

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/4

Nina Rubinstein Alonso
The Redhead Number 37

SIXTY GIRLS LINED UP can't see how they look because the mirrors are draped with paper. They side-glance, eyes outlined in mascara befitting potential swans, sizing up other bun-heads. The overhead fluorescents are harsh, the required black tank leotards flatter no one, worse with plastic numbers pinned to the waist. They wear seamed mesh pink tights and pointe shoes--no leg warmers, no skirts, no hide-my-butt fluffy junk.

The director, Marina Williston, is a square, bulky woman in a green-patterned dress, blond hair clipped short.

She says, "First five girls come forward, point your right foot to the side, arms in second position," so she can check proportions, bone structure, anatomical contours. Muscles must be firm, no hint of fat, legs long, the face not necessarily pretty-pretty, but even-featured under spotlight glare.

Marina studies them through her gold-winged glasses like an officer reviewing would-be recruits. "Next five," she says.

Eliminations start with 'body cuts' noted on our file cards—torso long, hips wide, legs short, head large, feet stiff.

Thirty-five of the sixty are dismissed without dancing a step. They find their bags in the jumbled pile at the back of the studio and depart in silence. Marina's drinking coffee and eating a wedge of pastry, years beyond worrying about her own waistline. She has a quirky, sarcastic way of speaking, but says nothing now as she's the final judge, no matter what anyone else may think.

Victor Abrams, the ballet master, leads the remaining twenty-five through a barre showing technical level, style of training and coordination, then we share notes and suggest more eliminations. Marina says, "Thanks so much for coming," and reads the numbers of the girls still in the running.

Eight of the original sixty get to dance in the center. The others must be audition veterans because only one looks more than routinely disappointed, a brunette who's likely the best dancer from somewhere, but five foot nine is too tall for. She shoves the studio door open muttering, and though we can't hear, Marina notices, whispering to me and Sylvie, "She'd be troublesome to work with even if she was the right height, so good riddance." We're trained to accept defeat with grace, maintain discipline, no bitching or whining.

Choreographers call the body 'the dancer's instrument,' though it's not a flute you can trade for a new one or a guitar you can restring. Modern dance is more flexible, not tragic if your foot doesn't point fully, or if your stride is closer to soccer player than swan. Ballet requires 'the instrument,' and bodies that don't fit the image get brief glances, if they get any glances at all. It's frustrating to work with someone who moves well, but whose body doesn't have balletic proportions as there's no way to revise physical structure.

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The girls move across the studio one at a time, sixteen beats apart, a pattern of bourrées, pirouettes, glissades, piqués to arabesque, satin hooves clattering lightly. They're all well-trained, but my eye goes to number 43, Luz Rodriguez, a dark haired girl with angled brown eyes and subtle musicality.

Ballet is regimented, but the best dancers add something, lyrical sensitivity, artistic energy. The audition's nearly over, and the pianist, Marina's husband, is rippling his fingers in case she wants him to play another sequence. He knows what a special dancer looks like because he's accompanied ballet classes for years. Once when we were chatting, Herbert, a tall, gray-haired man in blue aviator glasses, said that years ago Marina was so small he could put his hands around her waist, sharing a sensitive memory. Occasionally their daughter visits to help in the office, a solid, non-ballerina physique.

Number 28, Amber Corey, has a smooth arabesque and liquid port de bras, not as strong as Luz Rodriguez, but they're both the right size, between five-four and five-six. On my card I put 43 first and 28 next, the same choices as Victor and Sylvie, hoping Marina will agree, as she has the last word, the only word that matters.

She sips her coffee while checking our cards, then addresses the eight dancers: "We need one company girl, but there's also an opening in the apprentice program, and apprentices may receive a company contract after a year if things go well. You'll hear from us in a few weeks." She's recently signed an apprentice boy, so after this audition we should be set for the season, barring injuries or other surprises.

After the room empties she announces, "I like the redhead number 37, Dana Baxter"

"What about 43 and 28," asks Victor, ballet master.

"43 reminds me of Elisa Connors. Remember last year, that girl who gained weight and quit right before Nutcracker? And 28? Pretty, but not that put together. Maybe in a while she'll be ready."

"What about apprentice?" I ask, troubled she's judging Luz by irrelevant association with another disappointing dancer and brushing off Amber. Victor's cracking knuckles, his nervous habit.

Sylvie, a senior teacher, tries, "Dana's good, but not as strong as either of the other two." I nod agreement, but protest is useless as Dana's a redhead, and Marina likes redheads on stage.

"Not sure either of them are what I need. There's a nice girl in the school, Lisa Corcoran," Marina adds.

We've all taught Lisa Corcoran, a mid-level dancer, nothing spectacular, and the word 'nice' is our fall-back term meaning 'good,' but not pre-professional material.

"Sometimes I like to give a long shot a chance," says Marina, grinning impishly as she stands up to leave, brushing pastry crumbs off the wide front of her dress. Sylvie's frowning as if about to express disagreement, but doesn't risk it, just pauses and says she needs to pick up her little boy.

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Victor's glance hints 'enough talk,' meaning bite your tongue and don't say what you're likely to regret.

"I could use a latte, how about you," he whispers, and we walk to Sail-Away Cafe around the corner on Tremont Street.

"I have questions," stirring my chai. I'm closer to Victor than anyone on staff, know he understands how things work in the company, but not sure how much he'll tell me as I'm a junior teacher.

"What's on your mind, Carrie," he says as he rips open a packet of sugar and sprinkles precisely half into his latte.

"Aren't Lisa Corcoran's parents the ones who donated funds for the new Nutcracker costumes?"

Victor's watching sugar crystals sink through frothy milk into his latte. "Yes, major donors. Okay, looks bad, but the old costumes were thread-bare, falling apart, and we needed new ones, especially party scene, Snow and Flowers. Sylvie says Dana Baxter was trained by Marina's friend Elsa Kingsley, which I hadn't heard."

"Why bother holding an audition if she's already made choices? She ignored our notes, passed over two better dancers for a donor's daughter and her friend's redhead."

"Possibly she's not sure what she'll decide until the last second, though she has a thing for redheads on stage, also senses how a dancer may develop, watched the audition, made her choices. Try not to take it personally that she didn't agree with us. About Nutcracker funding, that's another consideration."

"So even though the redhead Dana isn't as strong as the other two, Marina suspects she could blossom into a star, and Lisa Corcoran gets to be an apprentice because her parents are big donors?"

"I was hoping she'd choose Amber for the apprentice slot, talented and well trained."

Victor performed with a Canadian company, started teaching for Marina after back injuries. He's realistic about the need for compromise, doesn't complain about how decisions get made or deny that the best dancers were passed over and staff comments ignored. Marina's the boss, and no matter how Victor rationalizes it, she chose her friend's redhead and the kid with the rich parents. Maybe I need to accept the way things work, need to keep my mouth shut or I'll lose my job.

Years ago my VW bug was slammed, rear-ended in a five car collision on Storrow Drive, neck and back whip-lashed. I healed slowly, no more performing, glad I can teach.

Though I suspect the answer won't satisfy me, I can't resist asking, "What about 43 and 28?"

Victor's checking his watch as he has another class. "They'll bounce back, explore other options, accept audition rejection as routine, move on, let it go," patting me on the shoulder.

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I finish my chai, have to get back to the studio, too, as I'm covering a late class for Bob who just called in sick.

"He's hung over again" Victor says as we walk up Clarendon Street back to the studio.

"Figures," I say, not sure how to 'let it go.'