THE PARIS DANCER

NICOLA RAYNER



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Head of Zeus Ltd
First Floor East
5–8 Hardwick Street
London EC1R 4RG

WWW.HEADOFZEUS.COM

For my parents, who danced beautifully together;
for Jason, who learned to dance for me;
and in loving memory of Olav,
who played the music

Prologue

Almost seven decades later, I still think of your face squashed up on the pillow next to mine in the mornings. You couldn't bear to see those early hours of the day slip by. "Wake up," you used to whisper. "You're wasting it."

Deep in the bowels of the musty theatre – a place daylight never reached – we could hear the noise of the occupied city. The curt demand, "*Aufmachen! Sofort!*" A human cry, protestations of innocence, a shriek of fear. Sounds that left me wide awake, my heart thrumming in the darkness. Waiting until they came for us.

You were right: there is never enough time. Even if you live to your nineties. I'm careful not to waste those early hours now. I'm careful not to waste any of it. But I don't know whether I'll be granted the time to finish what I started here. And I don't know if you ever forgave me. If I'll ever forgive myself.

I

28th June 2012

Nothing too sad, nothing too frightening. That's Mim's rule for films now, especially when flying. She's learned to be careful – you never know what's out there to ambush you. *Stupid*. She berates herself. *Stupid to watch something like that*. What was she thinking? And now they've come on too quickly: sobs that feel like they could choke her. Ugly-crying, Frankie called it. Ugly-crying on her own in the dark, seven miles above the ground, while everyone else on the plane sleeps around her, with their smug little eye masks and shoulder cushions. Their neat and tidy lives.

The grief, when it's like this, feels as if it could drown her. It could drag her under. Mim pushes up the flap of the window. There's nothing out there but darkness. *It's a metaphor*, she tells herself, and snaps it shut again.

A hand, outstretched. A tissue. Mim looks at its owner. There's a spare seat between them. He's been sleeping for most of the flight and they've barely interacted, even when she had to clamber over him to get to the bathroom.

Without the eye mask, his face is a pleasant surprise. He's her age – in his thirties, perhaps. Or maybe a little younger. Nerdy-handsome. Messy dark hair. Trendy dark-rimmed glasses.

"If we were in a 1940s film, this would be a crisp white handkerchief." He glances apologetically at the scrunched-up paper napkin.

Mim peers at the tissue. "Is that chicken korma?" She wipes her face hastily with her hands. "Chicken or beef."

A blush spreads across his handsome face and he folds the napkin away. "That worked better in my head – it's never like the movies, is it?"

"It's OK." Mim finds she's smiling, despite herself. "I'm no good on 1940s films, anyway," she adds. "*Breakfast at Tiffany's* is my favourite old movie."

It had been Frankie's too. They'd watch it together on hungover Sunday afternoons, weeping self-indulgent tears at that final scene in the rain, laughing and crying at the furious wet cat.

"That's the 1960s." The guy grins. A nice smile. There's something sweetly boyish about him. And he's wearing braces, Mim notices. She's always had a weakness for braces. "Far too late for me."

"Sorry," she says, though she's not sure what she's apologising for: her tears, perhaps, or being ungracious about the tissue. "I have a case of the mean reds – you'd know what that meant if you'd seen *Breakfast at Tiffany's*."

When she'd queued for the loo earlier, she'd tried her hardest not to look at the emergency exit. It did something funny to her, made her wonder what it would feel like to push up the lever holding the door closed. Would anyone

stop her? Would the door fly open? Would the suction of air feel like an enormous Hoover, pulling her out into the sky?

"I get more emotional when I fly," the young man agrees. "Especially when I have a drink." He glances ruefully at a couple of Bacardi miniatures tucked into the seat pocket in front of him. "Though technically it wasn't drinking alone," he adds. "You were right next to me."

"I don't drink any more." Mim used to be smoother at this – idle chitchat, shooting the breeze – but she can't remember how she did it. Booze helped.

"Well," he says, "it doesn't help with heartbreak."

For a moment, she wants to correct him, but what better word is there for what she's going through?

"Is that why you're running away to New York?" he asks. "Or are you skipping the build-up to the Olympics in London?"

"I'm not really the sporty type." She smiles. "And who says I'm running away?"

"You don't sound American."

"I'm" – she hesitates – "between things. That sounds better than unemployed, doesn't it?"

"Sure." He grins. "I'm between things too. At least for the summer."

"My great-aunt died recently." Mim fishes her water bottle out of the seat pocket and takes a sip. "I'm going to sort out her paperwork. Partly because I'm a writer too and partly because…" She takes a breath. *My family don't know what to do with me.* The words come into her head, but she won't say them aloud to this handsome stranger. "My older sister, Abi, has two small children," she says instead. "So she's got her hands full."

It's the kind of phrase Abi might have used herself. "Can you just do it, Mim? I've got my hands full here."

And, without warning, she is ambushed by a memory. Being on the phone to Abi. Her mobile sandwiched between her shoulder and ear, rolling her eyes at Frankie on the sofa opposite. Desperate to get her sister off the phone so she could get back to her best friend and the bottle of wine they were sharing.

"Anyway," she returns to the present, to the aeroplane, the handsome stranger next to her, "I'm—"

"Between things," he finishes with a smile.

"That's right." She nods. It's good to be with someone who doesn't seem to judge her for being unemployed. "What about you?"

"I'm a dancer. I'm spending a summer in New York to check out the scene there. It's the mothership – especially for swing dancers. Where it all started."

Mim frowns. "I can't picture swing dance."

"Have you seen *Hellzapoppin'*? That's one from the 1940s – there's a famous swing dance scene in it."

She shakes her head. "Sorry, I'm useless. The closest I've got to the 1940s is going to Casablanca in Brighton. A jazz club," she adds by way of explanation. "Kind of. I think we were dancing to the 'Macarena' last time we were there."

"The 'Macarena'?" He pulls a pained face. "No, no, no."

"Is it so bad?" she laughs.

"I just think dance used to be more romantic," he says. "The ballroom hold. Flying across the room in someone else's arms. When I had a bad day as a kid, my mum would let me drag a duvet downstairs and make a den on the sofa,

where I'd watch Fred and Ginger. I used to try to teach the guys at history club my favourite pieces of choreography."

"History club." Mim suppresses a giggle. "How did that go?"

"Well, there were only three of us, so we had to double up…" He smiles. "I was probably doing that while you were learning the complex choreography to the 'Macarena.'"

"Thank you," Mim says, "for acknowledging its complexity."

"What kind of dancing do you like now?"

"Actually, I don't really go out much these days." She reaches for her water again, but largely to give herself something to do.

"Not even to Casablanca?" When he smiles, a dimple appears on his right cheek.

"No." Mim's gaze slides away from him. She doesn't want to think of Brighton – she shouldn't have brought it up. "Things moved on."

There's a moment or two of silence between them. And then the guy looks at his watch. "I don't know if you heard, but they've actually found a cure for heartbreak."

Not this kind, she thinks.

"Yeah, it took them a while, but it turns out it's been with us all along. Or since 1952." He leans forward, lowers his voice to a whisper. "*Singin' in the Rain*."

"Is that a fact?" She remembers watching it on one of their hungover Sundays – Gene Kelly swinging around lamp-posts and splashing in puddles. She's reasonably sure *that's* not going to help.

He leans forward. "I've got good news for you – they have it on the plane." He taps the little screen in front

of him with a finger. "So, what do you say we plug in and watch it together? And if you don't feel better afterwards, I'll give you your money back."

"Fine." Mim is smiling again. "You're lucky we're not sitting in business class."

"I was right?" checks her new friend almost two hours later. "It *is* a cure, isn't it?"

They are sitting side by side now, eating a pre-landing meal together like old friends. Mim peels the lid from her fruit salad and spears a piece of anaemic-looking melon with a plastic fork. She wants to say something witty and cutting, but it's funny: her face feels more relaxed. She is smiling. "It wasn't so bad."

"Wasn't so bad? The best film ever made?" He hits his palm on his forehead.

She reaches out and touches his shoulder, just the lightest contact. His shirt still looks fresh and clean, as if he has stepped out of one of those old-fashioned films, where the men are handsome and everything is safe.

"It was actually quite… good," she says. "Quite funny. And the dancing – even as someone who doesn't know what she's talking about – I can appreciate it's something else."

His face flushes with enthusiasm. "When I watch 'Good Morning' at home, I have to stand up for that moment when the three of them dance over the sofa," he says. "It's too exciting to watch sitting down."

She wonders for a moment if there's a woman next to him on that sofa and feels an odd pang of jealousy. That's how it begins – a feeling of possessorship. Is that a word?

She can't remember. Anyway, maybe it's just his mum. Is that better or worse? Mim feels a small flare of curiosity. What would it be like to reach over and touch him again? How would it feel to start over as someone else?

"Did you teach that routine to the guys at history club?" she checks.

He nods solemnly. "Of course. And to 'Moses'– that's one you can try sitting down." He begins to tap out the rhythm of the song on his tray, making his empty glass and cup jump up and down. "Moses-supposes-his-toeses-are-roses."

"Could you stop that?" a woman in front of them snaps. Just a sliver of her face is visible between the seats – red cheeks, eye mask pushed up on her head.

Chastised, he sits back and taps the rhythm quietly on his lap like a naughty schoolboy. "But-Moses-supposes-erroneously."

"Well, my toeses aren't roses." Mim smirks.

"Not yet," he says. "Maybe they'd bloom if you came out dancing with me."

Mim lets the invitation hang there, unsure how to respond. She's conscious of the flicker between them. Easier to snuff it out than watch it be extinguished in some other way. She can't look at his hopeful face. And then, mercifully, she's saved by the Tannoy telling them that they're about to begin their descent.

She feels a wave of sadness at the missed opportunity, as she folds away her tray and adjusts her seat to upright. She knows how it goes: the plane will land and everyone on it will unclick their seatbelts just as soon as they can and get to their feet to grab their hand luggage, despite tutting attendants telling them to sit.

Then you wait, all sticky and dry-eyed and bloated, and file awkwardly out of the plane, and one of you, on the way out, says, "Have a good trip." Or "Good luck with that project." And maybe – if you're lucky – you give one another a rueful smile and then you each go on your way.

It's a cliché, anyway, she tells herself. Meeting someone on a transatlantic flight. What does she think this is? One of those old-fashioned romances he seems to like so much?

Except, things don't play out as she anticipates. He waits for her as they get off the plane, and they make their way through border control together.

"What are you up to tonight?" he asks as they wait by the luggage carousel with the rest of the bleary-eyed crowd.

"I don't know," Mim says. "I need to get some sleep – and I don't know what kind of state the flat is going to be in. It might need tidying. Esther was a heavy smoker and she had cats, so it wasn't the most hygienic place." She sighs. "Not that it ever bothered me."

A memory of the chaos of the apartment bubbles up. There were always brimming ashtrays and the reek of cat urine – that much was true – but then there was the warmth with which Esther would greet you whenever you knocked on the door to her bedroom. She would look delighted as she glanced up from her desk and she would say Mim's name with such pleasure in her lovely husky voice, which had never lost its French accent. "Miriam." No one said her name quite like that. Mim always knew she was Esther's favourite. But she had no idea why.

"What about you?" she asks. "What will you do?"

"Nap, shower, a few beers with my pal Agustín. And then

out dancing tonight, of course." A beat. "You're welcome to come with me."

"I told you I don't really dance any more," she says. She needs to be clear about what she can offer. Or can't. No point in stringing such a sweet person along.

"You *don't* dance," he says.

"That's right."

"Most people say they *can't* dance – not that they don't."

A wave of weariness washes over her. She doesn't want to have to explain herself – *can't, don't, won't*. It's too late for all of this: flirting and new beginnings. It doesn't lead anywhere good – this fluttery feeling. She knows that now. All she wants to do is sleep. There is no way she's going out dancing tonight.

"I'm sorry," she says. She'd guess that she's just a few years older than him, but in that moment it feels like a lot more. "I don't have your energy."

And there it is – perfect timing for once – her case on the conveyor belt: easy to spot with one wonky wheel held together by yellow tape. She steps forward to claim it.

"All the best in New York." She offers her hand for him to shake. "Thank you for the tissue. And for *Singin' in the Rain*."

His boyish face falls a little. "I never asked your name."

"It's Miriam," she says. "But everyone calls me Mim."

"I'm Lucky."

His name suits him. "Happy-go-lucky." She smiles.

"That's right," he agrees. She could be kidding herself but he doesn't seem to have shaken off the disappointment.

She only allows herself to turn around once as she walks away, and when she does, his gaze is still on her. Caught

watching, he breaks into a smile and mimes the "Macarena" arms at her. It's goofy, but oddly graceful, even when he circles his hips and jumps to change direction. Lucky moves as if he knows where every part of his body is. He's not scattered and discombobulated like Mim. It's unnerving. Attractive.

She shakes her head, still smiling as she walks away. The broken wheel on her case makes a terrible din. *It's a metaphor*, she tells herself. No point dreaming of new beginnings while her past is still rattling behind her.