

WAITING FOR PAVLOVA

By VIRGINIA WALLACE

Of all the pictures in our family album—and they are numerous, for my parents then were fascinated either by their growing daughter or by photography—the snapshot that always makes me pause is one of me posed with one arm arched over my head, the other pulling out the folds of a long dotted swiss skirt to reveal a foot pointed to curtsy. On the unbelievable corkscrew ringlets into which my usually recalcitrant hair had been coaxed sat a facsimile mobcap, the kind I always picture Shakespeare's Joan wearing when she "keeled the greasy pot". An outsider, seeing the ruffled sleeves and flounced hem of this garb would intuit school pageant. But I know better; the snapshot was taken in our garden and the dress is the one I wore when I was an Apple Dumpling in ballet school.

First, it must be admitted that the stress and strain of becoming a ballet dancer were not always glamorized by filmy costumes of dotted swiss. On the contrary, the school stipulated that practice clothes be white utilitarian garments, with short skirts and no unnecessary frills. This edict my mother interpolated to a costume as simply plain as she could make it. The pudgy contours of my third grade physique—I had all the grace of a baby balloon—were garbed in a white rayon top patterned from one of my sleeveless undershirts, and a slightly flared hiplength skirt which clung seductively over white rayon pants. I seriously doubted if Pavlova or any of her cronies had begun their careers with such a handicap.

But once at the polished waist high railing called the barre that ran the length of the ballet practice room, one forgot costume in the effort to hold head high, arms curved, and, oh, the bane of being fat, *derriere in, s'il vous plait*.

Just as it does not start with exotic dress, so ballet training does not start with a few casual twirls on the tips of the toes. There must be a preparatory time, about two years, during which the young dancer's ankles and leg muscles are built by slow and painstaking exercise into sturdy tools with which to hold precisely balanced attitudes and execute difficult steps with control and deceiving ease.



So the fifteen girls of my first term class wore the kind of limp black kid slippers Degas never painted, grasped the barre for balance and stained white uniforms with tears and perspiration as we tried to mold stubborn inflexible feet into the five positions that form the basis of all dance steps. We even managed to feel superior to a skinny black haired girl who finally dropped out of class because her knees creaked on all the deep bends.

All the practice, all the tedious exercise was deemed worthwhile if it earned a nod of approval from Madame Josephine. Once she had been *premiere danseuse* with a Paris company, but now she was the owner of our school. A figure of imposing vitality, she became invested with the most extravagant gossip: the older girls, who took their toe shoe lessons from her in awed silence, whispered that she had been jilted by her lover and the grief had driven her from the stage. To me, she seemed above such human tragedy. Even with the assistant teachers she was majestically aloof, and when she came to watch us, the young woman who led our practice session faded into insignificance. We hated our skimpy white costumes when we saw Madame Josephine's graceful knee length skirt and the cherry red shawl she wore for warmth over her low cut bodice when she was not dancing. She was tall, vibrant and moved with a regal ease that made us sigh. She always carried a stick, something similar to a classroom pointer, only, of course, nothing so mundane. She used to tap with it on the door before she entered; holding in her hands like a scepter she would walk with the curious grace of long toe-heel dancer's steps to her place across the room. Then, stick in hand, she would commence, rapping smartly for attention.

"First position." (tap, TAP) "Second position" (tap, tap) "Third position" (Tap) "Watch your arms, there." (tap, TAP) "Fourth—no, no with GRACE!" And she would rush up to the offender, holding one hand on the pupil's diaphragm, pushing and punching the awkward foot with her stick, until the girl approximated her standard of perfection. Sometimes, though this was the task of the younger teacher, Madame Josephine would demonstrate the steps. Tossing her red scarf onto a chair, standing where all could see, she would lead us in the movements we had almost come to hate, transforming the impossible formal motions into meaningful gestures. The moment she led us, our stiffness vanished; we were one with her, lithe and beautiful. I yearned for the day my pale blonde hair would turn black and grow long enough to twist into a bun like that of the aristocratic Madame Josephine.

What my parents thought of her or of the sacred disciplined mornings I spent at her studios I do not remember. I am sure none of the mothers ever really knew of the secret world we had. Talking in class was forbidden and even the sunlight that filtered through the frosted windows took on a hallowed air. In the free dance sessions in the other room we were encouraged to sway and skip to the music as we wished, but even here we were silent, concentrating.

My whole interest shifted to ballet. I abandoned at the beginning of the "D's" all my plans to read in alphabetical order the books in the children's room of the library, and concentrated on books on dancing. There were plenty, most of them about girls in the great Russian state schools. I longed to be Russian and live on a collective farm with my own Five Year Plan so I could dance for the Ballet Russe. All the heroines of these novels were peasants, or at least poor, and they qualified on arduous examinations for scholarships to train to be dancers. *They* all danced in black formfitting leotards.

Possibly because we had made some progress, but more probably because the mothers who paid for lessons demanded a more tangible reward than washing practice clothes, Madame Josephine announced that we would hold a recital. Here it was that I was destined to shine. The ballet of the first term girls, which might have been variously titled, "Evolution of a Blossom," had a story line that was sure to enthrall. In our sheer white dresses with the red flounces we were first dainty apple blossoms, subsequently rosy-cheeked apples, and in final pirouetting triumph, apple dumplings on the way to the oven which was, by coincidence, offstage. As the shortest in the class—and possibly the one with the figure most like a dumpling—I was chosen to head the line. Now heading the line was not the same as being the star, but it would lead to a certain conspicuousness, I reasoned, as I practiced on my own in our basement, endangering wet clothes with my flying leaps, while the spiders laughed in glee.

In an incredibly short time performance day had come, Madame Josephine was ushering in the parents, and it was time to lead the rest of the quaking blossoms out through the curtains. The dance itself was simple enough, though with fifteen of us, in assorted sizes, it posed all the problems of a troop maneuver. It started with a line which snaked its way around the semi-circle of spectators who sat on chairs on our level. (The piano reposed, safe from harm, on the platform stage above.) In this double S twisting, our arms encircled our heads, hands far enough apart to hold an imaginary balloon—a psychological trick to achieve that drifting, light-on-the-feet look. Then, at the

summons of a piano chord, we fell back, regrouped into a cluster of apple blossoms and began to *bloom*, springing out in two's and three's to assume arty stances. I rather think the falling of the petals was omitted for fear our naturalistic bent might have insisted on a Minsky routine.

With successive gyrations we fluttered through the buffets of a rainstorm and the kindly ministrations of the sun, evolved into apples, fell to the ground in a series of mincing hops, joined hands once around for the apple dumpling polka, and somersaulted off the stage to the oven. Applause and laughter followed the other fourteen girls; I somersaulted into a handy wall and exited to jeers of "applesauce" . . .

Madame Josephine gravely congratulated all the mothers and passed around the enrollment list for the next term. After a month, though, my contract was cancelled. I had been sent to learn bodily grace, but it was discovered that Madame Josephine was being rather too graceful with one of the fathers and the neighborhood mothers' league declared a boycott. My loyalty to ballet persisted until my next birthday, when I was given a baton and dreams of a stage career faded before visions of spinning the shiny baton in front of the blare of a marching band and a parade that would astonish all of Main Street.
