FLASH NONFICTION

The Ballet Dancer

by Andie Z Chen

"I'm Flying Through the Daytime City in the Clouds" by Nasta Martyn

Tint Journal, no. 16 (September 2026), www.tintjournal.com

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One of my aunties — her child had died of cerebrovascular disease. When her son was sick, blood kept coming out of his nose, and she would hold a towel over it for him every day. After he passed, she bought some little goldfish. She said she liked them because they looked like tiny fetuses in the womb, with bulges on both sides of their necks like gills.

At first, she was like their mother. She named one of the fish “Ballet Dancer,” because it had a black gauze-like tail, like a ballerina’s skirt.

“Time to change the water, my darlings, time for your little bath.” The auntie cupped their bodies.

The fish slipped right out of her palms. “Look at you, so clueless, don’t even know I’m doing this for your own good!” she grumbled.

She scooped them out of the big tank with a large net, let them drain, and dumped them into another clean basin. Thrown into the new, cramped environment, the fish couldn’t adjust — they thrashed and flopped, flop, flop. The auntie melted at how cute they were, chuckling to herself.

“Look at you, all slimy with your own filth, swimming in your sticky waste — how lucky you are to have someone so caring!” She scrubbed their skin hard with a toothbrush. The fish resisted, flailing wildly, their muscles straining — but they still couldn’t escape having to endure her scrubbing out of water.

That Ballet Dancer didn’t struggle — it just shut her eyes tight under the brush, basked in the sun.

The auntie tossed them back into the tank. The other fish were delighted to be back, but the Ballet Dancer sank to the bottom of the tank to admire the coral.

Tiny white spots speckled its scales. This fish-mother complained about the Ballet Dancer: “This one cost the most, and this one was sick — not worth the price.”

The Ballet Dancer was buried in a flowerpot, feeding the maggots in the soil.

After its funeral, this auntie even taught me: “Never keep pets — they cost money, they’re disgusting, exhausting, need constant cleaning, and when they die, it just weighs on your heart.”

Then she bundled up the remaining fish into a black plastic bag and gave them away as a gift, satisfied with herself, certain the recipient would like them — proud of being someone who knew how to maintain good interpersonal relationships.

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