

The Ballet Class

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I'll be the first to admit that I'm no expert. I didn't start classes till I was forty, and my boobs go flying when I try to pirouette. But there's one thing I can tell you with confidence: despite his lack of coordination, Thom was a dancer. When it came to combinations, you were lucky to get two steps, maybe three, from the six-foot, good-natured lunk. After two years of beginner ballet, he could do a *glissade assemblé*, and that was with great trepidation. Sometimes, when he performed this simple set of steps, he looked as if he were suffering from Parkinson's, pausing with great intensity between the glide and the jump. Yet there was something about him you could almost call graceful, especially when he was partnering. You always knew he cared, that he honored women, no matter who or how old they were. You could feel it in his touch. That's what made him graceful: his graciousness, his respect.

Thom was the only guy in the class, quite the underachiever at sixteen, but everybody liked him, and we all knew you didn't come to Midtown School of Ballet to pursue a career. People of all ages were put in the same class, and all levels were pretty much for beginners. But unlike some studios, especially those with names like Miss Deedle's and Allentino Academy of Artistic Expression, this place was legit. All the teachers were professionals. One came from the former USSR, said the Kansas wheatfields reminded her of her childhood in Ukraine. Old fashioned but sweet, she carried a wooden pointer to touch body

parts that failed to follow the rules. We all loved her. Davin, the short guy who taught Thom, a bunch of pre-teen girls, and a smattering of us middle-aged women, was just as nice. He never yelled or made catty remarks. He just taught.

Despite the convenient location and positive atmosphere, the setup was less than ideal. *Tombé pas de bourée glissade assemblé*, and you hit the wall. After a while, though, you got used to the small space: some chairs and a couch for the waiting area, a nice springy floor, and one bathroom with a broken lock. That's how I caught an accidental peek at Davin, nude, his left foot reaching into a dance belt. Nothing like that of a gym rat, his body was muscled but compact. It reminded me of an urban, small-space bedroom—you know, with a teakwood desk and attached bookcase, bed overhead: so stylishly understated, perfectly balanced, every piece in place. From calves to forearms, he was covered in a veneer of slender musculature—his abdominals like rungs of a ladder that led to a firm but cozy bunk. When I gasped, Davin just laughed. After a moment, so did I. We had nothing to hide. Attraction was part of the business—one-sided or not.

But as amateur as we were, all except the teachers, everyone knew the Golden Rule of Ballet: to save it—the emotions, sex, whatever—for the audience. It didn't matter that the few who bothered to come in and sit down on the ripped Naugahyde were bored husbands, hyperactive children, and polite friends, more interested in talking on cell phones, playing computer games, or reading magazines than looking at us hopping around on *demi-pointe*. But that's what made it exciting: my husband, Emily's kids, the whole lot of them getting a jolt, a spark of electricity that stirred them out of their complacency.

One of the dancers—salt-and-pepper hair and a half-decent body—took ballet to even greater heights, or so she thought. Her name was Lisle. A former intern who got booted from residency for condemning abortions in the OR, she used to arrive early, say a prayer, and slip in a CD of Tchaikovsky or Debussy. Her lips curling with a look of either constipation or ecstasy, she waltzed around the studio, sometimes with a Bible in hand, dipping from side to side as if she were using the book to anoint the room. Then, about ten minutes before class started, she went to the toilet. One time I didn't have the car and Frank dropped me off an hour early, Lisle asked me to the movies. They were showing *Black Swan* at the Megaplex, and she was organizing a protest.

"Hollywood's trying to desecrate the sacredness of ballet," she said, describing the film in graphic detail. "All about the flesh and damnation of the spirit."

I told her I'm not religious.

"But don't you believe in the sanctity of dance?"

She handed me a copy of John Paul II's *Letter to Artists*. I read a few lines: "Every genuine artistic institution goes beyond what the senses perceive and, reaching beneath reality's surface, strives to interpret its hidden mystery."

The Pope had a point. Whatever we had at Midtown, it certainly went beyond my senses, my reality. Davin's classes kept me young, gave me an edge. Ballet was something I took with me wherever I went, including the bedroom. Sex was never better. And when it came to Frank, who's slept beside me for too many years, *that* was a miracle.

I said no to the protest. Sure, *Black Swan* was awful, and anybody who's ever done a *plié* knows that Natalie Portman can't dance, but at least someone took an interest in ballet, even if it was twisted and sick.

"It's the age we live in," I told Lisle. "Ballet went out when Baryshnikov got old. Society's into raunch and exhibitionism, not *Swan Lake*. The fact that a ballet movie even made it into the mainstream, never mind becoming a box-office hit, is astounding. Gotta take what you can get."

One day, when we were warming up before class, Lisle invited me to church.

"Before you say no," she said, "just hear me out."

She told me about some novice liturgical dancer coming to the cathedral. "I know you'll just love her performance."

"I'm confused," I said, looking Lisle square in the eye. "I thought Catholics weren't supposed to proselytize."

Thom, who was trying to put his head to his knee while keeping his foot latched to the bottom rung of the ballet barre, said he might go. When Lisle went to the toilet, we both started to laugh.

It's amazing how we all got along in those Thursday night classes—such different people, all lobbed together in a less-than-adequate space. During the winter months, we'd gather by the steaming steel radiator to warm up. Sometimes we did Davin's "Squiggle Stretch." All you do is stand in parallel and squeeze your armpits closed while placing your hands in prayer position. Then, without letting your butt move an inch, you shimmy. Davin said the stretch stimulates the backbone, keeps it from freezing, when you have to hold yourself up. Thom said it makes you look anal-retentive.

Despite all the joking around, when class started, everybody got serious. No talking allowed, except for the teacher, unless there was a question, and even then, you had to raise your hand. A former soloist,

Davin always upheld the dancer's tradition of discipline, but not with all the attitude and self-importance of some. A native Kansan, Davin trained in New York, spent a decade dancing in Denmark, and came home to attend college and teach. When giving corrections, Davin never touched below the shoulder or above the knee.

"Feel the butt come into the chest," he'd say, when we were all squiggling around unintentionally, trying to balance in *passé*. "Press down on your shoulders, while you pull up on your lower body. Make the pressure equal—up to down, right to left. Then you can balance. Then you go nowhere."

And he was right, all except for the final statement. The few times I managed to stay in one spot without shaking or losing my balance, I knew I was on my way. If I balanced long enough, I went to the most amazing place: dense with forests, high cliffs, endless sea. Once, when I lasted thirty seconds on high *relevé*, I felt as if I had morphed into a lighthouse, solid and staid, my blinking eyes warning ships of rocks below. The longer I remained steadfast, the more vessels I could rescue from ruin on the jagged Nova Scotia coast. Nothing, including sex, gave me more satisfaction than a long balance. It was a time when I felt timeless, standing there, high on the ball of the foot.

We each had our fantasies when it came to ballet. Thom wanted to fly. And every now and then, when you saw him jump, he sort of did. Now I don't mean that he out-jumped Nureyev or Bujones or Baryshnikov. Most of the time, Thom's jumps were average at best. His Achilles' wasn't particularly long like Davin's, but if he took advantage of what little *plié* he had, he really took off. One night, when we were doing *glissade assemblé*, Davin told Thom to forget he was human, to assume the body of a bird.

“Swoop and then lift,” said Davin, lowering and raising his arms in *écarté*.

Thom followed with an aerial assemblage of the legs that reminded me of a Kansas scissortail pursuing a fly. Lisle said he looked like an angel, led by St. Michael.

Davin said: “Good. Now do it again.”

Thom couldn’t.

Another time, when we gathered by the radiator, Thom said his best jumps came when he forgot about ballet, when he thought of something else.

I asked him what.

“Getting chased by a Pflugerblip.”

Davin said he was crazy.

“Haven’t you ever played Alien Awesome?” retorted Thom.

“We hadn’t.”

After class, Thom took out his laptop and showed us a Pflugerblip. My first reaction was to laugh. But the longer I observed the purple blob rolling across the computer screen, squirting its victims, before devouring their bodies, I told him I understood. Then I turned away.

Originally, Thom came to class because his girlfriend dragged him. Her name was Smyrna, and she quit after a month. No discipline. I guess she expected him to quit, too, and when he didn’t, they broke up. She wasn’t nice. After Davin started teaching adagio, Thom’s body filled out. With seven females, that kid had his hands full—literally. And boy, did his muscles develop. From promenades to lifts, we worked him hard. Then we worked on Davin to get him to teach us the flying

fish.

Breathing with her partner, the woman rises to the man's shoulders, enjoys an eagle's view, and then plunges to the floor, one leg in the air and the other wrapped around her partner's back. The man's hands go just about everywhere, from waist to chest to inner thigh.

As partners, Thom and Lisle were perfect for each other. Her head reached his face when she went *en pointe*, and they both had a similar bone structure. When they got their acts together, they looked good. At the end of a really good class, Thom nearly dropped Lisle. We were working on the fish, and instead of listening to corrections, Lisle was all over the place, flip-flopping like a fish on a line.

"Head up," said Davin, but to no avail.

When Thom lowered her, Lisle buckled in the middle. Luckily, she was smart enough to catch herself with her hands; otherwise, her head would have crashed to the floor. Her weight all in the wrong place, she slid through Thom's grip and landed on the linoleum, sort of like a bag of Goldfish Crackers, tipping and dropping to the bottom of a vending machine.

"Sorry," said Lisle.

"Sorry," said Thom.

"Sorry's not going to do it," said Davin, "especially if somebody gets hurt. It's up to the woman to arch her back and keep it arched." He turned to Lisle. "He can't do it for you. The man can only go so far, especially when he's leaning forward. Gravity's in the way, which is why you've got to take charge of your own backbone. The woman works just as hard as the man—harder, if you take into account that she has to look like she's making no effort."

Lisle bit her lip. "This is harder than I thought."

"Let's try it again," said Thom.

"Wait a second," said Davin. "Lisle's not the only one at fault."

He faced Thom. "Don't hold her close enough, and you lose her. The woman gets injured, and you get blamed, no matter what. That's how it works in ballet."

Davin demonstrated with me. Perched, suspended, and hovering: It was all over in a few seconds. The experience caused me to vibrate—not on the outside, but in my bones. Our bodies were one, Davin's breath breathing into mine, my strength an extension of his confidence. It was magnificent: two people touching intimately—sensually without the sex, a spiritual connection that can only come from contact that's physical. The movement was like a prayer.

Unfortunately, Thom and Lisle were too inhibited to get it right. They failed to understand the importance of proximity. As the man switches his arms, the essence of friction is what makes it all work, especially in that single moment, when the man lets go, when the woman is airborne with no one holding on. As long as they stay connected with the breath, with the energy that dances between two bodies, the partners stay together. I felt it with Davin. Instead of getting that sinking sensation that I was about to fall, I experienced the opposite, as my chin dipped down to just a few inches above the floor. It was as if I were rising up, full and yeasty, like bread in the oven.

Smyrna, on the other hand, was more like a loaf that fell—a dumpy bleached blond with a flat chest and cakey thighs. During the month she spent at Midtown, the only thing I ever heard her say was that Davin was gay, again and again, as if a gay ballet dancer were

something novel, something worth alerting the media. I held my tongue, but several of the preteens told her to keep quiet. When she left, I thought we were rid of her. But out of the blue, at least a year after the breakup, Smyrna started showing up in the middle of adagio. From the doorway, she'd glare at Thom and whatever girl he was dancing with. When Thom ignored her, she'd leave. One time she sat down on the couch and wrote texts messages, causing Thom's phone to bleat out a few bars of Aaron Copland's "Hoedown." We all laughed because Davin imitated the announcer in a television commercial that made the song popular: "Beef: It's what's for dinner." After that incident, Thom kept his phone turned off. Kimberly, the owner of the studio, banned Smyrna from the premises and made us lock the doors during class. That's how we lost our audience. The husbands, mothers, and friends waited in the car.

On a cold evening, while waiting for our rides, Thom and I had a short conversation. His mother and my husband were late, and we had to stand outside, once Kimberly closed the studio.

"So why do you dance?" I asked Thom.

"I don't know. Ballet gives me confidence."

Before I could address the issue, Thom asked me the same question. I told him ballet got me through the day, especially when things got on my nerves.

"Same here," said Thom. "School gets on my nerves, and I think of Davin's class."

"What do the other kids think of your dancing?"

Thom's mother showed up, before he could answer.

Last February, when the temperature hit sixty, Kimberly left the door open to air out the studio. No one saw Smyrna come in, and she kept herself hidden for hours. Of course the only place she could have gone was the bathroom, behind the shower curtain into a tub that didn't work. There Smyrna stayed during technique class, a fifteen-minute break, and the first half of adagio. During the break, I didn't see the girl, but I definitely smelled her. The odor wasn't foul or perfumy, just different. Dance with a group for long enough, and your nose gets accustomed to each person's odor, no matter how slight or heavy. We sweated, which means we each had our own smell. Davin, for example, had a familiar odor—kind of like popcorn, just when it just begins to inflate. During adagio, we mixed up our smells to form new smells. To me, we all smelled of movement and music—different scents chiming in as bodies assumed their appropriate places. Smyrna, on the other hand, smelled sedentary, sort of like old pizza that gets forgotten at the back of the refrigerator, not yet inedible, but definitely stale.

When Thom and Lisle attempted the flying fish, Smyrna emerged. Exiting the bathroom, she popped a piece of purple bubblegum into her mouth, tossing the wrapper on the floor. All I could think of was a Pflugerblip. Smyrna and I locked eyes—everyone else was ensconced with Thom, Lisle, and the fish—and she ambled over to the couch, cell phone in hand. Thom didn't see her.

It took only a moment for Lisle to waver on Thom's shoulder.

"Just bring her down," said Davin. "Don't do the fish. Her butt's not far back enough."

Thom agreed, but Lisle protested.

In a spastic move that somewhat resembled a squiggle stretch,

Lisle lifted her chest and stuck out her butt. She was OK until she spotted Smyrna. Then her whole body hiccupped, her backbone buckling, her head flying toward the floor. Several of us gasped, and Davin, who was spotting the lift, lurched forward. The only way I can describe what happened next is that Thom, for less than a split second, lost his lack of coordination. Instead of letting Lisle fall from his grip, he bent his knees, stuck out his butt, and caught his partner's upper body. Lisle was safe. They didn't even need Davin. We all applauded—all except Smyrna, who snapped a picture, just at the moment of impact, just as Thom's right arm reached over Lisle's breasts.

"You can let go now," said Lisle, somewhat grateful.

Thom released his partner and started to go after Smyrna. "Give me that cell phone."

"Don't bother," I said. "She's not worth it. Don't give her the satisfaction."

As I spoke, Thom turned to look at me. I wish he hadn't because that's when Smyrna took the opportunity to run. From cell phone to Facebook in a matter of minutes: the picture was blown up and names attached in big black bold lettering. Still probably running around the Internet, for all I know. Of course it doesn't matter now; the damage is done. When he couldn't stand the accusations of his classmates, Thom dropped out of high school. Works on a farm, somewhere way out. Keeps to himself, I heard. Without Thom, Davin quit teaching adagio. After class on Thursday nights, Lisle and I started going for coffee. Sometimes Davin came along, and we reminisced about old times. We all kept saying that one of these days, we'd head out to the farm, pay Thom a visit. We never did. ▣