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Petrograd

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Petrograd

by Andrew Massey

Prologue

I passed the time drawing little figures with a piece of chalk on the platform as we sat and waited for the train. My Mother sat on top of her suitcase and kept her head down. I leaned into the case and its seams made a criss-crossing pattern on my cheek. My Mother's legs were bouncing up and down, her feet tapping the ground near my legs.

“Why are you moving your feet like that?” I asked.

“What's that, Alexei?”

“Your feet. Why are you tapping them?”

“Oh,” She stopped her legs for a moment and stared at her feet. “Well,” she said as her feet began to move again, “I'm keeping time until the train comes.”

“Why?”

“Because, if I don't get the timing perfectly right, you see, I will miss the train and it will go all the way to Minsk without me.”

I looked back down to my drawings and wiped the platform clean. After clearing the dust from my hands onto my pant leg, I took my chalk and started over.



A few days earlier, my Mother had taken me to a library and shown me a book as big as my whole body. The place was a wooden maze of shelves, each full to the brim with fading covers. We stepped lightly through the dim-lit stacks, only seeing one other living soul, an impossibly old man pouring over a book of numbers with a magnifying glass, his beard so long that it brushed the pages, and stopping every few moments to let out the faintest sigh or to lick his lips. She pulled our book down off of a high shelf and I thought her arms would snap like icicles under its dusty weight. She brought it down to a small table wedged between two of the crowded wooden walls and heaved the pages until she found the one she was looking for. The page was covered with splashes of color cut by thin black lines.

“Here, Alexei. Here. This is Minsk. This is where I’m going,” she whispered into my ear, making sure the old man, who had just let out a cold sounding cough, could not hear. “I am going to be right in the middle of this city here, dancing to wild applause!”

My Mother must have noticed that I could not make my eyes stay on the paper for more than a few seconds, because she grabbed me around the shoulder and kissed the top of my head.

“You know that I need to do this, Alexei, yes?”

“Yes,” I said, still not quite looking at the map in front of me.

“Hey, hey little pickle, why so sour?”

“I’m not,” I said with more force than I meant, enough so that the old man looked up from his book and stared in our direction before licking his moustache, smacking his lips and returning to his book.

“My darling, the Theatre here doesn’t have a space for me anymore, I’ve told you, but Sergei likes me so he found a Theatre in Minsk who would love to have me. You must understand that I wish I could stay.” She rubbed my back for a moment, “It’s not terribly far.”

“I understand, Mama.”

She pushed the book shut, and it shot out one last puff of dust before she lifted it back to its place, “Sergei has a place all ready for you when I leave. And I’ll be sending you so many letters. You know I’m much nicer in letters than I am in person.”

On the train platform, my Mother added a drawing to mine.



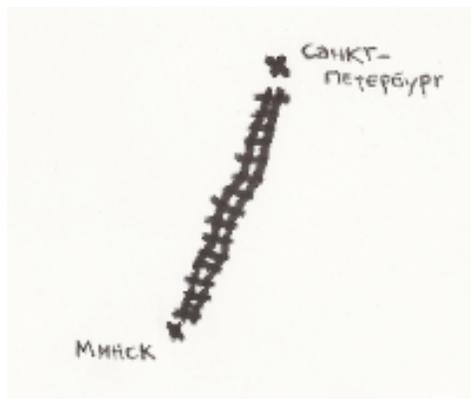
The platform itself was mostly empty, a young couple sat, hushed and huddled, at the very end and a man, who checked his pocket watch constantly, stood in a suit a few feet away from us.

“That’s not bad is it? It looks like me, yes?” My Mother said me with a laugh and toss of my hair. It really did look like her. She was tall and thin, but very strong, shockingly so. She once lifted me all the way off of the ground with one arm when I hadn’t noticed a horse run at me near the Saint Isaac’s Cathedral. She had a long river of hair, black, which she usually wore up in a bun, but sometimes let down, particularly after dinner, so that she could cover her face with it and pretend to

be hiding from me. She spent most of her time on the tips of her toes, and she somehow appeared weaker and older when she fell to the soles of her feet.

“Yes, Mama, it looks like you,” I said back.

“No one has ever said I was good at drawing. My Father used to say that it was good I was a dancer whenever I showed him anything I drew,” she whispered to me and laughed. The man in the suit looked towards us with large eyes and we looked back. He said something to himself and looked back at his watch before facing his head forward.



“You see?” she said, “It’s not far. It’s not even far enough that you can’t draw it on the ground. If you can do that it must not be so bad, yes?”

I said nothing, but looked up to her and opened my palm toward hers.

“Listen, Alexei, you like Sergei. He’s going to take good care of you while I’m gone. And the food they serve at the Theater is much much better than I could ever make.” She took my hand. “I would take you with me, but my contract will only provide for me. They’re not used to dancers with children.”

“We could pretend that I was a dancer too, that I was a boy that you found dancing on a street corner or in the park, couldn’t we?”

My Mother burst out laughing. “We could. Ha! Yes, we could. That might work except, when they asked you to dance, you would trip over your feet before you took your first step.”

I squinted my eyes at her and tried my very best to look upset, but I found myself laughing as soon as she looked at me.

“Listen, Alexei. I’m sorry I made fun.” She lifted her hands to her hair to make sure it was in place, “Some people are dancers and some people watch. I know this sounds like I’m insulting you, but far from it. The dancers, you see Alexei, never get to see the dance at all. When it’s done, all we can say about it is that it made our muscles sore and our feet ache. But, the watchers! The watchers can leave their seats and say they saw beauty fly through the air, that they saw pain crumple before them, that they saw people become something together.” She held both sides of my face between her hands, “You are lucky to be a watcher. You are lucky to trip when you try to dance. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Mama.”



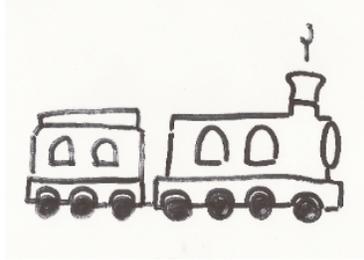
I saw the trains peek its head out from behind a mountain. It became larger and larger, spitting out coughs of smoke like Sergei does when he sits at his desk in the theater. I was filled with the need to disappear. I stuck my head inside my shirt and shoved my legs up inside to meet it.

“Come out of there, you little tortoise,” she whispered to me, “Come out. I know it’s big and sad, but you’ll have to believe me that it’s big and sad for me too, and I want you with me before I go.”

I drew my head and knees out, trying to dry my eyes on my collar before she noticed. When I could look at her, I saw that she had been trying to hide her crying with her sleeve.

“I’ve told you about the invisible string everyone has attached to their head, Alexei?” my Mother asked. I nodded. “Well, when I get on the train, I want you to pull that string up as high as you can so you stand up perfectly straight, alright?” I nodded again. “Once I’m out of sight, you can let it go or drop or twist, but I want you to be strong for me until then. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Mama.”



The train crushed its way to a stop at the platform, creaking noises coming out of every corner of its huge metal frame. The man with the watch immediately grabbed his bags and stood with his body taut, waiting for the doors to open. The couple at the end of the platform slowly rose and moved as one towards the train.

“Alright, my darling, you will behave?” my Mother asked. I nodded, “Do you have your string ready?” I nodded. “Well, pull it tight and come here.”

I stood up and she scooped me into her arms, lifting my feet from the ground. She put me down and kissed the top of my head, leaving a little splash from her eye as well.

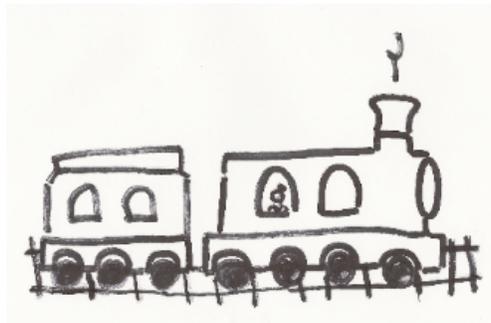
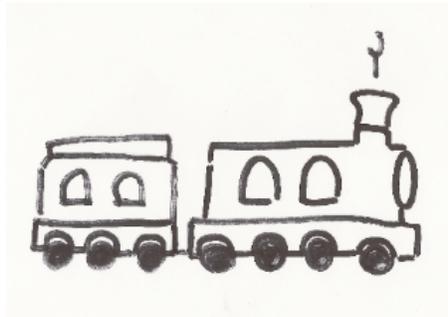
“Well,” she said, “The same goes for me.” She wiped the corners of her eyes on her sleeve again and stood straight up. “Goodbye, my lovely.”

“Goodbye,” I said, gritting my teeth and turning red as I focused all my energy on pulling the string as tight as I could in my head.

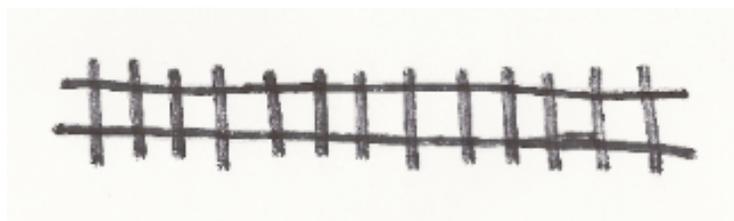
My Mother gave me one more kiss and lifted her bags, “Sergei is waiting by the road. You be good to him, Alexei. He has been very kind to us.” Again, I nodded. A man in a uniform opened the

door to the train. I stood still as my mother climbed inside the train. “Goodbye, Alexei, my lovely! I’m off!”

I waved to her as the man in the uniform pulled the doors closed and the train began to move. I pulled the string in my head tighter and tighter, as I watched her wave and wave through the blurry window. I pulled the string so hard it snapped and I collapsed on the platform just as the last windows went out of sight.



I sat for a while looking out, trying to pick out puffs of smoke coming from my Mother’s train. After a few minutes I could not even make out its outline.



I wiped away the chalk drawings from the platform and tried again to pull my string. I must not have been able to pull it all the way, because, when Sergei met me by the road, he said that I needed to keep my chin up, that everything would be all right.

I ran my hand along the inside of my pocket, making sure to save as much of the dust from my chalk as possible. I let the dust sit there and walk with me as Sergei and I went slowly towards the Theatre.

Act One

Today I am twenty. Letters came from Minsk weekly for the first three years. But, with the war being fought over in the continent, the post has been more than unreliable. Now and then a letter, usually torn, tattered, and opened, filters through the countryside and finds its way to the Theatre. My Mother never mentions the letters I send in return. Sergei says to take that as a compliment, that whoever is censoring the mail must think I write well and keep my letters for himself. I keep hers in an old crate near the back of my closet, stacked from newest to oldest so that, when thumbing through the stack, I can make my way back to the train platform.

The Neva River flows from my apartment to the Theatre. The walk takes fifteen minutes at the very most, depending on the weather and the day of the week. Tuesdays and Wednesdays are the fastest, just the brisk hustle of bankers and bachelors keeping time with the current and me. The ends of the week are the slowest, Sundays in particular, when the street swells with people in their nicest clothes, floating towards churches and cathedrals. Boys push their sisters. Mothers step in

between the two and scold them for scuffs and tears. Fathers walk ahead with eyes level. Soldiers march west out of the city. Beggars search for a place to sit.

I watch the street moving from my room on the fourth floor. I look back down towards my bed, the few worn sheets of which I tuck crisply under the mattress. Always making sure to keep the thin vertical lines on the blanket aligned with the edge of the bed, I run my hand along its surface, removing any extra puffs of air from underneath. I keep my room sparse. I don't like too many things cluttering. I feel safer knowing where everything is, knowing I can find it if I need it. I find my chest constricting in messy places. Sergei noticed this early in my life, so he made me the janitor at the Theatre. Whether he meant this as a cruel joke or a gift, I have yet to learn. After checking the bed one more time, I make my way down the stairs.

After swallowing one last breath on the stoop, I step out into the rolling mass. The snowdrifts that have been barricading the sidewalks are starting to melt, bringing with their exit a layer of grime that just reaches to the top of my boots. I can feel the wet starting to weave its way through the cracks and creases near my laces. Every step makes me grimace as the icy water creeps under my socks. People passing by spray sleet up with each step onto my pant legs. I'll roll up the cuffs when I arrive at the Theatre.

The city is glowing pale. The pastel yellows and greens of the buildings catch in the early morning sun and take turns in light and dark at the sun's discretion. By keeping close to the railing next to the river, I let most people pass at their own speed. This path also lets me keep track of the colonies of ducks and pigeons that make their homes in the cut brick of the canal's walls.

When Peter made this city, he made sure of every detail. Each corner had a place for a statue, many of which were soon filled, every building cut low on the horizon to show off the palaces and sunrises, and every canal full of faces. Most of these stern stone faces carved into the walls flanking had been created delicately, intricately, and weathered countless days of flood and

wind, only now to become perches for the nests of birds. Today the pigeons are beginning to peek out from their own tiny palaces, beginning again to walk the sidewalks and railings, still fat from winter and gruff from cold.

When I was a boy, I would try and touch these little peasants of the Neva, save a crust to toss them from the kitchen. Each time I reached my hand out for one of them, Sergei would flick my ear and tell me to pocket my hands before he used my fingers to test cigar clippers. Once I found one with a hurt wing in an alley while I was emptying dustbins. I took the bird up to my room in the boarding house. I filled a bowl I had stolen from the kitchen with water and brought up all the food scraps I could find because I wasn't sure what he would eat. I kept him under my bed and left the window open for him. He kept well for a few days, but, on the third night I awoke from a nightmare and began to run towards Sergei's room at the end of the hall, only to feel a snap beneath my foot, a swift crisp sound. Sergei took the still breathing bird outside with him and made me stay behind. He would never tell me what happened while he was gone and I sat crying alone on the floor of my room. He never again flicked my ears if I reached out at a passing bird, but I found myself all too often afraid even to try.

Though the snow is melting, a sharp wind still carves the streets. As I make my way across the bridge, I turn up the collar on my jacket to cover my cheeks. I can see the Theatre at the end of the street. Like every building in Petrograd, it has a white trim like frosting all around it. But, just by looking, anyone can tell that this is a special building. Under the white frosting are hidden bits of gold, and, unlike the others around it, it isn't attached to the house next door. It stands alone, proud, a dancer waiting for the first booming cords from the orchestra, a soldier primed for the signal to salute.

As I make the final bend with the river towards the waiting Theatre, I become stuck behind an old man dragging his feet as if they were attached to the ground. I peek over his shoulder and see

his beard dragging on his little round belly. He breathes with an open mouth, his teeth bared. Breaking my close contact with the canal, I move to go around him. As I pass on his left, he stumbles and grabs with his hand frantic to my coat. He topples and I crash down beside him.

I shoot up and, moving to lift him, say, “Are you alright?”

“I think yes.” His voice is gravel, a gasp of air from deep in his chest breaking through the winding path to his mouth.

“It can happen to anyone.” I smile and rub my knee, which hit the stone ground first.

“These are the most dangerous days, the beginning of March.”

“Yes yes,” he nods and laughs back to me, “The ground seems so determined to slip out from under your feet!”

I laugh back to him and tip my hat. “Just grab on to the railing tight. Summer will be here soon enough.”

“Yes yes,” he beams, “A sturdier ground!”

He waves as I turn away and I can hear his slow shuffle steady behind me.

I find myself in the Theatre’s shadow. The main doors are flanked with large portraits advertising the shows: a woman from an Eastern kingdom beams and bends over a large water jug, two lovers stand beside a lake holding hands with a booming orange moon rising in the distance, a man stands suspended by the strings of a puppeteer with a twinge of smile creeping into his lips. These posters are divided by even white columns leading to the doors at center. I allow myself, just for a moment, to imagine myself among the other dancers, my head held tall, controlled, and proud. I walk past this entrance and around to a little nook on the north side of the Theatre.

The workers’ door is hidden within the white folds of the building’s moulding. Sergei said it was designed so that the business end of the ballet, we workers and managers, could disappear from

the streets without being noticed, so nothing would distract from the pristine beauty our patrons pay to see.

Once I am through the doorway, I stoop to take off my boots. As the man who cleans the floors, I take special pride in not also coating them with mess. I even built a shelf just inside the Theatre so that the others might do the same, but, as of yet, my boots stand alone on the shelf.

I roll my socks off of my feet and put them inside their partner on the shelf. From the large outer pocket of my jacket I lift a pair of ballet shoes.

The shoes came from the hands of a disgruntled dancer and hit me square in the stomach. His name was Callinari and he was one of the company's best dancers from Italy. He was a beautiful mover and could jump like no other: Sergei said his head was so full of air and his chest was so puffed up with pride that it was a wonder he ever came back down to ground after he leapt. Callinari took issue with Saveliev, who was a Russian dancer from the academy being trained as his understudy. On the day he found out, I was cleaning the windows outside one of the main rehearsal studios. He stormed out of room and yelled something I couldn't understand, ripping his shoes from his feet and pelting one into the studio behind him and the other square into the pit of my stomach. He later found himself a job with a Theatre in France: he said he wanted a position with a "Real European Ballet." But, he left behind the shoes. They have since become my unofficial uniform, and I wear them every day for cleaning.

I slip them on and roll up my pants cuffs so no one can see the spray marks left behind from my morning walk. After making sure that both legs are just the same length, I move down the hallway towards the main stage.

Sundays are a busy day for the Ballet. We will have two performances before the day is done. I sweep the Theatre before checking in with Sergei. I do this because if any of the dancers or, worse, the Masters were to come in before I was done, they would have me fired before they had walked all

the way down the aisles. The artists of the Theatre take pleasure in believing the stage is perpetually spotless, that the beauty of performance does not leave behind any trace of sweat or dirt or dust. So, if they were to see me, the unwelcome reminder of reality, they would rather banish me from their sight than accept the stage as imperfect.

I start at the far corner, all the way stage up and stage right. I fold the bristles of my broom to the ground and let the force of my arms break the tension. The sound of the sweeping is a gentle hush over the ground, leaving a calm in the wake of each stroke. I imagine that rather than cleaning off the space, I am painting over the plane with a fresh coat. A new layer. A skin for only this coming dance, this one jump, this one twist, this one balance. I am an avid whistler, Sergei would call me a notorious one, but I never whistle when doing my painting. It is the orchestra's job to fill this space to bring the room cymbal crashes and yawning strings and perfect silences. I would not want my whistles to sneak their way into a performance. It would not match; it would throw off the balance. Each dance is a picture of perfect control, and I could not bear to ruin the work.

I curl about the stage, making circles within circles, taking with me last night's performance. After the first circle, I have three hairpins and two ribbons. After the second I have two more pins, several feathers, and an earring that I have to make sure gets back to the costume shop before the dancers begin to dress. I continue my flowing march with the broom towards the center. With each step I can feel more grit coming with me. With each stroke of my paintbrush I feel more weight. I arrive center stage with a tightness forming already beneath my shoulder blades, but I have done well. In my wake there is nothing but a space waiting the first stroke of a violin. With my dustpan I pull up all the trinkets and treasures last night left behind and I toss away the ribbons, dust, and pins, making sure to take the earring with me as I leave the Theatre, my little solo complete, and head back to the offices.

When I was a boy, it would take one hundred and twelve paces to move from the stage to the chair in front of Sergei's desk. For a long while I would try to hit that number precisely, finishing each walk with both feet planted together like the soldiers I would see marching out of the city. But, as time made my legs grow longer, I found it more difficult to complete this path. One day, after bursting into tears upon walking into his office in fewer than one hundred steps, Sergei convinced me to change my task into a game. Ever since, I've tried to complete the journey with fewer and fewer paces each day. It has become a measure of my fortunes for the day. On a good day it will take me somewhere in the mid-eighties, usually eighty-four or eighty-five. But, on a bad day, my steps will creep up into the nineties. Today it took me eighty-two steps from theater to chair, one of my best performances.

About once every two weeks, Sergei will look up from his desk of shuffled papers and ask if I want to see the night's show. He can only let me do this on nights when there are plenty of empty seats, not good seats either, but I am grateful whenever they come.

"Eva is dancing tonight. She's principal in the night show."

"Yes?" I say.

"Eva is dancing so I pulled strings to get you in. Are you deaf? You're only twenty but you have the ears of one our elder subscribers."

"I'm sorry. I don't know why you thought you had to do that."

"Being modest is only becoming on the very handsome and the very rich, Alexei, and you are neither so I would be grateful that I've given you any opportunity to see her dance. She has quite a following. It may be months before I can get you another night with her as a primary."

"Sir, of course I'm grateful."

"Stop talking for now. Your foot is about to go right into your mouth." Sergei goes back to his papers. "Just take the ticket. It's in your box."

“Thank you, sir.”

“I bumped one of our older and blinder patrons a few rows back to make sure you can see. He won’t notice. Now get out of here and finish sweeping downstairs or I’ll use the ticket for tobacco papers.”

“Yes, sir. Thank you sir,” I say as I go with my broom down the dusty alley of stairs that leads to the basement. I don’t know why we clean down here at all, actually. There is a leak that never stops from the gutters outside so sweeping instead becomes spreading the layer of mud as thin as possible onto the floor. It’s strange to me that a theatre with so much gold around its rims could have such a musty room buried inside of it. It is a special sort of responsibility to see this part of the Theatre.

As I scrape the floor with the broom, I wonder how Sergei knew that I wanted nothing more than to see Eva. I go to the ballets regularly, and I love them, I do, but Eva is the first dancer who makes me want to buy my own ticket instead of waiting on Sergei. There is a canister underneath the table in my room full of little coins, only adding up to a quarter of the price of a balcony seat. I consider myself lucky. Nonetheless the rest of the day crawls on, that slow sort of ticking. I sweep the entire building, kept company by twirling thoughts of Eva, of how she might move, and of Sergei, of when it must have been that I blushed when he said her name.

Act Two

Sergei let me out an hour early to go home and change. I make my way back to the Theatre in my only suit. In the mirror by my door I make sure that the jacket covers the tear in my shirt, where the hem caught on the fence that flanks the river. I've covered the hole with a small patch of white fabric, but the color is just off. If anyone of the patrons were to spot this linen square, they would recognize me immediately as something inferior.

Every time I go to the show, I feel my body shrinking back to childhood, back to my first time seeing a ballet. My Mother, who was off that night, took me, and we took the long walk that I now make every day from our lodging house to the Theatre. I remember the lobby's terrifying splendor swallowed me whole. I knew that I wasn't really supposed to be there. Just to get inside, we had to weave through horse drawn carriages presenting men in long tailcoats and women in white gowns and feathers. They all looked like kings. I smoothed the front of my shirt and made sure the back was still stuck firmly into my pants. I pulled my little jacket tight around me and tried to puff

my chest out till my lungs burned. My preparation completed, I followed my mother through the door.

The sound of the room almost knocked me back outside. The counts and countesses were laughing and talking about the show, the dancers, or other people's clothes. I caught myself staring blankly at a very tall women's necklace that was so full of pearls that I was not sure how her head was staying on her body. Since the revolution failed that some years before, the rich had been taking extra care to showcase their luxury. Many people nodded at my Mother, recognizing her I suppose as a fairy or a princess they had seen dance through the stage some weeks before, as if seeing someone from a dream- a veiled and foggy sort of look. My Mother nodded back to each of her spectators with a little smile, the twist in the corner of her mouth to let them know that she understood exactly what they were thinking.

"We dancers used to be serfs, Alexei," she leaned over and whispered in my ear. "They would take children they thought had potential from their farms and send them to academies to learn. Whether or not these folk will admit it, they still think that we belong to them so they get a bit uncomfortable when they see us out in the real world and not onstage performing where they expect us to be."

I found I was losing myself in the trains of the dresses and the peaks of top hats around me, my eyes following the soft waves of fabric to the ground or reaching to see the very pinnacle of the immaculately balanced caps atop each of the men's heads.

"Alexei! My lovely, come here!" My Mother was standing with a large man who wore a stunning, large, white beard on his face. "This is my son. It's his first time here."

The bearded man nodded and took our tickets. "I hope you love the ballet, son," he said, "But you must promise me one thing, only one thing."

"What's that, sir?"

“You must promise me that you will not get so excited that you fall off of the balcony. We have to clean too many boys like you off of the floor, too many too many.” He looked at me for a moment and then burst out laughing. I made myself laugh and looked up to my Mother.

“Oh, my lovely! Don’t be scared! He is only joking. You will be safe as long as you stay sitting next to me.” I looked back at the man.

“Your Mother is right you know, very right indeed, as long as you sit back in your seat and fall in love from there, I will not have to get my mop.” He laughed again and my Mother slipped him a coin.

We began climbing a mountain of stairs, each of them perfect white marble with red velvet carpet and gold trim. My Mother was able to do two of them at a time but I was scurrying and, by the time we reached the summit, I was almost collapsing.

“Stay here.” She left me next to a pillar that looked like it was blooming flowers and came back with a small set of brass binoculars.

“What are those for?”

“They help you see if you are far from the stage.”

“Are we far from the stage?”

“A little bit, my lovely, but these are much better seats. From where we sit we can see the whole stage, all the patterns that the dancers will run in. But we will use these binoculars if there is something you need to see a bit closer.”

As we got to our seats, I saw she was right. The whole of the theater opened up and everything was in front of us. The curtain was gold and flowered and looked as if it were made of layers and layers of silk, like one of the Countesses’ dresses. I found my head was darting around from person to person, from chair to chair, and all over the ceiling. I was studying the golden angels

decorating the topmost part of the Theatre when my Mother nudged me and pointed towards the stage.

Tonight I find myself in the same room, booming with gold and silks. I have learned over the years not to speak with anyone in the lobby. The people who see the Ballet are much more interested by someone who is silent than by someone who tells them that they clean for their profession. I prefer to keep my little secret inside and wonder what each of the folk are thinking about me. I leave the lobby as soon as the doors open, and begin scaling that same mountain of stairs.

Sergei had not been lying to me. He had given me a seat in the orchestra amid all the tall hats and shimmering gowns. I ease down into my seat, one a lot more comfortable than those on the balconies, and wait for the show to start.

...

I sit in my best clothes until I sweat through my collar. The stage seems even larger than when I was young.

Finally, a sweeping up of the curtain. The room expanding to infinity. The ability to breathe deeper. The empty stage supported by a low rumble of cellos, violins, and a sporadic trill from a lone flute.

A flash of white slips onto stage. Stands for a moment still. Seems to take in the whole room and, just when I think she's about to look at me, she shoots her arm up to the sky, brings her feet together.

What she wears is simple. White tights. White dress. Nothing any of us in the audience hadn't seen worn before many times. But on her it seems something different, something new. Every time the dress falls after a movement, its silhouette is a surprise and a masterpiece.

She curls her leg into her body. Brings it down again. Repeat. Repeat. White floats behind her as she shocks me by flying into the air with hands clutched close to her chest.

She is close to the edge of the stage now. Bolstered by a swell of strings, all of her weight goes to her toes. She becomes taller. As if taunting us all, she walks about with arms swimming through the air. She stares at her hands. A sea of people look at her but the only thing that she wants to see, the one thing important to her, is her hands and their course through the air. It seems that they are not her hands, that every move they make is a pleasant surprise.

She lifts her arms to the sky and stands on her toes. She is at her full height. She stays for a moment. Her hands become fists. The air goes into to all her body. Her ribs, just visible, shift to let it all in. She turns her head down and to the side. I imagine that she is thinking about the worst thing she's ever done. The thing she cannot forgive herself for doing. Her face is pained but focused. A timpani crashes and her dance becomes her apology. Her atonement.

This dance is fast. Rolling drums beat out her course. A swing of the left leg. An arch of the back. Her dance spells out a confession. A past. An implication. Each time the music rests, she holds herself suspended and looks out to us, wondering if she's done enough yet. If we've forgiven her.

Her mouth begins to open wider. Each breath she takes is urgent. A quick biting intake to make sure she has enough to continue. She thinks every gulp of air might be her last taste. A gasp before going back underwater, going back into the music.

It all becomes too much for her. She must start jumping. The leaps begin short and controlled. Her hands follow her up, stopping when her body forms a perfect letter *t*. She barely lands before she is in the air again. With each jump, she must get higher. She is jumping for something that is getting farther away. Floating away over her head. She loses control of her arms. They are not important. As long as she can return to the air higher, her arms do not matter.

The drums roar. She lands and contorts. Her back arches. Her arms weave into each other. Again she jumps. She uses this pose to spring herself higher, closer.

She is sweating now. I think that only I can see that. Her dress slightly out of place. Now she closes her eyes. Now she pulls her mouth into a grimace. Now the music slows. Now the drums roll away. She falls ever so slightly.

Behind her more dancers, flashes of black and white and tan, walk and leap. They are incidental. They are gone soon.

She is alone again. Crumpled to the ground and alone. The strings in the orchestra yawn out a sleepy march. Chimes punctuate.

Next, she begins to rise. This is not easy. Her arms and her hands she holds away from her body. She refuses to look at them. They remain perfectly still, but they are invisible to her. Her right leg is planted firmly into the stage, held like a perfect root. Her left leg is harder to understand. It moves freely. Searches for a hold.

She lifts herself as if she is suspended by the thinnest piece of thread imaginable and if she were to pull too hard it would snap.

The rise is not done when she is standing. It continues. Her left leg finds its hold on a shelf of air behind her. Her arms tunnel upwards until they find the pieces of light they are looking for. Her left hand rests above her head. Her right goes backward as if to find her foot. She rises once more. She finds the top of her toes and she stands. She stands as the strings of the orchestra rise to meet her.

And then it is over. We clap for her. I yell to her but cannot hear myself. She scampers off with a tiny smile on her face, melting into the deep black curtains of the wings.

The rest of the ballet passes. I forget it. All I can remember is the once or twice more the shock of white slips past the curtain ever so briefly to take hold of my eyes again.

I file out of the Theatre with the other patrons and follow the Neva back home.

Act Three

When I finish my morning's work early and I don't want Sergei to find me and think of something else for me to do, I push open the little door to the sewing room. The room is tucked down a long hallway with a low ceiling. The floor of the hallway always feels gritty no matter how many times I run the broom over it.

The theatre has two seamstresses, Anya and Lydia, and young bug-eyed girl named Maria who runs between them much like a small dog, darting back and forth doing tasks for the older women. Anya is ancient, much older than Lydia, and has worked in the costume shop since before years were recorded, or that's what Sergei says at least. She wears piles of cloth that appear loosely arranged overlapping around her body and hums to herself quietly. It's often difficult to tell if she is humming or muttering and it is never loud enough that you cannot hear a needle piercing into fabric. Lydia, while younger than Anya, has very quickly taken on her shape; the same permanent curve in their backs with their shoulders pulled up to their ears. Lydia does still wear recognizable clothing, though, which she makes herself. Anya and Lydia ran out of subjects to talk about many

years ago, so the only sounds to hear in the shop are needles swinging through cloth, Anya's humming, and the small percussion of Maria's shoes on the ground when either of the seamstresses needs another yard of muslin.

"Good afternoon, Anya. Hello Lydia. Hello Maria," I say as I push my way past a full rack of tiny blue and white dresses.

"Af-ter-noon," Anya says, as if to keep each syllable in time with her needlework.

"How are you, Alexei? Are you finished for the day?" Lydia says, popping her head out from behind a form, which is wearing half of a skirt. Maria stands slightly to her left holding a cloth with needles, scissors, and spools upon spools of thread.

"I'm good, I'm well. The lower part of my back is angry with me, I think." I lean my body against a wall and allow my weight to slide me to the floor as Lydia carefully aligns the second half of the skirt and, with the tip of her tongue sticking out from between her teeth and one eye closed, pins it into place.

"Maria? You know what you're doing with a needle by now, yes?" Maria nods so fast that some of her hair comes out of its pins. "Wonderful. Please put a seam on that. I've got to get to the dress." Lydia crosses the left side of the shop, where there are racks of dresses and shirts and capes. She pauses as if taking a breath and plunges into the sea of cloth, beads, and furs.

"What dress, Lydia?" I ask.

Anya looks up, "That Eva girl. She tore her dress. She tore her dress and we have to fix it."

"I'm sure she just tore it in the dance." From the racks I hear Lydia belt out a single, "Ha."

"It is a very complicated dance. I'll bet it was when she jumps." Those jumps were very high. I think that that must be when she tore it. Or it could have been during the closing bit, I remember seeing the dress tighten around her right hip just before the end. That could have been it.

Anya slowly looks up again, “You think we do not build costumes so that a dancer can dance. You think a jump is going to tear one of our dresses? Even Callinari never tore one of his costumes jumping and he could go up to the moon.”

Lydia surfaces from the racks holding a man’s shirt made of the same simple white fabric that had tucked itself into the wings the night before, “There is no way she tore this dancing.”

“I’ll bet you haven’t even seen her perform. Now that I think of it, I remember a moment where she was bending and I swear that I saw a seam pop.” But no, I remember, that bend was too early in the dance. It must have been later.

“Well that may be,” Lydia says, “But unless she sweats champagne, I think that she did more than dance in this.” Maria pokes her head up from her sewing.

“I’ll-bet-that-if-you-report-her-to-Posimov-you-could-have-her-fired,” the little girl says in a breath. Getting up the courage to say this has tired out Maria. She lowers her eyes and shoves her head back into her work.

“I’m not going to do anything like that. Besides she’s all the choreographers’ favorite. They will always find an excuse.” Lydia cuts a swatch from the shirt. She takes out a form and slips from a sack on her workbench a simple white dress. She sets to work repairing the tear.

The shop returns to its traditional score. The dress, at first glance, seems empty, seems as if it is missing its wearer. Yet as I allow my eyes to adjust to the sharp whiteness of the fabric, I begin to feel a weight inside the cloth, a fullness. I sit back in a chair and watch them work. I let my eyes slide out of focus as I watch Lydia snip and sew.

For a moment I am back inside the theater, back inside the green velvet of my seat. Back to the final moment of Eva’s dance. Legs perfectly straight leading upward to arms held out to accept our congratulations. And a face poised forward. The slightest trace of a smile in the corner of her lips, and a tiny mole just below on the right side. Eyes open and outward scanning the audience,

daring some poor soul not to swell and clap. Hair pulled back into a soft and sturdy bun, glowing with the reflections of the theatre lights. The smallest quiver swims through her body as she exhales deeply.

“Hey you, dreaming boy!” Anya barks at me, “If you think this is a place to sleep, you are wrong. Dead wrong. You help me or I tell Sergei that you spend more time in here than you do polishing windows.” Lydia and Maria both laugh at me. I get up quickly and move to Anya.

“Of course. Of course. I’m sorry.” She hands me what appears to be a tunic.

“You put this on.” I slide the tunic of my head and I feel like a child wearing his father’s shirt. “Now you stay perfectly still. No moving or you get stuck with my needle. I must add the stripes.” She takes out strips of red cloth and begins to pin them into place, perfectly vertical. I allow myself one more closed-eye thought of the dress and of Eva and of where it must have been during the dance that she tore the seam.

Act Four

When cleaning, I save the corner dance studio for last. It is a large room whose door appears only to be a broom closet or perhaps the office of someone unimportant, someone who no one sees come or go. But, if you are smart enough to know and you push open the little dented door, the room opens up into a bright box of light, windows on three sides, flanked by barres.

Sergei says the room smells like someone left a box of over-used shoes under a bed for weeks. Though I would never tell him this, I think he's just being grumpy. A smell hangs in the air, it's true, but it's not an unpleasant smell. I can smell how bodies moved. It feels substantial. I'm smelling steps and twirls and with a particularly deep inhale I breathe in a lift that I can feel in my stomach. It seems a shame to clean the studio at all.

I push open the secret little door and close my eyes to take in my first taste of the room. After I breathe out and I open my eyes, I see a ball of black and white on the floor, shaking slightly, and looking up towards me with confused and blotchy eyes.

“What are you doing here?” Eva asks from her spot on the ground.

“I, well,” my breath catches in my throat. I compose myself a use my belly to push out my next words, “I will be cleaning. But if you’re working I can leave.”

“No. No. Not working.”

“Are you sure? I can leave. I mean if you want.”

Eva laughs a little. She laughs with her nose, little puffs that made her nostrils turn up. “It’s really just alright. You can clean around me.”

“Only if you’re sure.”

“It’s fine, you can start cleaning,” she laughs again and wipes her eyes. My face starts to feel a little warm.

I cross to the other side of the room begin to push and the broom into the corners and cracks of the wood floor. I hum and stop once I remember I do not have a good voice.

“What is your real name, Janitor?” Eva asks while smoothing her rehearsal tutu, which has a large tear down it near her hip.

“I’m Alexei.”

“Are you new?”

“No.” I try very hard to keep my eyes to the ground. I clear out the lines of the dust between the cracks. I hear her stand up and walk over. She stands next to me. I look out of the sides of my eyes long enough to see her wipe her nose and eyes and then rub her hands on her skirt.

“Aren’t you curious why I’m here?” she says.

“Yes.”

“Yes?”

“Yes. But, well. I mean I didn’t want to ask, and it’s fine that you’re here, and I didn’t want to be rude.”

She looks up to me. I can see her hair stuck to where she had been crying. It is so hard not to lift my hand and brush it out of the way, to place it back in her hair. To tuck it behind her ear.

“I’m here because I fell during the last walk.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” My voice catches on the last word.

“The master yelled at me. Screeched really. She has a very awful voice.” She wipes her eyes and turns her head slightly as if waiting for something. “She said I wasn’t serious, that I was lazy and that she would throw me back in the ensemble if it happened again.” She turns her head again.

“What do you think I did, Alexei?”

“I don’t know.”

“I will tell what I didn’t do. I did not cry. I waited until she left and everyone left and I stayed strong.”

“That’s good,” I say. She steps closer.

“It is. I kept my head up and I looked into the master’s eyes and I did the last walk perfectly without looking away.” Another step.

“You did?”

“I did. But as soon as everyone left I felt the ropes that were keeping my head up snap and fell down on the ground.” Her eyes turn down to the ground as if she had been scolded. “And that’s when you came in. That’s when you saw me.”

“Yes,” I say. “I should start on cleaning the barres”

“Yes. You should, Alexei. Don’t let me get in the way.” She bites her lip and steps back to let me pass. It is an elegant gesture, perfectly spaced, leaving me just enough room to slip my body by. She narrows her eyes and pulls her neck back. I start past her, but I feel a hand on the small of my back, the place that aches from scrubbing the floor. I am rooted to the ground. Stuck.

“You know, Alexei, you are a good listener,” I feel her hand pull my shirt and she slides her chin across my neck, touching her cheek to mine. In one motion she turns her body to mine, pressing her lips to my cheek. She stands on her toes and is taller than me and grabs me by the hair. My blood pumps as if it is running late and I can feel my breath leaving my body.

Eva pulls away. She flicks my earlobe lightly.

“You know, Alexei. I dance in here every day.” Her hands smooth my hair, not a hair out of place. “And you clean every day, yes?”

I manage to force out, “Yes.”

“Those are two interesting things to know.” She stands flat on the ground and makes sure her own hair is in place. “I should leave you here to finish up.”

She walks out of the room and it is perfect. Her shoulders roll with each step, each step that moves from heel to toe like a pendulum. She stops before the doorway and puts her arm on the knob.

“Goodbye Janitor.” She blows a kiss. I want to clap.

She exits and closes the door behind her. I stand a moment to catch my breath before beginning to clean the barres.

...

And soon there is more. Eva passes me in the hallway and brushes my arm with her fingers. She stops me while I’m sweeping to ask me questions: have I noticed the new choreographer spits when he talks? Did the clouds outside this morning look like rain? What make are my shoes? She talks to another dancer loudly about wanting to go to Paris, how she has always wanted to go. Her eyes slide in my direction after she explains she wants to walk along the Seine with a sturdy Parisian man. Sergei catches me in daydreams more and more often, tugging me out with soft smacks to the back of my head.

The walls of Petrograd have started to shake with rumors. Rumbblings in the countryside. Tiny whispers of something coming, something large, something creeping through the cheeks and tongues of the people I bump into on my walk from home to the Theatre or on my way back again.

I try my best to keep Eva's attention. I write many letters but tear them up. I tip my hat each time I see her and she pretends to be a soldier and salutes me with legs straight as columns. Each time this happens she rolls with laughter before she finishes and says, "No need to put on frills," or "At ease, soldier." She does this to make me blush and she is sure to stare at me until I do. A flash of a smile lights up her face and she turns and moves down the hall with her hair bobbing up and down with each step and her shoulders rolling in time.

From our island at the Theatre, the strikes and starvation seem far away, seem to be a backdrop rather than any real action. But each day, my walk takes me past more and more reminders. Men and women, exhausted and sick, take up posts in the city and scream for justice. The amount of beggars increases daily. They mumble delicately for bread or anything I can spare from the railings on the banks of the Neva.

Days later, I am cleaning the studio again, and Eva comes and steals my broom. She sweeps like a child pretending, and laughs the whole way through.

"This is not so hard. I could do this," she giggles and pushes the broom along floor in long brushes, "I could do what you do."

"Maybe you could, but I doubt it," I can feel each word forming in my chest but I can't seem to control what I'm saying, "Your form is all off. All wrong."

"What do you mean, Janitor?" I have perfect form. Her long sweep splits the dust pile I had been collecting in half, "See?"

"I hear you like to dance, right?" I say and she returns the favor with a swift punch to my shoulder. "Well, in dance you have positions, yes?"

She does not respond with words but, rather, with a flurry of motion, her feet moving in smooth, firm crispness from angle to angle, pose to posture.

“You see, we Janitors have positions too.” I take the broom from her, “Let me show you. Number one.” I stand with the broom held perfectly straight in front of me, a soldier at arms. “Two.” Arching my back down and bringing the broom forward, I make my body and the broom two sides of a triangle. “Three.” I slide the broom forward, my chest, arms, and the broom forming a tent over the now spotless stretch of floor. “Four.” After tapping the broom down twice on the floor, I bring my right foot towards the bristles, leaving the left behind. “Five.” The left follows. I remain slightly hunched. I stand back to full height, “And then back to number one.”

“I can do that,” Eva darts her hands out and grabs the broom, “Watch me.” She goes through my positions. She does the movements well, but I notice she hardly moves any dust from the floor.

“No no no,” I say, “There must be more force behind it. Let me help you.” Standing behind her, I put my arms around her and peek my head over her shoulder with a slight brush of her hair and her cheek with mine. I put my hands on the broom over hers. “See now.” Together we push. My chest is pressed firmly to her back, “That’s better.”

She turns her chin up and traces my jaw lightly with her nose. When she reaches my chin, someone makes a noise from outside the door. We both stand up with backs as stiff as tree trunks.

“I have to get down to the dressing room,” Eva says, touching her hair to see if any strands had fallen.

“Yes,” I say keeping my eyes above her head and look everywhere but down, “You wouldn’t want to be late.” We stand in silence for a moment; I twiddle my fingers on the broom. She makes to leave. “Wait. There’s one thing I forgot.” I bend down and kiss her quickly on the lips. The broom falls to the ground, making a sharp sound that fills the studio.

“Oh, I see,” She says and kisses me again, “I’ll have to remember that.”

Eva leaves the room with a quick look back toward me and a tiny smile as she passes through the doorway.

...

Sergei has begun to lose weight. He likes to pretend it’s from the bread shortage but we all know he gets the same food we all get through the Theatre, which is plenty. He smokes his cigarettes with a shaking hand that sometimes misses his lips.

“Why are you smiling?” Sergei says to me as I come to his office after finishing up in the dance studio, “You must have a morbid sense of humor if you can find anything funny about today. Or it’s possible you are just an idiot who can’t help smiling.”

“What’s wrong? What’s happened?”

“Nothing has happened yet, boy, but something is happening.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I don’t expect you to understand. Hell, your head is always so ready to float away I barely expect you to come into work wearing shoes,” he stops. “I’m sorry, Alexei. We just need to be aware and it is very easy in the Theatre to forget the world. That is precisely what we cannot do.”

“You mean the strikes?”

“I mean the strikes and I mean the war we’ve been fighting for too long and I mean the fact that all the blame comes back to the Tsar.” He lights another cigarette and dusts off some papers on his desk that he has accidentally used as an ashtray. “And of course the biggest fact being that we, this Theatre, all come back to the Tsar as well.”

“I see.”

“It’s enough to turn a young man into a bald man, Alexei. It’s just enough.” He sits in silence and looks down. He looks to me like a bird with a broken wing who has given up trying to

flap, left suddenly without a piece of himself. Words form in my chest but die before my throat can form them.

I walk over to him, put my head onto his shoulder, and rub his back. I feel a tension shoot up from his feet along his spine. But, as soon as it has come, I feel this melt away, seeping out through the soles of his shoes and causing his body to crumple delicately onto his desk.

“I wish I had something to say, Sergei.”

“No that’s fine, boy,” he says back to me. “There doesn’t always have to be something to say. Sometimes there isn’t. Sometimes all we can do is keep them dancing.” He straightens up, “That’s all there is for us to do. Now get home, don’t waste any more time with me than you have too.”

I turn and I leave. I make my way along the river, starting for home. But, after a brief hesitation on the stoop of my building, I move along past it, going up the river now.

I find myself in the shadow of a statue, a man perched atop a horse in full military dress. The man here was considered important enough to be immortalized, but, for the life of me, I cannot remember why. I’m sure he did something great, something that must be jotted down in the history books, something that a librarian could tell you. I wouldn’t want that: only to be remembered as a fact. I would much rather be remembered as a feeling or not remembered at all.

I let myself be swept back down river, my feet carry me back towards the Theatre. I wait at the worker’s entrance, standing just outside in the rigid January air. I wait until Eva emerges. She is making sure her earrings are still in and tucking a little stray bit of hair behind her ear. I walk towards her, surprising her a little I think.

“Hello there,” I say and I kiss her. She kisses back and we stay that way for almost a whole minute, pressed against each other before we hear people coming from around the corner.

“Let’s go,” she says, “I don’t want any of the audience to see me. They don’t ever really want to talk, they just want to look.”

“That’s fair,” I say, “Come for a walk with me?”

She nods, “Of course, Alexei,” and we walk along, back up river. I put my arm around her and we walk and talk all night, not stopping until the first pink touches of morning ignite the sleeping city.

Act Five

Over the heads of the fading yellow buildings, St. Issac's looms like a stone sun. The people in Palace Square vibrate and sway; they are indistinguishable from each other. The city has exploded. The spark we'd been hearing about roaming the countryside finally found the powder.

"Come on, Alexei! Run, you Lead-foot!" Eva screams back to me over her shoulder as she pulls farther and farther away. Whenever we've walked since that first night two months ago, I find that she tends to drift ahead. "Do you want the only thing you have to write in your little journal tonight be that we missed the party?"

"I'm coming! I'm running, see?" My knee is swollen from scrubbing the studio floor. "See?" With each step onto my left leg, I draw a sharp intake of the prickly air. I must look like a child attempting a circle dance, fumbling and awkward, yet enthusiastic.

Eva looks strange when she runs. Her legs are so long and so thin that they become swinging angles in the air, stilts that catch the ground with sharp slaps. She moves so quickly I worry that her hat is going to make her fall down.

“Look at the square! Just look at it! If we don’t hurry up there won’t be room for us. We’ll have to watch from the river.” We reach the final ascent, a fierce, steep hill with the Square like a crown atop its brow. Teems of people dash in to the archway door, processions of coats, grays and blacks and the occasional blues.

The air grinds at my throat and chest as I try to gulp it down. “That’s impossible, Eva, that’s just impossible. Slow down.” She laughs back at me. The grinding in my throat is replaced by heat, a boil rising from the tips of my toes. I find myself trying to land on the ground in unison with Eva, to keep pace.

“I thought that you would be more fit. Maybe it’s best I let you go and take up with one of the boy dancers. They’d be able to keep up.” As we reach the archway that opens into the square, I accelerate all my knee will allow me. I am just able to grab Eva around the waist and lift her into the air above my head. I slide my hands under her coat and try to remember the order that she taught me. Hands to place, feet planted, knees bent, a lifting motion with both knees and arms in a purposeful glide, punctuated by stepping underneath to make a perfect column. I seem always to be distracted by the warmth of her hips underneath my hands, it breaks my focus.

“Your form is getting better,” she says as I bring her down to face me, “But your feet are still shifting and you can’t keep your hands from shaking.” I kiss her quickly under the columns. “Your form is getting better,” she says, “But—” I kiss her again, longer this time. She squints at me, “Come on, at this rate the revolution is going to be over by the time we get inside.”

She grabs my hand and we run in. The crowd around the square pops and swells like oil when you heat it in a pan. Every moment or so a new piece of it explodes with laughter or song. The music comes from all sides, a rolling drum of voices.

“People of Russia!” A voice booms from the steps of the Winter Palace. “Tsar Nicholas has a new name!” The square, a chorus of electricity screams its support. “If you see him walking the streets of Petrograd, what will you do?”

“What?” the crowd sounds.

“You will tip your hat to him and say, ‘Good morning, Little Nicholas Romanov. I’m sorry but I haven’t any spare kopeks for you!’”

I feel a punch on my left shoulder, “I want to get closer.”

“I don’t know, Eva. If we stay here we can get out if we have to. It’s much closer to the way out, see?” But she grabs my hand and puts it in her pocket. The crowd reminds me of the tricks we use to make waves on stage, panels sliding back and forth with only the tiniest slots of daylight to get through. Even on the edge of the group a few staggering bodies bump and collide into us.

“We are going in there. We are going at least as far as that bottle.” She points with her free hand towards a crowd of people about our age circled around an orbiting glass bottle.

“We can’t just take their drinks, Eva.”

“It won’t be taking. It will be sharing. And, either way, I have a pretty smile and I won’t let them see it unless they share with us.” She pulls me with her and we dive into the crowd. I feel like someone has put a roof on my lungs, I can only get the smallest gulps of air inside. Before I can stop it, the crowd has formed around us, taken us into its tide. I try not to look at faces for too long, I don’t want to hold contact with the wrong eyes.

Earlier in the day, the Theatre had been silent. The doors have been barred since the headlines said the Tsar was in hiding. Men, all wearing the same sort of thick coat, now come to the Theatre every day and ask to look around. Sergei makes me deal with them.

“I’m too tired to be killed today, Alexei. You go let the little murderers in,” he said to me without looking up from his papers. “And, Alexei, you tell them that they had better let us open up

again soon. We've missed one payday already and if we miss another will have a second revolution. You tell them, mark my words, there will be an angry mob of ballerinas storming the palace next."

The women from the costume shop, Sergei, and I are the only ones still working in all of the theatre for as long as it stays closed. After letting the men in, I followed them to make sure they didn't pick any of the gold paint off of the railings. I took them up our main staircase, staying three paces behind. I held my breath as they passed each of the statues, the muses, on their pedestals, flanking the stairs.

"I bet you get a lot of the rich folk in here, don't you boy?" said one of the men who looked about a year younger than me. He was little and had a pointy face and beard. I focused on my breath, drawing it in towards my stomach slowly. The last thing I wanted was my face to turn red or to spit out a cough. I ran my fingertips up and down the railing, tracing each bump, each of the unique bits to make sure they were still there. As I felt each one, my feet anchored me. I convinced myself that my knowledge of every curve of the theatre would keep me safe.

I leaned at the bottom of the stairs, just in front of a small and expensive bust of cupid, "A few, I guess. But we get people of all sorts--"

"To run the concession stands?" the pointy faced one interrupted with a laugh.

I stopped talking and let them go about what they were doing. I kept my hands tight to the railing. I knew I was safe in the theatre, but the little bulge above the little man's right hip sewed my lips shut.

In the square, I see many little men with pointy faces. Many men with beards. Eva tugs me towards the people with the bottle.

"People of Russia!" The voice booms again. "A new dawn is here. A dawn where you won't have to live in the shadow of an irrelevant statue! Today we have torn this statue down! And from this rubble let us build something that is actually ours!"

Just before we arrive at the circle of people, a dancing man catches my eye. He clutches his hands close to his stomach and spins. He crouches down, a weight on his head. A leaking comes from beneath his hands as he makes his dive, his finale. He completes his fall, a leg curling softly over the other, one hand trapped under a heaving chest. His other hand reaches out grasping for something just out of my sight. Three men in matching thick coats, men from the chorus, close in around him, shielding the soloist where he lay.

“Drink deep,” one of the men we have been walking to says, passing his bottle to Eva, “Drink to our new dawn!”

...

Later in the day, I crash into Sergei’s office. My boots are completely soaked through and I’ve almost slipped three times between the hallway and his door. He stands behind his desk pouring a drink from the bottle he keeps in his bottom drawer.

“Slow down, boy,” He says with sand in his voice, “Or you’ll blow the papers off of my desk.”

“I was just down at Palace Square--”

“Joining in on the celebration, Alexei? You are happy that our main producer had been toppled?”

“No, sir, of course I’m not happy about that, but I saw the new police kill a man.”

Sergei brings his glass to his lips and, with one quick flip, tosses the whole glass back. “Yes, boy, there have been many reports of just that. Our dear new benefactors...” He loses his voice and stares out his window. I see his strength leaving him through his shoulders, falling out of his hands, splashing on the floor below. I notice how low the level of the bottle is.

“Is there anything we can do?” I ask.

“How do you like Paris, Alexei? What do you think of it?”

“I don’t know sir,” I stammer, “I’ve never been.”

“Well, you’re going.” He says and begins to pour another drink. “You’re going in a week.”

“But--”

“No Alexei. You have to. Your Mother told me to take care of you and that means I’m not going to let you stay here.”

Behind my eyes images begin to roll. Petrograd in flames. The Theatre in rubble. The costume shop tattered up and blown by biting winds to all corners of the ruined city. The little corner dance studio turned to powdered glass and wood splinters.

“We’re all going, right? All of us?”

“No,” Sergei says with a grim finality. “The company has to stay here, the government says that they plan to continue on with the ballet even with the Tsar gone. They have many ideas they say. I’ve set you up with a job for another company. All of the members came out of this city, most of them even came from this Theatre. It will be comfortable.”

“I’ll stay. It’s not much safer there than here,” I plead.

“No. Paris is safer, people go into Paris every day. Someday we’ll find our way over. Not just yet, you see. We will bide our time. You will get out while you can.” He stares into my eyes for the first time since I walked into his office. “You take a drink, Alexei.” He pours for me and hands me the glass.

“You know,” he says as I take my first sip, “Peter brought the Ballet to Russia because he wanted us to become more cultured, more European. He wanted the French and the Italians to look at us and say that we were not just a mass of backwards people who lacked refinement. And we did that. We were the best in world at it. But we’ve hit the end of the path; the rest is just woods. We’ll see if we can find our way out. You’ve got your ticket. You go back to the beginning; where we started. You see if you can find a different end to this path. You see if you find a way out.”

I look down into my glass and my face shimmering back to me. I toss back the rest.

“Alright, Sergei. Alright.” I walk to him and shake his hand. His eyes are glazed with tears that fall out slowly and steadily, leaking out and painting his face wet.

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As I leave Theatre, I find myself stopped in the awning of the workers’ entryway. I stoop low and take off my boots, tying the laces and draping them over the back of my neck. From my pockets I pull out my working shoes, left by a dancer long ago. I put them on and roll the cuffs of my pants upwards so that they hang just above my ankles, perfectly aligned.

Though the snow and ice soak through, my feet do not feel cold. Each step, rather, seems to absorb in with it some piece of my city. I feel the stones beneath my shoes yield up to me their stories of the strokes of feet that have passed over them. The stories go even further back, I can feeling the rocks being broken in the quarry and being shaped into the uneven rectangles that cobble the road before me. Each statue I pass seems to turn slightly in my direction, pleading with me to remember it. A sad lion whispers my name. A smiling griffin hisses for me to stay. The Neva is a river full of the city’s tears. I look down at the flowing water and see if I can find Sergei’s or my Mother’s or the little puddles burning in the corners of my eye.

I turn up the road and lay my hand on the railing. I walk along, each step an attempt to take all of the city for my own. When my legs and my eyes and my chest are burning, I make my way back towards the Theatre, which lies in the night unlit and seems to me hollow. There is still a light in Sergei’s office but I decide to let him be, and I turn down the road and step, one foot and then the other, until my steps lead me to Eva’s building. And my steps lead me up each of the stairs. And my steps lead me to her door.

When it opens with a creak, she stands behind it rubbing her eyes. Without shoes, she seems so much smaller.

“Alexei,” she squints at my face, making sure she’s awake, “It’s late.”

“I know. And I’m sorry to wake you, but I have some news.”

“Okay, my lovely,” she kicks a dress out of the doorway, “Come in.” Her room always gives me a familiar constricting in my chest. There are things strewn everywhere: dancing shoes and boots, piles of cloth, long-empty bottles forming a battle line on her windowsill. By my hand she leads me to her bed and, after thumping down like a dropped sack of flour, beckons me to sit on the edge.

“What’s the news?”

I explain all I can, all I understand. At first she tells me to yell at Sergei, but this quickly ebbs into weary tears from both of us. I hold her close to me and count along the bumps of her spine, ascending until my fingers nest inside her hair. She runs the back of her hands along my cheekbones and kneads at my earlobe.

“Stand up, Alexei,” Eva says as she shoots up from the bed, “You stand up and dance with me.” She pulls me up to meet her.

Our dance is slow, simple. Just a light rocking, a boat in a sleeping harbor. Petrograd crouches outside her window, waiting for morning, but still we rock, chest to chest, my chin pressed against her ear. If I had to have a statue, if Peter himself commanded me, let this moment be it. Let the trudging masses going from home to church to work to battlefields west stop for a moment to admire this clumsy pair. Let this moment become a home for pigeons and ducks. Let them build homes upon our shoulders.

Like rivers finding oceans we lose our energy, melting to the floor as one while the sun rises over the low buildings, kindling for light of the day.

Epilogue

Eva comes with me to the train station. She stands with me on the crowded platform. I've brought only a bag packed with clothes, the letters from my Mother, and a few other necessities, along with a thick envelope that Sergei gave me at the Theatre which he said was full of French money. "You will have to trust me that it's there," he had said, "Don't be a fool and open it. You'd only lose it then. I know you. There's not much but it's what I could take from the accounts without anyone noticing."

The platform is the way I remember it, only a layer of grit has sunken over the place. The bags and people cram together on the deck. Eva and I hold close, working desperately to create our own ground, to isolate ourselves from the chorus behind us.

"They need dancers in Paris you know," I say to her after a silence.

"They do. It's true."

"I know you've always wanted to go. You used to say it loud enough so I could hear in the hallways."

“I’m glad you noticed. But you know I can’t,” she says.

“I know. I know that. But just thought I should mention.”

Eva lowers her eyes and nods. The train grinds over the tracks. Streams of people make their way out of the sitting train, curling around us where we stand. Whistles sound; a warmth comes from the tracks. I perform a familiar piece of choreography, myself this time. After a kiss, and a few words of goodbye. I lift my bag and make the steps onto the train. It is entirely different from the part I’ve danced before. My motion comes from my chest and pulls me inside.

Once I’ve stepped through the door, my face collapses and my body shrinks down into a seat. A rumble from within the depths of the machine creeps into my legs. It begins to move me forward. In a flash I look out the window, looking quick and close for Eva in the crowd. I find her bent over, and find myself wishing only for her to lift her head. But I see her head is forming a triangle and then a tent over the ground. She pushes her arms forward, steps forward on her right foot. Then on the left. She rises again and smiles towards me.

Her dance is done for now. But there is no bow. There is no curtain. There is simply a slow slackening of the strings holding her up, holding me up until we both stand and sit with weight coming into our bodies, waiting desperate and patient for a tug to bring us up again.

