

**THE**

*KILOMETRES APART.  
CLOSER THAN EVER.*

**LONG**

**DISTANCE**

**PLAYLIST**



**TARA EGLINGTON**



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*For the friends you can call in the middle of the night*

AUGUST

# Isolde

Saturday 25 August

I wasn't meant to be at that party. I almost *never* went to parties, especially on a Saturday, because Saturdays were either:

- back-to-back ballet classes
- dress rehearsals for school productions
- auditions.

Ask any ballet dancer – Saturdays are probably the busiest day of their week, and parties are the first thing you give up if you want ballet to be your career, not just your hobby.

Back when I was still in primary school, I tried to do it all. On a typical Saturday afternoon, I'd race from rehearsals to my non-dance friends' birthday parties – usually arriving three hours after everyone else.

Ninety-five per cent of the time I missed singing 'Happy Birthday', so it was pretty much a given that every piece of cake would have disappeared by then (yes, I am a ballet dancer and I *do* eat birthday cake, shocking, right?). I'd hang out with everyone for an hour or so, still wearing my ballet leotard and tights, and then Mum or Dad would drive me back to the dance studio to start warming up for that evening's performance.

In my mind, I was juggling it all. But being the last to arrive and the first to leave their party, tends to stick in your friends'

minds, no matter how great a birthday present you give them. All they remember is how late you showed up. They don't understand why you couldn't skip practice *that one time*, and I can't blame them. You *don't* understand unless you're a dancer.

As I got older and ballet became more serious, juggling was impossible. I couldn't slip off between rehearsal breaks. Teachers were watching carefully to see who 'took things seriously', because yes, making it as a dancer took talent, but that was only a small part of the picture. The rest was discipline, commitment and the absolute compulsion to *work harder than everyone else*. If I wasn't practising or performing, I was doing Pilates classes to work on my core and flexibility, or I was cross-training at the gym to build muscle, or I was stretching (a ballet dancer is *always* stretching), or sewing straps on pair after pair of pointe shoes.

If there's one question that sums up my world right now, at age fifteen and eight months (which is getting *old* in ballet years), then it's: *what are you willing to sacrifice?*

I feel guilty even writing the word 'sacrifice' because so many professional dancers say, 'If dancing is your dream, then you shouldn't think of those early years as "sacrifice".'

In ballet, the reality is, if you don't want it enough, there will always be someone waiting in the wings to take your place. So dancing always came first. That was the law I lived by. Everything else in my life fell by the wayside in the name of the greater goal.

This included parties, the movies and any activity that could result in a career-ending injury (skiing, ice-skating, almost all sports really). It was sleepovers and hanging out at the mall on a Thursday night, school camps and even my Year Six Graduation Dinner because that was the night I was dancing the role of Coppélia.

I feel like I've been running on a treadmill for years, and every year life dials up the speed even faster – and I have to

sprint like mad to adjust to the new pace, otherwise I'll topple off and that will be the end of everything.

There's this panic inside me that I'm Running Out of Time. Thirteen- and fourteen-year-olds are getting places with the National Ballet School. Let's face it, *this* year should have been the age I got in. Mum had never let me audition any younger, even though I'd all-out begged, and my teachers had spoken to her privately because *I had real promise*, and Dad had offered to pay for the rent on an apartment in Melbourne for me if I got in; heck, he'd move there if he had to.

I knew that it was selfish of me to ask Dad to even *think* of moving and leave Mum, who had to be based here in Sydney for her job, alone, especially now that Vi was overseas finishing off her thesis at Cambridge. But the rest of me stung with anger every year Mum said no, because didn't she understand what getting into that school – *the best school in the country* – would mean for my career? She was holding me back.

Ana's parents had let her audition from the age of twelve. The first two years, she wasn't successful. But on her third attempt, my best friend became one of eighteen students, out of the thousands that auditioned from all over the country, who got in.

Fifteen was the magical age that Mum deemed 'mature enough'. By some miracle, the National Ballet School finally had on-campus accommodation, which meant if I got in, I wouldn't have to live in a rental apartment.

But, as everyone knows now, the pressure of *finally trying out* got to me, and in June, I messed up the audition that I'd been working towards for as long as I could remember.

So now the treadmill is even faster, because the next time I audition I'll be sixteen, and if I don't get into a professional school that's linked to a ballet company by that point, that's it. Doors start closing on me.

I know this sounds conceited, but I'd never thought that much about the reality of *not* being good enough. Sure, I'd struggled with my line or my turnout on occasion, but those were things I could triumph over with hard work. Nothing made me feel the way that dance did – nothing came *close* to that high – so I knew I'd always give everything to it.

Since I blew that audition there's this ever-constant little voice in the back of my mind that says, *What if your everything isn't enough?*

And so now more than ever, any spare bit of energy I have, that last bit of reserve I drag out of myself when I feel like I'm sleepwalking after pushing my body as far as it can go, goes to ballet.

When Kelly from dance class posted on Facebook that her parents were out of town on the 25th of August, and miracle of all miracles, we didn't have a show that Saturday night, I didn't even *consider* going.

Aidan made a face when I said no. In any ballet class, there are always a few magical creatures that can party hard and get away with it. Who illogically seem to perform *better* after 'letting off steam'. Aidan is one of these.

I'm not. I felt guilty, of course, telling him to go alone, secretly hoping that he might wind up saying, *No, let's just hang out together*, even if that meant stretching our sore calves in my living room while watching TV. But Aidan just shrugged and said, 'Cool, I'll go to the party alone, then.'

For a millisecond, I thought about changing my mind. But the auditions for *Sleeping Beauty* were on Monday afternoon, and I wanted the part of Aurora. Every lead role was another addition to my dance resume, a flag to those analysing it that I was serious and had what it took. I knew extra rest and sleep would give me an edge. So sayonara party.

Tonight – the actual night of the party – around 8pm, I sent Aidan a *Hope you're having fun! :)* text. Ninety minutes later,

I hadn't had a reply. He always replied to my texts, usually within minutes. Then I started wondering whether he was mad at me.

The guilt kicked in. How lucky was I to be dating the cutest male dancer in our class, the one that all the other girls wanted, who I never dreamed would look twice at me until five months ago when he kissed me after the curtain fell on our autumn production?

We'd kissed during the show, of course, because I was Cinderella and he was the prince, but those had been little pecks – stage kisses. That opening night, he'd kissed me for real when no-one could see us, and it felt like we were the only ones in the world.

How lucky was I to have a boyfriend who understood ballet life, who was passionate about the same thing, who could really sympathise about injuries, or audition stuff-ups, who feels the same crazy level of elation that I do when I take those first steps onto the stage at the beginning of a show?

And so, while I was stretching, I started scrolling through Instagram, and judging by the photos from the party, you would swear I was the only one from class who *wasn't* there.

*You need to make an effort with people to have friends,* *Isolde*, my inner voice scolded.

Ever since Ana left, I'd felt like I had nobody in class (besides Aidan) who I was close to. Ana and I had always been together, whether we were doing pliés at the barre, or warming up backstage before a show. Because we were so tight, I'd never taken much time to joke with the other dancers or get to know them.

At that moment, I missed Ana so much it hurt. Even though we chatted online and skyped regularly, it wasn't the same.

So, at 10:30pm, I put on clothes that *weren't* leotard and tights, stepped into heels instead of ballet slippers and asked a very surprised-looking Dad to drive me to Kelly's party.

I was in a good mood before I stepped through the door to the party. But the second I crossed the doorway, everything changed.

*Aidan.*

*Steffanie.*

*Kissing.*

And the speed-of-light pace that I'd been living at for as long as I could remember slowed to a halt.

Looking back, I know the sound I made when I saw them – that mortifying half-choke – wasn't anywhere *near* loud enough for either Steffanie or Aidan to hear, but at that moment, it was as if the noise crossed the room like a sound wave from an explosion, because two seconds later, they stopped kissing.

Steffanie turned her head right around and saw me, and her whole face became red, right down to her swan-like neck. Whereas Aidan was the one facing me, and even though I was right in his line of sight when he opened his eyes, it was like he saw only Steffanie.

When his eyes finally met mine, my whole body started to shake. I wanted to shout or grab a drink from someone's hand and throw it in his face, or in Steffanie's face – DO something angry and powerful that proved I wasn't the vulnerable one – but I knew I didn't have a hope of saying a word because my teeth were chattering like mad.

So because I felt like I might actually die from pain or shock, or possibly even shame if I stayed there like a useless, trembling jellyfish for *one single second more*, I turned and ran the hell out of there.

# Taylor

## Saturday 25 August

I wasn't meant to be at that party.

Even though it's been almost fifteen months since that night, I still remember every moment leading up to saying 'yes' to that party in Wanaka.

I was wrecked from practice that day. I'd been trying to smooth out my landings coming out of a new Big Air trick – a frontside triple 1440 mute – and had fallen on my arse more times than I could count. To top that off, Joe had been in a foul mood, the one I called the 'bad-cop-coach' mood. All I wanted was two painkillers, some Netflix and bed.

I could just picture Joe's face if he found out I'd been at a party hours after he'd told me to 'get your (swear word) together. Stop saying yes to everything, and start saying NO for once. You can't have it all, mate, not if you want to be the best.'

So when Brad and Connor had barged through Mum and Dad's front door, yelling at me to get my arse in the car already, I was set on saying no.

'Come on, man, get your jacket on,' Brad said as he grabbed it from the hook on the wall near the door and tossed it at me.

'Nah, I'm going to skip this one,' I said.

'Seriously?' Connor made a face. 'You're not blowing us off to FaceTime Natalia, are you?'

'You *wish* you had a hot girlfriend like her to FaceTime. No, man, I'm just wiped from practice.'

‘We’re only going for a bit.’ Brad made a face. ‘I don’t want to drive back over the range too late.’

I heard Joe’s voice inside my head, saying, *Stop saying yes to everything*. He had a point – ‘yes’ was such a default for me that I was practically the definition of FOMO. My mouth formed the shape of ‘no’, but Connor interrupted me.

‘You know, word is that Travis is gonna be there.’

Travis Rice. Big mountain free rider. Red Bull athlete. Filmmaker. The guy that defined snowboarding in my mind, the guy that everyone else on the scene seemed to have crossed paths with at some point, except me. I knew Travis was in NZ, filming something top secret.

The ‘no’ became an ‘okay’.

That’s the word that kicks me in the guts every single day. Sends me spinning down a screwed-up thought tunnel of *what-ifs*:

What if I’d said *no*?

What if my mouth had let out two letters instead of four?

Two letters and I’d still have a snowboarding career.

Two letters and I’d be doing what I loved 24/7.

Two letters and I’d be travelling the world, rather than feeling like my own has collapsed in on me ...

# Isolde's Mobile

**Aidan**

Sunday 26 August, 12:09am

I'm going to keep calling until you pick up, Isolde.  
You have to let me explain, babe.

BABE? Aidan, leave me the HELL alone.

If you're not going to pick up the phone, I'm just  
going to say it – I didn't mean to hurt you.

THAT's the line you're going with?  
Please continue. I'd love to hear how you  
decided that RAMMING YOUR TONGUE DOWN  
STEFFANIE'S THROAT wouldn't upset me.

What I mean is I didn't plan to kiss Steffanie.  
We were talking, and then her head was right near  
mine and it just happened.

Things don't 'just happen', Aidan. You MADE it  
happen. At some point, YOU CHOSE to kiss her.

BTW, I know YOU kissed her because Kelly told  
me she saw the whole thing – just like EVERYONE  
else at the party. So YOU kissed her and didn't  
STOP kissing her (again, Kelly) until I showed up.

How do you think I felt, watching you kiss some  
other girl, when six weeks ago you told me you  
loved me?

Isolde, I didn't mean for it to happen this way.

'To happen this way'? Were you planning to dump me for Steffanie BEFORE this happened?

No. I'd just been thinking for the last month that our relationship wasn't working any more.

Right, you started thinking that two weeks after saying I LOVE YOU. Sounds legit ... oh, wait a minute, didn't Steffanie break up with her boyfriend A MONTH AGO? How stupid do you think I am?

Babe, I don't think you're stupid.

YOU DON'T GET TO CALL ME BABE ANY MORE. THAT'S STEFFANIE'S NAME NOW.

So, I'm guessing that this last month you were just waiting for the 'right time' to end things with me – let me guess, after the audition on Monday, right, so neither of us would screw up that uber-important thing? Then post-dumping, you'd wait however many 'appropriate' weeks before hooking up with Steffanie. Classy, Aidan.

Isolde, let's be real. The thing with Steffanie wouldn't have happened if things were good between us.

You mean – the thing with Steffanie wouldn't have happened if you weren't a lying, cheating jerk.

I wish we'd done this face to face. I didn't want an honest conversation to turn nasty.

Honest conversation? I thought that was the one we had at the park six weeks ago, aka 'I love you'.

I WASN'T lying when I said those words.

You obviously were – because you don't go from loving someone, TRULY loving someone, to wanting another girl in six weeks!

It was complicated, okay? Of course I felt for you – we were together for five months. But come on, Isolde, 90% of our conversations were about ballet.

So what? We're ballet dancers. You KNOW how that works.

See, that's just it. Ballet is your whole world.

I know you're going to take this the wrong way, but you're intense, Isolde.

That quality makes you an amazing dancer. I never told you this, but Ms Morris has told me at least three times over the last few years that you have 'that thing that can't be taught', which everyone knows means 'you can't take your eyes off her when she's on stage'. But maybe it's that intensity that doesn't work for us.

Everything is so serious right now, with class, with auditions ... I need some lightness now and then. Maybe that's why the Steffanie thing happened. It's different with her – she doesn't take things so seriously.

So you cheating on me is MY fault. Because I care about things a lot, including you.

That's NOT what I meant.

You know we had more than ballet holding us together. One day, when you finally decide you don't want to lie to yourself about our relationship just because it suits you, you'll remember that.

Steffanie and I have a real connection.

Oh, go text Steffanie this crap, Aidan. Do everything with her, seeing as she's your soulmate.

In fact, why don't you both tour jeté off a cliff.

I understand you're angry. I get it. You KNOW it hurts me to have hurt you. I'm really hoping that one day, we can be friends again.

Go to hell, Aidan.