

Come Dance With Me

Call me F-Rasquita, with a hyphen. I am a Pi-Do and proud. Like most Pi-Dos I love eating, sleeping, and tumbling in the grass. But sleep time is dreamtime. And after my favorite dinner of pea-shoots and shiitake mushrooms, I dream that I am on the stage of the world-famous San Panchito Ballet. I am Margot Fonteyn and Rudolf Nureyev—yes, both of them—Margot all svelte grace in pink tutu and pointe shoes, and Rudy devouring the stage in panther leaps.

Moi, La F-Rasquita de San Panchito, am not burdened by the classic lean and hungry ballet physique. I am strong and handsome, not scrawny and pretty. My haunches are well-shaped and muscular, and my legs taper most attractively into trim trotters. I've been told my facial features are “interesting” and have taken that as a compliment.

I yearn to make my dreams come true. Not easy for a Pi-Do. Some of you may be wondering what the heck a Pi-Do is. Depending on your point of view, a Pi-Do is an abomination or an idea whose time has come. We are biogenetic creations, hybrid pig-dogs designed to be intelligent pets or tasty meat products. Not long ago our post test-tube lives were miserable. We were crowded into kennels and sold off to the highest bidder. More often than not we ended up on the dinner menu once the novelty wore off.

A few of us escaped and launched the PLF, Pi-Do Liberation Front. PLF activists broke us out of the kennels and fought to shut the labs down. Thousands of freed infant hybrids of various combinations were rehabilitated and eventually established with foster parents. Then began the real work. The THs (Totally Humans) felt obliged to “domesticate, socialize, and instill decent morals” into us creatures with the human-like brains and “raw animal instincts.” Their motto: “Guide them out of the kennels and into the American mainstream.” The American

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mainstream periphery that is, with its murky edges and borders. We hybrids were clearly the “other,” the latest not-quite-welcome asylum seekers.

San Panchito became the flagship city for the SBRR (Sentient Being Rescue and Rehabilitation) communities. At age nine I was placed with Antigone and Arturo Hill, an elderly childless couple.

The Hills were kind, liberal, and righteously proud of their work with the SBRR. Combined TH and hybrid efforts had successfully lobbied Congress and forced BS (Big Science) to cease the bio-engineering of sentient organisms.

Sure, we hybrid babes have come a long way. And I hate to sound ungrateful, but my foster parents were clueless about what makes a Pi-Do tick.

They tried to make me over. “To help you fit in, honey,” explained Antigone.

Arturo wanted to crop my silky ears and bleach the brown spots off my fur: “Cause you look too much like an old hound dog.”

And my eyes were too small. “But we can fix that with eyeliner and mascara,” mused Anti.

“That snout has got to go—too much oink-oink,” hooted Art, slapping his thigh. Anti stifled a giggle but Art was on a roll: “Those hooves need one hell of a pedicure!” They were both guffawing by then.

“I’d rather go back to the kennels and end up as a Sunday roast!” I sobbed with fury, not hurt feelings. “Wonder what the PLF would think of your plans.”

“Okay, okay, you win, sweetie,” said Anti soothingly.

“Just trying to make life easier for you,” muttered Art.

They enrolled me in an “eclectic” school run by the Mistresses of Notre Dame. I proved a

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quick learner but “lazy” and slogged into my teens—a normal kid with self-image issues. I still dreamed and in my dreams I danced better than ever, my satin-covered trotters hardly touching ground as I spun and leapt, nailing one perfect pirouette after another. Oh, and I was stunning, too, in my snug, rhinestone-trimmed bolero, red and black layered tutu, and sleek leggings.

I admit I was a challenge for even the most open-minded THs. I refused to train for factory, hospitality, or low-level tech jobs. I was reading and telling myself stories, making up songs and dance routines before I left the kennels. But I couldn't sit still in class and hated homework. My hybrid brain wanted excitement—novels, poetry, mathematical equations, philosophical discussions. My hybrid body wanted to soar, to plié and pirouette and jeté across the universe. I watched the Fonteyn-Nureyev vids thousands of times. I studied and practiced every move.

Moi, La F-Rasquita with a hyphen, took to the stage—the closed lid of the toilet—in the privacy of the locked bathroom. Keeping my core tight and curly tail pointed down, I stretched into an arabesque and checked my form in the medicine cabinet mirror. I then relevéed onto tippy trotter, my sinewy neck long, my arms a graceful extension of my taut body. The mirror acknowledged my odd beauty—more like a rough-hewn elegance.

I just needed a few formal ballet classes to refine my technique. The Hills weren't getting it.

They signed me up for gymnastics, folk-dancing, Zumba, and hip-hop—all lots of fun. My P.E. teacher, Mister Agnes George, thought I had the natural build of a wrestler. But my soul, my passion, demanded classical training. By age fifteen I had worn them all down.

Anti Hill and I rode the train downtown to San Panchito Dancewear. I picked out lime-green tights, matching leotard, and a chartreuse mini-tutu. The skinny, saucer-eyed clerk refused

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to fit me for pointe shoes. “We don’t want you to hurt yourself, dear. Let’s just wait and see how your classes go.” Instead she brought out a pair of vegan slippers in a weird shade she called “nude.” Yecch—why not just call it light pink or rose?

Anyway, I was set to begin my ballet career. I gave Anti a big, happy hug and dreamed my best dream ever that night. My name in bright lights: “Featuring the One and the Only F-Rasquita with a Hyphen in a role made famous by Margot Fonteyn—and Rudolf Nureyev.”

And then...and then...at last, my big moment. My first classical ballet class—strict Vaganova technique—at the highly respected Madame Tallulah Academy of Dance. I was ready. All the ballet vids, all that memorized French terminology. The hours of practice in front of the mirror.

The payoff was now.

I ignored the smirks and whispers as I took my place at the barre. I’d show them.

It was going according to plan until I dipped into my first grand plié. Letting my knees sink lower, lower, and deeper, my eyes closed dreamily to the piano accompaniment (*Giselle*, was it?). I let go of the barre for a nanosecond, started wobbling, and couldn’t stop. I toppled backward, smack into the girl behind me. She rammed into the girl behind her, who knocked over the next one. The last girl hit the floor hard on her rear and started wailing. The other students gaped. The accompanist burst out laughing. Madame Tallulah flung herself on top of me, screaming in Russian and English, “You abominable, stupid, ugly ANIMAL,” spraying mint-scented spit all over my new outfit. I stumbled upright, slipped once, twice, and finally scrambled up and out the door. My legs started running, kept running until they hit the cool, soft sands of Ocean Beach.

Discovering I Am Not Alone

I lurched onto Ocean Beach, plunged through the thick dunes, sliding and sinking on the wet sand. An icy wave crashed over my knees, then slammed thrillingly into my chest. I was breathless but wonderfully alive. The rhythm was hypnotic, welcoming. Sea water at my neck, my ears skimming the foam.

Who-oo-o-sh!! The sands skittered, then swept my trotters out from under me. I was fully submerged. But I flailed and scrambled upright and lunged forward, sobbing and laughing. Then a sudden, sharp tug, followed by a nip in my haunch. I kicked it away. Back to the waves—my friends. “Don’t stop,” they crooned. “Don’t stop.”

“YEOW!!!”

Something viciously sharp had bitten my left trotter.

“SHARK!!!”

Terrified, I rolled my eyes back at the Big White about to devour me. But, but...it was a medium...brown and black.

A dog? Or a sorta dog, judging by ears and muzzle.

From a watery distance I heard: “Good girl, Lulu! Reel ’er in.”

I fought furiously but this Lulu thing just huffed and snorted and dragged me through slithery sand against the pull of waves and a nasty undertow. Midst pummeling arms it flashed on me: “I don’t want to drown.” And let Lulu do her job.

I got dumped face down, hard. Gasping, spitting out snootfuls of sand, I was staring at a pair of pink flip-flops and brown toes with chipped magenta polish. Next to me the big dog thing was on its side, wheezing and heaving and coughing up sprays of sandy snot.

“You okay, chica?”

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My raw eyeballs traveled from the toes to a long peasant skirt, loose white tee shirt, big, low-hanging bosoms, and a stocky frame. Finally I reached a brown face with a purple goatee, ponytailed gray hair, and friendly dark eyes—a Memme (definition: any/all/no gender person).

“Que paso out there, chica? Lucky for you La Lulu es muy fuerte. She’s part Pit—won’t let go once she’s got hold of you.” Their face cracked into a proud, sweaty smile as they patted the massive head next to me. La Lulu shrugged bulging shoulders modestly and thumped the fluffy tuft of a tail on the sand.

I opened my snout to say thanks and threw up all over the Memme’s magenta toes. I started shivering.

The Memme wiped their feet on a dune.

“No more questions, chica. Let’s get you dry before you catch la grippe. We’re just across the Great Highway. You drink oolong tea? Bueno. Vamos. Hang on to La Lulu. She’s muy solida.” Another proud grin.

Hoisted upright by my rescuers, I found myself in front of a tiny pink-and-orange house. They led me through the garage into a narrow turquoise-painted bathroom and tossed in a couple of towels. “Pass me that como se llama and your other wet stuff.”

“It’s a tutu,” I managed through chattering teeth.

“Whatever. I’ll rinse and throw them in the dryer.”

The Memme’s worried face peeked in—“Estas bien, chica?” I nodded with my bravest smile.

Their grin was big and happy. “Kettle’s on!” they bellowed. “You like Kombucha cookies? By the way, me llamo Marisol.”

Not long after, I found myself warm and dry in a white tee that had a cow wearing

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sunglasses and love beads on the front. “Make love, not steak,” said the cow.

There was a third person at the table, an older Asian lady. She smiled and patted the chair next to her.

“That’s La Chinita, one of the family.”

La Chinita beamed at me and winked, and I took the seat beside her. Marisol poured steaming, golden liquid from a blue-and-white teapot into aqua-colored flamingo mugs. Their long, pink necks were the handles—that tickled me. I sipped the hot tea and munched my cookie, suddenly bashful.

La Lulu belched and dropped her big head with a sheepish smirk. We all cracked up. “Y tu, chica? What do we call you?”

“M-my name is F-Rasquita. With a hyphen. I like hyphens.”

“Hey, hyphens are cool. Used them a few times myself.”

“Pleased to meet you.” I looked around the table and felt content. Silence except for slurps and crunches.

“You have a place to stay?”

“Oh, yes, I live with my guardians. They take good care of me. Oh, and they’re probably worried that I’m not back from class.” Anxious now, “Thank you so much, but I have to get home.”

“Hey, no problem. You sure you’re okay? Lulu, check the dryer, por favor.”

“Oh yes, I feel s-s-o much better. Um-m-m, I was just daydreaming, wasn’t trying to, you know...” Heads bobbed around the table. “Muchas gracias,” I concluded in my best high school Spanish.

“De nada. You’re welcome any time in our casita. Tea kettle’s always on. And if you

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ever need a place to stay...”

“Thank you, muchas gracias, but I really better go.” With that I dashed out the door in my clean, dry things, back to the Hills, my normal human family, to their cold, stern but kindly ways and the loneliness of my book-crowded room. I knew there were others like me. Where were they?

On the long ride home, I looked around me. Everyone was different—different size, color, shape, language. I noticed several blended families with their lively mix of children. I thought about Marisol and Lulu and La Chinita. They belonged together. Who did I belong with?

No! No more feeling sorry for myself. The Hills had given me a normal life, and I would not be ungrateful.

As I slunk in through the back door, I met Anti—her worry-wrinkled face and sad eyes. She didn’t ask where I’d been. I’m sure Madame Tallulah had described every awful detail.

But moi, I was nonchalant. I calmly informed Anti that, “Ballet’s not for me. It’s boring and old school.” I marched off to my room, carefully took off my beautiful dance outfit and found some bright-pink tissue paper to wrap it in. Then I tucked it under the bed, next to my outgrown clothes and toys.

My focus was henceforth school and homework.

I continued to ride the L train several times a week. I loved the long, meandering trip and the companionship of my fellow riders. And ending up at my favorite place in the world, Ocean Beach. I would take the path running parallel to the beach and the Great Highway. From the path I could pick out the tiny, pink-and-orange house. Seeing it brought back nice memories, but I never stopped in for a cup of tea.

La Chinita

A Sunday afternoon a month or two later, I was riding the L Taraval as usual to the ocean. Out the train window I saw the sky glowing yellow, then orange with purple, swirly clouds. I sensed eyes on me and got set to glare back at them. But it was La Chinita sitting across the aisle. She smiled and pointed outside. “We’re lucky to live here, huh?” I smiled back and nodded. Next thing La Chinita was perched next to me, staring hard. I shifted back on the plastic seat.

“You dance, huh?”

Oh, that. “Nope. Too busy. Have to study hard, get a scholarship to Diversity U. Can’t stay with my foster folks forever. Anyway, ballet is so artificial. Boring, actually.” I stuck out my chin and firmly pointed it out the window.

“H-m-mm.”

I got off at 46th Avenue and headed toward the beach. I took the path. La Chinita was right behind me, shouldering several full bags. Then we were walking side by side. We walked against the cool breeze, taking in ocean and crazy-colored sky and pelicans flying over us in vee formation. La Chinita stopped at the garbage bins to pick out plastic bottles and cans and stuff them in her bags. I was in no hurry. It felt good to not walk alone.

After a while La Chinita began her story. She was born in Chinatown at Chinese Hospital. Her parents were immigrants, working two and three jobs each. She was the oldest and in charge of her younger four brothers and three sisters. She talked about growing up in San Panchito in the 1950s. Trying hard to fit in. How lonely she felt attending a high school outside of Chinatown. The hostile looks she got from the other students.

And La Chinita described the day she met Marisol and Lulu on the L train. She was

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heading home from the Civic Center Farmers' Market. They got on at the Safeway stop, loaded with groceries. Lulu had a bulging backpack while Marisol lugged a couple of large, overstuffed paper bags. One bag was split at the bottom and trickling oil.

“Marisol had this guilty look on their face. Turns out they'd snuck half a roasted chicken into the shopping cart while Lulu, ‘a strict vegan, mind you,’ was sniffing the melons. Chicken smells filled the train car. Folks started looking in our direction. Marisol was getting panicky as the grease oozed over the floor. Meanwhile Lulu concentrated on her Freddy the Pig novel and shifted one seat over.

“Luckily I caught Marisol's eye and passed them one of my big pink bags. The two of us—quiet as we could—wrestled the ripped paper one into the plastic one. Then we started giggling while Lulu stuck her muzzle deeper into that book. Turns out those two were planning a big end-of-summer picnic on the beach that afternoon. Marisol invited me along. We had quite a feast that day—especially when Lulu wasn't looking!!!”

La Chinita and I strolled a while more in silence. Suddenly she turned and grabbed my sleeve.

“What if I told you there's a ballet school where you won't get bored? A school where all are welcome and a teacher who will believe in you?”

“Sounds like a fantasy tale.”

We walked a few more steps.

“So how do you know about this place?”

La Chinita grinned and started fumbling through one of her plastic bags. She yanked out a gray cloth sack, and then motioned me to peek inside.

“No way!!”

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I looked again.

La Chinita made like an old-time magician and whipped out a pair of worn, dirty-pink ballet slippers. I swear my jaw was touching my toes.

“Because I take ballet there. Other teachers told me I was too old, too slow. Sally showed me they’re wrong. Hey, F-Rasquita with a hyphen—come dance with me. Next Sunday. Sally’s Intro to Dance class. Always best to start with the basics. What do you say?”

I just goggled at La Chinita. Was she messing with me? Then I looked at the slippers—same size as her beat-up Mary Janes.

“Maybe... Where’s this place?”

La Chinita’s whole body shook, laughing. “Odd Fellows Building. And rightly so.”

We stood and watched the last of the sunset and made plans for the following Sunday. Then I took the L back home.

Moi, La F-Rasquita with a Hyphen, Resume my Ballet Career

At 9:45 a.m. the following Sunday, I squeezed myself into the rickety old elevator in the Odd Fellows Building, La Chinita grinning beside me. We got out at the fifth floor—the Alfonzo Lion Dance School. I was all shaky signing in, surrounded by so many excited, chattering voices.

Next thing I was lined up at the barre before a wall of mirrors. Carefully I raised my eyes from my feet to find the most amazing array of people—human, hybrid, gendered, non-gendered, rainbow-colored, young, old, and in-between, wildly different outfits, bare feet, pointe shoes, socks, slippers--all stretching and practicing and greeting one another.

And then, this twinkly-eyed, dimpled woman duck-walked to the front. She looked us

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over, hands on her sturdy hips. Uh-oh.

“First rule in my class: No frowns. They scare me. Second rule: Don’t look down at your feet—I haven’t lost a pair yet. Now...take a deep breath. And look up. Find that gorgeous person in the mirror who looks just like you. Smile at them. Tell them, ‘Hi, beautiful!’ Now—show me some attitude!”

I grinned happily at Moi—La F-Rasquita with a hyphen—and at La Chinita pliéing next to me. One-and-a-half hours flew. It was hard work and the best fun ever! La Chinita looked as pooped as I felt. She casually mentioned that Lulu and Marisol were waiting for us, fixing us a special lunch. I was too excited to go back to my room at the Hills’. So off we went on our favorite train. Lunch was bok choy and noodles followed by oatmeal raisin cookies and Tulsi tea. Gosh, I was hungry!

Lulu belched and fixed her slightly crossed eyes on mine. She growled shyly. Marisol leaned in eagerly. “Yeah, so how was your class?”

So I told them. Lulu and Marisol shook their heads, woofing and cackling and clapping their hands.

“Show us!”

I turned to La Chinita. She winked. Next thing, we had jumped onto the kitchen floor and begun showing off our graceful port de bras, tendus, and ronde de jambes, mixing in a few tango and cha-cha-cha moves to match the beats coming out of the radio. La Chinita caught her breath while I capped the performance with a flurry of improvised pirouettes. Our audience went wild as we took our well-earned bows.

Oh, it was good to be a Pi-Do.

And have friends.

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And a dancing partner.

THE END