

31 Ms. Glass 1993 words

I recall, with lucid clarity, returning from my trip to town one Sunday, and finding Bridoux in the act of dragging his trunk down the pinstripe hall. It was one of two occasions where I had seen him out of uniform, the first of which followed appendicitis. You can imagine my distress at the sight of him: tattered pea coat, valet cap tucked tightly under arm, abandoned utility door propped open by foot. He explained, in brief and morose terms, that circumstances had arisen making his work difficult to continue. Pathetically enough, Bridoux had grown to be my closest, if not only, friend in the past six months at St. Augustin. The placid Algerian doorman had served over twenty years, and bloomed as a necessary source of stability.

My initial distress was at the scene of his escape. As I hauled my bags past the barre classes, down rat labyrinth halls, that feeling simmered in my veins. Because what you know all too well, my dear Hastings, is that it takes provoking to move a man from his home.

The early-setting November sun had been replaced by an O-stamp moon during technique rehearsals when I learned the news. Our evening instructor had left us to stretch while she conversed stirring in French with another teacher, taking a long drag of her cigarette and nodding sympathetically. It seems that they too were talking about the incident. I unraveled my mat and hung it over the barre where the other girls had already swarmed. The air held a malign weight. A disturbance. Unseen to the eye, but felt, like grainy shards of glass.

“Oh Neve, no one told you.” Kitty Simmons said pitifully, with a leg pointed and stretched away from her, muscles sharp and flexed; the blade of a knife. “Annabelle Hastings killed herself last night. It was terrible chaos, I’m so glad you weren’t there to witness it.” She said this in a dragged out manner, as if in some concealed self-awareness, she relished in telling the story. Jealousy is a rabid dog, I know this now, Hastings. Getting bitten is only a matter of time. “Two bullets right through the head. Supposedly it was the recoil from the first, but I find

that hard to believe. The second cleared three inches of the first.” With one leg still running the length of the wall, she brought her other leg up behind her head and hooked it there, the way you would bait a fishing line.

“What are you implying?” said Molly, Kitty’s fair-faced competition. Kitty laughed violently. “You don’t *really* think Annie pulled her own plug, do you? She didn’t have the stomach. This was intentional. Whoever did this shot twice because they were afraid of her coming back.”

Sour paste varnished the inside of my mouth. The reason for Bridoux’s sudden departure. I disappeared to the hall and let out a muffled choke. One of the older girls, dark-haired Ramona Beaumonte, approached me. I ducked my head and pretended to be interested in the Nutcracker brochures plastered to the wall. She leaned her shoulder against the mahogany paneling, her face reading of motherly solicitude, and lifted my chin with her thumb. “Annabelle was a beautiful dancer... a *brilliant* dancer. But her spot is empty now, and it’s our responsibility to honor it. I know it’s hard. But can you be good and try for me?” She brushed her fingertips against my damp cheek. I nodded and felt her hands on my face long after they left. We walked back to class in warm silence.

The instructor hurried in, rapping a ruler against her thigh. “Fourth position ladies, we’re running short on time.” I was floating in a stupid daze the rest of class, magnetized to the open doors clear across the room, where I could see the perfect round moon. Unshielded. A mouth opened in terror. Did you scream, Hastings? I can’t remember if I did.

Ramona’s advice on honoring your painfully empty spot did, however, give me a renewed passion for dance. My hunger was clean and raw. I didn’t just want perfection. I wanted permanence; *transcendence*. The winter performance was in two months, and auditions were a

matter of weeks. In my consuming appetite for greatness, I took all of the proper steps to be good. Four in the morning came fast, and when it did, I began. Hot showers and tiger balm, darning shoes and rolling calves, silent fouettés, lacerating piqués. Mendelssohn for when I rehearsed alone in empty classrooms, Stravinsky when among others.

During my pursuit for the latest lead, my previous admiration for Ramona had grown to infatuation. I discovered from eavesdropping on Kitty's gossip that she had carved a pretty path to Prima. Her technique spoke of nothing but authority. The only distraction from my disciplined training was my desire to be good for her. Tall and angular, her body was a Cathedral mosaic: sharp hips and collarbones; eyes that were never the first to break contact; dark figure gliding across stage, moving with power and stature.

Despite refusing to look at her directly, my wide-eyed fervor was anything but subtle. "Neve, right? You're new here, aren't you?" She said one morning, slipping in front of the doorway, big white teeth smiling down at me. "Most dancers have been here since primary school." The academy housed girls from six to those well into adulthood. It was tumultuous when a newcomer joined the elite corps. "I'm on scholarship. My old school only went to year ten, and I want to dance professionally."

"Scholarship? You don't see them hand out those too often. Must be talented. You should come sit with me at lunch sometime." She reached down and unclasped my nervous fist, pressing a slip of paper into my palm and closing it back up. Inside was a ripped corner of a map painting the forest grounds behind school. "Are you trying out for the lead?" I was a deer in headlights. She laughed; a deep and silvery voice. "Well, you should. We need some new competition. Show those other girls true greatness." I stood paralyzed even after she moved out from the doorway.

That night I learned, via Kitty's informative gossip, that you, Hastings, were rumored to be killed by a malevolence. One haunting the Academy, seeking revenge for her unfulfilled potential after a career-ruining "accident." The dancers called her Ms. Glass. A figure cloaked in black; no eyes or nose. Only a gaping mouth open in terror and bloody footprints trailing behind her. At first it was a story made up to cope with your loss. It's a hushed truth that those with arrogance and unmatched talent find glass in their pointe shoes. Though it seemed a perverse projection of fear, the first girl to suffer at her hands washed away any denial. It was raining relentlessly when a couple students found Molly, fair-faced and howling at the end of the bathroom, blood smeared in swathes against the white tile, cradling her ruined feet. It was announced in a full assembly that any incidents of violence against one another would result in not only expulsion, but immediate arrest. For a while it soothed some anxiety, but when the Academy director called in a priest to examine unsettled history, everyone began taking precaution.

I stopped practicing alone. My introversion and general friendlessness worried me. I made a mild acquaintance with Kitty Simmons, for shelter under her reign of confidence and popularity. Upon hearing of Molly's "casualty," her own words, she swiped some white hair back into her bun and trembled her lower lip. "What a tragedy we... we were so close. I've known her so long." Uncomfortable with her clandestine sadism and the buzz of her party, I slipped out one lunch and followed the map corner into the forest, desperate to see Ramona again.

She sat on a bench in a clearing wrapped in blankets of pine. "How did you know about this place?" Her nose snapped up. "I didn't think you'd come." She grinned and patted the empty spot next to her. Over the next hour I learned how she would come here when she was young and

needed to get away from the chaos of competition. Through a bit of coaxing I spoke more than I had in months. My stories of home; comical friendship with the late doorman; unease with the eerie occurrences and unwelcomeness of the Academy. But mainly we discussed our stress regarding the upcoming auditions, which were in two days' time. I learned that she too was auditioning for the lead role and felt equally hesitant. Both of our auditions would be in darkness: hers at dawn, mine just before curfew. When rising to leave for my next class, she grabbed my wrist and pulled me in, so that I stood between her legs, which were still sprawled. "Will you meet me here after your auditions? I've really... *really* enjoyed getting to know you."

"Meet you for...?"

"To celebrate." Her voice lowered. She moved out of her forward-sitting position and leaned back against the bench, adjusting her hips as she did so, rolling them up. "I... sur-yes. Yes I'll meet you."

I could've walked into a ditch stumbling back down the trail over roots and rocks like a sedated animal. Only the dread of auditions could snap me back. I spent my remaining time in the rehearsal room.

After a grueling afternoon, my legs rested numb on the cool floors. I shook at them until the familiar glass pains of pins and needles returned: A reminder that I was still alive. Smoky overcast clouds dimmed the room. The soft-blue edges of the ceiling and floors were shadowy and blurred. It was just Kitty and I, though she'd stopped practicing and was lying in the splits, filing her nails. The left ring finger had a distinct slice of blood down the front, reddish-brown caked underneath. She noticed my fixation. "Ugly papercut, isn't it?" She tutted at it, rounding the file over her perfect oval nail. One of Kitty's friends rushed through the open doorway with

crazed wispy hair, the ends frizzed in panic. We then learned about poor Elizabeth Hobart, who was in an induced coma for internal bleeding after drinking glass in her morning smoothie.

My audition came and went in a matter of minutes. My dancing was terrorizing; divine. It echoed and illuminated the lamplit room in carnal flashes of death. All of my burning fear and lust boiled over in my dancing, scalding me from wrist to bloody heels. I didn't dance well.

I danced *brilliantly*.

In the hall I noticed a sliver of white hair. Lip in a bitter line. Kitty. The news must've gotten out to her that I did well in auditions. The head turned and disappeared. I had to tell Ramona the good news. I followed the path back through the root-tangled nest, not once checking over my shoulder. A stroke of dark hair blended gracefully against tree bark. She stood lax, back to a pine. I approached her. "I'm so proud of you." Her hands stroked against my cheekbone. My fingertips were warm and prickling. She pulled me in by the waist.

"You were so good for me."

Her grip on my waist tightened. The heel of her free hand skimmed gently up the back of my neck, and as I waited for her fingers to run through my hair, something hard pressed against my skull.

"But... I just couldn't bear seeing you in glass shoes. You don't deserve that pain. Greatness is earned. And you, my dear, earn greatness in memory." My eyes darted up to meet hers, jagged and piercing; black shards of glass. I felt her heartbeat in my chest as she switched off the pistol's safety. Finger on the trigger. My eyes refusing to leave hers.

And then—and then, Hastings— She pulled it!