

Antoinette and the Prince

by [James Kuslan](#) (November 2024)



Street, Berlin (Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1913)

This is an excerpt from Primo Tenore Ass, a novel-in-progress about a great tenor in pursuit of enlightenment. He is fascinated by Antoinelle Richards, a recently retired prima ballerina who hopes a rival will renew the ardor of her current lover, Prince Paul, who is losing interest. This chapter charts a baseline for a relationship headed for the rocks.

Antoinelle's aura antidoted the boorishness of the most *lumpen* cabbies. Their pumpkins remained coaches long after she stepped out of them. She hid her dismay from the gallant running red lights for her that he remembered her old address. She thought bitterly of the barracks with its cruel plenitude of south light from which she launched her sorties and to which he had taken her after a *Romeo and Juliet*. He was still working on his dissertation. No, she never sent signed photos now. That nonsense was behind her. Still, at dubious crossings, she made her seeming hesitations, and every man who wished to be a Raleigh flung down his cloak and knelt as she passed.

"When people ask me if I drive celebs, I tell them I took your flowers to the children's ward."

Antoinelle loathed cut flowers, everything that perished in advance of its time.

"I kept a rose," he offered.

His genie eyes, trapped inside the rearview mirror, watched her with hunger for a sweet rebuke and swift forgiveness. She knew why he looked so scraped and dented! As he hurtled on through space and time, his fixation on what was behind him guaranteed collisions in the now. With every shimmy of the taxi, with every move she made, his gray eyes rolled like beads of mercury. Antoinelle prayed the driver not turn to face her. She was certain that his disembodied eyes would

stare from the mirror, enjoying her horror at finding no face but a near featureless plane, eye sockets tubs of dark doom.

"It must be the world's oldest rose." She busied herself in her black caiman bag. If she couldn't find a cross to hold up to his gaze, she would open the door the next time he braked and run.

"Two drops attar, every week. You don't look one day older."

She shut her eyes. She would ask the Prince for a car and driver. As the cabby reluctantly slowed at the canopy of Le Mirage, Antoinelle had a fifty ready for the fortyish fellow she could not place to save her life.

"You don't have to do that," he protested.

"Old friends." She could not bring herself to speak the name she glimpsed on the little I.D. billboard affixed to the Plexiglas separator that divided the cab's cabin in half.

Two fingers like a sugar tongs extended the unincreased bill. No serene Zen master but she herself lacquered her short nails red, each coat microns thin. More than her startling rings, they bejeweled Modigliani hands that never dropped a dish nor washed one. Of her eyes, her mouth, her tiny ears, any fitting place where ornament could rest or tint define, she wrought objects for an altar. When she was sentenced to descend into the lower depths of humanity unchaperoned by her lover, the Prince, her plea to thread a way un snagged by rabble she must walk through was to hold herself so still before the wall of mirror in the foyer of the Prince's house that she went forth in the disguise of assurance, mesmerized by the painted totem of her femininity.

By the time the cabbie stopped wiping his hand on his grimy jeans, hoping to offer the dancer a dry hand to shake, Antoinelle was on the sidewalk. The Prince kept her papered in money. Better it should absorb the sweat from hands drooling

to touch her than she.

The *maître d'hôtel*, chatting with one of the middle-aged couples waiting for a table, at once excused himself. Their anger short-circuited when they saw who she was. No one would have known she noticed.

"Bon après-midi, Frédéric." With no more effort than were it a dusting of snow, Antoinette shook off her sable. A flickering minion in mute service at the elbow of the *maître* receded with the glowing amber trophy of the Prince's regard.

"Good afternoon, Meese Rishars. You luke 'specially smashing today."

"Vous êtes trop gentil."

"Pas de tout."

A naked hand went up toward her mouth. "My gloves."

"In the taxi, Madame?"

"Surely he's gone."

"Shall I send someone to buy a pair?"

"We're steps from Bergdorf." She turned the lily stem that was her neck toward light and Fifty-sixth Street. "Is the Prince..."

"Son Altesse le Prince vous attend." Paul had the successful businessman's habit of arriving in advance of his appointments.

"Is it really that cold?" she asked with sly charm.

Not when you smile like that, thought the *maître d'hôtel*. He would phone Bergdorf the moment she was seated. Le Mirage could afford it. If the owner quibbled, Frédéric would pay the bill himself.

That cabbie had her gloves to do God knew what voodoo with! She followed Frédéric down the dimming oaken corridor past top lit rustic Impressionist scenes Antoinelle had never come early or tranquil enough to consult. Museums were a life long vice. At the Louvre at sixteen, when to speak French was a thrill and the city not yet "that damned Paris," addressing the Nike of Samothrace, she exclaimed, "I can do that. And move, too!"

She breathed deep as she and Frédéric approached the *Petit Salon*. Its acoustic tricked one into believing that its patrons never raised their voices in anger, passion, mirth or lust. Eating there was like eating her way out of the belly of a pomegranate. Every meal taken there spooled around her another caul of winter.

Paul was at his usual table, the first to the corridor's left. A shaft of the light that backlit her in the far wall's beveled mirror fell across his spotless black shoe. He must be very provoked, she thought, to have crossed his legs. From his vantage against the banquette, Paul sized up every entrant. Of the discrepancy between their custom and the Prince's measurement, they were never apprised. Many acquaintances lunched here. Despite that, his digestion was good. The couples waiting in the foyer would wait in vain for the several empty tables. Paul had never seen the room upstairs.

As he stood to greet the dancer, his left hand dripped napkin as though it was a handkerchief asop with cologne. His right hand brought her hand to his lips with no calorie wasted; at fifty, he was still superbly muscled, and could outrun, outswim, outshoot his sons. Antoinelle marveled at the dense silvery hair that hovered over her hand. The proximity of his lips, which did not touch her skin, gave her the most sickening tingle. Properly, his *Handkuss* never wet her.

They were drinking champagne the first time they kissed. The accelerator of the Prince's hand on her back drove her lips

onto his; like a playful panther's claws, thrilling with the threat of harm, the fingers held; into her open mouth from his—his lips aroused by her shock at his desire—he sluiced her teeth with cold champagne and drank it off her tongue. She declined to go to bed with him that night because, just having danced *Sylphide*, she did not think she could live through it. He stood at once and said, "Until tomorrow?" How brazen she had been in her reply! "Until tomorrow night." That was the beginning of a year, the last of her career, when she gave more thanks for evenings when she did not dance than for evenings when she did.

Frédéric seated Antoinette and bowed himself out. The Prince never tipped him cash. On occasion, he mentioned a commodity or stock. Frédéric had reluctantly decided that when he opened his own restaurant, it could not be named La Bourse.

"You went to your meeting, I take it." The Prince cracked a small baguette in two and ate it without butter. He ate like a dancer. He had both feet on the cabbage rose carpet she detested for its *embonpoint* flowers one's lightest tread made mulch of.

"I left before it ended, but the traffic..."

With a wave of baguette, the Prince nebulized all traffic everywhere. "And your meeting?"

"I don't know if I should laugh or cry."

"That is your reaction to most everything, my dear."

A glass of champagne was served her and she sipped it with her eyes closed as she usually did. Her stillness on stage had been a hallmark of her artistry; her eyes seemed to watch from under opaque lids. On stage, the effect resulted from the most intense concentration; in life, from kneading bulges back into her silhouette before her rage exploded through the fragile skin.

"I have something for you."

Her enormous brown eyes, unmediated in expectation, evoked a smile from the Prince.

"There." Paul pointed the powdered gunmetal gleam of his voice at a wrapped, small rectangular box to the right of Antoinelle's service.

"May I?"

No fanfare thrilled him so much as the heartbeat of an excited woman. "*Bitte schön,*" said the Prince.

The woman presently his heartthrob did not unwrap his gift; she practiced reverse *origami*. Never had the Prince kept a woman Antoinelle's equal in grace. Women more beautiful, women younger, once, in his youth, a woman more famous: But whether she moved, stood, sat, slept, bathed, or what really drove him wild, stretched, her molecules were incapable of tangling. Bulgari was the name embossed on the blue leather box.

How unlike the biographies and memoirs of the ballerinas she memorized as a girl that after retirement a man paid her homage in dry goods. The only presents Antoinelle wanted from the men in her life were emotions to use on the stage. A few months before meeting the Prince, she had broken up with an academic whose scholarship made her feel bad about her lack of formal schooling. Their parting was almost restful; who could hate a woman who exited one's life on pointe?

She farewelled the stage a year to the day of meeting the Prince. She gave her scrapbooks to Covent Garden, where her European farewell in *Swan Lake* was still sinking successors without trace. Much was made of her gifts of costumes to young dancers considered promising (but not by her). She answered every communication she received, promptly refusing proposals to teach and proposals to wed. Refusals to return to the stage were not so speedily dispatched. Though retired, she saw no

reason to deactivate her Web site.

She woke later than Paul but in time for her ten a.m. class which she vowed to renounce when the younger girls stopped regarding her with envy. Before sharing a bed with Paul, her waking impulse to warm up her body by stretching in bed was easily attended to. Now, on those rare days when he was not up at dawn to pounce on his business affairs, she could not stir without Paul waking the sleeping beauty that, until his advent, slumbered. She doubted he made love to her more originally than he had to her predecessors. Nevertheless, he was her shining knight whose nakedness lustered in dark bedrooms like an armor he took her inside of. To his face, she called him Dr. Sex, was gladly his patient. She thought she knew her body inside out, but no sooner had she gone to bed with Paul than her being, long in thrall to dance, pledged allegiance to the man who made her anguish more sublimely than her art. Dancing had become too immediately painful. Paul's ravages she fancied she could fend off. "What is it?"

"A trinket."

"When did you buy it?"

"While waiting for you."

The trinket was a watch. Tiny sapphires twinkled on its platinum bezel. How Paul to choose platinum, not gold. Sapphires, not diamonds. How like him, to slap with a bauble.

"Paul, it's divine. But I have a watch."

She lifted her exquisite wrist, here, as in *Giselle*, act two, boneless, like a spirit's.

"This watch works."

She sipped champagne. "Thank you, Paul."

With the tip of his tongue, he licked a fleck of rock salt off

his finger which he rested on his lips like a silencer, studying the woman opposite him. Scraped back flat off her face, her hair looked wet, she like a mermaid out of its element. Her hybridism's unearthly fascinations were reversing themselves to favor needy womanliness. The Prince wondered when he would have to restore Antoinelle to the cobalt depths he had reeled her up and out from.

"What are you having, Paul?"

"The Dover sole. Trawled but hours ago from the depths *de la Manche* ... per our resident factotum, Frédéric."

"You have reason to doubt him?"

The Prince smiled, which was his whittled down version of laughter. "I doubt everyone."

In his own way, Antoinelle thought, the Prince was very honest. "I've no menu!" What a gaffe. Like sweeping onstage for a *pas de deux* and finding oneself abandoned. "They'll do something off the menu for me. Steamed vegetables. There's always too much oil in the salad."

"I ordered *vichysoisse* for you. *Et asperges en beurre.*"

Butter and cream. Treacherous cows! Females were not to be trusted. "You're so thoughtful, Paul." She spoke with no trace of irony, the secret seasoning that made her life inedible.

Only to staff of places like this, who, if they turned their mind-reading toward less licit pursuits might be as rich as their clients, was the finger that had lingered near Paul's mouth perceptibly lifted. The Prince refused to take his eyes from the woman with the blue black hair. His mother, still alive in Lichtenstein, wore her hair, now iceberg white, like that.

"*Oui, Votre Altesse?*"

Having been on the stage, Antoinelle was no stranger to trapdoors, but the ones at Le Mirage were something special. It was not just that her lover's hypnotizing eyes had narrowed her field of vision. To Antoinelle's silent applause, the waiter bowed to the man with the crest on his cufflinks.

"Nous sommes prêts," said the Prince.

He was always ready, thought Antoinelle, thank God. She was forty-four, longevity the curse of her family. It was remarkable how ungermanic Paul's French was. What a fool his wife had been to leave him when his youngest turned eighteen. It was fortunate for women that women were fools. "Paul, may I have more champagne?"

Paul smiled his Croesus smile.

"Have you changed to smaller glassware?" Antoinelle asked the waiter.

"I will ask," said the waiter.

"No need," said Paul not looking at the waiter.

Without touching Antoinelle, and still smiling, Paul set gently to tremble the pearl and diamond earrings he sent from Singapore on the occasion of her final *Bayadère*. A crisis he chose not to allow his representative there to resolve caused him to miss the performance.

He was so handsome when he smiled, his nose so narrow and so straight, it alarmed Antoinelle he wanted to touch her. After near to thirty years of make-believe princes, some of whom partnered women with the gallantry of well-bred but mutually unintelligible foreigners, Antoinelle had a prince of her own. She laid her old watch on Paul's bread plate.

"My raven must have what she likes." Paul nestled Antoinelle's old watch into a pocket of his jacket. He signaled the staff to bring a new bread plate and lifted Antoinelle's new watch

out of its box.

If the watch cupped in Paul's palm was correct, was she really so late? The watch face, blank for all its brilliance, offered no opinion, nor judgment of the man who bore the object toward her as if he himself had braided in platinum a garland of time in which to bind her. She extended her hand. The platinum frostbit a path to her wrist. Paul snapped the clasp closed with a finger.

[Table of Contents](#)

James Kuslan has a B.A. in English literature from the University of Pennsylvania and an M.F.A. from the Yale School of Drama. He is a former Edward Albee Foundation Fellow in Playwriting. He has a passion for opera and, with the German classical music recording giant Deutsche Grammophon, he has served as a voice scout, compilation producer of vocal CDs, copy and headline writer and writer of corporate communications. His essays on *Lucia di Lammermoor* and *Don Pasquale* are included in the booklets that accompany the DVDs of the Metropolitan Opera's productions of those operas, both starring Anna Netrebko. As a writer of liner notes, his credits include the London label's 20 CD collection, *Opera Made Easy*, featuring the artistry of tenor Luciano Pavarotti. In addition, he has written liner notes for the Philips and Sonoris labels.

Follow NER on Twitter [@NERIconoclast](#)