Gold Medal Summer

Donna Freitas
To Cheryl Klein,
for about a million different reasons.
Front Walkover

Back

Handspring

Back Layout

Front Tuck
Don’t be afraid if things seem difficult in the beginning.

That’s only the initial impression.

The important thing is not to retreat;

you have to master yourself.

— OLGA KORBUT, USSR,

four-time Olympic gold medalist in 1972 and 1976
I’ve never understood why people cry on the podium.

Why, after winning gold at a gymnastics meet, in the middle of all that glory, there are tears and not plain, simple happiness.

When I think about the different girls I’ve watched step up to take their place at the very top spot, receiving flowers and waving at the cheering crowd, I can’t help but wonder how many of them cry crocodile tears, faking emotion because that’s what people expect, or because it makes for a better photo opp.

Take Sarah Walker of the Jamestown Gymcats. She’s the best tumbler in the state, but she’s better known for chewing out teammates in public than for her double twist into a punch front tuck on floor. Then there’s Jennifer Adams, probably the biggest standout on the uneven parallel bars Rhode Island has seen in a decade. But she shrieks at the top of her lungs during rivals’ routines to psych them out, just before someone dismounts from the beam or starts her run for the vault. Jennifer Adams is merciless. Not to mention without class.
Put Sarah or Jennifer in that number one spot, though, and tears automatically fall.

I don’t get it.

Then again, it’s never been me up there.

It’s not that I don’t want it as badly as the other girls. Believe me, I do. I want gold so much I’d eat it for breakfast if it would make a difference. Sprinkle it on my spaghetti like Parmesan cheese and pour it over my ice cream like it’s hot fudge. I’d even coat myself head to toe in gold paint if it meant getting to march up to that number one spot and duck my head so the judge can drape that medal around my neck.

If gold medal glory does ever happen to me, Joey Jordan of the Gansett Stars, lover of beam and floor, hater of the vault, proud wearer of a sparkly leotard, tears will not be on the menu that day. I’ll be smiling as big as ever up on that podium.

I promise.

That’s just who I am.
Nearly perfect isn’t enough.


*Come on, Joey, next comes your favorite move on beam, the handstand you hold forever, that ends with the split that shows off your flexibility and style, which helps the judges forget you do a round off into a boring back layout instead of a full twist for your dismount.* . . .

“Go, Joey,” I hear my best friend, Alex, call from my right.

I flick my hands again for her benefit and, well, the judges’ too, and kick my handstand in a way that demonstrates my ability to easily achieve a perfect split on the way up. The slight tug this creates along the length of my muscles is satisfying because of the way it pushes the limits of my flexibility, and I love knowing it turns the shape of my body into something worthy of awe.

“Ooohh,” the audience sighs, their appreciation audible even over the Tchaikovsky playing for a competitor’s floor exercise.

Both hands grip the edge of the beam, the heels of my palms holding my balance, every muscle in my body tight, toes so
pointed they form a capital C. One knee bends toward my head, the other sends my toes toward the ceiling. After nailing the pose, I shift my legs into a straddle split until they are parallel to the beam. Then, ever so slowly, my shoulders pressing forward, my stomach muscles screaming with the strain, I lower my body until that split hovers just inches over the apparatus. I hold it extra long, long enough that I hear “wows” rippling through the crowd. A gymnast like me has to impress the judges with this kind of move, and I know Judge Garrison will count exactly how many seconds I stay in this position. These poses are her favorite, and she rewards gymnasts who can pull stuff like this off. To come out of it, I swivel so each leg is perpendicular to the beam, swing myself up to a standing position, and then walk — albeit with poise and style and a few flashy smiles — to the other end.

Now comes the part I hate.

There’s this series of moves I’m terrible at but it’s in my routine regardless — a back handspring, back handspring into a back layout. Coach Angelo says I need a sequence like this with a high degree of difficulty that is worth a lot of points, but I almost never stick it, so it ruins my score anyway.


“Concentrate, Joey, concentrate,” Coach says from the sidelines, where he’s watching and evaluating every detail.
“She totally won’t make this. She *always* falls,” I hear Sarah Walker say.

*Take your time, Joey,* I reassure myself and breathe deep. Wish for the sort of superhuman focus that blocks everything out, the kind that sorts the gymnasts who win at competitions from those who don’t. I need to erase the presence of my coach and Alex and especially Sarah, my biggest rival on beam. I do have one advantage over Sarah, though. She goes through routines like they’re a series of drills, with no artistry or joy. I don’t think she’s ever even smiled during her floor or beam routine. She totally lacks style.

But me, I’m all smiles, even as dread fills the empty space in my stomach.

I do my best to shake off the fear and frustration, flicking my chin upward, throwing my shoulders back, extending my arms forward so the tips of my fingers are my only focus, everything around them, behind them, the area for the vault, the thick mats at the end of the beam, all of it becoming a blur.

I can do this. I *will* do this.

“That’s it, Joey! That’s it. You’ve got it in you,” Coach cheers softly.

But as I rise on my toes, my arms poised to swing behind me, about to throw myself into the first back handspring, Sarah Walker says, “Joey Jordan is all style and no substance,” like
she’s just visited the inside of my brain and heard my every thought. I falter a moment, enough that I’m suddenly off balance the very second my body gains momentum for the first flip-flop. My foot shifts, then slips slightly, but I keep going anyway — I have to, I need to stick this pass to win — so I stretch straight on up into the second back handspring, my eyes spotting the beam as my legs travel over my head.

It’s not enough, though. Not enough, because after all this work, psyching myself up and out and up again, my foot catches weirdly on the landing, and my arms are suddenly flailing, balance gone, and I crash into a heap of long, skinny limbs, bright against the royal blue mats.

“Awwww,” comes the disappointment from the crowd.

“I knew she’d choke,” says Sarah Walker.

“Pathetic,” one of her teammates adds and they let go into a fit of loud, squealing giggles.

“Get up,” Coach says from my left, loud enough that his judgment booms through my brain. “Joey, get up. Finish like a champion. Do it. Now!”

“Come on, Joey,” Alex says.

Shaking, breathing hard with tiny, short pushes from my lungs, I untangle my arms and legs and pull myself up until I can stand and walk back over to the beam. Both hands hover a moment above the scratchy, padded covering, and I feel the heat
pouring from my palms, causing the rip I got earlier today on bars to burn. When I’m finally ready, I hop up and position myself at one end, trying to act like nothing happened, like I didn’t just fall and wreck my hopes for gold today, like my entire body isn’t still tingling with fear. I do a couple of hand flicks that aren’t in my routine and not only skip the back layout that by now there is no way I would land, but I even avoid the dismount I am supposed to do because I’m too shaky to manage it. Instead, I turn around and throw a simple back tuck off the side of the beam, doing my best to recover some sort of composure after my humiliating fall.

Made all the more humiliating because just moments ago, I’d nearly stuck a perfect routine.

My landing is solid and I throw my arms back past my ears for the crowd and judges, because this is what you do no matter what, even if you crash ten times. I step to the side to smile, pose again to signal my finish, and begin the requisite gymnast’s prance toward my teammates. But as soon as I turn away, the smile on my face disappears. If only Coach would allow me to do a routine that I excel at, one with moves better-suited to my strengths, then maybe I would finally stick beam at a competition for once.

“It’s okay,” Alex says the second I am close enough to hear. “Aside from the last tumbling pass and your dismount” — notice
how she doesn’t say fall? — “you were perfect. Seriously. You’ll still medal, Joey. Maybe even silver.”

I appreciate the way Alex is always the wishful thinker when it comes to my medal potential, even though she’s usually wrong.

I was the last competitor to finish today, so everyone is already gathering by the podium in the middle of the floor exercise. I don’t have long before I find out that, yes, even though I got only an 8.2, I did indeed medal for beam.

Bronze. Not silver, but bronze.

“It’s just too bad you don’t have the height for your flips,” Sarah Walker hisses above me, her gold medal catching the late afternoon sunlight streaming through the window. “You do look so sweet doing that little routine of yours, though.”

_I am stone, I am stone_, I repeat to myself, willing my mouth into a tight line so I don’t bark back, my feet firm on the lowest podium. My bronze is dull and looks almost dirty.

It’s fitting, I suppose. Placing third is dull. Simple as that.

“Now for the winners of the All-Around,” the announcer says, signaling that it’s time for the three of us to head back to our respective teams, which have gathered in small crowds nearby. A part of me wants to walk straight by my coaches and teammates and on out the door, since I probably didn’t even crack the top five this meet and don’t really feel like suffering more disappointment today, but I don’t.
“Nice job on beam, Joey,” says my teammate Trish, giving me a quick hug and a smile that is thoroughly genuine. Trish is one of the nicest girls at our gym, and she’s drop-dead gorgeous too. We’re allowed to wear makeup at competitions, but Trish doesn’t need any. It’s easy to forgive her looks when she treats everyone with such kindness.

Well, that, and she never wins any medals.

I thank Trish, then take my usual place at Alex’s side. The announcer says the name of the bronze winner into the microphone — Jennifer Adams — and I try not to gag. Alex looks at me, her face white, and I ask, “Are you ready to be a star or what?”

Alex shifts from one foot to the other, her eyes downcast like she’s placed last and not won the entire competition. “I’m not a star,” she says. “Stop saying stuff like that.”

“I only said it because it’s true. Besides, ‘We’re all stars,’” I add with a roll of my eyes, trying to make her smile. Coach Angelo is constantly telling us this, since our team is called the Gansett Stars.

Alex starts to protest further, but stops short because her name booms from the speakers as the winner of today’s gold medal for All-Around. I squeeze her hand quickly, watching as her head snaps up and she forces a smile to her lips. She walks forward, waving at the crowd. The cheers for her are deafening.
She’s such an audience favorite. I wonder if I’m the only person close enough to see that her smile never makes it to her eyes, that even after winning the whole day, there is intense sadness written all over her face.

After Alex climbs to the top, she drops her head so one of the judges can loop a red-white-and-blue-striped ribbon around her neck, the one with that coveted gold medallion dangling at the end of it. Alex looks up again, and I see them there, just like always.

Tears.

When Alex smiles, they spill from her eyes, the pressure from her cheeks tipping tiny lakes down her face, leaving streaks across her skin. The crowd thinks these are tears of joy, but I know better. The tears are because her ankle hurts and she competed through the pain today, because yet another win will get her even more and harsher attention from Coach at practice tomorrow. Because she’s tired of being a gymnast, plain and simple. Alex keeps saying she’s going to quit, and I’m beginning to believe she might be serious.

When the medal ceremony is over, I head toward the place I left my warm-ups and bag this morning, when the promise of a win was still ahead. Thinking about the hopes I had only hours ago brings tears to my eyes too.

“Joey,” Alex calls after me, her quick, soft footsteps approaching.
For a split second I want to snap at her, even though she has never been anything but the best of best friends. But sometimes, it’s hard to have a best friend who’s so miserable she couldn’t care less about winning, and even so, wins every time.

“Are you okay?” she asks me. “Do you want a ride home?”

“I’m fine,” I manage, my throat dry. Quickly, I force a smile and pull Alex into a hug, kissing her cheek too. A streak of wet glimmers on her face — whether from her tears or mine, I can’t tell. Alex wipes it away, not saying a word, but her eyes are sad again. “Thanks for the offer, but my sister is waiting outside.”

“Okay. Well, see you at practice tomorrow, then?”

“Yeah. Where else would I be?” I say, hoisting my gym bag over my shoulder. “Bye, Zany,” I add, using Alex’s nickname from when we were little and first became friends, watching as she walks out, her ponytail swinging left and right behind her. I’m about to follow, but I can’t resist glancing one more time at the podium.

Maybe, just maybe, someday it will be me up there wearing gold, mustering fake tears of joy instead of hiding real tears of defeat. Maybe, just maybe, I’ll get the chance to test whether I might smile in that winner’s spot instead of cry.

I take a deep breath, straighten up, and put on a brave face as I push through the heavy doors of the gym into the glaring sunlight of the afternoon.