



The North Train

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The North Train

BY VICTORIA REDEL

Madame S. did not want to get on the train. It did not matter that every Thursday for the last two years she had boarded the north bound train riding to the town where her old pupil ran a ballet school. It did not matter that every Thursday for those two years she had never wanted to get on the train. She had been contracted by her pupil as a Master Teacher, but a master teacher of what?—a school of ballet in the basement of a town church? All she ever saw on her Thursdays in the low-ceilinged church basement were girls who heard no music and girls who had the souls—not to mention the feet—of elephants. This is what Madame S. was asked to suffer.

She could show them feet. Even with her low heeled, tie shoes, Madame S. could show the girls how feet should look.

“Hello Madame S.,” the girls chimed each Thursday afternoon when she stepped into the basement room. The girls lined up at the barre, their hair bunned and wrapped in nets, their legs layered in loosely knit and frayed leg-warmers — outfits pitifully copied from magazine photos of real dancers in rehearsal. They hung on the barre practicing frappe and ronde de jambe.

Once Madame S. had hissed into a girl’s ear, “You think you can learn *one thing about ballet* when you can’t even pronounce my simple Russian name?” She made the girl hold an arabesque until she could properly pronounce the crush of consonants in Madame S.’s surname.

For the rest of the class the girl's shoulders shook trying to hold back her crying. Later, after dinner at the director's home, her old pupil had said, "Svetlana, it's easier, please, Madame S. This isn't Moscow. They'll botch your name."

This was not Moscow! What a thing even to say. What could Madame S. expect? Hadn't the director herself only ever been a second rate dancer? The very idea that her pupil, Juliana, called herself *Director of Ballet*, Madame S found a joke. An abbreviator. Sickled feet, no instep, at best a character dancer on the weekend pas de deux circuit. Maybe once, one season, one spot in the corps de ballet of Sadler's Wells. The kind of young woman who, with luck, might parlay a middling career into marriage with a young man who found ballet dancers exotic. And then to live in a nice house with dinners served on silver plated trays— Madame S. could see her old pupil had herself a little luck. A nice house in this nice town was proof a dance career had come to something after all.

She stood on the train platform and thought, "No more on the train."

A conductor stopped next to her. "Metro north to North White Plains," he said quietly.

"I don't want to get on," whispered Madame S.

"There's a problem?" the conductor asked touching the sleeve of her black wool coat. "Did something happen?"

Madame S. looked at the conductor. His head was too big. His hat was off kilter, perched on the top of his head. He looked a little like a black Igor Paravich, a boy she had known in Moscow. Igor Paravich, even with his oversized head, had been a lovely turner — five, six pirouettes was nothing for Igor

"Did something happen?" the black Igor Paravich asked again.

"Will you walk me to a seat?" she asked, lifting her arm.

The conductor looked around as if he might be breaking a rule. He took her small overnight case in one hand. With his other, he took hold of her by the sleeve.

"This is your train, right? The train is leaving soon," he said, leading her into the car and to an empty seat. "Will this be alright for you?" he asked placing her overnight case right next to her. He started to walk

off then stopped. "Miss, you stay there. I'll be back for your ticket."

Madame S. watched the black Igor walk off with his big tilted head ready to pull him, hat and all, to the ground.

What a funny, lovely thought! That boy, silly Igor— she had not thought of him in maybe forty years. She had been crazy for Igor Paravich, following him day after day as he paraded around the studio hallways. She had practically corralled him into her bed, then to find that he kept knocking into her; he was more elbow than anything else in her bed. For all his triple pirouettes, he was a boy without rhythm in love. And now to find him in America, a conductor and a black man at that!

Whatever her old pupil, the director, said, the girls in the ballet school were not nearly as afraid of Madame S. as she thought they should be. They talked among themselves while she showed them steps for the adagio. Or they called out, "Madame S., what comes after the port de bras?" In Russia, she'd never called out. Who would have thought of asking questions? Why she had barely been able to look any of her instructors in the eye. Not even that first pig farmer of a teacher she had in her village, or later, when she'd moved to Moscow, when she'd been noticed and pegged as next in line for the company, not even then, passing the Director of Ballet in the hallway, could she look up as she knew she should, with a vibrant and ready, "Good Day, Sir." No, she could barely muster an audible anything. Still she'd been noticed by the Director and she knew it and at night in her tiny room in the boarding house she'd hold the small mirror so that she could see her body in patches, and piece by piece she'd admire what she could see. Before bed, she'd take each foot in her hands. Pressing with all her strength on the instep, she'd admire the way her feet bent almost like claws.

This Thursday, like every Thursday, it was women who boarded the train. Not one of the women Madame S. watched — not the cream colored woman with her tied-up shopping bags, not the cinnamon colored woman with her country straw hat, not the woman with the tucked down face that to Madame S. looked gray— not one of these women as they got on the train and slipped into a seat looked to Madame S. as if she were happy stepping on the train.

As far as Madame S. could see, the whole train was full of women not pleased to be going north.

Then Madame S. heard boys. They jammed into the train. There were three of them, gangly white boys, limbs loose fitting and seeming to jut and bend at impossible angles. Their bodies looked modern. They swung into seats across the aisle from Madame S., each claiming a whole seat. They stretched out their legs, large sneakers dangled off into the aisle. Everything about the boys was loud, their slick jackets, their talk and the words themselves were loud words, words Madame S. recognized from her neighborhood that were worn proudly, like their sloppy clothes

“That’s too fucked up,” one of the boys shouted, slapping the top of the head of the boy in the seat in front of him. “I’m going to fuck you up, my man.” The other boy whipped around, popping over the seat saying, “What the fuck you got to fuck with me for?”

She heard a woman somewhere in the car say, “Please!”

“Oh fuck off,” one boy shouted and all the boys laughed, then they snickered and slumped so low in their seats Madame S. could only see them by their bright floppy sneakers. She was glad to have them in the car. She watched their large feet flexing and beating out constant rhythms and thought she’d have more luck with these loud, rude boys than with the girls she was going up to teach.

Madame S. reached into her handbag. She took out the piece of fruit she had brought for the ride. She did not like to eat on the train, but the lunch she had eaten in her apartment was not enough to hold her through the afternoon. It would be worse to hurriedly try and eat the apple between the children’s class and the advanced girls’ class. She had washed the apple before leaving her apartment and wrapped it in a cloth towel. But still, the apple looked funny under the fluorescent train lights and Madame S. polished it against her thinned lambswool sweater. Then she held it in her lap.

The lights on the train flickered off and then back on. The train jerked, then started slowly out of the station tunnel. Madame S. closed her eyes so that she did not have to watch the train break into sharp, flickering light as it picked up speed on the outdoor north bound tracks.

When she opened her eyes, it looked like a better place. Not a Moscow but maybe a St. Petersburg. Or a Hamburg. She had been to

Hamburg and Vienna too. And why hadn't it occurred to her before this day that this section of the trip looked a little like the forests and hamlets outside of Vienna? She had been on fire when she was in Vienna. It did not matter if she did one hundred feuettes or stood and simply pointed her foot — she had been on fire. And after the performance there had been a man, a Count or Baron, with hideous floppy flowers and devotions. She laughed at his formalities, his pleading that she must wear her plumage and agree to a holiday at his estate by the sea. But she left Vienna before he returned with his driver. Madame S. had been happy riding on the train out of Vienna with her crate of tutus aboard, her headpieces — the white Giselle headband, the Firebird tiara with long red and black feathers the seamstress had acquired at some cost from a dealer in exotic birds. She was leaving Vienna for Marseilles with the first violinist, a fast and thrashy man who it turned out liked her to walk up and down on his back while he begged for extreme punishments before he could finally settle into sleep.

Madame S. looked out the window of the train. They had left the wooded area and entered degraded, broken streets where the buildings were low and some close to the tracks were boarded up. They passed a tenement with the windows painted black. This was not Vienna or Marseilles. What had she been thinking? At least in the town where the school was, Madame S. was driven past large houses, houses large enough that a small baron might take up residence. The Director's house was modern, a split-level house, with clean formica surfaces. Madame S was given the youngest daughter's room to sleep in every Thursday night. The girl had collections of skeletons of fish-like creatures and rocks with plants embedded in them. The girl said they were fossils and then she spoke of how and when they'd lived as if she'd been alive that long ago. She'd handed Madame S. a piece of stone that looked like a cockroach and said it was Paleozoic, more than two hundred fifty million years old. The first night Madame S. thought she'd never get to sleep, with all the shelves of strange, ancient things in the girl's room. But now, every Thursday night Madame S. barely had time to rub cream on her feet before she was asleep.

The conductor was back in the car, stalling in the aisles, calling "Tickets" in the same good voice he had used with her on the platform.

What had she seen before? He looked nothing like Igor Paravitch. Igor was wirey and this man was all bulk, a wide body and head. He moved thickly, stopping to punch tickets.

"Tickets, please," he said, pausing with his hand-punch beside each seat.

He came to the first of the boys. "Why don't you just sit up nice and take those off the seats." The boy said nothing and Madame S. watched the boy's large feet brightly beating out some rhythm. "I said get yourself up, please."

Madame S. watched the conductor reach down and grab the top of the boy's shirt.

"Don't let me catch you with your feet up again," the conductor said, but Madame S. could see that as soon as the conductor roughly let go of the boy's shirt and pressed his way through the aisles, nodding at Madame S as he punched her ticket and then continued out of the car, the boy had already slipped down and stretched out his legs until they stuck off the seat into the aisle, his sneakers twitching, jumping in a way that looked very much like a well-schooled *changement les pieds*.

Madame S. took a bite of her apple. Then another so that her mouth was a little uncomfortably stuffed. "Go fuck off, Igor," Madame S. whispered, hoping the boy might turn around so that she could smile at him and let him know that she was on his side.

Madame S. looked out from the railway overpass to see her pupil, the school director, waiting as she waited each week in the station turnaround, leaning against her car ready to take Madame S's overnight case and with a bow open the car door saying, "You're here, Svetlana! How wonderful that you're here," as if Madame S. had come on the train from Moscow to a dacha for a little country vacation!

But the car was not there. Madame S. stood still on the overpass and looked towards the spot where the car should be waiting as if she'd somehow missed seeing it. She could feel a tiny vibration in the cement overpass as though her train had already pulled out of the station. Madame S. remembered that one time in winter her pupil had moved the car in among the parked cars and had come running with big frozen breaths back to the car, waving and shouting, "I bought coffee. Don't try coming

to me, you'll slip and break your neck. I'll pull around." But looking over to the parked cars, Madame S. didn't see her pupil waving, and looking at the two rows of cars she realized she didn't recall the color of the car she'd driven in every Thursday. It wasn't red. Or white. But what color was it? Dark, she thought, blue, maybe. Or grey. Something metallic. Maybe silver? It was probably as simple this time as that time in winter, when she'd gone into a store for a coffee. Or she was late. She'd never been late. But it could happen. Really, anything could happen to delay her even though she'd never been delayed before. Soon her old pupil would pull in to the turnaround, tooting her horn, flustered, apologetic. They might even be late for class. Madame S. should go and wait by the turnaround. Others waited. Two dark ladies. A girl with a backpack. But she could also stay here, on the overpass, above the empty track where she had a bigger view and could probably spot her pupil pulling into the station and get down to the turnaround by the time the car pulled up. She was sure that even if she didn't remember the color, she'd know the car as soon as she saw it.

She had never before lingered on the overpass. From here things looked different. Or were actually different. Had she gotten off at the wrong stop? A stop shy? What then? She looked for a reassuring marker but the north and southbound platforms looked larger than she remembered and slightly turned around.

Looking down among the weeds and blown newspapers on the tracks, she saw a man's dress shoe. It seemed from the way it caught the sun that it might even be patent leather. Who loses a shoe? Especially a dress shoe. She looked for its mate.

The vibration inside the overpass was stronger now, and building up, and then there was the overpowering, noisy pressure of a train coming from behind, from the north. It was there behind her and then it was under her and Madame S. was holding onto the railing. Now Madame S. thought she should move away from the vibration but she couldn't let go of the railing to go anywhere. She was caught. A great powerful sensation. She had to stay put, weather it. Actually it was like weather, like getting caught in a sudden storm. That complete, that almost thrilling. She could feel it in her feet, in her hands and it travelled up, through her legs and up her arms, the pleasure of it pressing low in her. She just had to keep her

balance. It was dizzying. She tried to keep a forward spot, like the spot she held in pirouettes, but the commotion of the train cars, everything a metal thrum, a great shaking, metal and air, strain and speed and the train passing behind and under and pushing out in front: there was nothing not moving for her to hold as a fix.

Then the train was gone. It was silent below her and Madame S. was standing there holding onto the railing. She wasn't sure she could let go. She didn't want to. Not quite yet.

When she could look down, Madame S. looked and saw that the shoe hadn't been disturbed in the slightest. It was as it had been. It seemed showoffy, that shoe, glinting in the sun. And by extension the man who'd lost it. And then looking to the turnaround, there was her pupil waving, as if she'd been waiting all this time, and it was Madame S. who had been late, dilly-dallying. Or gotten lost. Her old pupil was waving impatiently. Madame S. waved back. "I'm right here," she said without any intention of having her voice reach her pupil.

Then Madam S. put out her foot to make sure she had her balance. There were old cracks in the cement that formed a jagged path. She made her way down the stairs.

Her student rushed toward her grabbing the overnight case saying, "Hurry now. You'll be late."

"This week everything burst into bloom," her pupil, Juliana, announced as they drove through the hilly streets. "Isn't it lovely?" She said it as if Madame S. had not been kept waiting at the train station at all. As if an apology wasn't in order for leaving her teacher alone at the station. As if Madame S. didn't have her own eyes to see how since last Thursday things had changed a bit. She could still feel a tremble in her stomach from the train moving under her. Despite herself, Madame S. had to admit the trees were truly something. The white dogwoods and the great bushy lilac trees posing in tiered skirts.

"The older girls have prepared something for you, Svetlana. I think you'll be surprised."

"What?" Madame S. said suspiciously, looking at her pupil and the big ring that flashed on her hand as it rode the steering wheel.

“What’s the surprise, Juliana?” She didn’t want to be surprised. Not by the girls and not by lawn after lawn costumed gorgeously in flowers.

The pupil laughed, “Would it be a surprise if I told? The girls would kill me.”

Well, wasn’t that exactly the difference? thought Madame S. Between her training and discipline and this fake school of ballet, who kills whom? The students should be afraid of the teacher, not this other way round, the teacher afraid of spoiling student fun.

“They’ve been working on it for weeks. You’ll have to wait till after class.”

The classes. There would be no surprise there. That was comforting now, somehow. The rest seemed exhausting, the trees with that bursting vivid green and the girls with some awful late surprise. Her own body was unsettled. The girls in class might be awful but at least without surprises. These girls were like girls in villages everywhere—mild, hopeful, thick ankled. There was no one here whose arms had a lyrical line to snap a heart. Okay, one was a turner. One had extension but strained too hard and the leg sagged after a moment or two. Maybe one or two would travel into the city for an audition. Maybe there would even be a summer session at Harkness or Joffrey. But there would be no Budapest. Or Paris Opera. No barons. Or flowers delivered to the backstage entrance. She felt grateful for mediocrity. She didn’t want to endure, didn’t feel she could bear enduring these girls trying to amaze her and her having to see another new thing.

“I’m looking forward,” said Madame S., and squinted against the dizzying proliferation of flowers and trees. It would be enough simply to keep her gaze straight forward on the road for the rest of the ride. Juliana was next to her, turning the wheel, talking about the end of the year recital. Of course not *Sleeping Beauty* in its entirety, condensed but retaining the three act structure. The parents always like something they recognize. And it was always a reliable school ballet. All the waltzes, court dances, mazurkas. A lot of chances for all levels.

“I’ve been working with Mary,” Juliana said. “Her Lilac Fairy is nice, a little stiff still. But we have time. That was yours, wasn’t it, Svetlana? One of your best. I’m sure you could dance it right now. The body doesn’t forget.”

Yes. From the first *port de bras* into the sweep of the *developpe a la seconde*, even now she could count the measures of the lilac variation. She could close her eyes and feel the rigor, the elasticity and tension. But it was gone. Igor was gone. She hadn't thought of Igor until today. Igor who could turn like steel, something new and industrial about his body in motion. She hadn't thought of him. Now he was gone. None of it was left. Even her St Petersburg gone, nothing left with a grand gesture to it.

Which girl? Which of these girls was Mary?

"How do I open the window?" Madame S. said. Her hand fumbled at the car door. "I need air."

Her old pupil pressed a button and the window slid down. The quick slipping of the window made Mrs. S. feel sicker. The vibration was still lodged in her. Something feral and excited low in the belly. She took narrow breaths, trying to maintain her gaze straight ahead.

The car turned into the church parking lot.

"We're here," her pupil said, as if Madame S. might be uncertain where they were. Two girls were rushing down the stairs. Was one of them the Mary learning her Lilac Variation? The girls were hurrying to the basement room where class was about to begin. Madame S. could feel it had already begun.

"Are you ready, Svetlana?" Her pupil, the director, had come around to open the car door. She held out her hand. Madame S. stood from the car without help and walked briskly toward the church. The afternoon light stung her in the eyes. She didn't stop or wobble. She kept her balance.

There. That would be the lesson today. Not to strain, not to get behind tempo. "Abandon, but not without control," she'd say. "Close your eyes," she'd say, instructing the pianist to begin the Tchaikovsky waltz. She'd make them stand still, eyes shut, while the pianist played the piece four times. "Do you see where you are? Do you see yourself performing each step inside each note?"

She leaned on the metal railing as she managed the three steps to the basement. Through the door's small window she could see them at the barre, relaxed, warming up. She opened the door and they quickly adjusted their line, spaced evenly apart. The girls kept their eyes forward, chins up, feet and arms in first position.

As she did each week, Madame S. announced, "We begin. Preparation one and two." The pianist struck the opening chords. Madame S. walked the length of the girls and felt them tighten fearfully as she stepped near. She made her way, tapping a hand, a shoulder, adjusting a hip. She stopped at one girl and put her hand flat under the girl's chin.

After barre she asked for a long adagio. Then a couple of combinations that demanded quick footwork. "Cleaner," she insisted. "Don't mark it. Dance. This is in fact a dance class," and she made a motion with her hand to have the front line switch with the back line.

"Keep a spot. Keep a spot," she shouted curtly as the girls did *pique* turns at an angle across the floor.

Finally, at the end of class, one by one, the girls curtsied. Then there was clapping.

Cloth napkins, plated cutlery, everything properly situated on the dining room table. At last the dinner. Beef! A beef stew, carrots and peas and potatoes. A side salad with dressing. A warm roll on the bread plate. The pupil's husband passed Madame S. the butter and she knifed a thick pat of softened butter onto her plate. Then another. Madame S. tried not to look hungry or eat too enthusiastically.

"You really looked pleased with the girls today," the pupil said.

Madame S. nodded her head, but it was clear that wouldn't be enough. She took her time chewing then swallowed.

"You are doing well with them, Juliana," Madame S. said. "How you've gotten that big girl actually off the ground is practically a miracle." The two women laughed.

Then Juliana asked to hear again one of the old Bolshoi stories. Madame S. accepted a second helping. The basket of rolls came around again. Oh, those years! The years with Alexi! You can't imagine how it was then for us. Every day, a change. Thrilling. You never knew what he'd ask. So what, she invented few details. Why not? There was plenty of food still on the table. The pupil's husband and daughter excused themselves. There was more of the beef stew in the tureen. Juliana ladled out more for Madame S.. She managed slowly what was on her plate. The pupil could

listen to stories all night. Maybe the baron didn't quite insist he bring her to the seaside villa. Maybe there weren't telegrams and bouquets of flowers waiting at every stage door. There had been someone to care for Svetlana's costumes only. An extra ovation or the evening of praise and toasts by Danka after the performance. Who was left to say otherwise? Danka, Georgi, Tamariska. Madame S. gave everyone a nickname.

She forced herself to leave two spoonfuls of pudding in the desert bowl. But before they stood from the dining table, she finished the pudding.

"No, I have everything. I am just fine," she said when her pupil asked.

Then Madame S. went upstairs and settled onto the daughter's bed, the nice flowered coverlet folded down. The room had a bright orange and pink flowered wallpaper and an orange wall to wall carpet. Madame S.'s shoes were paired on the floor, her black skirt and blouse and cardigan hung over the chair as she creamed her feet, pressing over the gnarl of bunion with her thumbs. She flexed and pointed her feet ten counts as she did each night. Then she dangled them off the bed and beat sharply in petite battements. She tried to go looser and sloppier like the boy with his sneakers on the train. It was understood that for the train ride back to the city there would be a paper bag with an apple and two sandwiches in wax paper. She'd hold back, keeping the sandwiches for Friday and Saturday supper. Then four days when she would have the hunger as living proof. That brutal gratefulness she must endure. Every week there was Thursday.