

## We Absentees

First published in GSU Review, 2009

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Our palms are calloused from gripping the barre. We are not to do this, this gripping. We are to have a light touch. We! When police cars are screaming just outside and our feet refuse to whisper, wood on wood. We in our little pink shoes, our beautiful prisons. Our satin ribbons that cross and cross. We are made of these things.

We saw something in a painting that we thought we could possess. Degas' Ballet Rehearsal: its language of color, its language of light. A place in history, a leap that never lands, cellos playing, the end, and not a dry eye in the house. Compare these to the farting tour bus. Compare these to the homeless vets, sleeping on the sidewalk just outside the theater. They yearn to eat our expensive cakes with their bare hands. Let them come in! We are sugar-sick. We pose in droopy clusters about the stage, our arms draped around each other in saccharine embraces. George, the ballet master, says we look like lesbian cake decorations. This appalls and delights us.

No, one of us says. We are more like flat-chested Barbie dolls, all pointed toes and trick knees that lock and pop.

Yes, agrees another, with mock sadness, flat-chested Barbie dolls with no purple plastic Corvettes, no dream houses.

And we laugh. And when we pose in droopy clusters about the stage, sometimes our tiaras get hooked together and we become stuck like awkward antelopes in their

stubborn mating dance and we laugh about that, too.

We grip.

We are the silent chorus girls, the live stage scenery known as the corps de ballet. George refers to us as “corpses.” All right corpses, he says, look alive: from now on I’m going to call each of you Anne. That way, I can always get your attention and I won’t have to bother trying to keep track of your names. Now nod your heads so I can hear the rocks rattle.

We are living our dreams, and we are supposed to be happy. We do not know what this means. Don’t look at me, says one of the Annes. I’m only here because I couldn’t learn to play the violin.

We look at her anyway, because she is beautiful. This we can do: glitter.

Glitter has a sound: tiny drops on the floor, hairpins and sweat. Heavy breathing, someone is counting. We are not to do this, this counting. A muffled, “shit.” Wood on wood. During the snow scene, the tiny landings of the paper flakes, along with a stray M & M, maybe, swept up from the performance before. You can hear these things over the music, but only after the music becomes a backdrop, after the music has become too familiar to be a prayer.

And this is how we pack our accessories for the tour: this is our tube of hemorrhoid cream for our toes, it really does shrink the swelling. These are our false eyelashes, and these are our hair nets, strange furry looking creatures that like to escape from their packages and frighten the sackers at the grocery store. This is our Tiger Balm

(careful with the groin pull) and this is our pancake makeup. These are the pink sponge rollers and the handy wipes we cut up and stuff into our pointe shoes, each dancer with her own special technology; angora sweaters are not safe around us. This is our hotpot and this is our supply of cup-a-soup, zero grams of fat. And this, this is our container of magic tutu dust. Be careful not to let it get into your eyes, it hurts like hell.

We have waited our whole lives to dance with a company that is big enough to tour. We never stopped to think what it would be like to use the bus bathroom. We didn't realize we'd be headlining in towns with names like Sioux Falls and Pine Forks. This tour, our first stop is in Cedar Lake, Iowa. After the performance, we make a disco. We move all the furniture out of the motel room and onto the icy balcony. We make a tinfoil disco ball, screw blue light bulbs into the sockets, line the vanity counter with liquor bottles. We put the mattresses against the wall for slam dancing, and make everyone blow bubbles and get very drunk. This is not a good idea for those of us taking anti-depressants, but we don't feel we have a choice. It's Cedar Lake, for Chrissakes.

We are not what is printed on the backs of old program pages. As people we are completely broken, unless this is what it means to be human. One by one, we try to make a whole-hearted decision. We take turns doing this and doing that, trying to believe in fair chances. We muse about possibilities on the bus.

Sometimes I go to the laundromat just to be around normal people with a common goal, says Irene. What she means is that she likes to go to the laundromat that is also a bar, hoping to seduce a stranger with drip-dry leotards, one who will take her away from all this. Or, one of us will send away for application materials to physical therapy school,

or else teach plies to suburban children when we're not on tour, hoping to create a following. You never know when a following might come in handy.

The cities and towns all run together. The only memorable thing about Battle Creek, Michigan is the free cereal from the Kellogg Company, but no Apple Jacks. Mostly just Corn Pops, which hurt the roof of our mouths when we eat them dry on the bus. Fruit Loops do, too, but not as quickly as Corn Pops. They also give us Special K, which is the worst. Instant choke-age. We throw it in handfuls out the windows of the bus, watch it speed helplessly backward in the wind. The bus driver is not amused.

And yes, we can really do the splits and yes, we can really stand on our toes and yes, we really love it with all our hearts. And here are some other things we can do: this is an arabesque, and this is a fondu. This is a tour jete, and this is a frappe. We can taste the words on our hungry tongues and they are delicious. As victims of arrogant bodies that refuse to take direction, hunger is one of the few control devices we have. A fragile power, but thinness underscores our presence. We die if we are not seen.

In Paducah, Kentucky, which is predicted to be the epicenter of a large earthquake the night we are there, we have an earthquake party. We move the furniture out of the motel room and onto the icy balcony. We make everyone jump on the mattresses and repel off the walls and get very drunk. This is not a good idea for those of us who are scheduled to do the lecture demonstration at nine a.m. the next morning, but we don't feel we have a choice. Perhaps foolishness will bring on the earthquake. That would make a good story.

And here are our rules: No whistling in the dressing room, it's bad luck. No visible pubic or armpit hair, ever. Tights with seams down the back are more professional than those without, and only amateurs or men wear black ballet shoes. No eating garlic or onions before a partnering rehearsal. No calling in sick. No taking off your pointe shoes during rehearsal, no matter how much your toes sting, unless you have an official injury. Only a sloppy dancer would let the ends of her ribbons hang out; you must tuck them under the knot. When running offstage, keep moving past the wings or we will get backed up and some of us will be stuck onstage, keep going, keep going, you idiot.

In Worcester, Massachusetts, one of us pencils her eyebrows in a little differently than usual. It happens. One is in a funny mood, has had too much coffee. One's hand shakes a little, and suddenly her eyebrow is a little pointier than before. She draws in the other one to match. Result: Anne looks just different enough under the dim, blue lights of the snow scene to confuse everyone else during the tricky criss-cross pattern. There is a pile-up. We're still running to our places when the music stops. This is followed by a war in the dressing room, in which the offender faces an enraged crowd: what did you mean by drawing on your eyebrows so differently? Someone could have been killed!

Add this to the rules.

Some of us mean to change more than others. For example, Rebecca takes off for Canada in a snowstorm with her secret lover and dies suddenly in a plane crash. Now she comes to us in our dreams. We wish she would not do this. When she comes to us in our dreams, she smiles patronizingly and says, "It's better where I am." Dead ballerinas are creepy like that.

Or, Nora gets pregnant and doesn't know who the father is. Should she keep it? Keep it! Right now? And it's a wonder – who with? The goofy bassoonist? Everyone knows bassoon players are easy and weird. And when? Where? Like a slap in the face, we're reminded. Oh, that. *Life*.

Or, Kerry uses her parents' credit card to wear the latest thing from her favorite little Betsey Johnson shop on Boston's Newbury Street. She drinks a bottle of wine each night, then cries during the daily warm-up class. She sniffles through her pirouettes.

But no matter how depressed we get, none of us can quite let go to the point where we wouldn't sniff our snot back into our noses while we are performing turns. And only those of us who sneak down to the locker room to hold ourselves and sob like little fools know about the cleaning lady, who sings as she scrubs the toilets. We are envious of her joy, and we sob because secretly we know our problem is an ugly laziness. Part of us just doesn't want to have to try this hard. We would like to conquer our terror of eating butter. We want to be able to dunk our feet into the bathwater without worrying that our good callouses will go soft.

In Fayetteville, Arkansas, we take pictures of each other posing under the sign for the Swan Lake Mobile Home Park just off the highway. Then we go to the stadium, where we perform Romeo and Juliet on a very bad stage. People are buying beer and popcorn at the refreshment stand, and all along the walls are painted red boards and the words GO RAZORBACKS! Afterward, we have a big party in the motel where hardly anyone has a good time. We have a nine o'clock performance for school students the next

morning.

And George says: Juliet, pick up that poison bottle and drink from it. Juliet, fall on your bed. Have a sort of graceful spasm, no, not like that, like a delicate shudder. Don't forget to breathe. Are you breathing? No, not like that...Juliet, what are you doing? Juliet, do it again. Juliet, take five. Where's Romeo? Is he smoking again? Somebody go get Romeo, he's on the loading dock. Hurry up, please. OK, corpses, line up in order of intelligence – you, last. From the second phrase: five, six, seven, eight.

Juliet is real, and we watch from the sides of the makeshift stage. But Juliet is also Nora who got thrown in at the last minute because the real Juliette got food poisoning. Nora has just had an abortion on our day off in back in Massachusetts. She hasn't shaved her armpits or brushed her teeth but she's Juliet nevertheless, dying all over again in a delicate shudder we've seen a hundred times before. But this time is really moving and Nora is pale and shiny with sweat, go razorbacks.

In Wheeling, West Virginia, we get thrown out of the bar at the King's Lodge Motel, but the maids wash our tights for us. Kerry puts her face in the soup and we laugh, but she comes up crying. Everything tastes like dirt, she says, and she puts her face in the soup again. Then Nora, who has a dull salad, does the same. One by one, we all put our faces into our plates: corn, green beans, chicken. Even our director, who is crazy and fat and doesn't like us one little bit, bows his head and meditates into his beef Manhattan. Tour syndrome. It passes, but not until after you've been home and cooked your own bad food for awhile.

Sometimes, when we get back from tour, we cook onions just for the sake of

filling up our homes with a smell that is not lonely. We stir the onions while we hold  
someday in our hearts like souvenirs from lives not yet visited. We flirt with our futures.  
We slam doors. One of us gets her hair amputated. Job ads are circled. Then we reason,  
which we know is a stupid thing to do but we do it anyway. The bottom line is, we are  
lousy waitresses. We don't know how to do anything else but dance.

Back home in Chicago, George stops rehearsal to ask, Why are you doing this, for  
Chrissakes? At least ACT like you're not dancing to your deaths. You there, Anne, tell  
me, why the hell are you still dancing?

For the audience? she says.

Ha! What audience? says George.

I do it for the applause! says Irene.

That's not applause, that's the sound of people slapping each other's faces to  
wake each other up, says George. Corpses, look alive!

We laugh. One of us, the one who got her hair amputated, will have to buy a hair  
piece for Sleeping Beauty.

Maybe one day, one day in our thirties, after we've finished with a long and  
graceful career, we'll marry well and have two little girls with exotic names. We'll never  
look back and everyone will always call us "that ballerina" even though we haven't  
danced in years. And we'll wear black, and we'll wear hats well when other people just  
can't seem to pull it off and there's a garden and cheese blintzes. (Kerry tries this. She  
marries a snobby model from New York but she's back in two months.) Good God, what  
if we are incapable of love?



For awhile, everything goes as it is supposed to go and there is no party. We go to bed early and rehearse hard all day. We hate it when this happens. Some of us, usually the soloists, are normal people who take vitamins and don't smoke, read books from the bestseller lists and maybe have husbands. Especially the men, they're usually the ones with the husbands. Those of us who live this way are accomplices. Degas was a liar!

Isabelle, what are you talking about? Says Kerry. You think too much!

Nevermind.

It all began with the belief that we might learn how to fly. Sometimes we still believe this and yes, there are moments when we feel we are moved by a swirl of angels, but then we see the tutus hanging upside down on the back of the bus and they look like flying saucers from fou-fou land and I think, no, this is not what I meant.

Isabelle! whispers Irene. Wake up! George is talking to you.

...you can jump so well because you have a big butt, George is saying. Anne! Are you paying attention? People with big butts always jump well, it's a great power source. But you can't land like that, like an elephant, for crying out loud! Good God. From the jete. Five, six, seven, eight.

Flying is easy. It's the landing that's problematic. All this repetition, the daily grip, the plies, the shock of coming down so often and so hard, all amount to a kind of slow, chronic trauma. It compels people to do strange things, desperate things, secret things that pile up and create a kind of resistance, a substance that surrounds, through which it is impossible to move lightly. And through that substance, as if from a great distance, the questions stretch towards me: Isabelle, where have you been? Isabelle, why

didn't you take the warm up class? Isabelle, you've put on weight, do you think we're made of money and have the time to let your costume out? Isabelle, why did you call in sick yesterday – Kerry saw you at the Pair-a-Dice last night, drinking beer and dancing with an old man in a kilt. Isabelle, do you think you could be bothered to put down your book and join us for rehearsal?

And these are the new rules: Slim-fast for breakfast and lunch, Lean Cuisine for dinner, laxatives for mistakes. More coffee, less sugar and no cream. Jog between exercises at the barre: exorcize. Ride the nervous high, burn the anxious fuel of emptiness. Excel. Expel. Enjoy the absence of self generated by the manic pursuit of perfection. Manifesto: Improve, improve, improve!

But it's too late. When the cast list goes up for *Sleeping Beauty*, the name Isabelle isn't on it. Imagine what they will say: Isabelle pushed it too far. Isabelle isn't in *Beauty* at all, has she been suspended?

Oh, here you are, says Nora. You're on the other sheet. You've got a solo part. *The Canary*. Congratulations!

Thank you, says the far-away "I" that feels more like a habit than a self. Kerry storms off. She's been wanting that part for years. It's a fast, nervous, fluttery solo, short but difficult. It requires a lightness, a quickness, a kind of exuberance-on-command. *The Canary* is also a greasy café a couple of blocks from the dance studio, where a nervous yellow bird in a cage drives people crazy with its chatter. The café is filled with cigarette smoke, and, in an ironic reversal of the canary in the mineshaft, the bird has to be replaced from time to time. Just thinking about it makes me feel like folding up.

The “I” smiles, nods, accepts this new turn of events with grace and confidence, goes downstairs to the dressing room to change into practice clothes, same as every other dancer, every other day.

Upstairs, the daily technique class starts. The notes of the piano trickle down through the walls. The accompanist is playing “Beer Barrel Polka” slowly, lyrically. But instead of gripping the barre, my hands grip the sides of the bathroom sink, my eyes register my reflection with no flicker of recognition. My brain is damaged, maybe from all the turning, or else all the leaping and jumping. Who knew it would come down to a matter, not of choice, but simply of limitation? The story is so simple, after all: a corps girl in a second rate ballet company gets an insignificant solo and knows that even this is asking too much: it has become impossible for her to flutter. Let Kerry have the part, she’ll be so happy.

There are no triumphant last words to anyone. There is no victory march, only the sounds of that ridiculous adagio polka coming through the basement ceiling. I watch myself clomp up the stairs with my bag against my hip, as I’ve done a thousand times, watch myself go out the door and down the front steps in my vintage yellow dress and my red lipstick. A homeless man, the Vietnam vet who sometimes chases people down, trying to sell them invisible pencils, sees me and begins to scream, “Blue Ballerina is burning! Run! Run!” So I do. I am not running towards anything. I simply run north on Delaware Street in my platform sandals, the ribbons of my pointe shoes streaming out from my dance bag. My shin splints start to bother me but I don’t care. My lungs burn and my heart beats frantically against my rib cage: I am, I am, I am.

