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Astonish Me

Written by Maggie Shipstead

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Astonish Me

Maggie Shipstead



blue door

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I

September 1977—New York City

In the wings, behind a metal rack crowded with bundles of cable and silk flower garlands and the stringless lutes from act 1, two black dachshunds lie in a basket. They are awake but motionless, their small, uneasy eyes fixed on the dancers who come smiling and leaping offstage and give themselves over to violent exhaustion, standing stooped, hands on hips, heaving like racehorses. The dancers grab fistfuls of tissues from boxes mounted to the light rigs with gaffing tape and swab their faces and chests. Sweat patters on the floor. A stagehand pushes an ammonia-smelling mop around. The pas de deux begins. Two Russian stars are out alone in the light, both defectors. The surface of the stage has the dull shine of black ice; rosin dusts it like snow.

Ordinarily, members of the corps do not dare acknowledge the dogs, but Joan Joyce crouches and strokes their long backs. She fingers their velvety ears and smooth little skulls. The creatures shrink away into their basket, but she persists. In the shadows, other corps girls stand

waiting in a clump, tutus overlapping like a mat of stiff lavender blossoms.

"What are you doing?" one of them whispers. "You can't touch those."

Joan's roommate Elaine Costas, a soloist, is sitting against the wall and stretching. Her pointe shoes are pressed together at the soles like hands in prayer, her face bent to their arches. Her costume is yellow, the bodice embroidered with gold. "If Ludmilla were going to murder Joan," she says, looking up, "she would have done it already."

One of the dogs sets a paw against Joan's wrist and braces away, his hard ebony nails digging into her skin. She kisses at him. He lifts his ears, then remembers himself and flattens them, recanting his interest. Joan has never danced as well as tonight. She is of the corps but also entirely herself, both part and whole. The tiny ball of cells clinging to her uterine wall is a secret, but she feels as translucent and luminous as a firefly.

Arslan Rusakov and Ludmilla Yedemskaya appear in the bright channel between the black stage drapes and stop, glazed with sweat and white light. He turns her waist between his palms, his face set in an ardent mask. Love in a ballet is something that does not exist and then suddenly does, its beginning marked by pantomime, faces fixed in rapture, a dance. After, when they are hidden in the wings or behind the curtain, the dancers will grimace like goblins, letting the pain show.

At home in their apartment, Elaine sometimes does

an unkind imitation of Arslan's love face, dancing pompously and then turning to answer herself with a parody of Ludmilla's smile: bared teeth beneath flinty eyes. Joan laughs and asks for more, but the mockery stings. Arslan had been her lover. She had been the one to help him defect.

He and Ludmilla had been a couple when they were both in the Kirov, and now they are getting married. They had announced their engagement after a performance of *Swan Lake* with champagne for the whole company. Ludmilla's head was swathed in a crown of white feathers. Joan and Arslan were done before Ludmilla arrived, but still the tiny yellow-haired Russian provokes Joan's sense of having been taunted and robbed, deprived.

Applause, and Ludmilla sweeps into the wings. The music for Arslan's variation begins. Joan keeps petting the dogs, but the animals crane their long necks for a glimpse of their mistress. "They are not nice," Ludmilla says after a moment, her accent flat and heavy like a stone in the back of her throat. "You should not touch."

Before curtain, the dachshunds had moped around Ludmilla's feet while she warmed up, narrowly avoiding being kicked. She never seems to pay them any attention, but she brings them to every class, every rehearsal, every fitting, every performance, every gala. They were a gift from Arslan when she arrived in New York after her defection, replacements for dachshunds left behind in Leningrad. Their bony, penitent faces are always turned,

like so many others, toward her. They would never think of barking, not even when cymbals crash or when stagehands pump out chilly clouds of fog from a machine to make an enchanted haze or suggest the surface of a lake.

"They seem sweet," Joan says.

Ludmilla, dabbing her cheeks with a tissue, gazes at her with amused malevolence. "They bite."

"I don't think so."

"They are my dogs, not your dogs, but if you want get bite, suit yourself."

Suit yourself is something Arslan says because it is something Joan says. She taught him, and now he has taught Ludmilla. Joan gives the dachshunds a final rub—one bares a set of tiny, sharp ivory teeth at her, as dainty and menacing as his mistress—and stands up. Ludmilla turns away to watch Arslan pirouette at center stage (he is a prince! it is his wedding day!) as the music accelerates and sweat flies from his hair. Arslan is racing the conductor, trying to squeeze in more turns. When he is done, the audience will let loose the huge, docile roar of amazement they always do. The ovation is a given, but he will still earn it. He is extraordinary. The audience loves him for being extraordinary and also for having been born to the enemy, for coming to dance for them instead.

The end of the music. His last turn squeaks around a beat late. The roar explodes from the belly of the theater, blasts out to the back of the house. Arslan bows, bows again, gives a modest flick of his head. Ludmilla draws herself up, raises her arms over her head, and steps

briskly out from the wings. Her variation begins, but Joan does not watch.

Joan has known plenty of pregnant dancers but only a handful who stayed that way and only one who then returned to the company—a principal famous enough to be forgiven for the months of leave, her slow battle back into shape. For most of the women Joan knows, a child is unthinkable. The body has already been offered up; the body is spoken for. She is only eight weeks or so and still not showing, but she is surprised she hasn't been found out. The dancers keep close surveillance on one another, report suspicions of weakness. Elaine might have guessed, Joan thinks, but it's not her nature to interrogate or tattle. Usually they share a banana in the morning before class, but Joan, both nauseated and famished, has a new compulsion to toast frozen waffles and spread them with peanut butter. Elaine, eating her banana half, watches the passage of the sticky knife, says nothing. Mercifully, magically, Joan's nausea tends to dissipate during morning class. She hasn't betrayed herself by puking.

In July, after the blackout, she had faked a slight sprain and gone to visit Jacob in Chicago. He is not her boyfriend. In high school, they had explained themselves as best friends, proud of their status as a bonded but platonic pair, a relationship that seemed modern and cosmopolitan to them, worlds away from the short-lived, sweaty-palmed hormonal couplings happening around them. But Joan had known Jacob wanted more. For so long, he was too timid—and too proud—to try anything.

He had kissed her once, just before he left for college. It had been the kind of kiss that asks for something enormous. When she pushed him away, he was angry, and she had turned his anger around and punished him with it and hidden behind it. Then he left, and they wrote letters, which seemed safer.

She supposes Jacob still is her best friend, although during the time she was with Arslan and then recovering from being with Arslan, she had allowed their friendship to lie fallow. She prefers to think that way—her bond with Jacob was resting, regathering itself—instead of admitting she had neglected him. But Jacob is the forgiving type, the comforting type, the patient type.

In Chicago, at first he had affected a breezy version of their high school intimacy, taking her to a loud and smelly bar, alluding to the latest woman he was seeing, letting her buy the drinks. "What's the latest with Arslan the Terrible?" he'd asked in a brotherly tone. But shifting the momentum had not been difficult. She'd touched his arm as they drank, leaned into him, bumped against his side as they walked to his apartment, and, over a nightcap, told him she'd missed him. "I've been considering," she said. "Like you asked me to."

"Yeah?" he said, guarded. They were sitting on his sway-backed sofa.

"I think maybe."

"Maybe what?"

She was too afraid to look at him. "Just, you know, maybe."

She had anticipated a long nocturnal conversation full of hesitation, negotiation, reminiscence, and uncertainty. But instead he had taken off his glasses and set them carefully on his junky coffee table and then lunged at her the way he had before, when they were teenagers. In spite of herself, she laughed.

"What?" he said.

"Nothing," she said. "Sorry. Just nerves."

There had been no discussion of pills or condoms. She had the sense he was afraid to raise any impediment to what was finally about to happen.

Ludmilla is turning rapidly across the diagonal as the music builds toward the end of her variation. The corps girls in their lavender tutus shake out their legs, prepare. Joan can feel how impatient the audience is to applaud. Their hands are held apart like straining magnets. Ludmilla wraps the tension around herself as she turns.

When Joan begins to show, when she is found out, she knows she will feel regret, sorrow, panic—but now the sensation of purpose soars over her like the hunting bugle from act 2. She is surprised by the strength of it, the way it unfurls.

Applause. She falls into line with the others and is pulled out into the light.

THE SUMMER HAS been long, hot, chaotic. Civilization seems fragile. When the lights went out for a night in July, thousands of people looted and marauded and set

fires. David Berkowitz has been arrested, but the specter of random death lingers. Elaine knows all the bouncers in the city and has enticed Joan to nightclubs and parties where glittering people loom out of the smoke and flashing lights, sometimes in costume—Cleopatras, unicorns, Dionysuses—slip-sliding and pivoting, not caring *how* they dance, just that they are dancing. Hot spots. Joan thinks of thermal vents, volcanic fissures. She dislikes crowds and jostling, but she has seen the smiling cokehead crescent moon at Studio 54 and peeked through the doorway to the orgy room at Plato's Retreat and been guided by more than one guy who knows a guy who knows a guy through downtown deadlands and up secret stairs to illegal parties in cavernous lofts. Elaine doesn't look like a ballerina when she's out—she turns slinky and loose on the dance floor, matching the steps of whatever man materializes in front of her—but Joan is too precise, too reserved, too square. She has tried drugs, but they leave her clinging to a banquette or crouched in a bathroom stall, immobilized by anxiety.

Elaine ingests a steady but restricted diet of cocaine without apparent consequence. The key, she has said to Joan, is control. Control is the key to everything. Elaine has a strict limit for coke, a regimen. She will do a bump before a performance for confidence and maybe another at intermission if she's dragging. She will do a line or two—never more than two—once or twice (no more than twice) a week when she's out, and she will substitute coke for lunch when she wants to drop a few pounds.

She's not greedy about the high, doesn't want it all the time, just wants the boost of it. If she's short on money and doesn't have a man who's supplying her, she will cut it out entirely. No problem. That way it is a routine, something already managed, and the drug will not interfere with what's important, which is dance.

Elaine always has men but is never in love, except with Mr. K, the artistic director, who also believes in regimens. Their love can be managed, must be managed. Joan had been surprised by how kind Elaine was during the tumultuous futility of her affair with Arslan, how patiently she listened as Joan plotted with a conspirator's intensity the hypothetical events, realizations, and declarations that, if they occurred, would ensure Arslan's lasting devotion. Arslan! A man who had never been faithful to anyone and did not seem to love her. Maybe Elaine enjoyed the proximity to unmanageable love, the whoosh of it brushing by, the spectacle of someone else losing control. She must crave those things or else she wouldn't have such an appetite for nightlife. Joan wonders what she will think—possibly already thinks—about the pregnancy.

The sweepers are moving through the theater, clacking their dustpans. The audience has gushed, marveling, out onto Columbus Avenue. Arslan and Ludmilla have slipped away through the stage door. Tomorrow will start with company class. Almost every day starts with class, and those that don't are shapeless and problematic. Only what's left of the night separates Joan from more

stretching, more dancing, from the genteel swoop and clatter of the piano, everyone at the barres while Mr. K patrols, sweater tied over his shoulders, saying, *And open, and two, and again, lengthen your leg and UP, stay, stay, stay. No, girl. Like this.*

Joan should sleep while she can, but she isn't ready to go back to the apartment. She sleeps in a twin bed against the far wall of their small living room. For privacy, she tacked a sheet of printed Indian cotton high to the wall and draped it down over her bed to form a kind of tent, but the sheet only makes the room seem squalid and ramshackle. Which it is, in a way. The apartment is a crash pad, somewhere to go between classes and performances, between men, somewhere to recover from the hot spots.

She finds Elaine in the soloists' dressing room.

"Do you want to go out?" she asks, peering around the door.

Elaine, wrapped in a towel, is brushing her smooth black curtain of hair and studying herself in the mirror of the long makeup table. A plastic cup of wine sits on the counter, surrounded by colorful tiles of eye shadow, rounds of blush, tubs of pancake, fake lashes fanned out in their plastic cases. The wine helps her come down at night. No more than two glasses. "Sure. Where?"

"I don't know. I thought you'd know."

Elaine waves her in. "Come in already."

A few other soloists are still around. One is wiping

her eyelids with a cotton ball. Another stands naked, blow-drying her hair. Another lifts her dance bag to her shoulder and walks out, giving Joan's shoulder a friendly pat as she passes. A wardrobe assistant moves through the room, collecting tights to be washed, straightening costumes on hangers, putting the hangers on a rolling rack. Joan sidles in and perches on the table.

"Do you have anything else to wear?" Elaine asks.

Joan looks down at her jeans and platform sandals, her striped tank top. "No."

"We should go home first, then."

"No, Elaine, please, I'll lose momentum. It doesn't have to be a big thing. Just a drink out somewhere. I don't want to go right home."

"Well. Okay." Elaine pulls her dance bag out from under the table and paws through it. She thrusts a bundle of purple cloth at Joan. "Here." Joan unfurls a loose, filmy blouse with a low neck. She strips off her tank top and pulls the blouse on over her bare chest.

"Can you see my nipples though this?" As soon as she has spoken, she regrets drawing attention to her breasts, which are swollen.

Elaine's eyes are sharp and green and set close against her long, narrow nose, pinning it in place. No change registers in them. "Not really," she says. She turns to the naked dancer with the blow dryer. "Yvette, do you have anything I could borrow to wear out?"

"I have a little dress," the girl says.

It is a very little dress, and yellow, but it suits Elaine,

as most things do. “Do you want to come to a party?” Elaine asks Yvette.

The girl, who is zipping up another little dress, blinks as slowly and mechanically as a doll as she considers. “Yes,” she says. “That would be very nice.” Joan is disappointed even though she likes Yvette, finds her dippy and harmless. Yvette was born in France and retains traces of an accent and of continental diffidence even though she has lived in New York since kindergarten. But Joan is becoming nostalgic in anticipation of the end of her ballet life and had imagined the night as belonging to her and Elaine, a memory just for the two of them, although Elaine will probably vanish as soon as they get wherever they’re going. She has a way of vaporizing at parties, being immediately absorbed into the revelry.

Outside, the three of them find a taxi heading downtown. The city’s summer breath rushes forcefully in through the windows, smelling of garbage and gasoline, and they recline in the warm air, saying little, worn out but also energized, their blood circulating smoothly, as though the performance had swept their veins clean. Joan is already too hot in her jeans and borrowed top. She envies the others’ little dresses even though their bare legs must be sticking to the grimy vinyl seat cover. The driver peeks in the mirror, the silver rim of his glasses catching red and green sparks from the traffic lights. He handles the wheel gently, cautiously, with his plump hands. Most cabbies flirt a bit when the dancers

are out together, make some suggestion about where they should go, comment on how nice they all look, but he doesn't. He takes his glances in the mirror, like someone peeping over a fence.

The party is near Astor Place, in a brick building with peeling yellow paint and a fire escape made out of rust. It is not Elaine's usual sort of glitzy, careening, pill-popping party but something else, just a party, a humid crowd of languid people gathered in a smoky apartment. Edith Piaf warbles from the stereo. Joan didn't need to have worried about Yvette. The girl takes the French music as a sign of welcome and sets off for the table of bottles in the far corner, greeting strangers as she goes with little sideways *bonjours.*

"Drink?" Elaine says.

"No, I need to drop weight."

Elaine takes a pack of cigarettes from her purse. "Want one?"

"No, thanks."

A knowingness hovers around Elaine's pursed lips and raised eyebrows as she lights up.

About Yvette, Joan says, "I don't know why she still does this French act."

"She's just French enough to pretend to be French. I don't know—look at her. It works. I should think it's obnoxious, but I don't."

They look together through the people. At the make-shift bar, Yvette is smiling up at a tall and gorgeous black man. She cuts her eyes to the side, murmurs

something out the corner of her mouth, making him lean in.

"I'm going to get a drink," Elaine says. "And hopefully a very tall man."

Joan grabs her arm. "No, don't. I'll never see you again. You'll disappear."

"This place is tiny."

"You have a way."

"Come with, then. Five steps that way. We can rope ourselves together first if you want."

Joan follows. "How did you know about this party?"

"I went home with the guy whose apartment this is a couple months ago, and then I ran into him the other night. He said he was having a thing. I wasn't going to come, but then you . . . he's—where is he?—oh, he's that one." She points through the crowd to a pale head with full pale lips and small pale eyes. The head, partially obscured by a woman's red curls, nods in a courtly way, smiles slyly. It is the smile of a man who knows women like to think they are being amusing.

"He's handsome."

"Isn't he? I thought so." Elaine pours bourbon into a mug and offers the bottle. "You sure?"

Joan shakes her head. "All your men are handsome."

"I would *not* call this guy one of my men. I would call him . . . Christopher? I'm not sure. I should have asked when I saw him again, but it seemed impolite. Maybe we can delicately find out from someone here."

"Except Mr. K. He's not handsome."

"Mr. K doesn't have to be handsome. He's a genius. You should know. Arslan doesn't have to be handsome either."

"Arslan is handsome."

"No, Arslan's sexy. Anyway, he's not a genius the way Mr. K is. Mr. K *creates.* Mr. K has changed everything."

"Please, tell me more about your boyfriend, your old, gay boyfriend."

Elaine taps her cigarette into an empty wine bottle, unflappable. "Labels are a waste of time. So is possessiveness. I know what he is."

"God," Joan says on a long breath. "I can't believe how liberating it is not to care anymore. I watched Arslan walk out the stage door with Ludmilla tonight and didn't want to kill myself. Finally. I'm cured. It's heaven."

"Hmm." Elaine drags on her cigarette, drops it into the wine bottle. "I think you're pregnant."

Joan smiles at the linoleum floor. She draws her toe across it in an arc. "Because of the waffles?"

"Lately you seem like you're saying good-bye all the time, like you're about to go catch a bus." Elaine studies her. "Have you told Jacob?"

"No." Joan watches the tentatively identified Christopher as he walks around with a jug of red wine, filling people's glasses and mugs. This is the first time she has spoken about the pregnancy except with the doctor who gave her prenatal vitamins, and Jacob's name is loaded with a heavy, sudden future.

In high school, she had decided her mild sexual curiosity about Jacob was nothing more than a generic offshoot of her general sexual curiosity. He was younger, which was not sexy, and wore little wire-rimmed glasses, which had seemed to signify something important then, and he was transparently devoted to her, which was not sexy, and he was academically brilliant and a little insecure (not sexy, not sexy). Joan, however, had the mystique of ballet to trade on, her tininess and her suppleness, the grace that had been drilled into her until she was physically unable to be awkward. Lots of boys wanted to date her, and dating them was simple, while dating Jacob would not have been.

But when they were sitting side by side at the movies or watching TV on the couch when her mother was out, not speaking and not looking at each other, he would stay so still that she sensed he was restraining himself, wary of any movement that would betray what he wanted, and some hidden sensory organ in her would rotate toward him, probing, considering.

"Did you do it on purpose?" Elaine asks.

"Of course not."

"You can't do this if it's only about running away from Arslan."

Since she got pregnant, the cattle prod jolt of Arslan's name has worn off, become only a faint zap, two weak wires touched together. "It's not. It's really not. I might be running from everything else, but I have to go. I

have to find something else. You'll make it. I was never going to."

"You did it on purpose."

"I didn't!"

"It doesn't matter. It's done. But you don't have to . . . you could, you know, just quit the company. Not have a baby. Get a job. Do something else."

Solemnly, Joan shakes her head. "I couldn't just decide to stop. I thought about it. But I'm too much of a coward. I can't stay in the city if I'm not dancing, and I wouldn't know where else to go. Or what to do, generally."

"So you're counting on Jacob to figure all that out for you. This all seems really elaborate, Joan. I feel sorry for Jacob. He's walking around Chicago right now with no idea he's a marked man."

"He's getting what he wants."

"Oh yeah?" Elaine takes another cigarette from her pack. "Well then. You're a Good Samaritan."

"Give me a cigarette, please."

"You shouldn't smoke."

"I know. This one and then I'm quitting. I'm quitting everything. Everything is going to be different."

"Inevitably."

Finding nothing else to say, they pretend to be interested in the party that drifts around them as lightly as fog. Joan makes eye contact with a series of men. They are the kind of men who look over shoulders while they chatter, searching for the people they will chatter at next.

The crowd shifts, revealing the host's pale head inclined attentively toward the fast-moving mouth of a blond woman in a paisley jumpsuit.

Joan says, "Will you introduce me to Christopher?"

JOAN LIES AWAKE. Beside her, the man sleeps. Even his snores are polite and well formed. His name is Tom, not Christopher. Probably some other Christopher had swum through Elaine's nocturnal world, crossing bubble trails with this handsome Tom, an assistant professor of Old and Middle English at NYU. His bed is surprisingly clean and nice smelling for a single man with bohemian tastes. Joan wonders if he will be the second-to-last man she ever sleeps with.

The yellow night drops a window-square on the pale sheet. Tom makes a rough sound in his sleep that might be Old or Middle English. The cells continue to multiply. Joan rests her palm against her belly, trying to divine the exact spot where life has been planted like a tulip bulb. Usually when she is in bed with a strange man—there haven't been so many—she has trouble sleeping because she is preoccupied by the nearness of the unfamiliar body that has been recently and intimately explored and is now remote, locked away in sleep. But Tom holds no curiosity for her. She strokes her own skin, wonders what time it is. His wrist with his watch is under his pillow, and she doesn't see a clock in the room. When the sun rises she will make her way home and then, later,

to class. She wonders how many more times she will go to class. When she stops dancing, class will continue on without her, every day except Sunday, part of the earth's rotation. The piano will swoop and clatter, and Mr. K will say *No, girl, like this* to dancers who are not her. Her empty spot at the barre will heal over at once. But she wants a few more days, a week or two. She wants the cells to grow in time to the piano, to Mr. K's clapping hands, his *one pa pa pa, two pa pa pa, and UP pa pa pa,* to the rhythm of her battements. Until now, even when surrounded by twenty women dressed just like her, moving in unison with her, she has always been lonely, but the cells give her a feeling of companionship. For the first time she can remember, she is not afraid of failing, and the relief feels like joy.