

CHRISTOPHER LINFORTH

## FLIGHT

WHEN THE TAPE RUNS OUT, Mara holds the video camera above her head. She tells Patrik to keep dancing. She doesn't want him to learn about her mistake. She hadn't known the length of the tape or thought to check beforehand. Patrik appears unfazed by her animated insistence, her hand waving in a circular motion. He lifts one knee and flicks his foot. His body pulses forward, then angles up on its toes, spinning around. His arms cross, and he crouches down, becoming small and tight like a knot.

The unrecorded images cause her to memorize everything about his movements. Although more than thirty years separate them, she enjoys the youth of his body. He wears a black dance belt that reveals the limber strength of his thighs and buttocks as he turns and splits his legs. She focuses the lens on his abdomen and the perfect divots of muscle. She lowers the camera to his sheath. Patrik knows little about her relationships with her lovers—the men she cycles through every few months. He performs so calmly, so unlike a boy, that she thinks perhaps he will be the one to understand her. Before she hired Patrik, and long before the eruption of civil war in Yugoslavia, she fabricated sculpture in plastic and fibreglass. In the seventies she made her famous series of bird wings, the rectangular blocks moulded into Vs and bolted into blacked steel pedestals. Back then she was known throughout the art circles of Zagreb and Belgrade for *Flight*. The critics christened her the heir to Brâncuși.

She met Simon at a gallery reception in London decades ago. He was the only attendee not drinking the free champagne, and she discovered that he was a ballet dancer, who had been invited by a painter of white canvases. They talked of Makarova, Fonteyn and Nureyev, and of course Nijinsky. The sharp tone of Simon's voice intrigued her, as did his knowledge of Hofmann and Rothko. Wearing dark pants and a cream dress shirt, he resembled one

of the servers carrying silver trays of petite vol-au-vents and flutes of Moët. But he stood tall, his hair soft and wavy and his long limbs jutting at strange angles. Mara imagined the corded muscle below his clothes and how it could propel his body across the stage and lift a woman with apparent ease. She presumed he was gay but could not detect any of the outward signs. Perhaps she assumed too much about Simon and his reasons for a life in the ballet. Half lost in rumination, she heard him ask something and tilted her head to suggest that she was agreeing.

“U.S.S.R. or Romania?” he pressed. “Is that where you’re from?”

“It’s irrelevant. I’m here now.”

“That’s one way to leave your past behind.”

He was younger than Mara and astute for a dancer; she thought it better to feign ignorance. “I don’t understand.”

“Pretending where you’re from doesn’t matter.”

“That was not my point, exactly.”

“Of course,” he said. “It was mine.”

Mara struggled to decipher his curiosity about her. She wore an ox-blood turtleneck and baggy grey slacks. She was forty. Her clipped hair had clusters of white at her temples. Her face was still youthful, though boyish. Perhaps he was a tease. He was more handsome than her previous lovers, who had been art students—posers, really—without any talent. When she attended the Academy of Fine Arts she studied alongside these men, none of whom were interested in her assemblages of found objects or her experiments with shapes—a mechanistic recasting of natural forms. They only wanted to sleep with her. At twenty-six, she came to the conclusion that she would have to force her way into the art world. She cut her hair short and began wearing trousers and long-sleeved shirts, which became flecked with drops of polyurethane. Tiny burn scars marked her hands as she worked with new plastics, perfecting her use of synthetic media.

She suggested to Simon that they look at the rest of the exhibition. They drifted around the perimeter of the room, circling the hundred people in attendance. The gallery contained the work of several Eastern Bloc artists, including her own. Political illustrations hung on the far wall. In one, the artist had depicted Stalin lecturing a group of factory workers from atop a gold hammer and sickle—a moderate dissension. She assumed the man was now an exile in London, like so many others. Many of these artists were feted because of their banal political critiques. She disliked the instant and

easy attention these men received. As a citizen of Yugoslavia, she was free to come and go as she pleased. A disfigured portrait of President Tito would mean little outside of a few laughs.

They stopped by one of her pieces, "Flight #8," which had a wingspan of nine feet. It was her largest sculpture so far. The block of fibreglass ran smooth and angular. Coats of white polyester resin and a layer of clear sealant lacquered the monochrome surface. Simon traced his fingertip on the inside of the V.

"Be careful," she said. "No smudges."

"This is yours?" He leaned in to read the name printed on the label. "Mara Petrović."

"Correct."

"I thought you were a hanger-on," he said, "like myself."

"I feel like one."

"Do you know anyone here?"

"Just you," she said. "It's rather sad."

"Your sculpture is beautiful."

Mara drained the last of her champagne, wishing a waiter would stop by with a second glass—any distraction that would keep her from explaining her manifesto on aesthetics. "An interesting interpretation," she replied anyway. "I was going for the opposite."

"Ugliness?"

"More like futility."

"Ah," he said, like so many of her early critics. "I didn't get that."

A man she recognized as the curator of the exhibition crossed the gallery floor toward her. His name was Andrew or Duncan—something with two syllables. She had heard from her agent that the curator had inherited a great deal of money from his family and had wanted to ingratiate himself into the arts. Now the man beamed, kissed her cheeks, and asked if she needed anything.

"Another drink," she said.

"Of course, of course," he said, "but first let me introduce you to a few people."

Mara felt swept along by his energy, and over her shoulder she saw Simon grin and then become distracted by a man in a white suit. The curator ushered Mara upstairs to a private room, which appeared to contain the elite dozen or so of the reception. Several women were gathered near a bar,

chatting over highballs. An impassive barman stood behind a line of expensive spirits and wines. Atop a banquet table sat a chocolate fountain and a cut-glass dish holding the largest strawberries she had ever seen. Robert, as the curator's name turned out to be, said the strawberries had been flown in from the Continent. As they approached the bar, he ignored the wave of a round-faced brunette and turned away.

"We've sold three of your pieces," he said, "and I expect to sell the rest within the next month."

"Good. I suppose."

"Are you making more?"

"The *Flight* series is finished," she said.

"Don't be too hasty," he said. "There are guests here tonight who would love to get their hands on a Petrović."

Robert's insistence turned her stomach. Already she had been planning a move away from the whims of male collectors and critics, leaving behind the comparisons to Brâncuși and the orbit of his acolytes. Her past obsession with perfectly sculpted biomorphic forms seemed to belong to a different person, who was now foreign to her. In Robert's company she felt this even more acutely, yet she knew she had to play along for now. As she listened to his droning voice, she tried to place his accent, finally settling on South East England, somewhere around Surrey or Kent. She thought of Simon's conversational gambit but regarded a similar move to be wasted on Robert. She masked her distaste for his estimates on how much money she could make and who would buy her sculptures. She drank and Robert smiled and called a group of his friends over. In a flurry, Mara shook hands with a series of diamond-clad women and became the center of a discussion about the changeable nature of English weather. Once the small talk was over with, she was pestered with the repeated assertion that she must be glad to be out of a Communist country. She then suppressed a laugh when one of the women asked if people shared art in Yugoslavia or took turns in who displayed the nation's masterworks.

Mara ate several of the strawberries and drank a second glass of champagne—anything to fade out the chatter of the women. Though she was fluent in English, she felt isolated from their obsessive gossiping about who had been invited and who had been spurned. When Robert abandoned her for a grey-haired man, she made her exit. Downstairs, she hunted for Simon, finding him by the regular bar with the white-suited man and a couple of

women in short black dresses. She pressed a napkin with her address written in purple eyeliner into his hand. "Stop by," she said. "I need a model."

She photographed Simon in her rented West End flat, trying to capture the swirls and curves of his non-choreographed rhythms. She envisioned a shift into cut-up representations of the body—a world apart from the fashionable minimalist style of her own art or that of her peers. The pictures would be the start. She planned to use a gas oven to melt sheet plastic and mould the semi-molten material with Kevlar gloves. Perhaps she would fix his fluidity in half-formed cylinders or misshapen helixes flecked with bubbles and collapsed lips. Rough, jagged surfaces was all she knew.

After they had completed the sitting, Mara poured them both a glass of red wine. Simon sipped his politely and traversed the room. He pointed to the landscape painting on the wall. "I take it this came with the place," he said.

Mara said nothing at first. Watercolours of the English countryside hung in every room, and she felt cheated by the illusion they presented: the rare breaks in overcast skies, the sun illuminating hay bales and meadows, farmers scything corn or tossing seeds into picturesque fields. England was a world away from these genteel pastiches of Constable country. So far she had experienced freezing rain and heavy smog, annoying teenagers on the Tube, and men reading dirty magazines in the library. It was not that different from Zagreb.

"Yes," she said, "and it's priceless." She was glad to see Simon laugh. She had not yet had a visitor to her flat, and though she rarely felt lonely within its cramped confines she occasionally yearned for a moment of connection. It was not her conversation with him she liked the most but rather the periods of control she had when he posed, configuring his body to her whim. Whether he was gay paled in importance to the possession of his movements. The impulse arose from her time at the Academy when her life-drawing class shared a succession of slight women. She had despised her time spent sketching the models until she saw the professor berate one of the women for moving too often. Mara had felt a thrill that lingered long after the semester was over.

Simon exchanged his wineglass for a film canister on the mantel. "I've never had anyone take so many pictures."

"Not even your parents?"

“Perhaps when I was a child,” he said. “I haven’t seen them in a while.”

“I have a similar relationship with my mother.” Mara stopped herself from revealing any more information; she hated the thought that someone knew something about her family life. “Some more wine?”

“I have rehearsal in the morning,” he said.

“Can you stay for a little longer? I want a few more shots.”

“I should get some rest.”

“Just one roll,” she said. “I can pay for a taxi.”

“What do you want me to do?”

Mara directed Simon to crouch by the far wall. She took a light reading of his balled-up body and loaded a roll of Tri-X into her camera. As she stepped back, she wound the film on. She wasted some time fiddling with the lens ring, enjoying the sight of his huddled mass—a helpless boy. Then she was ready to shoot, and her finger hovered over the shutter release button. “Spin up,” she said.

Before each session with Simon, Mara rearranged the living room to be a studio. The paintings were taken down and stowed in the closet, white sheets were pinned to the walls, and her Leica was ready on the coffee table. She loved to capture different sections of his physique: close-ups of forearms spidered with veins, long exposures of bare feet sliding on the linoleum. Once, without explanation, he stood steady, holding his arms by his sides. The stillness terrified her, and she asked him to return to dancing and to speed up his glissades, jetés, and temps levés. Their relationship remained professional, yet they branched out from the sittings to visit museums and movie theatres, sometimes enjoying a late-night whisky together. They spoke of the art and dance scenes in New York and their mutual desire to see Patti Smith at CBGB. Sometimes she probed into his love life, but he always managed to brush her off. Once, when she asked if he had a lover, he told her to leave it alone. Mara pressed him, grabbing his hand and tugging it down between her legs, but he pulled back and said he was leaving. She noticed he still took his payment from the telephone stand.

A week later Simon failed to show for his sitting, and no call came to explain why. She assumed that he was finding money elsewhere, but she tried to resist this explanation by blaming his reticence on the insular nature of the English. She often wished Simon were like the young men she had slept with in New York, as Americans were forthright and took what they wanted.

But when alone in bed she fantasized about sex with Simon and what she could make him do.

Mara lounged in bed, sheet wrapped around her, reading *Artforum* and half-listening to the news on the radio. Bored by her magazine, she pawed through her photographs of Simon, tracing her fingernail around his stoic face. Examining one picture under her bedside lamp, she saw contempt for her creative process in his contorted expression and the blankness of his black eyes. She pushed the stack of photographs to the floor, reconsidering her ideas about transposing his movements into plastic. She hated her self-doubt; she had always been clear in the vision for her art. The men at the Academy would have enjoyed seeing her falter. She was certain of this.

Later that morning, she returned to the gallery in hopes of regaining confidence from viewing her sculptures. In truth, she hoped Robert would have Simon's telephone number. She had checked the directory but had been unable to find a listing. She assumed that it was kept private from his parents, and she felt foolish for not asking for his number and relying instead on his regular visits.

When she arrived at the gallery, the door was unlocked. Inside, light spilled through the windows, and the hardwood floor gleamed from a fresh layer of wax. Her sculptures had been removed, along with the pieces by the other Eastern Bloc artists. Adorning the walls now were large white canvases, and the paint shimmered in the lines of the dried brushstrokes. Gesso, she surmised. This artist had reduced art to the undercoat—a starkness of form. Against her better judgment, she found herself liking the work. She read the label with the artist's name: E. V. Cotterill.

She carried on through the gallery, entranced by each of the paintings, and ventured into the annex wing, where she saw "Flight #8" against the far wall. A spotlight illuminated the grandeur of the white-painted fibreglass: the form of a bird that could never fly. In her first conversation with Simon, she had been right about futility. She touched the V as he had done. She felt angry and finished with him. But what had he seen in her piece? Beauty, he had said. She tried to look for it in the smooth surface. There was only a faint reflection of herself.

"Mara," a male voice called out. Robert strode across the wooden floor, tufts of black hair curling out of his blue paisley shirt. "I'm sorry," he said, taking her hand. "I was going to call and give you an update on the sales."

“That’s fine,” she said.

“Come, let’s have a drink.”

A zebra skin spanned the central wall of the office. Beneath it stood a mahogany drinks cabinet, where Robert poured a sherry for Mara and a brandy for himself. She eased herself into the leather chair next to his desk. In the warm glow of his Tiffany lamp, he looked younger than he had the last time, as his face was now bronzed and his hair was dyed at the temples. She thought him silly—a silly old man.

“Your *Flight* series is almost sold,” he said, “and we’re still pushing it hard.”

Mara doubted his enthusiasm or the veracity of his statement. She had a feeling her other sculptures were in a warehouse, ready to be shipped back to Yugoslavia. “You need to,” she said, “if you want room for those blank slates on the walls.”

Robert smiled as he passed her a glass. “New styles always come and go,” he said. “How are things with you? Are you finding your time in London fruitful?”

“I’ve been working through some new ideas.” She sipped her sherry and waited for him to sit in his oversized chair. “But I fear that my model, Simon, may have fallen ill. Perhaps you met him? He came to my show.”

“The dancer?”

“Yes,” she said. “Do you happen to have his number?”

“I can get it,” he said, tapping his Rolodex. “Let’s have another drink first.”

Robert finished the rest of his brandy and asked for her glass. As he came around the desk, his countenance appeared jubilant, as though he had locked her in to what was to come. She raised her glass and stared at the sherry pooled at the bottom. She smiled in a way she thought would please him and threw back her drink. He thanked her and returned to the drinks cabinet to refill the glasses. As he fiddled with the bottles, she glanced at the closed door. She wondered if he had a secretary or an assistant of some sort. Even though she hardly knew Robert, she guessed he had a young woman somewhere.

Robert handed her a fresh glass. He sat on the edge of his desk and raised his brandy. “Cheers,” he said.

“*Ti si šupak.*”

“What’s that?”

“It’s the same.”

They polished off that glass and then a third. Mara impressed Robert with a few more bursts of Serbo-Croatian, giving him a false translation of each phrase. She secretly revelled in seeing his litany of quizzical expressions. When he excused himself to go to the bathroom, she considered flipping through his Rolodex herself, but she felt stunned by the alcohol. It had been a while since she had drunk this much, and she wished that she had eaten something beforehand. She pushed herself up but sat again when she heard footsteps outside the office. Only a moment later, she felt him grip her shoulders, his pudgy fingertips massaging her exposed skin. His hands snaked to her breasts. As he pawed at her chest, she heard his heavy breaths and his muttered frustration as he fumbled with the buttons of her shirt. For a few seconds she surrendered herself to his touch. She felt sure he was not a terrible lover, and she could imagine herself with him one time. It would not be too bad—most likely rough, sweaty, and short—but when his kisses wet her neck she slapped his hands away and stood. “No,” she said. As she left his office, she could hear his pitiful voice complaining about women—all women.

In the glare of the late-afternoon sun, Mara felt sick from the sherry and her initial acceptance of Robert’s advances. She braced herself against a lamppost, fearing she would keel over. As she told herself not to succumb, a half-remembered memory of the name of Simon’s studio came to mind. She was convinced it was in Hackney, and she caught a cab.

The studio sat on the corner of a busy junction. She paid the driver, hurried through the main entrance, and explored the foyer, her eyes running over the show advertisements pinned to the wall. Deeper inside the building, the hallway smelled of dry sweat and some sort of herbal balm. Then she heard shouts from one of the practice studios on the second floor. As she leaned in the doorway she saw a row of young girls next to the barre in pink leotards, cream tights, and slim ballet slippers, their tiny backs arched and one arm unfurled behind them. The teacher stood at the front in a long skirt and leg warmers, her hair slicked back into a bun.

Mara knocked on the mirror and waved to the teacher, who whispered something to the lead girl before coming to meet her. As the woman closed the door, Mara tried to describe Simon. The woman said that she knew him, but that was all. “Did you fuck him?” Mara asked. The woman stepped forward, took Mara’s arm, and escorted her to the foyer, where she pointed to a

stack of brochures. "Take one," she said. "It has the studio's number on the back page."

Mara called the number several times that night and the next day, but her calls went unanswered or were taken by a gruff man who said he would pass on the message. She considered telephoning Robert to get Simon's home number, but she knew he would never give it to her now.

She stayed in the flat for the next couple of days, feeling the situation was at an impasse. One evening, sick of self-pity, she dug through the mail, hopeful for a sales check from Robert. Finding none, she drank a little wine and flipped through the studio's brochure. Simon's face shone from the pages, his body aloft in midair. The photographer had been given something: the fine edge of a smile. She cast aside the brochure, went out to buy cigarettes, and smoked two as she walked back. Upon entering the flat she took an immediate dislike to the furnishings and tossed out the flower-print sofa cover and the doilies atop the television cabinet. Her eye caught the watercolours on the wall, and she began drawing dead birds in the fields and blackening the skies with a wax crayon. Then she telephoned the studio and demanded to talk to Simon. When he eventually came on the line, she asked to meet at a local pub.

As she seated herself at the bar, she was unsure if Simon would come. He seemed hesitant on the telephone—his voice soft, his words elliptical. She lit a cigarette and nursed her whisky, resolute that she would leave the pub once it was finished. She waited around a while after her whisky was gone, surprised when Simon showed up and kissed her on the cheek.

His hair was uncombed and a little matted. He could hardly look her in the face. She glanced over to the barman and held up her glass and two fingers.

Simon patted his trouser pocket, then slipped his hand inside, leaving it there. "I'm glad you called. Rehearsals have gotten the better of my time."

"Your ballet must come first," she said.

Mara paid for their drinks, and they moved to a small table in the back corner. They sipped their whiskies and talked about a play they had seen separately and then the awfulness of French films. Mara felt she had miscalculated how the evening would go. She had underestimated the degree of his youth and his inexperience in these matters. Her instinct was to lie and make up a pretense for a final sitting. What she knew of Simon, though, was

that he was always broke. She straightened her back slightly and drained the last of her whisky. “Forty pounds,” she said, “to come back with me.”

Simon hooked his fingers around his glass, rotated it, and scraped the bottom against the varnish on the table. “I’d like another.”

After she returned with a pair of doubles he said that he could do with the money, though it would cost sixty.

They caught a cab together. They both smoked rather than talked. Each played mute until they were inside her flat. He asked about the vandalized watercolours in the living room, and she replied that she had been attempting an homage to Duchamp. For the first time he failed to get one of her art references and simply looked around the room, a little lost.

“What happened to your sofa?” he asked.

“I didn’t like the colour,” she replied. “We can sit in the bedroom and have a glass of brandy.” She could sense his hesitation from the pause in his breath. “It’s special—from my hometown.”

They drank the brandy straight from the bottle and after a few minutes collapsed together on top of the sheets. They lay in the darkness, awkwardly undressing, neither of them making a move. Mara could feel his heft in the bed, and she could smell his sweat from rehearsal. She wondered if he had passed out or if he were waiting for something to happen. She turned his way and saw the outline of his body and the rise and fall of his chest. She told Simon to play with himself. “Think about anyone you want,” she said. She reached down to his waist, and he sat up, untangling himself from her.

“Let me get the camera,” she said.

“I can’t do this.”

“Just lie back.”

“I have to go,” he said. “I was supposed to meet Eric.”

“You have to stay.”

“No. This is the end of it.”

His words barely registered at first, but then her body suddenly recoiled and jerked away from his. She stretched over to her purse on the nightstand and groped blindly for some pound notes, slapping the bills she found against his chest. She rose to her feet and left the room, half-considering fleeing from the flat. Her mind dizzy, she lay on the blank cushions of the sofa, thinking over the events of the last few weeks. He had led her on, fooling her into assuming she had any sort of control over him.

After a while she felt cold; she wanted a blanket or some clothes. She lis-

tened for any noise in her bedroom, but she could hear nothing. It was possible Simon had fallen asleep or changed his mind about meeting his lover. She raised herself up, a dull ache growing in her head; she realized that she had met Eric at the gallery reception and that his paintings had later replaced her sculptures. She picked up her Leica from the coffee table.

In her bedroom, Simon was kneeling next to the nightstand, the lamp casting his naked body in silhouette. He arched his head around, his mouth opening.

Mara snapped his picture, the flash lighting up the room. "Tell Eric to use the money for some colour," she said.

"Please, Mara."

"*Govno jedno*," she said. "Get out."

She took a dozen pictures of Simon as he paced around searching for his clothes. He pulled on his trousers and tucked his shoes under his arms. She trailed him into the living room, still taking his photograph. As he left the flat, she flipped the camera around and snapped a picture of her own face.

Winter sun angles through the skylight of Mara's studio, and her eyes flit from the square of glass back to Patrik. Her arms ache from holding the video camera in midair for so long. She draws it to her chest, pretending to refocus the lens. Patrik rises from his pose, and the pale light softens the contours of his muscular torso and angular cheekbones. She knows that, now in her sixties, her skin has lost its elasticity. Her years of working unmasked has also left strands of silica pinned inside her body, which have formed lesions in her lungs. Notwithstanding her illness, she still desires reciprocation from her young men, like Patrik, though it happens less and less.

Patrik slips on his tracksuit pants and pulls on his T-shirt. She sees his nipples erect through the thin cotton, and she holds in her mind the perfect symmetry of his chest and abdomen. He asks for a cigarette, and she gives him the rest of her pack. Together they exit the studio and wend their way through her narrow gallery. He does not ask about the row of sculpted wing shapes, or why she moved on to video. Nor does he ask about her conception of the body or the title for the video installation: "(re)Fracture." She dislikes the fact that he does not sense what she achieved with the *Flight* series all those years ago, yet she knows that her latest work will be a chance for her to ascend to her rightful place in the art world. Fame will bless her again.

She passes Patrik an envelope, the front marked with a P in her finest hand. The two-hundred kuna inside is not as much to her as it is to him. As he accepts the money, he mentions that he cannot make next week's session, as he has a rehearsal for *Giselle*. She nods, already resigned to his excuse.

After she watches him hurry down the street to catch the tram on the corner, she goes upstairs to her office. By the computer sits her maquette for "Flight #8." Silvery hairs glint in the fibreglass. Her fingertip runs up and down the model's valley, the brittle surface now cracked. She never made the sculptures of Simon but instead circled back to Zagreb and *Flight*, fabricating variations on her earlier pieces. Even now she tries to forget about the box of photographic prints documenting his dances. She is sure Simon must have died of AIDS or Hepatitis B—some disease like that. No matter, there are other men in her life now.

She connects the video camera to the machine, loads the editing software, and sees the film from the tape appear on the computer screen. She speaks into the microphone while playing the sixty minutes of her directing Patrik, narrating his dance until the tape ends and the image instantly dissolves to white. She places her hand over the microphone and slides it down to the base of the stand. Then she presses her lips against the microphone's domed grille and whispers Patrik's last moves: his delicate spin, his balling to the floor. She describes all that she can remember—all that she wants.