



# Getting back in step

*Dancing may not be my life anymore, but it will always be a part of it.* // KIRSTEN HUDSON

I'm standing in the blinding lights of a stage at the Lawrence Arts Center waiting for my turn to perform in its annual dance recital.

My hair's pulled back into a tight bun; my legs — clad in tights — are turned out in first position and I'm wearing a shockingly yellow, fluffy skirt. I feel ridiculous.

*I'm too old for this.*

*I'm gonna mess up.*

*I just want this to be over.*

The nagging thoughts flash through my mind as I nervously wait for the music to play.

I didn't always feel like this when I was on a stage.

When I was 6, dancing in *The Little Mermaid* or *Sleeping Beauty*, I felt ecstatic to perform. It never occurred to me that I would ever stop dancing. Growing up, dancing was my life.

Once when I was 7, I made my dad drive me to ballet class through a raging snowstorm because I couldn't stand the idea of not going. The class ended up turning into a private lesson because I was the only student who showed up.

When I was 8, during my Saturday morning ballet class, my teacher asked the students to raise their hands if they wanted to dance professionally someday. My hand immediately shot up. All I wanted was to be a professional dancer.

I spent three evenings every week at the dance studio taking classes. Countless hours on the weekends went into practicing for *The Nutcracker* or whatever other performance I had coming up. I should have felt exhausted. But dancing always left me so exhilarated that I continued to stuff my aching, blistered feet into ballet shoes every day.

Once I hit high school, though, things began to change.

As usually happens around high school, I began to have self-esteem issues. I wanted to be the best dancer. I had to be the best. When I couldn't stick a double pirouette or lift my

leg high enough, I'd get mad at myself instead of just enjoying dancing.

This self-doubt continued to accumulate until I came home from ballet class one evening and ripped open the letter that would tell me what part I had received in *The Nutcracker* that year, only to find out that I didn't get into the corps of *Waltz of the Flowers*. Every other 15- and 16-year-old at my level had gotten that part except me, it seemed.

In the few seconds it took to read that letter my self-esteem vanished. I wasn't good enough to be a professional dancer, was I? I wasn't even good enough to get a part that everyone else my age received.

I didn't know the reasoning behind the decision. I never asked. It could have been that I wasn't tall enough for the part. (I hadn't gotten parts before because of that.) But at the time I figured it was because I just wasn't good enough. And I didn't want to deal with that. So, I stuffed my ballet bag into the back of my closet and never went back to class.

Once my anger subsided I wondered if I had made the right decision. But mostly I just refused to think about it. As time went on, at random moments I would catch myself feeling aches of regret, but I'd push them away.

Even so, not dancing made me feel like something was missing. I tried to fill the void with my high school dance team and later with belly dancing classes, but it wasn't the same. My need to not just dance, but dance ballet, kept resurfacing.

Than last winter, after five years of not taking ballet classes, I decided to enroll in a ballet class at the Lawrence Arts Center. The once-a-week class fit perfectly with my schedule and out-of-shape body. I figured I'd break out my dusty ballet shoes just to get some exercise. No big deal.

But it was a big deal. I loved it. I loved that even though I couldn't stretch as far or move as fast as I had when I was 15, my body still remembered what to do. But every bittersweet class brought on fresh waves of regret. Should I have quit dancing when I was younger? What if I had made the wrong decision?

Then in March, my ballet teacher mentioned that the class would be performing a dance in the annual gala in May.

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I didn't want to perform. I felt too old for dance recitals and didn't want to bring back any memories from my performing-days when I was younger.

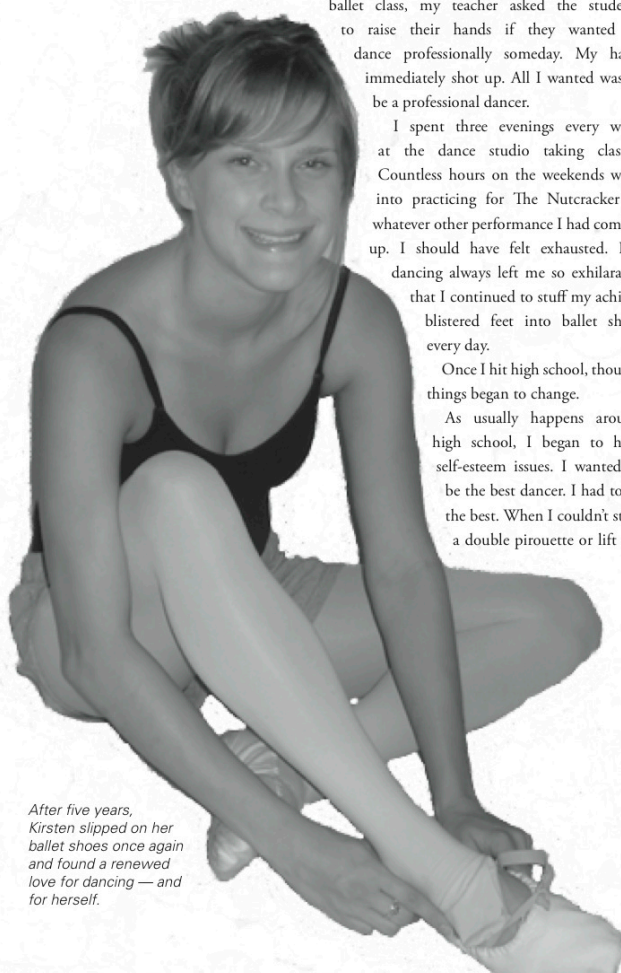
I went to class two weeks later fully prepared to make polite excuses about being too busy to dance in the recital, only to find out that when I'd missed class the week before, I'd been given a place in the beginning formation of the routine — meaning it would be rude of me to refuse to dance and mess up what my teacher had already carefully planned. I couldn't say no.

That's how I found myself on that stage, dressed in a ridiculous get-up, feeling foolish ... then the slow, classical music began to play.

As I started to dance, lifting my right leg into a *grand rond de jambe*, the sweet feeling and familiarity of the steps washed over me. And all of my embarrassment vanished.

While dancing I tried to just enjoy the moment. When the routine reached its end, I twirled toward the center of the stage, feeling a little relieved and a little sad.

I felt sad because I didn't know if I would ever perform again. I always regretted quitting ballet when I was 15 because I was afraid of never having it in my life again. But I guess going back after five years — and not just taking classes, but performing again — showed me that maybe I can never really quit. And who knows what dances are yet to come?



After five years, Kirsten slipped on her ballet shoes once again and found a renewed love for dancing — and for herself.