

TERRI BROWN-DAVIDSON

---

## THE DANCE TEACHER

I'D ALWAYS ASSOCIATED THE COLOR "black" with power. Not in a racial sense but in a nihilistic one. So when I watched Miss Shelley in her black leotard on that first afternoon, I thought, Here's a woman who's not afraid. She was straddling a folding chair at the end of the studio, using a black marker on dirty pink ballet shoes that she flexed between her hands. And I thought, without even realizing that the suggestion was in my mind, I wish I could be more like Miss Shelley. More powerful.

It was difficult for me to describe, even to myself, all the ways in which I felt "emasculated." By motherhood...but also by academia.

Why?

For my refusal to attend department meetings. For my propensity to teach both "The Waste Land" and Ayn Rand in freshmen comp courses. It was o.k. with me, though, that the department didn't rehire me. I was bored with teaching football players who doodled on the classroom wall while I talked about The Fountainhead.

But I'd drifted since I'd left teaching. I'd had a child, Nicole, via C-section and the euphoric assistance of several pharmaceutical aids, made a few attempts to write a novel, played Picasso for a while.

I felt emasculated.

And clearly, Miss Shelley didn't.

I've always been nervous in new situations. Though I'd lectured, once, to halls with 150 students or more on "The Waste Land," I hadn't taught in a few years, and now I could barely speak to the clerk who bagged my groceries. So, when Nicole begged for dance lessons, all I could think about at first was how I'd have to talk to people, make sure that Nicole behaved, get her to classes on time.

Yet, one late-fall Monday, I enrolled her over the phone and walked her down to the dull drab studio located between the Family Dollar store and Kentucky Fried Chicken. Children had clustered in the nippy air in their pink tutus and leotards; few had bought sweaters, and we

stood there, shivering, all of the real dancers and me and Nicole in our thick woolen sweaters.

I glanced at my watch. "So," I said. "Is she always this late? Miss Shelley."

"Yes," one of the mothers replied.

She was Hispanic and worn-out yet eerily, radiantly beautiful, the black shadows floating like crescent moons beneath her eyes. Lack of sleep, I thought. I'd been to that country, too.

Then, Miss Shelley drove up in a rust-colored car. Got out in a ragged fleece coat. Walked toward the studio, key thrust before her, all the parents vanishing into the shadows and the rich steaming stink of fried-chicken grease.

Nicole wasn't the neatest child — strands of her flaxen hair floated out from her headband like pale and drunken silkworms. I knew what I had to do; I gripped her by the shoulders, steered her toward Miss Shelley.

We stood before her but she didn't look up. I made polite coughing sounds. What I was afraid of had come true: since I'd left teaching, I'd lost my nerve.

Finally she glanced at me. One half of her face was burned. Paralyzed? She had a glistening, dull-red stretch of skin that segued down to a lip that hung slack from the right side of her face. I tried not to flinch.

"Excuse me," I said, and coughed into my palm.

She studied me coolly. Studied Nicole. Then said, very softly, touching Nicole's forehead, "But this is not at all acceptable, I'm afraid."

"What?" I asked, too loudly. I could feel myself flush.

"This...hair," Miss Shelley said, and picked up a few strands between her forefingers, let them drop. "A dancer is not unkempt. A dancer wears her hair neatly, always, off of her face, like so."

She gripped Nicole's hair so hard that Nicole winced and made a cheeping sound. I stared at the fist gripping my daughter's hair.

"So she wants to dance?" Miss Shelley asked.

"She dances constantly. To CD's. To Stravinsky's Petrouchka Suite! Around the kitchen nonstop."

Lies.

"Really?" Miss Shelley said: I couldn't read anything from her voice. "Then we'd better get her started."

I watched her hands close around Nicole's waist. Watched her carry my daughter across the room, position her before the full-length wall mirror, Nicole's eyes wide and stark, her little knees buckling.

After bedtime had always been special for me. My husband wasn't home yet; Tom arrived around ten, wearing his spare tire and an air of fatigue expressed through the bloodveined whites of his eyes, his dramatically rounded shoulders. But Nicole went to sleep around eight,

and the hours between eight and ten P.M.. were when I celebrated my freedom. Nicole was a perimenopausal baby; I'd had her at the age of forty. As soon as I found out I was pregnant, I became ambivalent, and the ambivalence had never left me. I'd turned selfish in the last few years, living in a solipsistic dream world made up of teaching and writing and painting.

I waited until I could see Nicole's chest rise and fall, visible breath movements in her throat. Then, I went to the darkened closet, pulled out my black-and-gold shawl, slung it around my shoulders. Though it was delicate, I loved to wear it while I was drawing; it made me feel important, was a nice change from the baggy sweatsuits I wore around the house. I set a Disney lullaby disk in the CD player, turned it on (I liked Nicole to hear soothing music all night). Then, I went back to the closet, fumbled around for my sketch pad, colored pencils, oil pastels.

I took them out into the hallway. The house, a rental, was a twenties-style dormer, rambling and with a plenitude of peeling paint. My husband called it "the genteelly decaying mansion," and though, at one time, it must have been grand, a perfect setting for dinner parties, the landlords had been renting it out to college boys for a while, boys who wrote their phone number on the wallpaper in pencil, who thrust their fist through the dryrot when they'd had too much to drink, leaving large and ragged black holes.

I lifted my pencil. Began outlining a human face. Broad forehead, narrow jaw. The tight bun. The left arm, slightly cocked. The leotard, black. I was drawing Miss Shelley. And there was a low-level hum inside my mind driving me on, my hand drifting, magnetized. I lifted the pastel, sketched her taut face gray. Colored in the drawing faster and faster until suddenly I couldn't breathe, dropped the pastel, watched it roll into a corner with paint chips and dust bunnies threaded with large brown wads of my hair.

Whenever I got nervous, I had to check on Nicole. She was lying on her back in bed, the covers tossed off, the blankets shoved beneath her feet. I stared at the shadowy trees outside her window. The cool taupe of a New Mexico night, the faint glimmer of stones across the mesa. This utterly serene sight jarred something in me. A sensation. A promise.

I'd always thought that motherhood would be a blissful experience, only realizing later that it was about being immersed in horrific images of what could happen to your child. When I got up, sometimes, fed Nicole her Cheerios with milk, I saw the upper part of her torso, her body bisected cleanly but bloodily by our car. When I gave her a bath, I saw her drifting, pale inches beneath the water.

When I woke up, I was on the hallway floor, my long, dirty hair brushing the wood. I could hear Nicole in her bedroom, singing. Frequently she rose before I did, sat among her blankets, played by

having each hand enact a different character, the knuckles rounded into heads, the fingers shaped into mouths.

I lifted my head – my neck ached. There was my drawing of Miss Shelley on the floor. I sat for a moment, contemplating it. From down the hall I heard Tom's breath sounds. He never snored, but had some form of sleep apnea that made his nostrils whistle. It irked me how, night after night, he could come home from work, find me slumped on the floor, not carry me to bed.

I collected my pencils and oil pastels, put them in their case, lifted the drawing, carried it flat into Tom's and my bedroom.

He was sleeping on his back, the blankets twined around his throat so his entire neck disappeared, leaving only his head and denuded chest, a pasty expanse of meat. I wanted to laugh. Didn't dare. I tiptoed to the closet, secreted the drawing inside.

While I walked Nicole to ballet class, I stayed fixated on my drawing. I hadn't looked at it since this morning, when I'd hidden it away. But I kept rehearsing different parts of it in my mind, as if the drawing might come alive for me in some live-action sequence, Miss Shelley holding first position, fifth, her face blurred no matter how much I struggled to recall its contours, her skin's delicate olive tint.

The crowd was waiting in front of the studio, including the beautiful but ravaged Hispanic woman.

I glanced at the woman's child. She, too, was gorgeous but exhausted. She stood there like a perfect miniature of her mother with her tiny oval face and sumptuous black hair.

I looked at the mother and all of a sudden felt like taking a chance. "You want to get something to eat?" I asked, gripping Nicole's hand.

"Who? Me?"

She looked at me. Her throat muscles tightened. Her dark, Kohl-rimmed eyes carried a faint gleam of panic. "No money," she said. "Only enough for the lessons."

"Kentucky Fried," I said. "My treat."

"And Serena?" she asked.

I glanced at Serena, who contemplated me quietly. "Of course. Your child's invited, too. Both children will eat. By the way, what's your name?"

"Marietta," she replied, in a whisper so guarded I could scarcely hear her, and moved her elongated eyes a flicker in my direction.

I led them into Kentucky Fried Chicken. Into the stink. There was always something so foul about the meat here; it tasted as if it were dipped in rancid grease, and yet it wasn't completely disgusting: I enjoyed the heat, the juice that dribbled down my chin whenever I bit into a chicken leg or a fat, bubbling chicken breast. Leading the woman and the girl, though, into Kentucky Fried was like stepping over the threshold into Wonderland; their eyes gleamed, their faces grew taut;

they seemed to stand taller, the girl in her leotard and Marietta in her cream-colored sweater and jeans; their faces were bathed in a wash of red light as they tilted them up toward the order board; it made me feel sad. It made me feel frightened.

"The lesson," Marietta said, glancing. "We will be late."

"That's OK," I replied; she seemed so small that I felt I could secret her in my palm. "As long as the girls don't get a gut-ache, we should be fine."

"What is that?" Marietta said. "Gut-ache?"

I rubbed my stomach in a slow, circular motion; Marietta watched my hand on my belly with a weird fascination.

I ordered all of us a bucket of chicken, Original Recipe. And mashed potatoes on the side. And cole slaw. We carried it over to a plastic table next to a window that looked out over the parking lot, the cars maroon-colored and strangely shaped in the fading twilight glow. I wasn't sure whether Marietta and Serena had forgotten about the lesson, but I was starving and didn't care.

I shredded the hot meat with my fingers. It tasted luscious, hedonistically good; Tom and I hadn't had such a fine meal since Nicole had been born, since I'd been let go from the English Department for teaching politically incorrect authors. The parking lot outside assumed shapes shadows in the dusk: rocks grew monstrous, purple; half-obliterated signs flapped in a rising wind.

The meat disgusted Nicole. Already, at her young age, she avoided most forms of protein. She picked at her meat then prodded it, slid the loosening skin back from the greasy meat. "Ooh," she said. "Stinky, Mom. It looks alive."

But Marietta and Serena paid no attention. They were hunched over their meals, shredding meat from bone. Flecks of grayish meat fell from their mouths. I felt, watching them, slightly ill.

Marietta ate three pieces of chicken before she seemed sated. Then, she sat up, looked at me with a laugh, reached under her fisherman's sweater, unbuttoned her fly, pulled the zipper down carefully, discreetly. "Very good," she said. "Now we can dance, eh?"

I smiled, touched by her satisfaction. "Now we can dance." I noticed that Nicole was looking at me almost angrily.

"Where is the restroom?" Marietta asked, and smiled.

"The bathroom? Uh—I don't know. Does Kentucky Fried have one?"

"End of the hallway," a clerk with pimples said, appearing by our table with a mop.

"We'll go, then," Marietta said, looking at me.

"That's fine," I said. "I'll wait here with the kids."

"No," Marietta said. "You come with me. Serena will stay with Nicole."

I looked at Selena, who nodded. "OK," I said then, brushed the top of Nicole's head with my open palm, rose.

There was something about the way the two girls looked together when I left them. Something eerie, though that perhaps wasn't the word I would have used. Serena was older than Nicole, but just barely: maybe a year or less. But it was the way they inclined their heads together, just lightly touching, that captured my attention. The way Nicole's pale blonde strands mingled with Serena's darker ones. A feeling passed over me. A sensation. Like when you swallow a pill and it gets caught in your throat then turns to power. Something impacted. Released.

I looked back at them as I followed Marietta. Nicole slipped her pale fingers into Serena's. Serena's fingers closed over Nicole's. Locked.

I trailed Marietta into the bathroom.

She didn't turn the lights on. I didn't have time to think anything else before she stretched out her palm and pushed the door closed. The restroom was small; my right hip was jamed up against the sink, and the fumes of something sweet yet repulsive, too — air freshener? — wafted around us. She stood so close that her small head with its dense black hair rose beneath my neck bones. I could feel the hair drift against my bare skin, warm, electric. For a second I thought she was going to hurt me, but I felt awake, alert, gazing down at her head, the part in her hair, feeling the chunky texture of her fisherman's sweater push against my arms, picturing the kids sitting at the table.

"Marietta —" I said.

She grabbed the waistband of my sweatpants, pushed them down around my knees; I felt big and awkward with them dangling. She looked into my eyes. "Do you want to dance?" she asked. I didn't know what she meant. I was wearing an old cotton pair of undies. She slipped her hand inside them to my sudden wetness, soak, all of me turning swamp-like, diffuse. I pushed the back of my head against the bathroom wall. I closed my eyes, feeling her fingers.

When she was finished, when I was, she turned to the sink, pulled off several paper towels from the roll, scrubbed her hands with liquid soap, dried them. Then she turned, flipped on the light, left me against the wall.

I knew I had to come out. The children were out there, waiting. And yet, I felt so dazed that, at first, I couldn't force my legs to move. The taste of the greasy chicken was in my mouth. My underpants were sopping, and a wild, rank, animal smell, impossibly hot, came from my thighs. Finally I turned around, locked the door, braced my palms against the sink. When I looked at my face in the mirror, the skin was shocked white, my eyes like the smoldering tips of two cigarettes. I washed my hands. Doused a paper towel with warm water then held

it, gingerly, against my mouth. She hadn't kissed me. I hadn't kissed her. What had happened?

The children were watching me. I felt the weight of their scrutiny. Improbably, in the blackening night sky, paperlike pieces of snow. I watched them whirl. I watched the children. Marietta was putting on her thin outer jacket. "It's time," she said, and looked at me, and didn't smile.

I approached the table. "Come on," I said to Nicole. She looked at me with her bland blue eyes. "Don't you want me to throw my mess away?" she said, jerking her head toward the pile of boxes. I shook my head no. I touched her shoulders, the bones in her neck. She shrugged and stood up, and then we all went outside.

Marietta didn't look at me as we walked to the studio. But somehow I felt the inclination to stay close. So I walked by her elbow, by the threadbare sleeve of her coat as she hurried across the sidewalk. From the side, I could see that her olive skin wasn't the best. The foundation was clogged, and her large, oily pores were visible through her face powder. I studied her profile with great interest until, as if sensing my scrutiny, she flipped a section of black hair over one cheek. She clutched Serena's hand; I watched them so intently that my sneaker caught on the sidewalk and I tripped.

"What's wrong with you, Mom?" Nicole asked.

I shrugged. I couldn't explain. And of course I felt odd. But I felt peculiar in a way, too, that I could scarcely characterize. Not violated, exactly, but unmoored—the same way I'd felt when the English Department discovered my list of subversive writers.

We entered the studio. It was hot in there; I could barely breathe. The parents always sat on the floor by the door; it was a tradition, I'd discovered. At first I'd resisted it; it seemed vaguely degrading; why should we all be forced to sit on the floor, on our feet, which were bound to go to sleep? I acquiesced anyway. Knelt on the hard linoleum floor with the rest; it made my bones and joints ache, and I was conscious of how fast I was aging, conscious of how fast the body was a mechanism that could wear down and wear out. Strangely enough, the concept didn't fill me with dread. I glanced over at Marietta.

To my surprise, she was looking at me, squatting, her delicate knee skin protruding through her jeans. She was staring into my eyes. In that instant, I was back in the bathroom. Her fingers were under me then in me, and the sense of transport I had, tilting my head back, wasn't sexual.

And now her lovely dark hair was close to my ear. Mouth. And then she was speaking, her voice so hoarse and low that I could barely hear her. "Have you talked to Miss Shelley yet?" she whispered.

"About what?" I whispered back, keeping my eyes straight ahead as Miss Shelley, her hair done up in a skin-tugging bun, gathered the

young dancers around her.

"You need to get to know her. She doesn't like us consorting with the other parents."

"Is that what that was?" I asked. "'Consorting'?"

I stopped speaking then.

Miss Shelley had left the children, was walking toward us.

She didn't stop until she stood several inches before me. I looked at Marietta and was surprised at her pallor. Then Miss Shelley dropped to one knee, but gracefully: every inch of her body retained a dancer's power; I felt it in her sinews and corded veins and the tendons above her neckline.

"You," she said. "You're one of the mothers?"

I stared. What else would I be doing here?

"I'm Nicole's mother," I said.

"Good," Miss Shelley said. "I want to talk to you. I mean, all of you. Gather the other mothers together, and meet me at the end of the dance studio."

"But..." I said.

"What?"

"I thought we weren't allowed to cross the studio. Because of our shoes."

"Bare feet are permitted," Miss Shelley replied, and gave me a look that made me feel like Thumbelina.

I turned to the other mothers after she left. I didn't need to tell them. They'd heard. A little dazed, I watched them unlace their sneakers, peel off their sweaty socks. Marietta looked at me, and I couldn't read her expression.

"Who are you?" I said. "Are you Nobody? I'm Nobody, too."

"What?" Marietta asked, and I shrugged.

"Not important," I said, and then we all crossed the floor in bare feet, a group of bedraggled-looking mothers.

Miss Shelley, awaiting us, settled into a Lotus. Her legs seemed to be almost crossed at the thighs; she looked scarcely human but, instead, like some superior being who'd been able to transcend the laws of motion and gravity and aging. And then I saw something that made me feel like a voyeur. That made me blush. A thin hint of black. A razor mark, remnant of a bikini line—I gazed on, stricken, entranced; I'd never actually seen another woman's genitalia, and I didn't know that dancers waxed.

My own pubic hair grew lush and wild, a smoke-darkened forest fire with a rim of pale gray sky.

I thought of Prufrock: "I grow old. I grow old. I shall wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled."

Just then, Miss Shelley looked up, caught my expression.

Hers softened.

"They don't wear underwear," she said, and the other mothers looked at me. "Dancers. Ballerinas. It interferes with their movement, sometimes. Even tights."

Then I said, somewhat boldly: "Picasso didn't wear a shirt either, when he painted."

Miss Shelley looked at me, bent a pink toeshoe backwards. "How do you know?"

"It's my daughter. Nicole. She watches 'Le Mystere Picasso' all the time. Plus..."

"What?"

It was weird, but I couldn't bring myself to tell her that I had a Ph.D.

As if she'd blame me for being smart.

She didn't say anything else but kept scooping toeshoes together; soon Miss Shelley had a pile of pink or black slippers stacked by her right thigh. And, as if in a dream, all the mothers standing around cowlike and slump-shouldered, staring, Miss Shelley started to shout. It seemed she knew each of our names, which surprised me: Nicole and I had only attended Albuquerque Dance once, so she must have memorized them off a list. And yet. . . .

At first I was so nonplussed that I couldn't listen to what she was saying. And I wondered if that made me stupid. Her voice went on and on, louder than a voice belonging to a ballerina could be, full of resonance. Power.

I glanced at the other mothers, at Marietta, but not one of them made eye contact. So I stood there in the continuing dream and watched the stretched, flexing movements Miss Shelley's mouth made, watched the veins grow blue and prominent in her neck. Then I understood.

She was yelling at us because we hadn't marked the toeshoes with our children's names.

It seemed to me that the other mothers shrank, very subtly, as they watched her. All of them standing there in bare feet, with their saddlebags stretching their jeans because, after motherhood had made them fat, they'd never readjusted their bodies in their minds. I looked at their chewed nails. Some mothers hadn't combed their hair. I bit my mouth, rubbed it: and then my attention turned back to Miss Shelley.

She was shouting my name.

"Yes," I said, "yes, yes."

I was agreeing to see her after class.

I watched them dance, the children. We were kneeling on the floor outside the studio again, all of us, Marietta and I pressed thigh to thigh, hers meaty and comforting. I watched Nicole move into first position before the mirror: Miss Shelley gripped her shoulders, corrected her turnout, her posture.

"You must be proud," she said. "Dancers are always proud. Stand up straight. Wear your hair off your face."

Nicole looked up: I saw her mirrored reflection waver, her eyes pale, strained; the muscles in her shoulders tightened as she slipped back into the position she'd adopted before Miss Shelley corrected her. Then I saw Miss Shelley's beautiful, elongated palm lift gracefully as a wing, backhand Nicole.

I stood up. Yelled.

But it was a dream-yell, lacking conviction.

"Hey —" I called.

Miss Shelley looked at me.

Her face bright red, imprinted with Miss Shelley's hand, Nicole glanced at me then ran to the bathroom.

"Marietta," Miss Shelley said. "You need to take her home. The address is in my office."

"Wait a minute —" I said, and stopped, confused.

Marietta reached up, grabbed my hand. "Go," she murmured. "See her after the lesson. It will do you good, I promise."

I wrenched my hand away.

Followed Nicole to the bathroom.

I went inside without knocking: it was my way. Though I lacked confidence, at times I could be the rudest and most aggressive mother imaginable. Sometimes I'd be shouting at Nicole and catch a glimpse of my face in the mirror and not recognize it: red, twisted by passion. It was one of the ways I controlled her, not allowing her privacy. I'd barge in on her in bed, in the shower. On the toilet.

I wasn't proud of my actions.

But that didn't mean I felt able to stop them.

Nicole was perched on the toilet, shoulders slumped, her panties dangling around her ankles. She was hairless all over, of course, and — because of that — always struck me as vulnerable. She was like a peeled egg, my baby, or some tiny animal that had wandered away from its momma. Her expression, when she looked up, was full of suffering, so naked that I had to lower my eyes.

I listened for the tinkle of her urine.

"I'm not going back in there," she said, and hopped off the bowl, worked her jeans up to her knees.

"Uh-uh," I said. "Gotta wipe."

"You wipe me," she said.

I wondered what my obligation was. Though I probably had my gray areas, psychologically, as a parent, I had no secret scatological tendencies. And, though I loved the smell of my daughter — though that pure animal bond that seems to exist between every mother and daughter existed between us — though I loved to smell her skin, her just-washed hair, wiping felt too intimate, pushed the bonds of our closeness: I

didn't want to end up an Anne Sexton sort of mother, or like the poet in one of my seminars who'd said he'd gotten an erection from his boy crawling across his lap.

"You know how I feel about that. You're old enough to wipe yourself. Now, pull your pants back down, and DO IT."

Her undereye area swelled: her face glimmered up, red and puffy, and I thought about what Miss Shelley had done, wondered if I'd gone too far. Nicole watched me for a long second, then grabbed a thick wad of TP off the roll, bunched it up.

"Momma," she said. "Please do it. Please."

Feeling like a monster, I shook my head "no."

"Go home, baby," I said, and watched my own wrist, posed near my left breast, tremble. "Go home with Marietta and Serena, and I'll stay and work this out with your teacher."

"Do I have to come back?" Nicole cried, as she dragged her TP'd left hand between her cheeks.

"No," I said, and felt as if I wanted to cry; I flushed the toilet, lifted her up under the hot-water faucet, dropped a stream of sticky pink soap onto her hands.

I felt even more like a monster when I led her back to Marietta. What was I doing? For years I'd thought and analyzed, written scholarly papers and passed "comps" in different subject areas to earn my Ph.D. I was so mentally driven that I could almost feel my mind sag at the end of the day, like an exhausted muscle in an overexercised body.

That one instant, in the bathroom, had altered years of conditioning.

I believed now that I was an animal. And I was curious to find out what an animal thought. How an animal behaved. I watched Marietta smile with her dazzling white teeth and, clutching a child by each hand, lead Nicole and Serena away. I turned my eyes away from Nicole's as she glanced back. I felt curiously detached, free, watching the other mothers leave, waiting for my turn to encounter Miss Shelley. I was a bear waiting to meet the trap. A wolf anxious to encounter the poisoned bait.

Such joy, surrendering to the body.

When all the other mothers had left, Miss Shelley leaned out of her office and beckoned me in with one hand.

Wordlessly, I followed.

The inside of the office was sweltering, the graying mortar stripes between chipped bricks visible. And no windows, which was unsettling. It was difficult to breathe, not only because the air was thin and stale but because it was clogged with the smoke from hundreds of cigarettes; jade-green ashtrays, thickly carved, exotically inviting, were set on every pile of books in the office. I was standing near Miss Shelley because there wasn't room to maneuver. She paused behind her big oak desk, her long hand stroking a paper stack, and, from this close, I could observe

many interesting things: how her nails were buffed and painted an apple red; how her breasts, tan and freckled, hung low and braless inside her stretchy black leotard, swinging as she stooped to scrutinize the papers; how the shadows bloomed long and dark beneath her eyes, as if she rarely slept. I observed these things and some others. Her skin was scented of jasmine, but, beneath it, another smell rose strong, as if she hadn't bathed for days.

"I have something to tell you," she said, suddenly. "Would you mind sitting down?"

She unearthed a black rolling chair from a stack of books, flexed the chair toward me with the curved tip of her foot; it rolled toward me a few inches in a dreamlike motion; I grabbed it and sat.

Miss Shelley, in turn, pulled out the stiff wooden chair from behind her desk.

She didn't sit down, though, but stood behind the chair, stooping and straddling it. Her scent wafted toward me: enveloping but not oppressive. Jasmine. And — beneath that — rot. The stink of the earth. Her breasts swung out and away, the long steep line of her cleavage a gathering of shadows. I watched her, my chin tilted up, my neck sweating; I flexed my hands closed and then my palms were sweating as I gripped them.

"I'm sorry," Miss Shelley said. "About what I did to your child." She didn't look at me. Kept her eyes trained on her own slender ankles.

"Nicole."

"Yes. Nicole. I — have a temper. Because I'm a perfectionist. Because —"

"Then maybe you shouldn't be teaching," I replied.

I felt stronger now, cruel.

"Why are you teaching?" I asked. "Couldn't make it with a dance company? Because of your face?"

She kept looking down. But, to my surprise, a little wetness beneath her lids.

I didn't stand. Move to her. Comfort her.

I still felt cold and cruel but now, also, fascinated.

Finally she looked at me. Looked into my eyes.

"Your chair," she said. "Closer."

I paused. "What?" A slick trail of sweat.

"Your chair. Wheel it closer."

I wanted to refuse. Looking at her, I could imagine the word emerging from my mouth. How rounded it would sound, definitive, that "No."

But I couldn't do anything except stare. Miss Shelley's mouth corners twitched; she wanted to smile. And I watched her and thought, absurdly, of the experiment where a subject kept administering what she thought were electric shocks to a second subject in another room,

even though the second subject screamed, even though the second subject went quiet suddenly, as if dead.

I thought about these things while Miss Shelley leaned over and gripped my rolling chair, one hand on each side. Her fingers pushed down hard as she grabbed the chair, rolled it toward her, eradicating the inches between us.

“That’s better,” she whispered. Her voice warm, sticky-sweet: like dark molasses.

I couldn’t breathe.

Once, after Tom and Nicole and I had just moved to Albuquerque, I’d hid a “just because” present for Nicole out in the woodshed adjacent to our apartment. But, actually, I’d wanted to give her the present to celebrate her being a very good girl. A long month of tantrums followed, talking back. In the meantime, Tom told me he’d discovered a spider in the woodshed.

“What did you do with it?” I asked; Tom responded, “Nothing. Let him be.”

A typical response.

Another month went by and then Nicole was better behaved and I decided I wanted that present. But I knew the spider was still out there, understood that spiders, in the Southwest, could be tough and tenacious, deadly. So I decided to kill the spider before I dipped my hand into the bag from Family Dollar, the bag that contained Nicole’s My Pretty Pony Mane and Nails Salon.

But a decision and an act were – for me – different. My *modus operandi* was to go into a situation with resolve but to have my will crumble when I discovered that whatever task I’d assigned myself was more difficult than I thought.

So I unlatched and unbolted the shed door with bravado but cautiously tugged it open.

The spider was still there. But Tom hadn’t told me everything about it. About her. An enormous, funnel-shaped web dangled from the box side she’d attached it to, and the spider was hanging upside down, large, glossy, black, her fat abdomen rocking back against the web, a blood-red hourglass upon it.

When I saw the spider, I couldn’t move. I’d read about black widows, of course, though I’d never seen one. And now here she was, her graceful black legs curved inside the web, her fat black body swaying.

Could she jump?

I didn’t know.

But I couldn’t back away.

I kept standing in the doorway, fearing her, admiring her.

Finally I retreated. Went back in the house, grabbed a bottle of 409, spent the next forty-five minutes dousing the black widow with an

opaque chemical stream until she dangled, heavy and sodden, from the web.

I was in the chair and couldn't move as Miss Shelley spun me around then wheeled me back. She pulled the chair closer, her knees jabbing my hip. I heard my heartbeats then, like an asthmatic's stolen breaths.

She leaned forward, wrapped her arms up to the elbows around my neck, placed her lips against my sweatshirt, slid her mouth beneath my hair.

"Marietta," she said, very quietly. "Marietta got to you already."

I tried to nod but my neck felt too stiff: and I realized then that I was terrified.

"Relax," she said. "I know what I'm doing."

She lifted her neck and shoulders. Slid her right hand inside my sweatshirt, cupped my bare breast, traced the nipple with her lacquered nails until I leaned back into her leotard front, until I felt her insert the other hand and realized that I wouldn't be leaving her office for a while. Then, she shifted the chair around and tugged mine closer and pulled down her leotard top and my mouth was against her breast, her lush, freckled breast, and I sucked on it and closed my eyes and pictured her backhanding Nicole, pictured her backhanding me once — hard — across the mouth, and I opened my lips wide, wider, over her large round nipple, so full of love I could barely breathe.