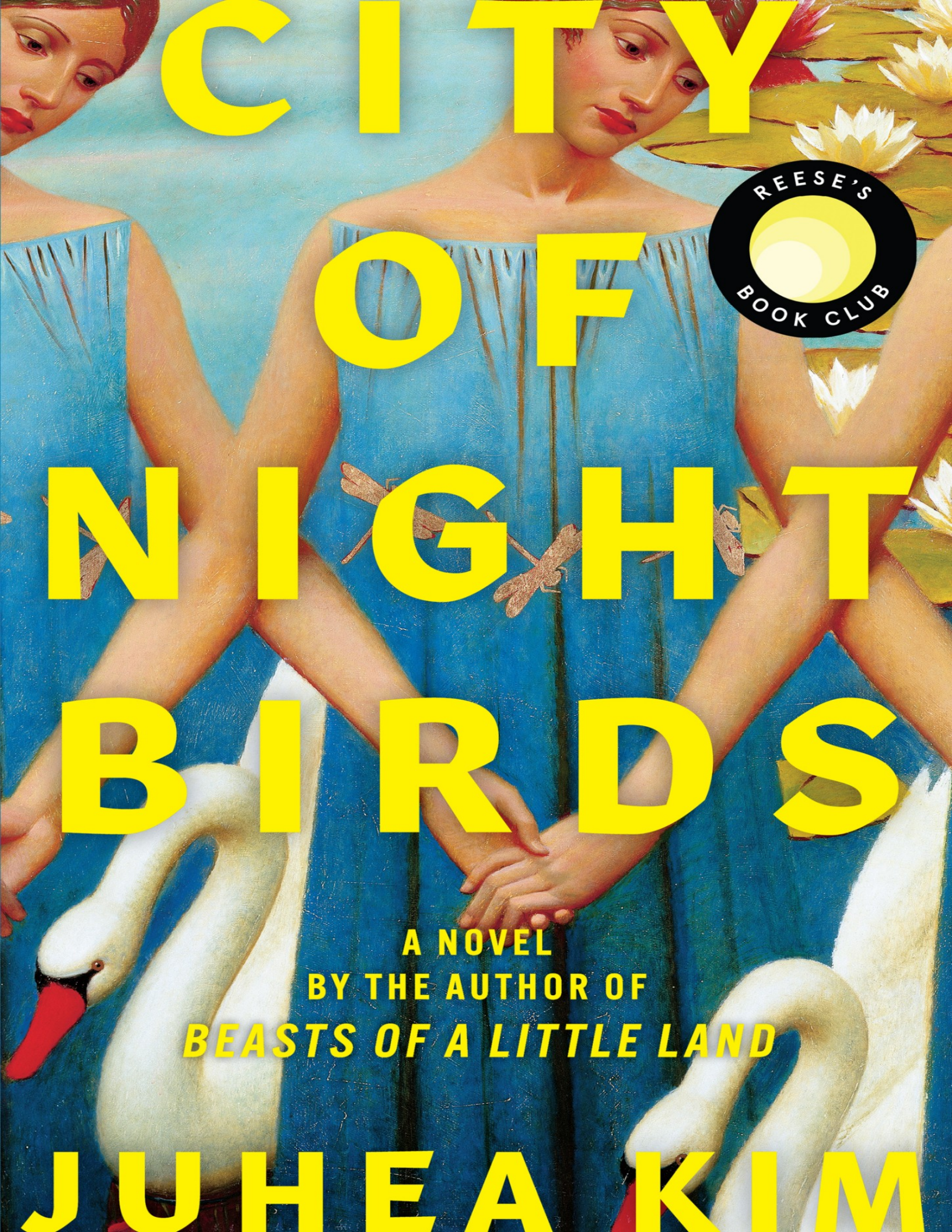
CITY OF NIGHT BIRDS
REESE'S BOOK CLUB
A NOVEL
BY THE AUTHOR OF
BEASTS OF A LITTLE LAND
JUHEA KIM

CITY OF NIGHT BIRDS

A NOVEL

JUHEA KIM

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Dedication

TO MY READERS

AND IN LOVING MEMORY OF MY GRANDFATHER

KIM SUKYUNG (1925–1994)

Contents

Overture

Call me a sinner,
Mock me maliciously:
I was your insomnia,
I was your grief.

—ANNA AKHMATOVA, "I HAVEN'T COVERED THE LITTLE WINDOW" (1916)

And it seemed to me those fires
Were about me till dawn.
And I never learnt—
The colour of those eyes.
Everything was trembling, singing;
Were you my friend or enemy,
And winter was it, or summer?

—ANNA AKHMATOVA, "FRAGMENT" (1959)

I FILL MY CUP WITH VODKA. IT TASTES OF THE STRANGE LONGING PECULIAR to flying into one's old city at midnight.

Outside the rounded window of the plane, the lights of St. Petersburg glimmer through the clouds. I remember then that it is the White Nights. Descending from the gray heights, the earth looks more like the night sky

than the sky itself, and I have the brief sensation of falling toward a star field. I close my eyes, breathe, and reopen them slowly. The city is utterly familiar and unknown at the same time, like the face of someone you used to love.

Say you run into this person by chance, at a park or on the lobby staircase between the orchestra and the parterre, with a glass of champagne you bought in a hurry during intermission. You're going up; your lover is going down. You recognize him not by his features, which have changed, but by his expression. You're splintered by doubt that this couldn't be him, yet in the next moment you accept that this could be no one else. You take measure of his body, while wondering how you look—your makeup, hair, heavy rings and earrings that you remembered at the last minute of getting dressed, and for which you're now grateful. You still haven't made up your mind whether to meet his eyes, to be coldly indifferent, to smile, or to say something, when you pass by each other on the worn marble staircase and the bell rings to announce the end of intermission. It's already over in less time than it takes for the champagne to lose its effervescence.

"Your seat belt."

A flight attendant stands in the aisle and glares at me until I buckle up, gather the empty mini bottles of vodka, and drop them into her plastic bag. Earlier, one of the other attendants had asked for my autograph, and I'd declined. "You're really not Natalia Leonova?" She'd questioned once more before going back to the clutch of her colleagues standing near the kitchen area. After that, all the attendants pointedly ignored me, as if slighting one of them meant slighting the entire crew. I close my eyes to their sidelong glances and see the faces of those I left in this city.

When the plane lands, my reveries cease. All I can think of is hiding where no one—other than myself—thinks I'm a horrible person.

I check into the Grand Korsakov, my usual hotel off Nevsky Prospekt. Although the view from the balcony is the best in Piter, I pull my curtains shut against the White Night. On the coffee table, there is a bottle of Veuve Clicquot, a vase filled with twenty-five cream-colored roses, and a card that

says, WELCOME BACK, MLLE NATALIA. For a brief moment I wonder about the sender, but the hotel logo on the card lets me know the manager, Igor Petrenko, must have been more than usually excited to see my name in the reservations. No one else knows I'm here. I take off my clothes, open the champagne, and bring it to bed with my pills. I've always enjoyed the sensation of sliding my legs into fresh sheets, and it is the one comfort I relish even now; but that solace turns quickly to disgust that not much else is left. To forget this fact, I put a Xanax on my tongue and drink from the bottle. When the fizziness floods my mouth, my nerves dull and I feel everything less—my stupidity, my heart, my ankles held together by threadbare tendons.

The sky glows all night like candlelight. Curtains do little to shield the restless violet. After tossing and turning, my eyes open when the room fully brightens. Evidently I've slept in—it is four in the afternoon. An involuntary groan escapes my mouth as I slowly swing my legs out of bed. Although I haven't danced in almost two years, my feet ache like an old woman's when they first land on the floor after waking up. I limp to the shower, leave the light off, and stand still under the hot water. It restores my energy enough that I decide to venture outside. But not enough that I can face Mama.

I slip out of the marble lobby without running into the manager. Summer air in Piter is thicker and sweeter than that in winter—like ice cream compared to iced coffee. It is filled with the scent of flowers, the molecules of water evaporating from the canals, and the orbs of pearly light between the Neva and the sky. People are walking in groups, taking photos and laughing, all their movements slackened as in a slow-motion video, which happens on sun-dappled days in cold countries.

I stop by a café and order a cappuccino to go. Then I walk west along Nevsky Prospekt until it reaches the Neva, flowing lapis blue like the robes of the Virgin in an icon. To the river's right, the lilacs are in full bloom in the Field of Mars. I once spent one of the most beautiful days of my life here,

and without closing my eyes I can almost see the shadows of our bodies on the grass.

Not far from where we'd lain, a string quartet is playing Vivaldi's "Stabat Mater." They are probably students at the conservatory, judging by their slightly different variations of white shirt and black pants. A contratenor begins to sing, "*Stabat Mater dolorosa, juxta crucem lacrimosa, lacrimosa* . . ." The lyrics call to my mind Mama's round face and hands, reddened from rosacea and labor. Her dull espresso hair that turned both limp and airy with age, resembling winter grass. I dwell on her image, willing it to give me peace. Yet the moment I realize I can't remember her voice, my mouth tastes of ashes. After everything I've done to return for Mama, I am not ready to see her.

The singer's voice stills me, keeps me rooted on my achy feet until they finish that song and another piece that I don't recognize. A small crowd gives them a hearty applause that bursts like flowers in the atmosphere. The musicians stand, glowing in the praise, then loosen the hair of their bows, lock up their instruments, and meander away together, hunching under the weight of their hard cases and music stands. Probably on the way to dinner. I realize then that I haven't eaten anything all day. I'm not hungry, but because of the music and the hopefulness from being around happy people, I pull out my phone and text Nina. Because we're now physically close, I feel that my overture after so many years of silence is permitted.

I just flew in last night. If you're free, would you like to get dinner?

I am taken aback and then excited by the three dots that appear, showing she has seen my message and is writing a response.

Natasha! You should've let me know earlier! But I can't—Swan Lake tonight.

Of course, I write back, disappointed as well as relieved. I hadn't checked the Mariinsky schedule—in fact, nothing could convince me to go back to that place or even look up their calendar.

Can you wait until after the show? I'll be done by eleven. Where are you right now?

I hesitate, thinking of all those times we had vodka and vareniki after performances, our faces adorned by half-erased makeup and youth.

I'm around the Field of Mars.

Just hang out there and come meet me at the theater. Please?

I think I should go to bed early. Jet lag, I type and press send. Nina doesn't say anything, and I realize with a pang of regret that I didn't even tell her *toi toi toi*.

My feet ache painfully, but I don't want to go back to the hotel just yet. I wander off to the Summer Garden and walk under the linden trees in bloom, their nectar so intoxicating that with one sip, bees drop to the ground.

I stop when I reach a gallery of Greek sculptures. I sit on one of the green benches between the statues and watch the sky turn from cobalt to violet and rose-gold. The twilight will last until sunrise. There is no place other than St. Petersburg in the summer where I've felt this slowing of time. Instead of the past, present, and future all flowing in order like train cars, they fold translucently into one another; and many years ago feels as close and real as yesterday, tomorrow as distant as years from now.

As if my thoughts have opened a portal, I see him between the white statues. Perhaps a phantom, or a piece of my imagination that has escaped like a moth into the night air. I grip the armrest of the green bench. But he begins walking toward me, and his quality of movement lets me know he is real. By god, there have been only a few humans who could look so alive. He darkens, lightens, darkens, lightens as he passes through the shadows of the statues. Darkens. Lightens again—revealing his arched eyebrows, black hair. Flashing green eyes that can rage or laugh without saying anything. The great Dmitri Ostrovsky to his fans, Dima to his friends, Dmitri Anatolievich to his company members. But to me, he is Janus. My two-faced downfall, and the only person in the world I would not hesitate to call my enemy. We maintain eye contact until he stops abruptly in front of my bench.

"Natasha," he says with a nod, as if it were the most natural thing that we have run into each other.

“Dmitri.” I level my voice so as not to give him the satisfaction of unnerving me. “What are you doing here?”

“What a way to greet an old—” He laughs. “Whatever you want to call me. May I?” He gestures at the spot next to me and sits down without waiting for my answer.

“Welcome back to Piter,” he says, stretching his legs out before him and crossing them at the ankles.

“Let us dispense with the niceties,” I say, and he smiles.

“I could never understand why you hate me so.” Dmitri looks out at the statues, shaking his head in an exaggerated show of regret. The frown disappears in a moment, restoring the smooth planes of his face. He hasn’t changed much since our last meeting. I remember the light filtering through the flute of champagne in his hand at our bar off Place des Vosges. I can hear the moonlight rushing through the four fountains and dropping like silver spoons into the basin. Our friends murmur toasts in French and Russian—*Santé! Budem!*

That night was just before my accident—and then I realize with a start that Dmitri might be the same, but I’ve lost everything since then.

“I have nothing to say to you, except that we are two people who should never have met,” I say, managing to keep my voice slow and steady. The air glows violet and warm between us. He cups his chin in one hand and turns to face me.

“Natasha, for my part I have always been truthful. Whatever I believe is what I do and what I say. You see how strange this is to most people, who live by deceiving everyone and, above all, themselves,” he says, smirking. “Were *you* always truthful?”

“Why are you here? How did you know where to find me?” I hiss, nearly standing up. He reaches his hand out and stops me by the elbow. The touch is surprisingly gentle, and my body remembers it in an instant. *Swan Lake*. The smell of sweat, crushed rosin, and damp wooden floors.

“Fine. I came to talk to you,” he says, withdrawing his fingertips and leaving only memories like bruises. “In fact, I came to offer you a job. I want

you to dance Giselle at the Mariinsky in the fall season."

I stare at him in disbelief, and he calmly holds my gaze. I can't help but ask, "Why would you want me?" A smile ripples across his face; he loses the seriousness and becomes mocking again.

"As the director, my job is to give people what they want to see. And there's no one else who sells tickets like you do, Natalia Nikolaevna."

"They won't buy tickets when they realize I haven't performed in two years." I roll my ankles as I speak, testing out the edges of the pain. When it returns, my eyes sting and my tongue becomes hot and heavy inside my mouth. What Dmitri doesn't know is that I haven't even gone back to the studio, let alone the stage, since the accident.

"Hold yourself together, Natasha. I'm offering opening night, with our newest premier as Albrecht. I'm not going to repeat myself." He rises, smoothing down his pant legs over his thighs. Just before vanishing between the rows of statues, he turns around and says, "The class still starts at eleven. See you tomorrow."

AT TEN IN THE MORNING, I go downstairs to the dining room. The sun is filtering in through the green stained-glass wall, and young waiters in white waistcoats circle self-importantly around the tables in a grand allegro. I take a seat and order a cappuccino and a croissant. It's a habit I acquired in Paris, and the heady smell of butter wraps me in comfort like a shawl. For a moment I forget that I'm in Petersburg; it's as though I'm sitting back at our favorite café in Le Marais on a Saturday morning. But the sense of calm was premature; at my slightest touch, the croissant defiantly shakes off a hundred golden shards on the clean tablecloth. As I'm brooming the fallen flakes with my hand, I hear the sonorous bass of Igor Petrenko addressing me.

"Natalia Nikolaevna, it is a splendor to see you again."

The hotel manager then comes into view, wearing a navy pinstripe suit with signet cuff links and a fat tie struggling against a little diamond pin. A

shopping bag is dangling from the crook of his left wrist, just below an enormous gold-faced watch. I have always held a secret place of scorn in my heart for men whose personal style tends toward "lavish." Yet Igor Petrenko has never been anything but perfectly courteous, which leads me to conclude that he is simply what's called an old-fashioned gentleman.

"Igor Vladimirovich, great to see you. And thank you for the flowers and the champagne."

"Oh, I cannot take the credit!" The hotel manager gasps. "It was from a gentleman—" Before I have a chance to ask "Who?" Igor Petrenko presents me with the shopping bag.

"The same gentleman who messengered this over, early this morning. Dmitri Anatolievich Ostrovsky."

The taste of cappuccino turns black like petroleum in my mouth. Noticing my changed expression, the manager tactfully lays the bag on the table instead of handing it directly to me. "I hope you have a wonderful day. If there's anything I can do, please don't hesitate to ask." The manager smiles and takes his leave.

Once Igor Petrenko vanishes, I take out the contents of the shopping bag. A pair of new ballet slippers. New pointe shoes, the same size and make as my last ones at Mariinsky. Elastic and ribbons. A small sewing kit. Three pairs of tights, one in pink and two in black. Three leotards—forest green, white, and mauve. A black knit warm-up overall.

A glance at my phone tells me that it's 10:40 a.m. now. I stare at the shoes, raking my loose hair away from my face. I find it hard to breathe—how did he know I was staying here? And why won't he leave me alone? What I find most deeply disturbing and impossible to understand in the world is people who cling. All my life I have been a leaver.

When I gather up the shoes and clothes to put them away, I find a piece of paper in the bottom of the bag. It's a printout of the fall casting list. I see several names of my generation and some younger ones I don't recognize. And under *Giselle*, I find TaeHyung Kim (Albrecht), and next to it—written in by hand—Natalia Leonova (Giselle). I can't help but chortle at this bait.

Dmitri always knows what gets me worked up: my competitiveness, the stage, and an exceptional partner. I saw Tae at a gala concert in Tokyo a few years ago, when he was a twenty-four-year-old, newly minted Mariinsky premier. The stage was big, almost as big as the Bolshoi's, and Tae ate it up with his coupé-jeté. The others watching from the wings—principals from La Scala, La Colón, ABT, the Royal, Stuttgart—took a collective gasp when he ended his variation with a triple tour double tour, a feat I've never seen anyone else perform live, before or since. Someone said "Fuck me now!" which surely reflected, in some weird way, how we all felt. When he came back to the wings, these leading dancers—every one an international star—floated over to him like swooning corps members. He patiently took pictures with them and spoke with humility, which is not a quality usually seen in a stupendously gifted young male principal. I saw that humility in his dancing, too. With true artists, it is not their dancing that you see and admire onstage, but who they are as people.

It is ten forty-five. I grab the bag full of shoes and hail a cab for Mariinsky. When I get in the car, the sky is milky and overcast so that the city feels like it's inside a pearl. By the time I'm crossing the plaza, the enormous pistachio-hued theater is glowing in a column of sunlight, which has just begun to break through the clouds. Seeing it, my stomach churns; I feel breathless and almost stop walking. Muscle memory.

Yet there is a part of me that wants to know: How much of what I remember is real?

Act I

There is nothing better than Nevsky Prospekt, at least not in Petersburg; for there it is everything . . .

Oh, do not believe this Nevsky Prospekt! . . . Everything is deception, everything is a dream, everything is not what it seems to be!

—NIKOLAI GOGOL, "NEVSKY PROSPEKT" (1935)

i

I WASN'T MEANT TO BE A DANCER. IT HAPPENED ONLY BECAUSE OUR north-facing window looked across the courtyard and into the apartment of a Ukrainian couple: a slender, soft-spoken mailman named Sergei Kostiuk and his cheerful and dark-haired wife. That family's apartment was a diorama for my curious and bored eyes, as is often the case in compressed quarters of poor neighborhoods—although I didn't yet think of myself as poor.

The Kostiuks had a son my age called Seryozha, whose padding around the rooms in a white sleeveless top and underwear is one of the earliest images I can recollect. Seryozha's arms were all one thickness from shoulder to wrist, and he was pale, thin, and soft in a way that reminded me of a Q-tip. Like the other boys in our class, he filled me with disdain. I hated how they spoke in short, overlapping shouts that only they could understand, how they pulled on girls' ponytails, the dirt caked under their nails, their damp smell like earthworms. Out of them, Seryozha was the worst because he constantly ran into me outside of school. When we crossed paths in the stairway I looked coldly away, although Mama said I should be nice to him because he was nice to me. I was sure Seryozha was only nice to me because his mama was saying behind our backs that I was nice to him. And so, on and on it went, the chain of mothers who forced their children to be nice to their neighbors' children.

It was a cold and raw Sunday morning. A sense of resignation coursed through the dead leaves and fallen apples strewn in the courtyard. The crows on the electric lines started cawing and Seryozha turned to his window—he caught me staring, turned red, and disappeared. A little later the yellow curtains of his room were drawn hastily shut. The birds cried louder, then lifted off as Sveta entered the courtyard below. Something that I learned from her is that some women are beautiful even from above. I called out to Mama, "Sveta is here!"

She opened our door before Mama had a chance to do a quick sweep around the apartment. Sveta—as I called her instead of Aunt Svetlana, at her insistence—had been visiting us as long as I could remember. Even as I grew older and Mama went to the theater more, Sveta enjoyed the tea, gossip, and bespoke adjustments Mama made for her at our home. She kissed Mama's cheeks and the top of my head while pulling off her tight-fitting leather gloves, one finger at a time. Then she stood in front of Mama's sewing table, exuding glamour at ten in the morning on a Sunday. It was the small details that proved fatal in ballet, Sveta said. Her Lilac Fairy costume was too tight in the bodice; the shoulder straps restricted the movement of her arms as she leaped onto the stage for her variation, so she couldn't get any ballon. Sveta had asked the chief seamstress of the women's costume department to loosen the straps so they could fall slightly off-shoulder, but the answer was a firm no. This was the costume design from the original 1890 production of *The Sleeping Beauty*, and changing something at the whim of a mere second soloist went against everything that the Mariinsky stood for, which was tradition—the very fabric of ballet passed down from feet to feet for two centuries. As Sveta said this, I imagined pointe shoes trampling all over the theater's pale blue velvet curtains fringed with gold tassels.

Mama told Sveta not to worry and then ordered me to go play in the living room. I turned on the TV and sat on the floor, where Mama had laid out the finished costumes to be steamed. The news program ended, and a black-and-white figure of a ballerina appeared on the screen. She looked like Sveta, with long thin legs ending in pinpricks of pointe shoes—and she

bounded off those sharp feet with one leg reaching high behind her so that it almost grazed her marvelous backbend. Her every movement was quick and spry like a sparrow's, as if she barely needed to touch the ground. But what I really couldn't resist was the music. I ran to our room to get my tutu that Mama sewed out of scrap tulle. I pulled it over my hips and started mimicking the dancer on the screen, shouting, "Mama, Sveta, look at me!" I turned up the volume of the TV, knowing that would annoy them. But I'd miscalculated how much I could push my luck, and a fatal back-bending jump sent me landing right on top of Mama's piles of costumes.

Before my foot slid out from underneath me and my bottom crashed to the floor, Mama rushed over screaming. "I didn't mean to," I began to say, curled up on the floor. I could feel the beginnings of a massive bruise on my bottom, but I didn't dare cry in front of Mama. She shushed me and examined the pieces one by one. There was a finger-length tear on a soft white tulle tutu, and she ran to the fabric closet in our room, swallowing curse words. When I made trouble like this, Mama whipped me with her belt. I wondered if she'd do that then—and suddenly I didn't want to dance or wear a tutu or do anything, I didn't want to live. I reached over and grabbed Sveta's hand, and she folded me into her stomach.

"Sveta," I closed my eyes and whispered. "Please take me with you."

She stroked my hair and patted my back, the way I wished Mama would do more often. She then crouched down to kiss my cheeks, and said, "Natashka, I can't."

I stepped back from her in disappointment, but she held on to my shoulders and smiled. "I saw you dancing. Do you know what ballet that was?"

I shook my head.

"That was a solo from a ballet called *Don Quixote*. What you did is called a Kitri jump. How old are you, Natashka?"

"Seven," I said, rolling my eyes to the ceiling while recalling the few significant dates in my short life. It was 1992 and I was actually seven and