

America

Mr. Bixby is showing us again how to do the lay-back. He says we're all too stiff, but what he means is that we're all too white. "*Curl* your upper backs! With every kick you're *giving yourselves*." He kicks as high as his shoulder and lets his upper back droop and he looks idiotic, but he's trying to get Melissa Ridge to quit it with her ramrod ballet kicks, and anyway, Mr. Bixby is Mr. *West Side Story*, and all we can do is go along.

He's already got us, the Sharks and their girls, training with the Spanish teacher to improve our accents. He's training the Jets' accents himself, and now Trent Boynton, who's playing Action, goes around muttering, "Kick da can to da koib." If Trent runs into any of the Sharks, he's supposed to refuse to talk. Mr. Bixby won't let the Sharks and the Jets eat lunch together or hang out after school. "This isn't just a play," Mr. Bixby says. "It's a life." The day I woke up surprised to see my regular room and not a tenement, I told him about it. "That's—good, that's real good," he told me. I wasn't five feet away when he complained to Rob, the script boy he always keeps nearby, "We've been rehearsing for two months. What has she been doing?"

I've been learning to be Puerto Rican. At first I wanted to be Velma, Riff's girl, but Mr. Bixby cast Antoinette Mercer, who's so stupid that she can say her line—"Ouble-oo"—and sound like she means it. Now I'm Marisol, the name Mr. Bixby gave me, and I'll have leeway to improvise lines once Mr. Bixby thinks my accent is good enough.

First, though, I have to learn the steps to "America." It's an all-girl number, which I thought would make the dancing easy, but Mr. Bixby says we're supposed to dance in Spanish, and none of us knows how to do that. At first he told us to wiggle, but

now he's telling us to ripple. "You can't just jiggle your skirt and think you're going to look Puerto Rican," he says, holding his hands up as if he were shaking out a towel. In case anybody has missed it, he's gay. "Your whole body is alive and flashing. The Jets girls are wound tight, but you are *exploding!*"

We try to explode. Some of the shows we've done are stupid—nobody has forgotten that cowbell in *Oklahoma!*—but I can feel *West Side Story's* angular music scraping at my brain, its constant anger keeping me buzzing like a high-tension wire. Every day my lay-backs get a little deeper, and my body is moving in new ways, as if it's barely holding back something I didn't know I had. One night, Mom asks me if I've taken out the trash and I say "*Sí*" without thinking. In the moment before she frowns, shock blanks out her face, and I feel a sizzling pleasure.

Because Tony and Maria are using the stage, we're practicing in the cafeteria—"Neutral territory," Mr. Bixby says. By the silverware bins, I tap my foot and watch the "America" rehearsal stop because of Marina Rowe, who must have been cast as Rosalia because of her boobs, not that Mr. Bixby cares about them. She's a terrible dancer and can't remember any of her sixteen lines. But she's the only girl other than Maria who argues with haughty Anita, and even though Rosalia loses, it's still thrilling to watch someone take Anita on. Or it would be thrilling, if the person weren't Marina. "What do you think you're arguing about?" Mr. Bixby says to her.

"Whether America is good or not."

"Deeper than that."

"Immigrants should go home?"

Mr. Bixby takes a deep breath, the one that signals we've just hit the end of his patience. "Inclusion. You're arguing to prove you belong. There's nothing more important than that."

"Okay," says Marina, happy to have the question answered for her.

"So how do you pour the hunger to be included into your dancing?"

"We ripple," she says promptly, then glances at his face. "We explode?"

Quietly, my feet moving lightly over the tile floor, I start again with the shuddering little steps, then the explosive kicks that make me cry out. I may be a sixteen-year-old German-Irish girl living in flat Ohio, but *West Side Story* is a chute I slide down, and every day I'm a little more Marisol, working in a west side dress shop and kissing Pepe on the fire escape. When Jeff O'Brien, who plays Snowboy, bumped into me in the cafeteria, I hissed at him.

Mr. Bixby notices me marking out the steps, and I see him pause. I feel the moment like a hitch in the breath, and for a second all the sound in the cafeteria stops. He's never seen me before—or rather, he's never seen Marisol, sixteen years old and hungry for an American car, an American house and boy and life. She did not come here to mark out tiny steps in a white cinderblock room that smells like gravy. Can Mr. Bixby see my sneer? Mr. Bixby would be lucky to have Marisol walk over him in her sharp-pointed shoes. Promises have been made on every side, but so far all Marisol has been given is a script, the boys she has known all her life, and one small hope in being picked out by in a man in tight pants and dancing shoes. I kick again, laying back into the air, which catches me.

Mr. Bixby claps his hands and sound rushes back in. "Again," he says. "Marisol, show them."

I swish my skirt, walking to the front of the room, and feel every set of eyes. We are living this play, almost all of us, and I wish a Jet were here so I could spit on him.

This is my country now.