

## *Between Practice and Perfection*

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At thirteen, the other girls in your gymnastics class are strong and graceful while you are not. You even used to take ballet, but no one would believe it, looking at you. The way you flop around, awkwardly moving your hands and feet as you attempt each exercise. The older girls are on the uneven bars, and they swing from one bar to the other and then back again. Their long bodies are extended, their toes pointed, and their hands never miss the bar, even when they back-flip in between. The younger girls in your class are not as graceful, but fast and energetic. They tumble and twist. They do forward and backward rolls and stay in line. You cannot do a cartwheel. You cannot do a pull up and you cannot roll forward or backward without going sideways.

Ashley Anders, the best girl in your class, is an ex-ballet dancer, five feet even, an inch shorter than you, and so light on her feet that she sails from one move to the next. If there were a way to do an entire floor exercise routine where only one foot touched the mat the entire time, she would be the first to figure it out. You watch her hanging out with the girls from the Intermediate team as they eat yogurt and graham crackers and watch the girls from the Elite team, picking out who has the best landings and routines and chance for going pro. Ashléy Anders is nice to everyone, and occasionally she has tried to help you, but to no avail.

Ashley Anders has rung the "success gong," a desk gong that is sounded when a gymnast achieves a goal, three times in the past week for being the first in her class to land a vault combination, a successful landing after dismounting from her bar routine, and for getting to perform at talent night with the Elite girls. The smallest girl on your team rang the gong for landing her round-off. Another girl on your team rang the gong for her handstand on the uneven bars, which she did only one week after recovering from a broken foot. You rang the gong when you learned to stand on the beam without falling off.

When it is time to start practicing aerial cartwheels, you pull Ashley Anders aside and ask her to explain it to you. Maybe watching movements is not the way you learn. Maybe you learn differently.

"How do you do this?" you ask.

"Like this," she says, putting her hand behind her back and cartwheeling like she had springs on the balls of her feet.

"Just put a hand behind your back," she says.

You try, but your hand touches the mat during your half-cartwheel.

She offers to help and supports your waist while you put a hand behind your back and try again, but your one hand is not used to supporting all your weight, and you go right over, kicking her in the nose in the process. When you right yourself, you apologize profusely, but Ashley is holding her nose and frowning. She walks wordlessly away from you, and the two of you avoid each other, and you are back to being on your own.

School is a welcome break from the gym. In art class you are asked to choose a picture to copy for your first assignment, and you choose a picture of Ashley Anders that you stole from the *Rising Stars* bulletin board at the

gym. Although the picture is hard to copy, you learn that with a brushstroke or pencil mark you can give the picture an appearance of flying or flipping or twisting—the kind of grace that you only have in your dreams. When you have finished the body with only the face left to copy, you copy your face instead of Ashley's. You look graceful and perfect.

You go home and practice in the backyard, using the soft, thick grass as a mat and an old, long block of wood as a balance beam. When you go back to the gym, you still cannot do a forward roll or a cartwheel. When you try a floor exercise, you sprain your ankle. When you try the vault, you break your nose.

Your mother assures you that you are at an awkward age, and she buys you a new leotard and purchases a "Gymnast on Board" sign at the gym's gift counter. She sticks it in the rear window of the mini-van that she takes you to practice in. You assure yourself that with practice you will get better. You buy mats and wrist guards, thinking that with the right equipment, anything is possible.

During every class, you strain muscles or fall awkwardly off equipment, and when you overhear the Elite girls laughing, you think they are making fun of you. When you come home, you work out your frustration in your sketches, which even you have noticed are improving. A few months later, when the Elite girls are getting ready for their competition, you are getting ready to enter your paintings into the school's annual art fair contest. When Ashley Anders wins a medal for floor exercise, you win three out of five categories in the art fair for your *Dreams* collection, where your pictures of Ashley Anders are included among pictures that you have sketched of children in the park, your father at work on the garage, and your own self-portrait.

Your teachers tell you that the way you capture actions in a series of strokes is beautiful, and at the end of the night, when you see your self-portrait in the dim light of the display case, you don't look so awkward anymore.