

Secret Dancer
By
The Ghostwriter

I was standing on an immaculate, well trimmed lawn in the early summer sunshine. There were five or six of us - his closest friends and his sister. A nurse brought out a tray of coffee and we sat around a little garden table sipping it and making small talk, as if we had met for a coffee morning at the W.I. or the village school.

I sat close to Mary. She was finding this difficult and before I had made my entrance she had apparently been in tears. She was struggling now to control her emotions and just before the coffee arrived I had taken her by the hand and led her along the little garden path to where there was a stream that flowed through the grounds in which big, fat carp basked in the morning sun.

‘I can’t cope with this, Rachel.’ She had whispered to me, dabbing her eyes with a soggy tissue, ‘I just can’t cope...’

I squeezed her elbow and gently took her arm entwining it with mine. She swallowed back a sob.

“I got here like I always do and I was just going into his room when the Sister stopped me. She said, ‘Your friend’s dying,’ just like that. ‘Your friend’s dying...’ Oh, Rachel....”

She dropped her head onto my shoulder and sobbed deeply. I stroked her hair and let her cry for a little. Eventually she looked up at me and I handed her a dry tissue from my bag.

‘Sorry.’ She gave me a watery grin.

‘That’s better.’ I fished out my mascara. ‘You look a mess.’

She sniffed away a tear and managed a laugh. I watched her do her eyes as I spoke to her.

‘We’ve got to be brave Mary... for the others. What about Jane? She’s his sister. Imagine how she feels.’

‘But it was so sudden. She just stood there and said he was dying. I was here last week and we were chatting...you know about old times and things...and now...’

Her lip began to tremble again.

‘Mary,’ I said, ‘We’ve known this would happen for months. He’s been on borrowed time...’

‘Yes...but I wasn’t expecting...not today’

I made more clucking sounds of comfort and sympathy and tried to make her buck-up, if only because I felt there would be enough tears later without starting now. Anyway, I sensed that someone had to be sensible and that there would be a lot of organising to do later and because I usually did the organising I wanted a clear head uncluttered by Mary’s misery.

If I was honest with myself I suppose I had to agree with her. It *was* a shock and part of me wanted to be sobbing into a hanky myself, not handing out the mascara and tissues.

Richard, Mary and I went back a long way. Twenty-five years...

It didn’t seem possible but it was twenty-five years ago that we had all met as young dancers recruited to the ranks of a regional northern ballet company.

Mary was pushy, ambitious and determined to rise to the top in a spectacular fashion. She had seen this first professional job as little more than a slight inconvenience,

essentially a nuisance to be got through on her way to her inevitable destiny as principal ballerina at Covent Garden.

I saw the job as a challenge and to some extent as a necessary step too – but towards my own goal of becoming a choreographer – not particularly in ballet either; even at that age I was attracted towards the glitz of the West End and the big dance numbers of the major musicals.

Richard had no secret ambitions. He stated his aims quite simply. He enjoyed dancing but it didn't particularly matter to him if he became a principal or not. His ambition was simply to do something he enjoyed and not to be part of the rat race; not to have to go into an office and toil for a living.

He enjoyed the pleasures of life and let's face it, he sort out more of them than most of us; he lived life completely to excess. He enjoyed everything, including food and drink and somehow, unlike us girls, he could indulge without putting on weight or the enormous amounts of wine he consumed affecting his performance.

Of course everyone knew he was gay – if only because he was outrageous in his attitudes and flamboyant in his clothing, even by the standards of the late seventies.

Being Richard he lived up to their expectations – he flirted outrageously with all the young men he met and affected a camp manner – 'hamming it up for his public,' he would say, exhaling cigarette smoke with a grin. In fact many women found him very attractive and his body, shaped by years in dance, was certainly very beautiful.

The three of us clicked at once. We shared a similar sense of humour and as the three youngest in the company we were thrust together in the worst digs, given the worst jobs and made to fetch and carry for those we considered older and more experienced than us but definitely not as talented.

Oh, the arrogance of youth. Did I really believe at that time that I was as good a dancer as our principal, who later went onto to become the director of one of the world's greatest modern dance companies?? I'm afraid that I did.

For Mary and me the only thing that stood in our way was lack of recognition, not lack of talent.

Richard was the great leveller. When Mary and I would be raging about some supposed sleight made against us by some over inflated principal dancer or when we would pompously comment on other dancers' abilities or make some pretentious comments about our own aspirations, Richard would merely sigh and pour himself another glass of the claret he so adored and suggest that we should be grateful to be employed at all, especially in such a good company on such a lovely summer's evening. Of course we ignored him and carried on bitching but he expected nothing else of us and we both knew that it amused him greatly to see us get on our high horses.

When the season finished we all moved down to London and for a while we shared a flat until we went our separate ways, seeking new friends, finding new lovers and travelling anywhere where we could find work.

We would always meet though. For twenty years we met each other in pubs and wine bars or went to shows with each other and we bitched and moaned about our careers or at least about their failures and exchanged gossip and made each other laugh and feel happy.

Then just ten months ago he had called us both up and asked us to meet him at a wine bar in Covent Garden.

He looked pale, paler than usual – his fair hair and light skin had never tanned and he always looked as if he was a creature of dark rooms and shaded trees. Over drinks we swapped gossip and moaned about the jobs we now had - Mary was a self taught design consultant, paid to give taste to wealthy people who had none themselves; Richard was now quite famous, he wrote acid and witty dance and theatre reviews for various journals and newspapers and was a necessary guest at any arts gathering or social event and I was running my own small, struggling dance studio.

What ever had happened to my dreams of long ago?

We had laughed and talked ourselves to a standstill when there was sudden lull in conversation – as there is sometimes when you have exhausted yourselves in the first flush of reunion.

He had spoken quietly, twirling his glass by its stem.

‘No need for panic, chaps but they’re going to operate on me for a brain tumour next week. Seems that’s what these wretched headaches I’ve been getting are all about...’

Mary and I sat there stunned. I paused with my glass near my lips. He grinned at us.

‘Well cheer up and buy me some decent grapes will you...? Put your glass down Rachel, you look like one of those living sculpture things.’

And that was how we found out. The operation happened the next week and there was great excitement when it went perfectly and huge relief all round but a month later his headaches started again and three weeks after that they found another, this time inoperable tumour.

And now here we were, his sister, Mary and some other friends of his who I didn’t know too well and we were sitting in the grounds of a hospice on a lovely Spring day and the Sister had told us that he would die soon, perhaps in the next hour.

So we sat there and we began to talk and soon we were all telling tales about Richard. His sister astonished us when she revealed that as a child he had wanted to be a vet! I had never even seen Richard stroke a cat. James and Sarah, who were friends Richard had made since his days in journalism and not really part of the dance world from which Mary and I hailed, were full of stories about his good nature and his snobbery over fine wines and good food. He had once refused to review a play because the theatre had served him some bad Pouilly Fume...and they told their stories and we laughed and celebrated his life but I could never tell them my story, my secret story because I had promised Richard that I never would.

‘Don’t you dare tell anyone, darling!’ He had said. ‘I like my reputation as it is and in some quarters it is essential.’

So we sat and waited for his death and I comforted poor, hopeless Mary.

And inside a part of me curled up into a little ball of misery and my soul screamed in pain.

There are occasions in life when the friends you make have feet of clay and when careers won’t go as you had hoped, when bills mount up and nights seem very long and cold. Both Richard and I had swung between the highs of life and the depths of bitter despair. Like two lost sailors clinging to each other in the wreckage we had come together on these occasions and given each other some comfort.

In fact we had become lovers soon after we met. By then he was already cultivating his mannerisms and outrageous ways, which over the years had become his trademark. On these he had built his career in journalism and his place in the ‘arty’ society he loved so much. To admit that he was not what he appeared, to acknowledge me as more than a friend, even by draping me over his arm at some book review or theatre cocktail party, would never have suited him or fitted his chosen role.

At first I had found it hard to believe that our ‘dalliance’ (as he called it) ‘affair’ (as I called it) was to be a secret. I had protested. I had shouted at him. What did he take me for? A whore? A tramp? - For use only on lonely nights and dark days?

‘But darlin’,’ he would drawl, smoke curling from his nostrils, ‘How could we possibly tell any one? It would simply ruin *everything* !’ And he would turn away with a hurt look, as if I had mortally offended him.

And of course I forgave him and went out without him and read his reviews and articles – just like everyone else, as if I was nothing very special.

It must sound terrible but I can only say in his defence, in our defence, that underneath his indifference he was more constant, more loyal and our relationship lasted longer than many of our acquaintances. And I think in his way he did love me. Certainly he was always there for me when I was sad or lonely or frustrated at my failings and setbacks. And in this he was reliable and generous.

You might ask did I feel cheated or regret not having a proper relationship? I don't think so. There were, after all, over the years other lovers, more macho, more down to earth – but there were none so tender or witty or intelligent.

When we buried him - when the others had left for the wake that I had organised, I lingered a little by the graveside. I realised then that my one regret was not to be allowed to grieve for him in public as his lover. There was a feeling of loneliness that was the more painful for being unshared. Loneliness greater than anything I had felt during the past years of hidden love.

It was suddenly cold and the sky was leaden grey as if the summer had put herself into mourning because I couldn't. So I turned from his grave and as I turned away I blew him a little kiss.

It was a secret kiss, unseen by anyone else.