

2/7/01 Wednesday's Rock, Grace Maryanka
Closing time: 11:59 p.m., C.S.T.

January in the same year falling after February . . .

Nikolai Gogol
“*Diary of a Madman*”

Why should we honor those that die upon the field of battle, when a man may show as reckless a courage entering into the abyss of himself.

W.B. Yeats

A Letter from the Glittering Capitol

7 February, 1908

My Dear Levin Petrovich,

I must write to inform you of Our good fortune, but you must promise not to breathe a word of this to Katrina Petrovna, as any mention of Our little dancer sends her into paroxysms of jealousy, even after all these years. I was in my box at the Marinsky at the premier of Vsevolozhsky's staging of the marvelous production of Peter Illyich's new ballet, “La Belle Au Bois Dormant”. (Our little Grace Fyodorovna had a small part as the “Bread Crumb Fairy,” and she quite outshone the much fawned-over Carlotta Brianza's “Aurora”. These Italians have technical brilliance, I grant you, but where is the feeling? And you will never guess who the wicked humpbacked demon, Carabosse, reminded me of — none other than Axinya Dimitrova herself, and to think that our liaison created such an angel! But I digress.) During the entr'acte, who should present himself at Our box, but the Tsar's illustrious uncle himself, Grand Duke Nicholas Nicoloiévitch, and with him, the venerable author, Our own Count Leo Tolstoy! I was so taken aback when Timofey handed me the calling card, that at first I mistook the Grand Duke's aide de camp for the royal personage Himself — indeed, they were dressed in the same uniform and looked very like!. But I instantly recovered from my *faux pas*, and I do not believe that His Imperial Highness noticed my indiscretion. What an honor for Our person! I assure you the Duke was most respectful, and in fact, He insisted upon the utmost informality. Just as though we had been old regimental chums! I could feel every lorgnette in the hall trained upon our illustrious little gathering, but there we stood, or rather sat, (the Grand Duke insisted) having our little *tete à tete*, exactly as though we were passing away the hours in a cab shelter! I asked your old friend, Count Tolstoy, what he thought of the production, and his response quite astonished me. He said, and the words are burned in my memory: “Music, as indeed any art, but especially music, arouses the desire that everyone, or as many people as possible, might participate in the pleasure being experienced. Nothing demonstrates the true significance of

art more emphatically than this: you are transported into other people, you want to feel through them . . .” I thought the remark rather striking, but made the comment, in deference to our imperial guest (host, rather, for indeed all of Russia is really the domain of the royal family), that of course what he said was true, but “the better sort of people naturally felt those ethereal realms which were quite out of reach for the commoner.” The Count made a disgruntled expression, and looked away, and the Grand Duke smiled benignly, as if to imply: “What can you say, we have to indulge Our geniuses as through they were children.” But Count Tolstoy had evidently taken umbrage to my mollifying observation, and he started in again. “So much that is considered elevated in music is merely decadence. It’s not even art, in the sense of something important and necessary to people, but the wanton play of robbers and parasites which has nothing in common with life. They indulge themselves with novels and stories about nasty love affairs, or fairy tales about bewitched princesses, or about people, much like themselves, dying of boredom. And this music is about the same thing. But life, the whole of life, is seething with its own problems about food, accommodation, work, belief, relations between people. But all this,” and here he made a wide circle with his arm, “it’s all shameful and vile.” After finishing this dissertation, I felt that the Grand Duke would surely be in shock, but that noble personage said nothing. However, his aide de camp, who was standing behind the Count when he uttered these sacrileges, seemed quite incensed, so much so, that at one point he tapped Our great *auteur* on the shoulder as if to silence him. But the Count continued undeterred. “The pleasure of this kind of music is only a little superior in its kind to eating. I can’t accept what people say with such obscurity and vagueness, namely that music somehow elevates the soul. The point is that it isn’t a moral thing. It’s not immoral, any more than eating — it’s neutral, but not moral. I stand by that.” And with that, the Count glared out of the hooded cavern of his great brow as if to cow the entire audience. Naturally, for the Grand Duke’s comfort, I sought to tactfully change the subject, and said, with as much good-natured affect as I could muster, considering the circumstances. “Well, perhaps Tchaikovsky’s score is a bit over embellished, an over-rich dessert shall we say. (Wasn’t this a clever *bon mot*!), but at any rate Vsevolozhsky’s production is quite sumptuous and the music, despite a certain triteness and some occasional weak links, admirably supports the dancing.” But the Count took exception to this as well, and said that the production was “nothing more than the misalliance of High Baroque with High Rococo, an enormous expensive luxury vulgarly designed by stiff hacks whose thin décor attempts to mimic the subtleties of Lancret and Watteau, but succeeds only in providing a sycophantic support for a gilded yet corrupt dynasty.” I drew in my breath at this remark, and glanced worriedly at the Duke, to let him know, that I did not at all approve of these blasphemies. But that august personage seemed completely untroubled by these treasonous insults. Although the aide de camp standing in the shadows seemed fairly livid with indignation. I placed my hand on the Count’s knee, to calm him of course, and to let him know with a tactful gesture, that it was best not to persevere in this line of discourse. But the Count brusquely brushed it aside. At which point I began to pray inwardly that God might inspire the Grand Master of

Ceremonies of the Ballet to begin the scene where the Lilac Fairy inspires Prince Charming to break off from his royal hunting party and to seek out the sleeping princes. Yet the Grand Master, aware of proper protocol, was dutifully waiting for the Duke to finish before allowing the ballet to resume. I hardly need tell you, Levin Petrovich, how mortified I was by the Count's inappropriate comments. And yet, the old man was not even finished! For then he continued his tirade, not only attacking the arts and the monarchy, but the Holy Orthodox Church as well! Going on and on in defense of the heretical Duhkhobors and Molokhans, praising their egalitarianism, their renunciation of property, their vegetarianism (of all things!), and their pacifism in refusing to serve in the Tsars' "rapacious armies." I swear on all that is Holy that those were his exact words, and with the Grand Duke sitting right there beside him, as calm as a stone! He said that they were true Christians, and that the Bishops who denounced them were nothing more than, and again I quote, "heathen demons who larded their bellies with the fat of abused animals and engaged in disgusting perversions of sensuality, while masking as Christ's servants." Levin Petrovich! I cannot tell you how shocked I was at these flagrant instigations! "But My Dear Count Tolstoy," I cried, "surely you do not condone the heinous practices of these vile Sectarians, the demonic *khlysty* and their wicked spawn, the insane *skotsy*, who revel in communal orgies and then castrate themselves as a way to attain their so-called 'divine frenzy'!" But the Count answered dryly: "And why not? Isn't that what we all do in our positions as Pomeshchiki, when we expend our lusts on the peasants bound to our lands, and then castrate ourselves in legitimate marriages to provide heirs for our criminal heritage. Christ said if thy hand offend thee it were better to chop it off, and as for our vaunted organ of so-called manhood, most of us would be much improved if we chopped that off as well!" I tell you I was fairly sputtering with outrage at this perfidy, but then, mercifully, the Grand Duke at last intervened. "And this bring Us, Sergy Fydorovich, to the purpose of Our visit." And just then, strangely, Count Tolstoy became perfectly calm, as if the Duke's statement was not an interruption of his maledicta, but its fitting conclusion. "We have learned that you have some interest in the danseuse, Grace Maryanka, and that you have a benevolent wish, as the Pomeshchik of her peasant parents, to further her career." I replied that this was certainly the case, and I must tell you, Levin Petrovich, that my heart was beating exactly as if I were flushed with wine. "And since that is Our wish as well," the Grand Duke continued, "we implore you to prevail upon a certain, how shall we say this, 'impresario,' by the name of" — and here the Grand Duke turned to his aide de camp, who rather impudently, to my mind, supplied the name, Serge Diaghilev — "yes, yes, quite right. We wish you, as Our child and subject, to prevail upon this — impresario — to include your young danseuse in the Company that he is forming to take to Paris." I cannot tell you, Levin Petrovich, with what mixed feelings I accepted this command! I had always dreamed of Our little Gracie as a *prima ballerina assoluta*, here, in our beloved Marinsky in Holy Saint Petersburg. But how could I consider refusing the Grand Duke! Of course, I bowed my head at once, and murmured, although my heart was breaking. "Let it be as You wish, Your Royal Highness." And with that the Grand Duke, with a slight nod of his esteemed

head, discreetly signaled the Grand Master of Ceremonies to recommence the performance. Before I could focus again on the stage — my brain and eyes were swimming — a whole act had gone by, and now I saw only the bewitched palace, a scene of dark morbidity, with huge cobwebs and layers of gray dust covering the gilt and splendor of a court that had been sleeping for a hundred years. . .

With respectful devotion,
Sergy Fyodorovich, Count
Bludov

Levin Petrovich Nekhlyadov, with grim, pursed lips, held the letter he had just received from his son-in-law to the blue flame of the oil lamp on his secretary. He was careful to turn the paper in his hand as it burned, assuring that the entire document was immolated, its wisps of ash drifting upward in the draft of the lamp, and falling, like gray snow, about his well-appointed study. These letters regarding Grace Fyodorovna were becoming more and more bizarre. *La Belle Au Bois Dormant* had premiered, of course, almost twenty years before, and Count Tolstoy was bitterly wasting away in Yasnaya Polyana, far from the horror and glamour of Saint Petersburg. To Levin Petrovich it seemed that the incoherence of these epistles not only symbolized the disorder of Sergey Fyodorovich's mind, but the fate of Russia herself. How many peasant bastards and bastardettes were dreaming nightly of their aristocratic fathers, and how much were these dreams infecting the brain cells of the gentry? He himself had his own little secrets running around on his estates, and even Count Tolstoy, now esteemed by so many as a veritable saint, had engendered a soul beyond the protected fortress of legitimacy. Clouds of curses disgorged by the hungry and abused mouths of whored mothers and shamed children were gathering over all their heads. Levin Petrovich, an old man now, placed his own heavy head in his weak hands, and trembled to think of the coming retribution. He decided that he needed some air, and he stepped out into the late January night. Here too, he found disorder, for a thaw had come, almost as if it were spring, and a thick mist was rising from the evaporating snow. Levin Petrovich found himself involuntarily listening to the beating of his own heart. From the river below the slope, there were strange sounds: it was the ice breaking up. A slow and tireless labor was going on, and he could hear sounds as of something wheezing, cracking, showering down, and thin bits of ice tinkling like glass. The mist had begun to settle lower and the last quarter of the moon sailed out from behind the wall of fog, shedding a somber light on something black and menacing.

Grace Comes Out of Retirement

In little, unobtrusive, gilt frames, copies of a single family photograph, taken in 1894, could be found in the private chambers in palaces in London, Berlin, and Saint Petersburg, a.k.a. Petrograd, a.k.a. Leningrad. In the photo, the grandmother is seated front and center in a chair placed upon an enormous bearskin rug. The bear's head is still attached to the skin. She is snarling with real teeth while squinting out through glass eyes. She is the matriarch — the grandmother, not the bear — and she is dressed in black, her round, fat face masked with a sober expression. One tuft of ostrich feathers

crowns her hat, the only adornment allowed her widow's weeds. This touch of finery from a plundered bird is her single concession to her august position. Around her are sons, daughters, grandsons, granddaughters, nephews, nieces, cousins, along with their wives or husbands. All are dressed in the fashions of the times — the women in long dresses with high collars, in furs, and in feathered or fruited hats, the men in suits, with bowlers or top hats, or in the military dress uniforms of their respective countries — England, Germany or Russia. It is a large family. There are forty people or so in the picture, not one of whom is smiling. They do not look at the camera. They do not look at each other. Although each is accustomed to being in the public eye, their own eyes gaze upon some interior space which may still be the same for each of them, a shelf perhaps with a long row of titled heads or skulls. In those same private chambers, where the copies of the photograph glowered, there were drawers with letters addressed to “Georgie” or “Willy” or “Nicky”. Everybody was everybody's chum — or so it seemed.

In those times, and in the decade or so that followed, one could, if one were a *prima ballerina assoluta*, travel from one of these capital cities to another, the guest of one or another of these kinsmen. One could travel in style, by rail, by carriage, by motorcar, by cruise ship or by yacht. Or one could steam to the Japans or the Americas. Or one could ride the Orient Express. One could traverse the civilized world from Paris to Constantinople, from Europe to the Near East, from Berlin to Baghdad on rail lines whose joint-directors were German, French, Turkish, Swiss, English, Russian or Austrian. It was lovely, these extended dynasties, these elaborate filigrees of iron, trade and money. It was all connected. One could make the same art everywhere, and be applauded by the same cultivated audiences, all with the same perceptions, and, as it happened, all with the same superficial values.

But after August, 1914, the picture changed. The bear stood up — ah! — she was not dead after all. Yet the grandmother, Queen Victoria, was dead. But little Georgie, Nicky and Willy, who, unfortunately were not dead, were trying to eat each other alive — through surrogates and assigns, of course, which was how they were “brought up”. It was 1916, and Grace Maryanka, who had traveled so freely, so royally before, now wanted to go from Paris to St. Petersburg, a.k.a. Petrograd, etc. But even if you were a former *prima ballerina assoluta* of the internationally renowned *Ballets Russes*, you could not cross the various battle lines of the warring European powers, unless you were a prisoner of war, and then, this was mostly a perfunctory exchange of various body parts, hardly the luxury that Grace had grown accustomed to. It was a horrid, nasty, uncivil family spat over who could play with whom's best toys — Africa, Asia, Alsace-Lorraine, the Black Sea, the Baltic — and Grandmamma was no longer there to settle it. Grace wondered what to do. The Alma said “go”. He didn't say why or how.

Well, there were two things that a dancer knew how to do: move and act. Grace could speak Russian, French, German and English fluently. She had played her share of maidens, queens, princesses, and also more than a few trouser roles. The rankest amateurs were parading about everywhere, pretending to be things they were not — brave, confident, smart — and she felt sure that she could infiltrate their shoddy theater. She dismissed — actually she married her off to the cab-driver now posing as a poilu —

the ever-fretful Françoise. She liquidated whatever valuables that could be made liquid, and converted them into as many Franks, Pounds, Marks and Rubles as she dared to deposit on her person. Then she mapped her route. Move northeast. And keep moving. Slip through the British trenches someplace in Flanders, maybe crossing over during one of the constant skirmishes around Ypres, move through the German lines, heading through Ghent or Antwerp, cross Germany, get to Danzig, skirt the coast, find someplace to cross the lines again in East Prussia, maybe north of Memel, somehow ford the Niemen River, then veer north — home free — to Saint Petersburg, Petrograd, etc. It was the largest stage she had ever performed on, and she had to improvise the choreography to the music of artillery barrages and machine gun fire.

As it turned out, the theater was less metaphorical than literal, for behind the British lines an unofficial, but extraordinarily complex social polypus had been spawned, sprouting from its toils newspapers, sporting events — boxing and equestrian contests were quite the favorites — and — bon chance! — various dramatic troupes and vaudeville companies. Grace, dressed “in drag,” as a Tommy. Then she double-crossed into counter-drag (if that is the term) as a Tommy cum chanteuse. And in this role, she passed quite easily and popularly, too, as the headliner for infantry thespian companies with names like “The Duds”, and “The Shrapnels”. In one revue, entitled “Thumbs”, she played the leading man/lady — lady/man, i.e., one Kitty O’Hara, whose performance was praised by the local trench rag as “over the top”, a witty double (quadruple?) entendre by the reviewer which implied that as a soldier, a man playing a woman, she had risked her manhood as much as those who leapt out of the trenches to charge the Huns. And although from time to time, understudies were suddenly and tragically thrust into leading roles, it was all the best of fun. The important thing was, of course, that she was in. And when her unit was rotated forward, she moved with them to positions opposite La Boiselle. She was assigned to a sapper unit — due to her diminutive stature — whose role was to tunnel across no-man’s land and under enemy lines. The object of this burrowing across a quaintly named piece of real estate called Mash Valley was to lay in a 46,000lb cache of ammonal, which was timed to explode at precisely 7.25 hours on 1 July, 1916, just prior to an “over the top” frontal assault on the German defenses. Here, as in any theater, timing was everything. A masterful stage effect! Worthy of a Bakst or a Golovine! Violence! Panic! Passion! Death! Despair! Needless to say, Grace, along with the other actors, got “involved” with her role. Too involved, really. Always a risk and a mistake on a performer’s part. Thus, when the curtain rose, the scene was not an aesthetic success.

Oh, the blood, the mutilations, the cruelty, the fury, the fire! The libretto was changed. Words like “ordnance” and “engagement,” these had only been the propagandist’s polite society terms to mask the curses of demons. But beneath the slather of officialese, was a snarl of unspeakable ferocity. The censors had redlined the stench of destruction, the overwhelming noxious spate of flame, the flies and maggots mining the corpses for cheese, and the Tommies and Huns reduced to a slosh of offal.

But Grace was a trouper. Although she often lost the contents of her stomach, she did not lose her presence of mind. As her unit rushed through overlapping waves of enfilade fire,

Grace pressed forward with them, knowing better, even as a sapper, let alone as a danseuse, than to march in the chorus behind the bagpipe music. They massed and fell like the crescendos and diminuendos of the orchestra. But Grace was a soloist, and unlike the ballet, here, a soloist relegates herself, not to the spotlight, but to the shadows. Hidden, she scurried *pas couru*, quickly, deftly — *élancer, étendre, glisser, plier, sauter et tourner, ma jamais relever*. From shell hole to shell hole, she made her way towards the Y-sap mine crater that she had help blow in the German lines near the road on the north side of La Boisselle. Mash Valley and Sausage Valley were true to their names, for shapes that had moments before been living beings, were mashed to sausage in them. At one point, she took shelter near the crumpled fuselage of a downed BEF spotter plane, the remains of the pilots and would-be rescuers dripping from the wreckage. Finally she reached the crater, and with a *grand pas de chat jeté*, leapt into it. It was a hundred feet wide, *un décor énorme*, and its lip was festooned, as she had hoped — if that word could be applied to such carnage — with the bodies of its defenders. And — presto-chango! — in the retching, smoky confusion, she filched a uniform from a slightly built German, and with this change of costume, she became a different character.

Extricating herself from this melee was no mean task. But Grace remembered the lessons from the Alma, the breathing and the emptying exercises, and she moved through the mayhem as air moves through the holes in a sieve. Through all that was sharp and hard around her, she somehow found a fluid, airy way. She had heard the rumors, like all the men who were menaced by the lacerating death fomented by the extreme mechanization of violence: the artillery barrages, the machine guns, the grenades, the mortars, the wire. Not all of those, it was whispered, who had disappeared into the sea of mud and entrails that was No Man's Land, had died. Some, by chance, or through the *deus ex machina* of a grotesque otherworldly intervention, had fallen into a network of tunnels that was off the murderous grid of the war strategists' sappers. Here, in the chalky substrate below Beelzebub's swamp, a strange society of deserters had found sanctuary, sub-humans, or sub-soldiers from both sides, who had discovered caverns and corridors centuries old, which led God knows where below the fields of fire, dreck and blood. Unable or unwilling to return to their units, these ambulatory freaks, men with cyclopean burn-scar faces and twisted, mangled limbs, had adapted themselves to the thunderous tranquility of darkness. Here, they had become plutonian gnomes whose only contact with humanity now was to arise from their undiscovered, labyrinthine sepulchers to rescue the salvageable wounded at night, thus ensnaring more damaged recruits for their treasonous pacifism. In the stygian tunnels, these creatures, deformed by war and darkness, somehow saw Grace, and recognized what they saw. And so, from paw to claw to stump, Grace passed below in this Überwelt, where she traveled through regions of compassion unimaginable to even the most enlightened of the upper world's saints. But before being deposited above ground in a rear area, where her movements resumed again among what passed for the living, she questioned the last, the darkest of her guides. "Who are you?" she asked. "Are you alive or a ghost? And why are you helping me?" His answer both shocked and calmed her, as if his voice were the premonition of words from a man awaiting her in the lightless corridors of the future: "When the hunger at last burns itself out, eats its own hungriness, it doesn't really matter if one is alive or dead, young or old, espoused or alone, suffering or in bliss. What is is, and it is all there is. Why do you

harbor questions?” Henceforth, although they sank almost immediately from her conscious awareness, these words were like a star, guiding her, cajoling her into unknown regions of love and time. Grace was changed, and these words had changed her. When she joined the ragged columns of the German wounded above ground, those legions of grey myrmidons, who, dazed, were streaming north and east, as their replacements rushed forward to stop the gaps in the lines and counter-attack, it was a different Grace moving across the weeping surface of weeping earth, a Grace who had visited the depths, a Grace who could somehow touch and even heal some of these ravaged beings oozing away from the front like a slow moving infection. Some who had sunk down into the shell-pocked earth, like a later day female Nazarene, she raised, and among those who were stumbling on, some silent, some moaning, she found men whom she could touch, redeem, as she had been redeemed, in the few hours — or was it days? — when she herself was lost, each of them now rebirthed, like those angelic monsters dwelling in the uncharted realms below. Grace had surrendered her name, her gender, perhaps even her humanity, and had become a mysterious entity for whom the real and the unreal had given way to expose the primal theater, the spectacle of the utterly fantastical. She could no longer even be described as an animal of material substance. She was now only a conglomeration of sensation, a mass of contusions which passed for perceptions, another un-soldier stagger-marching with that army of the destroyed, but not yet dead, which was slowly dispersing itself across the land that it had once so proudly, but vainly conquered. And yet, even here, among these revenants, things happened. Rain fell. The sun rose greyly and died in dull red meat hunks. Moonlight bled dimly white through smoke and clouds. Grace was a cipher, a ghost among ghosts, and yet experience seeped through her shroud. She held the hand of a boy from Salzburg. She petted a bony cat. She saw corpses in ditches, men and horses together. She saw flies. She saw eyes without heads and heads without eyes. Her own eyes settled on strange things. Later, she might have said that it was the clash of paradox that caught her attention, the incongruity of the life-giving sun rising above these clumps of shit and death. Or that it was the perseverance of reflections, a phenomenon too-oddly absent in the underground, reflections perhaps of twisted trees piercing desperately into the depths of rainfilled craters. Or that it was the disappearance of form itself in water or in stuff that shone like water. Finally, she was awakened by the splendor and the squalor of a fly’s wings, iridescent and gleaming on the glabrous surfaces of organs that could no longer be described as “inner.” Suddenly she knew, that even in the midst of this hellish force and fire, this gray and brown sty of total annihilation, that there gleamed, in the tiniest of examples, innumerable caches of heaven’s living diamonds.

In one of these ephemeral gemstones, in one of these countless puddles, one night, along with the reflection of the moon, the Alma appeared, and spoke:

“The third center, the Manipura, arrives as the fullness of jewels.”

The Search For Roundness

She grows full, the moon, shedding her lustrousness
Even upon the wounds of love and death,

Our incarnations scarred by life's fierce wars.
And we, to track her beauty, touch its source,
Must cross the scars with our own scars of searching.
How else could we discover her remoteness?
Wherever we looked for her, she was not there.
And yet all places felt her visitations.
The mud, the misery, the fury, all pain's forms,
Grotesquely raving through the blood of living,
Were each compelled to sanctify themselves
Beneath the styles of her silver veils.
She's here. She's there. She cleanses what is soiled.
Yet we can never touch her in this world.