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Rift Valley

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Rift Valley

The problem with ballerinas, Chrissie decided, was the great lengths they would go to in order to hop around on two little squares. Nothing seemed natural about standing stock-still for sixteen counts on nothing but packed sawdust, tissue paper, and glue—for that matter, the desire to do that seemed unnatural.

Ballerinas were proud of their ability to be gracefully unnatural, though, because they were the only group to pull the venetian blinds up on the window-wall of the studio room. Chrissie had watched this particular movement of *Swan Lake* at least thirty times since she started coming to this studio three years ago—she figured even she could muddle through the steps.

Chrissie's university didn't want taps to scuff up their nice state-of-the-art dance floors, so she searched out this place, Academy for Dance Arts, and begged them to let her tap during empty studio times. She also kept a plywood board under her bed to tap on, but her roommates hated the noise and it was about 146 square feet too small anyway.

As the fifteen fifteen-year-olds filed out of the room, all of them purposely trying not to stare at Chrissie's 5'7" lanky form scrunched up on the floor, she decided there was one positive thing about ballerinas: their punctuality. Their class ended at 4:30 on the dot every week, and Chrissie had a full stage room to herself by 4:32.

At the door, Chrissie slipped her socked feet into the worn pair of "men's style" lace-up tap shoes, just so she could hear the taps clip-clap across the floor and echo in the room. She set her backpack down under the mounted sound system and plugged her phone into the input jack before she turned the system on. The hum of the speakers filled the empty space while she searched her phone for the right playlist, Tap Mixes, and she pressed play.

She let the first twenty seconds of "Saturday Night Fish Fry" play so she could adjust the volume—and reach the part of the song she had done a rift combination to in the eighth grade. Dancers always held onto little pieces of all their routines forever—rift combos, time step series, the hot, blinding sensation of looking up at the pot lights some fifty feet above you because that one asshole choreographer thought head

tilts were “all the rage.”

Chrissie had danced since she was three. She had competed since she was six—she’d competed with tap solos since she was nine. She won her first competition when she was ten—literally the day after her tenth birthday, March 14. Did she have a birthday party that year? Chrissie spun a clean double pirouette on the resin-coated floor. She jumped out to land it, enjoying the loud snap of all four taps hitting the floor at once. She remembered having dinner at the Olive Garden with her parents and grandparents and her coach, Janelle, but whether it was for her birthday or her trophy was beyond her. It might’ve been both.

The next song to blare through the speakers—a remix of “Magic”—was from her senior year tap solo. It would be four years in April since she last performed it, and Chrissie still remembered all but thirty-two counts of it. She missed her prom for the competition. She took second place. She hadn’t touched a stage since.

Coach Janelle was pissed. They hadn’t spoken since they posed together for a photo with the trophy.

The song cut out to play her text tone before starting up again. Chrissie quit her turning time steps—a step devised by Janelle because it would be “impressive” and “original” when in reality Chrissie only did it correctly once, at the competition—to check the message.

Mark: Outside ready when you are?

Chrissie let the last thirty seconds of the song play over the speaker. Mark had agreed to pick her up so she didn’t have to walk half a mile to the bus stop where the bus might not come until after dark. The only catch: she had to accompany him on a geocache trail some three miles from the studio. She paused the music player when the song was over and unplugged her phone from the machine.

Mark didn’t understand “I have the room until 5” meant that she wanted to stay until 5.

Chrissie shoved the phone in her bag, slung it over her shoulder, and scuffed to the door before she took her shoes off. No one makes a career out of tap anymore unless they want a reality TV show, Chrissie reminded herself. No one wants to give a reality TV show to someone with twelve second places, seven thirds, and only five firsts.

She slipped her dusty hiking boots on and headed to the front door.

Chrissie met Mark in her mineralogy class last spring. She was interested in the hydrology end of the geology spectrum, and Mark liked to make maps, so they muddled through a required, rocks-only geology course to score themselves C's because nobody wants to suffer that class twice.

The moment their friendship began was on a two-and-a-half kilometer hike to a mine on the mineralogy camping trip. The weather had been constant rain, and Chrissie decided to test the waterproofability of her \$140 hiking boots by falling behind the clump of damp mineral hunters to cramp roll in a puddle. Toe-toe-heel-heel—splish-splish-splash-splash. A toe-stand for good measure: swa-splooosh. A fan of muddy water kicked out from under her heels. Chrissie was satisfied with the spray and her dry feet.

“Wow,” she heard behind her. “How are you not on your ass right now?”

Chrissie glanced back to find Mark—or the boy that sat in front of her in lecture and popped the plugs in and out of his one-inch ear gauges with his right hand while he took notes with his left. He had a yellow plastic poncho over his clothes and backpack, a Garmin strapped to his wrist and his field notebook open in his hand, a pencil shoved between his pointer and middle fingers.

“I dance,” she said. Cramp rolls were most often copouts in routines—they aren't particularly impressive.

“Mark,” he said, holding out the hand with the GPS strapped to it.

She turned on her toe in the puddle and shook his hand. “Chrissie.”

Now Chrissie wandered up to Mark's white Pontiac Montana van with the dent in the passenger door idling in the roundabout. She grabbed the handle and yanked—hard—to get it open. “Thanks,” she said, tossing her once-blue canvas backpack to the car floor. She plopped down, slammed the door shut, and buckled her seatbelt.

“Look,” Mark said, popping the right plug out of his ear. He held out his hand to reveal a shimmery clear gauge with brown-gold needle shoots locked inside. “Rutilated quartz.”

“Put that back,” she said. “That's gross—it's been in your ear.”

Mark popped the double flare plug back in and put the van into drive. “I wash them every day,” he said, stepping his foot onto the gas.

As if the one-inch earlobe holes weren't memorable enough, Mark also

had gold wire framed glasses and shoulder-length ash brown hair he kept in a ponytail. Chrissie's mom was so mad when she'd changed her Facebook profile picture to one of her and Mark because apparently "gauged ears and ponytails are red flags."

They weren't dating though—that'd be weird.

They stayed friends after the class was over because they both liked the same TV shows and watching entire seasons of new ones on Netflix in one sitting.

Mark drove them to a dirt parking lot with a sign that said, "Lydell Park." He pulled his backpack out of the backseat. "The directions said we have to cross a stream," he said. "Something like Lydell Creek. Empties into Lydell Pond."

"Who the hell is Lydell anyway?" Chrissie smiled as she slid her bag straps on her shoulders and kicked the door open. Streams. They were so gentle looking, but water had the power to turn rocks into sands and plains into valley.

September was still warm enough she didn't bother with a coat but cool enough she borrowed a hoodie from Mark's trunk. She put the hood up to cover the back of her neck from the light wind—her gold-blonde pixie hair cut lost some of its function in the fall and winter.

Chrissie followed behind Mark as they started down the trail and looking for orange X's spray-painted onto trees. He had the GPS on his arm, scribbling a bird's eye view of the trail into his field notebook. Somehow he didn't lose track of the trees with X's—or run into one.

Chrissie quickly grew bored of the thick trees with their thick leaves that made their own rainstorms when the wind was strong enough. She began to rift-walk behind Mark to pass the time. Scuff-heel-heel-heel-toe drop. Scuff-heel-heel-heel-toe drop. Mark walked slow enough she only feel a few feet behind.

Rifts were supposed to sound like a scrape and four hammer pounds. In mud and chunky hiking boots, they were just five dull thuds. She looped her thumbs through the straps on her bag.

Chrissie recalled from her intro geology course a chain of lakes in East Africa, with species of fish found nowhere else on the planet but in their respective lake. The lakes were part of a failed rift—the unlucky third arm where continental crust was forced apart by an upwelling of magma underneath. The crust rose until it broke, always into three arms

like a Y, two always spread apart into an ocean, and one always failed. The failed arm, a crack in the ground more or less, filled with sand and rainwater, creating lakes. The lakes filled with fish and the fish evolved into different species.

Mark took a sharp turn off the path and Chrissie trotted after him to catch up.

They crossed Lydell Creek, and Mark promised they'd stop on the way back. That boy would push down a mountain, Chrissie thought, if it meant getting a rusty toolbox filled with plastic army men or some other cheap prize.

The cache, it turned out, was stuffed into the lowest branch of a tree painted with two X's and a smiley face. Chrissie held onto Mark's bag, Garmin, and field notebook. When Mark was safely straddled over the branch and digging into the rusty toolbox, Chrissie flipped through the pages of Mark's notebook. Little map sketches, X's where each marked tree was. A scale in the corner: one centimeter was 100 meters. She glanced to the GPS screen to find it in metrics—the most scientific model of measurements.

Mark swung down from the tree, hanging by both hands before dropping the last two feet to the ground. She handed him his stuff back.

"Here," he said, taking something out of his pocket. "I thought you would appreciate that."

In his palm sat a little Happy Meal Barbie toy wearing a pink tutu. Chrissie smiled and thanked him before she took the toy and slipped it into the big front pocket on her sweatshirt.

"Stream?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said while pressing something on the GPS screen.

Mark and Chrissie walked side-by-side as they wandered back through their trail to find the creek. Chrissie folded her arms over her chest as they walked. The setting sun made the air cooler, and wind showers from the trees weren't helping. Her skin felt wet under the heavy gray sweatshirt. Mark set a hand on her back as they walked.

"Don't," she said, taking a step away from him. "I'm fine."

"You looked cold," he said. "Sorry."

Chrissie tried to smile anyway. She shoved her hands into the sweatshirt

pocket and turned the plastic Barbie toy over and over. She had plastic-molded pointe shoes, and Chrissie knew Mark knew the difference, but then again she never heard of tap dancing Barbie before.

They came to the stream, and Chrissie perked up because she realized this part of Lydell Creek—the whole thing went through the small college town about seven miles from here—was upstream. Chrissie's favorite feat of water happened upstream, where the velocity was great enough to push rocks across the streambed.

She stopped at the bank of the river and begged Mark to hold her boots while she climbed in and walked along the big, unmovable cobbles. The bed was only three feet across and filled with heavy cobbles, but Chrissie could see pebbles being pushed downstream across the bottom. She let the water wash over her feet and ankles and pretended she was also a pebble in the stream, following the flow of the water.

"We really shouldn't get off course," Mark said. His eyes flashed from Chrissie to the GPS screen. "I only have half a battery on this."

"We're on a stream," she said, hopping to the next cobble a foot over. "We'll just follow it back to your map."

Mark walked alongside the bank and carried her hiking boots by the laces while Chrissie hopped cobbles. She'd follow them until she ran out of big enough stones, then they would turn around. An orange X was on a tree close to the bank—they couldn't get that lost.

"Aren't you afraid of bacteria or something?" Mark asked.

"Says the boy who has to wash his earlobes every day or they smell like rotting flesh," Chrissie teased. She slowly moved her foot from a large cobble to a smaller one, balancing the ball of her foot over the smooth, rounded surface. The gap was two feet—maybe two and a half. Cold water rushed around her feet and splashed onto her rolled up pant legs. She smiled. "I did your thing now we're doing my thing."

Mark pouted. "I know."

Streams that moved bigger cobbles were better—rocks rolling and knocking into other rocks. Streams with the power to spit up small rocks lost in the tumbling water. They were more fun, not so much to walk through but certainly to listen to. A cacophony of taps and clunks and scuffs like a dance class before being called to order.

Chrissie moved her left foot off the back rock, aiming for a pink-gold

colored cobble making a small rapid two feet ahead of the one under her right foot. She swung her left foot in to her right ankle and held still a moment before swinging it out to the next rock. Her right foot lost its grip on the little round rock, her ankle bowed out, and her foot slid off the rock and forward, throwing Chrissie back. A popping crackle that could never be the sound of cobbles on a streambed filled her ears before Chrissie landed butt-first in the shallow water.

Sharp pain filled her right leg and Chrissie sat dumbly in the stream, letting the water brush over her—the velocity strong enough to push her right foot back and forth, compounding the pain.

She should've cried. Instead she glanced down to the misshapen ankle connected to her body. The little cobble she'd been standing on was between her feet now.

“Chrissie—whoa, hold on,” Mark said. He dropped her shoes and his GPS and stepped into the stream to scoop her up and lift her out. “Don't try to walk on that,” he said, digging his phone out of his pocket.

Chrissie nodded as Mark dialed the phone. “Yeah—my friend just fell in a stream and broke her ankle,” he said into the phone. “No, it's broken, I don't think bones should do that—” He balanced the phone between his shoulder and cheek, and helped Chrissie to the ground. “Lydell Creek, but upstream, north of town—” Mark picked up the GPS again and started pressing buttons. “—I can give you coordinates, but by the lot off 54th. My van is parked there, it's white—no she seriously can't walk I don't know how the skin didn't break. Down the path to the creek, there's a tree with an—I know an ambulance won't fit down that path.”

Chrissie leaned against Mark's leg and focused her eyes between her motionless ankle and the rushing stream behind it.

—

Memory stopped for several hours—either Chrissie's subconscious pushed it out, or passing out from the pain made it spotty. There were pieces like flashing lights and paramedics poking and prodding her and then doctors poking and prodding her and she remembered the word “surgery.”

The tape in her mind picked up in a cramped hospital room. Her mom. Mark. Supernatural on a TV mounted on the wall across from her.

“Chrissie-baby I told you that geocaching stuff was dangerous,” her mother said, setting a hand on her daughter's knee.

The bed was propped up so she lay on an incline. “We were done geocaching,” she argued weakly, surprised and upset by the hoarseness of her voice and tightness in her throat. She watched the TV, monsters and dashing men flashing across the screen. “I’m sorry.”

There was an IV in her right arm. She could feel the plastic pushing against her skin, held down by an adhesive patch. Her arm was cold with IV fluid, so she covered it with the blanket.

Mark sat in a chair next to her mom, and he held the sweatshirt. Her backpack and muddy boots were under his chair.

A doctor waltzed in then with a clipboard. He produced a pen from under the clip and tapped it on the board as he talked. “Ms. Maaks—” he started. Tap, tap, tap. “We had to put in two screws to hold those bones together—” Tap, tap, tap. “—successful surgery though. A few strained ligaments, but that’s to be expected—” Tap, tap, tap.

“Stop,” Chrissie said, her voice breaking.

Tap, tap, tap. “We’ll get the swelling down and wrap your ankle up before you leave. How’s the pain?” Tap, tap, tap.

“Fine,” she said, tears sitting in her eyes. “Just stop. With the pen. Please.”

He glanced up from his paper and noticed the tears. “Don’t be brave, sweetheart,” he said. Tap, tap, tap. “On a scale from one to ten—how’s the pain?” He flipped the pen over to write on the page.

Chrissie tried to focus, but the TV was spewing oofs and ahhs from a fight scene, and her mom was stroking her knee, and her arm was still cold. “I don’t know—”

The doctor had moved from his spot to poke at the IV bag hanging above her on a metal pole. “This is about empty. I’ll have the nurse bring another one.” He wrote something on the paper and tapped the pen—tap, tap, tap—before sliding it under the clip and waltzing out.

A nurse brought another bag of IV fluids and hung it, attached it to the tube connected to Chrissie’s arm. Whatever was in the bag was strong enough to make her fall asleep.

—

Chrissie was discharged from the hospital a day and half later, enough time for the swelling to go down so they could get a plaster cast on her. Enough time for one of her roommates to realize she was gone and text

her. For her mother to stop worrying and head back home because she had missed too much work already.

Mark brought her back to her townhouse. It had rained that morning; Chrissie heard the drops beating on the tiny hospital room window at 5AM because heaven knows she wasn't asleep with that dumb IV in her arm. There was a puddle in the piss-poor sidewalk job right in front of the stoop. Mark offered to carry her, Chrissie refused. She set her left foot—protected by her hiking boot—in the puddle, and set the two rubber crutch nubs on the step. She pushed herself up, wobbling on the crutches, but managing the six-inch step without breaking anything else.

The sight of the stairs right inside the front door made Chrissie mad, and she hobbled over to the sunken leather couch on the main floor. No one else was home, probably all in class. Mark fumbled with the bag of prescription painkillers and the bag of stuff from the hospital: the right socks to her left ones, her clothes she had come in, her phone and charger.

“Thanks,” Chrissie said, carefully getting down onto the couch. The pink of her cast was obnoxious, but Mark had insisted she get a color—“white will get dirty,” “I thought pink was your favorite color”—and she gave in. “You can probably still make it to class.”

Mark dropped the various bags onto the glass top coffee table, circa 2001. The prescription bottles clamored. “No, I want to help you get settled.”

“I’m fine.” Chrissie leaned back on the arm of couch and tore a throw blanket from the back to cover her. “See, all settled.”

“Do you want something to eat? Before you take the Vicodin?” Mark slid off his backpack and produced a videotape from the front pocket. “Top Hat, 1935—I found it at a garage sale.”

“I really just want to sleep, Mark,” she pleaded.

He nodded. “Do you want me to start it, at least?”

“Fine, alright.”

Mark put the tape in the ancient player, turned all the equipment on, and managed to get Chrissie to stomach a few stale crackers and enough water to swallow a chalky Vicodin tablet. Mark sat on the floor to watch the movie, surely feigning interest in the antics of the musical romantic comedy. Chrissie gave in—he would stay unless she managed to carry him out.

She stared at the ceiling and listened to goofy romance and Fred Astaire's clomping tap numbers on the TV. Nine weeks in this cast. Six of physical therapy.

Two years before her ankle would function normally.

Two metal screws that glowed in perfect shape on X-rays, reminiscent of a dog that swallowed a roll of pennies.

Two Sharpie signatures, one Mark and one "XOXO Love Mom and Dad" on her the top of her foot. Her roommates would sign it in pity: Jenne, Macy, Madeline—with snarky smiley faces and pointy hearts.

Chrissie closed her eyes and took a long breath. She didn't ask the doctor how long before she could tap again. It was a dumb question, she told herself. She would graduate in one year, anyway, and lose the time to a job, hopefully one her degree trained her for. She knew she'd stop eventually, she just preferred to make the choice on her own terms.

—

"Mark, you can't put glitter on everything to make it better," Chrissie argued, her eyes focused on the plastic rhinestones hot-glued to her hot pink cast.

"I know," he said, setting a bowl of boxed macaroni and cheese in her lap. "I wasn't trying to make anything better. I just thought it should match you—it should be pretty and not weigh you down."

She picked up the bowl and held it up to her face so the steam warmed her face. "Don't," she said. "Thanks for dinner."

"You're welcome," he answered. "I'm sorry—I wanted to cheer you up."

Chrissie scooped up a spoonful of orange noodles, something that always tasted like home inside the synthetic cheese sauce. She knew Mark meant well. "I'm glad you've been helpful," she said. "But I'd rather not think about glitter right now."

Mark sat down on the floor. "It's not the end of the world—it's not like dance is your livelihood."

"Yeah, but I used to live for it, Mark. I wanted the end to be my choice," she said. "Not nature's or whatever you want to call this—this incident. Now I have to turn my back on what's been my entire life, no good-bye, no—no nothing. Just done. Forever. And being blinded by my own torture device doesn't help any of that."

“I thought—”

“I know you want to help, but you can’t, and I don’t want you to—”
Chrissie set her hand over her mouth. “Mark—I’m—that came out wrong.”

Mark stood and scooped up his hot glue gun and the dish of rhinestones. “No, it’s fine. What do tap dancers do, anyway? This isn’t 1935—no one watches those movies anymore.”

“Mark—”

“You quit once,” he said. “A long time ago. Do you really think you’re quitting again?”

Chrissie sighed. “Just leave.”

Mark slung his bag over his shoulder and slammed the door behind him.

A few minutes after the headlights on Mark’s van disappeared down the drive, the lights on Jenne’s Toyota took their place. She’d be sympathetic. She’d say the cast is tacky and offer to pick the rhinestones off. She’d eat the other half of the mac and cheese sitting on the stove.

—

Chrissie set the gray metal crutches forward about six inches before she leaned her weight on them. She picked her left foot off the ground and swung herself to cover the gap and line up with the crutches. She’d been home for several days, and she hadn’t quite gotten the hang of using the crutches. Nothing weighs down on a dancer quite like a prop.

She had also decided there was no reason to move anymore, but that was beside the point.

Mark had texted her, and that was the point. Would you please come down to the park. The creek is flooded and I couldn’t not share—it’s epic.

Chrissie set her crutches a whopping eight inches ahead of her. Her eyes focused on the cement—the same gray as her crutches—as she swung herself to meet them. She was a block from her townhouse, and her arms were throbbing from use. The dishtowels she duct-taped to the armrests were useless in the battle against chafing her underarms.

I don’t think I should be anywhere near mud right now.

What about the bridge?

Chrissie had watched Top Hat at least a dozen times because she could rewind it from the couch. What do tap dancers do anyway? Street performances, Broadway, maybe the circus (depends on the circus). But street performing was dangerous, and Broadway dancers have to sing as well, and the circus? Chrissie was afraid of elephants.

Lydell Creek was flooded up to the playground so yellow caution tape was wrapped around the metal bars to ward off daredevil children. The cobblestone path and bridge were taunting and full of obstacles for Chrissie's three-legged walking. She flopped down—something she'd become skilled in—onto the wood plank bench in the middle of the bridge.

Mark leaned on the railing of the bridge to examine the overflowed banks and water just sitting in the park. A big dog pulled the leash out of his walker's hand and rushed into the giant mud puddle. Chrissie could hear the walker curse and yell for the animal to come back.

"I made you go down that trail," Mark said. "I ended your dance... career. Thing."

Chrissie looked at her feet. "Don't say that."

"It's my fault." He sat next to her.

She curled her fingers around her knees. "No, it's not. It was an accident, a stupid fluke, who knows."

"You don't believe that."

"No, but I don't believe it's your fault either."

Chrissie shrugged and scuffed her boot against the cobblestone, a dull thud on the polished rock. A rift, minus the right heel. Scuff-heel-heel-toe drop. One part of the rift always fails, making up for it in freakish fish populations. "Maybe in six weeks I'll know."

Mark laughed.

Chrissie elbowed him.

He elbowed her back.

"Tap dancers don't do anything," she admitted. The words felt good, if not a little bitter. Chrissies remembered the circus, the elephants—

not worth it. She set her broken foot out to rest it on the heel. The rhinestones caught the light and reflected little specks onto the bridge. They'd grown on her, or maybe she'd just accepted they were there. Her own freakish fish population, the result of specific conditions repeated nowhere else. "I do need your help for something," she said. "These are only on the front and I can't reach to do the back."

"I might be able to work something out," he said.

One piece of the rift has to fail, Chrissie thought, or the other two don't work. No one actually knows, but she figured it was a good guess—or maybe invisible screws hold that piece together on purpose. Whatever the reason, the other two always open an ocean on dry land.