

Piper Greene
"Tanz,"
12th grade
Greenville, SC
Honorable Mention Scholastics

Tanz

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When I was six, my family moved to Zürich, Switzerland for my Dad's job. It was my first time being on a flight for more than three hours, and I learned from the age of six the wonders of what a Benadryl can do when you can't sleep.

We only lived in Zürich for a year and a half, but I have so many memories of that city. I went to the Zürich International School where all the kids learned both English and German. The first day of first grade at ZIS is still one of the most intimidating moments of my life I can remember. I stood by the door and watched the classroom full of students speak a mix of English and German while coloring. 'Do they still have crayons in Switzerland?' I wondered. (They did.) I had so many questions, none of which I could answer before a small girl with waist length platinum hair came bobbing over.

"Hullo," she said in a London accent, extending her arm for a handshake. "I'm Phoebe. Pleasure to meet your acquaintance." I didn't know what an 'acquaintance' was but I assumed it was good and let her show me around the classroom, naming things in German along the way. I had never met a kid so comfortable with themselves until I met Phoebe. She took everyone under her wing, making sure they knew the rules of the playground and how to ask the teachers that only spoke German for snacks. I was a grateful student of her's, and we quickly became best friends. We would talk about Adele together and listen to her new album on my Hello Kitty boombox after school. For a while we were convinced we were spies, and made our own secret language so we could pass coded notes to each other in class.

I'm not quite sure how it happened, but our mothers somehow convinced us to take ballet lessons together, and many of my most vivid memories take place in that dance studio. Our dance teacher, Frau Something-Or-Other, smoked Djarum clove cigarettes while she taught us. The first day of class the two

of us were trying to keep up with each other in the haze of the smoke and in between coughing fits. Frau Something-Or-Other wore black hip hop shoes that would crackle when she showed us how to point our toes. “Hör genau zu!”, she’d shout, “Listen carefully!”

She would hit play on the CD player and show us what to do. “Fünf, sechs, sieben, acht!” By the time I had taken a couple classes, I could count up to eight in German after hearing it over and over from her red-lipped mouth. When she wasn’t yelling at us keeping tempo she was sucking the life out of a Djarum cigarette, leaving a rim of red where her lips had been. To this day, every time I smell the simultaneously sweet and bitter smell of a clove cigarette, I am back in that dance studio trying to see myself in the mirror through puffs of smoke.

There was no place for us to change after class besides the locker room, where the older girls changed. The little girls were exiled to the corners of the locker room to wriggle our small bodies out from under tiny, blush-pink leotards. I would watch the girls laugh and chatter as they changed. Recalling it now, I’d be freaked out by a little girl staring at me in my underwear, but at the time I was so transfixed by teenagers I didn’t realize how weird it must have been.

Their shoulder blades poked out from their backs like angel wings when they went to fix their hair, their ribs protruding from their sides. The older girls had arms so delicate and porcelain white, they looked like the spinning dolls inside a jewelry box. I would watch them eye each other’s bodies and get on a glass scale in a corner of the room. They would line up before each class to take a turn on the scale. I watched their curved backs slump as they looked down at the number before pushing the locker room door open. “Ach du lieber” they would mumble and roll their eyes. “Oh my god.”

Sometimes their classes would run late and we would tip toe into the hazy studio to see the girls spin, flailing their arms artfully in the blur of vapor that obscured them. We all wanted to be just like them, and grow up to wear red lipstick and smoke cigarettes.

Some days, Frau Something-Or-Other would take a measuring tape and measure the skeletal waists of the older girls. They would wait until everyone was measured before being dismissed, standing

in their leotards, their muscular calves turned out. She would mumble and grunt in response to the number each girl had. “Dahin kommen,” she whispered to one girl close to me. “Getting there...”

One day, waiting for my parents to pick me up from practice, I stepped on the scale just to feel like one of the older girls. The numbers flickered for a moment before settling on 43 pounds. I didn't know what that meant, but I stepped off the scale and muttered “Ach du lieber” because that was what you said after you saw your weight.

It was after a year of classes that I realized that this was a lifestyle that required compromise. You get strong legs after hours of sweaty turning. You stab your scalp daily just to keep your hair in place. You get lung cancer if you want to learn from a professional. You stay skinny if you want to be successful.

I didn't stick around long enough to be measured because we had to move back to the United States. Sometimes I wonder how far into that blurry world of dance I would have gotten before I realized that it was toxic. As a kid it seemed normal, but looking back now, it was a dangerous game to be playing.

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In 2018, I visited Phoebe in her house in London. Her family moved back to London around the time that my family went back to America. We stayed in touch and had been visiting each other every two summers since 2014, and to this day I still consider Phoebe to be one of my closest friends despite the distance between us.

Phoebe's house was small and narrow, stairs crawling up to three flights just so another bathroom could fit. At the time we were staying in their house, and all the kids used the same bathroom (her little brother was my sister's age and the four of us together were quite a force to be reckoned with).

One particularly humid night, after playing tag along Phoebe's street and listening to the street foxes, I went to take a shower in the bathroom. I listened to the laughs of Phoebe and her brother as I washed my hair with what I thought to be fancy British shampoo (looking back on it now it was probably the British equivalent to Suave or Dove). Stepping out of the shower and wiping away the condensation on the mirror, I glanced at myself and caught a glimpse of glass behind me.

I turned around and saw a glass scale almost identical to the one in the Zurich dance studio. That was the first time I had thought back to that time and I could swear that, among the steamy smell of soap, I caught a hint of clove cigarette.

I regarded the scale for a moment before looking back in the mirror. I let the towel fall from my shoulders and craned my neck. My shoulder blades looked more like flesh and less like the wings the older dancers had. I turned back to the scale, knowing that if I stood on it it would no longer show 43 pounds.

I paused for a moment before unlocking the door and walking back to my room. I wasn't a walking skeleton. Much to my surprise, I realized that I didn't want to be.