



BALANCING ACT

BY SARAH PENWARDEN

Hana's in her room with the door closed. She's dancing in bare feet. There's just enough space. She turns carefully, feels her calf muscles, strong and tight; concentrates on using her core strength. It's a classic move, the arabesque. But it can be hard without a bar. She raises her right leg and pauses. Then she raises it higher still. She wobbles and loses control, almost crashing into her desk.

"Hana?" Mum calls from the lounge. "You OK?"

"Just practising," Hana says. She starts from the beginning.

Hana's mum says she's always wanted to get things right. When she was little, she ate boiled eggs perfectly, one careful spoonful at a time. Her T-shirts never got dirty at day care. Or her gumboots. And she had a place for everything. Now, at twelve, her room is always tidy, her clothes still clean. She looks even neater when she's off to dance class, dressed in her black leotard and pink skirt, her hair in a tight bun. All the neatness helps her, Hana thinks.

She tightens her lips, looks for her reflection in the small mirror on the wall. She can hear voices in the lounge, footsteps moving towards her room. Then a gentle tap.

"Can I come in, love?"

Grandma looks a lot like Mum. They have the same blonde hair, though Grandma's is silvery blonde now. They have the same smile and laugh,

the same long legs. But Grandma is different somehow. Softer. Calmer. She's never in a rush. Hana's always loved spending the weekend with her. They do craft together – paint mugs or knit – or they go for walks, talk about whatever. As Hana has got older, they chat about things she's learning at school: coral reefs, gravity, chimpanzees, anything. Seeing Grandma always makes Hana feel like things don't matter quite so much.

Now she sits on the bed and leans over and gives Hana a kiss. "How's your ballet going, dear?"

"Good, I guess ..."

Grandma glances round the room. Hana can see what she's seeing: all her things in their place. There are the medals that hang by their ribbons; her certificates, pinned just so; the photos arranged on the corkboard, showing Hana in all her recitals and shows. In the wardrobe, her clothes hang smooth and straight. "But?" Grandma says.

Hana sighs. She doesn't know what to say. She likes dance a lot – loves it, mostly – although lately, it's felt like a chore. She's not sure any more ... Her mum would probably just remind her how good she is. Hana knows she's good. But it's hard being good. It takes a lot of effort.

"Sarah Grayson practises two hours a day," she blurts out.

"Every day?" Grandma raises her eyebrows. "Really? That's an awful lot."

"She's talking about the exam already."

“How are you feeling about it?” Grandma asks, reading her mind.

Hana says nothing.

“I know you’re focused on doing well,” Grandma says. “But just remember, you can only do what you can. No one’s perfect.”

Hana opens her mouth to say more and stops.

Ballet is all about perfect. Every move. Hana’s feet, calves, legs, arms, hands ... even her neck ... they all have to be positioned *just so*. She needs to have perfect posture, perfect balance. And yes, it might hurt sometimes. But sloppy won’t get you anywhere, and being great at something doesn’t just happen. You have to put the work in. That’s what Ms Martine, her dance teacher, says.

Ms Martine always moves like a ballerina: graceful, in control. Hana wants to be like that, too. She’s done ballet forever. For every birthday, her presents have been ballet-themed – dolls, books, movies. And then this year, the best gift of all: the pink satin slippers wrapped in tissue, ready for when she could finally go on point. But now, being on point just feels like more hard work.

Her last ballet exam had been especially bad. She’d hardly slept the night before, her mind churning through all the things that might go wrong. Forgetting her gear, falling over, an unkind look. She hadn’t eaten breakfast. Her stomach was rolling like the sea. On their way to the exam, Mum had been sympathetic. She’d said all the right things ... until she’d said the wrong thing. *You can do it, love. You’re good.*

She’s at her Thursday dance class. Ms Martine is counting them in. They’re practising for the dance recital. Their feet squeak a little on

the wooden floor, and the room is hot and still. One whole wall is a mirror, and Hana can see Grandma watching. Mum has a deadline at work. Most of the parents talk quietly among themselves, but Grandma sits alone, knitting. She’s wearing her favourite pink trousers, her feet stretched out in front. It’s her favourite position. It helps her sore hip.

Grandma smiles, but Hana is frowning. She looks at her feet. Her big toe on her right foot is throbbing. She takes a deep breath. It’s her turn to do a jeté. She springs off her right foot, ignoring the sore toe, and lands on the left. Then she does another, followed by a series of pirouettes. She fixes her eyes on a spot and turns and turns. As she finishes, she looks over and catches herself in the mirror. She’s standing in fourth position, arms wide, toes pointing. Completely still.

“Well done, girls!” says Ms Martine. Hana feels a bubble of happiness. She hasn’t felt this way in ages.



On the way home, Hana closes her eyes. The warm feeling is still there. It's like being in a bath. Or drifting half asleep. And that's when she knows what to do. She'll concentrate on the recital – and next year, she won't sit the exam. She can still go to classes. Ms Martine will be disappointed, but she'll understand. So will Mum, and Grandma will definitely agree.

She'll dance just for pleasure, just for herself. Hana sighs with relief. She thinks about doing the jeté: arms spread wide, neck straight, moving with grace. She had felt for a moment like she was skimming over water. She needs to remember that.

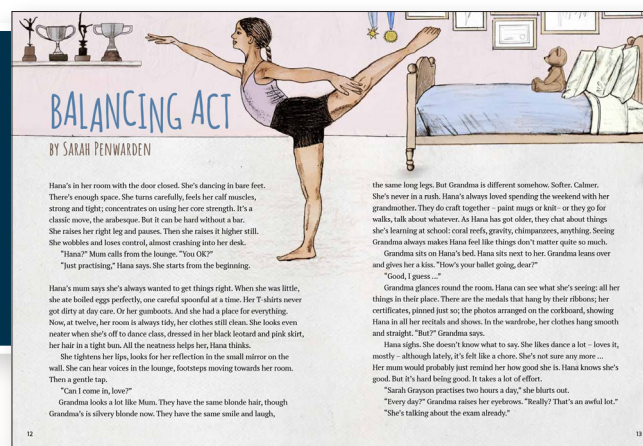
illustrations by Lisa Baudry



Balancing Act

by Sarah Penwarden

illustrations by Lisa Baudry



The text and illustrations are copyright © Crown 2022.

For copyright information about how you can use this material go to:
<http://www.tki.org.nz/Copyright-in-Schools/Terms-of-use>

Published 2022 by the Ministry of Education,
PO Box 1666, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.
www.education.govt.nz

All rights reserved.

Enquiries should be made to the publisher.

ISBN 978 1 77690 817 2 (online)
ISSN 2624 3636 (online)

Publishing Services: Lift Education E Tū
Series Editor: Susan Paris
Designer: Liz Tui Morris
Literacy Consultant: Melanie Winthrop
Consulting Editors: Ariana Tikao and Emeli Sione

SCHOOL JOURNAL LEVEL 3 NOVEMBER 2022

Curriculum learning areas

English
Health and PE

Reading year level

Year 6

Keywords

ballet, dancing, self-care, wellbeing