

ENGLISH: *CREATIVE WRITING*

The Dance Studio

"I don't fit, I don't fit, I don't fit!" The voice, a strangled cry, echoes in Tatiana's mind but she pushes the memory back.

The floorboards creak as if they are shooing her away in blatant unwelcome, telling her she shouldn't be here. Still, as she traces the phantom steps of her past life and enters the room, she is overwhelmed by memories of how she once loved this cosy little dance studio.

Years have passed since she returned here and it seems smaller than ever. But she knows that in reality, she has grown. Her baby pink ballet shoes pinch her toes now as she pulls them on. Another bitter reminder that this place does not accommodate her anymore. Too tight, too tight, always too tight. Her hands hover over another pair of shoes in the closet, well-worn and loved shoes, tied together at the laces, just one size larger. She leaves them and stands up.

In the room lined by mirrors, she feels both alone and surrounded. Courage! Courage! The image in the mirror pleads. Don't cringe! Don't cringe! Slowly, slowly, her courage bubbles to pride, warms her, but even that cannot keep old habits entirely at bay. As she warms up, stretching her body like well-used bow, she takes measure of herself. Her body is better, stronger, than what it was last August. Frustrated by its lackings, her shape her contours, so much more than what she wanted, yet less than what she could stand, she had tried so hard to recreate her under the watchful gaze of her mother. The memory of falling to her knees as if in prayer, before the altar of the white porcelain.

Measuring herself now, she feels the old echoes of her past self. Not a performer, never a teacher, no longer a student.

Why was she here?

She still didn't have a place here. Her mother too had stopped coming into the studio.

Why?

Trying to avoid the reality of her misplaced guilt?

"Why do you love dancing, mama?"

She loved watching her mother in the studio before her classes started, loved the way she could move in song and sonnetry, in stuttery staccato when she was feeling wild, or in the four slow bars of a favourite rhyme when she feeling lyrical. It was from her she learned that there are stories the body can tell, poetry the body can murmur only in motion.

"Tatiana, I dance so you will sit still for once in your life to watch me."

There had been a time, she reflects now, when being her mother's audience had been enough to earn a place here.

Her stretches finished, she rises into a staring plie. She whips her head around quickly, her eyes always returning to a fixed point in the mirror to keep balance as she turns and turns and turns. She imagines the swift, graceful figure of the dark-haired girl with her arms stretched out neatly in front of her, rounded until the fingers meet.

Is her mother dancing alongside her?

Her eyes turn forward after each pirouette to meet her own reflection—fiercely concentrating on the fleeting image in the corner of her eye projected in the side mirror-- but mostly in her mind, of her mother; present, sweating, and dancing with her.

She tries to peek a little more to the side, but it's too much--her eyes slide away, she loses her pointe, she stumbles. Her mother beside her, too, has stopped, and stands silently with her shoulders and chest rising slightly with each breath. In desperation for the comforting nest of her mother's arms, Tatiana looks to the absent space her mother once occupied. Nada. Nothing. Nulla.

How long can she keep chasing the ghost of better times?

She is her only audience here. With her ungainly feet – unworthy of her delicate shoes. With her broken rhythm – unworthy of her mother's tutelage. The memory pushes again to the front of her mind, the same voice. Her voice.

"I don't fit!"

For a moment, defeat overcomes her. But only for a moment. She rips off the baby pink instruments of torture, determined to go barefoot.

She stops. She remembers--

It's a matter of courage, yes, courage. Ask it! Ask it!

Am I good enough?

To the closet, headfirst, fearless, filled with purpose. The question needs no other answer. She is her mother's daughter. Nature or nurture, her mother was her nest--hatched and reared in her care.

Carefully, she opens the box etched with her mother's name, dipping her feet into a pool of memories. Hesitantly, at first, in case the water is too cold, but with growing confidence she wades in deeper, memories and emotions flood her. She holds her mother's shoes in her hands.

Maybe it wasn't that she didn't fit the shoes, she realises, but that the shoes didn't fit her. The wrong shoes, the right feet. She had only needed to find the right fit.

Tightening the laces of her mother's shoes, she picks herself up for another dance...