

THE PERFORMANCE

by

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CHAPTER ONE

Let me tell you something about Anyaskaya d'Borovik. With a name like that there's no ignoring her, not in the highest circles, not in the lowest. Harder yet is ignoring the severe beauty of her firm, sensuous mouth and cheekbones and dancer's flowing grace. Nor does gazing away from her raven-black hair and dark-eyed, aristocratic bearing prove any easier. This erect, always self-possessed air isn't an affectation but something real, something passionate, springing from undying memories of her recent ancestors -- all high born, White Russian exiles long scattered in drastically fading numbers across the world, the very few still alive skirting poverty near death. But not Anyaskaya. While hardly rich, she's managing quite well, having been born thirty-five years ago into New York City's churning, unceasing energy. And she's flourishing here, making her life often radiant far beyond what money alone can bring. Each day for her isn't merely a day but a sojourn into something more earnest, more splendid in her constant search for ways to vanquish the mundane. Today's hardly an exception but could prove much more fraught than that.

This uncertainty started on a warm autumn afternoon months ago in South Hampton, when Anya's most trusted, steadfast friend for years, Evan Donegal, a prominent, irreverent New York journalist, spies Henri Mellington, still wearing his

tennis clothes, suddenly entering a vibrant, end-of-season beach party, crowding the Mellington estate's huge veranda, over-lording the slumbering Atlantic.

“Over there, Anya. That's him.”

Anyaskaya at once ceases musing over the placid waves barely touching the shore and begins carefully appraising this Henri Mellington, standing amidst a hectic circle of revelers eager to talk to him. And he's addressing them bored, his eyes peering around for something more engaging. *Good*, Anya's assuring herself, having no doubt she could change that mood.

“Alright,” Evan's urging, “introduction time. Let's go.” And he begins hastily leading Anya forward just as a band starts playing. And an eruption of dancing's unfolding immediately all around them along the crowded veranda. But even amidst this commotion, Evan's catching Mellington's eye.

“Hey there, Henri,” he's finally calling out with a wave. “I want you to meet someone.”

Mellington gazes first with a jaundiced look at Evan -- then a surprised one at Anyaskaya.

“Well, that doesn't look like too much of a chore.”

“No, Henri, I don't think so.” And Evan steps aside. “Anya, this is our host.”

“A pleasure to meet you, Mr. Mellington,” she says, feeling no need at all to bat her eyes. He's already staring unblinking at her, stroking his just graying banker's mustache, getting more and more engrossed in appraising her.

“Anya ...? I believe I've heard that name before.”

“You might have. I know your aunt Gwyneth very well.”

“Oh, yes, aren’t you a dancer? A controversial one”

“I guess so. Some of my concerts have been called that.”

“Well, glad you came by today.”

“Actually, Gwyneth suggested it. She wants us to talk. She’s out of town, you know.

“Out of town, oh yes. On one of her, should I say, other-worldly journeys.” And he smiles an amused, knowing smile. “Do you know about those?”

“Very well.” But Anya says no more, the whims of that powerful woman are not an easy subject for her to discuss. Mellington, his eyebrows rising, seems to understand.

“So why did she want you to speak to me?”

“She’ll be away for months. To India this time. She’s strongly backed my most important performances. And I’m about to put together, perhaps, my most important one of all,” Anya explains, betraying a hint of worry.

“That sounds serious.”

“It is.”

The merriment along the veranda’s rising to its full crescendo. And in the din Anya’s leery of venturing into any complicated explanations. But Henri’s already quite taken with her, she can see that. *So get on with it!*

“Why don’t I come by your office tomorrow, Mr. Mellington, and we can talk over financing this performance? Gwyneth wants us to do that.”

Henri Mellington laughs:

“Ah yes, what that lady wants, that lady gets. No doubt about that. But let’s meet in more pleasant surroundings. No?” And he’s quickly waving someone over. “My assistant will give you my number. Call in a few days.” Then while shaking her hand as they’re parting, he peers at her again with awkward fascination before striding off. And soon Evan Donegal’s hurrying up beside her.

“Well, well, looks like your financing problems might be over.”

“Could be,” Anya’s acknowledging warily. “But one way or another, I’m afraid it’s still going to cost a little.”

II

For the next few days Anya’s in no hurry to make that call -- not that she’s uneasy at going forward with it, not in the least. Showing urgency, however, to theatrical angels before a check’s signed simply isn’t a good policy. *Keep them waiting*, she’s reminding herself. And she’s too shrewd not to comply. Regardless, though, of her shrewdness and a remarkable discipline rooted for generations in the rigorous, abiding nature of the d’Borovik family, especially on her father’s side, she, nonetheless, can be quite impulsive, often adding tension and the unknown to both her art and her life. But this time *no impulses* she’s demanding. And for a few days she keeps waiting resolutely for his call. Then sure enough it comes:

“I, uh ... thought I’d hear from you by now.”

“Oh, I’ve been meaning to call but things keep coming up.”

It's bothering her that she's playing him, but that's New York's theater world. Getting her dance production staged by, yes, any means must go forward -- more than ever. What she's striving for isn't simply another striking theatrical spectacle, uh-uh. It's a calling now, she's acknowledging vehemently, an urgent, persisting one.

"I'm riding at the East Hampton Polo Club tomorrow in a major tournament."

Mellington's telling her now proudly. "You know that place?"

"Yes."

"Why don't we meet there for a drink?"

"Tomorrow? Well, hmmm ... okay."

Watching rough polo in strong sunlight the following afternoon's proving, she must admit, very thrilling as she's admiring the swift, powerful horses tearing across the field, sending the turf flying and crowd jumping to their feet. Later after the match down in the bar, she's noticing Henri's strutting, athletic frame and look of triumph at his team winning the day.

"What are you drinking, Anya? They've some very old brandy."

"No, I don't drink much. Hardy ever."

"Now that's surprising. You seem like such a modern woman."

"Modern in some ways," she says enigmatically. "Ancient in others."

She doesn't allow the subject to go any further, leaving Henri yearning surely to hear more. And when they meet again a few days on and then at his insistence only a few days later, he finally presses her:

"Ancient, modern -- what did you mean by that?"

“I don’t really want to go into it right now. But I’ve enjoyed learning about your polo, Henri, and going to the theater and dining with you at the Carlyle. But can’t we, please, start talking seriously already about my performance.”

He’s been obviously putting that off, guaranteeing more and more of her attention, and seems stung at her sitting beside him tonight in a famous French restaurant for any other reason than his charm.

“Do we have to deal with that here?” he says annoyed, despite trying to hide it.

“But that’s exactly what I have to deal with. I’ve been waiting.”

Their conversation turns suddenly subdued and remains that way for the rest of the evening. And only when settling the check does he inform her curtly.

“Alright. Send me a budget.”

Though Henri’s hardly the only one she’s met with ample funds and a hunger to bed challenging, attractive women, especially creative ones, he’s the most powerful of them. And seeing his emotions toward her stirred tonight so quickly beyond simple desire is beginning to concern her. *But there’s no turning back*, she’s urging, not if this performance gets staged *on schedule*, considering the grueling months of preparation ahead. And for the rest of the week she keeps pressuring her accountant to put together budget numbers, then fires them off in an email, asking for a quick response. And it comes but not quick -- caught in the hard-to-get game she convinced they’ve both already begun playing.

To: <anyadance@gmail.org>

Let's talk about what you sent me but I think it's best we discuss it at a week-end party we're having next Saturday at the Mellington estate up in Newport. We can go into details there and enjoy the perfect weather we're having. I've important things to deal with after that. I strongly suggest you'd better come up then on Saturday.

Henri

'Better' come up! Though vexed, Anya's laughing. *Ohhh, and you've perfect weather. Uh-huh, to do what?* Doubts at opening up to Henri began troubling her from the very beginning, but she didn't embrace them totally. After all he's a handsome man with abundance energy and prowess. And she's almost at that age, half way through her thirties, when the years seem to be quickening and the prospect of settling in with someone no longer seems so stifling even for a tempestuously free artist like herself. But it's still a distant yearning, hardly an overwhelming one, only recently emerging. Yet it's there. But no longer for Henri, not a chance. And vague reservations at his patronizing manner are vague no more as she starts briskly striking her reply button.

To: < mellingtonbankfund@gmail.org >

Henri,

Sounds splendid up there but I just can't make it this week-end. Let me know when you're back in town.
Regrets,

Anya

III

Five days pass -- to be expected. By the sixth Anya's a bit concerned and wondering -- *should I've done this more subtly?* Less curt, yes, she's sure -- *and maybe a bit more enticing.* She's wrestled, of course, many times in a tug-of-war between her impetuosity and her discipline, having ample amounts of both. Sometimes this leaves her, she's discovered, not too well understood by some yet no less intriguing -- or is it challenging -- to others, making her even more sought after. Could these very contradictions, she often wonders, be igniting the daring of her choreography and allure of her dancing? How deep the roots of this lie, however has never been a mystery to Anya.

The reckless, willful, exciting spell of her beloved mother remains lodged vitally within her and never feels far off, though she'd watched that cherished woman suffering profoundly from her own impulsive adventurousness before slowly dying years and years ago. Compelling memories of her departed father too, steeped in the long standing Russian mysticism of the d'Boroviks, are likewise seldom forgotten. Throughout her childhood, Anya had witnessed in awe her devout father seeking holiness through charity and meditation and his driving mission to enhance a universal consciousness in all of us, dreading the horrors he feared looming over our future if we fail to do so. For Anya there's little mystery then why a struggle between the sacred and profane persists so strongly in her.

Later that day Anya, escaping mounting worries at Henri's not calling, moves defiantly to her desk and for the very first time begins plotting out a sweeping

choreography for her unprecedented performance. And then when her drawings start unexpectedly vaulting way beyond her expectations, she can't help reaching in excitement for her phone and enthusiastically informing Lana Svensen, a superb dancer long resisting every effort Anya's made to recruit her:

"You've got to see what I just blocked out, Lana. You won't believe it. It's wonderful!"

"Y'know Anya, I still don't understand what this performance of yours is all about," Lana's grouching, her husky voice deep with annoyance. "You never clarify it."

"Well, it's ... uh, complicated. I keep working out the details then ... I start working on 'em again. Give me a little time. I'll explain everything. I promise."

Though Anya's known these details for years inside out, she isn't daring yet to reveal them to this skeptical, up-to-date Manhattan woman so jealous of her freedom and no pushover for anyone. It's the same with all the other truly talented dancers Anya knows and respects. And getting them to go along with exactly what she's hoping to do is going to be daunting. Lana, rushing off the phone now dismissively, is proving exactly that, leaving Anya gloomy for the rest of the day. Only the continuing brilliance of the dance maneuvers she's resumed sketching is keeping her from slipping into a steeper gloom over what she'd certainly endure scrambling for financing, if Henri doesn't call. But then, well, he does. And though hesitant and uncomfortable, he's admonishing her:

"... You missed a wonderful weekend, Anya."

"Sorry about that. Just couldn't make it. Maybe next time."

"To tell you the truth, I've -- I've been thinking about you ... a lot lately."

Not knowing what to say to that, she remains silent and waits.

“Anya, why don’t we have tea tomorrow in the Palm Court at the Plaza. You like that place, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Good. That’s good.” He sighs. “Three o’clock then. Is ... that okay?”

IV

It’s the first of November already and windy all day, hinting at a bleak winter. After shivering down Fifth Avenue for blocks, Anya’s ducking gratefully into the warmth and comfort of the Plaza Hotel. But that blessing’s not lasting long. Henri, having arrived early, is sitting stiff and fidgeting in the Palm Court, watching her passing through its Corinthian columns and then in among its festive palms and calm, aged elegance. But there’s nothing calm about Henri as he’s forcing himself to smile as Anya’s sitting down beside him.

“Well,” he tells her in a tone anything but elegant, “I was wondering if you’d even make it. You’re always an elusive one, aren’t you?”

“Excuse me?”

“People are practically breaking down my door with proposals like yours. And I have to struggle to get you here.”

“Ha, I’m sure you have a very thick door. Uh uh, I’ll leave breaking it down to others.”

“Are you are always so cock sure of yourself?”

“Well, enough not to go around begging,” she answers sharply. “My proposal’s unique and darn well deserves financing. Yes! I’m sure of it.”

There’s no taking back her impatience, though she’s already wishing she had, sensing with a stab of concern her words caustically roiling inside him. *He must have been up night* fretting over her, she’s realizing with regret. No, she’s no desire to hurt him. But there was simply no other way to handle this. *Or was there?*

“Why don’t we order some tea, Henri. You should try their Lavender Oolong. It’s truly special here.”

“I think I can pick my own tea,” he says mystifyingly combative and waves for the waitress and, when she comes, takes a rushed look at the menu and snaps, “I’ll have that Imperial Long Jing. It’s green tea, isn’t it?”

“Yes sir.”

“Hurry up then, will you.”

Maybe he woke up with ‘agita’ this morning, Anya’s thinking charitably. But knows better.

“The Japanese brew their tea finer,” Henri asserts, his chin held high with authority. “Did you know that?”

“Not really.”

Although trying to control her rising ire at Henri’s endless sense of entitlement and blind flaunting of pedigree and privilege, it’s becoming increasingly difficult, especially after surmising what must be bothering him on this sunless afternoon. She’s been through this before with other willful, influential men. Often they pursue her allure, her freedom,

her imagination wildly but are never at ease with this and ultimately go floundering into hopeless self assertions trying to overpower it. She's seeing this in every stiff movement of Henri's body -- but just can't take it today. And she's lapsing into a silence so total, it has Henri fidgeting again, grasping for something to say:

"My ...uh ... aunt Gwyneth's coming in for Christmas. She asked about your dance concert."

"What did you tell her?"

"I told her I don't know enough about it yet."

"What!" Anya exclaims, confounded at hearing ... *rank ignorance? Or an insult?*

"Well, Henri, you had plenty of time to find out, didn't you?"

And she turns away chagrined and doesn't look up until their tea's brought over in two bright, sterling silver pots. Henri, sitting silent and glum chaffing at Anya's displeasure, touches his briefly then glares up at the waitress:

"This isn't hot enough," he berates her. "Get this done right."

The woman's head sways back dismayed and Anya -- dismayed now too and totally impatient -- swings over, touching Henri's pot thoroughly.

"For heaven sake, this doesn't feel cool." And she demands unable to stop herself: "What are you trying to prove, you can push that poor woman around?"

But Henri keeps looking up simply indifferent and superior as the waitress picks Up his tea timidly and carries it off. *Oh, I can't take this anymore!* And rising in resentment, she announces in a hurry:

"I'll ... I'll be right back?"

Uh-uh, she's no intension, none, of doing that. *Enough for God sake*, she's repeating over and over as she's heading through the plush lobby for the door. But at a sudden, compelling thought of Gwyneth's returning at Christmas, she hesitates, unsure if she's over reacting then begins walking in uncertainty towards the lady's room. And she's soon sitting in there on an antique leather seat struggling – after vigorously washing her face twice -- to get real and hurry back to the Palm Court. But it remains a struggle, an increasing one, as she's deeply struck by what her father on a pilgrimage to Tibet told her as a baffled child seeing beggars suffering outside an ancient monastery.

“Anyaskaya, don't cry. High or low, the universe doesn't care. Only men judge them harshly. Be kind.”

Anya still remembers the gongs and nasal chanting reverberating through the great, ancient halls of Lassa's Potala Monastery. And when she's told of people drinking white wine clutching crystals, searching for nirvana on the shore of Fire Island or Big Sur, it turns her stomach. The d'Borovik's search was in earnest, fought for sometimes in anguish extending back generations. Her great grandfather, Boris d'Borovik, once accompanied Leo Tolstoy on his great spiritual journeys; her grandfather celebrated Madame Blavasky and Ospensky for some of theirs. And her own father's journeys were courageous and uncompromising. Thinking now of Henri looking up at that waitress with such cold disdain is infuriating her again. But no, she has to go back and say a final good-by; she has to do that for Gwyneth. And though excruciating, she'll have to let Henri's money go too. She must.

“Henri, I just got a call in the restroom.” she’s informing him in a rush now among the palms. “It’s terribly important. I have to go.

“You’re leaving! Now! Right now?”

“Yes.”

“But ... but you haven’t even touched your tea.”

“This can’t wait. Sorry.” And she takes up her scarf and walk firmly toward the lobby as Henri watches crestfallen and amazed.

V

Indignation carried Anya out of The Plaza sure of herself and is maintaining her in her certainty for almost a week. But then she not so sure of herself as she begins agonizing once more over financing. Still, she’s promising never to contact Henri again. There’re other options, but none are very good and a few downright harrowing. One foundation probably would come up with the money. But she’s suspicious, very much so, of what goes on there. Other possibilities are either unlikely or would leave her wound up in red tape endlessly. It’s depressing and getting more depressing, dismally holding her back from venturing out there, making any moves at all. But then one night caught wholly off guard, she spots Henri’s number on her phone and mindlessly picks up, despite a surge of apprehension. And Henri in a rush surely detecting this tells her before she can say anything:

“My secretary’ll wire you what you need tomorrow. It’ll cover your whole budget.” Then he adds: “Sorry it took so long.”

Yet even in his humility, Anya's detecting an echo of something disturbing.

"Honestly, I don't know what to say, Hernri."

"Don't say anything. Not a word. Have lunch with me tomorrow. Please Anya."
