

The Piper's Fife

She cupped a brandy snifter with both hands and gazed down into the swirling cognac as she spoke.

Indianapolis. When I was seventeen, I appeared in a ballet in Indianapolis. There was a talent scout in attendance. He was looking for young, mostly women, whom he could recruit. He liked what he saw in a couple of us on stage and offered to fly us to New York for tryouts with the New York City Ballet.

My parents agreed to let me go. They didn't have much money, and I guess I'd become a burden to them, even though I was their only child. I think they wished me well, but I could tell that they were just as happy for themselves as for me.

And I was more than willing to go. I'd been receiving what were allegedly free dance lessons. But they weren't really free. We had a high school teacher who sponsored this "free" ballet instruction. He would show up at our dance sessions and he ... well let me just say that he tried to have his way with us. We were just kids! It wasn't clear at first what he was doing ... I mean ... to put it bluntly, he was an authority figure who abused young girls. And I was one of his victims. I tried to tell my parents, but ... Aaah! That was so long ago! ... So, you see I was quite ready to leave.

New York. After the tryouts in New York, I was accepted into their dance company on a trial basis. It meant endless rehearsals and travel. But it was an exciting life. And then it finally happened. I was given a major part in a ballet to be performed in Sao Paulo, Brazil! I was unbelievably excited! I thought I had arrived!

However, my good fortune didn't last long. The day before the performance, we had a brief run-through on the stage where it was to be held, and I was practicing an allegro movement—a *sissonne*, it's called—where you thrust yourself in the air—one leg straight ahead, the other bent behind you . . . I'm sure you've seen it, if you've ever been to a ballet. But I came down wrong. I broke my ankle. And that was that. It was my only real chance at a career as a ballerina.

She sighed and, for a time, fell captive to her own silent muse.

New York City. Before I was shuffled off to New York—still back in Indiana—I had already learned something of the nature of ballet. It's governed by a set of rules. Strict rules. And if you want to be a ballerina, you have to master them in minute detail. But mastering them is more than meeting the demands they place on you physically—daunting as that can be—which it surely is; ballet is also rich with emotions. When you dance, you can allow your

mind and body to become one, fully ensconced in music and movement. Your sensations can reach such heights when your timing is exact and precise. And you find you're in a kind of zone. A silent exultant zone. You're not consciously thinking, just allowing your body to take over. It's a personal 'letting go.' A soulful escape into a blissful reality.

I only had the momentary hints that dance could be this liberating from the self, until I came to New York. I tried to bring all that I felt I had learned, but I was immediately confronted with what at first threatened my future as a dancer. My first instructor brought us onto the floor and asked us to perform some movements that he demonstrated for us. We struggled to be technically precise, just as we were taught. Memorize the movements. Memorize them in every detail. But we were not free in our execution. And our instructor was not sympathetic with our struggles.

Then, one day, he seemed ready to give up on us. And he quoted Ballanchine: "...ballets are here and gone, like flowers or butterflies ...dance is an ephemeral art of the present ...". And it suddenly became clear. Memory is not history. Memory in dance is what you strive for in mind, body, and soul. It's a memory of the perfection that you seek and that you know so well that you have no conscious recall. You're simply in the moment, all the time.

But even with that revelation, I had not freed my-

self from the distracting inhibitions of sexual allure that I felt may show in my dance. I struggled with it. After all, you are placing your youthful body on public display. And there's no denying that the movements themselves can be overtly sensual and erotic.

However, those movements are choreographed with intricate precision. There's simply no room in their execution for sexual arousal within the performance itself, regardless of how sexually suggestive the dance may appear. So, I learned to concentrate. And with that I become a dancer . . .

. . . Hmm! It's a great irony: Dance had become my salvation from those unspeakably ugly, frightening moments of my youth that dance itself had once enabled.

She took a sip of cognac; then another. A wistful melancholy overtook her countenance. She didn't look at me when she spoke again.

New York. After the incident in Brazil, when I broke my ankle, I returned to New York, believing that I'd be able to rejoin the company and return to the stage. Of course, that never came about. The ballet company took care of me for a while. But I was never able to perform at the same level again.

Not knowing what else to do, I eventually took the GED to get a high school diploma. It turned out that that didn't really do me any good, because I managed

to obtain a modeling job, and you don't need a degree for that!

While I was convalescing, I continued to show up at the studio and I attended all of their performances. I witnessed the various routines that were being rehearsed, and I began to take notes. Initially, I was sort of doodling with descriptive adjectives that expanded into phrases and eventually I was writing dance reviews. They circulated among the members of the dance troop and found their way to the desk of a media mogul, who lived in the world of fashion, but kept one foot in the dance scene. I was introduced to him at a party by the head of the dance studio. His name was Benjamin Tyler . . .

“I'm pleased to meet you, Ms. Wycliff.”

I smiled, not knowing what to expect from him.

“Mr. Tyler is our biggest critic.” There was laughter between the two celebrated New York powerbrokers. “Now, if you'll permit me, I must see to the other guests. So, Lilly, I'll leave you in good hands.”

As he walked off, Tyler turned to me and spoke in a faux secretive voice: “Actually, I am their biggest fan.” He smiled good-naturedly at me. “But, I'm also a big fan of modern dance, and I must be faithful to it. And, if you'll pardon me for being so forward, I have read one of your reviews, and you appear to be of a similar persuasion.”

Before I could say anything, a tall, flamboyantly dressed, middle-age man, with a long chock of wavy,

shoulder-length, silver-gray hair made a brusque, boisterous appearance. “There you are!”

Tyler seemed a little ruffled by the man. “My dear Sylvester! You always show up at the most unexpected moments!”

The man smirked, turning his gaze toward me. “Aren’t you going to introduce me?”

“Ms. Wycliff, this is Sylvester Fontaine. Known to some as . . .”

The man interrupted him, raising his already boisterous tone of voice: “Never mind that, Tyler!” He nodded slightly in my direction. “Most delighted, Ms. Wycliff.”

“Mr. Fontaine.”

“Since your friend here is not inclined to give a proper introduction, let me tell you how much I admire your presence this evening.”

I had no idea what he was talking about!

“Sylvester . . .”

“No! Now, you’ve had your turn with this young lady!” He moved closer to me and cast an unwelcome gaze into my eyes. “I have watched you, Ms. Wycliff . . . let me say . . .” He raised his finger to the air as if to preempt any objection. “. . . *move about the room.*”

I took a step backward.

“Don’t tell me you’re not here to be seen! Everyone is here to see or to be seen. I’m here to see. And you are here to be seen. Now don’t deny it!”

“Sylvester! I think the lady doesn’t appreciate this

talk!”

He turned to Tyler. “Well, maybe she will appreciate why I bothered myself to engage her in conversation!”

I was dumbfounded. I looked back and forth between Tyler and Sylvester Fontaine.

“You see, Tyler, I want to ask her to audition for a spot on the runway.”

She was smiling as she spoke.

I laugh to myself now whenever I think of that party. I wasn't to know that those two men were both later to play a significant role in my life. At the time, I felt vulnerable, fearing that these two middle-aged men were just . . . well, just out to see what I would do to get ahead. How far would I go? *Ha!* It turned out that good ol' Sylvester was gay! *He* was the one, not Tyler, who was sincere . . .

Actually, that's not fair. Tyler was also sincere, but he was just feeling me out, so to speak. I was later to learn that initially he was genuinely interested in meeting the woman behind the review that I had written. Sylvester, on the other hand, was on the lookout for new blood to fill his next show . . . I would prove to be a quick study . . .

I went to his studio. He was sitting on a chair in front of a drafting board. He stood and abruptly walked toward me when I entered.

“Oh! Come in! Come in! So good to see you. I am terribly busy. But I need to . . .how do I put it? I need to determine if you’ll do. I mean, can you show my designs to their best effect? . . .Do take off that coat. Now, those shoes! Well, let’s try it.”

He spoke rapid fire. All I could do was comply.

“Now, turn around! . . .Mmm Hmm. Yes. OK, walk!”

“Walk?”

“Yes, WALK!”

“Where?”

“Go to the door and walk across the room toward the window there.”

“No, no, no! I know you’ve been a ballerina, but it’s not your body that’s on display! It’s the clothes you’ll wear! Try again!”

I took a dozen slow steps, crossing my feet with each step.

“Better! Better! Now, let me see . . .Here!” He handed me an umbrella. “Now, I want you to walk again. Improvise with this! And I want you to think that you’re being watched.”

I took a step.

“No! No! Do not smile! It’s the clothes you want to be the focus! Make your face as impassive . . .yes as impassive as . . .That’s IT! . . .Now, the umbrella! Improvise with it! It’s not to appear a burden! Make a show of indifference! . . .Think: ‘the umbrella needs you!’ . . .Yes! Yes!”

A brief derisive smirk spread across face.

Grand Bahama. I was actually able to make pretty good money as a model, particularly when I was working the runway, and the good times continued for a while. But, I was always self-conscious on the runway. It was an acting job. I never really liked it. I still had that ballerina suppressed inside me.

Eventually I wasn't . . . well, I was no longer twenty-something. The only modeling work I could find was clothing for magazine displays. I had long since cut ties with my parents, and really everyone back in Indiana. I seemed to be down on my luck.

However, I still knew the models and the moguls of the fashion scene in New York. And I attended their parties. At one of those parties, where they were schmoozing potentates, I was introduced to an older man who, it turned out, was a Lieutenant Colonel in the Army. His name was Charles I. Maddox. He came from a wealthy New England family, was well-connected, and he was divorced.

I continued to see him at the fashion events, and he began to show an interest in me. He was old enough to be my father, but I played along and he was eventually to give me an easy out. I could marry this older man and share his retirement aboard his yacht in the Bahamas. It was either that or the humiliation of posing in sporting outfits for catalogues and business flyers.

I don't know what I hoped for exactly when I married him. He was true to his word. And he showed me a kind of disciplined respect that was nonexistent in that vulgar world of fashion. So, it gave me a release from an artificial existence that I was leading. I was grateful. But it was more of a respite from a restless, repressed despair than an answer to a prayer.

I have to say that it was, at first, a very pleasant, and even exciting time. I was unburdened, to be sure, but it wasn't long before our age difference became too much. He didn't seem to want to go anywhere, or do anything. Just sit around and drink rum and watch videos and play cards and talk war stories with his old Army buddies, who were always dropping in. I found myself mired down in the tedium of endless days aboard his yacht devoid of any meaning or sense of purpose at all. The gaiety had left me. I had to return to the living. And I soon left my good Lieutenant Colonel husband. We divorced after a couple of years, and I went back to New York.

He was generous in our divorce. And I returned to New York and to the parties I had found myself once again craving . . .

So, that was that. I left him. I just up and left him. I had gotten what I wanted. And, for a time, he got what he wanted. Now, I could live as I wished. And I felt no regrets about the consequences for him.

New York, NY. I was finally able to afford a nice

apartment in New York. There were endless parties. I always had nice clothes. But I never stopped going to the ballet. I continued to write down my take on the performances. And Benjamin Tyler kept showing up, seemingly wherever I went. He was kind to me. Published some of my 'reviews' and suggested to me that I should begin to write reviews of the fashion shows. And I did write them, but with a twist. I didn't just describe the new designs with a breezy flair that critics seemed to rely upon. I decided to write the reviews from a different perspective. Rather than how the new fashions appear to the viewer, I wrote about what it would feel like to wear them.

It was only over the course of the next year or so that Benjamin Tyler began to show more interest in me than in just our business relationship. He was married and some twenty years my senior. But by now, I had *my own 'credo'* when it came to these kinds of overtures. There were two essentials. The man must show me respect and he must be rich. Benjamin Tyler filled the bill.

However, I made it clear that I was not to be his intimate 'girl Friday,' as long as he was married. I was certainly not the only reason for the breakup of his marriage. Ol' Ben had a number of dalliances, but it was shortly after my intentions were made clear to him that the divorce occurred. And it wasn't long after that that I became the new Mrs. Tyler.

Like his previous wife, I looked the other way when

it came to his little affairs. In fact, I welcomed them. They relieved me of having to keep him satisfied. And they gave me license to seek out my own ‘pleasures.’

We developed a kind of relationship that was accommodating to us both. I would become his ‘trophy wife’ ... *Hmph!* ... *Yeah!* ... And I played the part ... but I also secured a few concessions from him. And we’re still married. However, he’s pushing seventy now, and he’s grown a little weary of the travel between his home in Hollywood and the various fashion centers. So, I began to cover for him.

The arrangement has worked out well. Better than I expected actually. My travel schedule is so full that I hardly spend any time with him at all. And he appreciates the fact that I can put a face on his businesses that seems agreeable to the public ...

Not a bad arrangement for me. I spend most of my time in New York, or traveling. New York, Milan, Paris—and I only travel first class! So, I drink cognac and live the ‘high life.’

She cast an impish look my way.

And if I decide to take a side trip on a whim ... Well, that’s part of the bargain ...

She continued to stare.

So, what does that make me?

A dismissive, sardonic smile met my silence.

Well, you're right about me. You see me as a rich, self-indulgent, aging woman beyond her prime. Now don't deny it! You thought it, didn't you?! ... And it's true ...

I suppose my bitterness is of my own making. The virtues of the 'high life'—if there are any—are superficial in the extreme. Much like the cognac I drink. It removes me from reality. And all the while my life is passing me by ...

I was once a beautiful woman, you know. And now, I'm only rich ... *Humph!* ... I've never really known love. Not really. I've never had to ... But I did live for a time ... A time when I was a ballerina ...

The brandy snifter she held in her hands was empty. She ran a finger slowly along the rim of the glass.

You know there are a lot of pockets of 'would-be-wannabe's' in New York: would-be writers and poets in Greenwich Village; would-be fashion designers and architects on Madison Avenue; would-be actors in and around Time Square; would-be financial wizards on Wall Street; would-be musicians and dancers ... It makes you wonder: Why are there so many? I suppose it's because out of the army of would-be-wannabes trying to make it big, you get Norman Mailers and Alvin Aileys. But maybe it's not so important that in the end you actually make it 'big,' only that you make it ...

... Yeah, I was one of those would-be-wannabes! And I made it for a time ... a time when I could 'soar among the clouds' ... even if only for a brief while.

— Milton H Marquis