The Ballerina and the Butcher

By

Juliet Wittman

Grushenka was dancing. What can you say about that? Grushenka stops the universe when she dances.

The audience was still, all two thousand of them, not a cough or rustle to be heard. The members leaned forward at an identical angle, sharing the same inbreath, unwilling to disturb the air between themselves and Grushenka with the rhythm of their own ragged and unworthy respiration.

She crossed the stage on the diagonal, little feet pick-picking on the wooden boards, as curved and flexible as a kitten's. She placed herself exactly over the point of each pink shoe as it descended, this one, that one, flying across the stage faster and faster while her body curved in a tender arc above those delicately tickering feet and her arms swayed like seaweed in translucent water.

I hated Grushenka. All of us did. We whispered and snickered behind her back. Marie was just as good, we said. Josephina had talent. Why were none of us ever chosen? Maybe my body wasn't as perfect as hers, but they could at least have considered me for Kitri. I looked the part more than she did.

Now she was still for a moment in her red and black tutu, chin high on that white column of a neck, fluttering her fan.

I was forming criticisms in my mind--the crook of her elbow was too sharp; those ear-grazing extensions were just a way of showing off--when she turned with a tilt of the hip so playful and impish that even I had to smile.

Grushenka dancing. A brilliantly eye-pleasing collection of curves. A quiverful of thrilling tricks. Ethereal yet steady as a bookshelf, strong as a pit bull. The perfection of her technique and the emotions she conveyed with it: subtle, slow and deep as mother's love or quick and clear as water. The curve of her neck alone could bring you to tears.

Let me not forget her musicality. Some dancers move to the music; the more gifted allow it to flow through them. Grushenka did as she pleased. She contained the music in her body or let if fly from her fingertips like drops of water. She gave it her liquescent limbs to play with. She teased it, stepping out of its flow a little then returning in a gesture of the profoundest acceptance and humility. And oh how joyfully it received her back.

I noticed a man sitting in the front row. He bulged onto the seats on either side of him, his flesh hanging over the arms like extra clothing. As he watched Grushenka, he quivered with joy; he started and mumbled with each of her thirty-two cleanly-snapped-out fouette turns. When she danced toward the front of the stage, he pulled his chins modestly onto his chest , his fat white hands gesturing in his lap, as if to say, Oh, no, please, really, it's too much. His red mouth worked like a sucking baby's, a snail trail of saliva tracking to his chin.

Two other corps members, my roommates, had joined me and were peering through the curtain.

"Yech," said Paulina.

Marie giggled. “Maybe he’ll eat her up.”

He came every night after that. He must have bought those three front row seats for the season. He jiggled his mountainous flesh happily to the music from “Boutique Fantastique.” When Grushenka danced “Rites of Spring,” a grey leotard clinging to the hollows of her body and revealing the silvery pattern of her bones, he burbled and salivated till I thought he’d melt over his chair.

Grushenka’s Juliet is famous. The first time she danced the part, rapturous adjectives flew off the newspaper pages like clouds of grasshoppers. Glorious. Transcendent. A revelation. When the company revived the production, we watched her together, the fat man and I. I gritted my teeth as she charmed everyone--the nurse, the guests at the Capulets’ ball, the audience. But during the balcony scene, when she gave herself to Romeo--so pliant, so tender--I found myself weeping. Was it envy? Or something else?

He cried, too. He turned his massive head to the side and the self-pitying water slid down his shaking cheeks.

It was by accident that I discovered who he was.

We’re frugal eaters, Marie, Paulina and I: vegetable broth, plain bagels, unadorned noodles, the occasional celery stick. Along with lots and lots of coffee and cigarettes. (Grushenka, of course, has no problem with weight; some dancing god designed her thin as a snake.)

But one evening we were entertaining a couple of boys from the art school, and we needed a chicken for dinner. We went into town.

The floor of the butcher’s shop was covered with sawdust; the smell was a greasy

film coating the backs of our throats. On the counter lay a skinned calve's head, dried blood clotting a nostril, an eye socket turned blindly in our direction.

It was the fat man who came from behind the counter, smiling, wiping his hands on his stained apron.

Marie suppressed a giggle.

We asked for a chicken, and he nodded and went out. From behind the store came a scuffle, a loud, anguished clucking ending in a gurgle. The butcher emerged holding a limp, feathered corpse.

We stared.

"But we wanted it dressed." Paulina was pale.

He nodded again and placed the bird on the counter. Then he seized a small hatchet, whacked off the head and held the bleeding neck over a basin.

"Come in an hour," he said. "She will be plucked."

Outside, we held on to each other, laughing. Marie closed her nose with her fingers and made a retching sound: "phuey."

"It's him," said Paulina. "The one who loves Grushenka."

We were weak with disgust and malice.

"She should marry him. She could sweep the sawdust."

"Serve the customers."

"Pluck his chickens."

The dinner was a success. We nibbled green beans as the boys cleared their plates and praised our cooking. After Marie and Paulina had gone to bed--each with her preferred student--I raked through the trash for the chicken bones and carried them to my

room. There I scraped off every remaining shred of gristle, flesh and cartilege with my teeth. I sucked at the marrow and gnawed at the ends. I fell asleep with bones all over my pillow and a smear of grease on my chin.

All night the music from "Romeo and Juliet" flowed through my head. I wished Grushenka was dead. Or that someone would snap both her thin little legs. Somewhere in the distance, the chicken was still clucking. I woke with an idea.

The butcher's mouth fell open when I told him the ballet company was inviting him to the end-of-season party.

"Me?" His hands pressed against his heart; his head wobbled. "Me?"

"They're aware of your loyal patronage," I said.

He was almost in tears as I turned to leave. "So kind. So kind." He caught at my hand, pressed it between his wet palms.

He came early to the party, wearing a wine colored jacket and a bright waistcoat--probably his idea of arty and Bohemian attire. His long black hair was slicked back and tied with a narrow ribbon. People looked at him curiously, but no one questioned him. Doubtless, they assumed he was a rich donor.

He sat down by the wall on a wooden chair that must have been sturdier than it looked, rubbing his hands together and nodding eagerly at everyone who passed by him.

When Grushenka came in, laughing, pushing the hood of her white cape back from her dark hair, his fingers began stroking the arms of his chair. They moved faster and faster, until I thought they'd wear grooves in the wood. People were swirling by him scattering "Darlings," and air kisses, gesturing freely as dancers do, taking delicate little sips of wine and, with a malicious narrowing of the eye, talking about others who weren't

there:

"But in arabesque...her foot..."

"Oh, darling, stuck up like a spoon."

Spurts of laughter.

I don't know what the fat man made of it all. The bustle and flow, the people who stood directly in front of him to scan the room, presenting to him their uncaring buttocks. Between the moving figures of others his eyes traveled from face to face, always returning to Grushenka.

My God, she noticed him. She smiled and drifted over, giving him her pretty hand, sitting down in the chair next to him. Even across the room I could see him start when his podgy fingers made contact with hers. For at least an hour, she sat by him, talking and laughing, cool and demure as an Egyptian cat goddess, yet with that haunting sense of heat beneath the skin--not the roaring heat of passion but something like a candleflame commemorating the dead--something pure and bright and inextinguishable.

Though his eyes were huge, his endless fidgeting had stilled.

I saw her writing on a piece of paper. She was giving him her phone number. In bringing them together, I had hoped only that his presence would embarrass her. Now it seemed things might go further. I shivered with guilty pleasure. What would the fat man's slavish devotion do to beautiful Grushenka?

A month later, at ten in the evening, there was a knock on our door. Grushenka stood outside, rain pounding on the street behind her and cascading from the gutters. Her hair lay soaked and heavy on her shoulders; dark splotches of moisture dappled her raincoat; a drop of water stood at the tip of her nose.

Your eyes loved Grushenka, even when your heart hated her.

We ushered her in, helped her take off her coat and gave her a rough towel. When she'd wiped her face and toweled her hair into rumpled waves, she sat down on the sofa. Paulina handed her a glass of cognac. "Oh, that's good," she said, sipping. "So warm and nice. Here." She tapped delicate fingertips against her breastbone.

I sat on one side of her, Paulina on the other. She gave each of us a cool, damp hand.

"I didn't know where else to come," she said. "You're my best friends."

She was thinking of marrying him. The fat man. The butcher. Grushenka was thinking of marrying him.

"He's so kind. He loves me so much. What should I do?"

I imagined him wallowing on top of her, grunting with effort, his loose flesh rolling across her limbs and oozing onto the bed. I imagined her gasping for breath, heard her bones cracking.

I hesitated.

"A wonderful idea," Marie said. "We'll be your maids of honor. We'll have sandwiches and little white cakes..."

"Velvet dresses," said Paulina. "Waltzes."

He'd slaughter baby animals and feed her their tender meat; he'd buy cream for her coffee.

A little color had returned to Grushenka's face. "You're right." She looked from one of us to the other. "We'll have a good life together. My friends. You are so dear." Her eyes moistened, and she hugged us, each in turn.

I think of the wedding in fragments. Her high-arched foot in its silver shoe as she walked down the aisle; her butcher turning to watch, his vast moonface creased in tenderness. The music of Bach jigs in my ear. I see him enfolding her in an embrace; their hands together on the knife as they cut the cake.

Soon after the wedding, she invited us to her flat above the butcher's shop. She wore a black dress and served chocolates and coffee in a living room crowded with heavy furniture, tidy and devoid of ornament. "Marriage is nice," she said. "It's so good to be settled." We watched closely as she moved. Were the clear lines of her body blurring? It seemed to me they were. Like tree limbs thickening with bud in spring.

Grushenka continued to take class with the company--at least the barre portion--until she was six months pregnant. Then she stopped. I saw her at the farmers' market on Saturday. One hand was in the warm, damp crook of her husband's arm, the other clutched a bulging grocery bag, carrot fronds falling over its top. Though she held herself as upright as ever, everything about her seemed rounded and soft, used somehow: the disheveled hair against her forehead and cheeks, the untucked blouse, even the long legs in their scuffed and ordinary sandals. Her eyes were peaceful and inward, focused on the child in her bulging belly.

She was happy. There was no need for guilt.

It was odd not seeing Grushenka in company class, the line of vertebrae along her bent back, her leg in its grey warmer stretched on the barre. I worked as hard as ever on my technique, but I no longer felt that satisfying ache, the glowing sweatiness that meant I had pushed myself to the limit. We all thought we'd been stunted by Grushenka's proximity, like saplings whitened and etiolated by the nearness of an oak. Now she was

gone and we were free to stretch to the sun. But the sky seemed to be empty.

When we repeated Don Q, I was given my first solo, as a gypsy. Marie had a solo, too, in the dream sequence. Paulina was again shunted aside. We told her over and over how sorry we were about that, how unfair it was. We didn't want her eye focusing evil on us.

For Kitri they chose Leslie, a skinny seventeen-year-old with jutting elbows and knobbly knees who'd just been accepted into the company. Leslie danced with great energy, seemed to have no joints and leapt like a grasshopper.

Grushenka's baby lived for two days. Its heart was weak. When we went to the butcher's shop to convey our condolences, the butcher nodded gratefully, huge tears rolling down his face and dropping into the ground beef. He didn't offer to take us to Grushenka. Some time later, we saw her walking along the street, slow and off-kilter, as if the air were heavy. Everything about her had thickened--her face--even her wrists and ankles. She stumbled on the edge of a paving stone, righted herself and stood swaying on the sidewalk, staring ahead with empty eyes.

We crossed the street to avoid her.

The next thing we heard was that Grushenka and her butcher had left. They had settled in a small town fifty miles away. Grushenka was teaching for the amateur ballet company there.

Leslie wasn't Grushenka, but she was young and promising. Audiences loved her. Watching her prancing around the stage as Kitri, they roared with delight. It made me angry. Had Grushenka's dancing left no more trace in their imaginations than a fish makes on the water it swims through? I thought of her arabesque in penche, the purity of

the line, her body making deep obeisance to the earth while her lifted leg sketched a straight path to heaven.

"Dolts," I muttered.

But Leslie was hardly worth hating and ballet...well, it wasn't a matter of life and death to me any more. It was only make-believe, fantasy, an entertainment featuring elaborate sets, overblown plots, great washes of sentiment and costumes that managed to be at once prissy and prurient. I had become too aware of the straining muscles behind the great leaps, the pummeled bones, the bunions deforming those prettily tickering ballerina feet.

I was restless. One Sunday, I borrowed a car for a drive in the country. I thought I was driving aimlessly until I found myself in her town: white buildings surrounding a square, with a deep still pond at its edge. A flyer outside the library told me the ballet was performing that night: "Les Sylphides."

The performance took place in a wooden barn. The spring breezes crept in through the slats. There was no orchestra, only a pianist pounding out chords as the audience filed in. Men with shaggy beards, hefty women trailed by squads of children. The fat man came in alone. He was delighted when he saw me: he took my hand and led me to a seat near the front. "She's wonderful," he said. "Better than ever."

It was a recital really, with round, tumbling infants, solemn teenagers in leotards circling the stage and showing off their steps. "Sylphides" was the last piece on the program and the organizers had made some effort with it. The music was taped. The corps wore filmy white dresses and, though they wobbled, tried very hard to dance in unison. Every now and then I saw a trace of talent--a nicely arched foot, an arm floating

into position.

The audience was noisy. They discussed the pros and cons of what they were seeing, rustled candy wrappers, told little tales about the performers--"That's Sylvia. Her brother's gone to university." You could tell the parents by their gusty bravos and volleys of applause.

Grushenka entered. The fat man sat up. Her body was puffed, like yeasted dough. She moved slowly, setting down one foot--cautious, tentative--then the other. When she raised her leg, it went no higher than her waist. As for her grand jete...she was barely airborne when she was back on earth again.

I had prayed for this.

She stood before the other dancers, raised her arms and swayed; as one, they swayed with her. I saw a field of wheat rustling in the sun, waves on the face of the ocean. I saw something lovelier and more haunting than all her former elegance and gaiety. It was in the deep shadows round her eyes, the gravity of her mouth, the way she and the music loved each other. There was a shining about her, as if the moon stood still in her chest. Her fingers, flicking back her gauzy skirt made me smile; the curve of her neck moved me to tears.