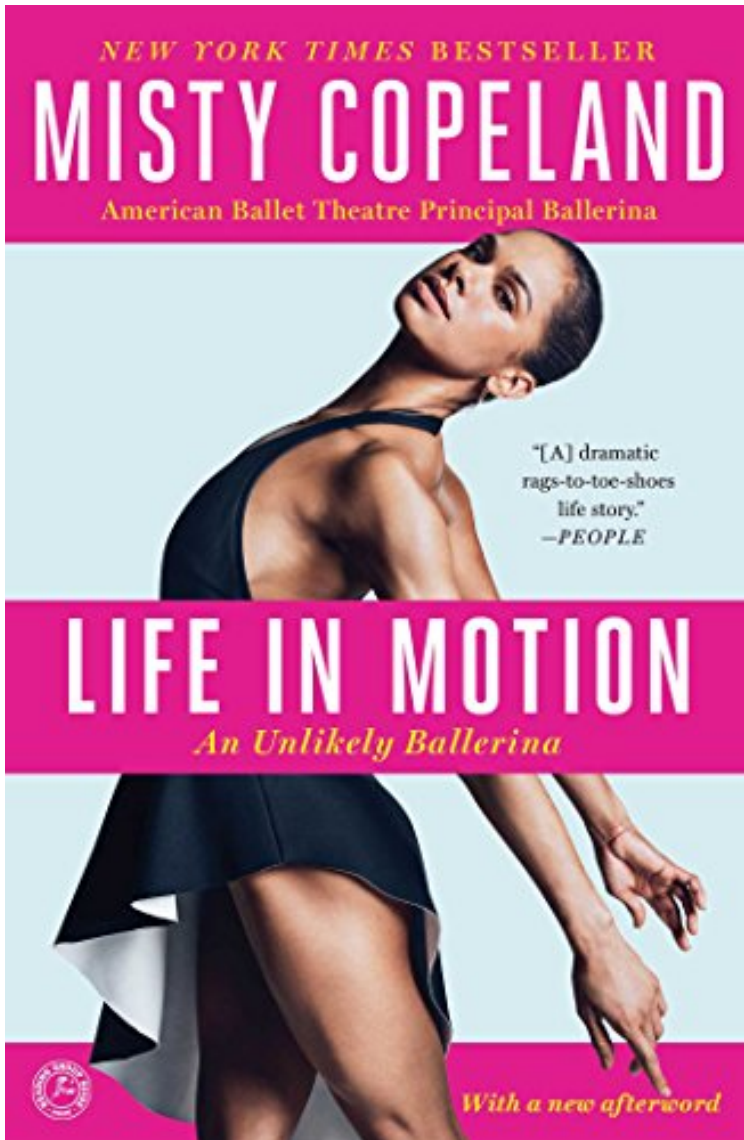


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# Life in Motion: An Unlikely Ballerina (English Edition)



Par Misty Copeland  
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## Description :

Prsentation de l'diteurDetermination meets dance in this memoir by the history-making ballerina.In this instant New York Times bestseller, Misty Copeland makes history, telling the story of her journey to become the first African-American principal ballerina at the prestigious American Ballet Theatre. But when she first placed her hands on the barre at an after-school community center, no one expected the undersized, underprivileged, and anxious thirteen-year-old to become one of Americas most groundbreaking dancers . A true prodigy, she was attempting in months roles that take most dancers years to master. But when Misty

became caught between the control and comfort she found in the world of ballet and the harsh realities of her own life, she had to choose to embrace both her identity and her dreams, and find the courage to be one of a kind. With an insiders passion, Misty opens a window into the life of an artist who lives life center stage, from behind the scenes at her first classes to her triumphant roles in some of the worlds most iconic ballets. A sensational memoir as sensitive and clear-eyed (The Washington Post) as her dancing, *Life in Motion* is a story of passion, identity and grace for anyone who has dared to dream of a different life.

*Life in Motion* Prologue ITS MORNING. EIGHT A.M., to be exact. My alarm goes off for no more than five seconds before I sit up to stop the nagging sound. As I stretch my arms, I realize how achy my body is. Still, its a wonderful aching every dancer knows. As many busy New Yorkers do, I click a few buttons on my computer and order my morning coffeeblack, no sugarand blueberry muffin from the corner deli to be delivered to the door of my Upper West Side apartment. Class starts at ten thirty at the Met. The ordinary rituals of my day belie what will be an extraordinary evening. Im eager for this day to start so that, later, I can rise again, this time on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera House. Tonight, I will become the first black woman to star in Igor Stravinskys iconic role for American Ballet Theatre, one of the most prestigious dance companies in the world. As the Firebird. This is for the little brown girls. My barre warm-up this morning would be familiar to any ballet dancer, whether shes an apprentice in Moscow or a seven-year-old taking his first ballet class in Detroit. Its slow structured yet fragmentaryperfectly designed to bring me to center, where I can dance freely without the barre, each motion a broken-down version of what tonights solos will be. I start with plis, increasingly deeper bends of the knee which warm up my legs while still allowing them the support that they need. I transition to larger movements of the leg, circling them in my ronds de jambe, and bending them in fondus, gradually stretching my hips and knees. I finish with a port de bras, stretching my torso forward and from side to side. I move to center, where each aerobic exercise moves more fluidly to the next without the barres strictures. I know that each graceful glissadewhere I jump in first position with both legs flicking to a dagger before closing into fifthstems from that disengaged brush of the leg where my foot leaves the floor, which stems from a tendu, a single pointed toe that Ive extended while maintaining contact with the floor. Ballets are just stylized versions of these seemingly basic movements on a grand scale. If the basic strength and elegance of a barre class is like slipping on a little black dress, the challenge of dancing a full three-act ballet is like learning to accessorize for any occasion. I have to think about whether I want to add sass or longing or, as I will tonight, the exotic, otherworldly energy of the mythical Firebird. You have to know the appropriate way to adorn each story and character with your body. Sleeping Beauty, for example, is very elegant and regal; its movements are fluid, with few accents. There are certain ways you have to hold your torso, position your head, and use your arms as a certain character that can differ from what I rehearse in class. The difference between being an amazing technician and being a soloist or principal is mastering those interpretive flourishes to tell the best story. Otherwise you arent a ballerina youre just another dancer. No matter how old you are or how long youve been dancing, ballet professionals know that we have to repeat these steps in class every day to maintain the strength and the clean positioning thats so essential to dancers. Im constantly working on my technique. Even a single day off can cause my muscles to forget what my mind knows by heart. I take class seven days a week, even though the company only works five days each week. I know that Ill never perfect the ballet techniqueever. Thats why I love it so much. It never becomes boring, even though Ive done all these movements in this very studio a million times over thirteen years. Its my safe place, where I can experiment. I sweat, grunt, and make faces that would never pass on the Metropolitan Opera House stage. Its the time to push myself beyond my limits so that my performances can feeleffortless, fresh. Not everyone wants to push themselves to that brink of breaking, but its what you commit to when youre a professionalthe very present reality that you may break instead of bend. Today, I dont jump. My left shin has been hurting, and I dont want to risk straining it before tonights performance. I have always been known as a jumper, able to soar to great heights and land like a feather on the stage. The Firebird flutters and flies. But it has been difficult to practice her grand jumps the past several weeks. The pain in my leg has been intense, and Ive had to save every bit of my strength for the actual performances. By now, I am as familiar with the feral gestures of the Firebird as I am with my own breath, my own heartbeat. American Ballet Theatres spring season has been under way for six weeks, with two more to go, and Ive previously performed as the Firebird twice in Southern California, barely an hour away from my hometown. I have a light rehearsal around noon at the Met, to space the choreography and get the feel of the stage. I want to be sure that I hit all of my marks, that Im always in the right place so I dont collide with the corps de ballet during my variations or move out of sync with my partner when we dance our pas de

deux. When the public walks into the hallowed space of the Metropolitan Opera, it sees its gilded foyer, its luxe patron boxes, and its grand stage. But behind the scenes there are studio spaces where performers can hone their magic, eking out a final practice before the show begins. I spend part of the afternoon in one of those rooms for a private rehearsal with Alexei Ratmansky, Firebirds choreographer. Alexei, ever the visionary and perfectionist, is changing the choreography up until the last minute. He tweaks a leap here, a twist there. We go through all my solos to ensure that the counts are exactly right. Beat one. On my toes. Beat two. Dart to the right. Beat three. Bound through the air. Alexei changes my entrance to the stage several times before we finally agree on the steps that best suit me. There are two other casts, and the Firebirds entrance in each is different, difficult, unique. I feel energized. I feel ready. This is for the little brown girls. I walk home to my apartment, a dozen blocks from the Met. I shower and flip to the Food Network just to have some background noise as I try to relax my mind, wind down my body. A couple hours later, Im back at the Met. The curtain wont go up until seven thirty p.m., and I wont take the stage until nine, but I want to be early, to not have to rush. It is a special evening, and not just for me. Kevin McKenzie, ABTs artistic director, is also being honored. It is his twentieth anniversary in that role, and in celebration there will be speeches, a video tribute featuring congratulations from the artistic directors of nearly every major classical company in the world, and performances by all of ABTs principal dancers. Its getting close to showtime. I have been a soloist for five years, and the eleven of us have a dressing room all to ourselves. But I have never used it. I prefer the comforting camaraderie of the dressing area shared by the corps. I spent six years as part of the corps de ballet, and with them I want to remain, preparing for my first principal role in a classical ballet surrounded by loving friends. Nothing feels different between us, even though Ill dance the lead. That, at least, provides normalcy on this extraordinary night. I have my own corner of the dressing room, claimed long ago. The table is so crowded with flowers and chocolates and photographs that there is barely room for me to squeeze my cell phone. There are bouquets of orchids, my favorite, and dozens of roses. Arthur Mitchell, the founder of Dance Theatre of Harlem, has left me a voice mail, wishing me luck. There are dozens more e-mails, texts, and cards from friends, family, and fans all over the country wishing me well. Looking at the beautiful bounty, I start to get emotional. But I cant be distracted. I cant be overwhelmed. This is for the little brown girls. I go into hair and makeup about a half hour after the evening performance starts. In the mirror, Misty disappears and a mystical creature takes her place, its face dusted with red glitter and painted with dazzling red spirals that shoot from the corners of its eyes. Even my inch-long false lashes are colored red. One of the companys dressers slicks back my hair into a smooth swirl to better attach my red and gold plume. Good luck, Misty, a dancer hollers at me with a smile. Merde! one yells. Enjoy it! says another. I know that they wholeheartedly mean what they say. But those are everyday salutations that can be tossed out before any nights performance. They dont reflect the monumental nature of this evening, what it means to me and the rest of the African American community. Maybe no words could. Fifteen minutes. I plop down on the floor of the dressing areas lounge, stretching, flexing, staring at myself in the mirror. I stamp that thought down as quickly as it emerges. I think to myself, This is it, this is my moment. Finally, the moment to shine, to prove myself, to represent black dancers at the highest level of ballet. This is for the little brown girls. But my shin is throbbing uncontrollably. I know deep down that I cant go on much longer with such pain. Tonight will be the first time I perform as the Firebird in New York, and I pray it wont be my last. By the time Firebird is up, ABT has performed several other pieces and two intermissions have paused the program. I make my way toward the stage. Kevin McKenzie, the conductor, and the rest of ABTs artistic staff are standing there, behind the curtain, wishing me luck. I remember the first time I stood on the stage at the Metropolitan Opera House. I was nineteen years old, still struggling to find my place in ABTs corps de ballet. I traced the marley floor with my pointe shoes and imagined myself on the stage, not as a member of the corps, but as a principal dancer. It felt right. It felt like a promise: someday, somehow, it was going to happen for me. A decade later, I am here, waiting for the moment when I will explode onto the stage in a burst of red and gold. Outside, the largest crowd I have ever seen waits. Prominent members of the African American community and trailblazers in the world of dance who have seldom received their due are here tonight: Arthur Mitchell, Debra Lee, Star Jones, Nelson George... but I know I will also dance for those who arent here, who have never seen a ballet, who pass the Metropolitan Opera House but cannot imagine what goes on inside. They may be poor, like I have been; insecure, like I have been; misunderstood, like I have been. I will be dancing for them, too. Especially for them. This is for the little brown girls. I stand in the farthest upstage wing when the curtain rises. There are a flock of Firebirds who enter the stage first after Ivan, the prince. I can feel the anticipation rolling off the crowd as

they pose and preen. They expect me to be among them. I take a deep breath. The music starts, and with it comes the cheers, a great roar of love from the audience. I realize in that moment that it doesn't matter what I do on the stage tonight. They are all here for me, with me, here for who I am and what tonight represents. I run onto the stage and feel myself transform. As I approach center, my flock parts, leaving me to stand alone. There's a brief second of silence before the audience erupts into applause once more, clapping so loudly I can barely hear the music. And so it begins.

Life in Motion Chapter 1 FROM THE TIME I turned two, my life was in constant motion. That's how old I was when my mother loaded me, my sister, and my brothers onto a Greyhound bus in Kansas City and we left my father. I was the youngest then, with lips and a nose like his, but I wouldn't know that for many years. I had no memories of him or photographs to remind me, and the next time I saw him, I would be twenty-two years old, traveling the world as a dancer with American Ballet Theatre, and Doug Copeland was just a middle-aged man whose temples had turned gray. I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, my mother's second baby girl, and her fourth child. Two husbands later, our number would swell to six. When my mom squeezed our lives onto a bus headed west, our family began a pattern that would define my siblings and my childhood: packing, scrambling, leaving often barely surviving. I don't remember the ride, but it took two days. Our final stop was the city of Bellflower, a working-class suburb of Los Angeles. We started anew there, and for a time that would turn out to be too brief, we had a home full of comfort and warmth, along with a new father. His name was Harold. A childhood friend of my mother's, he met us at the bus station, and a little over a year later, he became her third husband. Harold was a sales executive for the Santa Fe Railroad, but his personality didn't match the stiffness of his title. He looked like the baseball player Darryl Strawberry in his home run hitting prime, muscular, and chestnut brown. Until my sister Lindsey was born three years later, I was the family's baby and tiny for my age. Harold would scoop me up in his strong arms and tickle me until I dissolved into tears of laughter. Most of my earliest memories aren't of my mother, but of him. We kids were practically spilling out the front door and windows of our small apartment, but if our home sometimes resembled a three-ring circus, Harold was more the ringmaster than a parental figure committed to reining us in. He was a prankster with an infectious laugh. When my mother wanted him to discipline us kids, he would turn even that into a game. "I'm not really going to spank you, but holler like I am," he'd whisper as he corralled us in the bedroom and shut the door. Then he'd take his broad palm and loudly slap the bed. No, Daddy, no, we'd scream, choking down giggles as we put on a performance we thought worthy of an Oscar. Mommy, satisfied and sitting in the living room, was none the wiser. Despite there being so many of us, Harold would carve out moments that made each of us feel like his only child. I remember loving sunflower seeds so much that my sisters and brothers took to calling me Bird. I trace my obsession to the times I would sit with Harold on the couch, the two of us alone together, popping seeds in our mouths and cracking the salty shells. Mommy hated it because the shells would fall between the cushions, making a mess. But memories of those afternoons remain precious to me. That was the side of Harold we kids saw: cheerful, comforting, kind. But behind that facade of laughter and fun, my mother saw something entirely different. Harold was an alcoholic. We caught only glimpses of it, out the corners of our eyes, like the ever-present beer can on my parents' nightstand. But I later found out that what was mostly invisible to us was in Mommy's plain sight. When I was eight or nine and we had a new home and a new daddy, Mommy would tell us stories of Harold not being in his right mind because of liquor, and how it sometimes frightened her. When I was in middle school, Lindsey, his biological daughter, would often stay with him, and I would join them a few nights a week. By then, I had a best friend, Jackie Phillips. We were inseparable. I thought she was beautiful, lean with dark brown skin, she towered over me. We had most of our school activities in common. Jackie lived right around the corner from our middle school, so Mommy didn't mind me staying there a couple of nights a week before Harold would come back to pick me up. One night, Jackie and I were cracking up, blasting TLC's CrazySexyCool while we did our homework. The phone rang. Jackie's mom yelled that it was for me. Lindsey was on the line, crying. Daddy's drunk, she said through her tears. I told him that he shouldn't drive. Can you find another way home? I hung up the phone feeling sick to my stomach, not sure whether to tell Jackie's mother what was going on or to call Mommy. I went back into Jackie's room. Time ticked by as I tried to figure out what to do. Too much time, as it turned out. The doorbell rang. It was Lindsey. Harold was waiting in the car. I guess he knew better than to come to the door in his condition in front of Mrs. Phillips. When I got to the car, it reeked of cigarette smoke and beer. Harold put the key in the ignition and his foot on the gas, and we sped off over the Long Beach Bridge. My heart was pounding as the streetlights streaked by. Lindsey and I sat in the backseat holding each other's hands tightly. This was truly the first time

we understood the condition Mommy spoke of so often. We wove in and out of the lanes on the bridge that night at high speed, so close to the side rails hundreds of feet above the ocean. We feared for our lives. Yet there was something inside me and Lindsey that had such a strong image of Harold's warmth and gentleness that we did our best to never show him that we knew he was drunk or that it changed our perception of him. The next time Lindsey called to tell me Harold was drunk, I asked to speak to him and told him that I would just spend the night at Jackie's, that he didn't have to pick me up. I never loved Harold any less. To me, he remains one of the best parts of my childhood, the daddy who'd cook Lindsey and me waffles and serve them to us on plastic trays while we watched cartoons in our pajamas on Saturday mornings. I remember him sitting in the bathroom with me when I was four, holding my hand while I cried, straining from a stomachache. Memories of Harold are never cloudy, only clear and bright. And he's now been in recovery for fifteen years. But five years after we'd arrived at Harold's apartment, Mommy decided that, once again, it was time to pick up and go. Mommy strapped Lindsey into her car seat in the blue Mercedes station wagon while the rest of us squeezed in around her, finding space wherever we could. As we drove to God knew where, there was no tussling, no yelling. We were too confused to laugh, too scared to play around. Our leaving was always like that—dramatic, hurried, and ragged. Slender, not quite five feet six, until Mommy reached middle age she looked more like somebody's cool and sultry big sister than a mother of six. Mommy retired her Kansas City Chiefs pom-poms after only one season, but she carried a cheerleader's exuberance throughout her life, rooting for her children and always smiling, despite too many marriages gone wrong and, at times, bill collectors on our trail. To this day, I'm still trying to understand Mommy, all that shaped her and, most of all, the choices she made. She didn't talk much about her childhood, but from what I could glean, it was filled with pain. She was born to an Italian mother and an African American father, parents whom she would never know. They put her up for adoption, and while they didn't leave an explanation saying why they didn't keep her, I'm sure that, at a time when blacks and whites could go to jail for being married in many states, they peered into the future and figured that raising a biracial child was more than they could handle. Mommy was given a home by an older African American couple, a social worker and her husband, but they died while she was still very young. From there she began to shuttle between the homes of various relatives and ended up mostly raising herself. Leaving Harold was the beginning of a time when I could measure my days through my mother's boyfriends, her dependence on an ever-changing string of men. But all that clarity came later, when I was much older. On the night we left Harold, I was only seven, and the movements of my life weren't yet up to me. Our family was headed to San Pedro, a portside community nestled next to Los Angeles Harbor, and it would be the place to which we would always return, the place that, in between the picking up and leaving, my siblings and I would forever think of as home. I DON'T KNOW IF Harold knew that his wife and children were leaving him. But the man who eventually became our new stepfather knew that we were on our way. Robert, my mother's soon-to-be fourth husband, was the polar opposite of the man who had been her third. A successful radiologist, Robert was a little chubby, and, like my half-Italian, half-black mother, of mixed race, with bloodlines that were Hawaiian, Korean, Filipino, Portuguese, and Japanese. A century earlier, fishermen from Japan, as well as from Croatia, Greece, and Italy, had plied San Pedro's waters for sardines and albacore, making Los Angeles Harbor the biggest fishing port in the country by the 1920s. Fishing was a hard trade. Growing up, I heard of longshoremen who were killed on the docks. But it was also a good living, and many of the local men my schoolmates' fathers, brothers, and uncles chose to answer the sea's call. Life in San Pedro was etched by the sea, so much so that I don't ever recall learning to swim, only that from the beginning of my time there I was able to glide through the water effortlessly. When I hit my teens, my clothes would carry the scent of burned wood from bonfires on the beach. And there was many a school field trip to the Angels Gate Lighthouse, a structure built in 1913 that still serves as the port's sentry. When a ship needs guidance, the foghorn pierces the quiet with two blasts every thirty seconds. As a child, the sound must have interrupted our games of jump rope, our lessons, our prayers. But it blared so often that the longer we lived there, the less we noticed it, and it faded into the background, like a heartbeat. We were a part of Los Angeles but about as far from Hollywood, the city's flashy, mythical core, as you could get. Except for the palm trees, San Pedro was a lot like Mayberry, the fictitious country town that existed only on black-and-white TVs. Generations lived and died there, unwilling to pull up the roots that their grandparents had buried deep in the sandy soil. There were no skyscrapers. Instead, downtown was like a daguerreotype come to life, with gaslights and Victorian shops. In San Pedro, it was the simple and familiar that mattered. Most of my old neighbors have no recollection of the time I won a life-changing award dancing the role of Kitri in Don Quixote at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, even though my picture

was splashed on the front of the Daily Breeze. But everyone still talks about the talent show at Point Fermin Elementary when I wore a white wedding dress and little, skinny Aaron, my classmate, serenaded me from down on his knees. That's the kind of thing that they remember in San Pedro: Aaron, my frilly costume, and a heartfelt but painfully off-key love song. There were so many hills and curves on the way to Roberts home that it looked as if we would drive right into the Pacific Ocean before the car suddenly, mercifully, swerved and hugged the next bend. The house was a single story built in the Mediterranean style, with a huge front yard. It was a perfect house on a perfect block and what seemed like the portal to a perfect life. You could even see Catalina Island from the front porch, gleaming like a mirage in the morning fog. But what looks perfect is often just an illusion, like the dancer with a strained hamstring who wears a smile instead of a grimace when she lands as delicately as a butterfly despite her pain. We kids didn't pay much attention to the beauty around us. We were too busy trying to figure out why we were here, what had gone wrong, and, most of all, when we would see Harold again. But this was home now, and soon we fell into the rhythms of our new life. We had chores for the first time: taking out the garbage, washing the dishes, sweeping the breakfast crumbs off the floor. And there was no more grabbing a plate and eating on the couch. We sat down at the dining room table for our meals morning, noon, and night. That was okay. We Copelands were like a nomadic tribe: hardy, fiercely protective of our band, and adaptable. We clung tightly to one another. And there were so many of us, we made our own party, our own fun, wherever we ended up and whatever the rules or circumstances. My oldest sister, Erica, was twelve when we moved in with Robert. She was the most like our mother, vivacious and outspoken. She led our brood on the daily walks to school and tended to my bushel of hair, pulling it back into tight ponytails or blow-drying it straight after my bath. Doug Jr., our oldest brother, was eleven, the namesake and, we would one day learn, the spitting image of our father. He was fiercely intelligent and so intent on gathering knowledge that he would curl up in the chair and read the dictionary the way other boys burrowed into comic books. Like so many African Americans, our family was of mixed ancestry. We had an Italian grandmother on our mother's side, and our father was the son of a German woman and an African American man. But Doug Jr. stood firm in his blackness. One day, when I was in third grade, I came home and found Doug Jr. sitting on the porch. His brow was furrowed as he fiddled with something small and white that he held in his hands. What are you doing? I asked him. I'm reading about our history about slavery and I wanted to know what it felt like for our ancestors, he said. So I'm picking cotton. Unlike sand or seashells, raw cotton wasn't easy to find in San Pedro. But somehow he'd gotten hold of some and was spending time picking the seeds out of a white wisp. That was quintessentially Doug: intense, conscious, and culturally curious. After him came our brother Chris, who gave glimpses of the attorney he'd be one day in the way he'd argue every point with absolute conviction. If he was wrong, you'd better not tell him. He was fearless, playing every sport tennis, basketball, football at some point in our childhoods. He was so full of energy that he would sometimes just race around the house, literally crashing into the walls. Our little sister Lindsey, who eventually sprinted her way to a track scholarship at Chico State University, was the baby born to Harold and my mother. She had a luminous smile and a raucous sense of humor like her father. And our baby brother Cameron, who would cry his way through T-ball but found his gift sitting in front of a piano, was born after our mother got involved with Robert. Then there was me in the middle quiet, introverted, and happy to disappear within the clamor of our rambunctious family. I was a nervous child. And my unease, coupled with a perpetual quest for perfection, made my life much harder than it needed to be. I think I was born worried. There wasn't a day that I didn't feel some kind of anxiety, especially in school, and my panic would begin from the moment I woke up, fretting that I would be late to homeroom, until I came back home in the early evening. I was just nervous about life, period. I felt awkward, as if I didn't fit in anywhere, and I lived in constant fear of letting my mother down, or my teachers, or myself. It wasn't like Mommy was a scold. But you had to earn her praise, and I craved it desperately. With so many brothers and sisters, it was hard to command her attention, and my voice, muted by my intense shyness, could barely be heard above my siblings. I strived to be perfect at school as well. The thought of being tardy could set my heart to racing. The summer before I was to follow Erica, Doug, and Chris to Dana Middle School, I constantly reminded myself that Mommy and I had to pay it a visit so I could memorize every turn and twist: which staircase led to algebra, where my English class was in the building. I was terrified of getting lost and then having to walk in front of a sea of staring faces when I arrived after the bell. Mommy refused to accommodate my summertime walk-through. She was always trying to get me to relax, to calm down. But later, when I was in high school and could make the trek on my own, no one could deter me from my pre-Labor Day route rehearsal or the other strategies I devised to avoid

being late. Pretty much all the way through twelfth grade, I would get to school an hour early, plant myself on the floor in front of my locker, and study until it was time to go to my first class. I was never late, not even once. I REMEMBER WHEN I appeared onstage for the first time. I was five years old, but unlike my later performances, what I most recall is not the confidence I felt in front of the crowd, or the rush from the applause, but the way Mommy reacted after the show. We were still living in Bellflower with Harold, and Mommy entered Chris, Erica, and me into the talent show at Thomas Jefferson Elementary School. She made our costumes, and we practiced for weeks, shaking our hips and lip-synching to Please Mr. Postman. I caught on quickly and I loved the experience, running home every day after school, practicing in the living room. Most of all, it was fun to see my mother so excited, especially when she was getting us ready the night of the performance. Oh yes, wait a minute, Mister Postman. It was showtime. Erica and I channeled the Marvelettes, while Chris, seven years old and dressed in navy blue shorts and a white shirt, toted a satchel and tossed envelopes to the audience. We were a hit, especially with Mommy. You guys were great! she gushed afterward, snapping our pictures and beaming as members of the audience came over to tell us how cute we were. You are naturals! Misty, you belong on the stage. I felt so special that night. Even though I shared the spotlight with Erica and Chris, I felt for once that I stood out from the crowd of little Copelands, that Mommy's attention was focused solely on me. That happened only occasionally, like when I got a good report card or was picked to be a hall monitor at Dana Middle School. Mommy would bring me bags of sunflower seeds as a treat, or stationery with sketches of sunflowers, or a sickly sweet kiddie perfume called what else Sunflower. I would gleefully accept my rewards, clinging to Mommy's attention for as long as I could. I didn't feel particularly good at anything when it came to school. So instead I worked incredibly hard, going over equations, pronouns, and dates of Civil War battles until they were imprinted on my brain. I aced pretty much every exam, but it would not be until I found ballet in my teenage years that I would realize the true gift of my visual memory—the ability to see movement and quickly imitate it. My first model for movement wasn't a dancer at all. It was a gymnast, Nadia Comaneci. I wasn't born when Comaneci made history in the 1976 Olympics, becoming the first woman to score a perfect 10 in gymnastics and winning gold medals for her strength and elegance on the balance beam and parallel bars. Instead, I discovered her when I was seven and saw her story depicted in a Lifetime movie. Smitten, I recorded the broadcast on our VCR and would sit on the floor in front of the TV, pressing the rewind button so I could watch it again and again. I became obsessed with gymnastics, tuning in to any meet or exhibition that I could find. But from the start, I was more drawn to the floor exercises than the aerial acrobatics—probably, I realize now, because it was the closest thing to classical movement and dance that I'd ever seen. I started to teach myself gymnastics, and my body knew what my mind didn't yet comprehend: that rhythmic motion came as naturally to me as breathing. In our new home with Robert, we had huge yards in front and back, and I would stretch out barefoot on the grass, teaching myself how to do backbend walkovers, cartwheels, handstands. I already knew how to do the splits, though no one had ever shown me. My legs just slid into position. I could balance on my head the way others stood firmly on their feet. I didn't question why I could instantly do moves that it might take others months to achieve, why my arms and legs had the elasticity of a rubber band. They just did, and I just knew. I spent hours after school and on weekends practicing my backyard routines. Then when I was done, I would arch my back, throw up my arms, and let the applause only I could hear wash over me. Just like Nadia. Eventually, I realized that I didn't really want to be a gymnast. It was the floor routines that transfixed me, not all the tumbling and flips. But for the first time, I'd tapped into the power of movement and felt its meditative grace. In it, I'd found an escape. IT WAS AROUND THIS time that I began to get my first migraine headaches. Mommy told me that she had started getting them at around the same age. It was genetic, but I think that the crippling pain I experienced, as well as the vomiting and blurred vision, came mainly from stress. I was a constant ball of fear. I would leave school early some days, too sick to study or play, falling asleep in my clothes as soon as I reached my bed. Light exacerbated my pain, so I had to lie in a pitch-black room. Robert would wake me when he got home from work and help me change into my pajamas. Over the years, my pain became routine but no less severe. There was never a moment quiet in my house. There was a person sprawled on every chair, a book or toy tossed in every corner. We woke up every morning to a wall of sound, with children yelling, music blaring, and the television on full blast. The TV became our family altar because that was how we watched sports. It didn't matter which sport, what game, or which team: the Chicago Bulls, the San Francisco 49ers. Everyone had his or her favorite—everyone, that is, except me. But the Kansas City Chiefs belonged to us all. Before we children were born, my mother had become a Kansas City Chiefs cheerleader just so she could get free tickets to see the

team play. On house-shaking, popcorn-spilling weekends and Monday nights, the rest of the family would gather in the living room and roar over every stolen yard and fumbled pass. My mom and my siblings were consumed by it. I, on the other hand, would retreat to a bedroom, crank up a pop aria by Mariah Carey, and create. I didnt know it was called choreographing at the time. It was more hip swaying and head bobbing than anything else. Mirroring the dancing I saw in the music videos that were constantly on the TV, Id perform a pantomime, literally acting out a songs lyrics. Ive been THINKING about YOU, Mariah would sing. Id point my fingers at my temples, and then stretch my arms out to my imaginary boyfriend, hips and shoulders pumping to the beat. Then she crooned that she was falling in love. Id flutter my arms and slowly drop to the floor. No, it wasnt exactly George Balanchine. But I could easily imagine myself directing a video for MTV. Sometimes I would pull Lindsey into my game so I could see my creation brought to life by another body. She was an unwilling student to say the least, probably because of all of us kids, Lindsey had inherited zero rhythm. We used to tease her mercilessly, asking if shed been dropped into the wrong family or was secretly a white girl in cocoa skin. Please, Lindsey, do this dance for me, Id beg. I dont wannnoooo, shed wail, tears welling in her eyes. Ill get Chris and Doug to give up the TV and let you watch Sister, Sister, Id cajole. Thats usually all it took. Lindsey loved her some Tia and Tamera Mowry. But shed pout her way through every step. Though I discovered dance while we lived with Robert, its true role as my sanctuary was yet to develop. Ours was a chaotic life. We had a house and interludes of stability when my mother had a husband, and crowded, cluttered apartments when we lived life in between. Ooh, child, things are gonna get easier./Ooh, child, things are gonna get brighter. Id sashay around Mommys bedroom, listening to Tupac, hoping he was right. Bam. Id fan my hands in front of my face, and swing my hips to the left, rocking out to Salt-N-Pepas Whatta Man. Pop. Id jerk my head to the right, my arms undulating while Craig Mack gave me Flava in Ya Ear. When I was a girl, I loved watching reruns of The Brady Bunch. The six kids shared rooms in their spotless house, and the biggest crises they ever faced was Marcias skin breaking out the night before the senior prom or Gregs voice changing on the eve of a talent show. When we eventually left Robert, like we had Harold and my father before him, and our family had to give up our blue station wagon, I would ride the bus and daydream about all the things a little girl should have that I didnt: a mommy who cooked dinner for her family; a big, sparkling clean house; and problems no bigger than a pimple. But whenever I danced, whenever I created, my mind was clear. I didnt think about how I slept on the floor because I didnt have a bed, when my mothers new boyfriend might become my next stepfather, or if we would be able to dig up enough quarters to buy food. My worries would dissolve with the dance, and there was no crisis that a Mariah Carey song couldnt cure. My love of performing was an unlikely one. At school, I was still so afraid of being called on in class that my stomach would tremble. Misty, Mrs. Schweble, our sixth-grade English teacher, would bellow from the front of the room. Please read the next sentence. Id shakily clutch my copy of The Catcher in the Rye. Life is a game, boy, I read, my words catching in my throat before rushing out in a breathless squeak. Life is a game that one plays according to the rules. But for a little girl who lived in terror of making a mistake, of being embarrassed or criticized in front of others, the stage was somehow an oasis. I came to understand why when I later became a part of ABT, performing at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, the Bolshoi Theatre in Moscow, the Bunka Kaikan in Tokyo. As a professional, you have to endure a tremendous amount of criticism and judgment leading up to a performance. You can barely take a step in rehearsal before the dance mistress will clap, stop you, and give you a critique. But during the actual performance, when the music swells, and the crowd hushes, its all up to you how high you leap, when you breathe. Theres no more time to worry or try to make it better. It either works or it doesnt. You land with grace or you stumble and fall. That absoluteness, that finality, is freedom. And the stage was the one place where I felt it. I knew all that even as a child. Only then, the stage wasnt buffering me from the ballet mistress or dance critics. Instead, it allowed me to forget my worries about not fitting in, my embarrassment about Mommys being married so many times, the ache I felt on the days when I couldnt see Harold. When I was in the sixth grade, I decided that I would choreograph a dance for my two best friends, Danielle and Reina, and me to perform in the annual Point Fermin Elementary School talent show. Danielle, part Mexican American and part white, with long dark brown hair, towered over our troika. Reina, a mixture of Mexican American and Asian ancestry, was tiny and brown, like me. We three were inseparable. I would go over to Danielles house every afternoon after school, and wed hang out, doing our homework and dancing to New Edition and Boyz II Men. We were sisters, Danielle and Reina and me. But I didnt let my affection get in the way of cracking the whip hard during the mandatory rehearsals that I called leading up to the show. We would line up in Danielles living room, me in front, and practice our routine. Unfortunately, Danielle and

Reina lacked my passion, and on the Friday night when we finally hit the talent show stage, their less-than-enthusiastic preparation was glaringly revealed in the auditoriums hazy white lights. As I lip-synched to Mariah Careys *I've Been Thinking About You*, Reina and Danielle danced awkwardly behind me, mixing up their steps. Disappointment doesn't begin to describe how I felt. But I didn't doubt the excellence of my own performance for a moment. Out there, in front of the crowd, under the pinpoint of my elementary school's spotlight, I felt fierce. The next time I performed like that, it was the following school year, and I was the new kid at Dana Middle School, trying to follow Erica's lead and win a place on the school's drill team. Dana's drill team was legendary. It swept the competitions held throughout the state, and my sister Erica had been one of its stars. She had always been my idol: beautiful, popular, and never seeming to suffer even for a moment the self-doubt that often paralyzed me. I wanted to be just like her. And because the trepidation that dogged every other part of my life seemed to disappear when it came to the thought of performing, I wasn't aiming just to be part of the team: I wanted to be captain. Trying out for captain meant I needed to perform two routines: one that all prospective members of the drill team would have to dance, and an individual routine that I would create and perform on my own. Erica agreed to help me with the choreography but warned that the drill team would likely not be the same storied group it had been when she was part of it. The coach who had guided it to so many wins had left the school at the end of the previous school year and a recently hired history teacher, Elizabeth Cantine, was taking her place. I still wanted to try out. Our family loved George Michael, post-Wham, and we decided I would dance to *I Want Your Sex*. Erica and I practiced every day after school. But Erica wasn't happy with my performance. It seems that I wasn't properly carrying out her creative vision. Eventually, she erupted in frustration. *You can't remember anything!* she screamed one afternoon, before she stormed out of the living room, leaving me in tears. It was a curious critique, given that, years later, choreographers would specifically seek to work with me because of my gift of recalling and mimicking their steps instinctively. But that day, if it had been up to Erica, I wouldn't have been cast in a low-budget music video, let alone a performance of *Le Corsaire*. I begged her to come back and help, but Erica refused, so I finished working out the routine on my own. Two days later, I showed up for tryouts in the school gym. It was my first audition—the first of what would become a lifetime of proving my skills. I felt a little intimidated standing before the judging table. Behind it were three school-yard prima donnas who seemed to relish the chance to dish out a bit of what they'd gotten the year before when they'd been the nervous neophytes trying to grab spots on the team. Next to them sat the new coach, Elizabeth. She was birdlike and tiny, like me, with brown curls framing her calm gaze, and her features were as delicate as bone china. I danced with the dozens of other girls trying out for the team. Then it was time for my solo. I stood straight, eyes to the ground, hands folded, one knee poked out, waiting for the tape to start. *Baaaaby*, George Michael shouted, and I was off. I stomped, spun, and gyrated my hips for the next three minutes, ending the routine by sliding into a split, my arm stretched out in front of me, eyes fixed on the ceiling. Silence. Thank you, an auburn-haired drill-team diva said curtly, making notes on a yellow legal pad. But I caught Elizabeth smiling. Back home that evening, I paced around the living room, butterflies skittering in my stomach, waiting to find out if I'd been chosen. The phone rang. Not only had I made the team, I'd been named captain. Now my days had a new ripple. Drill-team practice was during my sixth-period PE class, which was a good thing because my school day was packed. I was sixth-grade treasurer and also a commodore, Dana Middle School's fancy name for a hall monitor. The thirty of us girls who made up the drill squad would gather in a room adjacent to our school gym. We'd wear our gym clothes to practice but put on our school colors for the games, teeny yellow skirts with blue-and-white trim that we made even shorter by rolling them up. We had yellow V-neck tops with thick straps, and white rubber-soled slip-on shoes that resembled Keds. My shirt had **CAPTAIN MISTY** in the corner, embroidered in white thread. Being drill-team captain made me automatically popular, but I didn't really feel I fit in with the others on the team. Some of the girls were older than me since my September birthday meant I was among the youngest in my grade. And I was a nerd, still playing with Barbies and having nightmares about showing up for Spanish class unprepared for my oral exam because I'd somehow forgotten that it was finals week. My drill teammates, on the other hand, were what Mommy called fast, slathering on pink and purplish lip gloss and rimming their eyes with black eyeliner. While I was carrying out my duties as hall monitor, making sure everyone was getting to class on time, they were leaning against their lockers talking about who they wanted to make out with on the basketball team. I never really hung out with those girls outside of practice or games. My best friend was still Jackie, who, like me, was in student government. We'd sit together at lunch and have sleepovers at her house on weekends. But my teammates were friendly enough, and more than that, they showed me respect.

There was no question that I danced the best and that's why I was captain. When I was in that practice room, I found my voice. It wasn't called drill team for nothing. Aten-hut! Id yell. Left face! I was the littlest thing on the team, but the girls listened attentively and did whatever I commanded. I loved that power, but the confidence it brought would disappear and my anxiety would return as soon as practice was over and I went back to a life where I was terrified of losing my footing and crashing down. There was one other space, however, where I felt at least somewhat comfortable—the San Pedro Boys and Girls Club. Every day after school, Id walk the two blocks there and hang out with my siblings until Mommy got off work and came to take us home. DRILL-TEAM PRACTICE WAS NOT what Id expected. Elizabeth had been trained in classical ballet as a child, and she incorporated some of its basic technique into warm-ups and choreography. The first day we all got together, I stood on tiptoe as Elizabeth instructed, stepped to my right with arms open, and closed them, spinning around. Chan, the name of the step, was unfamiliar to me, but the whoosh of momentum when I spun was like the surge I felt when I did a cartwheel in our yard. Elizabeth taught me to bend my knees, twirl, and quickly shift my weight to one leg, bringing the other up into a bent angle, before landing on my toes. She called that a piqué. I thought the names of the steps were unusual, but the movements themselves never felt foreign to me. A few weeks into the school year, I got the idea of choreographing a routine for the drill team to Mariah Carey's All I Want for Christmas Is You. It became my obsession. I even put the sewing skills Id learned from Roberts mother, Grandma Marie, to good use, making all the costumes myself. I asked Elizabeth to use some of the drill-team budget to buy us red leotards and I spent a couple weeks sewing little red skirts with fake fur trim. I loved doing things like that: sewing, crafting, imagining, creating. I retrieved red canes, left in the school basement from a long-ago Christmas show, and wrapped them with white tape for us to use as props onstage. I was determined that the team would have the steps down cold—there would be no repeat of the disastrous talent show with Reina and Danielle. I even ordered rehearsals on the weekends to make sure the performance would be perfect. There were piqués, and leaps, and pirouettes with the girls knees facing forward—like jazz choreography, I later realized—instead of the perfectly aligned turnout that Elizabeth would sometimes have us practice. It was a mangle of all the new steps that the team had learned from Elizabeth. But for our finale, we used a move as familiar as Jingle Bells, lining up like the Radio City Rockettes, kicking our heels high in the air. The audience gave us a standing ovation. Our Christmas show came at the end of the semester, and then we were off for the two-week winter break. When we came back, Elizabeth said she wanted to talk with me. You know, you have the perfect physique for ballet and a natural ability, she said. I know you go to the Boys and Girls Club after school. A friend of mine teaches a ballet class there. Her name is Cindy Bradley. Why dont you check it out? I was caught off guard. Ballet? Why would I want to do that? I had never even seen one. I cant remember if I had much of an impression of what one might be like—maybe lyrical and slow like the dance Elizabeth had the drill team do once with giant ribbons? Id enjoyed that since all movement was fun for me. But what I found frightening was the thought of going beyond my comfort zone. I didnt know the ballet teacher at the Boys and Girls Club, and the idea of seeking out this stranger to start learning a dance form I knew nothing about intimidated me. Still, that afternoon, because my coach had asked me to and I always did what I was told, I dutifully walked to the Boys and Girls Club gym, crept quietly into the bleachers, and sat with my arms wrapped around my knees, watching. For the next week or so, I was an audience of one for a dozen or so girls and a couple of boys, most of whom were younger than me, pointing, tapping, bending, and stretching. One day, their teacher, Cindy, glanced back and walked over. Ive seen you sitting here every day. What are you doing? she asked me. My drill-team coach, Elizabeth Cantine, told me to come check it out, I said quietly. She thinks Id be good at it. She told me about you, Cindy said, her eyes widening with recognition. Why dont you come join us? But I couldnt bring myself to. Not yet. The other girls clearly had been at it for a while. And they also looked the part, with their smooth slippers, crisp pink tights, and colorful leotards. How would I fit in? I dont have a leotard or tights, I mumbled. Dont worry about that, Cindy said. Just wear your gym clothes. Another week passed with me sitting and watching. I didnt tell my brothers and sisters I was going to the gym because I didnt want them to try to convince me to try something I was scared to do. What if I took the class and made a fool of myself? What would go through the other kids minds? What would Elizabeth think when Cindy reported back to her? She couldnt follow a single thing I said, I imagined Cindy saying, shaking her head, still stunned by how pitiful I was. This girl needs to stick to the drill team. Finally, one afternoon I told myself that if I was going to go to the gym at the Boys and Girls Club anyway, I might as well give it a try. I went into the locker room to change and emerged, slightly embarrassed, in blue cotton shorts long enough to scrape my knees, my white T-shirt,

and a pair of old gym socks. I willed myself to walk to the center of the basketball court. I found a place. I stood up tall, gazed straight ahead, and, for the first time, lay my hand on the barre. *Revue de presse* Wrenching and revelatory. (The New York Times) An unexpected page-turner... Her story is an inspiration to anyone man or woman, black or white who has ever chased a dream against the odds, and the grace with which she triumphs is an example for us all. (Booklist (starred review)) Thorough, sensitive... clear-eyed. (The Washington Post) [A] dramatic rags-to-toe shoes life story. (People) Engaging... [Copeland is] a poised, intelligent writer whose temperament disciplined, determined, driven gives the book a special spark In LIFE IN MOTION, she looks back on the past without bitterness or anger, only gratitude. Hers is an out-of-the-ordinary story about defying stereotypes, and she shares it in an inspiring narrative that's enlivened by her own grace and generous spirit. (BookPage) Captivating... heartrending... literary. (Lisa Jo Sagolla The Kansas City Star) Remarkable. (Juicy Magazine) [LIFE IN MOTION] reveals a woman as graceful and powerful in life as she is in dance. (Melissa Harris-Perry) A raw, honest tale. Her memoir is filled with passion, pain, success, and pure joy. (Ebony.com) Reads as a modern day Cinderella story this memoir is an inspirational read especially for aspiring dancers. (JET Magazine) Misty Copeland, a ballerina of extraordinary talent and charisma, offers an autobiography as mesmerizing as her dancing. She overcame adversity in the studio, in her home life, and in ballet's own traditionalism to become one of its brightest stars her passion and perseverance will inspire dancers and non-dancers alike. (Eliza Minden, author of The Ballet Companion and Co-Founder and Head of Design at dancewear company Gaynor Minden, Inc.) [Misty Copeland's] book is a breezy read for such deep subject matter, but her beautiful and prevailing spirit shines through on every page. (The Inlander) Reading her memoir... it becomes even more apparent how this 31-year-old woman has parlayed her natural talent along with an uber intense discipline, passion and focus, into a stellar career. (The NWI Times) Misty Copeland's LIFE IN MOTION is an inspiration to all young people. She is the Jackie Robinson of the ballet world, and a true role model for an entire generation of new ballerinas. (Frank Sanchez, Vice President, Boys Girls Clubs of America) [LIFE IN MOTION] is the stuff of which movies are made. (Chicago Sun-Times) What a remarkable, encouraging story. Written naturally, modestly, and conversationally... [readers will] feel her triumphs and tragedies, wincing whenever she falls and cheering her on every time she gets back up. Brava, Misty. (Bildungsroman) A tale of hardship and remarkable success. (Los Angeles Magazine) A poignant primer proving the power of perseverance in the face of adversity. (The LA Sentinel) An important book for teen collections. (Angela Carstensen School Library Journal) Told in graceful prose... [Copeland's] achievements will encourage all those attempting to beat the odds in competitive fields. (Publishers Weekly) A page-turner... fascinating and emotional. (The Philadelphia Enquirer) [Parts] the curtain on the ballets central illusion: that it is empowering for the female dancers at its centre. Providing a behind-the-scenes look at the glory and gore of ballet... you find yourself rooting for her. (Deidre Kelly The Globe and Mail (Canada)) A gift to all balletomanes, not just the brown ones. (Esther Cepeda) Misty's unwavering belief that we can be anything that we dream is an inspiration an inspiration to break the mold, follow your passion, never take no for an answer and do it all with grace, kindness and the spirit to help others on their journey. I am thrilled that my two daughters have a role model in Misty, who is breaking down doors that that they will never have to. (Rachel Roy)