

Showtime

by Daniel Harris

A man in a black wool overcoat stood at an ATM in the lobby of a bank on Broadway. A black and white Shetland collie sat at his right foot. It was after 1 a.m. The man withdrew \$100, put the money in a trifold wallet, and returned the wallet to the inside breast pocket of his tuxedo. The man snapped his thumb and middle finger. The dog, ever alert to his master's movements, walked out of the bank lobby, his head even with the man's right knee.

Man and dog walked two blocks down Broadway to a produce market. The man purchased a Gala apple and a Bosc pear. The store clerk, a sullen man, put the purchases in a small plastic bag.

—No dog in store.

The man ignored the clerk.

—Every night the same. Next time, no dog in store.

The man turned and left the store, the dog heeled next to his right knee.

The man and dog continued down Broadway. Near the corner of 79th Street, the man stopped. In the window of a women's boutique, stood five naked, bald mannequins. A lithe, athletic woman, early thirties, was dressing the mannequins. The window display lights were not on. The only light was a bare bulb in a clamp lamp attached to the back of a metal folding chair. The store specialized in women's dance and exercise wear. It was called Femme Nikki.

Man and dog watched as the window-dresser removed an exercise garment from her body and put it on a mannequin. After she dressed the mannequin, the woman seductively removed another layer of clothing and dressed the next mannequin. When all five mannequins were attired, the woman wore only a scanty white leotard. The striptease took a half hour. At no time did the window-dresser make eye contact with the man or the dog. But before she left the window, the woman looked upon her observers, waved, and switched off the light. The dog barked once, jumping against the

window. The man snapped his finger and the dog trotted to his post at his master's right knee.

The man and dog turned right onto 79th Street and walked toward the Hudson River. They stopped at a building on West End Avenue. The overnight doorman, sweeping the lobby, walked across the foyer to unlock the door.

—Good evening, Mr. Speilmann. Chilly tonight.

—Good evening, Julian. Yes, unusually chilly.

—And how is my favorite dog, Zeke?

The man made a quick hand movement, the dog stood on his hind legs and extended his right foreleg. The doorman shook the dog's proffered paw.

—You are one smart puppy. Can I give Zeke a treat?

—You know the rules, Julian, no treats.

—How was the opera tonight, Mr. Speilmann?

—The best *Figaro* I've ever played. James Levine and Renée Fleming ... superb. Everyone was.

—You're late. It's almost 2 a.m.

—The opera finished after midnight. Then I took Zeke for a workout in the park.

When the man arrived at his apartment, he fed Zeke, shaved, took a shower, and went to bed. He had a rehearsal in a few hours at the Metropolitan Opera.

The man dreamt about making love to the woman in the window. In the dream when the woman removed another layer of clothing, her body became more distinct. It was the electricity of her flesh, the easy grace of her movements that excited him. Her long dark hair frequently masked her face. When he could see the face, he remembered its proud visage: high cheekbones, big eyes, full lips, a regal nose. As he reached to embrace the woman, he awoke.

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The next day, when the man came home from his morning opera rehearsal, he discovered a Tupperware container of macaroni and cheese in the refrigerator. It was lukewarm. He microwaved it. Sitting on a bentwood chair in his music room, he studied a clarinet

part on the music stand while he ate from the Tupperware container. He drank the double cappuccino he had bought at Starbucks. Zeke watched his master, following each forkful of food from Tupperware container to mouth. The man uttered a soft whistle and, using his fork, flipped a single macaroni in the air, it almost hit the ceiling. Zeke jumped and caught it five feet off the ground.

—Good boy, Zeke. You could play for the Yankees.

After a short nap, made enjoyable by another erotic dream about the woman in the window, he washed his face and donned a leather jacket.

—Showtime, Zeke.

Zeke knew the drill. He fetched his leash and sat by the door of the apartment. The man grabbed a pack containing a plastic student clarinet in a cheap case, a quart of water, and a collapsible water bowl. He met Zeke at the door. They walked to Riverside Park. Zeke trotted at the right knee of his master, carrying the leash in his mouth.

At the park, the man exercised the dog. Through a series of hand signals and whistles, the dog went through a vigorous exercise regime. The dog kept an eye on the man for direction. It was as if the man were conducting the dog in a wild *scherzo* of jumps over benches and bushes, summersaults, rolls, and flips.

When they finished this phase of the workout, Zeke jumped up on the park bench, panting. The man petted and praised the dog. He gave Zeke half a dog biscuit, then poured water into the collapsible bowl. Man and dog sat on the bench surveying the local scene.

The man took the clarinet case from the backpack, opened the case, and assembled the clarinet. Zeke jumped off the bench and sat alert, waiting for the next set of signals.

—Showtime, Zeke.

The man began to play his clarinet. Zeke went through the same routine as before; but this time, Zeke's cues were from the music. When the man would come to a complete pause, Zeke would freeze in his current position, sometimes with two legs off the ground.

A group of children and nannies gathered around the man. He ignored them. The man and the dog were working. When they finished the routine, Zeke jumped up on the bench, licking his master's neck and cheek, then sat waiting for another round of praise, half a biscuit, and fresh water.

—What's your dog's name? asked a small girl.

—Zeke, said the man.

—What a smart dog, said a young boy.

—World's smartest, said the man.

A short woman in a three-quarter length fur coat approached the bench where the man and his dog sat. She moved with the stage gait of a professional dancer, though with a noticeable hitch in her step as if her right leg or back had been injured. Zeke jumped off the bench and ran to her. She petted Zeke, who licked her hand, tail wagging. They were not strangers to one another. She sat on the bench. Zeke jumped up next to her. She put her arm around the dog. The man remained at the other end of the bench.

—You watched me in the window last night, she said.

—I did?

—You don't remember?

—Of course I do. Showtime on Broadway.

The man wondered who this woman was. Was she actually the woman in the window, or someone who *saw* him watching the woman in the window. Didn't the woman in the window have dark hair? This woman's hair was an ash blonde and her skin the color of a peeled apple.

—Thank you for the fruit, she said. You know Gala apples are my favorite. When I was dancing, we were never allowed to eat sweet apples. I put the pear in a paper bag so it will ripen. I left you some mac and cheese for lunch. Did you find it?

The man turned so abruptly to face the woman that Zeke barked and jumped off the bench. The startled woman shrank away from him. Then he smiled, his face softened.

—Sorry. I'm not used to strange women speaking to me.
—David! Stop this charade! You *know* me! I am your wife, Nikki, not some strange woman. I am *Nikki Nazarova*. Nikki — *your wife*!

The man sat confused, as if he didn't know what she said were true. Of course this annoying woman at the end of the bench *was* his wife, but not the *same* wife he married and lived with happily for seven years.

—Yes, the mac and cheese. Yes, yes ... quite excellent. But, didn't I buy it at Zabar's two days ago?

—No, *I* made it for you this morning, David. Because I worked so late last night, I didn't open the boutique until noon. It still should have been warm.

This woman is playing with my head, he thought. I'm almost positive I saw a Zabar's label on the container.

—David, I put it in a Tupperware container with a red top.

How does this strange woman know *all these details* of my life? Yes, he remembered the red top. Yes, she was the woman miming a striptease behind a glass window, dressing naked mannequins. And, yes, she was the woman in his erotic dreams. But *his* wife was someone else altogether. *His* wife was the *prima ballerina* of the City Ballet. This woman before him? An imposter. Why, she can't even walk correctly.

Tears formed in the woman's eyes. She took a tissue from her pocket and blew her nose.

—David, I must return to the boutique now. I'm training a new girl later this afternoon. I'll be asleep when you get home tonight. You can wake me if you wish.

The man stared at the New Jersey side of the river. Zeke started to follow the woman, his tail a proud banner of feathers. The man called the dog back and patted the bench. Zeke returned and jumped up on the bench. The man took a comb and brush from his pack and began grooming the dog.

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En route to her boutique on Broadway, Nikki decided to stop at their apartment. She turned on West End Avenue. Karl, the daytime

doorman was standing at his usual post watching her walk toward him.

—Afternoon, Nikki, you are walking so much better lately.

—Thank you, Karl. One more surgery and rehab. With God's good grace, I may be whole again. Who knows?

—That's good news.

—You're my hero, you know.

—No, David is. He rarely left your side for three months. Even after you came out of the coma, he never wavered in his devotion.

Karl had been on duty the day her first life ended. She had left her building and walked toward 79th Street. She was on her way to morning warm-up class at City Ballet. She would catch a cab on Broadway. A car, driven by a drunk, struck her as she crossed West End Avenue. Karl heard the screams of eye witnesses and ran to the scene, shouting, "No! No!" Nikki's last image before it all went dark, was Karl leaning over her shattered body and cracked head, shouting into a cell phone: *Get an ambulance here now!*

When Nikki entered her apartment, she looked in the dishwasher. There was a Tupperware container with remnants of macaroni and cheese as well as a colander, the pot she used to boil the macaroni, and the casserole she used to bake the dish.

She took the pear from the paper bag, rinsed it, then sectioned it with a paring knife. She put the pieces on a small plate decorated with a kitsch image of Anna Pavlova, poured herself a half glass of Sancerre Sauvignon Blanc, and walked into the living room where she sat on the custom recliner David had bought for her recovery. She recalled someone telling her that Marcel Duchamp said that no two pears were exactly alike, even if from the same tree. Each unique, just like each *prima ballerina* is unique.

She closed her eyes and let the tears run. *She* was the one who had had her brain almost knocked out of her head, yet it was *David* who couldn't, or wouldn't, remember her, or even acknowledge her. The therapists said he was in denial. Perhaps in a fugue state. He only wanted to live the memory of her as the *prima ballerina* he married ten years before. But that woman was taken from him three

years ago by a drunk on a beautiful October morning while he rehearsed *La Bohème* at the Metropolitan Opera one mile south of the accident. Nikki, the shopkeeper, was not Nikki Nazarova, the superstar *prima ballerina* seen in advertisements symbolizing all that was class and beauty in the world. To the dance world, she personified the terrifying nightmare of all dancers: the career-ending accident.

Nikki went into the bathroom and refreshed her face. She could smell David's cologne. She took his cologne bottle and inhaled the scent. That fragrance had comforted her when she lay nearly comatose in hospital. And it comforted her now. When she finally emerged from the chrysalis of plaster and bandages, she had morphed from a *prima ballerina* to a broken woman. Sadly, David chose to live in the delusion that Nikki Nazarova, the ballerina, had died. Nikki wondered: What woman does he think he lives with *now*? Who does he think *I* am? Would *he* ever go to therapy? Would he come to her bed again? David, the perfectionist could not see his own imperfection.

She booted her computer and checked David's rehearsal and performance schedule. He had a rehearsal tomorrow morning and afternoon, but no night performance. She left a note on his music stand: *Dinner tomorrow. Please! Love, Nikki.*

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David finished grooming Zeke. The late afternoon November sun glinted off the Hudson River turning the water silver and gold with bright flares of blinding light. The sun hurt his eyes. He stood and faced toward Riverside Drive. The windows of the apartment buildings reflected the golden sunlight. He saw a short woman in tight jeans and a leather jacket walking towards him from Riverside Drive. He recognized the woman. She was Ashley Cottsworth from the *corps de ballet*. Zeke walked up to her, his tail wagging. They were not strangers.

—What a good boy, she said, petting the dog's head.
The man snapped his fingers and Zeke came and sat at the man's

right foot.

—Hello, David. You don't look pleased to see me.

She leaned in for a kiss. He ducked away from her. Hurt and embarrassed, she stood facing him, shielding her eyes from the bright sun with her hand. She donned a pair of large-frame sunglasses. A single tear rolled down her cheek.

—What's that all about? Why did you pull away from me?

The man ignored the question.

—David, I saw Nikki last night.

The man gave her a sharp look.

—Did she tell you the company decided to offer her a cameo in this year's production of *The Nutcracker*?

—No. I didn't see her last night. You know she needs another surgery and then maybe, with good rehab, she will walk properly again. But dance? She'll soon be thirty-five.

—It's not a dancing role, David. She'd be one of the parents.

—The company is using her name to attract patrons. She still has box office in the dance world. Fucking bastards.

Ashley looked at Zeke. She felt defeated by David's indifference. He had never been curt with her before. Normally when she met him in the park, they couldn't get to the bed in her tiny apartment on 83rd Street fast enough. She turned so that the sun wasn't in her eyes. The man walked to the bench and started to load his pack.

—Nikki told me you don't sleep with her.

The man ignored her remark.

—Are you or aren't you sleeping with her?

The man dumped the water from the collapsible bowl onto the ground.

—Well? She turned her head to look him straight in the eyes. Are you getting a divorce?

The man said nothing. He disassembled his clarinet and put it in the case.

—Why are you acting like such a bastard? Answer me! You make love to me like you love me. What can the broken and damaged

Nikki do? She is done. Over. Finished. I'm whole and healthy, young and beautiful.

The man snapped the leash clip onto Zeke's collar. He looked at Ashley. She *was* desirable. He *had* wanted her. *Had* slept with her. *Had* savagely sexually sated her, attempting to avenge his loss of Nikki. But, he never declared love for her. Never went out in public with her.

—Nikki is my wife, Ashley. Did you hear me? *Nikki is my wife*. I won't abandon my responsibilities.

—But don't you want sex? Don't you want a fully functional woman who loves you? Who adores you? Who will be your best friend? Take care of you? Have children? Nikki was extraordinary, yes, but she can't do those things anymore. As a woman, Nikki is ... well ... dead.

David glowered at Ashley. A talented wind-up doll, he thought. That's what the *corps-de-ballet* dancers were: talented wind-up dolls. Why, Zeke had more panache. Ashley could never be a Nikki Nazarova. Never would inspire thousands of little girls around the world. Would never make an audience gasp like Nikki could. Never have Nikki's glorious power to command a stage.

—Look, Ashley, I'm playing *Tristan and Isolde* in two hours. Don't lecture me about love. I've had my *Liebestod*.

