

PART ONE

ANTON'S RIFF

I

I was fucking the up-and-coming great ballerina, Olga K, when I decided to defect.

Early spring, 1982.

Our company, the up-and-coming V ballet Company from A, was making its tour abroad and we had just pulled out of the Warsaw station on our way to Prague. Olga's husband, Dimitri V, the up-and-coming Impresario, and his lover, Sergei F, the Soviet Union's new up-and-coming composer, were unconscious from the vodka. All four of us were in the tiny sleeper compartment that Dimitri V was entitled to because he was an up-and-coming Impresario. The boys were knocked out in a knotted naked heap on the compartment floor between the two bunk beds. So when I made my decision to defect we had just pulled out of the Warsaw station.

But I had not yet pulled out of Olga.

The two of us were going at it on one of the bunks. As usual, through it all, Olga could not stop talking. Mostly about her rival, Sonya P, the other up-and-coming "great" ballerina, who was renowned in the company as an anal specialist.

Olga was singing her usual song; how Sonya P had no talent, had butt-plugged her way to the major starring roles. But the song had only one long chorus that night: how Sonya P had finagled the last pair of stockings in a store in Warsaw by giving the store manager a "back-door" quickie in the back room. This was undoubtedly true. Sonya P was noted for her "back-door" quickies. I myself had had a number of *pas de "back door" jig-jigs* with Sonya and one especially memorable one during a three-minute interval before one of Sonya's entrances in *Swan Lake*.

"She never danced better," the critics said of her that night.

But one does not like to hear such talk when one is fucking. In fact, one does not like to hear *any* talk. At all! Grunts, moans and the like—yes, talk—no! My astrological sign is Scorpio and fucking to a Scorpio is serious business. Scorpions, you see, concentrate religiously when fucking, *on* fucking. But there I was, humping away, and I had to listen to a yarn about stockings!

But that's the way it was. Not only with Olga K, but with every female in

the company. From the newest ballerina in the corps de ballet, to the legendary Irina P, to Natalia O (the great costume mistress; she of the velvet hands)—they all talked, talked, talked while they fucked. About the lousy vodka, they talked. About the shortage of food, bedpans, heat, they talked. About rivals, jealousies, lousy choreography; about nail polish and foot powder; about everything and anything they talked and talked and talked, talked, talked! Depressing!

The main reason I decided to dance was to be the only bull in the cowherd. Stupid, I know. Well, in those days I thought all the ballet boys were queer and I would be the only bull.

Actually, I also danced because I liked to move, had an incredible musical ear, jumped high, was athletic and I knew, almost as soon as I could smell our real Soviet air, that it was important to be part of an elite something or other—and ballet, in my strange country, was about as elite as you could get. Well, as you know, this dancing business in my country is very competitive and, since dancing didn't mean anything to me *in itself*, I'd always relax in a competition, let my natural abilities and instincts take over, not agonize too much about the result (*if not elite dancing, it would be elite something else*); as a result, I did become a dancer and I got some respect, a lot of elite security—and my share of fucking. But I also got a lot of talk, talk, talk, talk talk.

I suppose, in a way, I'm unique. Baryshnikov, Nureyev, Godonov, the Panovs—that whole crowd from the Stone Age—they all decided to defect for artistic reasons or political reasons or all kinds of other reasons. But I, Anton Otchayanie, in the early spring of 1982, during Olga K's monologue, decided to defect—at least initially—because I needed a quiet fuck.

II

My father was the same way. Until he was about to die, that is. But up until that time he was the same way—a world-class fucking machine. Except, papa wasn't as serious about it. He was the jolly kind of fucker, and believe me, he got his jollies off all the time—no matter what you *now* hear about it!

My twin brother Vahktang was a different story. Fragile. Nervous. Intellectual. "*The little priest*," Papa used to call him. That was Papa's way of laughing at Vahktang. Priests, to Papa, were nervous, fragile, sometime fuckers, the most laughable kind of man. And to Papa (I thought—*then!*) Vahktang was laughable. Well, it turned out that Vahktang was far from laughable. But, *then*, Vahktang did blush at the very thought of fucking. Which meant that around me (and Papa) Vahktang's face was always red. Right from the start I used the word *fuck* straight out. But not to make Vahktang blush. Or to offend anybody. Or because I was a smartass. No. That's what "fornicating," "making love," "having sex," "doing it," "coming together," meant to me then: *Fucking!*

III

It was Papa I first saw doing all of the above.

I heard the noise, awoke, sat up in bed and looked over at Papa's bed and

was faced with an enormous female ass. Our one room flat had two windows that faced the East. The sun was just coming up and I recognized Papa's knees and his hands. I didn't recognize the ass. Somehow Papa and the lady had wound up in the middle of the bed so that her ass and his knees were facing me. I unfroze and said,

"Papa, what are you doing?"

Lady's back straightens then tilts back then lady's head turns. Tossed, long, disheveled, unbraided woman's head turns in my direction, and my father's head peeks out from her right side.

"This lady and me—we are just having fun." And Papa laughs. Then the lady laughs. I shake my brother Vahktang.

"Look, Vahktang, Papa is having fun!"

But Vahktang, who also must have heard the noise, keeps his eyes closed. Tight.

IV

Of course, when twin Vakhtang did have his eyes open, often he'd see things in a way that would make your morning hard-on go limp.

"You know what the world is like, Anton?" Vakhtang asked me one day, holding up a grape.

"The world is like a grape?"

"That's right," said Vahktang. "And do you know what you could do with *His* world? If you were God?"

"Eat it?" I asked.

"No. *This*."

And Vahktang placed that grape in his armpit and tried to squash it.

V

Apparently my father could never keep his fly zipped, even when my mother was around.

Of course, I never knew my mother. She was a poet who went her own way; always a dangerous person in my country. (In any country, I guess.)

But Mother was a poet who went her own way in the time of the *mad asshole*, Stalin. Only once Papa spoke of it, how my Mother disappeared. Papa was drunk when he spoke of it. He recalled how he woke up one morning and Mother wasn't at his bedside. He recalled having met some strangers at the local tavern the night before who had bought him vodka, a great deal of vodka. And he couldn't remember anything else until he woke up and found that his wife—my mother—wasn't there next to him. He thought she was working on her new long poem at the wooden table; using the one candle so as not to bother Papa with too much light (we lived in one room). But she wasn't at the table. So Papa went to the flat next door. Not there either, though the neighbor seemed to remember some noises in the night; apartment and car doors closing, slamming shut; and voices, voices muffled but penetrating. Papa knew enough not to go to "*The Authorities*." The penetrating voices undoubtedly the voices of "*The*

Authorities." Papa then had a job as a night watchman in a building filled with "*The Authorities*". And Papa had two infants to take care of. Twins. Identical twins—Vahktang and myself—barely a year old at the time. Yes, papa knew enough not to complain for fear he'd lose the job, and us, perhaps even *he'd* be taken away and made to disappear.

So papa stopped looking for Mother. Like hundreds of thousands of people during the reign of the "*Mad Asshole*," another citizen had been eradicated—made to not exist. *My mother.*

VI

In the light of all that happened and the parts my mother and brother take in my story later on, I have the urge to stop and deal with them *now*. (And Rathjib, the cop, too; same urge) But logically, my mother and brother should be dealt with later (Rathjib, of course, a little sooner) when the story changes, turns, descends into something—well—else; when the story lives up to my surname, *Otchayanie*; which in Russian means...despair.

VII

Besides, I'm not through doing my *defection riff* yet.

VIII

Actually, the precise moment on the train when the thought to defect came to me was when Olga was sitting on my face, bouncing and babbling on to the train compartment's ceiling about her revenge; about how she was going to put a run in Sonya's last pair of stockings (remember butt-plugging Sonya?).

But how to defect? And where?

The Panovs got the international community of artists to pressure for their release. But there was no international community of artists interested in me. No one even heard of me. Only recently was my country getting to know me. Well, Warsaw now knew (we were a success there), but no Pole is going to come to the aid of a Russian. So much for the Panov's approach. And Baryshnikov and Nureyev and Godonov had been on foreign soil when they decided to make what we in the company used to call "*the big leap*." But I was between Warsaw and Prague on tour and our final destination would take us to East Berlin then back home again. For me to make "*the big leap*" meant that somehow I had to leap from territory where there was no sanctuary and onto foreign soil. How, how to do it? Olga, still sitting on my face, looked down and gave me the answer.

"And you, Anton, will help me get even with Sonya P. Putting a run in her stockings is not good enough. No! It's time I get rid of her for good!"

"*WUKNAIDU?*" I asked, half smothered.

"I will tell you what you can do," Olga said, and bounced with more vigor. "You can disguise yourself as a secret policeman, make no secret that you are a secret policeman and scare Sonya to death."

Of course! *Disguise!* That was the answer. That was my genius. *Disguise!*

"*THASNODBADIDEE,*" I said, still half smothered.

IX

I did not have the dancer's calling, that's clear. And yet, I was *the* up-and-coming star of this up-and-coming company. In character parts, would you believe? I was a young man, but I was one of the best dancers of character parts in the company; perhaps in any company. Old men, old women, witches, devils, sorcerers, clowns—that whole bunch of distorted characters you find sneaking, skulking, running, materializing in and out, making lots of trouble for everyone in the classic ballets—I played. And “*apparently*” I played them like nobody else ever did. Actually, our ballets in those days were seventy-five percent old-fashioned mime productions, in my opinion. And I guess that's what I did, mimed around a lot. On the other hand, when I finally did see a great mime, I realized that *that* wasn't what I did—feel around in the air and make walls, and squeeze into make-believe little boxes and walk up make-believe stairs—*that* kind of mime stuff. No. I did something else. But I'll be damned if I knew what it was I did. That's why I said “*apparently*.” All I know is, as soon as I made a stage entrance, everything stopped. I mean, there was a moment when everything *seemed* to stop. Everywhere. *On* the stage, *and* in the opera house audience. No coughs. And our audiences were serious coughers; hacking away even when Olga K was doing her famous dying swan—and she always did that beautifully. But when I made my entrance as Madge, in “*La Sylphide*,” the coughing stopped. Again, you must understand that I did not know what I did. I can only say that once I entered on the stage I was not Anton any longer. I was *Madge* or the widow *Simone* in “*La Fille Mal Gardee*”; or Bottom in “*A Midsummer Night's Dream*.” Or, rather, I was two people. By that I mean, I was split. I was the character, that's true; but I also was off somewhere looking in on me *being* the character. I don't know how else to explain it.

—Mirrors! Yes. That's it. A room full of mirrors. Image in image in image. But it wasn't just the image of an actor in disguise. I'm told it was the image of the soul of that character as I invented the soul that was mirrored. In that sense I was like God, because it's clear an actor can create a character, but only God can create a soul. But how is it possible to create a soul and be so detached? As detached as I was? And did that mean that God, too, was detached? Once in awhile I used to think about that.

X

Which was unusual since I didn't believe in God. Although being part of a country that was so crude in their attacks on God in those days made one *want* to believe in God. Actually, I tried not to think about things like that. Then. It wasn't until later that I began to dwell on God and “*nothingness*” and even just mentioning “*nothingness*” at this point makes my crotch sweat.

XI

Papa, of course, did not believe in God. Like priests, God had to be a non-fucker; therefore laughable. And, of course, laughing at God was good politics, too. Then. Vahktang, you can imagine, *did* believe in God. In fact, I sometimes felt that Vahktang thought he *was* God.

XII

Sancho Panza.

That was my first character role; the role that started the hullabaloo; the role that flushed out Rathjib, the cop, and put him on my tail. And the way I got to play the role of Sancho Panza came about this way:

Our leading character dancer, Yuri P, had just had a double hernia operation and the company was in a bind. We couldn't postpone the performance of *Don Quixote* because visiting members of the annual Congress of Provincial Commissars were visiting our area and they needed an evening of Culture. With us. Those Commissars must have been low Comrades on the *clout* totem pole if they were to be billeted in our town. But even though they were not top Brass, they were Brass and the *first* Brass we had ever gotten. And the head of that group had a passion for *Don Quixote* (especially the Petipas version—old warhorse that it was) and had personally requested we do it. So Dimitri V decided that Yuri or no Yuri, *Don Quixote* had to go on. (Dimitri V wasn't an up-and-coming impresario for nothing.) Who to play Sancho Panza? One of the new girls from the corps de ballet piped up; said she knew I had the talent to do it. The girl's name was Elizaveta G. How she knew about my talent for character parts is a story in itself. Anyway, Dimitri was desperate and he asked the legendary Irina P, who was coaching us in the great roles and who I was fucking regularly, if she thought I could do it. "*We'll see,*" Irina said in a strange way ("*strange*" in hindsight, now that I know what I know). So Irina P threw me into rehearsal and I managed to learn the part in a few days. Nothing dazzling, in rehearsal; just serviceable. And *that* seemed to please Irina P ("*to please*" in hindsight—now that I know what I know). But when, during the performance, I made my entrance as Sancho Panza, the magic happened.

And my life changed.

XIII

You'll recall that in the prologue of *Don Quixote*, the Don is introduced as a man obsessed with chivalry and has a vision of the beautiful Dulcinea, the lady he'll pursue throughout that damned, long ballet. Sancho Panza runs in. He has stolen a goose and is being chased. The Don comes to Sancho's aid and, afterwards, makes Sancho his Squire.

So I make my entrance as Sancho. And I think I'm entering in the same buffoon/clown/mindless way I did during rehearsal. But, no! something comes over me. I, Sancho Panza, have not just stolen a goose because I am a silly clown and have been told by the choreographer that I am mischievous; no! I have stolen the goose because *I am hun-gry*. And I am *so* hungry that when they attempt to take the goose away from me, I fight them off and start biting into the dead bird that, suddenly, stops being papier machè and seems to become a real dead bird. And for a stage moment I am a *grotesque*; and, while there is laughter in the opera house at the grotesque, fat, heavily made-up little dancer, there is also that simple shock of recognition; a human being is starving and the audience gasps and reaches out to him (me); loves him (me) and so does the dancer por-

traying the Don. The dancer dancing the Don no longer is an obviously young dancer heavily made up as a silly old man suddenly saving, and employing as his personal Squire, a stage clown because that is the story line and that is what the Don/dancer has been told to do—No!—The Don/dancer has caught my reality and is suddenly a really old human being, reaching out to save and employ as Squire another real, starving human being. Humanity link. In addition, when I make my entrance, I make it a bit sooner and see the last seconds of the Dulcinea vision that the Don sees. Or *think* I see the vision. I can't be sure. But I *am* sure that I am in the presence of an important moment between the Don and his vision; some vision—which I respect—and the Don/dancer sees that I see (or sense and respect) his vision, and another deep connection is made between the Don and Sancho (me). *And the audience*. And so, without thinking, but just doing, the deep, mystical and human link is established in a very short while, and lays a realistic foundation for the rest of the piece. And it is I, apparently, who made that possible.

XIV

It was Elizaveta G who describes to me what I did. For, again, I did not know I was doing it when I did it. And it was Elizaveta G, the new girl in the corps de ballet, who told Dimitri V that I had the talent to play the part. And Elizaveta G knew of this talent because of the unusual way I got to fuck her.

XV

There are some ballerinas who are “so pretty, so sweet, so vulnerable, so fragile, so shy, so porcelain, so scrubbed, so tiny breasted, so long legged, so tiny buttocked; so ready to blush, to cover their ears at a reprimand of themselves or at others or at an obscenity; so breathless; so untemperamental; so decent and honest; so ready to listen and not to say; so rarely hungry; so full of prettiness and fairness and sadness and longing,” that one wanted to hold, to protect that purity, naked in one's arms, forever. Elizaveta G was such a ballerina.

XVI

When Elizaveta entered the company I was still just an uninspired dancer who stayed on because, finally, I was the only male dancer who would fuck our legendary teacher, Irina P, the former Ballerina Assoluta and holder of a samovar full of Soviet awards and honors.

Irina P—an institution, a powerhouse on all the national cultural committees—had enough points with the powers-that-be (including, it was rumored, “*old Frankenstein himself*”—that's what we used to call Brezhnev—remember him? —“*Frankenstein*,” because of the robot way he walked and because of his frozen face and flat head); enough points to choose whatever company and school Irina P wished to spend her phased-out dance life with. She chose to return to her hometown, which was the town where our ballet company was growing—muscle, one might say, her way into our company. And made it very clear that she was “*to be serviced*”—as she put it (and we all knew what

that meant)—from time to time, by one of our male dancers. Dimitri V held a meeting with all the boys of the company to deal with the “*Irina problem.*” Most wouldn’t “do it” with an older woman. Some just couldn’t “do it” to a legend. Of course, I volunteer.

I “do it” with anything.

And I had never had an older woman. But I felt an older woman would know new tricks, or that the old tricks would be—how shall I say it—more comfortable; *securely agile*. Also, I was sure there would be fewer games or no games at all. To the older, experienced woman, what was important, I thought, was to get down to it. Essentially, with Irina P, that was the case. But it didn’t turn out to be as all jolly as I thought it would be. For one thing, Irina P generally wanted it the usual way, with me on top. Oh, she didn’t mind me “*servicing her that other way*” on occasion (by that she meant, going down on her), but most of the time it would be the usual *bang, bang* and that was that. And never, never would she go down on me. That was “*doing the American vice*” and she would have none of that. According to Irina, most American ballerinas performed better on their knees than on their toes. And for another thing, and as usual, there was the talk; usually about Irina’s past conquests with bigwigs or heroes or celebrities who she would belittle. She was above politics and patriotism and taking anyone seriously, and would use them all for what she could get out of them.

On other occasions she would zero in on *me*— and talk!

“Listen, you little turd,” she’d say to me affectionately, “I know that fornication is all that is on your mind and that shoving your *baton d’amour* up my experienced *caverne de luxure* ...”

(She always used French words for *pecker* and *pussy*; though, delightfully, she’d also use a word like *shove*, too)

“...is all you care about and, at my age and for my needs, that’s okay. But there is something defective about you and—but, wait—nibble on my ear while I lecture you.”

(That’s another thing I liked about Irina P. She took command. While the fucking repertoire was small, she told me what she wanted. That got me hot. Gets most men hot I imagine; women taking charge.)

“This afternoon,” said Irina P, while I nibbled on her ear, “I judge the new girls for the corps de ballet. I will be at the large desk. I want you under the desk and, while I judge, you will service me. And be good. I will be judging *your* performance, as well.”

So that very day, while I was under the desk, I paused because my neck got a cramp and the tip of my nose got a burn. In the pause I looked out through a chink in the wooden desk and saw Elizaveta auditioning.

XVII

A week later I took Elizaveta to see the latest art show in town. The show was of all Japanese paintings and prints. This friend of mine was in charge of the art show and had a collection of erotic prints in the back of the gallery; you know, those fancy pictures of Japanese royalty in amazing postures and

costumes and colors and oversized peckers and pussies. Elizaveta looked at the prints and started to cry.

"You're offended," I said.

"No, no!" she said, "I'm not offended—and please don't feel guilty. Those prints are charming and lovely; elegant, really. My crying had everything to do with them, but not in the way you think. No, they didn't offend me. In fact, they pleased me and excited me."

That's all I needed to know. I took her back to the studio at the school. Where else could I go? I couldn't take her back to Irina's place; and I couldn't take her home. I hadn't been home for some weeks, but I was sure my father would be there, probably with some woman. As soon as he saw Elizaveta, I knew Papa would want her, too. If Papa wasn't at home, Vahktang would undoubtedly be there and that would be just as difficult. We were identical twins, remember, and that would probably confuse Elizaveta. For another thing, Vahktang had nowhere to go; no friends to go to. Oh, he would offer to go out, but that meant he'd have to walk the streets and he knew I'd feel guilty, and I was damned if I was going to let Vahktang make me feel guilty. Also, Vahktang might very well see Elizaveta as a grape and might try to squash her head in his armpit. So I took Elizaveta to the studio because I had a key from Irina P and there were cots there, and when we got there I immediately set up a cot in the center of the room and steered Elizaveta to it.

"No, don't," she said. "I know your reputation and I knew you'd try to make love to me. But you can't."

"Of course I can. You say you know my reputation; you allow me to take you here; we are alone in a studio lined with mirrors on all four sides," (one of the mirrors was a door) "and a ceiling made of mirrors, and I've made a cot all nice and ready for us in the center of the room."

"No. You don't understand," she said. "I like you—quite a bit; that's why I'm here; but it is not possible for you to make love to me. You see—" she paused, then blurted,—"I am too small!"

(Then, in a stage whisper)

"Down below!"

And she began to cry.

"No one has ever been able to enter me," she said through her tears.

I didn't know what to say or do, but I was thinking.

"Oh," she said, still crying, "I see you don't know what to say or do, but I can see you are still thinking. Well, I can save you time. Many have tried to enter me, and many I have wanted to enter me. For I have as much sexual appetite as any dancer. And I have never wanted to be different from the other ballerinas. And I saw, from the start, that all the work at the barre and all the sweat and the images of all the bodies in the mirror—arching, spinning, stretching, spreading and bending—but mostly, looking—made it all so sensual. Yes. Sensual. And I saw what it did to all my colleagues in whatever school or company I've been in. For I am not what I seem. Oh, I know that because I am so pretty, so sweet, so vulnerable, so tiny buttocked—" and she continued that list of attributes

about herself that I mentioned before. (That's why that section is in quotes. I was quoting Elizaveta.) "...that I seem so young. But I am not that young. I am just small and I have been in many companies and it is always the same. Because of the sensuality, everyone ends up making love. And do you know what I think is the major reason for that?"

I sat on the cot, fascinated, as she began to pace. Then she answered her own question.

"One's image in the mirror, *that* is what always leads to love making. Oh, not the image of one's partner, but the image of *oneself*."

And as she talked she used the time to practice her *pliés, stretches, positions, port de bras*, so that what she said became part of an exercise.

"I have heard," she continued, "that an American choreographer has made a ballet of *The Afternoon of a Faun*, and it is not at all like the Nijinski ballet that we know. The setting is a ballet practice room. Like this one. Only smaller. There, two dancers, a boy and a girl, look in the mirrors and enjoy their own images. And they never stop looking. They look while they are practicing. They keep looking when they discover each other; when they become lovers. Always, all the events are always viewed through the mirrors. And what is being viewed is not the partner, but the one *looking*. It is all about oneself, you see, and that is what makes the sensuality. And I don't know if the man who made that dance approves or does not approve of always looking at yourself; but I approve. Because, one way or the other, finding oneself sensual always leads to making love to others. But not for me. Oh, the sensuality happens; but not the act of making love. For I am too small."

(*Stage whisper*)

"Down below."

(*Normal voice*)

"And when, after the workout and the solo viewing and the sensuality has made a partner *want* to enter me... he never can. —Oh! Once! Once I *thought* it would work. It was after a heavy workout. I was so lost in myself, in the wonderful waves of feeling moving through my body, that I kept working, looking at myself in the mirror, even after everyone left. Soon, I, too, decided to stop. And while I was changing in the changing room, I looked at my naked self in the mirror there, all glistening from the sweat, and I knew I hadn't finished and I leapt out onto the studio again and danced alone; furiously; freely; and let the dance come out of my feelings. And the sight of my little self, responding to a delicious inner whip in me, made me *want* to be made love to.

But suddenly my legs cramped and, at the same time, I noticed in the mirror that a man was looking at himself; one of the dancers in the class, who had returned. And I flew to him and said, as I have often seen others say to dancers waiting in the wings when they come offstage all cramped, 'Hold my legs! Please!' And he included my naked self in his viewing of *himself* in the mirror and I did a handstand. And he understood. And he held my naked legs so that the blood would run quickly to my head. And I opened my legs and he looked straight ahead at himself in the mirror over the V of my body and, never tak-

ing his eyes from his own mirrored reflection, he bent his head and I felt his tongue on my flesh. And my inner being was so open, that I was sure, finally, that I would open there, too. But no; I stayed glued shut; still. And he kept stabbing and trying; trying and stabbing with his tongue; and tried so hard that he stopped looking at *himself* in the mirror. Alas! And he got angry and not only left me, but pushed me over as he left; and my body got bruised, and my soul got bruised, and I am bruised still; still to the soul and—”

She would have continued on and on but I had thought it out and I leapt up from the cot and into a demi-plié and executed a brilliant tour en l'air and landed in front of Elizaveta, facing her; did a deep plié in second position and, holding that position, roared:

“*THE DANCE OF THE ARTIST, THE MAIDEN AND THE MAGICAL CRIMSON CLOTH!*”

XVIII

If I am to save this girl, if I am to open her up, I know I *must* create a ballet. And once the *need* to make a ballet drops in, that becomes the overwhelming need for me; more overwhelming, even, than the need to open up Elizaveta. So I talk it out loud—my ballet. And I quickly get lost in it as I talk. And Elizaveta gets lost in *me* getting lost in *it*— makes the imaginative leap with me, into my ballet. And she moves into a corner, waiting, until the moment when I can create a proper entrance for her.

And we are so *totally* lost in my ballet that neither Elizaveta nor I realize that someone else—a third party—has entered the studio; an intruder, a voyeur (enemy? friend?), who observes me creating my creation and the attempt to open up Elizaveta.

And my need is so intense that I talk it out loud—this ballet I create—and I transform the studio of mirrors into a magical, oriental, place—a space filled with shoji screens. Then I take off all my clothes and I tell and dance the tale of an oriental artist in an oriental country—an artist who has been stripped of all garments. But my nakedness is covered by a long, thick, knotted white rope; a girdle, knotted and entwined around my naked flesh, from my thighs to my shoulders. And my arms and hands are plastered to my sides, under the rope girdle.

But it is not the girdle that pains and enrages me; it is the fact that I cannot paint any longer. And I roll on the ground and leap into the air as best I can. I even describe the kind of rapid flute music and scherzo rhythm that accompanies it all along with the blue/green light that bathes the scene and the solo spotlight that follows my tortured dance. And when I am exhausted and drop to the floor, an image of moving clouds appears on the shoji screens and a celestial voice sing-chants that “You cannot paint because you have ceased to use human figures in your latest paintings.” Exhausted and prone on my back from the floor, I sing-chant back: “Yes, it is true; of late, human figures have become irrelevant to me; but give me back my skills, and I will paint in human beings again.” “It is too late,” the celestial voice sing-chants back, “your painting life is over. But

because you once so beautifully told life's story, your skill will return and you will paint one final masterpiece—with just *one* magnificent human figure—then you will die. But listen: that one figure, of course, will live forever; so, if you paint *yourself* into that picture, then *you* will live forever.”

And from the sky a very large and very long and very wide crimson shiny silk cloth floats down. When it lands I hop on to it and the knotted rope-girdle falls away and my naked body is no longer bound.

And the orchestra EXPLODES as I leap into the air and the music becomes a sparkle of notes, thousands of notes, and I jump and leap and roll on the magical crimson silk cloth and I get to my feet and begin to paint on the shoji screens.

And I am the Master Artist again and the strokes are quick and staccato and the music is quick and staccato, too. And I am happy. Because the painting I am painting keeps flowing from my brush and no matter how far, fast, high I leap, spin, jump, I always return to the magical crimson silk cloth and I feel that soon the human figure—I—will emerge from the tip of my brush.

But the music CRASHES and becomes an ominous chord. And a SEVEN-FOOT PUPPET appears—with a green and white kimono and THE HEAD OF A VULTURE. Then the music *crashes* again and another giant puppet, leaps in over the screens. And this puppet is an AMAZON WOMAN PUPPET with huge breasts and a huge puppet ass and an enormous amount of crotch hair. And the head of this Amazon is THE HEAD OF A DRAGON! And as soon as this—AMADRAGZON—makes her entrance, the dissonant music turns into a lovely romantic melody and the AMADRAGZON begins to dance—a supplicating lyrical dance, and the music is lyrical, and I am puzzled, because I do not know what she wants.

(And is this the point where the intruder intrudes into the dance studio and observes? From what I'm soon to learn, I'm certain it is.)

Then the VULTURE-PUPPET sing-speaks the following:

“I am *The Authority* and I have been bewitched. She is my daughter and is also under the spell. And we have heard that *you*, Master Artist, can see inside the dolls we have become and can paint us what we *were* before and, therefore, make us “*us*” again. And she, my daughter with her simple heart, begs you to paint “*us*” as we were. But I, who am not used to begging, *ORDER* you to paint “*us*” as we were!”

And the VULTURE-PUPPET AUTHORITY still stands between me and the magical crimson cloth, and before I can get to it, and without thinking about the consequences of what I'm about to say, I sing-speak:” But I can only paint one, one figure who will live forever in that scene. And *I* had planned to be the one who—

“NEVER!” roars the VULTURE-PUPPET AUTHORITY, and he threatens me and I am away from my magical crimson cloth and I am frightened and sing-chant, “I'll paint you!” But in an aside I also say, “When I get to the magical crimson cloth, I'll paint myself with such swift strokes that before the VULTURE-PUPPET AUTHORITY can harm me, I'll be imaged forever in my scene.”

But before I can get to the magical crimson cloth the AMADRAGZON *stands on it!* And suddenly, behind her, through the shoji screens, a beautiful, slight, lovely woman materializes. And the music is the lyrical theme the AMADRAGZON danced before and the beautiful image is a naked Elizaveta!—seen dimly through the shoji screens.

All slow white turns, Elizaveta dimly does; and feather lifts and rapturous backward runs, Elizaveta dimly does. And I cry out: “This, you AMADRAGZON, is the image of who you really are! And I love that image and, therefore, I love you; so *you* can live forever in my final work of art! Even though I die instead!”

And I pick up part of the magical crimson cloth of silk, throw it over the AMADRAGZON, stand on another part of the magic cloth and I begin to paint.

And the music is all frenzy and once again *The Authority* screams: “No! Paint *me* and let *me* live forever!”

But I keep painting in a fever, and the image in the shoji screen glows and glows and glows and the AMADRAGZON and the VULTURE-PUPPET squirm and sway and then—when the violins hit the roof—a puff of smoke! Flashing lights! And the giant puppets disappear. And a naked Elizaveta LEAPS through the screens and I give up my part of the crimson cloth and give it all to *her*:

And she wraps herself in the crimson cloth and the music swells and a wind comes up and Elizaveta is all billowing crimson now; fluttering and trailing and opening and closing until all that one sees is the folding and unfolding crimson silk cloth and, once in awhile, a glimpse of the white, white Elizaveta at the center of the crimson folds. And, with the undulating music, she undulates toward me; and the outer wisps of crimson touch me and I reach out and I feel the flapping silk cloth and let it pull me in; entangle me in its crimson folds, so smooth I slip on back and in, and know I’m slipping to my death; sacrificing myself for someone else.

But my ballet doesn’t get a chance to end. For, at the moment when the violins scream and I am being sucked into the center of the crimson folds—a voice, a woman’s voice, Elizaveta’s voice, sings out and over everything:

“Anton! Anton! I’m open! I’m open! You’ve entered me!”

And the music *crashes!* And I crash out of my ballet world and the studio returns. And, yes, it *is* true. I am in the center of the studio floor, on my back. Elizaveta is on top of me and, yes! —*I am in her!*

And even though I’m giddy and light-headed and things are somewhat blurred and I don’t feel a thing, I know it is true; *I am* in her because I see it all vaguely blurred in the studio mirrors. The naked, white, white Elizaveta is riding me and her arms are stretched out to the sky:

“And look, Anton! With no hands!”

Yes! With no hands! So securely are we locked, she doesn’t need her hands! Her arms shoot up to the mirrored ceiling and she rides and rides!

And I have saved Elizaveta!

And I have created my FIRST BALLET!

And the intruder has seen it all!

XIX

“You fornicated her, you little turd! I saw it! I was there, hiding, when you made up that ballet and you fornicated Elizaveta G in the center of the studio so that all the mirrors could see!”

It was a week later at Irina P's apartment, and a few hours after my triumph as Sancho Panza. The last guests had just left the party Irina had given for me on the spur of the moment. She was at the door saying goodbye to the last guest.

I was standing behind her with my arms around her waist, peeking out to the side of her. And I was smiling and I was drunk, drunk from adulation and from vodka. And I'm echoing Irina's goodbyes to all the well-wishers when, suddenly, Irina—who had been the sweetest she's ever been to me *during* the party—pushed me back into the flat, slammed the door shut and screamed:

“You fornicated her, you little turd! I saw it! I was there! Hiding...!”

She started toward me and stepped on a glass plate with left over potato salad that was left in the center of the floor. She slipped and sat down hard on her ass. I started to laugh. She started to weep. I stopped laughing and went to her. She allowed me to help her to her feet. Once on her feet she pushed me aside and moved to an end table, picked up a box of little black cigarettes she liked to smoke, took one out of the box and put it in her mouth. Then she picked up a box of matches, took out a match and tried to strike it. Her hand shook. I took the match and match box from her. She let me. I lit her black cigarette. She sat down on the couch.

Silence.

And suddenly I was aware of the room. I had been there many times before, of course, and had recently been living there (on and off), but I had never really seen it. I never see my surroundings, really; the details. I never really see the women I fuck, either. The week before, I became aware of *that* fact when I fucked Elizaveta in the studio. At the end, when she opened to me, when her pleasure was so intense it became painful, I noticed her. (Oh, not a physical pain; “*The pleasure,*” she said, “*was not a physical pain,*” but, apparently, some inner, newer, deeper pain that had brought her joy, “*permanently,*” she thought. And she was happy about it. Which seemed strange to me. How can one get joy from pain?) So I saw the shift in Elizaveta—from pleasure to pain—and the pleasure, from then on, mixed *with* the pain. And then, I also saw, for the first time, that Elizaveta had freckles all over her face. And one eye tended, ever so slightly, to wander. And her teeth were white and even; *except* for one tooth—just one—in the front, slightly pushed out in front of the others.

And also, for the first time, I “*saw*” Irina's apartment. Irina was one of the lucky ones. She had a bedroom *and* a living room *and* a small kitchen *and* her own bathroom. We were in the living room and it was filled with the after-effects of the party, but also with plants and flowers and many photographs of her past performances in ballets; startling moments when time stopped and Irina was caught in some movement—flight, turns, leaps. And each frozen move

was perfect, textbook perfect, astonishingly perfect: Irina as Giselle. Irina as Esmeralda. Irina in *The Flame of Paris*, in *The Hump Backed House*, in *Swan Lake*, in *Chopiniana*; and, mostly, Irina as Juliet and Cinderella.

There were many books. That really surprised me. I wonder why? There was very little furniture, most of it of the heavy, stuffed kind, so that the room *seemed* full.

But the eye immediately moved to a nook with a long oval mirror. And all around the mirror were more photographs: Irina, with all the top leaders of our country, even with the *Mad Asshole*. In that photo, Irina is part of the children's corps de ballet in *The Nutcracker* and the *Mad Asshole* is smiling at all the children and cupping the face of one little girl—Irina, with the same face then as now. Also, there is a progression of photos leading to the present; in each, Irina is being honored.

And there were medals pinned to the wallpaper, and trophies on little shelves; and a composite photograph of small medals, as well as real ribbons, also pinned to the wallpaper.

And none of it suggested someone who had laughed at all the official nonsense (as Irina always boasted she had). No. That wall was a wall that wallowed in all that official crap.

Standing in front of the long oval mirror was a pedestal and on it, in profile, was the sculpture of the beautiful head of Galina Ulanova—the great, great, great Soviet ballerina. And all this, I swear, I saw—really saw—for the first time.

“I am a has been.”

Irina looked straight ahead as she talked, and smoked her little black cigarette.

“I am a once was. I teach others to make the art I once made. I am not an old woman, but I am too old to do my art well. And I need to fornicate younger men and to be around art and artists. And I find you and then I discover that you have a monumental talent and I never knew it, never guessed it, never expected it. I return to the dance studio one night last week and I stumble upon an orgy of creativity and the fornicating of a girl who, until that moment, had always had a closed *centre de jambeaux* and who, because of the power and brilliance of *your* art, ‘*opens up*’ like a chasm. I open up one of the mirror doors—just a crack—and *I cannot believe my eyes!* Or my ears! She is screaming that she is out of a Japanese print—yes! And that your—and here she becomes unbelievably vulgar—that your ‘*tree-cock has blasted her open!*’—But yet you are fornicating ‘*elegantly*’—yes! ‘*Elegantly!*’—that’s her word; that skinny, young, animal-in-heat!—‘*Elegantly! As in a Japanese print,*’ she says.

“All that because my little turd—one of the great fornicators of all time—is also a great artist! And I am in such a state that I reel home and wonder if I actually had witnessed what I had witnessed.

Then, just a few days later, this same Elizaveta G suggests to our Impresario Dimitri V that you are capable of taking over Yuri P’s place in *Don Quixote*. ‘Yes, yes, yes!’, I think to myself, I will test what must have been a mirage! I will coach you myself in the role of Sancho Panza and I will see for myself if

you have the talent I thought I saw when you fornicated that young girl in the studio. You and I work together and you show me—nothing! Just clumsy attempts at character dancing, and I breathe a sigh of relief. I had not been wrong! You are nothing but a mediocre dancer and a monumental fornicator!

“But during the performance—ah! *During* the performance you cast a spell over everything, everyone on stage, and you *become* the role and the role *becomes* you. No! It is not a role any longer; it is larger than a role; larger than LIFE!; an embodiment of the character; a transcendent—what?!—Oh, I don’t know. I just don’t know how to describe it and—

“Irina!” I interrupted, “I don’t know how I did what I did tonight. I don’t know how I did what I did with Elizaveta in the studio the other night. And I don’t know what difference it all should make.”

“*THIS* is the difference! Before, you were nobody. Now you are a Master Artist of the Soviet Union. Or can become one. And I didn’t realize that—didn’t *realize!* And not only did you create an entire ballet in that studio for that girl—a ballet of enormous interest and individuality—but you also had the audacity to use puppets—and *speech; AND YOU PULLED IT OFF!*—So you *don’t* know what you do—*BUT YOU DO IT!*

“So what—?” I asked.

And her response shot out—“So you possess what I never possessed! And *that* is what is killing me!”

She sat again and again there was a long silence.

Then Irina P spoke again:

“They called me a great artist. I was decorated and honored and admired because I was a great artist. And I was. But do you know what kind of an artist I really was? I was a technical marvel; a precision machine; *that* kind of an artist. And I was the best ballet *machine artist* my country had ever produced. I was decorated and honored and admired. Never loved. And rightly so. One does not love a machine. One loves—”

And Irina stood and moved to the pedestal in front of the long oval mirror in the nook of medals and ribbons. She timidly placed her hands on the face of the bust of Galina Ulanova and gently traced the features and said softly:

“One loves *her*. Why? *Why?*” She paused to find the answer. She found it quickly. “Because Galina Ulanova was more than a technical machine. She had a center and that center was—oh, I don’t know! ...Radiant

... That glow beyond itself; that glow that warmed everyone who saw her; man, woman and child—yes, even children she warmed with that glow; *embraced* with that glow. While I, I embraced no one.” Then Irina turned to me. “But you—you, Anton—you did tonight; you *embraced* them all.”

And she broke off and wept softly, but with many tears.

And *that’s* when I first saw Irina *whole*. Oh, not actually *saw*.

I knew her body, of course; still stretched, a bit longer than mine, in fact, but beginning to go to chunk. Fleeshy; the breasts heavier since she stopped dancing regularly (no breasts at all in her photos); the more oval, fleshy face (not the sunken cheeks and high cheekbones of the photos); the still golden hair, with

just traces of grey, pinned up now in a round braid behind her head; the slow but sure returning to the peasant stock she came from.

All *that*, I had always seen.

But what I had never seen before was that thing—in the eyes. Of course there were sadness and confusion and hurt and hysteria in them, but beneath all that—deep, deep, deep in the eyes, there was...—I still couldn't name it. But I was about to.

Irina stopped crying.

"Listen, Anton, we must talk."

She moved to me and took me by the hands and led me to the couch and sat me down next to her.

"You are a natural treasure; a rare talent; a genius, perhaps. I have done many wicked things and I have been selfish in satisfying my degenerate desires with you. But that was when you were nothing but a little turd. Now you are a Master Artist and, whatever else I am or am not, I am proud of my country's achievements. I *am* patriotic, as you know—"

(I was beginning to know)

"—And I know how important it is to develop rare talents to keep us at the forefront of the artistic world and—"

"Irina! Please!"

I pulled away and stood up and paced.

"Stop talking like a propaganda leaflet. I am a turd, nothing but a *turd* and fornicator and I tell you I don't know what it is I've done. And if I don't know what it is I *do*, how can I be an artist? How can I be important? And patriotism had nothing to do with it! And because we fucked does not mean your desires are degenerate and—"

"Anton! Rathjib was here tonight! That means I am right!"

I stopped pacing.

"Rathjib?" Who is Rathjib?"

"That tall man. The one in the evening dress. The distinguished man with the silver hair. The one who stood in the corner there, observing you—the one who drank nothing but fruit juice and smoked a pipe with perfumed tobacco."

"Not perfume," I said, remembering. "Spice, some kind of sweet spice. Like cinnamon. Yes. The same man who was in the wings when Sancho Panza came offstage and smiled at me as I passed him. Yes. The man who was here at the party. Looking at me. Always looking at me. He never talked to me."

"Rathjib," Irina said, "he's the police. Defection Division. It's his job to smell out a star in the making. Then he observes the artist. It is his job to make sure the artist never defects."

"Defects? What are you talking about? I have nothing to do with politics. I fuck! I fuck! And all I want to do is fuck!"

Irina rose and she began to pace.

"I see it all clearly now. I was angry with you because Rathjib appeared. You had brought him down on our heads. And now the company—*this* company on the rise—would be under surveillance again. Olga K, with her astonishing,

reckless *pas de poisson* and her even more reckless *conduit de plaisir*; and Sonya P, with her incredible springy legs and even more springy anal passage—those silly, talented ladies—both had passed the test of scrutiny they were under as rising stars, and Rathjib stayed away from the company. Suddenly there were you—there *is* you—and *because* there is you, there is Rathjib again. And so palpable is your performance that Rathjib hears of it. *Hears?* No! *Smells* it. He *smells* your sensational performance somewhere out in the city and is backstage at the opera house *before* the performance is over!

“Oh, I do, I *do* see it so clearly now. It is not an evil thing that you did, bringing Rathjib down on us; *it is a great honor*. When Rathjib singles out a company, that company is marked for greatness. Yes, yes, that’s what must have happened! Dimitri spotted Rathjib at the opera house and so Dimitri also knew his company was on the rise again. *BECAUSE OF YOU!* And he begs me to invite Rathjib here. How can I refuse? People like Rathjib always frighten me. Once here, Dimitri and Rathjib whisper and talk and look at you, all evening long.

“Oh yes, I *do* see clearly what must be done. No more fornicating, that’s certain. All your energies will be channeled to your art. We will repent our past indiscretions. And together we will work for the glory of our country. And all my technical brilliance I’ll transfer to you; support your genius and make you greater still.”

Then Irina stopped pacing. She looked at me, tilted her head back, took in a deep, deep breath through her nostrils and said,

“And you, Anton, you will transfer your genius to me. That’s right. To *me!* Or, at the least, you will use your genius to create works for me; for *my* age and for *my* talents. And they will be such wonderful works, I know, that they will make the public love me. Yes! The way they love Galina Ulanova. Yes! Your genius will insert the one ingredient in me that makes them love me—that will guarantee they love me. I have never tasted their love and I must, I must.”

She breaks off and is now standing in front of me. She grabs my hands, looks into my eyes with that unnamed look I still can’t quite name, and she says,

“And I must taste your genius, too. Yes, yes. I have never tasted you, Anton; your *essence d’amour*. And it is time I do. For, while I must forego, as atonement, my absorbing you through my abysse d’estase; absorb you—your genius—I *must*. Yes! Before we embark on our holy crusade to resurrect my creativity and to make me loved, I will have to taste your genius from your *baguette de sensuel*. And the only way to taste that genius is through my *bouche de plaisir*. Yes, yes, my *bouche*; through the taste buds of my *bouche*.”

And she continues talking as she pulls me back and over to the couch and sits and faces me. But I can’t make out any longer what she’s saying because I keep looking down at those eyes that look up at me even as she unzips me and those eyes close out the words and even when she has me in her mouth she keeps on talking and looking up and I have to look away. I’m a Scorpio and never, never, never have I *not* been able to get hard. But even looking away I see those eyes and she keeps on talking anyway even with her mouth full and I become frightened because *IT WON’T GET HARD!* And because suddenly I

understand the thing in Irina's eyes I never saw before:

Madness!

Deep in the light green of her eyes, beneath the new religious dedication and the old horny needs *is* and *was*, *was* and *is*—*madness!* And there is a further shock; that I've seen that look—that madness—before. In Elizaveta G. In Olga K. In Sonya P. And in the others, all the other women I've had; and even in the eyes of a mother whose eyes I only saw in faded photos.

MADNESS!

And madness was now talking with a mouthful of soft cock, and those mad, mad eyes kept rolling up at me.

And I panic. I pull away and I try to zip up so that I can get out of there. And in my haste, I back up into the medals-and-trophies nook and into the pedestal!

And the bust of Galina Ulanova falls over!

Irina screams and the bust hits the floor!

And Galina's head breaks from the shoulders!

Irina gets to her feet and rushes to Galina's head and picks it up, crying and making sounds—*whimpers*—as I back up to the door and keep trying to zip up, and I do open the door, but my zipper stays stuck. I run into the hall and down the stairs, trying to pull up my zipper all the while. And Irina, who clutches the head of Galina Ulanova to her chest, stumbles after me and out to the hallway and shouts down the stairs—

“Never mind, my genius! My darling genius! You will create great masterpieces for me, and a great bust of *my* head will be made, and the love everyone feels for me will be in that head! And that head, my head, will be on my pedestal! Anton! Tomorrow! Tomorrow! I'll taste your genius tomorrow, in the studio! So that all the mirrors can see! Antooooooooooooon—!”

But I am out of range—of her, her hallway; of her apartment house—but not out of range of her eyes, those mad eyes that managed to keep me soft. And as I run, I keep trying to zip up, and I keep imagining I see a tall man with silver hair in evening dress waiting for me under every street lamp. And although he never stops me, he blows the smoke from his perfumed pipe into my face as I pass, and the sweet cinnamon smell stays in a moving cloud over me, and I give up on the zipper and I just keep running —*and I am afraid.*

But, even in my fear, I step outside what's happening and begin to see it all as a dance: the victim chased by demons, in and out of pools of light from street lamps in his own head—*my* head. And the music is strong and galloping and the setting is all gossamer see-through stuff on a black, black endless stage, and the stage gets filled with cinnamon smoke, and a thousand eyes appear through the gossamer see-through stuff and onto the distant sky, but, instead of collapsing into the arms of a beautiful ballerina so that the hero—*I*—can exorcise my fears in a lyrical pas de deux, I arrive at my father's apartment house and the phantoms and the perfumed cloud do finally leave me. But my zipper stays stuck still and, in a kind of fever, I pull myself up the stairs to my father's apartment, and to a confrontation with a father, a twin brother, and a scene of death.

XXI

"*The Satan! The Satan! See? See? Even at my death bed he comes with his fly open!*"

My father has seen me fall into the room and he screams and he pulls himself out of his covers and moves back against the mirror on the wall.

"Oh, dear God, don't let the Satan near me!"

My father is pulling the flannel nightgown over his head and he's all skin and bones. My twin brother Vahktang is nearest to him. But Vahktang doesn't move. There is a priest there, too, and he is shocked at my entrance. Frozen. The only thing I can think to say is,

"Papa, your *Willy* is showing, and I can see your ass in the mirror."

The priest claps his hand over his mouth. Actually, it's hard to tell if the priest has a mouth, he has so much beard. Papa uncovers his head and lets the flannel nightgown fall down over his legs. But he still stays half kneeling on his pillow and continues to hug the wall. "See! See!" says Papa, "My son Anton is only concerned with *my privates!*"

"Papa, " I say (and you must remember I am not thinking clearly. I am acting on reflex.) "Papa, you never called them *privates* before."

"See! He wants to turn the tables; blame me for the corruption of my soul!" shrieks my father. At least I think he's shrieking. The voice is so hoarse and there's so very little volume that I can't be sure. And he hugs my twin brother Vahktang and, as he does so, papa knocks the mirror off the wall and it shatters on the floor at Vahktang's feet.

"Oh, Vahktang my son—my true son—you are right! *I am a sinner—was a sinner. I admit it! I lost my way. But he, he, the sex-Satan—he saw to it that I stayed lost. Depravity! Disgusting excesses! Sex! Sex! That's all he ever thinks about! And—Oh! Look! I'M HARD! See how he affects me! I'VE GONE HARD!*"

This is all too much for the priest. He seems to want to run—or something—because he looks around the room in a wild manner. And suddenly he grabs the newspapers on the table and gets on his knees and using one part of the newspaper as a shovel and the other part as a scoop, he tries to scoop the broken bits of mirror into the newspaper-shovel, while papa keeps on talking.

"I've gone hard! I'm a dying sinner and the sex-Satan enters and makes me get hard so that I'll die in a depraved condition!"

Of course Papa is *not* hard, but he starts hitting at himself.

"Get down! Get down! —Oh my God! Maybe the stiffness of death has already begun and that's where it starts in *my* case! In the place that caused my soul to rot—the place he made me think my whole world *was!* Get down! Get down! Vahktang! Vahktang! It won't listen to me! Oh, please, please, please, Vahktang, promise me that when I die and when they are ready to shovel me into the oven, please—if it's still up, you talk to it. You are holy. It will listen to you. If not, then have it cut off! Please! I will not go into the furnace with it up! And please, please, Vahktang, get the sex-Satan out of this room!"

Then he turns to me, and screams (and the scream is in the face, not in the actual voice; there is hardly any voice left, just air, screaming air, nothing more).

“Out! Out! Out!”

Vahktang untangles Papa’s arms, lays him back onto the bed, steps over the priest (still busy scooping up the splinters of mirror into the newspaper shovel), takes me by the arm, turns me and guides me out the door into the hallway, and closes the door behind him.

There is a fixture on the wall with a yellow electric bulb in the shape of a flame. And I notice for the first time that there is a filament or something in the bulb that makes the bulb flicker (was it always there, that flicker?). Vahktang stands in such a position that the light flickers on his face; which is also my face.

Vahktang says: “Two weeks ago the doctor sent Papa to the hospital. Papa had a lump in his testicles. Cancer. Too far gone. Nothing to be done. Works very fast. I told him the truth. Told him he was going to die. Further, I told him it was just, his being stricken in the testicles, because of the kind of life he’s led. It took me three days to turn him toward God. You never came home. I didn’t know where you were, where you were sleeping these nights. So I left word with the ballet company. Papa is about gone. As you can see.”

I count the light flicks on Vahktang’s (my) face before I say anything. Ten flicks.

“Vahktang. I never made Papa do anything he didn’t want to do. He’d invite me to tag along. It’s true I went. And we had fun. I thought.”

Twenty flicks.

“Vahktang, aren’t you frightened? Having a priest here? You can be certain it will be noticed. The authorities will notice you brought a priest here.”

Thirty five flicks.

“Vahktang. I had a great success tonight. As Sancho Panza. In the ballet *Don Quixote*. Do you think Papa would like to hear about it before he dies?”

Forty flicks. Vahktang doesn’t answer.

“Vahktang. It’s awful. Where did Papa’s face go? All I see is the skull.”

Then Vahktang moves to me. He reaches out and, without any trouble at all, he pulls the zipper up on my fly. Then he takes my (his) face in his hands and kisses me (him) on the mouth. Then he steps back and opens the door. But before he goes in, he turns his head and for the first time in his life (and mine) he smiles at me and says,

“Anton. Never return.”

XXII

And in the corridor—the train’s corridor—on our way to Prague (God knows how far out from Warsaw we were), I thought of papa with his non-existent hard-on going into the flames. Not that I actually was in the crematorium when Papa was cremated. I had obeyed Vahktang’s order to stay away—guilt, I guess. But I had hid behind a tree across from the crematorium and looked up at the smoke leaving the chimney and there made my goodbyes to Papa’s puff.

But Papa entered my mind for just a moment in the train’s corridor. What

crowded my mind, made my face flush, made me feverish, in fact, was my decision to defect. And it was the same kind of fever I'd catch just before going onstage; just before facing the danger of *play acting*. And the decision to play out the drama of defection had so crowded my thoughts that I never did come when I was fucking the up-and-coming "great" ballerina Olga K. But *she* came; time and time again. I took her from behind, on her back, on her side—you name it, and with each turn—BANG! For Olga K. There was even a moment when Dimitri and his lover Sergei raised themselves for a moment, saw our performance, applauded, and still drunk from the vodka dropped back down. Finally, after all those *bangs*, Olga fell off to sleep.

But I stopped thinking about Olga K and the V Ballet company and Vahktang and Elizaveta G and Irina P and I thought, instead, of plans and disguises, all kinds of disguises. Each image or each plan and disguise almost immediately set off a scenario for escape in my head, and I got more and more excited, and I had the largest urge finally to get some relief—have my own *bang!*—before my balls turned blue.

So I headed for the toilet at the end of the corridor. But when I got there, the toilet door was locked. I was about to head for the toilet in one of the other cars when the train lurched and the toilet door suddenly opened out into the corridor and I faced the back of a man who was looking into the mirror over the sink.

He was tall. Distinguished. With silver hair. He had on a crimson silk robe and through the mirror I could see that he was wearing a white cravat and a white clown nose—a very long and crooked white nose. He saw me in the mirror and his eyes smiled and he said,

"Turnip nose."

Then he pulled the turnip nose, which was attached behind his ears by rubber bands, and the nose stretched away from his face. He let the nose snap back to his face. Then he pulled the nose up and let it sit on top of his head.

"Unicorn," he said in the mirror.

And laughed.

Then he took out a pipe from his robe and placed it in his mouth. He did not light it but I could still smell what was left of the spicy tobacco in the pipe. He kept laughing into the mirror, and when he turned he continued to laugh and he kept laughing as he bowed a bit and moved past me.

Needless to say, I lost my hard on.

It was Rathjib, of course.

END, PART ONE