

fat bryna

Nobody would play with her because she was fat. Bryna didn't precisely know that was the reason, nor did she know that during and immediately following the war, being fat was uncommon and maybe shameful. She knew her mother felt no compunction about going to the butcher to buy lamb chops and chickens with black market coupons. She ate meat every day. But it was not illegal meat that made her fat. It was candy she stole from the drugstore, hunched down onto the linoleum floor in front of the glass case, with her back to the pharmacist.

Bryna was already fat long before that, fat from infancy, when her mother shoved a bottle of formula into her mouth to shut her up when she cried. But the girl didn't know that, she knew only that with her back to the pharmacist she was fisting onto her tongue some secret consolation.

Consolation paid for with isolation, with a deep intuition that nobody liked her, nobody chose her when teams were chosen, nobody wanted to play hopscotch or jump-rope although Bryna could jump, her round body springing on sturdy legs and delicately arched feet. "Little Barrel" they called her, and indeed she was as wide as high, clad in her brown jumper and brown laced up shoes, white ankle socks marking her flesh.

Despite this absurdly inappropriate body her mother sent her to learn ballet. The classes were given by a Russian ex-patriot supposedly a famous ballerina in Moscow. But who knows. Bryna didn't know where or what Moscow might have been. But she took onto herself a dream, the dream of becoming a slender dancer with

a long neck, clad in white tutu and pink toe shoes. She held her head as high as she could, and gazed off into a distance where she was not fat isolated Little Barrel.

In those days nobody hesitated to put toe shoes on young children, and so she would tie up the lengthy satin ribbons, lacing them around her ankles below the thick muscular calves of each leg. And then rise on the toe boxes, as easily as if she weighed forty pounds less. She moved in the classes with her head erect and her eyes fixed on the distant illusion, speaking to no-one.

These classes kept Bryna going for some time, they were her secret and her hope. Then one day the trolley-car taking her home had a different driver. This driver didn't stop at her corner. He wanted to drive the trolley to the other side of the intersection's traffic light, about thirty feet further along the track. Bryna began to cry.

"How will I get home?" she screamed. She felt lost already, carried beyond that very thin line dividing the space where nobody knew her or spoke to her, and her mother who would feed her and put a book in her hand to keep her quiet. Bryna had many books, some with heroes and dragons, some with ballerinas. In these books the hero, a prince, would ride off to fetch a lost princess.

"How will I get home?" she screamed, although if her eyes had been clear she would have seen the same street she always descended onto, merely on a different side of the intersection. The trolley driver was as frightened as she was, terrified of a screaming fat child who somebody might accuse him of abducting, of keeping her forever in the anonymous neighborhood he hourly transversed. He stopped the car and pushed the lever. The door doubled open and Bryna descended, dropping her bag of ballet shoes and practice clothing on the steps as she jumped. The door swung shut and the trolley departed without Bryna, carrying away her pink slippers.

She told her mother she didn't want to go to dance classes any more. She refused to go, and her indifferent mother, relieved to save the fees, never inquired as to why, or what became of the toe shoes.

Oddly, Bryna did not remain fat. At adolescence her body elongated, almost unbeknown to her, taking on the female form and initiating menstruation. Nevertheless in adulthood Bryna consistently purchased clothing too big for her frame, and avoided gazing into mirrors when she shopped. At her work as a bank clerk she stood behind the teller cage, and smiled pleasantly at people who could not see her body. When the bank changed over to ATM machines she was able to move into a semi-private cubicle where nobody bothered her. Year after year she wore loose cotton shirts in summer and loose woolen sacks in winter. When her vacation time came around she stayed in her small apartment, eating salads in the summer heat. At Christmas she listened to the season's music on the radio. She supposed her parents were dead, back in the old neighborhood. With no communication system in place, she lived alone in her distant apartment, knowing that with a credit card in her bag she could not ever be lost, because although nobody would seek her, she could take a taxi back to her own address. She kept a cat, female and spayed, and the cat required feeding, hence she was not really free, not even after the first cat died and then the next three cats followed suit. They seemed interchangeable to Bryna, all orange and white fur with pointed ears and long tails. Like herself, they never mewed, nor were they companionable. Their task was to wait; she would always arrive home.

One day Bryna achieved age 63 and applied for her pension, for Social Security, and on the same day, for a passport. A passport guaranteed she or her body would also be returned home. Because this city was her "home", the place where once she dreamed of wearing a tutu and dancing on pink toes. She wrote onto her passport the name of the city, and her apartment address although she was giving it up. One had to write something.