

Raine Radke

Finalist

2019 CFUW Writing Contest

### Dance Against the Lights

The message was clear: there would be no celebrating tonight.

Camila stood at the bus stop in silence as flakes of snow settled around her. She watched as the day turned to dusk, trying not to peer at her mother who hovered by the sign. Even without looking, she could tell the older woman's lips were pursed; her hard gaze so transfixed on the faint twinkling lights of the far city across to notice her daughter's consternation.

Camila looked down, tightening her grip around the quarters of her ballet shoes. They had been a pretty-peach colour once. Elegant and sophisticated with fine leather bindings and cascading satin ribbons. "These will make you appear weightless. Like a sylph," she had been told. And they did. When she danced with them, lithe and spritely despite her bruised toes, she felt she could do anything. Now, the light-weight shoes looked over worn. Riddled with loose threads and dark scuff marks along the canvas.

Her mother had never watched her dance before, but somehow, she had run out of excuses. Phrases such as '*I will be home late*' or '*I still have work to finish*' that she had often used in the past were now not heard. The week prior, when her mother realized she had to come, the reluctance on her face had been impossible to ignore, but it had only made Camila practice more rigorously. She had desperately wanted to win, wanted to feel the roar of victory around her, that euphoria that would spread like wildfire from her chest to every part of her body, feeling triumphant over every dancer, claimed by the many eyes and cheers of admiration – especially her mother's.

But in the end, she had not even placed.

“Just change at home. We might miss the bus,” her mother said after her loss. So, Camila had slung her winter jacket over her sapphire tutu dress and quickly slipped her swollen feet into her more comfortable winter boots. She had swallowed the confusion and anger before it could rear its ugly head and make things worse and trailed after her mother as they trudged towards the bus stop. They had not exchanged another word. The message had been clear then, and she would be foolish to expect anything more.

Now, the stillness between them sat like a third presence. Camila sniffed. Because of the cold, or because of her humiliation and disappointment she did not know. She felt out of place. Maybe it was because she was wearing a tutu by the bus stop in the middle of winter. Maybe it was because she was standing next to a mother who would not acknowledge her efforts.

Their bus approached the preceding block’s stoplight, waiting for the light to turn green. Camila reached for her duffel bag, preparing herself to board when a hand suddenly reached out and wrapped around her own.

“Camila,” her mother spoke in the heavily-accented English familiar to her. “By the way, I thought you did very well.”

And then her mother smiled at her.

Camila had not seen that smile in a long time.

It reminded her that her mother had been beautiful once. Back home, where she had been successful, admired and respected by many. Now she was worn out, tired and pale. Their move to this new country they now called home had weathered her once-vibrant skin, her eyes now empty after working from paycheck to paycheck at a job she was overqualified for, for men who worked only half the amount of time she did.

Her once-beautiful mother, who had learned to rush in order to catch the bus every day or she would be stuck waiting in the cold.

Her mother, whose hard-earned money was spent on ballet classes for a daughter who would not acknowledge her efforts.

At Camila's lack of response, her mother let go and again, Camila looked to the dull colour of her ballet shoes.

The orange and white lights of the bus closed in. Its beacons glared almost like a spotlight coming to rest on her while onstage, signaling her turn to perform, to begin and *dance*.

The bus pulled up the sidewalk, and the silence that had encompassed them came to an end as the doors opened to the cacophony of shuffling feet and the boisterous, lively laughter of the passengers within.