



I knew I could do it

Come on, Billy, you're not a girl, are you? Put some strength into it! Spin it, spin it! You're a man. You've got to go like a rocket! So I did. I span round so fast my feet slipped and I ended up sprawled out on the floor like a prat¹. The girls stared down at me. They didn't dare laugh, though. She came down on anyone who laughed. You have to be prepared to be a bit of a prat when you start off learning these things, so you can end up good. Same as anything.

'Practise at home,' she said. And then we went to barre, which was a lot better because it was all slow and you could see the moves easily and I could do that OK.

At the end of it I was knackered², but I felt great. That spin – I knew I could do it. It was just a question of practice. I was sitting on a bench pulling me jumper on and that Debbie was hanging around me again, watching like I was a TV set or something.

'See,' she said. 'I said it was harder than it looks, didn't I?'

'Aye, you did.'

'The spin's hard, isn't it?' She practised it a couple of times.

'You're not as fast as me,' I told her.

'You can't even do it,' she scoffed³.

I got up to show her. I did a slow one to start with and it wasn't half bad, but when I did it fast it was no good. I couldn't keep my balance.

'You need to go round at least twice. A strong lad like you.' It was Mrs Wilkinson.

'Aye.' I sat down and started packing my bag. She nodded at Debbie.

'Scram⁴.'

'Why, Mam?'

'What did you call me?'

'Miss. Sorry.'

'Go on.'

Debbie cleared off and Miss looked down at me, holding her fag to her mouth and squinting through the smoke.

'So then. Do we get the pleasure of your company next week?'

'Dunno. It's just... I feel like a right sissy⁵.'

'Then don't act like one. Fifty pence.'

I handed over the money. She pointed at my ballet shoes.

'Well, if you're not coming, give us your shoes back.'

I hesitated. Ballet – well, I didn't care for it all that much, but I wanted to learn how to do that spin.

I wanted to do it in the boxing ring. That'd show'em!

'Nah, you're all right,' I said.

'Right,' she said, and she turned on her heel without even saying goodbye or anything, and walked straight out.

And you know what? I didn't realise how much I liked it until I found myself dancing all the way home.

I felt really light-headed. I went skittering⁶ and jumping all the way, and it wasn't till I was standing in the kitchen with the ballet shoes in one hand and the boxing gloves around me neck that I thought, What have I done?



MELVIN BURGESS, *Billy Elliot* (2001)

1. **prat** (n.): (slang) an idiot

2. **knackered** /'nækəd/ (adj.): (slang) exhausted

3. **scoff** (v.): say mockingly

4. **scram** (v.): (slang) leave at once

5. **sissy** (n.): (slang) *une femmelette*

6. **skitter** (v.): move lightly and hastily