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an excerpt of

In Rehearsal

FOR a long time, I retired early—from living, from writing. The curtain did not go up. For a long time, I could not remember to write, or I could not remember how to write. How to produce the play, which was and was not the thing. I forgot how to learn to act, in every sense of the word. Or I refused to learn. I did not remember enough; or I remembered too much and waited for the connecting thread to reveal itself, not understanding that *I* had to spin that thread myself.

And I regret it all.

I regret what I cannot and what I do not know.

I regret time I can account for all too well, because I watched it wash—sometimes grind—past me. I did not lose it in the sense of mislaying or misusing it. I lost it because I could not move with it.

I regret not having been a British actor.

I clung to my regret. It was all I could think of writing about.

Edith Piaf famously abjured regret—“*Je ne regrette rien*”—but her courage in doing so always sounds ironic, as if she were telling us, “I regret everything but must not say so; I must claim no regrets so as to have your absolute empathy, for you know that regretting nothing is impossible.”

Regret may be a longing for revisions that cannot be made (water under the bridge, spilled milk) or that we refuse to make. Yet to remain in regret’s stranglehold may itself be a form of revision: we revise the past to fit the grief, clothe our past lives in a single dull color. We revise our memory, or our memory revises for us.

Self-disparagement and a pervasive sense of futility—to say nothing of gnawing guilt—are readily fueled by regret. *Underachieving* is now the name

we give to what might produce the regret and the attendant “I could have been . . .,” although that word came into common use only in the early 1950s. Appropriately, one of the best-known expressions of underachieving may be Marlon Brando’s in *On the Waterfront*: “I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody.” (I once saw a television listing that noted the famous film contained the line, “I could have been a bartender.”) Terry Malloy, Brando’s character, does not even try for “I could have been a champion”; he just longs to have been in the running.

Chekhov’s Uncle Vanya, on the other hand, conveys the full spectrum of the comic and the tragic when, in his terrible frustration, he bursts out, “I could have been another Schopenhauer, another Dostoyevsky.” Vanya is overcome not only by an understanding of his own failure and the victimization to which he has subjected himself, but also by his own helplessness. His suffering and loss are real; the very impossibility of Vanya’s being another Schopenhauer or Dostoyevsky (as if there could be any number of Schopenhauers and Dostoyevskys) is all the more pitiful and comic. Being either one of those two great pessimists would certainly not have improved Vanya’s mood. But many of us find it more palatable, which is not to say ungalling, to see ourselves as failures once we accept the standards set by the achievements of Dostoyevsky or Schopenhauer—or, for that matter, Chekhov.

Regret keeps us gazing at the declared emptiness of the past. If, however, we could fill that emptiness with words, perhaps they would spill forward and carry us with them, like a river’s current. They might also settle us on firm ground. Words on a page—words we read, words we write—might actually allow us to cross a border or, more precisely, to inhabit a borderland between stasis and transformation. Words and sentences possess, on one hand, a graspable, welcome solidity; on the other hand, they are steeped in fluid possibility, alive with an ongoing potential for practicing metamorphosis.

My father was an actor on stage and in film; my stepmother was a dancer, my godmother a famous choreographer, my mother a singer. My childhood and adolescence were immersed in high drama—not just on proper stages, but in domestic forced-audience-participation theaters. I longed to participate, yet I heartily resented the demand to do so. I resisted, weakly; I adapted, far too successfully. My learning to live theatrically, to nurture and elaborate crises, did not translate readily into learning to embody drama imaginatively on the

page—or when as a teenager I studied acting and later in my twenties spent some years as a dancer and choreographer, on the stage or in the studio.

When I'd given up both theater and dance, I began to read my slavish imitations of my father and the two dancing mothers as a mirroring of false lives. But these lives of my literal and figurative progenitors were not false. Yes, these people could be said to be removed from reality; certainly they created their own contained realities. Their truest selves emerged on the stage. They extended the stage to incorporate everything and everyone else: limitation masqueraded as extension, betraying sometimes a brutal force of imagination and sometimes an imagination deeply constrained.

An actor is clothed in another self: the costume and the role may reveal aspects of the self otherwise inaccessible to the artist. A dancer's body moves far beyond wearing the heart on the sleeve: every movement, large or small, sinuous or jagged, can intimate a range of intimate emotion. Offstage, the onstage selves—the revelations and intimations—are buried.

An actor maintains both distance from and an intimacy with an audience. He is distanced from himself, yet tenaciously aware of himself; he forgets himself while letting his full consciousness flood mind and body. He is someone else, whom he has on some level watched himself become, and he fills that other with himself, his only tool. Free association, channeled and refined, intermingles with dissociation. The same could be said for dancers and other performers, but it is in the actor that these tensions seem clearest.

As I became, in adolescence and young adulthood, an increasingly adamant self-observer, and as my own dissociation, a companion since my early years, fostered that perspective, I stumbled over the problems of balance and proportion. Many believe that the habit of self-observation goes hand in hand with the urge to write. But ingrained dissociation nurtures paralysis. The would-be writer—like the would-be actor or dancer—stands aside, watching herself *not* write, or act, or create, or do much of anything.