

Poor little sausage puppets

By Cheryl Caesar

I am ten. I'm standing, facing two rows of girls in leotards, pink tights and pink ballet slippers with elastic straps. Behind me is a wall of mirrors and Judy with her record player. This is Judy's Dance Studio. If it were my studio I would call it something evocative, but for Judy there is no other possible name.

The floor is tile, with concrete underneath. Other studios have wooden floors, kinder to the feet, but Judy's Dance Studio is not about what your body feels. It's about how it looks, as dictated by Judy first and the mirror second. As Judy's daughter and unpaid assistant, I have the official job of demonstrating the steps. But my real purpose is to stand in a leotard and reveal every lump of an inferior body. It's sort of like being in the stocks. The primary lesson of Judy's Dance Studio is that your body is unacceptable, and I am the prime example.

I hear Judy snickering with the moms sometimes about dance teachers, how they make someone else the fairy princess and make you the gnome. Now she has beat the racket: she gets to decide who is sprinkled in fairy dust.

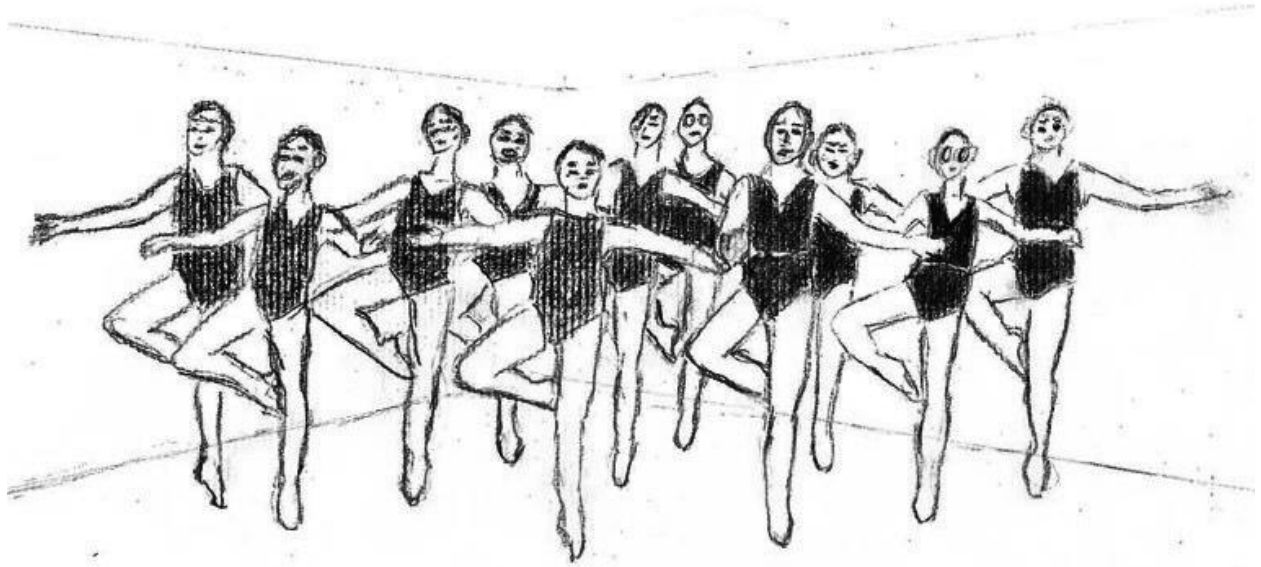
Other dance teachers sometimes give in to the entreaties of their students and dance themselves, even in the annual recital. Judy never does this; she only judges others.

The apparent aim of dancing is to be cute – cute for whom, I wonder. Sometimes the preschooler’s music suggests it’s the parents – “Mom, Dad, aren’t you proud of me?” Hands must be held in one rigid position: palms flat down for tap; the “pretty hands” of child beauty pageants for ballet; spidery “jazz hands.” I see dancers on TV doing all sorts of hand positions and movements, but Judy derides that as “stoo-pud,” her favorite adjective. “Have I got a cute expression on my face?” sings the record, and I think of the awful results of forcing a cute facial expression.

Sometimes in the older classes, the Chopin begins to seep through my muscles and I feel the warmth of exertion, the release of stretching, the flow. A moment of calm. No one ever speaks of this feeling, or of any motivation beyond Judy’s orders. In my teens, another teacher will one day interrupt the class and call us to the window to see the sunset. I will be amazed that this is allowed.

I am inferior, hopelessly inferior, but I am not allowed to leave. I have to work here every day after school. I cannot do some other activity that I might be better at, because being inferior is my job. The deepest shame is being made of meat. The ideal is bone, with skin and leotard stretched across it. Some girls are closer to the ideal. I study the folds their leotards make over their flat bellies when they sit down, and arrange the same wrinkles in my own leotard. I sometimes ask Judy about certain favorite students – are they destined to be dancers? She sneers and points out their faults. No one is good enough.

I will never be good enough, but I am not permitted to give up. Why the other girls continue is more mysterious. Every afternoon I stand in front of two rows of obedient girls, poor little sausage puppets.



At 63, I read Brené Brown and others on the experience of shame. “Shame is feeling like you’re bad meat,” someone says. I no longer feel that way. I don’t even eat meat. Flesh is different – living flesh, my body. My soul’s battered but loyal companion on my life journey.

Now I sometimes dance down the hall, with no one watching, just for joy. I do yoga and feel the warmth of exertion, the release of a stretch. ("Show your hamstrings some love!") I look at the sky, the garden. I close my eyes. There are no mirrors.

