

VERONICA RAIMO

LIKE NO MOTHER

Translated from the Italian by Diana Thow

“You can’t understand the miracle of motherhood. You have the barren womb of a great performer.”

As Irene let him rest his head in her lap, the womb beneath which she would soon discover was indeed barren, though for more clinical reasons than those dreamt up by the Maestro, it was with these words that the promising young dancer was dumped two days before the premiere by the man to whom she had unconditionally dedicated her particular talent (*her vocation of malleability*) and her particular existence (*what doesn’t transform into pure movement*) seven months earlier.

“I’m going to be a father. This will change the nature of our encounter. Life’s pull distances me from you. The gravity that doesn’t weigh on your body.”

“I’m not made out of air, Rudy.”

“You’re made of movement.”

“Isn’t that what you loved?”

“I’m going to be a father. My son will be the son of a mother and a father.”

“He’s going to be the son of a man and his wife.”

After a few calculations, Irene guessed that Rudi had at the very least lied to her. They met in November. In December, she was sodomized for the first time in her life. In January, he swore to her that he was no longer having sexual relations with his wife. In early June, the seed of paternity sprouted from this abstinence.

How can your wife fit a child in that boney cage of hers? Where did she hide it? And where did you even find the space to squeeze inside her? That’s what she would’ve said to him, for if corporality were really the issue, fine, let’s say that she were indeed *made of movement*, but then his wife didn’t exist in the world either; she was inorganic, as if someone had forgotten to graft something, anything, onto her, over those small, knobby bones. She’d seen Carla only a few times, the few times that she’d insisted on helping with the rehearsal, and Rudi had appeased her because when dealing with the inorganic, it’s not easy to argue. Those times she sat, sinking like a stone into the dark sea of the sofa, and

stayed that way, immobile, a thing to fear, without moving a muscle, without stirring the smallest bit of dust from the heavy cushions. Irene couldn't help but stare. Of course Rudi realized this, and he entertained himself by torturing her: "Concentrate, Irene, you're alone, you're alone in space, stay focused," and grabbed her sharply from behind with the same fervor with which he took her after rehearsal in the theater closet, and—forcing her in his wife's direction—repeated: "Stay focused...focus...Christ! What's gotten into you today?"

What was the reason behind that humiliation? Forcing her to watch his wife while he reprimanded her for her constant mistakes. Forced her to watch his wife while he pulled her legs open, extending them so far that one crushed the side of her face, leaving only a split image of Carla, eyeing her young, leotard-sheathed pussy. Those legs that no one would've ever been able to break because of her *vocation of malleability*, those legs that Carla had seen spread wide and closed and raised to heights now forbidden to her; her destiny instead the complete opposite: rigid and stubborn muscles, muscles that had resisted so completely when Rudi had tried to mold them years before, until he finally broke them *for love*.

Concentrate, Irene, concentrate. Anyway, her legs would stretch to infinity. Anyway, she'd win in the end. Not even granite rock, that dead weight on the sofa, would be able to crack those limbs. *I've got nothing to lose*, Irene thought, *the rock will crumble, small erosions will continue, but my body is stronger because it's weightless.*

Three months later, the same weightlessness that drew Rudi between Irene's legs pushed him away from her like a dark sickness. Little Irene, little muse, little weightless dancer, little breasts, little buttocks gathered gently around his penis. How would this seem obscene to a man who was about to become a father? *I'm going to be a father, Irene.* As if it had nothing to do with him, as if someone had done it just to spite him. Every evening after rehearsal, Rudi would reach for her hair, gathered carefully by her mother in a bun at the nape of her neck, and loosen it until every lock flowed freely over her naked body. Then he would lean her up against the wall of the little room and take her from behind, firmly clutching those thick tendrils. "I want my body to change shape in your hands," she said. And yes, her body became everything he wanted.

Rudi hadn't been her first lover, but she'd learned about pleasure for the first time with him. She couldn't explain how it had happened; it had been an external thing, a change that occurred on its own terms. Like floating for

the first time. Just a moment ago you were sinking, and then all of a sudden you realize you're buoyant. When making love with Michele, her boyfriend for nearly a year, Irene never got wet once. Nothing was wrong with him—he had nice body, a special ability to accept Irene's insecurity, and an intense desire for her perfect nudity, although together their bodies could only generate the minimum amount of dampness to make penetration more or less manageable. He entered her, and she allowed herself to be entered, the only awareness that she'd really ever had about sex. If once every so often she suspected that it might be different, she'd never pushed to understand what this difference might entail. Progress didn't come naturally to her if no one showed her the way, or if she didn't have even a vague idea of the outcome beforehand. She knew in a very abstract way what an orgasm was, but she considered it completely arbitrary. She didn't think there was anything scientific about it; it wasn't an unequivocal sign, nor was it a definite indication. *The maximum limit of pleasure*: right, she considered this an insufficient explanation, either because she didn't understand in what form this pleasure would appear, or because she thought it was ridiculous that a physical limit in nature could actually exist. *And after?* She wondered, *what could possibly happen?* She who always had to demonstrate the exact opposite, always find something beyond, something to unravel every threshold of resistance. If her arms could conquer centimeter after centimeter, arching relentlessly behind her back, why did she need to find a limit to pleasure? Then one night, Rudi took her into the theater closet, barely brushed against her, and she discovered she was completely wet. Ten minutes later she was panting, seized by her first orgasm.

Back home she carefully examined the white traces left on her leotard; at seventeen she learned her own smell. She realized that up until that moment she'd lived sheltered from this, from the material alchemy that defines the essence of a body and distinguishes it from the rest of the world. She tried to recreate the sensation provoked by Rudi and got wet the second time that day. From then on, it became a sort of ritual evening exercise, an acknowledgment that the flow of her body was dominated by her mind, that her thought could further amplify the potential of that immeasurable organism. And one by one, she saw her limits fly away, her arms clenching at her chest, then her legs, and then spread out wildly in the air, and Rudi orchestrating it all, and if she had wanted to, she could have reached endless ecstasy.

But in the theater closet, her orgasms were actually shorter. It wouldn't have been difficult to discover them there: by some suspicious dancer pretending to have left a headband, or by Carla, arriving unexpectedly to bring Rudi something to drink or running like a lunatic on her spindly little legs to share her big news: "Darling, we're expecting!" This was what she'd say, *we're expecting*, a gross error, for if anyone was expecting anything, it was *her*, she was the one who brooded over that microscopic thing, she brooded over it, stuck to the walls of her fertile womb, her only hope of Rudi's return, of tearing him away from the beauty of love.

Rudi, Rudolph Krekeler, born in Cologne of a German father and Italian mother, moved to Italy at the age of fourteen after his father's graceful suicide, a picturesque flight from the fourth floor, his father still dressed in concert attire and holding his violin, the only companion he considered worthy of dragging into the disaster. When the young Rudolph was introduced to his new high school class shortly after the move, someone already knew and whispered, "His father's dead." Half German, with a ridiculous accent, he was the object of much ridicule from his classmates. But at least *he* made an effort to speak, about what didn't much matter; he'd always find a topic of conversation. Instead, the problem was his mother: her tongue had slipped permanently into the sarcophagus of her mouth, her lips unclenched only to sip a glass of water or the swill administered to her by her nurse. *This can't be good for you*, she kept saying to the boy.

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But then why wouldn't that stiff little woman put poison in the mush? What was the point of keeping her alive? Which was the worse regret: killing a woman who wanted nothing else, or killing a boy in whom the serum of life flowed with a wild, impossible obstinacy, pounding, every morning he woke, every day, every fucking moment a frenetic pulse, because it was the body itself that wanted it, a demonic desire for life? The nurse wasn't the one to decide. After a mute year on a liquid diet, Rudi's mother died. A half-liter of bleach sucked greedily from a vial. Both parents gone in the course of thirteen months. Yet terrible misfortune gave Rudi the opportunity to transform his intimate knowledge of pain into an entrance to society. After all, if he escaped his past alive, if he survived, if tragedy cut at his features without leaving a mark, if familiarity with that ritual performance, the glorification of weakness, the banal struggle of man against his destiny, hadn't deprived him of sleep, appetite, or desire; if at sixteen, having lost every trace of that

silly transalpine accent, he became one of the most popular students, if the word *orphan* was transformed among his friends into a catalyst of envy, then it meant it hadn't all been in vain. It meant not only that was Rudi able to fight off his demons, but that there was also something inside him even more repugnant and obstinate than those demons, a disgusting principle of living, a malformed fetus that devoured the flesh of its mother, membrane by membrane, swallowing the small surgical instruments inserted to suppress it, and found itself finally outside the hole, ready to exist.

Orphanhood was ultimately Rudi's best weapon, as someone took the time to fully realize his potential. A succession of scrupulously intentioned mentors invested in him as no father and no mother would have ever done. And now, Rudi, at the age of forty, had long repaid those debts. And his wife, Carla, wagered on him as well; as soon as they met in Brussels at a workshop, she chose him as her Maestro. And he had accepted the challenge: a classical dancer, already mature, who decided to risk everything to put her trust in the anarchical plasticity of this young choreographer three years her junior. Rudi became her Maestro and soon after, her husband. And everything in their union obeyed the rules of complementarity: she was small, proud, methodical, a tiny soldier in lockstep; he was powerful, gigantic, wild, an eternal self-reviser. They worked together for a few months, up until the day of the accident, when Carla's legs wilted to the ground like a rotten flower. Something out of alignment in her martial precision, a force that brought the full armor of the classical ballerina to pieces. The force of chaos, pure movement. Carla stood up with difficulty, like a warrior wounded more by the indisputable recognition of weakness than by a weapon. And from that day on, she never danced again. She continued to work with Rudi and became his manager; she was responsible for turning Rudi into a rather prosperous genius and oversaw a good number of his shows, from the set design to the auditions. She often reviewed the aspiring dancers, recognizing her past talents in them, the same energy, the same devotion, the same blindness.

But she did not choose Irene. Only Rudi was present that day of auditions. Just Irene's dancing body and Rudi following the rapture of pure movement with his hands. It was the first time that Irene had ever felt so examined. She had spent months alone preparing for her audition, and his gaze was the first that brought her back to reality. Outside that room, a forty-year-old watching her so closely would have only embarrassed her. Her body reacted to challenges she had never known, and each in turn presented new chal-

lenges. And she had never danced like that before. What happened to the mechanism of control over her limbs? The precise movements studied day after day? The conviction that those were the only possibilities? Rudi's hands drew a framework of disjointed, infinitely dissolving movements, and Irene thrashed within that skein, pushed forward by a completely new desire: to please someone other than herself.

When the music stopped, Rudi had approached Irene steadily, raised her a few centimeters from the ground, and, drawing his face close to hers, said: "You're it." It was never a secret among the other dancers that Irene was the favorite; Rudi dedicated an attention to her that was excessive, even in the more despotic moments of his training, in the continuing need to improve her, the endless inflexibility, the instinctive ferocity over her body. Often at the end of rehearsal, a dancer would approach him complaining of leg cramps, and he'd let her stretch out and tenderly would knead her afflicted limbs; but with Irene he never did so. And she was so happy that nothing between them would be shared with the other girls, that everything would remain closed inside that little closet of damp rags and brooms. She fetishized everything in that claustrophobic hole; her fantasy, newly trained to the pleasures of revisionary love, transformed objects, shaping them to adhere perfectly to the constructs of her mind.

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Rudi instead preferred to concentrate on her. The first form that appeared to him was the ebb and flow of Irene's hair. It became a backdrop, enveloping the irregular harshness of the detergent bottle or the broom-hooks on the wall. The second vision was that of Irene's torso. Her pelvis, the way she had of pushing it forward and leaving it swaying as if it were detached from her body, a swing suspended in the air at zero gravity. It always seemed a miracle to be able to penetrate it: to aim at a feather floating midair and to hit it full on. Irene hardly ever spoke while making love; she listened to Rudi's voice as he added image upon continual image, describing their embrace, madness, perfect genital complementarity, adoration, their cult of movement. "We didn't invent this, Irene," he said. "We are slaves to movement. We follow it." And together they worshipped that abstraction, subservient to an idea before pleasure.

Then, suddenly, a baby arrived, displacing the idea. *Barren womb of a great performer*. Rudi had left her nothing: even in the act of abandon, he had to be clear who was Maestro and who performer. But for him, this was Irene's great virtue, her capacity to let herself be passed through and never hold onto anything, to be an instrument, to give everything back to the world. And so,

as he sought the precise words to leave her, her tears were the last of the gifts that she was ready to offer him: a sublime performance of weeping.

One of the doubts that lingered with Irene two days before the premiere was the possibility that Rudi had made it all up, because, in the Maestro's head, a traumatic encounter led people to give the best of themselves. Maybe this baby didn't actually exist. Maybe it was the ultimate test of his love for Irene. Another of his slightly cruel tricks: forcing her to perform under fictive suffering. But then, on the day of the dress rehearsal, Rudi and Carla arrived together to give all the dancers the good news. "It only seems right to share something with you all, like I've shared the creation of this show," Rudi said. Then he delicately caressed Carla's belly, which was still completely flat, and left his hand there for a few moments as his wife looked down towards this undeniable act of paternity.

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On opening night, Irene's parents sat on the far side of the theater, as if they were afraid of invading the space that their daughter guarded so jealously. Michele took a seat in the second row. As darkness fell in the hall, he followed the last trail of dust illuminated by the spotlights before he was plunged completely into the darkness with a slight sense of fear.

She appeared on the stage. Kneeling, unmoving, she stared out at the emptiness. Naked. An image that lasted too long for those who knew her. Nearly a minute passed, and then choreography began around her body; she exited the stage writhing like a snake. Then she reappeared, the music started to grow, and the lights gradually began to constrict above her. And she began to dance. Michele was terrified. Here she is, the great dancer. The same girl who never gave him anything when he held her and confessed his love. The same girl who remained rigid, distant, on his bed. The same girl who undressed only if almost forced. Who never wanted to be watched. Now, here she was, every part of her body, even her breath, ravaged by unfamiliar eyes. The same girl who never moaned when they made love. Dished up. Given away. If he needed other proof to understand that Irene was nothing like what he always thought—there she was, and he couldn't remember if he'd asked for this proof, or if it had been forced upon him, like everything else: first, his girlfriend's passivity and now the shamelessness of this unrecognizable woman. But the worst was yet to come. After fifty minutes, Rudi entered the stage. His duet with Irene was simply the simulation of a rape. She writhed, spread her naked, sinuous body under him, and Rudi dominated from above,

the muscles of his forearm illuminated in the spotlight, the movement of his pelvis as he pressed it on hers and then raised it again, high enough for Irene to drag herself away on her back the total length of the stage.

The audience hailed the triumph of the Maestro and his pupil. A loud applause, even more embarrassing and incomprehensible for Irene's parents and her ex-boyfriend than the last five minutes they'd just witnessed. "What was that trash? What was good about it?" The girl's father asked his wife, hoping that the question would hit the rest of the audience like a slap, but with a gaze so imploring that it overpowered his explosion of rage. A reproachful glance from the person sitting next to him was enough to silence him.

Only at the theater's entrance, when she ran to her parents, hungry for compliments, did Irene begin to realize how things really stood. And when Rudi joined her in greeting them, her father avoided shaking his hand. "My daughter has been humiliated in front of both strangers and her family," her mother responded. "These provocations were already ridiculous twenty years ago," she continued uncompromisingly. "You, sir, are a grown man. You know what I mean."

Irene tried to catch Michele's eye, but he lowered his gaze without saying a word. Before Irene had time to gather her thoughts, her father turned to her: "You were repulsive," he said. Not *silly* or *sloppy* but *repulsive*. A word that she had never heard her father pronounce, so hyperbolic it didn't even sound like him, and only that particular effort, calibrated to hurt her and strike Rudi at the same time, could have produced such an image.

When Irene returned to the dressing room to collect her things, Carla approached her with a smile that surprised her. "You have an incredible talent," she said. "Don't ever throw away any of your gifts."

But you should, Irene thought. Throw away what you were given. Throw out this baby. It's not even a talent. What good will it do? And why did her hatred for Rudi have to betray her right now? Why was he the only one whom she could feel close to? She ran to find him. Crazed, she dragged him from an interview to a more secluded place, then burst into tears. "Please, Rudi, hold me. Please, just one last time. Tomorrow everything will change. You'll become a father, you'll become someone else, whatever you want. But please just hold me now and say that what we did was beautiful. Say that I was beautiful."

Rudi was barely able to look at her, this beauty that begged other beauty. How could she look for it in him, and right at the moment that he had

decided to give it up? He felt awkward embracing her, for the first time completely inadequate. Forget *maestro*—he wasn't even able to defend her in front of her parents, nor was he able to defend himself against the accusations of her mother. He wasn't prepared; he'd thought that the time when he'd have to prove his worth to such idiots was over.

And what did she mean by *provocations ridiculous twenty years ago*? What exactly was she alluding to? Why didn't she throw out a name, an event, anything at all? If she were going to blurt out nonsense, it would be better simply not to say anything. Maybe this was why he had given the task of waiting backstage for Irene to his wife and instead had gone to rave in front of the reporters, to put the meaning of those "provocations" down in black and white, to look for the right adjectives, to say *indomitable*, *semantics of the body*, *pure movement*, to combat the obtuse nature of this mother and this father, whom he'd luckily never had to deal with before. This was his task, and Irene surely wouldn't be able to understand it. Rudi wanted to begin every sentence with some sort of justification: *if only I could, Irene... God, if only...* It would have been easier if she hadn't been so beautiful at that moment; not even onstage had he ever seen her so beautiful. But onstage all of her fragility and need for him transformed into something else, whereas here only life remained, *what doesn't transform into pure movement*. And Rudi really didn't want to interfere with her life. No. His task was something else.

"Of course you're beautiful," he said finally.

Rudi cancelled the rest of the show's scheduled performances, despite the audience's ovation and the kind words from the critics who didn't deem his "provocations" too passé. Irene had to leave the company—at seventeen, her parents' veto still carried weight—and the Maestro didn't think even for a moment of replacing her. But it was precisely the irreproducibility of the show that decreed its fame. The lucky few in attendance that evening continued to brag at length, turning the event into a minor urban myth. And although Rudi and Irene never saw each other again after that night, her role as lead dancer in the most highly acclaimed and elusive work of Rudolph Krekeler established the career of the fledgling dancer, something even her parents had to admit.

Rudi moved to Berlin with Carla a few months later; it was there that their son Vedar was born, and it was there nineteen years later that the Maestro died of a heart attack during a rehearsal. Irene learned about his death from

her mother, in one of her many daily phone calls in which she informed her daughter about the general state of the world with the meticulousness of an ANSA reporter. Irene lived the isolated life of a touring artist. She never got married; she took the occasional lover, but they never lasted long enough to leave a disastrous aftermath, let alone more invasive forms of nostalgia.

Irene saw her Maestro's face for the last time a year before his death, when, while touring in Germany, she turned on the hotel television, and Rudolph Krekeler appeared, standing beside a deputy parliamentarian who was discussing the most recent bill in support of the arts. Rudi wore a pathetic mouse-gray suit, but the most disturbing thing was watching him laugh at the politician's jokes, and it struck Irene that she never had seen him laugh before.

When Irene decided to go to Berlin to pay homage to the Maestro's grave, she never imagined she'd find herself scanning the telephone directory for the number of the Krekeler household, calling it, offering her condolences to Carla, and accepting an invitation to come over for a glass of wine. But, actually, were it necessary to question a part of Irene's behavior, it wouldn't be so much the motive behind the call as much as the decision to sacrifice her first free days after months on tour to go put a flower on Rudi's grave. The rest happened on its own. Ways to stem the painful sense of emptiness that washed over her when she heard her mother say: "You remember that fool Rudolph Krekeler, right? He died."

Irene brought a box of sweets to Carla's house. When Carla opened the door, Irene's memories, all formed around the harshness of that face, were confronted with a new languor. Carla welcomed her with a delicate smile, and with the same delicateness she brought her into the hall, walking on the tiptoes of those tiny feet of hers, almost childlike. It was this fact that had escaped Irene before: Carla looked utterly and astonishingly like a child. A wise, serious child, but still forever a childish being, filled with that unsettled grace only children manage. Irene settled into the sofa, hoping to minimize the sweep of her gestures, as if she were afraid of overwhelming those of the other woman. But even without that precaution, the delicate movements of Carla would never vanish from that room, nor any room, nor from the memory of Rudi. The way Carla opened the cookie tin, poured the wine, spread a cloth napkin for Irene, belonged to a private liturgy that transformed the space into a paradise of matter. And then her voice, generated by that same universal balance, gentle and calm, slightly impersonal, captivating in its monotony. It was

so difficult to understand how these factors might be sensual, but for the first time, Irene felt her sensuality so strongly that she had to turn within herself to protect herself from the affront. At sixty-six, Carla seemed a more beautiful creature than she had been twenty years prior. But it wasn't the belated proof of her beauty that hit Irene the hardest—on the way home, she was sure she'd find a way to dissect it—the real problem was that Irene felt happy to be there. Listening to Carla's stories as a guest in the house that she should have despised and embracing family memories that never could have belonged to her made her feel good, as if comfort were one state of the soul that reproduced against the body's will. She was still uneasy as she looked for a way to arrange her legs on the sofa, but elsewhere, in the space where Carla spoke to her of Rudi and of the love that the Maestro had kept over the years for his little weightless dancer, Irene felt mostly happiness. It was for this reason that Irene accepted Carla's invitation to stay the night.

She led Irene to Vedar's room, and as they passed through the hallway, Carla showed her an enormous collage of photographs hanging on the wall. They were all images taken during rehearsals for Rudi's shows; in one, Irene stood next to the Maestro: she in a severe pose and Rudi watching her, looking amused.

"Rudi always saved everything," Carla said. "He was obsessive about it. This is why it's even harder to survive him. The house is just overrun with memories."

Irene looked over all of the photographs, almost embarrassed by a feeling of jealousy; all these women photographed near the Maestro, who always looked the same, identical to the image that Irene had preserved up until a year prior, when suddenly that smile on the television had violated her memory.

When Carla left her alone, she searched for some trace that would remind her of Rudi. But Vedar's room was just a teenager's room, a place that she'd never had any opportunity to investigate, except for those long-gone excursions in Michele's bedroom, when she, left alone on the bed, observed the space around her uninterestedly. She seemed to disappear inside that room; Michele touched her, and she didn't feel anything. How many things were ruined to pursue the vanity of an even bigger ruin? And then she'd grown up. A frugal woman who carefully savored her attachments to things, a woman who wouldn't accept another ruin, perfectly at ease in hotel rooms, whose objects never once reminded her of anything else, where it was so simple to detach from belonging.

Irene almost felt obligated to inspect the bedroom of her host. She looked around for a picture of Vedar but couldn't find one, so she took the clothes that he'd left piled on a chair and spread them out in an orderly fashion on the bed to try and give his body dimension. Then, once started, she also began to dig around in his dresser. He had to be a tall boy, somewhat thin, with a preference for pale colors. She inhaled the linen fibers of the clothes, because then the image became more real, and from all of those mixed scents something sharp surfaced, the same bitter odor of the dressing room from when Irene was still a young dancer. Here, this was the first reasonable fact that she could name, a first identification. She threw herself onto the bed, near the clothes, attempting to stem the flow of her thoughts. What was she doing here? It had been dangerous enough to decide to stay the night, and now she found herself in Vedar's room, trying to evoke a familiar presence, a past mistake, by smelling these clothes. She put everything back into the chaotic order she'd found it in, undressed, and got into bed wearing only a shirt that she'd picked out from the ones in the dresser. And at that point, she also knew why. It had been one of Rudi's shirts.

Around three hours later, when Irene heard the door open carefully, she was still awake. Actually, in those three hours she'd spent in the dark wearing Vedar's (and his father's) shirt, she had done nothing but imagine the moment. So when the door unlatched and the hallway light shone over that slender body across the bed, Irene was neither startled nor surprised.

"Go ahead and turn the lights on, Vedar. I'm awake."

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to bother you—I just needed to get my book..." Vedar stopped for a second, the moment when he realized that the person he was addressing was the half-naked body of an unknown woman. "Oh, sorry...I'm so sorry...I didn't know...I'm sorry." What didn't Vedar know? That she was naked? That she had stolen a shirt from him, that it was falling off her shoulders?

"Vedar, don't worry, I wasn't sleeping," Irene said, anticipating him perfectly, pretending that this would be a reason for justifying herself. "Come in, I wanted to meet you."

Vedar entered his own room cautiously, like a stranger, and didn't know where to look, nor how to block the light that shone on Irene, since the only way would have been to close the door completely or turn off the hallway light, and both of these things seemed even more embarrassing to him than her nakedness. So she did it. Just a few minutes later. Or maybe right away. It

wasn't a reflex; Irene felt possessed by a need to act, ready at last not only to perform her role but also to orchestrate the entire production. The impulse to try to clarify all of the reasons that had nagged her up until then—the decision to go to Berlin, the sweets she'd bought for Carla, the shamelessness of wearing a dead man's shirt—vanished the moment Vedar stepped into the bedroom: no explanation needed, no idealization, no time wasted, just the violence of desire; an adult body desiring a young body. What had Irene thought all those years, dressing up after some show to pick up some theater director, pulling her hair back, wearing pale, transparent slips, painting her nails or lips red? What was she thinking? It wasn't for sexual pleasure, it had never been that. As it had never been the ecstasy of pure movement that attracted Rudi to her young pussy. And suddenly she knew the answer: a thing that should embarrass her, just the thought of it: *young pussy*. Instead, with a jeer, Irene repeated it to herself, *young pussy* a full sound, and she wanted to throw her head back and laugh crudely and cling even tighter to the body of Vedar and make him laugh, too. Laughing together at Rudi's words. Laughing at pure movement. Laughing at that damp little room. Laughing at Carla's wisdom. Laughing at her unrealized life. All the evenings she spent imagining the Maestro's hands. It was all so exhilarating that she'd never stop laughing if only she decided to start.

Vedar's room swirls around her like a memory left to wait too long. She feels herself touched through the shirt, collects Vedar's fingers between her small breasts, and tries to remember the Maestro's hands, but he isn't the one that she needs now. Desire has been freed, it flows happily over her body. It's so different to caress the skin of a boy, it has nothing to do with tenderness, it's pure devotion. She could ask him anything, now that she's ready to worship him, and this is what Vedar is waiting for; in the farthest corner of his consciousness, this is exactly what he wants: reverential instruction. Irene lies under him, respecting his request. Her every movement is a generous act of deference, and so Vedar lets himself be led, a timid testimony to his own excitement. He pinches her nipples and almost seems to shock himself with this sudden act of courage. Irene understands his stupor, lies watching him, amused until the very end, when he, in the dark, theatrically opens his eyes wide to look at the stain he's left on the sheet, and then tries to hide it with his hands.

She'd never have imagined that revenge could be a comic feeling. It was precisely what she'd tried to avoid her whole life, because otherwise everything

would've been completely different for her. But is it really possible to accept that you've lived a farce and not a tragedy? This is what the Maestro must have understood twenty years ago. When she ran to him after her father had lashed out with that nonsense—that she'd been repulsive—and Rudi had, instead of bursting into a roaring laugh like the one she'd seen on television, held her one last time and told her that she was beautiful. Thinking about it now, Irene was barely able to restrain herself. And her mother saying, "Remember that fool Rudi Krekeler? He's dead." But he wasn't a fool, mamma. No more than I am right now, making love to his son, whispering words to him, the words his father once whispered to me. And he accepts them. As I once accepted them. We didn't laugh about them together, and so now what? Something has to be done with those words. So that nothing goes to waste. It's no longer possible. We've run out of time. Rudi kept everything. All those photographs. All those legs standing near him. He couldn't keep the moment, and so he kept those legs. I should immortalize every centimeter of this body. Vedar. Every centimeter of muscle, cut into little pieces and stashed in my purse. There's no time to lose. The details are crucial. The nauseating smell of his clothing. Keep it all. His embarrassment when he entered the room. The desire to be freed from his embarrassment. In ten, twenty, a hundred Sundays, it will help you to feel less lonely. To break the weight of freedom. Take it all. Don't forget anything. There is so much useless space to fill. Seize everything. Hair arms teeth. Just look at it, it'd be such a waste to leave it behind. Rudi never led you astray. Up till the very end. It was never his decision. It's youth that sets the rules, that generates delirium. Only youth. The abstraction that made you come, it wasn't his fault. Everyone who said that the Maestro had ensnared you. And you didn't even know what the word meant. And now, yes, you understand. He's the one who surrendered. Really. There's no other valid hypothesis.

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In the darkness, Irene could guess vaguely at the features of Vedar; all that she could imagine was a young Rudi. Very young. A marvelous paradox. And she was able to possess it completely.

The next morning, when Irene appeared in the Krekeler's large, bright kitchen for breakfast, she was struck by two tragically identical faces, so much so that she was unable to say whether she recognized Vedar's features in Carla or vice versa. Sure, from now on she'd have to accept these little pranks of her comic fate; the nature of the false vision that had followed her throughout the night reminded her of what she already knew: once begun, the farce must continue

forward. At the table, a small breakfast tray was ready for her, assembled with loving precision, everything already decided upon and rational, like Carla's gaze, which had gone blank and indecipherable again. Did she know what had happened? Had she spoken with Vedar? Or had she been the one who'd constructed this little joke; had she sent her son to his room to see how she would react? Had she calculated everything? She was a meticulous woman and certainly capable of it, a classical ballerina, a genius of precision, one who set the table for breakfast in such a sophisticated manner; it wouldn't have been hard to consider all the details. Was this the reason she hadn't shown Irene even one photo of Vedar; was this the reason that she hadn't seen one in his room? So that the discovery would taste like punishment? A torturous, efficient result; only a professional like Carla could manage it. And what had changed for Irene? The taste of punishment was neither more sweet nor more bitter than the dream of possession that had conquered her just a few hours before. Laugh if you must. Go ahead. Right now. Now that we're all here. The living and the dead. Now that the time is right. After breakfast, on a full stomach. Go ahead. A nice, loud laugh. It's as if Rudi had already begun.

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But even the farce has its rules. If you're on the inside, you won't be the one laughing. So Carla introduces Vedar to Irene, and the two shake hands. Irene sips her coffee, assuring Carla that it's still warm. She never drinks it very hot, it doesn't suit her, it's a matter of congestion. And then she also assures her that she's actually got to leave right after breakfast, unfortunately—she's got a million things to do, a dancer's hectic life doesn't leave much free time, you know how it is, though she'd love to stay, certainly she would—and Carla agrees, yes, it'd be marvelous if she'd stay for a few days longer, too bad it's just not possible, what a shame, there'll be other chances. Vedar doesn't open his mouth once, and Carla's gaze is an exercise in restraint, Irene incapable of doing anything about it; she's no longer able to interpret the void behind those eyes, and perhaps it had never been any other way—she'll convince herself of this, although it seems an impossible endeavor, the vast wait and then nothing. After breakfast, walking her to the door, Carla hands Irene her photograph with the Maestro.

"Take it," she says, "and take good care of it, like Rudi would have done. I can't anymore."

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