A dark and dingy stairwell intimidates a five year old. Glass cases hold memorabilia that few look at and most barely remember. The stairwell opens with chatter around quarter to 4 when the girls start arriving at Red River Dance and Performing Arts Studio. They tumble up the stairs with mom, dad or a grandparent in tow. Pairs of leotard-clad legs protrude from fluffy coats. Hats and mittens get thrown into the hands of waiting parents. Thirteen girls in tutus and dancing shoes emerge and enter their world. It’s fast paced, disorderly and blossoming pink. While the parents sit out in the waiting room gossiping and trading information, their little girls bounce and laugh a few feet away. For that hour the outside world is forgotten, and 26 little feet have the floor in their own rose-colored room.

Head instructor, Laura Beauchamp, corrects her students “Up, up! Shoulders up! Natalie point your toes.” The girls giggle as warm up exercises get class underway. This ritual opens to the funny comedy of a 5-year-old dance class. Most cannot quite make an exact copy of their more seasoned instructors. Being this young allows the pupils to have more flexibility than their teachers, but less accuracy and far less focus. Even as they move, a few get lost in adjusting their petite dance shoes. “Everyone to first positions,” the teachers call to order. The first one to get to correct position is praised while the rest obediently fall in order. “Show me a tendu.” A few toes obediently point while the rest are lost to their own fancy.

A leader is chosen each week to start the lines for working on basic skills. Each girl waits for their turn to lead the line like they wait for dessert after dinner. Beauchamp goes over to the official list and checks to see whose turn it is. “Today’s leader is … Katie.” Twelve faces fall just a little bit. Little Katie blossoms with a broad smile of satisfaction. All the girls start out in a line and are fairly serious about what they are there to learn. When the seriousness dissolves into giggling and smiles, Katie watches everyone like a den mother—even to the point of taking over the teacher’s authority. “Stand back! You stand here and you stand behind Anna. You two can’t stand by each other. You make too much noise.” They are brought each week to learn how to become
the beautiful dancers they see in the movies. Some asked to come, some were brought. All were instantly hooked.

Halfway through the hour, it’s time to move on to tap. The soft clomp of slippered feet is quickly replaced with the overwhelming drumbeat of thirteen little girls in shiny black tap shoes. The combination of a slippery floor and sliding tap shoes is an irresistible temptation for sliding across the floor. Most of the time the girls end up on their bottoms rather than on their feet. All too soon the two teachers have had enough of the tap chaos and call to order with a stern, “All right everyone sit!” Thirteen pairs of eyes look guiltily around for support from one another. “It’s time for us to work on our program,” Beauchamp calls out. “Remember we need to remember to reach for our teddy bears when we turn around. And I want to hear you all sing.” Voices rise for the first couple lines, then it becomes more of a mumble than an actual song. In the mirror that runs the length of the room, concentration reflects back as the girls watch themselves try to learn a new step for their program—turning in a full circle. This is the challenge; the girls must get all the way around without getting their legs tangled. Sometimes it works. Most of the time the feet and legs do not work together.

The clock says ten minutes until class is done, and the parents start gathering coats and gloves. The teachers begin closing the class. Concentration on learning is just about gone. The girls are oblivious to the clock and its overcast face. They know that it is time for free play and the usual game is called “Freeze.” The song plays, and when it stops, the girls stop. Laura lays down the rules every time. “I want to see you dance. I don’t want running around. Let’s see what you learned today.” Every time the game is played, the rules are repeated. Every time they are forgotten. As if Laura had not even said a word, the music starts and five girls grasp hands and circle like a merry-go-round. Two or three start sliding around. The rest grasp each other by the waist and proceed to make a train around the room. Two well-intentioned teachers try and keep up with their precarious students, but by the end of the hour they are happy for some peace and quiet. The girls tromp out to waiting parents holding coats and backpacks. They start retelling everything that happened during their hour for the parents. For that hour they commanded their own world.