

So Close to Christmas

December 14th

Lubin, Poland

1939

For being so close to Christmas, the streets are strangely empty. There are no children to stand at the toy-store windows, fog up the glass, or leave finger-print smudges in their wake. The chocolatiers have closed their doors. It is quiet beyond the hum of street lamps and the patter of sleet on the shingled roofs.

A lone woman hurries along under a large black umbrella. She walks as if guided by a tune, with her chin up and shoulders back. Her fine hair is as pale as her skin and coils into a tight bun on the back of her head. She is long and lithe, dressed all in black, with eyes of jade green. Her final destination is a townhouse-turned-storefront on the street corner with a bay window. When she enters, the bell above the door twinkles.

It is more workshop than store. Though a cash register occupies the corner of the cluttered workbench, it is an afterthought. A man perches on a stool behind the counter, bent over a shoe of pink satin, needle in hand, as his glasses slide slowly toward the end of his aquiline nose. Beside him, amongst the piles of ribbon, leather, and fabric, rests a golden six-pointed-star where it had been discarded earlier that evening.

“We’re still going.” Says the woman, better known by her stage name, Lena Czajka.

“Thank God.” Says her husband, who’s name is not known at all.

Lena abandons her umbrella and black coat; strips off her mittens, woolen socks, and boots,

and flops into an overstuffed armchair beside a portable iron stove. Sitting sideways, she can stretch her bruised feet out toward the stove as she pulls the pins from her hair. She removes only two before a calloused brown hand closes around her white one.

“May I?” Asks her husband.

He knows he can, but she hums in assent regardless. He settles cross-legged on the floor behind her.

“How was the big show?” He asks.

“Passable. The German does not know what he is looking at, but he likes to flatter himself that he does. Luis convinced him to let us go.”

Her husband’s face twists. “I take it Luis has not changed his opinion.”

“He remains utterly unaffiliated. He fumbled the lift with Marie, but he speaks German. It helped.”

“So it’s off to Paris?”

“At the end of the week. Will the shoes be done by then?”

“I finished them this afternoon. You should try them.”

“They will fit.”

“Indulge me, then.”

Even if he had not asked, she would have.

The phrase “fits as if it was made for me” is often overused, but in this case, it is the only apt descriptor. Her husband had made her hundreds of shoes, each one perfect, yet somehow outdone by the pair that follows. She is not the only ballerina under his care, but her shoes are always receive extra attention.

Gently, Lena rises up onto the platform of the shoes. She seems to hover for a moment, then

uses her husband's shoulder for balance to shift onto one leg, where she remains for several ticks of the grandfather clock in the workshop corner. When Lena comes down, a smile adorns both her face and her husband's.

"Brilliant work, as always." She compliments. "Paris will not know what to think."

"They will think of the woman wearing the shoes." He says. "Which is what I want."

"I wish you could come with me."

"Maybe next year."

The evening is a quiet one. Lena will be gone for the holidays, so they exchange gifts in their home above the workshop over glasses of wine and lamb-meat pies. Lena receives a fine ivory hairpin, topped with jade to match her eyes. For her husband, she purchased a cloth-bound copy of Dante's *Inferno*. It cost more than she will admit. Books have been hard to find these days.

When they retire to bed, neither is eager to sleep. The sleet turns to snow outside, settling gently on the windowpanes. Moonlight speckles their quilts and highlights the dust idling above them. In the dark, Lena whispers, "Be careful while I'm gone."

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December 18th

Lubin, Poland

1939

The train station platform is barren except for an old man and his grandson—both bundled in thick coats with caps pulled over their ears—and a lithe, pale woman in a black coat, who is best known by her stage name, Lena Czajka.

The train puffs steam into the frigid December air. Lights glow within the empty cars. A blow

of the whistle summons the passengers forward. Though most of the compartments are empty, Lena settles in the one furthest down the car, placing her bag under her seat and a small, wooden box in her lap. Despite the few passengers boarding, the train sits in the station for most of an hour, belching smoke. Finally the compartment door slides open. A tall gentleman, equally as pale as Lena, stands on the threshold. He wears a grey uniform and matching hat, both with red accents. The end of his nose, too, is red from the chill. He is the sort of fellow you would not think twice to pass at the grocery; he would smile politely when you locked eyes in the library, then both of you would entirely forget the interaction. That is to say, he looks no different than any other blue-eyed young man. He looks frighteningly like Luis. The most remarkable thing about him is the splattering of freckles across his nose.

“Where are you headed?” He asks.

“Paris.”

“Ticket?”

He is not a member of the station staff, but Lena hands over her ticket.

“Is anyone traveling with you?” He asks.

“No.”

“What are you carrying with you? Any papers?”

“No.”

He scans the compartment with a glance. His eyes land on the box in her lap and he holds out his hand. With an expression perfected from years performing, Lena gives it to him. He fumbles briefly with the latch, frown deepening. When the box pops open, any sign of malcontent flees his features.

“You are a dancer.” He observes. Within the box, Lena’s pointe shoes shine under the

compartment's lights.

"I am."

"My daughter does ballet." Says the officer, smiling now. "She's eight years old in a month. I cannot dance to save my life, but that does not stop her from pulling me along with her."

Lena smiles politely, eager for the train to leave.

"Will you be in Paris long?" Asks the officer.

"Until the new year."

"Best of luck." The officer hands the box back and glances at her ticket once more before he withdraws. "*Auf Wiedersehen*, Miss Czajka."

As soon as his footsteps withdraw, Lena doubles over the shoes her husband made her and utters a prayer in a language few would dare utter that year.

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December 21st

Paris, France

1939

The *Palais Garnier* is disturbingly subdued. Any other year, the lobby brims with laughter. Young boys act out the part of the nutcracker and imagine their sisters to be the rats, chancing them around their parent's legs. This season, the theatre is no less full, but no one lingers to converse. They sit in their seats, speaking in whispers, though no performer has graced the stage.

Back stage, the company walks through the last steps of warm up. Up close, their makeup appears grotesque; over-exaggerated. It smells of sawdust and cosmetics and coal. In the corner, a lithe pale woman—not so out of place now—steps through rosin sprinkled on the floor. To the

outside observer, her fidgeting looks like nervousness over the performance. That is not the case. Though it is opening night, Lena Czajka's mind is far outside of the theatre.

It is the hum of the orchestra tuning which draws her back to the moment at hand. The younger dancers take their places in the wings, muttering to each other in half a dozen different languages. Luis, who—like Lena—does not go on stage for some time, comes to stand beside her. He is in his full costume except for his mask: a huge, the heavy caricature of a nutcracker.

“Doesn't quite feel real, does it?” He asks.

“The performance or the state of the world?”

“Both.” Luis grins. He is always grinning, especially at Marie, who has a habit of winking back at him.

“I hope the railways are open for the journey home.”

“They will be.” Says Luis. “Things are not so bad.”

The lights above them dim. The orchestra transitions from tuning into the first measures of the overture. Luis bows lightly to Lena. “Merde,” he wishes her, then joins Marie as they wait for their entrance.

The show runs smoothly from start to finish. If you ask the performers, they always have things to nitpick. A step off timing here; a sickled foot there. The audience of in the *Palais Garnier*, however, would have nothing but glowing admiration for the production. Theatre itself contains an otherworldly quality, but that night, it was tangible even to the most stiff-necked show-goer. Children lean forward in their seats. Mothers bite their tongues as a dancer leaps and remains suspended in the air a breath too long. Fathers—though they are few and far between—see something more than a nutcracker and toy soldiers on the stage. When the rat king lies defeated, the auditorium explodes with applause, far more enthusiastic than one would typically

expect at the downfall of a tyrannical rodent.

Far up in the balcony seats, a young gentleman watches the performance more intently than the rest of the enraptured viewers. He is short and mousy and afflicted with a rattling cough, which is perhaps the only reason he is not elsewhere this holiday season. He is an unusual patron, for he came to the show alone, yet carries a bouquet of roses. When the nutcracker and Clara enter the land of sweets and the sugarplum-fairy takes the stage, he leans forward. She is who he came to see.

She is breathtaking. The shoes on her feet are a perfect extension of her leg. No one pays them any mind at all; except the young man in the balcony. He watches her steps, counting each second before the show is over. To everyone else, she is but another jewel in the crown which is the performance. When Lena concludes the piece, the intensity of the applause manages to pry a smile from her.

The show ends with many bows and a standing ovation, after which the performers hurry backstage, celebrating their success and critiquing what could be further perfected for the following night. Lena Czajka breaks away from the hubbub begun by Luis opening a bottle of champagne to the backstage door. It opens to a poorly-lit alley. By now, Lena has abandoned her costume in favor of her thick black coat and gloves. She carries a box under her arm as she steps into the light snowfall, blinking as her eyes adjust to the darkness.

A slim figure walks into the pool of light flooding from the open door.

“You were beautiful tonight.” Says the young man. He is English. He holds a bouquet of roses.

“Thank you.” Says Lena.

Had a stranger overheard them, they would have remarked that Miss Czajka has come a great

way to see her lover. They think the pair standing so close in the alley could be no more than a moment away from a passionate embrace. They would smile to each other and hurry along as to not disturb the couple's privacy.

"We collected as much as we could." Lena says. "Though it feels like pitifully little."

"Anything helps." The Englishman stifles a cough, tugging his coat collar higher. "Will you be in Paris through the New Year?"

"No."

"You are going home?"

Lena nods.

The young man coughs. Though he routinely does so, this time does not seem to be the result of habit.

"My husband is there." Lena explains.

"Ah-" he hides a wince beneath a tip of his hat. "I see."

"Have the Germans done something?"

"No." He reaches for the shoe box, extending the flowers in trade, but Lena is not ready to let it go.

"They have." She says.

"The Germans have done nothing, to my knowledge, since I have been in Paris the past few days."

"What did they do?"

The young man pauses with his gloved hand a moment away from her. He does not retreat, but coughs once more. Lena pulls back on the box. His grip turns to a vice. For a breath, they are locked in a tug-of-war, before the stage door reopens. Luis leans on the doorframe with a glass of

champagne in either hand.

“Lena, darling, join us, won’t you?” He says, grinning. His teeth are as white as the snowfall.

Lena tucks her box into her coat, but she is too thin to fully disguise it. Luis’ mirth dims. His light eyes flit to the young Englishman. “I did not realize you had company.”

“An admirer.” The Englishman says. “I have a heart for the ballet.”

“I will be in soon.” Says Lena.

Eyes locked on Lena’s box, Luis sips his champagne. “You will catch cold out here, Lena. You should come in.”

“I will. In a moment.”

“The party is going on without you.”

Lena meets him in the doorway. In one motion, she takes the champagne from him and calls inside, “Marie!”

The girl turns away from the gaggle of her fellow cast members. Her costume glints blue and gold. Champagne has turned her cheeks pink beneath her dark hair and dark eyes. Lena nudges Luis’ shoulder toward her. “Luis has been wanting to speak with you.”

Marie quirks her head. Lena pushes Luis more firmly, and Marie steps to meet him. She catches his hand with a wink to Lena. Luis casts a glance at Lena as he throws an arm around Marie’s shoulders, his grin back in force. His cheeks rival Marie’s for their liquor-given rouge.

When Lena closes the stage door, her hand is shaking with more than the cold. She samples her champagne in a portion of half the glass, then extends it to the Englishman. Her lipstick has left a stain on the rim, but he accepts. As he drinks, Lena says, “Luis cares more for Marie than anything else. He does not think of much else.”

“And the girl?”

“She cares for Luis.” Lena says. “And she knows my husband. He makes her shoes.”

The Englishman polishes off the champagne. Snow replaces the glitter of carbonation in the glass and begins to melt. Lena trades the box for the cup and the roses.

“I should be going before anyone else notices I am gone.” She says. “Have a good night.”

“Churchill ordered raids. In Poland.” The words form a cloud between them, before fading into the wind. “The Germans have done nothing yet. But I thought you should know. Thank you again. You have done us an incredible service.” He turns to go, securing the package under his coat. “Oh, and Happy Christmas, Miss Czajka.”

Lena is left in the ally behind the *Palais Garnier* with a rose bouquet, an empty champagne glass, and the laughter of her troupe buzzing inside the theatre.

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December 28th

En route to Poland

1939

The trains are open, but they are empty. The few travelers Lena encountered on the first leg of her journey are gone now. It is only her, her bags, and dozens of lonely train compartments. She watches the snow-kissed hills of Europe go by. It is mostly farm houses and withered fields, but every so often, she passes a uniformed company slugging west. Halfway through the trip, the white topped grass and the neat houses on the outskirts of a town turn into a black, sunken crater. The train is moving fast. Lena only sees it for a moment, but she shuts the blinds of her window and stares instead at the buckles of her suitcase, rattling against the seat opposite her with each chug of the engine car.

After several unexplained delays, the train glides into the Lubin station. The lone occupant

steps onto the platform, where two men in grey uniforms await her. One of them has freckles across his nose.

“It’s an honor to welcome you back, Miss Czajka.” Says the freckled officer. “I am sorry for the unanticipated delay. I am sure you are eager to get home.”

Lena looks between the officers and says nothing.

“If you would accompany us, I would be grateful.” He continues.

Lena walks between them, gripping her bag in both hands. Of all the excuses which pass through her head, only one phrase actually makes it past her frozen lips. It is not what she expects. “Did the British raids succeed?”

“Yes,” say officers in unison. Neither look pleased.

They reach a small side room, labeled *baggage storage*. The freckled officer stops with his hand on the knob. “I realize this is unexpected, but I hope you can understand.” He looks back, sees Lena’s drawn face, and adds, “cheer up, Miss Czajka, this will not take long. She will only have a few questions for you.”

Lena has a split second to offer a brief prayer before he opens the door. Inside, a girl, perhaps thirteen, sits on a green trunk with her hands tucked under her to keep them warm. She has blue eyes and a freckled nose. As she sees Lena, she jumps to her feet. “Papa! I thought you were joking!”

Stone-faced, Lena turns to the officer. He shrugs. “The best Christmas present I could give her was to meet a real ballerina.”

“You danced in Paris.” Says the girl.

“I did.” Answers Lena.

“Were you Clara?”

“The sugarplum fairy.”

“Show her your shoes.” Says the officer, and to his daughter adds, “they are beautiful.”

Lena stands very still. The girl is hugging her father and speaking, but Lena does not hear the specifics. She remains like that for quite a while, debating a lie, when the officer prompts, “Miss Czajka?”

“I do not have them.” She says.

At this, the officers glance at each other. The father pulls his daughter closer, but she breaks away with an excited squeal. She announces, “You have a secret admirer! Oh, how romantic.” She bounces up to Lena and asks, “did he bring you flowers?”

“Yes.”

“It’s a long way to go to visit someone in Paris.” Her father says.

Lena puts immense amounts of concentration into retrieving the roses without a hurried panic. The flowers rest in the very top of her bag, now dry and crumbling. Lena breaks off a dying rose and extends it to the girl. “For a lovely dancer.” She says. “Who might perform in Paris one day.”

The girl accepts it with another squeal. Her father does not look as amused. His fellow officer slides the open bag from Lena without comment and begins searching.

“What happened to the shoes?” He asks.

Lena again debates a lie. Anything she considers seems absurd. She is left only with the truth.

“I gave them away.”

“To the man?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Miss Czajka, that is a violation of-“

“Don’t you know, papa,” whispers his daughter, “they only give them to their secret admirers. It’s like a ring.”

As the officer looks down at Lena, she thinks another prayer which blots out any other thoughts. Over and over again, the words, “God, please.”

The officer’s daughter shows him her rose. He takes it; glances at Lena, then smiles. He tucks the flower behind his daughter’s ear. “Very romantic.” He says.

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December 28th

Lubin, Poland

1939

Lena walks the streets of Lubin like a ghost. Her pale skin matches the falling snow. Her black coat matches the burnt out rubble piles of what used to be homes. There are more boards than glass now in the road-side window panes. Her time with the officer and his daughter had delayed her long enough for the horizon to swallow the last traces of the sun. Her steps are slowed by dread. The firm answer of the officers’ “yes” is now evident to her as she passes a town home which has been scalped.

Her prayer has not stopped since the station. Since then, the silent thoughts have become mutterings which fog in front of her, “God, please.”

When she rounds the corner onto her street, she closes her eyes. She takes several steps blind, heart pulse pumping as it never has before a performance. Finally, she brings herself to look.

The townhouse-turned-storefront stands still. Its bay window spills a puddle of golden light onto the cobbles. Lena’s steps quicken. She is a pace away when the door opens to meet her with

the familiar twinkling of the shop bell.

A thin, pale face greets her. It's blue eyes meet her own.

"I am sorry, Lena." Says its owner, who she only then recognizes.

"Luis?"

"I didn't want to do this, especially during the holidays."

"Do what?" Lena breathes.

"You can't hide it forever, Lena."

"What did you do!"

Luis shakes his head and goes to step around her. Lena catches his coat by the lapel. Luis is a head taller than her, but to any passersby, he looks like a kitten caught by the scruff. "What," Lena whispers, "did you do, Luis."

"He deserves to know the truth," he snaps. He pulls from her grip. "I'm sorry." Before she can question him further, he pops his collar and trudges off down the injured streets of Lubin. Lena yells something after him which should not be repeated.

By the time she opens the shop door, the first of her tears has frozen on her cheek. More follow as the familiar scent of satin and wax hits her. She does not know how long they have before the results of Luis' efforts come to bear. She does not know if it is worth it to run. She drops her bag by the door mutters a final prayer into the palms of her hands, "God, please."

"Lena?"

Her husband's arms engulf her before she can look up. He plants a kiss on her head. "You are home late."

"Too late."

"Even on time is too late."

She shakes her head into his shoulder. “What are we going to do?”

“About what, Love?”

“Did you not see Luis?”

“I did.”

“He has ruined us. Even if we get out of Poland, we still have Germany to cross—“

“I don’t want to leave. Certainly not because of Luis.”

Lena pulls back. She opens her suitcase and then begins on the rest of the shop, grabbing anything she deems important to throw into the already full bag. One of their books crushes the Englishman’s flowers. “The trains are still running. If we go now, then maybe—“

Her husband’s hand closes around hers before she can grab his coat from the rack. He holds it even when she tries to pull away. To Lena’s surprise, he is grinning. She punches him in the arm, but it is not him she is angry at.

“This is not something to scoff at.” She says, “they have been taking—we have to—“

“Lena,” Her husband catches her hand; places a kiss on her pale knuckles. “Luis came to tell me about your lover. In Paris.”

Lena blinks. “What?”

“He told me about your secret admirer. Behind the theatre. How you were giving him presents. That he brought you roses.” By then, he is laughing. He kisses her again, first on the cheek, then the forehead, and finally once on the lips. “He knows nothing of the shoes.”

Lena melts into his arms. Her laughter joins his. Taking her by the hand, he leads her upstairs. “It is you who gave *me* a fright.” He says, “you are late. I almost lit the candle without you.”

“I was detained.”

“Detained?”

“A little girl wanted to meet a ballerina for Christmas.”

They sit by the light a menorah burning the mantle, far out of view from the window. The pointe-shoe maker reads aloud an excerpt from Dante’s *Inferno*. Lena opens the wine her husband procured for the evening. Together, they light the fourth candle.

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December 29th

The English Channel

1939

Typically, the young Englishman would have been miserable in the cold, bundled up with some tea and a book, and far, far away from the water. This year, however, he occupies one of the few places aboard a ferry chugging along the Channel. The listing of the vessel, the smog of the docks, and the constant mist would have been enough to dampen anyone’s temper, but yet, he could not wipe the grin from his features.

His fellow passengers were not so chipper. They wore matching tan uniforms, boots, and hats. For the most part, they slept, drank, or stared over the water at the fading lights of Paris. The young Englishman approaches one of them with more boldness than he usually possesses.

“Do you have a knife on you?” He asks.

The soldier in question passes him a clasp-knife without a second glance.

The Englishman finds a private corner of the ferry where he opens the box from Lena Czajka. The shoes within are no longer pristine. They are scuffed and scratched; they smell vaguely of sweat and sawdust. They are still beautiful, but it is the beauty of use and craftsmanship, not of immaculateness. With a small blessing upon both the maker and the wearer

of the shoes, the Englishman digs the soldier's knife into the toe of them.

The maker of those particular pointe shoes takes great pride in his craft. Each pair he designs is constructed with care. It begins with layers of fabric, paste, and paper, stacked to form the box which supports the dancer. These particular shoes are made with choice pieces of material—pieces inscribed with names and numbers. Locations and dates. They are scribbled in tiny, looping writing. With each scrap the Englishman pulls from the butchered shoe, his smile grows.

Somewhere on the ferry, a soldier begins a part of O Come All Ye Faithful, which is picked up by his fellows. It is not entirely on pitch, but it is earnest, sung in at least three different languages across the small boat. The Englishman finds himself humming along as he unpacks piece after piece of information from the pointe shoes of Lena Czajka.