyrics start, our Bachata choreography kicks in. Bachata is an intense and intimate dance style, so Justin and I have to be perfectly in sync with each other, despite the fact that the audience is primarily focused on Jacob right now. For his height and build, his grace must come as a surprise to them.

Jacob's eyes are trained on me like lasers as the chorus hits when he slowly dips me and the lights change to a gorgeous golden hue and all eyes are on me as I slowly transition into my furious grand jete, which adds a component of ballet to the dance for a brief second before we transition into ballroom choreography, then tango. The crowd gasps at every twirl and dip and it's perfect. Then, as the song finishes, the echo of applause rings in my ears yet again as Justin dips me back into our starting position for our final position.

I stand up straight again, but before I can walk off the floor, Justin grabs my wrist and kisses me, tangling his fingers through my hair. My trainer Alan smirks at me as Jacob, and I finally pull apart and walk away with ruffled hair and crimson faces.

Finally, we look at the scoreboard, and it updates, flashing our scores. Then, the tears start falling. We both scream, and he kisses me again.

We won! We're going to World Championships! *Together.*

JY MCGIVERN

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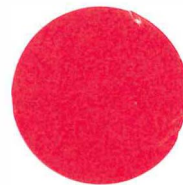
## Bleeding Sand

The afternoon shadows bleed into the sand, standing like pencils on a flat plane. A man stands alone his sun-kissed skin blistering under the ascending sun. His legs drag across the desert leaving a trail for any to follow. The man stumbled down into a small canyon pulling a dirty rag out of his pocket, gritting his yellowed teeth he tied it tightly to his blood-soaked leg. The sounds of gunshots in the distance grew louder. The man crawls into a small hole in the escarpment of the canyon, concealing as much of his body as to not be seen. Silence falls over the canyon, the man now covering his mouth attempting to not be heard. The crescendo of gunshots began again travelling into the distance.

The man peeked his head out of the escarpment, still unsure of his safety. He stumbled back following the trail of blood he left behind. He reached the burning town he fled, seeing the damage that was done. The motel he had been staying at was now consumed by fire. Trying to find a physician he stumbled down to the small medical shop. He entered the shop, the windows smashed, and the door busted in he didn't imagine finding much. The bloody display cases lead him to the back of the shop where he found the physician face down in his blood. The man grabbed the side of the physician looking for any tonics that might relieve his pain but found nothing. He moved to the broken displays, sifting through the glass he found a small bottle of snake oil, he hastily uncorked the bottle pouring it down his throat.

He left the shop, pulled a cigarette out of his pocket, and sat on the side of a small wooden deck. He looked out to the rest of the town, dead bodies were charred and mutilated being left for the buzzards to eat, and buildings were ransacked and burnt down without a care for human life. Exhaling, he stood up, walked over to a dirty trough, and cleaned his face and hands of dirt and blood. While looking out to the town he noticed that one of the stables was untouched. He walked across the mud and dirt, arriving at the stables he found a steel lock barring the way. He looked around to the burning pile of bodies and wood and noticed something that he thought might help him.

He waltzed over to the pile of bodies and yanked out a gun that was pinned under one of the bodies, there were only a few rounds left in it. He pulled the bolt of the gun back and aimed at the lock, the gun fired destroying the lock in the process. Opening the stable door, he came across a few horses that seemed to be still spooked by the attack on the town. He walked to one of the horses calming it down while picking up the saddle that was laying on the fence penning the horse from the rest of the stable. Leading the horse out of the stable he saddled it, he followed the horse trails he assumed were left by the town's attackers. He followed them leaving the town and travelled across the endless dunes.



Term 1 2023

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### Crackling Stairs

A typical night. Same old routine. Amy laid in her bed, ready for slumber after her bedtime story (story time was her favourite part of the day). As she felt the back of her sparkly clean teeth with her tongue, she was wondering what this night would bring her. Story time was the only good thing about nighttime; there were too many dancing shadows and eery creaks in the old floorboards. "Just one night without a nightmare, please," she pleaded to the empty room. Nightmares were common; she didn't know why she had them - she had the perfect life for a 5 year-old.

"Good night sweetheart," shouted mum from the kitchen downstairs as she was preparing dinner for tomorrow. She often did this in her exhausted state; it saved time the next day. Amy could just about hear her in the left wing. She felt isolated.

"Night, night, mummy, see you in the morning.

Tomorrow was the biggest day in her life to date. Tomorrow was the first day of school. So much to look forward to. Or worry about. Either way, Amy was excited and looking foward to having some real friends, instead of her tribe of soft toys that cluttered her playroom.

Outside the large oak window, the wind was howling and the rain was dancing on Amy's windowsill. Amy was sleeping, her hands up above her head and her mouth wide open. Tonight, she was in a deep sleep. Nothing would disturb her tonight. Surely?

At exactly 1.11am, a sleepy little 5 year-old woke from slumber, yawning as she tiptoed to the bathroom along the long, decorated halls. She never usually woke up to use the bathroom, not for at least 2 years. As the solid bathroom door slowly creaked open, a chlaustrophobic smell filled the nighttime air. Had daddy left the window open again? Amy proceeded to wash her hands. The water was ice cold,afterall, it was mid-winter. The shock of the icy water made sure that Amy was now wide awake. She could still smell the air, but this time, it didn't smell like the wintry air seeping theouhg the windows from the farm, it smelt like smoke.

"It's just a nightmare," Amy whispered to herself. "It's just a nightmare."

Amy tiptoed back and as she passed the spiral staircase that connected the left wing with the floor below, she caught sight of what looked like a sparkling ruby at the bottom of the stairwell. She rubbed her eyes cautiously, and all of a sudden she wide-awake and struggling to breathe.

"Fire! Fire! Fire! Mummy, daddy...help me, there's a fire, I can't breathe!"

Amy stood shaking at the top of the spiral staircase, wanting to run down the stairs to safety. Trapped. Crackling stairs. The smoke was now filling the air more quickly than before, rising above her like a cloud in the sky. Except it wasn't beautiful. The extreme heat had caught the stairs and rendered them useless.

The stairs were made of the finest quality oak, just like the windows, and had been varnished to make them look shiny. While they looked extravagant once, now they didn't. The varnish on the stairs was crackling like an egg in a pan. Amy could hear it. Clearly. She stood at the top of the stairs, shouting for help, but no one heard her; the house was just too big. Someone was coming for her, surely?

Her dainty little legs could not support her little body anymore and they crashed to the ground. Black. Nothing.

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Amy woke up to machines beeping like she had never heard before. Her eyes reluctantly opened to mummy and daddy standing by her side. "Sweetheart, how are you feeling?"

"My throat hurts, mummy."

"It's okay darling, you're going to be okay" whispered mum in a regretful tone.

"What happened, mum?" asked Amy in a croaky yet curious voice.

"I am deeply sorry, Amy. I fell asleep while preparing dinner. The fire, you being here...it was my fault. I am so sorry."

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Amy didn't get to enjoy her first day of school with everyone else. She did make a speedy recovery and was soon home again, enjoying playing in her cluttered playroom. Only this time, she wasn't enjoying the company of her soft toys, she was enjoying the company of her new friends that she had met in the hospital. Amy was thrilled to discover that these friends were in the same class as her when she finally enjoyed her first day at school.

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### *The life of a lollipop.*

I lay still. Unmoving in this round wooden dome I have been banished to. I can hear the thundering stomps of the giants coming closer. They're monsters. All of them. I have lost many family members to their greed. I feel the dome move, but I stay where I am. I can see my friends, family, colleagues, and neighbours getting picked for execution one by one. Suddenly I feel fingers grasp around my middle. This is the end. This monster will take away my skin and savour my insides. As I'm lifted, I look beside me at my best friend. I smile sadly as he cries out. Begging me to fight back. Fighting is fruitless, I must focus on accepting my death. That's the best way to do it, or so I was always told. I am put down with a thud and I await my execution. I continue to wait. Nothing happens. I can hear the booms of what I'm sure are words coming from the giants, but nothing happens.

"Oi!" I scream at the giant above me. "What are you waiting for, finish me already!"

The giant doesn't move. I sigh, this was worse than I could've ever imagined. Worse than I was ever told. I wait for what seems like an eternity, though maybe that's what any amount of time feels like in the face of death. Then finally, finally the giant takes its fat fingers and begins to twist my skin. My life is over. I hear the crinkling of my dying skin. It hurts. I can hear the squeals of my fellow pops as their skins are removed too in a ceremony of torture. Then it happens. My skin is yanked from me, and I'm gone. I can still see the giant though; my mind is still active. Not in my body, but just outside of it. I move feeling the cold air of death brush against my being as I move for a better view. The giant holds my dead body between its fingers. Waiting. I glare at it, I know it can't see me, but it's the thought that counts. Everything slows as I watch my body being lifted to the giant's mouth. I can hear it sucking my flesh. It sounds like squelching mud. I can tell it likes how I taste; I was one of the best flavours. I want to look away, but I don't. I continue watching with great remorse as this monster of a thing savours my very being. I think to myself about my life. I know it wasn't long enough. I know one day I will get my revenge for all those who meet the fate of the monsters. I will float the world as a spirit and share my knowledge, fix the wrongs, and end the suffering.

I am lollipop.