

The dancer stares at the curtains, she counts the stripes in the darkness and the night tram rattles past for the third time in an hour. Surrounded by the night, she feels the vibrations of the thin window course through her body as a cold chill. Restlessness tosses her from one side to the other, and gripping the pillow tightly into her chest, she draws up her knees to form a barrier against the rushing wave of pinpricks. All she wishes for is sleep, the unconscious release of blankness. But instead she lies tormented by the din of her beating heart. Fighting back against the thunder which lurks on the other side of silence, her eyelids are screwed firmly closed. These sleepless nights are an eternity, a detached reality all of their own. During the daylight hours they seem a figment of her imagination. If only, in the morning, this night would no longer be true.

The dancer was a woman who decided to love as if she had never been punished by a broken heart, to give herself as openly as she could. To trust like she knew she shouldn't. She had felt love before, but ironically it was only through experiencing hurts that she had gained the courage to bury them. Suddenly she was pushed out of her bed and her uncomfortable twilight by the trails of scurrying ants rummaging through her bones and sinews; she threw off the thin, sweat moistened sheet and opened the wide balcony doors. Lit cigarette in hand, leaning out into the gentle snow fall, with wide brown eyes, eyes which cried louder than her syrupy voice ever dared, she gazed at the towering Baroque façade without seeing. Over and over, hints and flares of the previous evening's performance turned out in her mind's eye, the crisp strings floated into her delicate ears once again. Vanity had no part in it, but she sighed as the caretaker of the Grand Opera House intruded into these thoughts, scattering them as liberally as the

salt he sprinkled on the icy pavement, she turned back into the dark, empty room as his tuneless whistle reverberated from the cobblestones below. These were streets for lovers and the dancer turned her back on them, shivering as the cold air drew goose bumps out of her warm, caramel skin. Her eyes wandered over the shoes by the wardrobe, the watch still lying on the night stand. Excluding her pain, lightly perched on the edge of the bed, she tried to capture and to hold, if only for the breath of a moment, that last night under the lights, the final act of abandonment.

She had been the pride of the conservatory, swooped and pirouetted in all the brightest capitals of Europe, between Vienna and London; had lapped up encores the world over, from Seoul to Havana, pausing for effect upon every stage in between. So often, the world-famous director, whose wagging finger drove the other girls to terrified and anxious mistakes, had raised her as an example to be followed. 'Kindly watch how serious and proper she is, please girls', sung the fearsome battle axe. Gushing over her application and dedication, the director made her into the envied hate figure of her peers, all the better for forcing her talent on to yet greater heights. This reputation for serious commitment to her art, for the rejection of all else, preceded her – and, with this foreshadow in mind, was even an impression initially shared by new people she met. But we cannot help how others speak of us, if the lemon tongued Director of Ballet at the National Academy had described Juliet herself, she would have painted her in acidic tones. A simple glance at the dancer's button nose, the elegant movement of her neck and arms, the first whisper of her innocent laugh, or the hint of her modest smile would be enough to dispel the starchy image formed by such praise.

'What was this all for?' she thought in the sad haze of another cigarette, her silhouette naked against the frosty air. The gloom she now willingly surrendered to had gripped her whole supple being. With good reason, she had consciously abandoned the hesitation and reserve that all scolded lovers learn to shield themselves with, and the dancer had believed the same of him. Both as open as the other, so their story went, neither protected, they would only have each other as insurance against life's fickle weather. Dismissive of common wisdom, she wrapped her sun-browned arms around his wide neck and kissed his coarse lips, happiness leaking from her deep loving gaze, as she whispered assurances that he had definitively left his fiancée melted any lingering hesitation. Now here she sat, trembling in their high-ceilinged apartment. Everything given up. This was more than a love-nest, it was their home, their shelter, and, for three months, her comfort from the storm. How stupid she felt now, at this pivotal moment; how abandoned, shamed, abused. Everything was over and she curled her toes on the soft carpet as tears welled in the creases of her eyes. Self-deprecating judgements raged through her, each overtaking the last, none reaching a conclusion. The corners of her dainty mouth shook and trembled. 'Why?' She said out loud, surprising herself by the struggle in her own feeble, shuddering tone. 'Why did I believe him?' She should have known, our wounded angel tells herself in this longest of nights, 'I should have known when he did not take me to the Christmas party in his office.'

The casual, dismissive way he had announced his sister's wedding plans, just a 'by the way' as he cooked her dinner, while she lay with precious legs draped over the arm of his favourite chair, she thought back to this moment. 'He never intended to.' That his family adored the fiancée she knew well. The pert, Harvard-educated, daughter of a state-minister would always outrank a common ballet dancer, no

matter how famous she had become. Wandering from moment-to-moment, she retraced her steps through a catalogue of pictures from that evening to this. Too stubborn to press the implied invitation, loose enough to escape firm commitment, she asked if she had been wrong. But already by that point, she had ignored all the advice of her friends – and that of her own experience – she felt she had given enough. So, as the weeks ticked closer, she accepted the lead role. Telling him one Sunday morning, whilst he stood over her, lovingly squeezing her shoulder, she felt his hand stiffen. ‘Oh, you know that was the date of my sister’s wedding?’ ‘It was?’ asked she.

Behind her the first hint of the morning revealed itself to the snow, drifting more and more heavily across the frozen pillars of the Opera. However had this happened? a shudder ran up her long spine as, by the encroaching day, the scale of her illusions were exposed, and not only the present, but the past was irrevocably altered.

Her lover was gone and so would she be. Very soon. With one last thought for the beautiful, controlled stillness of that final performance, the dancer pulled on a thick woollen dressing gown. As the scent hit her, she recoiled, almost crumpling over under the weight of the wrenching blow. Her throat gagged; this was his dressing gown and now it was empty, like her life, and reality churned her agonising soul. Too weak to throw it off, she had nothing left to resist the gushing sweep of the bitter-sad memory. She could never perform without speaking with him first; especially this night, how could she give her all under the lights when half herself was torn by such simmering distance. Hands grabbed her clothing from wardrobes and drawers, her worldly possessions were thrown into

the pile of open suitcases and sports bags strewn across the bed. In front of her eyes, however, were only the imprints of yesterdays blurred by tears, while the desperate sirens from some lawless slum quarter of her inner world rung the relentless images of that phone call.

'Mr S.?' the receptionist at the hotel had said distractedly, clearly fidgeting with paper work and unaware of the explosion he was about to detonate in a heart far away. 'I'll have to take a message Madame, Mr and Mrs S. have just stepped out of the lobby.'

Hovering on these words, she made sure that every trace of her naive, false-love, the spurned, rejected sacrifice of herself was erased from this theatre of shattered beliefs. As on cue, streams of pale early-morning illuminated the large ornate windows of the Opera one last time, the dancer stood in the street out front, her teeth chattering, her whole life and half her dignity discarded, scattered between the cases, bags, and boxes piled on the curb. She glanced back only once after they had been loaded into the taxi, and the yellow cab hummed on the empty street, waiting for red to become green, for an entire existence to dissipate like the snowflakes in the headlights. The dancer barely shuddered when she noticed the unkempt driver eyeing her exposed leg in the rear-view mirror. The driver was transparently weighing his chances whilst slurping on a mound of chewing gum. The amber light shone at them, as the voice rang out, and she vacantly returned the driver's reflected gaze.

The sound echoed along the cobblestone boulevard, and it was quickly followed by a figure; a figure running, tripping, flailing towards the car. The driver grunted as

he started to pull off, thinking to himself, for the hundredth time, how drunks messing up the streets at this hour should be arrested. But through syllables still strained with tears the dancer muttered her instructions. Too softly, the driver was moving; picking up speed, the figure in the dark diminishing; so, she hit him. 'STOP' she screamed as her open hand slapped the driver's ear a second, a third time.

Babbling some complaint more lethargic than angry, the heavy-set man slammed on the breaks, sending the photo of his family tumbling from the dashboard. But, however he stopped, he stopped; in fact, he stopped right in the middle of the road, directly in front of the entrance to the Opera. Beneath the watchful marble eyes of a great playwright, the door flung open. Today, thinking back on this seminal moment in her life, the dancer does not remember if it was she or he who did the flinging. Either way, his face was broken, drawn with suffering, grief, drained by the effects of a fifteen-hour slog over fields, cities, and oceans, by plane, train, bus, and, when these failed, foot; carried through cold, wet hardship, by only the faintest trace of hope. His shoes torn, his clothes were mud stained and bloody. 'It was my parents' this was all he could say as his dilated, bloodshot pupils met the features which so immaculacy gave flesh-and-blood shape to the soul he loved. They kissed in the snow. No thought, no question, just each other as he grasped her shoulders. 'Mr and Mrs S., it was my parents.' They cried, they took her things inside, and he healed her with his touch. She warmed his frostbitten body with the fire of her lips and they lay together, watching the flakes descend from the universe.

This day, the dancer, the one we all should admire, the one who just held herself against the torrent, she learned that all love is complex love, all roots are entangled

with other roots and weighed down with the debris of other love; and she learned that the beautiful tree which springs from these knots and bumps only grows slowly, and can only ever be the visible product of the dirt and the earth. It is the order we extract from our own chaos. The dancer and her lover? they lived happily ever after.