

THE DANCER

A Recurring Memory

She floats up the gangplank like a strand of silk on light air; her dancer's carriage, elegant yet arrogant, casts a cautionary spell; her blue-black hair, sleek and severe, is drawn tight to a bun; her bare, olive-toned arms and feathery hands alight occasionally on the handrails for balance. An offshore breeze wafting up the ship's hull lifts her skirts as she places a toe on deck and long fingers on the first officer's extended forearm. Her dark eyes barely acknowledge his reflexive glance at her thighs or his welcome aboard. A man, observing this theater from a deck above, wonders, then shakes his head and lets it fall to his chest. No need watching the mule train of passengers who follow. She was what he had hoped to see.

*

When they were first married, Jeannie accompanied Jackson on his 'Croesus cruises', as she called them, because in their youth these voyages seemed so lavish. They ate and drank free, lounged in the sun, and grooved on the music into the wee hours, he perched atop a collapsible chair, laying down the beat, she draped over a bar stool filtering out the real deals, who were few, from the barflies, who were many. "Did your wife have to stay home to work?" Jeannie would ask when she spotted a pale halo on a ring finger. She loved to ambush the philanderers, to jab them with questions about their infidelity, and Jackson knew why.

She had shared the dark secret with him the night they became engaged—after smoking a joint or two. She had once seen her father with her mother's best friend, Mrs Villatoro, half-naked on

the tendril-patterned cushions of the squeaky back porch swing. “I was only ten, for God’s sake,” she said. “I was collecting leaves for a Girl Scout badge in the woods behind Auntie V’s house.” The writhing bodies had stunned her, dropped her flat on her stomach. She remembered being well camouflaged in her scout uniform but still feared being seen so she lay low and still until Auntie V moaned and giggled and they went inside holding hands.

“I’ve never breathed a word of this to anyone,” she whispered to Jackson, “hoping my silence would erase the memory, but of course it hasn’t.” Instead, she found that the earthy smells of her garden, the sound of leaves under foot, even things unidentifiable could fling her back across time where she could feel the pine needles pricking her chest as she tried not to look at her father’s fleshy white ass.

“Our life was never the same,” she said. Jackson held her hand as she recalled the silence that encroached on their household and her parents’ disengagement from their intimate dances: their teasing, their private nicknames, the ease of their co-existence, all congealed in the chill that summer, then disappeared.

“And what happened to Auntie V?” Jackson asked.

“Oh God! She she fell backward on her cellar stairs, snapped her neck on a riser. Died instantly.”

To Jeannie’s guilty relief, Auntie V’s death released her. The wicked witch was dead; her spell, broken. “I couldn’t shout hooray from the rooftops, but I did begin to feel better. Then, I discovered I could sing,” she said, brightening at the memory. This was a natural love affair, her mother told her. The musical DNA of her maternal grandmother, who had studied at Juilliard, had leapt a generation and spawned in Jeannie’s pool. At seventeen she had a smoky contralto voice, a broken heart, and perfect pitch, nice credentials for a blues singer.

She learned about phrasing, breath control and interpretation, but mostly she just sang...during long teenage showers, in the car, and with a jazz group on weekends. In college she got into minor keys, dissonance, and syncopation, sounds and off beats that reflected the lack of

resolution at home. She found when she sang from the heart, allowing the loneliness she felt to prevail, she could hush and haunt a room, but she was unwilling to do that often. “It’s too personal,” she told Jackson.

“When I first heard you sing,” he said, “I was touched almost to tears. It’s one of my most memorable moments in music. I even remember what you said when I introduced myself to you after that set. You said, ‘Yeah, I know you. You play so clean. I love your music, man.’”

*

“*Hombre, me encanta la musica.*” He heard the husky voice that night on the cruise ship as he returned to the bandstand. Even before he was able to associate it with the woman he had watched float across the gangplank that afternoon, he realized her first words to him had the same meaning as the first words Jeannie had spoken to him years ago.

Drummers pick up on rhythms like this. The lapping of waves, a woodpecker’s vamp, the swaying of hips. If it’s repetitive, there’s a rhythm. Jackson returned to her table when they finished playing. “*Buenas noches,*” he said, pulling up an extra chair and placing it off her shoulder so she had to turn away from the two couples sharing her table. He wanted no interference. “Jackson,” he said, extending his hand. “*Me llamo Jackson*—that’s my name—and that’s the end of my Spanish. “*No mas,*” he smiled.

“Well, *no te preocupes, Yackson.* Don’t worry. I speak English and I do love *la musica.* You can really touch your toes to it.”

“Yeah, it’s toe touching music all right. May I ask where you are from?”

“I am from Madrid,” she said, thickening the first ‘d’ and softening the second to a ‘th’. She had lived life fully, perhaps too fully, Jackson thought, aware that this up-close impression was at odds with the apparition he had seen from afar that afternoon. But she sat as she walked, buoyant, diaphanous, her posture in perfect plumb. In contrast to her lightness of limb, her face was somber, more Moorish than Latin. It was marked along the jawline by a trail of pocks, the

vestige of an adolescence long past. The eyes were private, not-to-be-trifled-with eyes. They looked down a flat, broad-bridged nose that gave strength not beauty to her face.

Jackson took a chance. "Goya would have loved your face," he said.

"Goya?"

"Yeah, the Spanish painter," Jackson replied with the hint of a question in his voice. Did she not know him? "I think he painted some Spanish royalty when he was young...before he got consumed with disaster and pestilence. I remember his portraits in the Prado, great faces."

"*Ah, si. Goya. Perdoneme*, but I didn't understand your pronunciation. You have visited *el Prado*?"

"Yes, I have. I was touring with Dr. John. Didn't have much free time, but I did go there. Loved it."

Her smile rolled gently over her grave features forming fine crinkles at the corners of her eyes, soothing their intensity. It softened the set of her jaw and the vibe between them. Jackson returned the smile. It worked, he thought, like flowers on a weeknight. "Would you like to buy me a drink, Yackson?"

When she rose to leave almost an hour later, she extended her hand toward his lips in a courtly gesture. Jackson, caught off guard, reacted by catching her hand in both of his, a response grooved in his brain since his days as a Little League shortstop. Then he bent and bestowed a misdirected kiss on her watch. "*Buenas noches*," he said, unable to stifle a grin. "Ah, my dear Yackson," she said in her throaty voice, her hard Spanish eyes softening again.

*

"*Ah, my dear Yackson.*" He could still hear it. A come hither farewell if he ever heard one. But what the hell are you doing, Jackson thought, slumped across the only chair in his steerage cabin. Leave her alone!

The Dancer

His mood, as often occurred after he had played well and hard, was losing altitude, letting down through the clouds of adrenaline. Playing drums could alter his mind. Maintaining a clean, relentless beat, hands and feet creating their own catchy embellishments, bearing down then easing back, tapping out accented triplets on the snare's sweet spot, then only on the rim or on a wood block, mouth involuntarily askew, then a Rich-type roll, left left, right right, slowly accelerating until the sticks are a blur, and the applause spontaneous: he got high on it. But afterward, off-stage and alone, he would sink to reality again. Jeannie called it 'rubbing the rosy off his glasses'. He thought of her and told himself again, Let it go, man. This lady of Spain ain't worth it.

Over the years, Jeannie had become the ballast in his inconstant life, a shelter from the craziness of the music world. She had given up her singing because singing the blues gave her the blues. She often left the stage not only sad, but even angry. "You know," she told Jackson once driving home from a late night gig, "I don't blame Frankie one little bit for shooting Johnnie, the little shit. He deserved it." Jackson took note—a father's influence can last a lifetime.

She became his manager, booking his dates, negotiating his contracts, jumping on problems with the purpose of a pit bull. She was good at it, tough and knowledgeable and yet accommodating to other musicians' agents, as long as they kept their word. One lie, though, one false promise and she wrote them off.

"You know," he said to her one night as they were drifting off to sleep, "you make me feel protected."

"Hmm...love you," she said wiggling backward into him.

*

The sense of security he felt nestled next to her never waned. "Hey, J, whatdaya say?" became the opening line of his calls to her when he was on the road. Whether he was sitting backstage in

a theater in Nashville or killing time in San Francisco on tour with Clapton or Toussaint, she was always with him. And she was always on his mind when he succumbed to temptation. Topsy girls and women, enchanted by the music or by musicians, offered their favors and hustled him off to the most unlikely venues: a tanning salon, a spacious bunk in the cab of an 18-wheeler, the office of a state legislator in Bismarck, North Dakota. But, plodding back to his rooms in the middle of the night, he always felt despicable and puzzled over why he repeatedly did this.

He would lie on the bed in his hotel and call home. The calls became a ritual, an unction to soothe his guilt. They would yak and laugh and before falling asleep he would recite the litany to himself: it was a harmless occupational hazard; he was not—never had been—even vaguely interested in an affair; and, Jeannie was not hurt by these one night stands because she never knew about them, thank God! These obedient sheep jumped out of their stalls when summoned and trotted docilely across his conscience—each bearing a piece of woolly truth—until he fell asleep.

The women meant nothing, he fretted about his carousing frequently. He wondered if it were an addiction like Booker and heroin, or some cryptic compulsion to prove something. He had no answers. His only certainty was that eventually his infidelities would cripple their marriage. Even if he could keep Jeannie in the dark, he knew he could wreck it all by himself. Pushing up from his chair, he pulled off his clothes and slid into bed. I've gotta kick this habit! *Ah yes, my dear Yackson, you really must.*

*

He was wading in flotsam, pants rolled up tight below the knees, strangling the calves. His feet were numb in icy water, but he waded on through construction debris: a yellow crime scene tape, and twine, yards and yards of it, snarling his ankles, impeding his progress. Gypsy cants, Sephardic, hoarse voices in minor keys, the percussion of stamping feet drew him into deeper water. She drifted vaporously toward him across wooden boards, topless, back arched

imperiously, fierce eyes locked on his. Her many hands and flexed wrists swayed above her head like October branches while her fingers made chestnuts click and snap, embellishing the perfect accented triplets rolling off her feet.

“I dreamed about you last night,” Jackson said stretching out on a deck chair next to hers.

“I am flattered.” The tell in her eyes was unreadable behind her extravagant sunglasses. I trust it was a pleasant dream.”

“I dreamed you were dancing the flamenco in a grand pavilion on the water somewhere,” he said, “and that your footwork was much better than my drumming.”

She turned from the sun, abandoning her tanning devotion, and slowly removed her sunglasses to look at him. The eyes were hard again, suspicious.

“Is this a joke?”

“No. Why do you ask?”

“I *did* dance flamenco in Sevilla on the Mediterranean.”

“Is Sevilla on the Med”? he asked.

“Wherever! But how do you know this if you even don’t know my name?” She had coyly declined to give Jackson her name the previous night, even after he bought her a third drink and teased her about being mysterious.

“If we are going to discuss your presence in my dreams, such an intimate topic, I must first know your name,” he said.

“For now you may call me Marquesa,” she said and returned to the cover of her sunglasses.

“Marquesa. How wonderful! I am conversing with royalty, or was that your stage name?”

“Ah, Yackson, you are the drummer from heaven, but you have a mean stripe. No, my name is Charlotta Ruiz Rosa, La Marquesa de Girona y Bourbon,” she said. “*Ahora*, tell me how you know I was a dancer of flamenco.”

Jackson studied her. He saw tawny skin, probably protected from Spain’s harsh sun and pampered; sinewy arms, veins tracing subtly around her biceps and down her forearms; muscular

legs even in repose; luxuriant, raven-black hair, probably its natural color and a source of pride. It flew in the sea air, freed from its usual sleek discipline. Only the hands, willowy but worn, hinted at her age; mauve squiggles meandered across the long bones running out from wrists to knuckles. She had wrapped herself in a sheer pareu, orange and teal with black and white, open-mouthed fish, nibbling here and there and seeming to swim across the folds of the material as it rippled with the breeze. A small Macy's tag flapped occasionally from a corner at her knee. She had tucked the garment into itself a discreet two inches above the nipple line. She wore no jewelry and every inch of skin glistened with an oil smelling of bananas. Jackson thought: she is around fifty, hard-working, disciplined, and physically active because she is quite fit for her age; she is organized, and calculating, but not wealthy or well educated. Had Jeannie been there, she would have given Jackson good marks for his insights, but he knew her observations would have been more refined and insightful than his. Her keen intuition gave her an edge over Jackson in this little game they often played.

"I *didn't* know you were a dancer," Jackson said. "But you move like a dancer. You are Spanish, as is flamenco. I had just spent one hour flirting with you. Then I go to sleep and dream of you dancing. *Por favor*, is that not logical? Now tell me, how did you become the beautiful dancer you are?"

"I will tell you on one condition."

"Anything. I will do anything you ask."

"Invite me to lunch, my dear Yackson."

*

Lunch became a ritual, a rite of passage Jackson hoped. It was always late and long, Spanish style. Jackson ate absentmindedly and he fell under her spell. She ate with finesse, European style, her graceful left hand holding the fork inverted and ever so lightly, while her right hand, using her heavy dinner knife with the dexterity of a surgeon, sliced and diced and arranged delicate bites on the fork. Jackson admired her flair just as he admired hands sweeping a

keyboard or dancing between frets, but it was the quantity of food she consumed that fascinated him. At every lunch she prepared lady-like portions of every offering on the buffet table: soup, cold or hot; green salad, fruit salad, pasta salad; meat, fish, and chicken entrées; breads and crackers with butter and dips; each luscious dessert and coffee, black. The food was there, included in the fare, so she ate. Peculiar, Jackson thought.

“I was a prodigy,” she began. “In my region of Andalusia to study flamenco was an option in my private *colegio*—I think that is like your high school. I was a natural, my teacher said, and I adored it.” She paused to convey an artful arrangement of salmon, capers, and dill to her lips.

“So, you continued after high school?”

“I continued *in* high school. I was sent to a school of dance in Sevilla. I had the best teachers and trainers and, of course, I worked my butt off,” she said with no accent at all.

“Do you still dance?”

“Ah, my dear Yackson...” she hesitated and looked into the distance, promoting a wistful silence. “I dance in my room everyday.”

She was drama itself. She could summon a coquettish character with a bat of her lashes or a sensual turn of her shoulder, and then dismiss her with the cool tone of a single word. Jackson found her transformations unsettling. He wondered who she was. “Do you mean that literally, that you dance in your room?” he asked the her.

“I had a great following, especially in the south of Spain, but that story is for another time, my dear,” she said tipping the last drops from her *café solo*.

“As you wish, but remember, you have promised to continue. We play from 9 to 1 tonight. Perhaps over a drink afterwards?”

“*Vamos a ver*,” she said. “We shall see.”

She did appear that evening at about 10 o'clock, dressed simply in black and without much jewelry. She sat at an empty table. Jackson acknowledged her from the bandstand with a big American smile. She responded curiously by laying an index finger on her temple. Maybe it's a

Spanish gesture, Jackson thought, meaning 'I see you, I caught your greeting.' Later, two gentlemen joined her, seating themselves one on each side. Surrounded. Jeannie could have handled them, he thought. Three drinks arrived and from Jackson's distant perspective conversation flowed. His attention flickered between the table pantomime he was trying to interpret and the pulse he was feeling through the drums; table to traps, traps to table as if there were a pulsating strobe in the room.

Jeannie lingered in his thoughts. He wondered how often *he* was in *her* thoughts and if she had liaisons too. She was a free spirit, after all, and he was on the road often. As he beat out a lively tempo on the drums, his imagination swept him down a dangerous slope. The loneliness of her life in New York certainly could make her vulnerable to some smooth operator and living in a metropolis. Applause suddenly shattered his fantasy. The set was finished. He heard the increase in applause when the piano player called his name which he acknowledged with a short, angry riff.

Ten minutes later Jackson approached her table. Her companions had left. As she gestured for him to sit beside her, he took her hand and dusted a kiss upon it. "See, I'm learning."

Perhaps the red wine she drank that night inverted her sense of modesty or put her inhibitions at bay because she rolled out the dream-like tale of her career. It was full of gypsies, handsome guitar players, music and lovers, scarlet and black scandal, castanets and minarets and, above all, *el baile*, as she always referred to the flamenco. It was set in the clubs and theaters of Cadiz, Sevilla and Malaga with an occasional performance before royalty in Madrid. She had been a star, she said, at least among those in Spain who were aficionados of *el baile*. She had twice danced for the King, had a fling with a bullfighter, a fight with the tax authorities, and a marriage to the Marquis de Girona. Jackson, a son of White River Junction, Vermont, could imagine the

smoky bars and plush theaters of Andalusia and Spain itself, hot and exotic, and this sultry, suspicious woman had been a part of it all.

“Walk me home, my dear Yackson,” she said suddenly. “I have had too much Rioja, *por favor*.” As they left she slide her hand into the crook of his arm. When they reached the lobby, she kissed him on the neck below the ear and said good night.

*

Their brief song was a rhapsody, irregular and improvised—deck chair rendezvous, lunches winding through the past but skirting the present, solitary siestas, and Courvoisier after midnight. A covetous tension hummed between them. He could not find the key to free her—for more than a delightful moment now and then—from the protected preserve she seemed to prefer. He was inhibited by her presence and her exotic past. Her title and poses jostled his instincts, made him feel gullible and green. One minute she would raise the veil, soften her eyes, place a hand on his, and listen as he told her risqué tales of the music world. The next minute she would look away and the veil would rise again, eyes wary, her hand withdrawn and cool on the sweaty surface of a glass. In neither persona did she ask Jackson about his life outside music. This restricted him from asking much about her personal life, but Jackson could dig it. Their no-pry agreement kept her a safe distance from his world too. Unfortunately, it also was keeping him from her cabin and time was running out.

*

“So what’s life like in Espana these days, for royalty that is?” he asked one morning as they lay sunning on a lee deck. “What’s the King like? Do you know him?”

“I have met him, the first time with my husband and mother. The second time, thirteen months later, he approached me, called me by name, and asked after my mother. I was impressed. Of course, some magazines say he is a *mariposa*, that he has his favorites among the handsome palace guards.

“What’s a *mariposa*?”

“For *mariposa* I think you say butterfly, no? The gay man who flies from flower to flower, polluting each one.”

“I think you mean ‘pollinating’, Marquesa, but I understand. So, the King of Spain is gay?”

“No, no, my dear Yackson. I tell you on good authority it is not true. As she spoke Jackson admired her contours and imperial profile, canted precisely toward the sun. Her chest with its sheen of fruity oil rose and fell, twice for every roll of the ship. “I would love you to rub some lotion on my shoulders and back,” she said as she rolled over.

“Do you know New York City?” he asked as he began to rub.

“Why would you ask that?” she said casually, but he felt the muscles tense in her neck.

“Just wondering.” He allowed a long pause to widen between them; he wanted her to answer. “I work there often,” he said finally, preferring not to disclose that he actually lived there, and paused again for her response. “Just curious.”

The Marquesa waited several beats. “Curiosity can kill the *gatito*.”

“Curiosity is also responsible for advances in science, the arts, and many other human endeavors,” he said as he slipped the straps of her bathing suit from her lean shoulders to apply more lotion.

She rolled over again, swung her toned legs to the side and faced Jackson nose to nose. He could feel her breath; a stray hair tickled his forehead. “*Hombre*,” she said, “you are not now thinking of advancing science.”

“I always favor progress, Marquesa. The slower we move, the more we lose.” He said these words semi-seriously while staring at his reflection in her dark glasses. While her eyes were hidden, her lips betrayed an expression of amusement, he thought, or perhaps acquiescence, but his question remained unanswered.

The Dancer

*

The entertainment director radiated an astringent lime fragrance. He stood too close when he conversed and his busy hands were constantly plucking a hair from someone's collar or stroking his goatee. He had been touting the Grande Finale of the cruise for a week. Surf and turf served late, champagne on the house, formal dress optional, and gaiety—lots of gaiety. The band would play an hour later than usual, which curtailed Jackson's ultimate opportunity with the Marquesa and irked him generally. The counterfeit hilarity, the requests for schmaltz like *MacArthur Park* and *Muskrat Love*, and the passengers' slurred compliments—he hated them.

To make matters worse, the Marquesa never appeared. He kept looking up throughout the long evening hoping to see her quirky, index-finger-to-temple greeting or to watch her effortless glide through the room. He banged away at the music, sticks becoming heavier, finesse vaporizing in the heat of his labor. Finally, they arrived at *The Party's Over*. He gave out a long sigh with his final flourish.

Minutes later he waved off his usual, a draught beer the bartender started to draw for him, and asked for a scotch instead. "Tough night, Jackson?"

"Yeah. Too much Lester Lannon shit, man. I gotta get back to the City." A moment later watching the man's deft hands punctuate a bright blue drink with a paper umbrella Jackson asked, "You seen the Marquesa tonight?"

"Nope."

"One more, Phil. Make it a double," Jackson said, lifting his empty glass. He shoved back from the bar, grabbed his new drink, and stepped out on deck to feel the soft caress of Caribbean air one last time. He unbuttoned his sweaty collar, removed his shoes, and watched the moon slip behind an amethyst cloud. In time the moonlight and drink lifted the persistent tension of hope and allowed Jackson to consider his failed quest. The Marquesa's whims and moodiness had thrown him off. She had escaped because he had never known precisely who he was courting. But now he could return to Jeannie a chaste man. This was a good thing, a legitimate clean start. He stepped lightly down the passageway feeling like Gene Kelly.

*

“There you are, my dear Yackson.” The husky voice flew at him from behind like a brick. He froze for an instant, a snapshot of a walker in full stride.

“Jesus, where have you been, Marquesa?”

“*Querido*,—my dear—please don’t be upset. I passed my last evening on the deck,” she said. “So lovely, the sounds of the sea, the moonlight. My last night. Sorry.” As she spoke, her long fingers produced a key from beneath her shawl. “Isn’t it fatal that we should meet by chance on our last night?” she asked. Moving gracefully in front of him she led him up several stairwells and down a passageway. Finally she stopped in front of her door, inserted her key, and held her door open for him. “Do you believe in fate, my dear Yackson?”

His first step into her tiny cabin banished his thoughts of chastity and redemption. He stood before her, shoes in hand, and slightly tipsy from the scotch. She rose on tiptoe, kissed him with moistened lips, then knelt before him and laid his shoes on the floor.

Shortly before dawn he rolled out of their narrow berth. “Be back at ten,” he whispered, “so we can have coffee before we disembark. You hear me?”

“Hmmm.”

At ten o’clock he returned to find her door ajar. “*Buenos dias*,” he called. No answer. He pushed in tentatively. No Marquesa. No baggage. Only a rolled piece of stationery on a pillow. He unrolled it expecting an explanation or a word of farewell, but there below the ship’s name was the Marquesa’s theatrical adieu: a scarlet imprint of her lips. He let it fall to the floor.

*

As the months and years passed he discovered that she had left him more than a lipstick smudge. Memories remained, drifting like phantom companions along the edges of his mind. Why did they linger when memories of the others had vanished? It was not the love making that kept her there; their night had been nothing special. Was it the grace with which she moved, or her exotic story, or the blush of theater she daubed on everything she touched? It was more than

that, he reluctantly admitted. It was the sense of unease moving among those memories, a nagging impurity, a suspicion that he had been willingly duped that haunted him still.

A Recurring Memory

Several women descend from a Maids R Us van and, hunched against a gritty, winter wind sweeping down 1st Avenue, scurry toward a nearby bus stop. As they approach, a man stares vacantly out the window of a deli. He is preoccupied with thoughts of his recent separation, but irresistibly his attention is drawn to one of the women. She is bundled, wool cap pulled down, collar turned up, listing slightly under the weight of a Macy's bag, but still she moves effortlessly—like a dancer. Involuntarily the man rises from his chair, staring. The woman glides to a halt in line to board her bus. As she turns her back to the wind, the dark eyes, unprepared, glance through the deli window. The man races the length of the deli, then down the sidewalk but the procession of dirty windows and billboards is already filing slowly by him into traffic. Awash in fumes and breathless he spots her face again in the last window, an index finger lifting curiously to her temple.

The End

The Dancer