

Ms. Swenson's Story



(1) I stood staring at the bulletin board. My feet suddenly felt too big for my body, too heavy to move, stuck to the floor—my name was not there.

(2) There must be some mistake. My name was missing. I checked one more time.

(3) Ballet level 1—there was my name, Sarah Swenson. Good. Modern level 1—there was my name, Sarah Swenson. Good. Pointe level 1—many names, but none of them were mine. No Sarah Swenson.

(4) Not good.

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(5) The hallway with the teacher's offices was dead silent. I heard my heartbeat: *Why? Why? Why? Why?*

(6) My dance teacher's door was slightly open. I knocked.

(7) "Come in," she called.

(8) I pushed the door open and stepped inside. She was standing over her desk, looking through a stack of papers. She glanced up when I came in, then looked down again.

(9) "Yes?" she said.

(10) I swallowed. "Um... my name. My name, um, wasn't on the list for pointe."

(11) She looked up at me again. "And?" she said. "Why are you here?"

(12) I felt my cheeks burning. "I—I'd like to know why." My voice was small and weak.

(13) "What's your name?" she asked, standing straighter and looking at me with her eyes narrowed, like she was trying to remember me.

(14) "Sarah Swenson," I said. I cleared my throat. I swallowed again.

(15) She pursed her lips. I waited.

(16) "Oh, yes, yes, yes," she said at last, her face clearing. She stepped to the side of her desk. "I remember you. You're not strong enough. You need a few months to develop some more strength. We can see you dance again you after Christmas, but absolutely no pointe for this semester."

(17) As she talked, the room seemed to get smaller and smaller. *No pointe? My thoughts raced. Back home... Years... I've been working...*

(18) "But I—I've *done* it!" I said. "I've been en pointe for three years. My senior dance—my senior *dance* was en pointe. Can I try again? I know I can—"

(19) "No." She held up a hand to stop me. "Miss Swenson, I'm sorry, but our decision is final. You're just not ready. If you put the work in, we'll try again in a few months. That is all."

Comment [SK1]: After reading this paragraph, I had students pause. I asked them, "How would you feel if you were in my shoes? Why?" They jotted their reactions in the margin of their paper, and I invited a few students to share with the class.

(20) I nodded; it was a tiny nod. My throat tightened and I couldn't speak. I turned and left. On the long walk back to my dorm room, I knew we would not reevaluate in a few months. I had already put the work in. It was not enough.

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(21) Before college, ballet was the only type of dancing I had done. The semester started shortly after my meeting with the dance teacher, and I discovered something new: modern dance.

(22) I loved it.

(23) And you know what? I was *good* at it.

(24) I pushed myself every day. My body was not made for ballet; I was made for freer movement. I never would have known that if I hadn't tried something new.

(25) Without pointe, I discovered another new thing Belhaven College had to offer: creative writing. I'd been writing my whole life—even before I could read, I told stories with pictures—but no one had ever told me that you could *study* that in *college*!

(26) I danced. I read. I wrote. I started to grow and change from the stories I was hearing, sharing, and living. I had discovered something I love even more than dance: words.

(27) All because my name was not on the list for pointe.

Comment [SK2]: After reading this paragraph, I had students pause again. I asked them, "What would you do if you were me?" They jotted their reactions in the margin of their paper, and then shared with a partner.

Notes for helping students begin their own drafts and find their stories to share:

How I thought about this:

Oh, man! Thinking up a good and important story to share is HARD! I tried to write stories three different times this summer, and I had to talk with a lot of different people to finally find a story that felt important enough to share.

1) I looked through the questions I had planned for you all to think about. I tried to answer as many as I could, and what helped me finally find the story I wanted to share was asking myself about things that had been important to me in the past but are not important to me anymore, and why that changed.

2) I thought about different times and ages of my life—when I was very little, last year, when I was in college.

3) I knew I'd picked the right story when it felt a little bit scary to share it. I hadn't really told this story to many people before I shared it with you; I had to really trust that you would be kind to me and hear my story well. The best stories that we can share WILL be a little bit risky! We really want to know each other. It's worth it.

Question 5:

- What's an experience from your past that changed you? How did it change you?
 - In my freshman year of college, I didn't make it into one of the dance classes I wanted to be in. That was really hard because I came to college to be a dance major, and I'd been dancing for years and years and had been one of the best dancers at my studio back home, and then a teacher at my college had to tell me that I wasn't strong enough, I wasn't prepared enough, and I wasn't ready. I chose to focus on other types of dance, ended up changing my major to creative writing, and truly getting very good at other things—but it meant I had to let my first dream go.