

The Dance of Despair

For all her years of dancing, when the big night came, Elena was worried. She was worried about her lipstick on such a big night. She was more worried about what was going to happen that evening. The lipstick problem was soon solved. Elena knew that tonight of all nights her lips had to be red, to be symbolically red, bright unapologetic red though she was used to wearing the dark brown that suited her best. But tonight it had to be red. Elena sat in her white lace and tulle dress and leant carefully towards the great mirror in front of her. She prepared her lips with Prep and Prime Lip and then ever so carefully applied her MAC Viva Glam 1 gently spreading and dabbing it over her luscious full lips. Sitting back, Elena inspected her work and was satisfied. All that was needed then was the application of lip pencil in Brick and the job was done. That was one worry off Elena's mind. But what of the evening ahead?

It was one thing to perform on the opening night of a ballet which had been danced so many times before, a Sleeping Beauty, a Swan Lake or a Nutcracker. Elena had been in the business long enough, although she would never thank you for reminding her, to know those dances inside out and, crucially, to know what pleased the crowd and how to keep them happy. But tonight was different; it was a new dance and an unfamiliar theme and Elena was worried. It was a risk at this stage of her career even agreeing to perform and play the role of principal ballerina, but here she was and the lights were about to go down. As ever the true professional, Elena would just get on with it...nerves or no nerves... She checked her lips once more, took a deep breath and prepared herself to go and wait in the wings for the opening music and the rising of the curtain.

Outside the venerable theatre, the rain was beginning to softly fall as the audience arrived; mostly women, with a few men dotted around, some of the ladies sheltering under large umbrellas to protect themselves from the spitting clouds above. Janet met up with Rachael and Catherine and all three walked smartly over to the theatre as they didn't have the shelter of any large umbrella. They got to the theatre door with minutes to spare and Rachael rustled in her shiny black Gucci handbag for the tickets.

Rachael handed the tickets to the woman at the door and they went in. They showed their tickets to a second young woman and were ushered to the correct entrance and it was pointed out just where their seats were. They had made it with a few minutes to spare so they sat talking, surrounded by the swirling voices of the polite chatter of the rest of the audience and the swirl of a hundred different perfumes, as the theatre gradually filled. It was Janet who spoke first after they had all sat down comfortably and found places for their bags and coats.

"Well, this is nice, isn't it".

"Yes, it is. Thank you for organising the tickets, Rachael", Catherine added.

"Oh, you're welcome. I hope you enjoy it. It is a new ballet after all", Rachael replied.

“I’m sure we’ll be fine”, Catherine replied. “Anyway, did anybody see that Wife Swap on television last night. It was hilarious. There was Edwina Currie and that funny man from the racing....I forget his name...you know, he looks like someone out of a Dickens novel....”

“I know who you mean”, Rachael replied. “I didn’t watch it myself, but I saw the trailer. They both looked pretty horrible to me....”

“Oh, they were....I bet both their spouses were glad to get rid of them for a week”, Catherine said, adding, “did you see the programme Janet?”

“No, but I saw the programme before it. About a country far away. It was quite harrowing. The poor people there. They were being attacked by the army of their own country and then those who wanted more human rights who were being tortured....and then all the people made into slaves....and hardly anybody in the world seems to know about what is going on ...or care....”, said Janet, her voice trailing off as she looked into the glazed eyes of her two friends. There was a short silence before Catherine spoke.

“Well, it all sounds mad to me”, said Catherine, before looking around her and adding, “Still I do like your skirt, Rachael. I saw one like that in Zara recently. Is that where you got it?”

“Yes”, said Rachael, slightly blushing at the praise for her new garment, after secretly hoping that it would be noticed by one of her friends. “Thank you. I bought it last week. Now that summer’s coming in I just needed something to cheer myself up. Do you know what I mean?”

“I do, Rachael, I do”, replied Catherine. “It is not so dark now and is a good time to buy something a bit brighter. All through the autumn and winter I seemed to go to work in the dark and come home in the dark. I hate that time of year....”. Catherine paused. “And I like your ear-rings, Janet. ”

“Oh, thank you”, replied Janet quietly. “I just hoped that I didn’t look too tired after work today.”

“Are the children being lively again?”, asked Catherine.

“You could say that”, replied Janet. “I looked into my eyes this evening and they looked so red, like a map with lots of roads across it.”

“Well, they look fine to me.....”, replied Catherine.

“Oh, well I feel so tired; it must be my new mascara. It must be doing its job...Still it should do. It cost enough after all. It said on the packet that, er, ‘the megawatt brainpower of engineers normally devoted to aircraft technology has been enlisted by the beauty industry’...and that the company had ‘employed an aerodynamics firm to design its latest mascara’ or something like that....”, said Janet, her voice trailing off into a little laugh, as the lights began to dim and the great curtain slowly lifted.

The music began, a slow, almost ethereal music, producing an air of other-worldliness, yet in its own way quite modern, like the music which often accompanies television programmes about man's journeys into outer space. At the back of the stage, the set portrayed a small village in a forest, which had been painted onto large solid pieces of wood. From one side of the stage, Elena dramatically appeared, arms aloft while from the other side her partner bounds on energetically. Elena was dressed all in white, with a long tulle skirt and lace top with beautiful willowy sleeves. Her partner was dressed in a bright red tunic above his white tops, with a large bulge just below his tunic, as what appeared to be a ballet blanc began.

Slowly the music changed and became faster. Elena smiled as she looked at her partner, her bright red lips glistening from the stage lights above. The two dancers were playing the parts of lovers as they embarked on a long elegant pas de deux. First there was a stately entrée, setting the scene for what is to follow and then comes the slow adagio, showing off Elena's remarkable grace. She smiled again as the confidence began to flood back into her. New dance or not, Elena was dancing well tonight. Elena's partner left the stage as Elena danced a long beautiful solo, getting high on to the pointe of her tiny ballet pumps, at one point performing a number of beautifully executed bourrees. The three friends were entranced along with the rest of the audience and as the solo came to an end, they burst into spontaneous applause.

Elena's partner danced strongly and exuberantly, as if every step he took was an expression of his love for the character, which Elena was playing. The end of the pas de deux came with the coda in which Elena and her partner were reunited. They danced playfully with each other with a number of petit allegro, small fast steps, before a final port de bras, when they left the stage temporarily with their arms linked to wild applause from the watching audience as the curtain fell to mark the end of Act One.

Rachael excused herself to nip off to the toilet, while Catherine turned round to Janet and spoke:

"She is a wonderful dancer.....what is her name, Janet?"

"I don't know, Rachael did say, but I can't remember....we didn't have time to buy a programme"

"That's true...anyway I'm really enjoying it".

There wasn't a long wait before the curtain rose again and Act Two began. This time the set had changed. The houses were gone and nothing had been put in their place. Instead, Janet and her friends saw what looked like a clearing in the forest. Elena came on once more from the wings, again in white, this time in a traditional tutu, with a pretty, gauzy, tulle skirt, spreading out in an almost horizontal fashion from her slender waist. She began to dance to the music and it was a gentle almost vulnerable dance, her isolation in the clearing becoming ever more apparent to the audience. The music was sparse and haunting reflecting this loneliness.

Suddenly from the wings, Elena was joined on stage by eight dancers, four women and four men, who danced around her in a menacing fashion, dressed in green outfits, with a dash of brown here and there and black ballet pumps. Gradually as the dance progressed, so the eight dancers moved closer and closer to Elena who dramatically lifted her right leg, while pirouetting on the toes of her left leg. From the wings came another group of dancers dressed in what looked like the most expensive costumes Janet and her friends have ever seen on a stage during a ballet. They began to dance round Elena and the group around her occasionally looking over to her with disinterested glances.

Then, just as it looked like the group in green were about to pounce on Elena, they dropped so that they are squatting around her. Elena's character grabbed the opportunity to plead with the well-dressed group around her; to help her, to care, to do something to stop her from being attacked by those dressed in green. They looked across and some of them even gestured that they had sympathy for Elena's character, but they did nothing and one by one they started to look away and then drifted off to the edges.

Seeing that the well-dressed dancers were going to do nothing to save Elena, the green group pounced on their lonely prey. Symbolically, they killed Elena after she had danced one last dance in front of them spinning from one green clad murderer to another in a series of 24 fouettes, which brought some of the audience to their feet with applause, including Racheal and Catherine. In contrast Janet sat motionless, her eyes fixed on the lonely tragic figure of Elena's character as she danced her last dance alive before falling to the stage and kneeling motionless with her head bowed. Janet noticed the bright red of Elena's lipstick and understood what it meant. The green group danced a macabre dance of celebration, full of saut de basques, leaping high into the air and laughing and smiling triumphantly.

Gradually the green dancers vacated the stage leaving it to Elena who danced a sad slow adagio with her former partner who was now dressed in black. At the end of the adagio, the male dancer stood with the 'dead' Elena in his arms, as the curtain fell to rapturous applause from the sell-out crowd.

Catherine turned to Rachael and spoke:

"Well, I'm not sure what that was about, but the dancing was wonderful wasn't...especially the main ballerina. I wish we had bought a programme".

"Yes, I know what you mean", Rachael replied. "A programme would have been handy. Well, perhaps we can get one during the interval. What do you think, Janet?"

"Well, I think it is about..."

"No, do you think that we should buy a programme in the interval", asked Rachael of Janet.

"Er, yes", replied Janet quietly.

“Good.....I’ll buy one and we can all share it. I think I’ll have an ice-cream too....Shall we go?”

“Yes, let’s do that”, replied Catherine and the three friends made their way to the front of the stage where a lady was selling ice-cream and then into the bar to find a programme seller...Catherine bought a programme and then joined Rachael and Janet in the queue for ice creams. They all bought what they wanted and return to their seats. Catherine sat looking at the programme, while Rachael and Janet began to devour their ice creams.

“Well, I have to say that this is lovely ice cream”, commented Rachael.

“Yes, it is”, replied Janet. “What does it say in the programme, Catherine?”

“Well, the principal ballerina is called Elena Harrison. It says that she was given Elena as a first name, because her mother was such a big fan of the classical Russian ballet. She thought that it sounded Russian and it was her turn to name a child. Elena’s father had just named their son a few years earlier after the Liverpool football team which had won everything at about that time.”

“It sounds like a bit of a crazy family”, said Rachael in reply.

“Well, I guess it takes all sorts, doesn’t it?”, said Janet.

“It does. Anyway Elena’s mother wanted to call her Pierina, after the Italian ballerina Pierina Legnani, who it says here, first ‘danced and made famous, the dual role of Odette and Odile in Swan Lake.’ So actually, Elena’s mother wanted to name her after an Italian, but ended up giving her a Russian sounding name, because Elena’s father couldn’t stand the name Pierina.”

“Hmm. Typical. He got his way with the Liverpool football team didn’t he? And that is even more bizarre...”, said Rachael in her very best indignant voice.

“Well, anyway, that’s the story, so there we go...”, replied Catherine.

“Does it say much about what the ballet is about?”, asked Janet.

“It does. Yes. Do you want to read it?”, asked Catherine, handing the programme over to Janet.

“Did you get that problem at work sorted out?”, asked Rachael, changing the subject.

“Yes, it is fine now”, replied Catherine in a rather evasive way. Janet sat with her head in the programme, then the lights fell and the great magic curtain at the front of the stage lifted like a morning mist as the sun gradually warms up the air.

The music began again, a sad mournful tone, not quite like a funeral procession, but with a deep sadness, almost so deep that it cannot be touched, like something from deep within a dark well. From the left-hand side Elena reappeared in exactly

the same kind of tutu as she wore in the second act, with one vital difference. This time it was not white. It was as black as coal.

The forest stage setting had reappeared but this time the lighting was very minimal and the atmosphere was mysterious and other worldly. The music began to speed up slightly so Elena danced quicker, with a strange kind of melancholy joy, her black tutu flitting up and down as she performed bourrees and pirouettes, representing a celebration, a time when all was well in the world. Only it was not. There was an elusive despondency at the heart of the dance, as Elena gradually picked up speed.

One by one she was joined by other dancers, dressed in the same costumes that they had worn in Act Two, at the time when the character played by Elena had been murdered. They began to dance a corps de ballet of contrition, even of remorse, in recognition of how they had danced around as Elena's character had been murdered. They danced around Elena pleading with the black-clad dancer to acknowledge them in some way. But Elena ignored them, to their regret, and continued to dance her lonely solo as the music continued to speed up, whilst still retaining the element of elusive sadness.

Rachael, Catherine and Janet sat, like the rest of the audience transfixed by what they were watching. Catherine and Rachael were almost on the edge of their seats by this time, enthralled by the beauty of the music and the dancing of Elena as she began a series of remarkable fouettes and pirouettes. Janet sat back a little from her two friends in a reflective mood, and a small tear appeared in her left eye. She turned her head slightly towards her companions for a silent gesture of support, but Catherine and Rachael did not notice as they continued to watch the amazing performance in front of them. They all watched as Elena became the perfect danseuse aerienne, dancing as only a spirit can, ending with a carefully choreographed climax of 24 non-stop fouettes, before she fell to the stage floor in a dramatic gesture of defiance and despair.

This was the signal for the well-dressed dancers to reappear on stage. They encircled Elena, with their heads bowed. Janet, watching as if she was alone, gently cried a tear. It slid down her face, making her carefully applied mascara run. The tear then dropped silently on to her pretty top, turning the part where it splashes into a deep blood red, matching Elena's lipstick. As the final curtain fell across the front of the stage, Catherine and Rachael joined the rest of the audience in wildly applauding the beauty of the dancing. They turned to Janet and then quickly turned away, not comprehending why she seemed to be in so much distress.

The audience began to file out, but Janet just stood staring towards the stage and the brightly coloured curtain, which now hid it from view. Rachael and Catherine were by now concerned for Janet.

"Are you alright, Janet?", Rachael asked.

"Yes, I'm fine", Janet replied, before reaching into her handbag for a tissue to wipe her eyes and face with.

“Are you sure?”, Catherine asked unconvinced.

“Yes, yes, I’m fine”, Janet replied again.

“O.K.”, Catherine replied smiling back in return.

The three friends made their way outside where Rachael hailed a taxi, which they were all able to get in, as they all lived on roughly the same side of the city. Janet seemed to perk up during the journey and Catherine and Rachael cheerfully talked of how good it had been for them all to meet up again after all this time. Soon the car was parked temporarily outside the house Rachael shared with her long-term boyfriend and she was getting out.

“Well, it’s been a lovely evening, girls. We should do it again”, Rachael observed.

“Yes, sure. that would be great. Give us a bell next time you’re going”, Catherine replied. That’s if we were good enough company compared to your mum and she doesn’t mind!”

“Oh, I think that will be O.K.!” , Rachael replied. “How about you, Janet?”

“Er, yes that would be nice”, Janet said gazing into the distance.

“Are you sure that you’re alright Janet?”, Rachael asked.

“Yes”, Janet replied quietly.

“O.K. well, I’ll be seeing you both”, Rachael said before elegantly stepping out and landing her high heels on the pavement. Catherine and Janet waved goodbye.

1. Soon the car was outside Janet’s flat. She rustled in her handbag for a fiver to help Catherine to pay the taxi fare, before getting out. Both women quietly said goodbye to each other and Janet watched with a sad smile as the car’s tail lights slowly disappeared into the dark evening. She walked up the path to her front door and turned her key. Stepping inside, she flopped into her favourite chair, kicking off her shoes and carefully placing her handbag on the floor next to her. She was exhausted.

Janet gazed into the middle distance at nothing in particular and sighed..

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