

THE LOOKING GLASS

MELODY GRAVES

I never thought the simple sound of a woman's voice could raise my soul from the dead.

She stands only four feet eleven inches and resembles a lovely china figurine, dressed in lavish silk, resplendent in jewels. Her eyes, Spanish coals of blackened heat, entice me; her long tresses draw me to her moorings.

I must tell you her name. Breath of my breath, keeper of my soul. My angel and my demon. My sacrament and my damnation: Violetta.

Her plummy lips mouth a sweet "o" of ecstasy as her voice rises with her bosom. This voice, the breath of God, indiscriminate in its transcendence, blankets me with holy manna. How does this sound nourish, when it is merely a chimera?

Voice, the badge of the elect, how we rise above our animal brethren. Voice, which makes us human, yet enables our blasphemy. Voice, which now commands the Holy of Holies, all that—

"Pardon me, sir, do you mind terribly putting away your journal?" the man whispers. I glance up at him, his face a dim silhouette against the stage lights illuminating his earlobe.

"Yes, of course. I'm sorry to disturb you."

The man nods and turns toward center stage, where she stands. But the moment is too perfect, and I must finish my sentence.

Voice, which now commands the Holy of Holies, all that I am and all that is in me. Fairest Eve, seductress of the ages, how can I resist you?

The man next to me coughs pointedly into his kerchief.

Yes, yes I'm putting it away now.



IT IS MY FIFTH TIME to the opera. God only knows what profession I would have chosen had I been aware of the treasure trove that lies within these

hallowed, velvet halls. But now I have been reduced to sneaking about like a common criminal, tasting a life that will never be mine. In my shaky hands I cradle Mrs. Johnston's opera glasses, scrabbling for the knob to focus the image until I realize the lens is reversed. Fortunately, Miss Bianchi has enchanted the rest of the audience, and no one pays attention to my ineptitude.

What can I say about this divine voice, singing *La Traviata* tonight, except that it defies all literary description? I float through the performance as a sleepwalker might; the waking dream suffuses my soul with such lightness, I could have mistaken my fellow patrons for the Heavenly Hosts. As the house lights rise, my neighbor acknowledges me, and his face turns peevish.

"Oh, pardon me, Father. I did not realize I'm terribly sorry for being such a nuisance earlier this evening. I would not have disturbed you had I known you were a member of the clergy."

I bow, accepting the pretense in good sport, and flash my journal, embossed with a cross, so he will see it. I cannot help but smile, fiendishly glad to see him in such discomfort.

"How long is it since you've been to church?"

"Er, well, I don't really know. It's my work, you see, keeps me so busy I scarcely have time to go to Sunday services. . . ." He falters off, his rotund face resembling a beet with a grayish tuft.

"You know, God always has time for you."

"Indeed. Oh, dear, where has my wife gone off to? Very nice meeting with you. Good night."

Something cold brushes past me. Perhaps it is the insidious winter air blowing in from the street through the open doors of the opera hall. I cast my cloak over my shoulders and follow the path of the red spongy carpet to the performers' entrance. The door, made of fine mahogany and burnished to a deep coffee sheen imposes, a locked monolith. Other patrons scatter the halls, murmuring in half-tones like the rustle of dried leaves in the breeze. I am alone. Or am I? My fingers grasp the silver cross I have hidden in the pocket of my cloak.

The musty, kiln-dried aroma of tobacco smoke envelops my head, and the door opens. My cross burns in the flesh of my palm. Tighter I hold it. Tighter. It is my only weapon, rendered as melted wax under the torch of her gaze.

Violetta is radiant, wearing the dressing gown of her costume for the Third Act. She still wears stage makeup, but it melds with the purity of her complexion and contrasts the smoldering curve of her brow.

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“Father McIntyre, how nice to see you again so soon. I trust you enjoyed the performance?” She extends a hand to me. I plant a chaste kiss on it, but I fear I linger too long savoring the sweetness of her.

“Miss Bianchi, your singing is pure genius. Are you certain that an angel does not reside within you and perform the music in your stead?”

She laughs, the lilt of her voice mimicking the skips of my heart. “What an original form of flattery! I see the clergy has not diminished your ability to tickle a woman’s ears.” She swings the door wide, allowing me to pass, and my sleeve brushes against her naked arm. Oh dear God above, help me.

The rehearsal room is spacious. Singers cluster around a small pianoforte, laughing and chattering, milky-white drinks in hand. What is this? Upon the ebony mantle of the instrument rests a shapely glass decanter, half-filled with an emerald green liquid. Absinthe, drink of the Bohemians, jeweled inspiration in a bottle.

“Would you like a taste?” Violetta asks, noting my keenness for the decanter.