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La Serre

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La Serre

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La femme qui rêve, qui pleure, qui conte un amour qu'elle
désirerait avoir, ne tarde pas à le créer.

[The woman who dreams, who cries, who recounts a love that she
would desire to have, does not hesitate to create it]

– Rachilde, *Monsieur Vénus*

It was the dead of winter. I had just moved to Paris, and had taken up a spare room in the apartment of my cousin in Montmartre. I had trained in painting, and though I dreamed of some kind of greatness and dizzying heights of beauty, I knew that I possessed no great genius. I found work designing illustrations for a London department store, but it was dull work, and it was not long before I tired of sketching compacts and perfume bottles.

So I had come here with the idea that I might find a place for myself in the theatre. Set design, I thought, in what they called the *avant-garde*. My cousin, Aubrey, was a journalist, with some experience writing about ballets. He politely pretended not to notice how ridiculous my aspirations were, ignoring my utter lack of sophistication, my pedestrian gaucheness in the face of *la vie bohème*. He kindly encouraged me as much as he could, and indulged my interest by taking me out most nights. I had hoped that I might meet some people with enough talent that they could grant me some by association.

One night, he told me he had heard of something underground, something secret – not the kind of thing he would ever review for his newspaper. There was no advertising. Nothing so formal. It was a seasonal ballet that only appeared in the longest nights of winter for just twelve nights. He knew nothing more.

We left the apartment later to be greeted by a bright night, the moon hung low and swollen in the sky. We chatted freely as we walked, scintillated by the clandestine feeling of the outing, by

the hidden door upon which Aubrey knocked to gain us entry. We grinned childishly to each other as it swung open.

There was no foyer – the space could barely be called a theatre. The room we entered was cavernous and full with spectators speaking low and soft. There were no seats, and the stage was not raised; it was simply a space on the floor outlined by a semicircle of lights. The audience, almost all men, stood shoulder to shoulder in the room. The ones at the front pressed the toes of their shoes against the lights but did not break the barrier. Ahead of them, clustered at centre stage, were twelve dancers draped in voluminous white silks, standing silent and still with their wide eyes unfocused. The lights on the floor cast the dancers' stretched, indigo shadows onto the bare white wall.

The dance began.

It was like nothing I had ever seen. Like nothing I had any desire to see, not at first. The ballets I knew were all grace, all swiftness and smoothness and the supernatural lightness of something holy.

But this was brutal. They stamped, stamped, stamped, and grunted and shrieked in time. It was almost like a dance of primitive man – perhaps the dance before man. There was no orchestra, no music of any kind in the sense I had come to understand it. All of the sound came from the mouths and bodies of the women on the stage. It was not discordant, as it had some pitch and a sort of savage rhythm, but it was utterly strange. It had a resonance that felt unlike any composition I had heard.

Some flitting moments of terrible lightness came upon their movements after a few minutes, when the pull of gravity was not so heavy and their hideous stamping abated. But somehow their grace was not a relief, was somehow still secret and hideous: they and their shadow doubles upon the wall broke apart and came together in spectral patterns that were indiscernible to me. Delicate and dazzling, like a spiderweb set on fire.

The audience was in a frenzy, slithering up and onto each other like gape-mouthed carp in a pond, though none of us ever crossed the border onto the stage. Eventually I was no longer able to make out the percussive bodily music of the dancers, which was entirely drowned out by mad hollering and the stamping of our own feet, and by the swelling of my roiling blood rushing to my ears.

As though to meet the challenge, the dancers' cries and the flurry of their movements grew faster and faster into a crescendo, their wails and shrieks pitching higher and higher until all at once they came to a shuddering stop. After a moment, the audience grew still as well.

One of the dancers moved forward away from the rest. She pulled her silks over her dark hair, then stepped forward across the border of lights. She moved through the men in the crowd, slowly turning, scanning their faces. Eventually, she took the hand of one of the men and brought him back with her out of the shadows, across onto the stage. The rest of the women slid noiselessly inward to form a tight crescent around them. The man's face, rapturous and eager as a servile animal, was trained on the woman who held his hands. She pressed down upon his shoulder until he knelt before her, his back facing downstage. She brought a small silver cup out from her robes, and a second dancer brought a lambskin flask out from her own, from which she filled the cup with dark red wine. The hooded dancer drank deeply, then let the cup slip from her fingers to the ground with a harsh clang. She pulled the man's chin downward until his lips were parted, then, to my horror and fascination, she let the wine fall from her lips and into his mouth. His body shook with the horrible ecstasy of it.

The dancers fell upon them and the lights were put out, plunging the room into black.

It was over.

Aubrey and I hardly spoke the next day. We didn't need to. We both felt the pull.

The next night, we returned, and then the next.

On the fourth night, as I turned to leave with the rest of the crowd, I was brought short by Aubrey's hand on my wrist. He stood with his back pressed against the wall, letting the rest of the audience file out one by one. When the room had emptied, he led me not toward the door, but across the lights and onto the stage itself. At the centre was a wooden door cut into the floorboards. He stamped hard, over and over, violently, his breath ragged in his chest. His desperation rendered his movements a pantomimic copy of the artful stamping of the dancers.

I did not try to stop him. I felt myself trembling, vibrating with anticipation.

Eventually the door gave way, and we hurtled down into the black. Aubrey pulled a candle out from his vest pocket, and with it we navigated our way through narrow corridors, ducking furtively under crossed wooden beams, until we finally reached a red door. Aubrey, suddenly timid, knocked so softly I was sure he would not be heard.

But then the door opened, and across the threshold stood a giantess. She loomed over us both, and as I peered inside at the rest of the women I realised that here, now that we were close enough to breathe their perfume, they were all several inches taller than we were. She beckoned us to enter, saying nothing, and so we did. No one spoke; there was a stillness in the air swirling with the misted scent of floral perfume and something herbal and burnt.

A small door at the back of the room opened and the final dancer entered. It was the high priestess – for that is what I had come to call her in my mind – and she had taken her hood back down to her shoulders, her raven-dark curls falling free. Her muscular throat was deeply flushed, her eyes feverishly bright.

One of the women approached and kissed her on the cheek. 'Renée', she said, bobbing her head in our direction. 'Si on les garde un peu? Pour jouer?'

The one called Renée came closer. She was breathing fast, as though she had just run a great distance. I had heard of some of the magical substances that artists in Montmartre drank or took into their lungs, and wondered what they might have in that secret back room.

‘Madame, I am sorry to disturb you’, Aubrey said. ‘But your dance has so disturbed me that I could not stay away.’

‘A strange reaction to repulsion, do you not think?’ she replied. ‘Instead of recoiling, you come closer.’

She turned to me now, and came so close that I could feel her ragged breath on my face. It smelled botanical, and sweetly metallic.

‘And what did you think of our performance, monsieur?’

Being caught in her regard felt like being struck by lightning. Blood swelled to flush my neck and face.

‘C’était comme si vous corporisiez les rêves, ou peut-être spiritualisez les sensations. Madame, vous avez fait l’impossible.’

She smiled widely, her deep and livid scarlet lips framing sharp, narrow teeth.

‘Call me Renée. And yes, stay.’

We stayed, we drank, we filled our throats and our veins with shifting mercurial things, until the realities of life faded and the smoke filled the windowless room so thickly it was hard to see. We left then – back up through the stage and out the door into the night air.

To the Seine. Where else? Where else to let our loose tongues speak freely, cry out loudly. Bottles in hand, we sang and spoke of art, of fire and genius, of ichor and worship and beauty. Above all, we laughed. Loudly, unashamedly, mouths fully agape and howling as though with jaws unhinged.

And below us, the Seine glittered with a crystalline lunar shiver. I remember so clearly, though my memory of the night otherwise is a haze, that it glinted crimson in the starlight. I imagined bleeding toes tripping across the surface, leaving a stain in their trail. I realised then that I had never really seen the Seine properly before, never understood that to sit on her banks with a bottle of wine was to feel the pulse and gush of a major artery of the universe.

At some point before dawn, Renée, dancing, pulled me against her. I suppose I must call it a dance, as I can think of no better term, though I swear to you it felt more as though she had made me a part of her – our embrace melted our two forms together at the breast into one whole.

Dawn broke. Her breath warmed my cheek as she said, ‘Come back to me.’

The spell was cast. My life from then on was defined by the sensation of her body pressed against mine. I wanted nothing else. It was more than desire. I dragged my hollow bones to her each evening and only left with my hunger sharpened.

I watched these women night after night like a man obsessed. Possessed. Their beautiful bloodlust and naked savagery felt as though it expressed a truth that I could only guess at. Their dance was as blinding as it was enlightening, and they moved before us through those shifting lights carrying an enormous question, a question they embodied wholly. They carried it with them perhaps not completely understanding it even themselves, like a great cat that turns in its cage, rubbing up against its enclosure, or like the electricity that shoots through the body without any other motive except brutality and the exquisite grace of the asking of the question.

I began to suspect that the men they took into themselves at the climax of each performance were the only ones that could truly see beyond the shifting lights and the haze. I began to want, desperately, to be initiated. I wanted the truth. I wanted the meat. I wanted my hunger sated, that question answered. My own desperation disgusted me, but I could not deny it.

Then, one night, they took Aubrey. Witnessing his calling was torture. The resentment I felt raged like a holocaust in my skull. I did not want to make my jealousy known, for I dreaded appearing to Renée cloaked in something so low, so I said nothing. I danced with her again as usual, drank, swayed like the tide beneath the underbelly-pale moon.

But Aubrey never reappeared after the show, and he was absent from his apartment the entirety of the next day.

The next night, before we left their dressing room for the banks of the river, I asked after him, softly, in the gentle curves of Renée’s ear. I couldn’t hide my weakness then, my anger, when

I was so close to her. My tongue flicked out from between my lips, the wet muscle asking for so much more than my words did.

‘Mon cher petit, mon petit prince... You are jealous? You want to know what happened to him? Where he went? What he felt?’ She drew me closer, and traced two fingertips across my eyelids, coaxing them shut. ‘What he tasted?’

She kissed me lightly, and drew away. Something warm and wet pressed against my lower lip, and I let my tongue slip tentatively out to greet it. It tasted like wine, but more herbal, more saline. It tasted gorgeous – like a masterpiece beyond anything I had ever seen. I opened my mouth wider, and let it trickle freely inside. When it was done she kissed me again, harder this time, nothing held apart from me. I nearly fainted.

She whispered, ‘I want you to tell me how I taste. I want you to tell me what you feel when I’m on your tongue – when I am inside your body.’

But I knew she already knew the answer – that she coursed through me and pooled like a bruise in my lower abdomen. Whatever disgust I felt – for even then, yes, I did guess as to what I had just sipped – was nothing compared to my need. She pulled away, and by the time my heavy eyelids could drift apart, she was gone.

Aubrey had still not returned by the following morning, and I had no more insight into what had become of him. I left again that evening hoping he would be one among the crowd. It was the penultimate performance, and I knew Aubrey would not willingly be absent.

He was not there. I asked after him again, standing this time across the room from Renée – determined to show strength, to fight the sanguine tide in my veins that pulled me toward her.

She shrugged elegantly. ‘Perhaps he is in our studio. One of the girls may have brought him there.’

‘And has not let him go’, said another.

‘Yes... perhaps he is indisposed.’

‘Le pauvre, so exhausted.’

They all laughed at that, and I found myself blushing. Renée watched me intently with her flashing eyes.

‘We do not normally allow men to enter’, she said. ‘But it is not strictly forbidden, you understand.’

‘I know just what to do’, said another. She took a small compact out of the depths of her robes and smeared my lips with the red within. ‘You must simply play the part.’

She took me by the elbow, and trippingly took me through that second door. The corridor was long and dark. My eyes had only just begun to adjust to the shadows when we burst forth into the light.

‘Bienvenue à la serre’, said Renée from behind me.

The studio was enormous, a towering glass-sided hothouse rimmed with deep green foliage and climbing tendrils. Strewn among the vegetation were silk cushions and shining silver conduits for absinthe and hashish. The smell within was sweet and deep and bruised, like the last of summer jasmine fallen beneath bare feet. The air was thick with it, and clouded with a haze of mist that left a slight sheen on my skin. Each panel in the glass was tinted so that the moonlight filtering through it onto the suspended moisture sparkled like the inside of a rainbow. It was beautifully warm. It felt like heaven.

I grew dizzy, as though I was intoxicated.

‘We rehearse here. And play a little’, she said, smiling. ‘You can search for your cousin if you like, but please do not touch the plants – they are delicate.’

I attempted to focus my eyes and look around me for any sign of Aubrey. Finally, I saw what looked like the dim shadows of men clustered on the other side of one of the panes of glass. There was no door that I could see, no way for me to enter the space myself. I sought Renée out again and asked who they were.

‘Ah, our benefactors’, she said.

‘Nos sauveurs’, said another.

‘Nos chevaliers servants.’

‘Nos princes.’

‘We would be nothing without them’, said Renée. ‘Don’t worry, mon cher, they won’t interrupt. They just observe.’

‘Could Aubrey not be among them?’

‘No, no. Please take those thoughts from your mind. I am sure Aubrey is fine, asleep in bed at home already. Here, have some hashish. Lay your head on my lap.’

I did not attempt to resist any longer. The languor in my limbs, my mind, caused by the warmth and the wet air, could no longer be denied. To my shame, I did not search any further for my own cousin. My own flesh and blood.

My head was still throbbing from the revelries of the night before when I quit Aubrey’s apartment again the next evening, only to be stopped on the staircase by an old woman.

‘Ne buvez pas, monsieur. Par pitié.’

‘Pardonnez-moi, madame?’

‘Do not drink their wine.’

‘And how does it concern you?’

‘Par pitié, monsieur’, she said again. ‘It’s for your own good.’

‘I have already emptied more than one bottle with them.’

‘No, monsieur. You have not yet tasted their true wine, or at least you have not drunk your fill. You may still be saved.’

Without another word, she disappeared behind a door. I continued on my way.

The men in the crowd that night were in a raging, delirious mania. I was almost certain that some number of them would penetrate the invisible barrier between the stage and the writhing horde. I, by contrast, felt myself wilting away, withering pathetically, in the very back of the room.

I was in despair – not out of worry for my cousin, no, but with the knowledge that this all would soon be over. I knew that these beautiful dancers would not last the rest of the winter; that they would disappear with the morning light like a light dusting of snow on cobblestones. I found myself weeping pitifully.

Then, a miracle: the crowd parted, and there was Renée, veiled, gigantic, perfumed and lithe, making her way toward me. I hardly dared breathe.

She took my hand, and initiated me into the mysteries.

I drank deeply from her lips. I was transported.

La serre had become a sacred wood, full of acanthus and some ancient, gnarled trees whose columnar forms dwarfed us all. The studio seemed now suffused with twilight, and an atmosphere of enchantment coloured my vision. The tendrils of smoke wafting through the air entered me and my whole being dilated, grew immense – I felt as though I contained all the terrible beauty of creation.

Renée's lips were at my ear, brushing softly against its folds.

'Il était une fois', she began. 'We were born upon the stage. We burst in upon it like steam from a wound in the earth. We danced gracefully, like spinning, tripping leaves on a cold winter wind. Every night, one of us would die, blood sticky and wet upon the stage. The next night, without fail, she would be born again as shadow, and another one of us would die. We loved this dance, this devilish debauchery, and though we mourned each sister who came to die of it, we rejoiced in the crimson on our toes and the revelations in the hearts of our audience. It was nothing like what they had seen before, these pastel Parisians who draped their wings with gold. We were dancing something true, our troupe of shadows.'

Dancing and death were all we knew. Eventually, on a sacred twelfth night, I came to wonder if I could gain us something more... if I simply refused to bend and break. I looked out at the red, sweating, puffing faces of the men before us and dreamed of something different. I leapt to them, with eyes wide open and teeth bared. My shadow sisters followed suit. Screams

followed this leap, and blood, and the gnashing of teeth. From then on, lips and hands rendered red, we twelve dancing spectres gained bone and flesh and marrow and blood.

We lived, and kept on living.

Sacrifice was necessary. Blood for the shadows, and flesh for their substance. But it did not need to be ours.

We are not cruel – we make the passing sweet. The juice of a few flowers can cause nectared reveries from which you would not want to wake, even if you had the choice.

Now you know our story. I have told it to you, because that is what we women do. We make the pain something else, something to hold, something to love, something to share. It's truth, the lights and the glitter. The drunkenness. The shade upon the surface. All truth.'

She kissed me again. I felt the scrape of her teeth on my lip, and a beautiful twinge of pain. I refused to let myself pull away. She took my hand and raised it to her white neck. My heart raced.

'Feel me. Here. Feel it rage. That heat', she said. Her eyes were wide, her nostrils distended. 'It's familiar, no? But wilder. You have this, or the potential for it. We can take it from you and create something that endures. We're kindred beasts, you and I. Sister species, made of the same dust. You're bound to that dust as you are now, and you'll return to it. Is that what you want? Or do you want to dance forever, and pierce the earth with staggering beauty? Don't bite your lip – cry out!'

I am one of them now. A shadow upon the surface, unspooled and stretched into a dark, quivering tendril. I am smoke – I feel thin and endlessly dilating, drifting, dancing. I am inhaled, coiled on her tongue, in her throat. Incandescent.

Our dance is eternal.