

# The Royal Peacock Palace

Kathleen de Azevedo

Come to think of it, Giselle could see how the show she was in was popular. The audience comes in and it's the cheesy stuff, some jittery comedian named Duffy wearing a big sombrero making lame jokes. Only in Reno, swear to God, could people get away with it. The guy is a coke fiend and his raw nostrils flare even redder when the audience laughs. Then it gets better with the Cuban Greenhorns and their salsa band. Then there is the other stuff, guitar duets, a pseudo-Cumbia group from Oregon. Then of course George and Yolanda, tango dancers whose parents were on the Lawrence Welk Show and learned tango somewhere, with ganchos, kicks, sweeps, and feet all tangled up. Yolanda always dances with her head in profile so you can see her two buttery black curls which hang on either side over her ears. Then of course, the splashy feather show, the samba number as visualized by Tony Chong, Reno choreographer. First, two men enter wearing white pants and striped shirts and straw hats all cocky. The scenery is a lonely street like the Gene Kelly numbers where a man finds himself well-dressed in a foreign land. These guys have taken ballet and they swirl and do a few loopy pirouettes and one does a fouette to impress upon people that he was a ballet dancer and has seen better times. Then some new music starts, drums throb, and the Gene Kelly guys skitter off stage to make way for the Birds of Paradise, the samba queens.

Women in tall hats with feathers are pluming and gliding down staircases from all directions, breasts in underwire sparkling bras, but mostly underwire and little bra. The bottom part is spare too, sequined merkins strung with beads that slap on their thighs. They wear high heels, higher than Yolanda the tango queen's heels, and their behinds, covered in black fishnets, look like restless hens caught in chicken wire.

When Giselle looks into the audience, she sees black with bright gold lights, like the headlights of an oncoming train. It is frightening that she can see it coming toward her. Her hips go automatically, shake and shake, and she bends her elbows slightly, it is no biggie. Her feet shuffle, the thing is in the hips, high-powered machines rattling like maracas, by god. But she still sees the train almost hitting her and rumbling past, leaving her buried in crepe paper leaves. Things are beginning to show an absurd brash core. This frightens Giselle because it is important to go forward

and not look to the side and see things happening in the wings.

Giselle is suffering because of her friend, Francine. At 40, flesh turns to liquid and once-knotty muscles float like pieces of ice under the skin. Francine was called in and told to apply at the Bella Donna, a casino that hires older dancers. Bella Donna's portico features three stucco statues of revolving show girls, one in Hawaiian gear. It's another way of saying it's your last show. It's not *you* Francine, they say, it's that your skin has become thin.

Giselle knows about the end of a dancer's career. Happens to everyone, even to Cyd Charisse. But it's still a shock to be told to go to the Bella Donna, and then find yourself working with your mother at the Bolo Tie Store and Gift Shoppe, and wearing one of those sleeveless cowboy shirts and puffing on cigarettes and calling everyone "honey," then going to the Leprechaun Club for a nightcap. There are the sensible ones that go home to their husbands and kids and that's it. Sure. But there are others who wanted more.



Still, the next afternoon, there is dance class. The girls from the show are all there, in spandex pants and halter tops so Tony Chong the choreographer can check their midribs for signs of decay. Tony is a small man with oversize muscles in his thighs, which makes him look like a bull dog. His torso is lean, with ribs arguing for space with his abs. His black hair is cut spiky like someone in shock.

Francine, the tallest woman in the company and lead dancer, sways in like the royal peacock of casino fame, her hair in a floppy top knot, her legs "go on forever" as they say, her boney toes calloused and clawed from years of high-heels. But it is the two newer dancers, tall women with pointy cone breasts and small hoof-like feet that impress Tony. Tony looks at their breasts constantly, and scrunches his face when Francine accidentally slithers in front of his gaze. "Glide, Ladies! Fly into the clear blue sky!" he calls out as all the dancers trot forward, one foot in front of each other, straight-legged, tight-assed, two at a time across the floor, turn, turn, like a shipment of mannequins on a conveyor belt. Giselle suddenly panics: *I should have quit ballet when they said I was too tall. What in the fuck am I doing here in Reno, just turning? Turning into what?* She bolts out of line and trots toward the doorway for air to answer the question, maybe thinking she will find it outside, or in her purse. Tony stops everything and cries out: "What's the matter with you, now? Are you going out for a jog?"

Giselle scoops up her dance bag and jogs, her character shoes going clickity-clack on the pavement outside, past the bail bonds and liquor stores. Out on the street, in heels and bare-midriff spandex, she knows she looks like an abandoned Barbie. She had just taken off from her other job

at her mom's Bolo Tie Store and Gift Shoppe and now she'll be returning, unexpected. She can see her mother in back of the counter, her hair dyed all-one-color black, as Giselle enters, sighing, "Oh boy. Oh boy."



Still, there are two shows that night. *The show must go on*, they say to performers, even those plodding forward to their demise. The dressing rooms smell of sweat and dry-cleaning chemicals. The dancers sit in rows, facing mirrors. Most of them arrive in shorts or in tattered jeans. They wear large old button down shirts and no bra, and the breasts by nature hang in small flaps except for the luckier pointy-titted. They pull their hair back with a band as most of it will be hidden in a hat, but some will let their locks flow. Giselle is one of those girls with a nice head of hair and she braids it beforehand so it will fluff. The women lean forward and trace the buds of their eyelids, then the buds of their lips first with a darker lip liner then fill them in with a lighter color. They swash the cheekbones with rouge. They talk of Francine with fear, with bravado. "Now she'll have the night off," and "Now she'll really get to eat." "A torso in this business," one girl announces, "must look Greek. Francine's no longer looks Greek." It's not the Greek that Giselle knows, the guy with a big paunch who works at the deli. Greek as in statue. Think of Cesars Palace. We are marble.

The women talk of men and make fun of Jett Jered, this washed up guy with a little dick that performs over at the Leprechaun Club. The dressing room gets raunchy that way because everyone is in bare feet and their crotches are shaved clean of pubic hair. That washed up guy at the Leprechaun hasn't seen a woman in ages and it oozes through his pores, the desperation. *I love when men get that way*, one of the girls says. Ha, ha, it's a soupy cruel laugh.

Francine stumbles in late, her blonde hair bundled at the top of her head, held with a scrunchy so that her locks spray out like warrior feathers. She has a devil-may-care manner, throws her make-up kit on the table, then clatters herself down. The women are silent. Giselle and some of the others are ready to put on the headdress, a crown with three huge plumes, the signature costume for the Birds of Paradise number and Giselle is reminded over and over that it costs a pretty penny. She puts it on and the assistant is tugging at it while complaining to her that she didn't pin her hair back right. Giselle feels a great sadness rising in her, flowing through her body, soaring over treetops and darting forward with a whoosh of wings. The wings are extended and strong. Below, she sees a small river dotted with bodies. The girls are fluttering out of dressing rooms in bursts of red and gold and green, eyelids heavy with makeup and sequins. The Cumbia band is playing and Yolanda, the tango dancer, is outside, smoking and cussing at her partner about something.

Francine has dressed quickly and stomps into the line forming backstage, the assistant following her and adjusting her headdress. "If it falls off it's your fault," the dresser hisses.

"Fuck it all," Francine says, "fuck all of you."

Touch it and glide. This is what Tony says. Before you go on, touch your stomach lightly so that your core becomes alive and you don't slouch. Touch and glide into the void.



Giselle lives in one of those desert subdivisions of trailers that look like houses, flat like coffins; they all have small fenced-in gardens most of which consist of nothing more than rocks and decorative pinwheels. Giselle's breakfast table has a stack of *Vegetarian Times* magazines. It is a single person's house, a house for someone who "*never got a life*" as they say.

Giselle wakes up late, puts on her robe, and has coffee in front of the T.V. Her skinny legs are beginning to have cheeks around the knees. The V of her robe reveals skin with a tinge of brownness from her mom, a one-fourth Shoshone. Giselle's eyes don't twinkle but are sad and dull from a story of which she already knows the end. Reno is "the end." Lately, whenever she goes into town, she stops in front of the Heavenly Palms retirement community. This is where the dancers say they will go when they get the boot. They will work at the Bella Donna, have drinks at the Leprechaun Club, screw Jett Jered, and live at the Heavenly Palms. It's where Francine says she's headed. Francine says she plans to have that boof white hair, the kind that needs a sleep turban to keep in place or else she'll be one of the sporty dyky-looking old ladies with a bowl cut.

The kidney shaped swimming pool at the Heavenly Palms is surrounded by green indoor-outdoor carpet. There are lounge chairs under umbrellas and two rows of date palms from the gate to the apartment houses, one and two story, the second story having an aqua blue railing. In the late mornings, when Giselle drives past to help her mother in the shop, she always sees in the pool the same man doing the crawl, back and forth. He is almost bald and his fringe of grey hair wavers in the surface of the water like seaweed. He wears a pair of those baggy swim trunks that bubble up in back. He does not want to be old. If he swims without stopping, maybe old age will just fly by.



Giselle decides to get a drink at the Leprechaun Club. This compulsion comes to her like some strange omen. The women say once you can stand to sleep with Jett Jered then you know it's the end of your career.

It's like a coming-of-age ritual for old bags. The Leprechaun Club has a café in front that serves sandwiches. The café is dim and greasy, filled with those who stay in cheap hotels nearby—teachers on vacation, truck drivers, gamblers with a few bucks. Half of the kitchen help is from a rehab center and they painstakingly make meatball and corned beef sandwiches while the non-rehabs swish around them, telling them to hurry up. Surly football-player busboys, with large hands, shovel up glasses and plates and dump them into plastic basins.

The entrance to the Leprechaun Club is from the café. The club itself has a green carpet and round tables balanced on kind-of sawed off tether ball stands and decked with black ashtrays and white pot o' gold drink coasters. The club serves green-tinted highballs.

The stage is a polished hardwood platform that thrusts forward onto the green carpet. At the back of the stage hangs a shiny white satin curtain appliqued with a large, green-sequined four leaf clover. A crystal pot of gold suspended from the ceiling, revolves slowly, sending fluttering gold flashes around the room. The musicians on the stage play intimately; their lips always with the lie of love on their kisser, even when crushed by a trumpet mouthpiece or a sax reed. Jett is a trumpeter for the Bos Heart Band and he's the guy all the girls talk about. His hair is combed back meticulously and greased, like a washed up Elvis impersonator. He has a wide beefy face. The other guys in his band are Ziggy on Vibes, Hoss on piano, Blue on bass, and Little Bobby Crachit on drums.

Jett starts playing songs on his trumpet like, "Jean-Jean the Dancing Queen," "Mommy Rae Has Gotta Have Her Day" and other polyester classics. He puts down his trumpet and sings, pacing back and forth as if he's a one man band, as if he wants to get out everything he always held inside about love, and he needs to sing it right here in this dingy room otherwise who would listen? He probably imagines himself Dizzy Gillespie swinging out the blues, the music swanking in slinky silk stockings. Or maybe he imagines himself a Desi Arnaz hotwire playing the rhumba, jerking around Cubano rhythms.

But the Leprechaun Club is where musical careers nose dive into tired chewy riffs. It's the Royal Peacock Palace without the feathers. This is the place one uses in the expression, *why do they continue on when they are past it? They'd do anything, even play at the Leprechaun Club, the Hollywood Squares of Reno show people.*

Some women at a corner table have dressed up in shiny Lycra pants suits and fat rosin earrings and their hair reeks of Aqua Net. They speak a Spanish and English hodge-podge, laugh and talk loudly. Giselle guesses they are hotel maids because they keep talking about weird things they find in beds. Giselle sits at the back with a sandwich and a highball. She crosses her legs and she's wearing pedal-pushers, and her hair is in a ponytail. She doesn't look like someone clubbing but someone lonely.

Jett puffs into the microphone, swaggering, wooing, saying "Look

at all these pretty ladies here, ditched their husbands just for me." The women in the corner laugh, jabbing their fingers at each other, pointing to the musicians below the waist, and laughing. Jett keeps the trumpet mouthpiece on his kisser. The women must have made him nervous because his horn sounds too brassy and too uncontrolled, his tongue sput-sputting, spit valve drooling, no talent, clumsy. Suddenly, Jett can't take it anymore, shoves his trumpet into the case. Giselle expects him to stomp off stage, but instead, he approaches the ladies. They open their eyes wide. He sits at their table, crosses his arms, and fiddles with the ashtray. "What," he says "what is so funny?" The women give little gasps and mutter in Spanish. The curly haired one looks at him sharply. Her dress is tight, and a fake-ruby pendant around her neck shines like a red eye. She rubs the stone and croons, "I love you mi amor," for everyone to laugh. Meanwhile, Blue, the bass player booms in the mike, "Jett, what are you doing? Let's finish the song." And now Jett grins, and everyone knows it is part of the act. "Which one of us do you like?" one of the women says. Jett winks and said, "Maybe you," he points to one, "or you," he points to another, then he turns and points to Giselle. "Or you!" Giselle shrugs. Jett casts an intriguing look at Giselle, then goes back on stage. He prowls and mugs his moon-face as he plays. The Spanish ladies get sad, and Giselle wonders whether Francine has ever been desperate enough for Jett. Could Jett crack through Francine's normally brazen contempt for love?

But Giselle's fear for herself is this: what can she do to make her feel like she is flying? That can't be taught. That's the hardest, elation, the rush of near disaster—anything from scenery falling, feathers flying, forgetting the steps. Show business creates problems so no performer has to run out; if there is a crisis, you are alive. That is why some of these guys go until they are doddering fools. Jett is trying to recapture that feeling of flying but he is plummeting beak first towards the earth. Such a disaster he doesn't need.

The one guy that captivates Giselle is Blue, the bass player. Blue doesn't care where he is, as long as he is playing music. Blue's skin shimmers like his music, dark coffee, hot and oily with performance sweat, his expert fingers sporting all up and down the strings. His eyes are heavy and seem always to have tears. He thumps the bass real soulful, real crash and burn. When he is done with his solo, he shakes his head slightly like "what the hell am I doing here with *this* bing-bong?"

At the break, the band disappears and Jett comes deliberately to her table and says, "May I?" Giselle nods. Giselle wonders if Jett wants to visit because she is "at that age" when a woman becomes desperate for male approval, even if he's weird pseudo-Elvis. And oh the old guys can sniff them out, you bet. Jett orders a drink for him, a refill for her. All he talks about is his act, how he got started, who he worked with, all the people who thought he was good. He gets pushy with the person who

brings him a highball. It is one of the kitchen workers, a woman with disturbed eyes and a bad short haircut that make her head look like a box. When she waits for the tip, Jett says, "Go away now."

Then he starts talking, and it doesn't even matter if Giselle is there or not, he impulsively chatters, first about Herb Albert, about how Mexico was in the 60's where a man could go there and get ripped off, and it wouldn't matter because everything was cheap and you could always play a gig somewhere and pay for your tequila. Then it's about Mai Tais and the hammocks and a real Margaritaville he was at once, and all the women he found there.

Giselle wants to ask him how he ended up in Reno playing in such a loser club. She wants to know how his heaven turned into something this dismal. He doesn't even look at her when he talks, and she rehearses in her head what she'd say if he asks if she wants to go home with him. Francine used to take up offers from men who wanted to see her after the show. She said she liked to watch their faces during the night, fall and grow soft.

Finally he asks Giselle what she does. She tells him she is a show girl at the Royal Peacock Palace and his eyes light up and first she thinks that maybe he will mention Francine. Instead it's : "Wow. You could be chasing after Wayne Newton." Yeah, right. He looks around wondering if he should get the free club sandwich, but he hates the food here and the people who serve it give him the creeps. He says, "I feel like I'm in a looney bin."

But Giselle feels dead inside. She wishes he wasn't here. She makes a plan that when he begins his next set, she will slip away. The thing is, she is the only one in the audience besides another drunk who is closing his eyes. The Latin women have all left. She wonders if he'd still be sitting with her if she didn't say she was a showgirl. Say she said, "I am a maid," or "I am a school teacher," or "I am a black jack dealer." Would he still be interested?

Oh yes, he would. That's the frightening thing. She's just a hair's breadth racier than sitting on the couch and watching T.V.



Francine has come over to Giselle's trailer. It's Francine's last week at the Royal Peacock Palace. She could look for other work, but Reno is full of Tony Chongs who want only the best; they are breaking in a new girl for lead dancer she says, and I'd like to break her neck. Francine, all ruffled, runs her eyes up and down Giselle's body. *You are lucky* as if to say, *you are lucky to have a job.*

Giselle gets flinty. No one can do this forever, Francine.

Francine glares. Huh. She sits on the couch, crosses her legs and slouches into an S. The wrinkles around her eyes flare at the sides from

smiling, and pucker between the eyebrows from frowning. You expect her to talk or something, rant about that stupid Tony, that little measly faggot, but all Francine does is stare out the window, into the desert and cry. Giselle sits on the couch next to Francine but can't bring herself to do or say anything. The bridge between them is so fragile it might collapse. She sees herself in Francine's place, crying her eyes out in complete emptiness, staring out at the desert, the wind whispering ha-ha-ha. No more dry cleaning perfume that billows from the feathers, no more animal flesh smell of nylons and shoes, no more sculpting the air with your body, limbs like clay or like marble, moving and silent, no more sore ankles and calves that make you feel alive, no more being in a world that doesn't exist. Yeah, you shoulda got married, nit wit. You shoulda known someone more intimately than your own body. You shoulda married a man who watches Comedy Central after work. Francine has finished crying, crosses her long legs and sniffs. She looks out, doesn't say anything. She is planning an escape maybe, somewhere where she can fly anywhere, just as long as she's outta here. She says, "I don't want to be reminded what washed up looks like."



The last show at the Royal Peacock Palace: the audience here barely knows Latin music, and is not sure what a Latin Review looks like. So of course, they were disappointed with the Cuban Greenhorns, every one of them old white men, wizened except for a young Mexican boy on drums. Didn't really like the Cumbia stuff either because the performers wore T-shirts stenciled with American flags. Of course they liked Yolanda and George in their tug of war of feet, Yolanda being forced to move back with her long flinty strides. But when the tropical birds descend, the audience is sure of where they are, the Reno that they came for, the land of the mincing one foot in front of the other promenading down the stairs, the feathers wafting from headdresses, Francine's looking extra exotic like a huge white plumed war bonnet. The backdrop rolls down and it drips with tinsel. The bikini bottom that Giselle is wearing has cut into her flesh in a way that it never has before. She feels that the skin has puckered so much, it is covering her clothes but she can't look down or the headdress will fall. The hips start to swivel, and the beads start to clatter.

The stage lights are just a tad off, and tonight, Giselle can see the audience, and they look like the people who live in that Heavenly Palms retirement community, the one with the lonely bald swimmer. Their faces are benign and friendly. She read once about dinosaurs swimming in tar, but sticking, not able to move. There are bones to prove it, all jumbled together, their bodies moving as one.

Afterward there is champagne to celebrate Francine's leaving. The

toast is very happy-happy. Francine gushes, "I love you all. Will you still come to see me when I'm old?" All the girls chirp, "Of course we will." Francine announces that she will live with her mother while she is *making some decisions*. Hers is a fragile flutter.

Then Francine turns and points to Giselle. With a lushness partly from the alcohol, she almost lunges and says, "Giselle, girl, you are NEXT!" The girls twitter and laugh. Giselle smiles steel. At that moment Giselle decides she will quit. Tomorrow! She will not make speeches like this. Giselle plans to ditch Jett and the Leprechaun Club. Yeah, she'll think of the feathers trembling, the wings perched, the beady eyes watching for the nearby thunder of jets, or rain, or the ghost of A-bomb testing, or Russian spies, who knows. Then when the wind is right, she will fly. She needs to start wanting something else, and she has to start now, or she will plummet beak first, landing with a small "poof," the way it happens in cartoons when Road Runner leaps but never dies.