

# **The Testimony of Usher 22**

BY

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THESIS

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## SUMMARY

Dissertation project *The Testimony of Usher 22* is a novel that explores and subverts the subgenre of “opera novel” — the works of fiction in which opera occupies a significant part, both thematically and structurally. While the majority of these works tend to focus on the world of opera “producers” — singers, orchestra musicians, stage directors, conductors, and composers, this novel seeks to bring the most neglected character in the category of “opera novel” to the fore — the audience. Not infrequently, audience is presented in opera novels as a unified body whose participation in the plot is limited to expressions of delight or fear at what is happening on stage. This project, on the other hand, intends to make the viewer’s perception and understanding of the opera and classical music an integral part of the novel’s plot.

There are two protagonists in this novel: JB who works as an usher at the Metropolitan Opera and Sally, one of the Metropolitan Opera regulars. Sally’s ever growing obsession with opera leads to the tragic consequences: during the performance she becomes so annoyed with a noisy member of the audience that she gets into a physical altercation with him. As a result of the fall, the man dies, and Sally is charged with involuntary manslaughter. Because the reader learns about the murder at the Met (a common trope of the “opera novel”) early, the obsession that drives Sally to commit the crime becomes the main driver for the narrative. Similarly to other authors who focused on the limits of operatic obsession and were committed to portraying the audience, the novel presents a wide panorama of opera lovers as dynamic well-rounded characters with flaws and sympathetic characteristics.

## Fantasy Opera Season Archive I

[www.fantasyoperaseason.com/archives](http://www.fantasyoperaseason.com/archives)

### “Accident at the Met”

February 16, 2014. Posted by LaDivina

We have just been informed that a horrific accident took place in the family circle tonight during the performance of the double bill of Cavalleria and Pagliacci. According to the information that is available to us so far, there was an altercation between patrons: a woman pushed a man who fell over the ledge above the entrance. The man was taken to the hospital, and the woman was arrested. The performance was halted for about thirty minutes, but then resumed.

UPDATE: Alas, the man, whose identity yet remains unknown, died in hospital upon arrival. Let the media carnage commence.

**Comments:**

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02/16/2014

**operakid\_25:** That sounds truly horrible! Did anyone here go to the performance tonight?

**LaDivina:** I thought about asking in the post, but then I figured it is very unlikely any of the fantasy opera patrons went to see this mediocre cast in this already problematic production. Unless Mauran’s voice has overnight become ten years younger, then of course, we all should have been there.

**TheRenaissanceMan:** Actually, if one followed the Met’s announcements more attentively, one would know that Mauran cancelled tonight because of a cold.

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** Oh really? So did Master Peter pull a surprise stunt of some kind, or they allowed the understudy to sing for a change?

**LaDivina:** If I cared for this production more, then I would have known about Mauran’s illness, but I happen to have a life, believe it or not. Moreover, I doubt that even a fresh-voiced understudy could do much for this uneven Cavalleria. And I don’t think Salvare’s interpretation of Tonio changed much since the last time I saw it.

**TheRenaissanceMan:** Surprisingly, I agree with you on this one. If it were for me to decide, I would have forbidden any production of verismo operas which attempts to update them. They belong to the time period they were written in.

**Gerry-flapper2.0:** And here we go, back to “I hate Regie-theater so so much” moaning again.

**TheRenaissanceMan:** Go on, prove to me that this production’s updating makes sense.

**Gerry-flapper2.0:** I am not in the mood for proving anything to anyone. I’ll just say it works for this Pagliacci, and you know perfectly well that the problems of Cavalleria

have more to do with the way stage space is utilized.

**TheRenaissanceMan:** But you too know perfectly well that the reason for it is the director's need to show everyone that he can too do conceptual productions. Too bad that the only concept for this opera that has worked so far is staying true to the text.

**Gerry-flapper2.0:** Okay, fine, we have had way too many identical arguments about this. I will stay quiet from there on.

**LaDivina:** Speaking of quiet, it is so unusual to see Gerry fighting Regie-theater hatred without her valorous partner in arms on her side.

**Gerry-flapper2.0:**

You're right. Can't wait for my gal

**quiet\_leonora** to show up, because she'd be so disappointed if she missed the umpteenth reiteration of the same traditionalist argument, so incredibly exciting and new.

**TheRenaissanceMan:** I've had enough for the day. I'll come back later to see if there are more updates on the accident. Enjoy your little Regie fan fest while you could, because it will destroy opera sooner or later.

**LaDivina:** Bona sera, darling! Do not rush to come back — our Regie fan fest might take a while.

02/17/2014

**Madame\_Viardot:** I was there, but we were in the dress circle.

**LaDivina:** Pauline, dear, you went to see THIS production in the dress circle? Are you feeling well?

**Madame\_Viardot:** Ha :). I know, I know, of course I would have never bought dress circle tickets to see this one, but my in-laws are in town, and I promised my wife to entertain them because my credit of solitary Met visits was running low. The in-laws are not that picky when it comes to cultural events. It was either this or some musical I have never heard about, and even then, I had to do some

coaxing by emphasizing the glitz and glamour of the grand opera — hence the dress circle. I didn't think they could handle anything more complicated than this, and I was right. They did fine with Cavalleria, but the halt of the performance right after “Vesti la giubba”, however symbolic for those in the know, did not work well for the newbies.

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** That's when the accident happened?

**Madame\_Viardot:** Well, I don't know when exactly because they did not stop the performance right away. There was a scream coming from the family circle, but it was also the end of the aria, so there was a long applause, and I guess it drowned the initial response to whatever happened up there. They even tried to continue the opera right away, but the family circle was too noisy, so they dropped the curtain, announced an emergency intermission, and that the performance would resume soon. In about twenty minutes the bells were ringing. My in-laws completely lost their ability to focus by then — all they wanted to know was what happened. I almost snapped when my sister-in-law took out a phone while the performance was already going. In all fairness, everybody was shaken and was waiting for the opera to come to the end as fast as it was possible considering the tempo. Tonio was killing Nedda with this “do I really have to?” attitude. What a pity, especially since Zalvare had very good energy tonight. That “Vesti” aria was really, really good. Very real. If the opera continued without interruptions, I might have even cried in front of my judgey in-laws. I guess I was saved by the fall, sorry for macabre humor.

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** Since we are at it — could you enlighten us on Master Peter's decision re: substitute for Mauran? Did he convince Monastyraska to sing for one night? What not to like — costumes are simple, production is static as hell, no excessive use of bronzer required?

**Madame\_Viardot:** It was the understudy. I have never seen her before. Her name is Tracy Cantin, I think. She was quite good — the voice definitely beats Mauran's, no pitchiness and very solid middle, but probably the nerves got her, because acting was a bit forced.

**Loge:** According to my sources, the man died in hospital soon upon arrival.

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** That's not good. Not that it wasn't bad before, but now the woman is in serious trouble.

**LaDivina:** I'll update the post. Thank you for the information!

**Germont-pere:** He died? If they were on the row above the exit, that's still not that much of a fall. What do they not tell us? Did she stab him, or something?

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** Let's not allow our operatic sensibilities affect our perception of reality too much. The distance of several feet is enough for a person to have a lethal fall. I have seen quite a number of those cases in my practice. Human bodies break in mysterious ways. No need to stab anyone.

**Gerry-flapper2.0:** Oh my goodness. My condolences to the man's family and friends.

**Loge:** The name of the woman is Sally Shepard.

## Chapter 1

### Usher

Season 2013-2014, March 7th

When JB put on his usher uniform, he always took some time to clean and adjust his badge. It read "Metropolitan Opera. Usher 22." He enjoyed the anonymity of the Met's usher badges: in most places they displayed the usher's name, but until recently Met's badges were the safe haven of numbers — 14, 57, 96. His was particularly cool. Two and two. Numbers which contained identical digits had finality, roundness, wholesomeness. In addition, this one was reminiscent of the novel, which very few had read, but everybody heard of. JB read it because one of his professors at community college suggested it would help him better process his experiences in the army. Despite the novel's incredibly slow start, it turned out pretty good in the end. So when JB became an usher, he was pleased to discover two and two on his badge.

About a year ago, Met's management decided to add names to the badges of the full-time ushers. JB's theory was that an audience member, a donor or even a Board member, most likely, got offended by the absence of possibility to talk to an usher while using a condescending diminutive of their name. JB fought the first attempt of his supervisor to add his name to the badge successfully, but he knew that the days of his anonymous badge were numbered.

What his supervisor refused to understand was that a person with JB's name would definitely prefer to be distinguished from his colleagues by a number. In his teenage years when his peers were perfecting their teasing and nicknaming skills, he was the ultimate target: the

Whiskey Boy, the Alco, the Bottle, Booze were only the tip of the iceberg for the roster of his nicknames.

“Why?” he asked his parents multiple times, “why did you think that calling me James was such a good idea? When you paired that name with the last name, didn’t you for a second stop and think, huh, doesn’t this sound too much like a whiskey? Is it a good idea to call my son Jim Beam?”

His mom would listen patiently and quietly remark afterwards:

“You are James, not Jim. That’s different.”

His father would be less patient and would usually interrupt JB in the middle of his rant with a stern “If you don’t like it, you can change it when you grow up.”

JB was planning to do so. As his second name was “Nicholas”, he was entertaining the idea of being “Nick Beam”, which was also not the best variant, but at least excluded endless bourbon jokes. When the time came, however, JB’s plan never realized: JB detested bureaucracy and was too lazy to deal with it. He was also too busy going through a teenage self-destruction phase: he skipped school hanging out with his buddies, smoking pot, and drinking cheap beer mixed with the cheapest liquor they could find. He ran away from home several times. He would last for a month, then return, and then in a month disappear again. It continued till his father kicked him out for good. JB did not know what else to do and, in the end, got enlisted in the army. After the army, changing the name seemed even a bigger drag, and then, as his life started to spin faster and faster, name change became something to contemplate once in a while and never do.

JB was putting on the uniform for the evening performance of “Werther.” He liked this opera a lot, but tonight he was dreading it: “Werther” had two intermissions which meant that lots of regular patrons who usually stopped by to chat with him between the acts would definitely try



to talk to him about “the accident” — even though the patron’s fall was not that accidental, since the girl pushed him, it seemed like everybody at the Met had unanimously decided to call it that way.

The story of the accident had already made it everywhere. It probably wouldn’t have been that bad, but social networks continued to fuel the fire. “Murder in the Met” had been “trending” on Facebook only for a day right after the accident, but that was enough to attract attention of what seemed like the whole world. The media sensationalized the accident, savoring every gory detail of it, quoting witnesses who preferred to remain unnamed and who exaggerated the sound of the fall and the moans of the man who fell. It was not important why the accident happened, what mattered instead was the fact that it happened: the excitement of violence, the titillation of imagining the body falling down.

And of course, nearly every newspaper presented an account of the previous deaths in the Met. The most similar one happened in late eighties when an old man killed himself by falling from the Family Circle all the way down to the first floor of the orchestra. JB knew an usher who was working in the theater that night. He said he was not one of those who approached the old man sitting on a railing rocking back and forward, but he saw clearly from his corner that the old man leaned back with force and then there was no one on the railing and the screams started filling the house. It was during the second intermission of “Macbeth.”

Somebody must be really tired of life not to finish watching that opera, thought JB. The truth was that the old man tried to do it during the first intermission too, but the two ushers pulled him from the railing. The witness-usher who told JB his memory said that after the accident those poor ushers swore they did not suspect that the old man wanted to commit suicide. They thought he was just old and confused. Old he was, sure, 82, but clearly not confused. Or at least,

determined enough. He was a voice coach. Some of the more cynical ushers joked that it was probably the singing that forced the old man to plunge.

That story and the story of the murder of the violinist by the stagehand, and all non-violent deaths were brought to light by the newspapers. Not that it meant particularly good reporting, smiled JB wryly. Anyone could know that if they bothered to read ‘wikipedia’ entry on the Met till the end. To think of it, “deaths at the Met” was a separate paragraph in the entry. And now that paragraph was going to become a sentence or two longer. JB wondered, if they had already updated the entry. There had to be some obsessed Met opera fan out there, who read about what happened in newspapers, and immediately set out to edit the existing text.

JB finished adjusting the bow-tie and checked the time. It was still thirty minutes before people would start pouring in. He had the time either to linger in the resting room or to take a quick look behind the stage, something he indulged in once in a while. This day, he took a stack of newspapers which he brought with him to work: he wanted to sit undisturbed by other ushers, because he felt especially tired this day, and the opera was on the longer side — nearly four hours.

That meant a lot of standing and remaining alert, but for him standing was by no means a strenuous activity. Sitting down and standing up, carrying heavy objects were much worse for his legs and his arms, so when he, initially a stagehand, was offered to become an usher, he gladly agreed. He still sometimes worked as a stagehand part-time, but his predominant occupation was ushering. He liked being an usher: it required a transformation. As a stagehand, he was himself, in his old battered jeans and a T-shirt with some cryptic, potentially funny message. Working as an usher meant dressing up in a suit. Ushers were required to wear dresspants. Cuffs and lapels of their jackets were made of dark maroon velvet which shimmered and changed colors under the light.

He also liked to be alert in the crowd. He liked watching people. He liked watching the same opera over and over again. “Don’t you get bored?” sometimes people would ask. He never felt like he was bored.

Even mere leafing through newspapers was enough to understand that the media was not letting the accident to sink into oblivion. JB became upset. He pushed the papers aside and walked out of the resting room. It was nearly the time to go upstairs, to his station at the left entry to the lower level of the Family Circle. After the accident he was offered to switch his space for another level, “to clear the head” as the manager phrased it, but JB refused.

“I will be fine, just fine. Remember, I’ve been in the army.” he told the manager.

“Oh yes, right.” nodded the manager, and it was quite obvious that the manager had totally forgotten and now felt guilty for not remembering it.

For some reason, everybody thought JB to be the Iraq vet, but he wasn’t. He got his discharge around the same time when his division was deployed to Iraq. People who knew him would often say that he was lucky. But JB knew he was not. Where was his so-called luck when the humvee he was driving at not more than 60 miles per hour overturned? While his injury earned him life-long healthcare and a small disability check every month, it was an accident. Accident absolutely not worthy of a purple heart, even though JB had read somewhere that people would get purple hearts for the most insignificant wounds received in combat.

All metal that JB got as a result of his accident was in the rods that now held his wrists and neck and one of the legs together. They did create some noise for him, but it was the noise of metal detectors in the airport, and ever since his injury JB flew less because he hated the hassle of showing his scars and repeating the story of the injury to the TSA agents. Flying was not very comfortable anyway — sitting without moving made him ache. He preferred standing. Especially

if it was standing in the Family Circle near the stairs that led up to the rows of seats located above.

His position for the night was near the railing. He gave out programs and directed people to the seats on the right and on the left of him. Almost all seats in the first two or three rows in the Family Circle were bought by the subscribers. He couldn't remember if Schaeffers usually came on Thursdays or Fridays. Schaeffers were probably his most favorite regular old patrons. They were polite and funny, and there was something very sweet about the way they communicated with each other. Mr. Schaeffer knew quite a lot about opera and took pleasure in impressing JB with the list of the legendary singers and conductors he had heard live. At certain point, JB had learned them all, but continued to act impressed whenever Mr. Schaeffer felt like boasting. Mrs. Schaeffer listened to the stories of her husband with a kind smile, and once, had lingered near JB, as they were leaving and said quickly: "Thank you for being so patient with Mark. I know he gets repetitive, but he is pleased with your love of opera. None of our children likes opera, unfortunately, and that gets Mark upset, poor thing."

The people started to arrive in greater numbers. JB was getting close to the bottom of his stack of programs. Some of the regulars had already arrived: the two old men, one of them short and thin, the other tall and corpulent, sat in the aisle seats and had matching ties and handkerchiefs in breast pockets of their jackets. They always came together, but they almost never left together. The short and thin old man rarely stayed till the end of the performance. He left about five minutes before, which always puzzled JB, because it was hard to believe that such a short headstart could be of any advantage. It was not enough time to get to the parking lot for the car; it was probably too much time to catch a taxi, because the tall and corpulent old man was never in a hurry. He took his time applauding during the curtain call and never left till the curtain went down. Maybe the short and thin man had some kind of irrational fear of closures, thought

JB. Maybe, he loved the music so much that he could not bear the thought of it ending forever. Maybe, he felt compelled to leave the auditorium before the final phrases are played, so the music continued to play in his head, endless.

It was probably the only drawback of being an usher: he never had a chance to savor the ending moments of the opera. He could still hear them, but he had to switch back into his alertness mode, as a lot of people left right after the music ended, without staying for the curtain call, to catch a train or bus or for whatever else unconvincing, in JB's opinion, reason. There was no excuse, he believed, that could explain the need to rush. Since tonight's was "Werther", JB had no doubt that the short and thin old man will pull Cinderella as usual. There were probably three performances that JB and other ushers could remember the old man to stay till the end, and in at least one of those the old man did not leave only because he was not seated in the aisle seat.

The bell chimed the second time. JB looked over the rows at the front: Schaeffers' seats were the only two empty on the first row. "Good evening, Jimmy!" he heard and felt the relief rising inside his chest. Mrs. Schaeffer was climbing up the stairs slowly. Mr. Schaeffer was not with her. A young woman was waiting patiently behind while Mrs. Schaeffer conquered the steps, but it was hard to tell whether she was accompanying Mrs. Schaeffer or came on her own.

"Goodness, Jimmy, has the Met added more steps to these stairs? I swear last time I was here, there weren't that many steps. Tell the management, please, if they keep adding steps, I'm afraid I will have to relocate to the Orchestra, and you know how much I hate those stuffies" said Mrs. Schaeffer as she put her hand on the railing to steady herself.

JB laughed. The feud between the orchestra audience and the first rows of all higher levels was a known thing, and each group thought they were better, more open-minded, more devoted opera lovers.

“Good evening, Mrs. Schaeffer. I think you’re right, the stairs do feel steeper than usual tonight.” said JB. He really wanted to know if Mr. Schaeffer was okay, but he knew better not to ask those questions. In way too many cases with the regular patrons that meant the only thing, and it was not that much fun to learn that thing from a grieving spouse.

“Mark decided not to go out tonight, but don’t you worry, Jimmy, he is fine.” Mrs. Schaeffer conveniently answered his unvoiced question. “He’s not a big fan of the tenor, says his voice is too dark, but you know what — I think he’s just jealous because all women adore Kaufmann, and he doesn’t like to watch me adoring somebody else. You, men, are so self-centered!”

“We are, Mrs. Schaeffer. But since you mentioned it, I hope you brought your binoculars. If not, I might know a guy who can lend you those.”

Mrs. Schaeffer laughed.

“Oh thank you, Jimmy, it’s so thoughtful of you. But you know my rules — never go to a Kaufmann performance without binoculars. Especially today when I am bringing the novice.” She turned to the young woman behind her. “You will not regret having binoculars, Maddy, dear, Werther will be so handsome.”

Maddy smiled and nodded.

“Jimmy,” said Mrs. Schaeffer. “This is my neighbors’ granddaughter, Madlen. She has been very nice to us, old boring people next door, and so I offered to show her how old people have fun. Can you believe it — it’s her first opera! But don’t you worry, dear,” Mrs. Schaeffer turned to Maddy again. “You’ll like it: it’s about unrequited love, and you seem to know a thing or two about that.”

Maddy laughed: “Amanda!” and blushed a little.

The third bell chimed.

“Oh dear, we are late. It’ll take some time to have all those old people to stand up, when we get to our seats in the middle!” exclaimed Mrs. Schaeffer. “Sorry, Jimmy, we have to go, but I will chat with you later. You know, because things happened.”

JB nodded avoiding giving a clear affirmative answer. Of course, Schaeffers would want to talk about the accident: they were exactly the generation to read “The New York Times” as their only source of information, and the accident did make it there too. He looked at Mrs. Schaeffer and Maddy settling down in their seats. Maddy was probably in her early twenties, very pretty with big dark eyes and long wavy brown hair. JB could not believe she called Mrs. Schaeffer by her first name. Amanda? How could she be Amanda for her? She was nearly four times her age. “I am getting old,” thought JB. “In my late thirties I feel closer to Schaeffers than to Maddy’s generation.” JB felt a bit guilty for looking at Maddy and finding her attractive. It felt somehow inappropriate even though she was nowhere near being underage.

JB was not surprised it was her first opera. Very few people in early twenties went to the opera: if it hadn’t been for the student tickets, the crowd at certain performances would absolutely feel like a retirement home. JB himself was introduced to the opera when he was twenty-five. If anyone would have told him when he was joining the army that the interest in opera would be the main gain from his army years, he would have laughed in that person’s face. Yet, here he was: having listened to “Werther” countless number of times and feeling lucky that he would get one more chance to hear it live.

The chandeliers which some of the older subscribers called “sputniks” in respect to the cold war that they lived through and won slowly rose to the ceiling as the lights dimmed, indicating that the opera was about to start. For JB, they more than anything resembled sea urchins that a drunk designer genius decided to encrust with Swarovski crystals. In some of the

articles about the Met he saw an expression “supernova explosions” and incorporated it in his own vocabulary for the time when he wanted to sound sophisticated in conversations.

Not that those conversations happened often. Or rather, not that those conversations happened often outside his Met-related circle. The two people from high school he was still in contact with used to be into punk and heavy metal, and now were deep into married life and TV shows. He did not make many friends in college, because he was so much older than the rest of the kids. One of the professors whose classes on the history of classical music he audited kept in touch with him and would come to say hello whenever he would make it to the performance in the Met. There was an ex-girlfriend, or two, technically, because the second one was a rebound, but he did not understand that at the time, but none of them cared for opera. He brought the ex-girlfriend, the real one, not the rebound, to the opera once or twice, but the enterprise failed miserably, as the girl could not get past the exceptional corpulence of the singer in the title role.

“Just listen to her voice, Jess, she’s one of the most remarkable sopranos of our time!” implored JB, as the girl snorted at the singer’s attempts move lightly and carefree around the stage.

“I am sorry, honey, but the libretto describes her as a consumptive soon-to-die seamstress, and if this one dies on the stage, the cause of death is not going to be the consequence of malnourishment!” snapped the ex-girlfriend. During the intermission she continued to disparage the production’s casting choices, and JB stood at his post gloomily, trying not to listen.

What did she know about the casting choices! True, that particular soprano looked a bit too blooming with health and there was hardly anything consumptive about her appearance, but her delivery was stunning. If she did not look particularly delicate herself, her singing was as delicate as the fragile flowers that her character embroidered in her cold attic room somewhere near the top of the Montmartre hill. JB felt especially bummed, because he agonized over the



choice of “safe” opera to bring a novice to for weeks, and when he finally made his decision, because so many people had told him that there was no way for a human being not to love “La Boheme”, there he was with his witty, sharp-tongued girlfriend making fun of the smallest details in the performance which he did not even notice in his regular suspension of disbelief mode.

There was no such thing as a “safe” opera for beginners. JB had seen it all: people storming out of Mozart’s operas, because they thought his music was too easy and hence, stupid, people getting hooked on opera forever after accidentally buying tickets to a Wagner, people raising their brows at Verdi and refusing to comprehend everyone else’s admiration for him because it just did not do it for them, whatever that might have meant. Unless Maddy had some previous background in listening to classical music, Mrs. Schaeffer took quite a risk bringing her to “Werther.” It was very Massenet-like beautiful, but it was also long and could seem dragging to the unaccustomed listener.

From his seat, JB could more or less clearly discern Maddy and Mrs. Schaeffer sitting in the first row. The children whose carol singing lesson was opening the opera was already over, and since it was only a matter of minutes for the tenor to appear, Mrs. Schaeffer was holding the binoculars, poised to stare at Kaufmann without a break while he was on stage. JB wondered if she would be capable of sharing the binoculars with Maddy. Mrs. Schaeffer adored Kaufmann. To be fair, every woman in the audience adored Kaufmann. JB suspected that men who liked to grumble about darkness of Kaufmann’s voice and that the Met capitalized on his good looks way too much secretly adored him too, because he was as talented as he was handsome. And no one yet in the history of opera had made it to the top with just a pretty face. It was not possible, especially since the guard of critics were ready to jump at any singer whose mid-range notes seemed to quaver for a second during the performance.

The next time JB threw a furtive glance on Schaeffers' seats, Maddy had the binoculars. Kaufmann had been on the stage for about ten minutes, and JB decided that Mrs. Schaeffer, as a responsible indoctrinator, found in herself the strength and the generosity to pass the binoculars for the young woman's enjoyment. JB loved the first act: no other opera managed to convey the lightness of adolescent suffering and, at the same time, the foreboding that nothing would go right so accurately. Werther in contemporary times would be a hipster kid in tight jeans, composing gloomy conceptual poetry about suffering that he had never really experienced in coffee shops of Williamsburg. Thank god, JB thought, none of the directors, even those with the most inclination towards Eurotrash productions, had ever attempted such an update. JB in general was not in the camp of the staunch anti-Eurotrash opera lovers, but there were limits. And although JB knew that if most of the contemporary hipster kids bothered to read Goethe and went to the opera, they would find a lot to relate to, he dreaded the image of such Werther singing his heart out about nature and poetry and falling in love with Charlotte, a beautiful badass barista with a nose-ring and one trouser leg rolled up and her bike chained to a traffic light pole outside.

JB shook his head: boy, his mind was wandering more than ever. He usually didn't find it hard to concentrate at the opera, but tonight he listened to the music only half-heartedly. His thoughts were everywhere else but on the stage, where Charlotte's fiancé Albert returned, and thus, the inevitable doom became obvious. He looked at the first row to check Maddy's progress: she was leafing through the program without looking at the stage. That was clearly one of the signs of novice disaster. He hoped she did it quietly, because he did not want Mrs. Schaeffer to be blamed for bringing a noise-maker to the opera later. True opera lovers took noise personally and never forgot.

Yet, not all hope was lost: the second act would most likely drag for her, but the third one was intended to get to anyone who was not entranced by the first two. JB once overheard a

conversation between two young women when they were walking out of the auditorium after the opera ended. One of them, with red puffy eyes, clutching a tissue, was loud and exasperated:

“How, how could Albert give Werther the guns? It is like giving a suitcase full of drugs to an addict! At that moment, I was like, stop, what are you doing! And I have seen this opera before!”

The other reacted calmly:

“You know that this is not real, right?”

The emotional one nodded

“Of course, I know, but I don’t think I will ever be able to see this without shouting “No” inside when the gun moment happens.”

JB could not agree more: it was a powerful moment, but it was still two intermissions and an act and a half before it would happen. And the program was not long enough to get through it, so Maddy would have to find other ways to keep herself from falling asleep.

The first act was coming to an end, and JB switched back to the alertness mode. In less than five minutes he would have to stand up and open the heavy velvet curtains that were drawn for the time of the performance in front of the entrance doors. On the stage Werther worked hard to charm Charlotte, who was so close to give up her engagement, but was reminded that she promised to marry Albert when her mother was dying. JB glanced towards the first row: Mrs. Schaeffer had the binoculars, and there was no doubt where the focus of those binoculars was. Maddy was looking at the stage too. Maybe realizing Werther’s bad luck made her connect. Didn’t Mrs. Schaeffer said something about Maddy and unrequited love? If that was the truth, then it was possible Maddy would get into the opera before the third act started.

Not that Werther’s love was unrequited in the pure sense of the word. JB found it ironic that in opera only bad guys suffered from unrequited love: those poor baritones and basses chased

soprano girls they were not intended to be with due to their voice classification. The good guys, the mellifluous-voiced tenors, mostly suffered because they could not be with object of their love due to all the obstacles created in their way by the bad guys. Werther was one of the very few tenors who got to experience unrequited love. But even then, Werther's love was unrequited only till the middle of the second act, when he would realize that Charlotte loved him too. After that, the balance in the opera microcosm would be restored: the tenor could not be with his soprano not because she did not return his affection, but because she was married. It made JB almost angry with Werther: so much whining and moping around, while he knew that she loved him. Try loving somebody from afar without ever knowing what she felt about you because she did not even know you, because she remained always an unattainable dream.

JB helped Tony, usher 97, whose post was at the entrance to the Family Circle, to secure the curtains in front of the doors. When the last note of the first act was played, JB was still tying one of the curtains. It annoyed him immensely at times that he could not hear the last note in peace, but then, even before the applause subsided, he was overrun by a flood of people eager to get out for the intermission, and he once again understood that he would not be able to hear that note in peace anyway. He hurried back to his post. In the aftermath of the accident, the management told the ushers to keep near the railings at all times. JB thought it was stupid to imagine somebody deciding to copycat what happened, but then, with all the other crazy shit happening in the country, maybe the management people had their point. All that coverage in the media — who knew what ideas it could give to a psychotic or a suicidal person.

Mrs. Schaeffer and Maddy approached him after most of the first rows cleared out.

“Goodness, Jimmy, these people are so slow!” exclaimed Mrs. Schaeffer. “Isn’t Kaufmann a darling tonight?”

“He is, Mrs. Schaeffer. I think Mr. Schaeffer was right not to come. I don’t think he would handle my admiration for Kaufmann well.” said JB.

Mrs. Schaeffer giggled:

“You are right, dear, you are right! Losing you to the enemy would be a tragedy. After all, he spent so much time impressing you with his legends talk. He can forgive us, women, because we are weak and only care for good looks. I think Maddy likes the tenor too. Don’t you, Maddy?”

Mrs. Schaeffer turned to Maddy. Maddy blushed lightly and said:

“He is very attractive, Amanda, but ...”

“But? Are you telling me you are not yet madly in love with him? I don’t understand how you, youngsters, can be so blasé. I’m eighty, and that man makes my heart flutter.”

Maddy did not reply, only smiled.

There was still time before people would start returning from the break into the auditorium and Mrs. Schaeffer and Maddy would be in everyone’s way and would be forced to go back to their seats. But for now no one tried to walk by, and so Mrs. Schaeffer lingered. JB understood right away what it meant: Mrs. Schaeffer was dying to gossip about the accident. He was right.

“Oh, I don’t feel like climbing these horrible stairs again.” said Mrs. Schaeffer. “Maddy, honey, if you need to go outside, then feel free to go. I have a knight here who will take care of me.”

“Only if he promises to take good care of you, Amanda.” Maddy answered looking JB straight in the eye and smiling.

“I promise. I will be more loyal than Wolfram.”

“Good.”

Maddy turned away from them and walked down to the exit. Her dress was dark blue and silky and flowing.

“She didn’t get your reference, of course.” giggled Mrs. Schaeffer. “But the old lady here is really happy to have a friend whose loyalty is greater than that of Wolfram’s.”

“You see, Mrs. Schaeffer, my loyalty is so great that I’m willing to make a fool of myself in front of a very pretty girl.”

“Oh she’s so pretty, isn’t she? But I wouldn’t get so infatuated, if I were you. She has a tendency to like scoundrels, and you are such a sweet young man, Jimmy, I don’t think you can be mean enough for her taste. And I don’t think she will get into opera. She read the program during the first act!”

“Well, to be fair, Mrs. Schaeffer, the first act is not of the most dynamic ones.” protested JB weakly. If only he could continue this chitchat till the people start to return. But he knew it was a hopeless affair. A journalist for many years, Mrs. Schaeffer liked to present herself as an airhead octogenarian, but when she needed to find an answer to a question that bothered her, she would latch onto one like a leech, letting go only when she got what she needed. He heard Mr. Schaeffer telling his wife to loosen her grip when she questioned a friend of theirs about his rumored fling with somebody many decades younger than him: “Amanda, dear, he’s our friend, not a sleazy politician you are interviewing. Could you be just a bit less *professional* with him, please?”

And there was no way to escape Mrs. Schaeffer’s professional grip now. She looked at JB seriously and asked:

“So, were you working the night when that happened?”

“You mean the accident?” asked JB, buying time.

“You know what I mean, Jimmy. And I don’t think that it’s accurate to call it an accident. I think at the very least it can be classified as involuntary manslaughter.”

“Doesn’t that mean that the manslaughter that occurred was accidental?”

“So you were working that night?”

Why couldn’t he lie to her? It would be so simple: “No, I had a day off, Mrs. Schaeffer. I came to work next day, and that was all everybody talked about, but I wasn’t there.” But, damn chivalry, he could not lie to an old woman, especially the one he liked. He imagined sometimes how great it would have been to have grandparents like Schaeffers: they were smart, sophisticated, openminded. They would have taken him to the opera as a child. Instead, as a child JB witnessed an alcoholic grandfather on a bender at the end of each month. His grandmother, tired and overworked, died when she was sixty-five of a third heart attack in a row.

“I was, Mrs. Schaeffer.”

“So what happened? Is there anything the newspapers do not tell?”

“No, most of the reports in the newspapers are more or less accurate.”

“Wait, it only now dawned on me — it happened right here! So if he fell over the exit, his body would have been somewhere over there near the steps. The carpet looks absolutely fine there, though. You must have very good carpet-cleaners here in the Met, Jimmy.”

“There wasn’t much to clean, Mrs. Schaeffer. As far as I understand, the injury was internal.”

“Does the Met’s management want you guys to keep your mouths shut about what happened?”

“Correct, Mrs. Schaeffer.”

“What are they afraid of? Media’s spin? A lawsuit?”

“I think all of the above. But to be honest, I am not sure I want to talk about it ever again. I have repeated the same story so many times that it no longer makes any sense when I tell it.”

“I understand. You poor thing! Well, maybe some day. Mark and I are old gossipers, and we were dying for some first-hand details. Newspapers have so many useless theories for what happened, that they don’t actually give any reasonable account of what exactly happened there.”

“It was an accident, Mrs. Schaeffer. He was noisy and obnoxious during the performance. She got mad, and it all went horribly wrong.”

“Oh look, here’s Maddy.” Mrs. Schaeffer waved to Maddy walking towards them.

“Seems like it’s time for us to get in the middle of our row.” Maddy said.

“Yes, dear, we should go. Making all those old people stand up was such a drag. I felt like a horrible, horrible person. Here, Maddy, you go first now.”

Mrs. Schaeffer turned to JB:

“To be totally honest, Jimmy, I would hate anyone who would ruin “Vesti la giubba” for me.”

JB was puzzled: she seemed to know quite enough. What was the point of her trying to make him talk? The second act was about to start, but JB knew that there was no way he could focus on the opera tonight. It just was not happening.

## Chapter 2

### Sally

Season 2012-2013, April 6th

It was Sally’s second fantasy opera season, so checking opera reviews in the morning was just as much of a routine for her by now as brushing her teeth. Sometimes, however, she would



save the reviews that came up during the week and read them all on a Saturday when she indulged in a once-a-week all-alone three-hour-long breakfast. This Saturday morning she was following her established routine, as she sipped her coffee slowly and scrolled down opera reviews for the performances all over the country.

“Ah Brian, why did you have to sound tense during your opening aria?” she muttered. “I am definitely losing points for my “Aida” now.”

Calculating points in fantasy opera was ridiculously hard, but that was mostly because, as Sally and other fantasy opera participants joked, the idea of fantasy opera was ridiculous and was conceived by ridiculous people. The drafting for the opera season usually started a couple of weeks after most major opera companies ended their season — mid-May. The process of drafting went in several stages: during the first one, participants picked singers out of the big stars on a first come, first serve basis from a list posted on fantasy opera season website. The time was limited, but there was rarely a singer left by the end of the time slot, because big stars went really fast. Sally was lucky this season to get a couple of big names, and she knew they would not disappoint, but Brian Hymel continued to sound tense in the opening aria, and that was seriously ruining Sally’s hopes to have the best opera season this year. Or at least, to get into the top three. The winner of the season did not have to participate in the drafting race, because they were given a thirty-minute start before the regular drafting session began.

Sally drafted Brian during the third stage, when the list of young and promising opera singers was released. She had high hopes for him, and otherwise, he showed good results: even this performance with the ill-fated aria was praised immensely, because he was a good actor and a powerful singer, but that damned opening of Percy in “Anna Bolena” just was not his thing. It wouldn’t have caused so much worry, hadn’t Sally drafted Hymel for “Aida”, in which the opening aria of the tenor had a similar hike to high B flat and was even more challenging than

Percy's swift jump to high C's. Maybe, she thought, she should have listened to a fantasy opera season participant she knew under the name of "Midwestern\_loggionista" who told her that Hymel was still too young for Radames, and she should draft somebody older. But she really wanted to have a handsome Radames, so that it would be easier to believe why Aida was willing to be buried alive with him.

Otherwise, the outlook for Sally's opera season 2012/2013 was very promising. She made smart choices when she drafted conductors, both from superstar and established star-lists, as well as stage directors, set, costume, and lighting designers. She was really lucky to secure Royal Opera chorus, but the one she really craved was the Met Opera's chorus. And the Met's orchestra too, but she was not quick enough to get them. When she imagined herself the winner of this season, the Met's chorus and orchestra were her worthy prizes. Yet, to get those Sally really needed more points, and Brian's forced high C's were not helping.

After each real performance of any of the draftees, fantasy opera season participants calculated the points depending on reviews and online feedback from the trusted local opera-lovers. The points were awarded for the overall performance, technical aspects of singing, acting, and additional points were given if the performance was sold out. It was so rarely the case, though, except for the times when really big names performed. "Really big" meant they were known outside the opera world, like Domingo, for example, who Sally had heard often to be confused with Pavarotti, because those two were probably the only two opera singers a layman would ever come across in their life.

While it seemed at first that calculating the points would be the easiest part of the fantasy opera since there weren't too many categories, the participants soon discovered that there was rarely a case when the reviewers praised the same thing and disparaged the same thing. It made awarding points somewhat similar to figure skating judging. One never knew if what one critic

deemed worth 0.0 would not be glorified with 6.0 by another. Sally smiled remembering when one of the participants brought up the figure skating analogy and somebody told him that the system was changed nearly ten years before that.

“Man,” he typed in his online answer, “I was over figure skating when the quadruple jump was not yet a thing. I became so tired of judges fighting their own cold war with those 6.0s, that I hadn’t watched a single competition ever since.”

It no longer surprised Sally that she spent a huge portion of her time imagining operas with people twice and, which was the case much more often, three times her senior.

After a number of heated online discussions, the participants agreed on the list of critics whose positive reviews would get the largest number of points and the list of critics who seemed to be positive no matter what which meant a smaller number points awarded for their reviews. The critic who found Brian’s top range somewhat narrow was from the top list, which was unfortunate. Sally sighed. Opera was like sports in that way: there always seemed to be moments when chance would interfere. Squeaks happened. Sudden losses of voice happened. Things broke on stage. Audience would suddenly laugh during sad, highly dramatic moments. One could never be one hundred percent sure.

Sally got up, refilled her coffee mug and switched to other reviews. A couple of younger singers she had drafted had performed recently too, and she needed to update their stats. Also there was an interview with one of her set designers, which she saved for dessert of this long breakfast session. Saturday mornings were Sally’s most favorite part of the week. They signaled the end of a workweek which was usually hectic and filled with meaningless tasks. Sally worked in a PR department of a company which developed and produced pharmaceuticals, but the main reason why they hired Sally about four years ago was that she knew German, and thus, they

actually saved on hiring outside translators, because they dumped any of the lesser translation jobs on Sally, “since you know German, anyway.”

Sally’s mother who was still unable and probably would never be able to get over the fact that Sally decided not to get a PhD repeated regularly that translating boring press releases about obscure meds that might not even get to mass market till year 2050 was an incredibly good use for an MA in German Philosophy.

“When we patent the drug that cures cancer, mom, and then everybody will want to be your friend, because your daughter has connections,” Sally would reply in attempt to dissipate the cloud of her mother’s progeny disappointment.

Her mother would not even bother to reply to that and would only scoff bitterly. During those moments Sally really wished she wasn’t an only child and had a sibling or two whose disappointing life decisions her parents would obsess with in addition to Sally’s. That any of those life decisions would be more or less disappointing, Sally had no doubt, as her parents, her mother especially, had a very clear as well as limited understanding of what being successful in life meant.

Maybe, her job was not the best use of Sally’s knowledge of Hegel and Kant’s work and the fact that she read those books in original with more or less success. Yet what was, she often thought when she listened to her mother’s laments over her future. After Sally spent more than a year trying to find a job in the aftermath of the financial crisis of 2008, she came to believe that an MA in German Philosophy was quite a self-indulgent major. It would have been useful if she had decided to stay in academia, maybe. However, when Sally understood that she could not imagine herself teaching undergrads for many years while she worked herself to death in a race for the much coveted tenure-track position sacrificing her free time in the process, she knew it would be a smart decision to get out. All she needed was a job which would pay her bills and

opera tickets, and not the most expensive opera tickets, at that. Her current job was not the most exciting one — she hated translating unimaginative, formulaic press releases, but at least it helped her avoid communicating with haughty trade journalists who thought themselves to be Andrew Ross Sorkin of The New York Times and demanded to be danced around any time their company needed an article about their products. Publicity was not Sally's thing, but it wasn't a big hassle job, and she was lucky to have it — it paid enough for Sally to have free time which she devoted to the thing she loved most.

Sometimes Sally thought about getting ATA certified and going freelance, but she didn't feel unhappy enough at her job to give up the security it gave her. Being a freelance translator would be a rollercoaster, and she was not sure she was ready for that. Yet there were times it really got on her nerves that her co-workers treated her as a walking English-German dictionary. The R&D Dan, for example, was particularly annoying.

"Here is our German Shepard" he said every time when he saw Sally, so proud of figuring out that her last name and the word "shepherd" were homophones.

Every time he passed her cubicle, he had a German vocabulary question of some kind.

"Hey, do you know if *straffes Bindegewebe* means dense or loose connective tissue?" he asked her the day before.

His question made Sally wince — there was no way he hadn't figured out those terms yet, and if he hadn't, for Sally it screamed willful ignorance which Sally found difficult to tolerate.

Her cubicle neighbor Maxi rolled her eyes and whispered as he turned and walked away after Sally barked "dense" in reply:

"Bless his heart, the R&D Dan is so into you, Sal. Has he asked you out yet?"

Maxi was probably right, Sally thought, but he'd better not ask her out, because the R&D Dan did not stand a single chance, particularly after he forced his opinion of opera on Sally even

though she did not ask him to do that. He noticed a CD on Sally's desk and launched into a long tirade, decrying opera as a snobby and outdated art. Not that Sally wasn't aware that she was, in fact, an opera snob. She knew that opera was proclaimed a dying art almost every other day mostly for the reason it was perceived by general public as elitist, overcomplicated, unforgiving to beginners. What made her fume silently while Dan stood there imparting his views was the very fact that he felt she needed to know his opinion. If somebody walked up to a dog-owner in the street and told them that owning a dog was a decadent selfish pursuit, nobody would consider that normal, yet for some reason, when people found out about Sally's passion, they felt obliged to share their opinions on opera with her even if she never ever asked for anyone's opinion. "Rest in peace, dear R&D Dan," thought Sally as she issued him a cease and desist order in her head. If before, maybe once or twice, she actually did think that he was somewhat cute, now it was clearly over. Now, every time he asked for her vocabulary help, she either gave a one-word answer when she was in a good mood, or sent him to google, if she was in the middle of a tricky passage about molecular drug delivery systems. Maxi thought Sally was overreacting, but then no one asked Maxi to be a dictionary app in human form.

Sally rose from her kitchen table and stared cleaning up the breakfast mess. Thinking about the R&D Dan reminded her to check if her boss emailed her a release which might need to be translated over the weekend. Sally hoped it would not come till Sunday. This Saturday Sally was going to the opera, and she did not want translate in a hurry, because releases always needed to be done immediately, when she was getting ready to go out.

Saturday mornings were twice as good when Sally had the tickets to the Met. She would leave for the opera earl early, get on the A train, which would take her ever so slowly, with starts and jolts, to Manhattan from her Bed-Stuy neighborhood. Sally's co-coworkers could not understand why she did not move somewhere better, at least to Prospect Heights, which had the

best brownstones in all five boroughs, or Astoria, which was all the rage now, but Sally liked it there. Her apartment building was new, but the rent was much lower than what she would pay in any of the fancier neighborhoods, and she felt as unsafe in her neighborhood as anywhere else, including Manhattan, because it didn't matter where you were in New York, as you were destined to be mugged there at least once. The good side of Bed-Stuy was that it was clearly at least two years before gentrification, as artistic types ousted from Williamsburg and Prospect Heights had not discovered it yet. Two blocks to the west it had already started — last time Sally walked to the Brooklyn Museum, she noticed two artisanal bakeries, brand new and very much un-Bed-Stuy clean and shiny, facing each other on the opposite sides of the street.

“Good luck with that,” she thought, because she was not going to break her steady relationship with the Jamaican bakery which was a breezy five-minute walk from Sally's apartment, several blocks from Nostrand Avenue subway stop. And she was sure that most of the inhabitants of her neighborhood were not planning to cheat on that bakery either. Their pastries were decadently sweet and delightful. She couldn't even give up them for Lent, when she tried.

Sally found her penchant for city grit both ironic and amusing since before she moved to New York for grad school, she had always been the pampered and overprotected small town dweller. Yet the moment she was in New York, she felt that she finally came in touch with her true self — the urbanite who felt at home surrounded by skyscrapers, crowds, noise, litter, and steam, and who rejoiced at riding often slow subway as well as walking in anonymity among thousands of people. Every Sunday she walked dogs for the BARC shelter in Williamsburg, and the main reason why she chose that particular shelter to volunteer for six years ago was the place where the shelter was located: the corner of Wythe Avenue and North First Street, near the industrial stretch at Kent Avenue between Williamsburg Bridge and Greenpoint. Unlike other volunteers who would often go to the nearby McCarren Park, Sally preferred to walk up and

down Kent near the East River, circling around the deserted large building which used to be a factory of some kind or sitting on a bench in a tiny Grand Ferry Park, with its graffiti, fast food wrappers, and empty bottles. The view of Manhattan skyline it offered was the best in Brooklyn, in Sally's opinion. Of course, the neighborhood was losing its grit with every coming day, but Grand Ferry Park still remained quite untamed. And it was obvious that even its days of wilderness were numbered.

On an opera night Sally liked to get off the A train several stops before Columbus Circle and walk to the Lincoln Center. The noise of the streets and crowds made her head spin, but it also intensified the quiet of the opera house which would strike her when she entered the building among the first opera goers, clearly as crazy as she was about being afraid to come late to the opera. This Saturday Sally was in the Family Circle, in a regular seat, which was unusual for her because she often opted for standing room for the operas she went to in addition to her subscription tickets. Since subscription packages never covered all of the operas in the Met season, and certainly were not created for people who needed to see the same performance multiple times, Sally migrated between Orchestra and Family Circle standing room, occasionally buying more expensive seats in the Dress Circle. While subscription itself rarely cost more than eighteen hundred for a season, with Sally going to the opera up to three times a week, it became quite an expense. Luckily, she got this ticket for free. Wayne, one of the fantasy opera people she actually knew in real life, gave her the ticket because, as he told her, he saw so many operas in a month that watching one more would clearly give him sensory overload.

Sally understood that well. Opera overdose was nothing to joke about.

She looked forward to tonight's performance. It was going to be "La Traviata" which Sally was very fond of. It was the first opera she had ever seen on stage. During her freshman year at Oberlin, when she, her roommate Liz, and several other girls who lived in the same dorm



formed a self-proclaimed nerdy clique which refused to participate in such exciting realities of college life as partying and excessive consumption of cheap beer. Instead, the nerdy clique held book club sessions every Sunday, watched classics of world cinema on Fridays, and teased each other ruthlessly for mispronouncing foreign names of directors and writers. Of course, the nerdy clique didn't last longer than a semester, and by the end of spring its former members of the nerdy clique were just as comfortable at parties, as they previously were at book clubs, but during the first months, reading books and watching films suited them perfectly, because their nerdiness hid the fact that they scared shitless of their new life which was nothing similar to the comfort of their suburban childhoods.

To prove the true nature of their alliance, the nerdy clique established a swear bank. Each swearword cost a quarter. When the coins in the swear jar stopped jingling, they opened it. They collected about 120 dollars, and after a debate which added more quarters to the sum, the decision was made to spend the accumulated swear-money on the tickets to the theatre.

Not simply the theatre. Someone from the nerdy clique, Sally had already forgotten who, suggested opera — the highest of high arts, the enjoyment of which would have proved them to be very intelligent, sophisticated, and truly nerdy. The choice of “La Traviata”, however, did not stem from their knowledge of opera, for they had none, but was mostly determined by what was offered by the Cleveland Opera during that season. In the final rounds of deciding, the story of a noble courtesan won over the story of a meek seamstress with cold hands, and so Sally and Liz drove to Cleveland one weekend to get the tickets.

Several years later, when Sally and Liz were reminiscing nostalgically about their opera adventure, Liz admitted with laughter that the only reason why she wanted to see “La Traviata” was exclusively the movie “Pretty Woman”. Liz said that she would never have admitted that at the time, because it would have sounded absolutely opposite the main principles of the nerdy

clique, and yet, secretly, it was Vivian Ward, Julia Robert's character, in an elegant floor-sweeping red dress and white dressing gloves that influenced their decision most.

"Well it wasn't exactly against the principles of the nerdy clique. We had that rom-com marathon after mid-terms, remember?" said Sally. "Notting Hill," "Four weddings," and tons more. "Pretty Woman" was one of the favorites then."

Sally watched "Pretty woman" again recently when she was stuck with nothing else on TV during Christmas break at home, and she could clearly see why this movie ended up to be the nerdy clique's inspiration for the opera visit. It held a promise that if a streetwise, but not exactly refined prostitute could be moved by the timeless music of Verdi, then the well-read perceptive girls would be moved too. Classical music was not scary and only for a select few, it was for everyone. Also, everybody looked very nice at the opera. Of course, the nerdy clique couldn't dress as glamorous as Julia Roberts in the movie, but they had agreed not to wear jeans, and in the end, looked quite glamorous in their own eyes.

Unfortunately, the opera experience did not live up to Sally's expectations shaped by three minute preview from the movie. Whether it was the absence of handsome millionaires or the presence of high-school students in the audience, it was hard to say, but Sally sat through the entire opera wondering how on earth she was supposed to believe that this middle-aged woman could charm this fat kid who was at least twenty years younger than her.

The music was probably better than acting, but she could not remember a single melody after she left the opera house except for what she had already known — the Drinking Song which only the laziest hadn't used in their ads or movies and Violetta's desperate cry "Amami Alfredo" as she agreed to sacrifice her love for the sake of her young lover's future. For some reason Sally was convinced that she was supposed to memorize the whole thing just after one visit. The State Theater which housed the performances of the Cleveland Opera was a grand Art Deco

auditorium, built in the early 1920s, but the abundance of gold, marble, giant chandeliers, and velvet felt oppressing and made Sally feel like an impostor.

When the nerdy clique was leaving the theater after the performance, the conversation was all about the beauty of the music and the splendor of the staging. One of the girls insisted that she flooded the lower balcony with her tears. Everyone declared “La Traviata” their most favorite opera, even if it was the only opera they had ever listened to, and so did Sally. She even bought the CD at the opera store. What Sally tried hard not to show was her disappointment with herself: how come that everyone was moved, and all she focused on was the thundering symphony of coughing which grew in volume and subsided as if it followed its own score? Wasn’t she sophisticated enough? Perceptive enough? Intelligent enough? Too busy with self-deprecation, Sally did not even question the sincerity of the nerdy clique’s reactions. Everyone agreed that they should go to the opera more often. They never did it again.

After Sally forced herself to listen to the CD several times and never reached the connection with the music that everybody claimed they had, she let it go and decided that opera was definitely not her thing. How that Sally would be surprised if she saw me today, she thought. The irony.

Sally’s true obsession with opera started about six years ago, when she went to the Met for the first time. Her first opera at the Met was “Tosca.” Just as with “Traviata”, Sally didn’t leave the Met with a clear understanding of what she saw that night: her first impressions were very few and scattered. All she remembered from that time was the children’s chorus and the goose bumps it gave her. She did not remember exactly when that moment occurred and only when she saw “Tosca” a couple of times after that, she realized that it was “Te Deum”, an utterly terrifying ending of the first act, in which this opera’s villain Baron Scarpia renounced his faith, of which he, the most villainous of all villains, already had very little, in order to make beautiful

actress Tosca his mistress. Among angelic voices of the children in the church, Scarpia's low notes rang menacingly; the contrast instilled nearly primal fear in Sally, but at the same time, because she was aware it was an artifice, it was a painfully pleasant moment, which continued to be chilling no matter how often Sally listened to the first act's ending.

Even now, when Sally thought about Scarpia's initial "Va, Tosca!", it made her shudder. Goose bump moments were an essential part of Sally's opera-going experiences, and a performance without a single one was a sad time in life, indeed. Luckily, she lived in the city with one of the best opera houses in the world, so even the worst of the nights guaranteed some shuddering. She always got a tiny chill when the sputnik chandeliers were going up signifying the start of the performance. It was the highest peak of anticipation and excitement. Three, four, or, if Wagner, six hours of enormous pleasure and bliss were ahead of her, once the chandeliers became stars in the golden skies of the Metropolitan opera's ceiling.

If there was anything that Sally remembered well from her first visit to the Met, it was the house itself. She loved it from the first moment she entered it. She liked that it didn't look like the nineteenth century building or the early twentieth century one, that even though the house's main colors were red and gold, it was not overdecorated, that there were no gigantic cherubs or muses painted on the ceiling — it was painted gold instead, and there was not a gigantic nineteenth century-style chandelier, all sparkly glass and fake electric candles, which would give Sally panic attacks if she had to sit underneath it, because the chandeliers like that she had seen in Europe, when she travelled with her parents as a teenager, never seemed fully secured. The Met's chandeliers looked modern, light, and safe — even if one of them did fall, it was hard to imagine that such an effervescent structure could hurt anyone.

Sally liked that the Met had individual screens for subtitles built into the seat in front: some of the older fantasy opera participants complained about it, saying that they missed things

happening on the stage because they had to lower their eyes to the tiny screen, but Sally preferred this system to the surtitles projected above the stage. One time at Brooklyn Academy of Music, when she accidentally bought a ticket for a seat very close to the stage, Sally ended up with a stiff neck the day after, because she craned her head to see the surtitles on the screen which was right above her. Of course, ideally, as some opera snobs liked to repeat, the opera should be understood without translation, but it was incredibly unrealistic. Sally appreciated her ability to understand most of the German operas without the need to read tiny letters, but even then, not everything was clear, and even operas sung in English required subtitles at times. A year or two ago, she got into a fiery online battle about this in the Operavore blog: as any other battle over operatic minutiae its end was rather anticlimactic because participants simply disappeared when they finally had something else to do; no one changed their original opinion, nothing was learned. That was the time when Sally made it her principle to argue about opera only at the fantasy opera season website. Fantasy opera comment sections were moderated, and quite a number of them were kept hidden from public access.

Ever since the disappointment of the Cleveland Opera Traviata, Sally almost never listened to classical music before she started going to the Met: she only had been to the Carnegie Hall once during the first year she was in New York for her Master's because somebody gave her a free ticket. During the second one, she made it to at least half of the Met Opera's season and figured out how student tickets worked at Philharmonic, Carnegie, and BAM. Still, those first visits — they were more mostly about the experience of the venues, rather than the actual performances, which were pleasurable, but also confusing and sometimes mind-boggling. Yet the most puzzling element of any performance Sally experienced then was the audience. She didn't remember the motif of "Te Deum" or "E lucevan le stelle," afterwards, but she remembered

perfectly the way the soundtrack of coughing that accompanied every second of the musical performance made her gradually more and more annoyed.

“I don’t get it, Viv,” she complained to her friend who was responsible for convincing Sally to go to the Met to see Tosca, “it sounds as if we are in a respiratory ward.”

Ever so delighted with everything around her, Vivi giggled and said:

“Actually, I am not surprised. With the way you guys set the temperature of your ACs, it is actually a wonder that some people stay pneumonia-free in this country.”

Vivienne was European and had a lot to say about American air-conditioning.

Sally and Vivi were in the same year of the Master’s program and had totally bonded over their dislike of the Research Methods class, because professor Richards who taught it made them annotate classical music. It was funny to think about it because now that would be a task Sally would undertake with much more enthusiasm than translating press releases. But then, they were thirsty for knowledge, and neither Haydn, nor Handel was enough to satisfy their need to read soul-crushingly difficult texts, so they could feel smart. After classes Sally and Vivi walked in the Park or went shopping, “to walk off Richards frustration,” as Vivi put it. Although Sally did not care much about clothes, she wouldn’t miss shopping with a French woman. Vivi absolutely lived up to the stereotype and possessed an impeccable sense of style. One day they stumbled across the dress sales at Macy’s. Vivi insisted that they should try all black dresses they could find in their size. Looking at herself in a flowing empire style gown, Vivi sighed:

“It is such a pity that we can’t wear these dresses anywhere.”

Sally joined Vivi in front of the mirror in a new look dress:

“Unless, of course, you want to give professor Richards a heart attack, then you can wear it to class on Monday.”

“That *emmerdeur*, he totally deserves it!” exclaimed Vivi. “What did you think about that task to make annotations for an oratorio? I am a philosophy major, not a musicologist! I wasted two very precious days of my very precious life on that meaningless task. Can you double-check what the price is for this one? I can’t reach it.”

“It’ll be about sixty bucks after the discount.”

“Oh, it’s so cheap for such dress! And it fits so well. Too bad I don’t need it.” Vivi went back to the fitting-room. “You know, I hate his tasks not because I hate music.”

Vivi spoke in a flow which connected different threads of conversation — Sally had to be always attentive to the switch of the topics:

“I love music. My father is a musician, my mom plays piano quite well, but these tasks... they make music so boring!”

Sally nodded in agreement even though Vivi couldn’t see her.

“You know what?” Vivi emerged from her cubicle.

“What?” asked Sally. She sensed a brilliant idea coming. Vivi was a generator of brilliant ideas.

“I have a great idea. We should buy these dresses and go to the opera. It is our last refuge” Vivi pronounced the last word in French — “re-fuj”

Sally winced:

“Viv, I don’t think I am a big fan of opera.”

“Oh, no, no, no. It is a brilliant idea! We are buying these dresses and going to the opera. My mom has already asked me why I haven’t been to the Met yet. She’ll be so happy to know that we are going!”

Vivi could make a stone feel enthusiasm. And the new look dress which Sally had chosen was so beautiful that any reason to wear it seemed a good enough reason.

“Ok, Viv. We should also invite professor Richards with us, then you can have your revenge and enjoy the music.”

Vivi responded with her tinkerbelle laughter.

Of all things about Vivi, Sally missed her laughter most: beautiful ringing sound of a silver triangle. Vivi went back to Europe after getting her Master's, and long-distance once again proved to be quite difficult for Sally. She believed that drifting apart was inevitable: just like most of Sally's friendships from Oberlin which dissolved once people graduated and moved all over the country. It was mostly Sally's fault: she was not good with maintaining regular communication and avoided opportunities for skypeing because she hated that awkward feeling when she didn't know what to say after all the recent news got listed in less than five minutes. The only friend from the nerdy clique that remained was Liz, but it was definitely an exception. Sally tried to rationalize it for herself that the friendship was doomed once Vivi had to go away, so it wasn't too bad she ignored Vivi's desire for online communication — it was realistic. It saved her from feeling guilty at times, but occasionally, when Sally was walking in Central Park or going to Tosca performance, the guilt resurfaced and stung.

Sally washed the dishes from breakfast and went back to her laptop. She had a message from “Midwestern\_loggionista” and she didn't need it to read to know that he was probably gloating over her tenor's first act tightness. It was indeed so:

“Hey, QL., just wanted to tell you that I actually saw Hymel squeak those high D's at the Lyric last week. Don't know how it will play out for your Aida. He did warm up significantly by the end though. And also we can't really blame him: that “experimental” staging is so stilted, that no wonder the singers don't know what to do with their voices.”

Sally smiled and typed: “Oh, don't be such aloggionista!” She knew it would annoy him that she didn't try to argue about this.



“You are so remarkably Midwestern in your responses” he once told her. “I don’t know how you survive in our shark tank with your aversion to confrontation.”

Clearly, Midwestern\_loggionista was nearby his computer as well, probably checking his Saturday stats like Sally did. She got a reply email almost right away:

“Well, I am actually not that much of aloggionista. I can afford better tickets than upper balcony or what you in the Met call ‘family circle’. But then, we have only seven performances a season at Lyric. I have no idea how you maintain your extravagant opera-going habit in New York. Anyway, good luck with Aida!”

Sally laughed: looked like Midwestern\_loggionista was desperate for some mild altercation. She was not going to give him one:

“I’ve got Owens for “Porgy” this season. I’ll see if anyone can beat that.”

He wouldn’t know what to say against that one: if there was anything Sally and Midwestern\_loggionista shared, it was a crush on a bass-baritone who became a Met sensation two seasons before after his portrayal of Alberich in the “Ring Cycle”, which was still made commenters on Operavore blog swoon occasionally when they discussed Wagner — Operavore blogs commenters in general seemed to be willing to swoon much more often than the fantasy opera people.

She had a couple of hours before she would leave for Manhattan. She decided to check her email the last time before she would turn off anything life related from her mind, so she could get in the more concentrated state for opera. There was only one new email in her mailbox. Hoping that it was spam and not the email from work, Sally opened the page. It wasn’t the email from work, but that didn’t mean good news either. It was an email from her ex John. They had not been together for nearly five years, but he insisted on remaining “friends”, even if he was the one who initiated the break-up. Staying friends meant that he would occasionally email Sally

random links to articles she rarely found relevant, and they met for coffee to catch up once in a while. Friendship with Sally also came in handy any time John needed somebody to check in on his elderly father Frank with whom Sally maintained a steady, if somewhat unusual — even for her, relationship. Frank told everyone that he adopted Sally as his granddaughter. Sally called him ‘my grandfather-almost-in-law’.

“What now?” Sally wondered, as she held the cursor of the mouse over the email, “catching up coffee or an essay about whales in South Eastern Pacific?” She made it a rule not to read his emails right away, because she didn’t want to seem excited about them. She would let the email be for a day and then read it, but today it was a more complex choice to make: not read it and then go to the opera thinking what could there be in the email, or read, become upset, and then sit in the opera thinking about it. Sally decided to read the email later. She needed to start getting ready for the evening.

The memory came to her in the shower — obviously prompted by the email which wasn’t fully off her mind now. The day when she bought the new look dress with Vivi, she brought it to John’s place. She put it on and, as she swirled around the room, John, on the bed with a book in his hand, looked at her over the top of his glasses and whistled.

“So where are you going to wear it?” he asked.

Sally stopped in front of the mirror and reached for the string of pearls she bought:

“Vivi and I decided that we will go to the opera.”

“Opera? I didn’t know that you were interested in opera.”

“I am not, really. Vivi wants to go,” Sally replied.

“Oh that’s a pity. I think you’ll enjoy opera, if you give it a couple of tries. It’s an amazing art form. I used to go to opera all the time.”

He got up from the bed and stood behind her. When he was so close, Sally's skin tingled, and she could feel it even now, five years past, in her kitchen. She could also feel that his arms were wrapped around her waist and his breath as he was murmuring in a low voice:

“When I finished college, I rented a room in Upper West Side, near the Lincoln Center, so I could be close to the Met. You know, those rush tickets — sometimes they would be sold so fast, so in order to get one, I had to wake up at six in the morning and head straight there.”

He kissed her neck.

Sally shook her head to snap out of the memory: so incredibly real it felt. It was strange to have these memories return, especially since the relationship was dead for such a long time, and she was fine — she was over it. Sally decided she would walk to the Lincoln Center on foot. There was still enough time to do it. It would be a long tiring walk, but it should help to keep her mind off non-opera thoughts.

## Fantasy Opera Season Archive II

[www.fantasyoperaseason.com/archives](http://www.fantasyoperaseason.com/archives)

### “Accident at the Met”

February 16, 2014. Posted by LaDivina

We have just been informed that a horrific accident took place in the family circle tonight during the performance of the double bill of Cavalleria and Pagliacci. According to the information that is available to us so far, there was an altercation between patrons: a woman pushed a man who fell over the ledge above the entrance. The man was taken to the hospital, and the woman was arrested. The performance was halted for about thirty minutes, but then resumed.

UPDATE: Alas, the man, whose identity yet remains unknown, died in hospital upon arrival. Let the media carnage commence.

UPDATE 2: As some of you have probably seen right now, the identity of the woman has been made public. We have decided to abstain from discussing her identity here, because she is one of the participants here, and we implore all of you who know her alias not to disclose it.

### Comments:

1 / ... 4 / 5 /

**LaDivina:** Loge, thank you for your timely updates. To be totally honest, I am a bit envious of your omniscience. To whom it may concern, please, contain yourselves: you know what I am talking about.

**IlDucadiMantova:** Well, well, why am I not surprised. Somehow I knew this was going to happen sooner or later.

**TheRenaissanceMan:** I know, right? I was starting to wonder why there is so much silence. I am not surprised either.

**Thefourth\_Rheinmaiden:** Wait, fellow patrons, this is not fair. You seem to know something, and it is not okay to keep from the rest of us. Do you know anything about this woman we don't know?

**Bill:** What Rheiny has just said. What do you know?

**Sills\_fan:** Is she one of us? If that's the case, we deserve to know.

**Mrs.HansSachs:** They are right, not everybody on this website lives in New York and has an opportunity to meet in reality. Some of us do not have an opportunity to step out of our little virtual bubble. Who is she?

**IlDucadiMantova:** Since the public insists, let me just say that now you would know better than disobey one of our moderators. Apparently, she is strong enough to kill you, if things are not going her way.

**Bill:** Quiet Leonora? No way!

**operakid\_25:** Wow, this is really hard to process. quiet\_leonora, of all people?

**Gerry-flapper2.0:** That cannot be true!

**MVW:** Are you absolutely sure about that?

**IIDucadiMantova:** I don't see what you find so implausible about this. If you look at her comments on this website, you can clearly see that the girl has no respect for anything what most of us hold dear and clearly suffers from misandria which, to be fair, is not exceptional to her, but a common consequence of rabid feminism a lot of young women are exposed to nowadays on a daily basis.

**Gerry-flapper2.0:** Seriously? Have you gone completely mad? Are you seriously going to make this tragedy a case of oppression of heterosexual white men?

**IIDucadiMantova:** Tu dixisti.

**Gerry-flapper2.0:** You know what? Fuck you.

**IIDucadiMantova:** It's tough when you have nothing to say, isn't it? I guess, you can always revert to violence once you exhaust your limited stock of feminist arguments. Seems to be a common go-to move among women nowadays.

**Bill:** Where are moderators when you need them?

**TheRenaissanceMan:** Well, one of them is obviously in jail. Honestly, I don't see the need for moderation. I would like to make a gentle warning to Gerry-flapper2.0 to abstain from profanity. One of the reasons for creation of this website was to provide the platform for discussion done by mature, respectful, polite adults.

**Gerry-flapper2.0:** Really, (moderated)? One swear word is more outrageous than misogyny we are subjected to from the Duke on the regular basis?

**TheRenaissanceMan:** May I remind you that refraining from calling each other by our real names is one of the rules of the website. Why don't you cool in the ban zone for a couple of days?

**Bill:** Really? So Gerry gets banned for using TheRenaissanceMan's real name, the Duke doesn't? How fair is that?

**IIDucadiMantova:** I didn't say her real name. In fact, it was you who connected the real name with the nickname and announced it for everyone out there to see.

**Bill:** You've got to be kidding me! Seriously, I miss the golden days when you were permanently banned more than ever.

**IIDucadiMantova:** À la recherche du temps perdu, aren't you? May I suggest a madeleine as a consolation treat?

### Chapter 3

#### Usher

Season 2013-2014, March 7th

Of Werther's four acts, JB liked the second act the least. It was as pleasant musically as the rest, but there was something about Werther's moping around in the second act that annoyed JB immensely. After Charlotte married Albert because those deathbed promises seemed to be always kept in opera, Werther found nothing better to do than to write dreadfully sad poetry and spend time with Charlotte's family because her marriage didn't bring him enough pain. JB understood that in many respects Werther's pitiful moping was determined by the operatic conventions which required a good character sung by tenor only to be able to love one woman in their life. That was why most operas ended with both characters dying: once their function as lovers for life was rendered impossible by cruel antagonists or unfair life circumstances, they had absolutely no other reason to be on stage. Yet, the second act angered him, and JB knew why: Werther's suffering in it was boring. It wasn't self-destructive enough for contemporary audience. Werther's counterpart in the twenty-first century would have known what to do: there was alcohol, there were drugs, there was gambling, there were TV show binges, for that matter. Except for mild masochistic overtones of Werther's insistence on seeing Charlotte everyday, his suffering had nothing to offer to people who were so sophisticated in self-destruction. At times,

JB caught himself thinking that Werther could definitely benefit from some hard physical labor. It was amazing that this operatic hipster made him think things that JB's father would say when he went sober.

Since the action on the stage was not exciting enough for JB to lose track of reality, he could no longer ignore the pain which was getting stronger. In addition to the pain in his wrists which JB woke up with, now his knee was hurting. JB knew that he needed to stand up and move around, but that meant making noise. He decided to wait till he couldn't deal with the pain anymore. The thing about Massenet was that even when Werther was moping, his arias were very sweet and melodious. JB didn't want to ruin anyone's experience of that. He glanced towards Mrs. Schaeffer and Maddy: both were looking at the stage. Mrs. Schaeffer had the binoculars, and when she tried to pass them to Maddy, the girl smiled and shook her head.

The pain in his knee always felt different from the pain in his wrists. While his wrists ached steadily, with the pain becoming acute when he would bend his hands at a certain angle, the pain in his knee started small, concentrated in a spot where his patella used to be, and then it would travel down, engulfing his lower leg fully to the point when he could not feel anything else but his leg on fire. Walking before the pain started to intensify helped a little. Sometimes, if he was lucky, the pain would decrease to a hardly audible white noise. Most of the times, he wasn't so lucky, and then the pain would prevent him from sleeping, from being able to concentrate on everyday tasks, from thinking about anything else.

Those were the moments when he was supposed to feel free to take opioids which were prescribed to him right after he recovered from his injury at the VA Hospital in Texas. He found it incredibly ironic that after having spent his teens taking any drugs he could get hold of at the time, including one try of crystal meth, he sat down in front of the doctor who was writing JB's first ever prescription for a bottle of hydrocodone and worried about getting addicted. The

chances of that were actually quite high, he was told. It was a common thing with vets. However, there was no point in worrying about addiction, because what JB was definitely signing up for with that orange bottle was physical dependence.

“The problem is that once you get used to the dose, it no longer mitigates the pain adequately, so people usually start taking more,” said the doctor. “How is it different from addiction then?” he continued. “Well, in simple terms, the difference is that patients usually are not that happy about taking their pain medication. Even if it brings the relief from constant pain, it comes with a whole load of side-effects. The problems start when people find themselves liking it. That’s something to run to us about.”

“And?” prompted JB, not really expecting anything reassuring as an answer.

“Not much. We will put you into a rehab, tinker with alternative ways of pain management, and soon you will be back to normal. Well, your normal dosage that is.” chuckled the doctor.

JB knew it was not an evil chuckle, but there was something sickening about the doctor’s overall cheerfulness. JB sensed awkwardness: after all, that doctor had a job of a legalized drug dealer and his drugs weren’t even that much fun. It was hardly very uplifting to sentence people to a vicious circle of increasing the dosage and then going through withdrawal hell of weaning off only to start popping more pills some time later.

“I’ll be honest with you, doc, your job doesn’t sound like a dream job to me,” said JB.

“Look, JB, let’s get this straight. Full recovery after polytrauma is a myth. You can’t stick metal rods into somebody’s bones, remove organs, cut out muscle tissue, or whatever we have to do to keep the patient alive, and then have them frolic around as if nothing has happened. Everybody who walks out of here has chronic pain. Everybody requires some type of pain medication. You know what could really help? Not to have polytrauma in the first place. At least,



you weren't drunk driving when your accident happened. Think about what those idiots feel when they realize that their accident was all their own fault."

JB wasn't drunk driving when his humvee overturned on a particularly difficult part of the track at NTC, but he was frustrated and hungover. He didn't pay attention to the road, he didn't keep the speed below 55 mph, all he wanted was to go back to the base as quickly as possible so he could chug a beer to relieve his hangover headache. It didn't help that his sergeant, both evil and dumb, which undoubtedly made him the worst superior to report to, sat next to him and yelled repeatedly:

"You can't drive for shit, Beam! Watch where you're going! You're two weeks from deployment and you can't drive for shit!"

Of course, JB couldn't. He was from New York. No one in his family had a car. JB was handed his driving license two months after he got enlisted in the army and the closest experience to sitting behind the wheel he had ever had before was the bumper cars arcade at Coney Island. As Sergeant Russell continued to spout driving advice, JB had to grasp the wheel till his knuckles became white because it was so very hard to refrain from punching Russell's angry stupid face. JB allowed the vision of swinging his left arm in the direction of his sergeant overpower him just for a moment, and the next thing he knew he was tumbling around in his humvee.

Russell, the lucky bastard, got away with severe concussion and a dislocated shoulder. JB's body got pinned by a heavy trunk with equipment, and because it took a long time for the medical crew to arrive, the injury in his left leg became even more irreparable than it could have been if the trunk had been removed from his body right away. The trunk was most likely not secured properly as it should've been, and otherwise that would have been the fault of one of the mechanics responsible for the vehicle, but it was decided that this fact should be ignored the same way it was ignored that JB's speeding caused the accident and jeopardized the life of his superior.

JB's division got deployed to Iraq while he was still attached to the feeding tube in hospital. By the time JB was prescribed opioids, one of the soldiers from his former battalion was recovering in the same hospital.

The doctor was right: the trick with opioids was that taking them was as uncomfortable as not taking them. JB usually tried to take time off his painkiller meds at least once or twice a year, depending on how bad the pain was. In summer he would sometimes go without pills for two or three months, but once the cold weather started to settle down in the fall, the pain in his wrists and his knee returned with a vengeance, and JB would reach towards the orange tube. Because his tolerance went down during the summer, when he started to take pills again in the fall, he always had the same annoying reaction — his nose became itchy and red, and if he happened to be around other people at the moment, he was often offered anti-allergy meds, because for the outsider it looked like a bad case of allergic reaction.

Over Christmas break he stopped taking his painkillers cold turkey because he significantly increased the dose over the fall and once even ran out of his prescription day or two he could get another one. He did quite well, but the changeable weather of March was too much for his broken body. For the past few days JB fought the need to take the pill, but tonight seemed to be the moment when he could no longer avoid it. He figured that if he took the pill now, the “quick high” effect would not dissipate by the intermission.

It was not a good idea to look sick at his working place. Most of the subscribers who knew him fell into two categories: they were either extreme germaphobes who would steer away from anything as if it was plague, or they would throw a fit of grandparently care offering him predominantly useless advice, even if JB declined it politely and repeatedly. At times it was very hard not to say something like “no worries, just getting my vicodin high.” He smiled imagining Mrs. Schaeffer's reaction if he dared to utter something like that in front of her. He wouldn't

dare, actually — it seemed that Mrs. Schaeffer's discontent would be terrifying even though she was in her early eighties and had to take rest between each step she took in order to get to her seat. And of course, he didn't want to be scolded by an old lady in front of her beautiful young companion. JB glanced towards their row. Why lie to himself — that was the main reason. JB decided to persevere during the intermission and then, hopefully, the music of the third and the fourth act would anesthetize him enough to hold out to the time when he came home and took the pill right before bed. His dreams would be so good.

On the stage, Charlotte's husband was about to realize that the brooding youth, who the family most likely tolerated hoping Werther would marry Charlotte's younger sister Sophie, was in love with his wife. For JB it was the signal that the intermission was about to start. He got up quietly from his seat, glad to stretch his throbbing leg, and moved closer to the doors. He knew that even before the last note stopped sounding, there will be people rushing outside of the auditorium as if their life depended on it.

Unfortunately, Mrs. Schaeffer and Maddy decided not to leave their seats during the second intermission. JB caught himself glancing in their direction several times — at one point Mrs. Schaeffer noticed that and waved at him. Maddy looked in his direction and smiled. It was enough not to feel disappointed, and JB would have enjoyed more of this exchanging glances game, but at that moment he heard his name called. There was no doubt about who was approaching him and that clearly meant that the game was to be suspended. Wayne, one of the family circle most regular patrons, wanted to talk to JB, and it would most likely occupy JB for the whole intermission.

“Mr. Beam, how are you tonight, my friend?”

When in good mood, Wayne always addressed JB by his last name and would insist on doing so, even when asked to call him “JB”. It was something to beware when Wayne would suddenly switch to ‘Jimmy’, which didn’t seem the case tonight.

“I’m well, Mr. Hamilton, thank you. How about yourself?”

“Not too bad. Kaufmann seems to be in a good place tonight. I found his brooding in this act incredibly adorable.”

“You did?”

“Do I hear a touch of disbelief in your voice, Mr. Beam? Could it be true that you are waiting for the greatest hits material, thus overlooking the subtlety of the first and second acts?”

“Well, Ossian’s poetry is not exactly a crowd pleaser.”

“True, but I don’t think you will disagree that “Pourquoi me reveiller?” is the sole reason why some ladies in the audience keep coming for every single performance of Werther. It is a major heart-melter. Well, both the aria and the tenor.”

“Wait, I didn’t know you were one of those “Kaufmann is popular because he is attractive” people.”

“Oh no, God forbid, Mr. Beam, I am not one of those extremists. I’m in the middle. The man’s gorgeous, no doubt about that, and I’m not sure I’ll ever get over my disappointment with his last Siegmund, but after all, I am here, enjoying this performance from the height of the family circle, unlike the orchestra people who for sure come to look at his face.”

“But you do have your binoculars with you, don’t you?”

“Of course, I do. I’m not made of stone. I am allowed to have my insignificant, harmless weaknesses.”

“I didn’t know that tenors could be considered weaknesses too. I thought opera queens were all about Callas.”

“Leave La Divina out of this, Jimmy. That is not about weaknesses.”

JB nodded apologetically — he should have known better than dragging The Diva into the conversation with the Met’s self-appointed opera queen-in-chief. However, it seemed that Wayne wasn’t into rhapsodizing over Callas tonight, and understanding why didn’t bring JB the necessary relief.

“May I ask you something, Mr. Beam?”

Well, one storm passed, but the second was coming right through.

“Sure, sir.”

“Do I understand correctly that you were working the night of the accident that happened?”

“Might be.”

“And you are probably not willing to talk about it, for the multitude of reasons.”

“That’s a correct assumption, sir.”

“All right. Then I will be direct. I saw our wonderful Mrs. Sharkey questioning you during the first intermission...”

“Mr. Hamilton!”

“Oh she knows how we call her. You have no idea, Mr. Beam, how fierce that woman is. She’s only fifteen years older, but when I just started, writing my pathetic itsy-bitsy reports, she was already known as an interviewer who could easily make her subjects cry. Don’t you sometimes feel like she’s going to tear your Adam’s apple out if you don’t answer her questions the way she wants?”

JB couldn’t help grinning in reply, because it was exactly how Mrs. Schaeffer seemed when she needed to know. Ferocious.

“So, may I inquire whether Mrs. Shar ... pardon me, Mrs. Schaeffer was able to get anything out of you?”

“I can assure you, sir, absolutely not.”

“Oh how brave of you. Well, if Mrs. Sharkey failed, Wayne Hamilton has nothing to hope for. All right, then let me tell you what I know. Do you mind that?”

“Not in the least. Go on.”

JB knew better than to say “no” to that: partly because it was utterly unrealistic to shut up Wayne Hamilton, but also because, due to his journalist past, Wayne had access to all gossip that was circulating in town. However, imagining that Wayne just wandered around blabbering gossip would be a huge a mistake. Wayne would talk seemingly endlessly, but would only let out the information that he wanted or needed for the other person to know. JB prepared to listen to figure out where this might have been going.

“You know, Mr. Beam, I could have been one of the main witnesses in this case too.”

“How so?”

“I used to give Sally tickets for the performances I didn’t want to go to all the time. It could have been my ticket, and then I would probably have had some explanation to do.”

“Do you think they would care that much? After all, it’s not like this is a difficult case. I don’t think there will be a trial or something.”

“Well, there shouldn’t be. I am pretty sure there’s a fair chance to get some kind of agreement in this case, but right now she’s ruining it all by maintaining she’s not guilty.”

“What?”

“Yes, I know, it’s ridiculous. I don’t know what’s going on with the poor girl. Some kind of a weird delusion, maybe. Dozens of people saw that guy fall down.”

“Right.”

“It’s quite possible that you were among those dozens.”

“Are you back to your questioning, Mr. Hamilton?”

“No, I apologize, sometimes happens without me noticing.”

As if JB was going to believe that.

Wayne continued:

“I just can’t believe it. She’s such a nice human being — I had no idea that’s something was going on.”

“So you didn’t give her the ticket then.”

“Of course, not — can you imagine me buying that horrible seat? I can’t go higher than the third row. I’d rather be in the Orchestra then. I actually don’t know who the ticket was from. I don’t think any of our fantasy opera people bought it.”

“Fantasy what?”

“Fantasy opera season. Wait, you’re not one of us? There’s no way I haven’t tried to recruit you to participate in it.”

“Participate in what?”

“It’s exactly what it sounds like. You know fantasy sports, right?”

JB nodded.

“It’s the same. You should play too. I’m sure you’d enjoy it.”

Could’ve that been the reason for Wayne’s stopping by, JB wondered. Again, like Mrs. Schaeffer, Wayne seemed to know more about the accident than JB, and there was no way JB’s account of that night would bring more light to what had happened. But then, all this just for some ridiculous opera thing? JB doubted it.

“You don’t seem to be that interested. That’s a pity. We desperately need some young blood. Sally was doing so well this season. She didn’t win the last one, but somebody gave her

the Met Opera's chorus she wanted so much, and she had a good line-up. Horrible it's all going to fall apart."

"But with the internet access, she still can finish it, right?"

"Well, she doesn't want to. Definitely, we're witnessing some kind of breakdown there. I'm going to try and talk her into finishing it, but it's unlikely. I am afraid we're stuck with an unfinished season this year."

JB couldn't believe it: it was for this fantasy opera thing.

"Well, can't you consider her season interrupted because the orchestra and the chorus went on strike, you know, some unsuccessful contract bargaining?"

"Ha-ha, very funny. You know that the mere mention of the union will send some of the fantasy opera oldies into paroxysms from which they won't recover for months. I am responsible for moderation, and I'm still exhausted from cleaning out the shit they were flinging at each other when the Minnesota orchestra's lockout was taking place."

"I see. Must be brutal out there."

"Oh yes, internet exchanges of opera buffs are intense. You'll love it."

"You think?"

"Okay, Jimmy, I'll get down to business then, since you seem to be unwilling to cooperate. I was wondering if you could finish Sally's season. It seems like she won't be able to, for sure, and I don't think she would mind that such a nice intelligent young man kept her records."

JB froze at the mention of his intelligence. Tonight's interaction with Wayne seemed to be ridden with traps. He hurried to take the offer:

"Okay, sure, I'll look into it. I'm just afraid I won't be able to catch up. How difficult are the rules to play?"



“The rules aren’t the easiest, but once you start keeping scores for the selected singers and all according to the reviews, you’ll be able to figure it out.”

“You rely on reviews? There’s no way you can do that. Aren’t they all so different? Even for tonight I expect a huge disagreement among the critics whether Kaufmann’s pronunciation was passable or not.”

“It’s okay, although I would love a better “reveiller.”

“You see?”

“Ah, Jimmy, you’ll get it. If octogenarians and even some nonagenarians understand, could that be a problem for a young man with a fully functioning brain?”

Jimmy. Wayne was definitely getting impatient. JB felt it was easier to agree now, and then look for ways of getting out of it later.

“All right, Mr. Hamilton, let me try. Is there a website for this fantasy opera thing?”

Wayne took his smartphone out of the pocket.

“Here, type in your email, I’ll send you all the information.”

“I can’t believe you have your phone on during the opera, sir!” JB joked as he clumsily touched the letters on the screen. When the pain in his wrists returned, he would usually have trouble doing anything with his phone.

“Oh don’t you dare! It’s on silent, and there’s no way anybody who knows me would call me between 6 pm and midnight on my opera night. They know better.”

“Here, sir.”

“I’ll send you the details as soon as I get home. I still need to run it by Sally, but as I said I don’t think she cares. Why would she take and ruin everything? Poor child. Have you met her?”

“No. I saw her all the time, but we never talked. You know I am not the talkative kind.”

“Ha, and yet you talk to us all the time.”

“But it’s not like I initiate conversations.”

“That’s right.”

The third bell signaled the end of intermission. Wayne looked around locating his seat.

“Ah too bad, you haven’t met her, Mr. Beam. You would’ve enjoyed talking to her. All right, need to hurry back to my seat. Must clean my binoculars.”

“Enjoy the rest of the performance, sir.”

“You too. By the way, forgot to ask, have you figured how to get that foreign language requirement?”

There it was. Ever since JB let it slip in conversation with Wayne that he needed only a foreign language requirement in order to complete his Bachelor’s, Wayne was constantly interrogating JB whether there was any progress on the issue. It had been three years. Tonight JB just wasn’t in the mood to be lectured.

“The performance is about to start, Mr. Hamilton.”

“That’s a no, then. All right. I’ll talk you later, Jimmy.”

As JB watched Wayne getting to his seat with multiple and colorful apologies, he felt the fire setting up where his left knee use to be. JB limped to his seat and while the audience applauded the conductor’s arrival, he took out his pillbox from the inside pocket of his uniform jacket. He hesitated for a moment before putting an oval-shaped tablet into his mouth. Acts three and four lasted for about an hour. It should be enough for the initial high to subside.

## Chapter 4

### Sally

Season 2012-2013, April 6

Sally reached the Lincoln center about forty minutes before the performance. She entered the square so that the newly-remodeled fountain was right in the middle. From the distance its jets of water aligned with the bursts of light from the Met's chandeliers which could be seen through the arched windows of the oblong building. The old-timers often lamented the brutal simplicity of the modern Met, but Sally liked it, even though it might have been because she didn't know better, as one of the fantasy opera participants constantly reminded her. This was her Met, and no matter how often she went there, every time she approached it, she took a deep breath of excited anticipation.

They had just started letting people in when she entered the building. One of the ushers who was collecting tickets — his name tag read "Usher 157" in the first line and "Ronny" in the second, smiled and nodded in recognition. Sally smiled back, pleased. Unlike a lot of the Met's regulars, she rarely talked to the ushers, but she knew that they knew her and she knew where most of them could be found during the night, and this quiet acknowledgement of each other's existence gave Sally the sense of belonging which was even more valuable because she didn't need to talk to anyone in order to get it. Sally always had trouble being the first one who started the conversation: it demanded courage and social aptness which she knew she didn't have. Once approached, Sally could more or less successfully maintain the flow of the conversation — that was how she met Wayne and Janice and many others, but reaching out to address a stranger, however interesting that stranger might be, was still beyond Sally's abilities.

She never took the elevator to the Family Circle level — she decided to postpone that for the time when she was about eighty. Instead, she walked up the dark circular staircase. Every time she did it, she lost count of the floors by the second or third turn of the staircase, and for several moments enjoyed feeling lost in the endlessness of the walls and steps covered in shimmering scarlet velvet. On her way up, she passed some of the older patrons who defied their age by insisting on coming to the opera earlier so that they could stoically ascend the stairs to their level. Sally admired their perseverance which was beautiful in its ridiculousness.

Wayne's subscription seats were in the center of the first row of the Family Circle, but this night, Sally found herself in the fifth row, moved significantly to the left. She suspected that it was not so much the claimed "opera overdose" and the dislike of the famed tenor-turned-baritone, but the off-center seats which were the reason why Wayne was so generous with the tickets. Moreover, Wayne had a soft spot for the young tenor in this production, so Sally was quite surprised when he gave her the ticket for this revival.

"Pirgu makes a lovely Alfredo, for sure, but I just can't deal with Domingo's newly-discovered passion for baritone roles. His voice doesn't have the right color," said Wayne mournfully when Sally reacted to his offer with disbelief.

Since Sally came quite early, her row was still empty when she walked to her seat in the middle of the section. She looked at the seat on her left and then on her right — one of those would be occupied by another of Wayne's numerous friends. Every season Wayne bought two subscriptions — one to the operas he went on his own with seats in the orchestra or dress circle or the first row of the family circle, and the other with much cheaper seats in the family circle, as he always bought two tickets, because he liked to enjoy an evening at the opera with "company." The company could mean anything: there were former lovers and current lovers, former crushes and current crushes, there were professional contacts, budding opera lovers who needed

encouragement, future fantasy opera players, anybody interesting. Wayne breathed human communication and seemed to know everyone. He knew almost every usher by name, and the Met bartenders stored away his rye with a single cube of ice without reminders — his generous tips and regular chit-chat made it unnecessary.

Sally looked around: tonight was a regular night. Ushers 22, 57, 14 were standing at their positions near the railing. The Met had changed ushers' name tags not so long ago: now some of them carried the names, while the others still remained just the numbers. Sally wondered about the reason for this change: it was probably something related to the union, as things were now getting really quite heated with the bargaining. Most likely, the full-time ushers were finally given names, while the part-timers remained anonymous. Sally preferred the anonymity of the numbers.

Usher 14, or Sheila as her name tag suggested, was a middle-aged woman who, according to the regulars' lore, once kicked out a man for taking pictures during the performance. Regulars respected her greatly for the deed: although the Met required the ushers to reprimand the rule-breakers, for the fear of bad publicity the management did not recommend kicking them out. Which was lame of them, of course, Sally thought. There were worse things than a glaring screen of a smartphone, but it was still very bad to be distracted from what happened on the stage by the blinding white glow, especially when all lights in the auditorium were turned off.

Ushers 22 and 57 were young men. Sally couldn't really tell their age, because she was really bad with guessing people's ages. They could be anywhere between mid-twenties to late thirties, and that was the closest she could guess. What she knew for sure was that both ushers were cute. They stood out mostly because they looked young. Sally knew it was ageist of her to think so, but it was nevertheless true. She called Usher 57 "Cherubino": he had fair hair, big blue eyes, and a boyish blush on his pale skin. He looked younger than Usher 22, and was more

talkative and smiled more often. 22 was the opposite — dark-haired with dark eyes, brooding. Once, when Sally passed him on her way out of the auditorium, she noticed a tiny bit of a tattoo on his neck picking out just above the collar of his suit. He seemed more reserved, even though she often saw him talking to the regular patrons. While 57's tag now had the name on it — Cherubino was apparently Roy in real life, 22 had no name on his, which was strange because there was no doubt whether he was a full-timer.

Sally could not fully figure 22 out, but she assumed that he would be some kind of a darker, baritone role. She did that a lot — categorized people around according to the opera roles. R&D Dan, for example, was a bass role from opera buffa — an idiot in pursuit of a soprano girl who was not meant to be with him. Maxi gave Sally a strong impression of Dorabella, Sally's best friend Liz was a mix of Rusalka and Charlotte. Fred, one of the fantasy opera participants who drove Sally nuts with his comments on anything which was not fully traditional, she thought to be Don Pasquale on good days, and something infinitely evil, like Yago, on bad. Not that she was alone in doing so — everyone she met on the opera forums and websites assumed this or that operatic persona — either a part from an actual opera, or a singer. Wayne, of course, insisted that he was Callas, but when Sally pushed him a bit more, admitted: "Dear, there were no roles that would really fit me until those sweet people decided to make "Brokeback mountain" into an opera. Before that I could be hardly anything but divas." And Wayne was a diva, all right. Sometimes Sally thought he would make a convincing Queen of the Night.

It was getting closer to the start of the performance. Most of Sally's row was full: she felt the relief when she looked around because most people seemed like they would be more or less decent listeners. If there was anything Sally could do well when it came to opera going, that was spotting a noisy neighbor who could ruin the performance completely. With "Traviata" it was especially challenging, because it was one of the crowd-pleasers which everybody knew. It way

too often attracted people who had no idea how to behave at the venue which performed unamplified music. Tonight looked promising: no obvious newbies who would get bored in the middle and start fidgeting because no one told them that the opera was going to drag so long, no old ladies with jingly bracelets which continued to twinkle long after the applause for the aria subsided, no couples on a date which for some reasons always had one person in the couple narrating what was happening on stage to the other in a clear loud whisper, because their date was obviously not smart enough to figure opera's completely unpredictable plots on their own. There were so many things that could ruin the opera.

It was worrying that the seat on Sally 's left remained empty, and judging by the fact that on Sally's right there was an elderly couple, that empty seat was clearly the one for Wayne's "friend." The house was almost full, and the people entering the auditorium were hurrying down to their seats. Sally looked at her watch. If that guy, whatever he was to Wayne, was going to rush in last minute and ruin the quiet opening of the Traviata's prelude, Sally would not even bother to acknowledge his presence later. Sally knew well that current lovers or crushes of Wayne were not sent to the opera on their own, so if that was an old flame, which he probably was, Sally didn't have to care, as clearly Wayne had stopped caring before her.

Wayne's friend rushed in when the ushers already went to the doors to close them. A youthful man made his way to the seat apologizing quietly but profusely. As he lowered down to his seat, he was still trying to catch his breath. Running up those stairs to the highest level was no joke. Sally sized the new arrival up and down, nodded, and turned to face the stage. The conductor — her current conductor crush, exceptionally talented — was about to come out, and only a minute or so separated Sally from one of her most favorite operatic openings. The neighbor, unfortunately, was not yet focused on the upcoming action.

“I am so sorry for running in late. My D train got stuck in the tunnel for like fifteen minutes,” he whispered.

The conductor was making its way to the pit. Sally whispered back amidst the sound of applause:

“No worries.”

The conductor did his graceful waving and bowing, and Sally stopped clapping just a little bit before anybody else, because she was so impatient for the opera to start. But the neighbor continued whispering:

“You’re Wayne’s friend, Sally, right? I’m Eduardo.”

Sally felt tightening of her jaw. It was the bad habit she had: she clenched her jaw when she was stressed. She knew it was her fault — she celebrated the fact of other neighbors not looking dangerous too early. She might have jinxed it. She didn’t turn to the guy this time, she only turned her head, and as the whole house hushed, she whispered to Eduardo: “Later.”

And then, almost at the same time, the strings started their seemingly shaky, hushed introduction to the musical world of *povere donna* Violetta.

Sally had listened to Traviata so many times that she knew nearly every note: she was definitely not coming for surprises in this one. Instead, she wanted the opening phrase to be hardly audible at first and then slowly gain volume and power until the main theme — Violetta’s love for Alfredo which would later come up in the middle of act two — filled the auditorium with the strings announcing in unison “Amami, Alfredo.” Yannick Nezet-Seguin, classical music world’s hope for the future of conducting and a valuable addition to Sally’s facebook’s news feed, where he posted pictures of himself looking awesome on different stages around the world, rushed the opening just a bit too fast for Sally’s taste. She heard and read a number of qualified people who said that it was the appropriate tempo for the prelude, but she liked it slower, almost



dragging — when deliberate stretching out of each note gave her this almost painful pleasure of anticipating the notes that would come next. Yannick, however, completely redeemed himself because the short trills of the violins which complemented the development of the main theme were executed perfectly, at the right time and with the perfect amount of lightness, and Sally could feel the goose bumps. Quite an achievement, since the opera started only three minutes ago.

This production was vehemently hated by quite a lot of fantasy opera people. Each discussion online and even in person, during the intermission of the performance to which they would nevertheless still come, was filled with vehement exclamations: “Ridiculous,” “Traviata for dummies,” “horrible set,” “stifling staging,” “only Netrebko could pull that garish red dress off” and so on. Sally did not feel so strongly about it: there were some redeeming qualities to Decker’s production, and the red dress actually looked well on whoever sang this part — Sally saw Netrebko, Poplavaskaya, Dessay, and now Damrau doing it, and the dress looked just fine on her, as she wandered the empty white stage with an enormous clock which showed that Violetta was running out of time.

The prelude was reaching its last moments, and Sally felt her whole body tightening in anticipation of applause which would come after the end of it. How she hated to hear those random claps during the silence which was meant to be there. She wished it was written in the playbill somewhere that this was not an overture, this was a prelude, and Verdi did not intend to have the applause there — the silence of the pause was written into the score and instead of discordant noise of people’s useless excitement at the end of a three-minute piece, it was supposed to give everyone a chance to reset, get a breath of air before the bubbly, loud, clamoring noise of Violetta’s guests would pour in. Thankfully, Yannick’s rushing actually served the piece well this time — the pause which he had between the end of the prelude and the

start of the first act was barely perceptible, and so before anyone could make the mistake of starting to clap, the ball at Violetta's house had started.

She saw this production this season when it just opened — about a month ago, and the second time made her even more pleased that she had managed to get Damrau for her fantasy opera season. Damrau made an amazing Violetta, not Sally's absolute favorite, but definitely in the current top five. Watching her moving around the stage with grace and teasing young Alfredo was very delightful, and Pirgu eased into the role nicely, because at the premiere he seemed to Sally a bit too cautious and not energetic enough by the time "Brindisi" came up.

The drinking song was ultimately the most famous operatic aria in the whole world with the runners-up of "Nessun Dorma" which Sally had seen badly performed on a number of TV talent shows with the audiences in apparent raptures over a pop-music wannabe destroying his voice completely with this aria and "El Caruso" popularized by Pavarotti during his "three tenors" stunt. Sally had heard it so many times that she could for a second relax and not care at all if there would be any external noises while it was performed. The irony was that because it was the only thing people knew, they listened to it carefully, and there was all of a sudden no fidgeting or coughing or whispering.

Sally had her own favorite moments coming up, which she as a newbie would not have even noticed. While everybody else usually waited and cheered for the short duet in which Alfredo professed his love for Violetta and sparked the interest in her — Pirgu tonight managed to do it very well, so lovely and charming was he that Sally could not believe that Wayne would skip on his favorite singing that, she waited for a very short exchange afterwards during which Violetta would play Alfredo completely, at first convincing him that she did not at all care for his advances and would prefer him permanently friendzoned, and then immediately reversing the situation by telling him to come visit the next day.

And tonight, as in many other nights, Violetta's giving Alfredo the flower did not fail to be a goose bumps moment for Sally. There were some coughs, because people were as usual bored by this insignificant dialogue which probably for them was just a useless connective tissue between large arias and ensembles, but overall, Sally could concentrate on it quite well. Violetta-Damrau's playful "Prendete questo fiore" after Alfredo-Pirgu announced his leave followed by his confused "Perche?" and her brisk, clear, sending the exact message: "Per riportarlo." And although Violetta said that she would want Alfredo to bring the flower she had just given him back, he would still not get it: "Quando?" he asked to which Violetta who so obviously enjoyed his inability to believe what was happening sang back "Quando sara appasito" — "when it has withered." The moment that gave Sally indefinite delight was the change in the orchestra part which switched from being the hushed accompaniment to reflecting Alfredo's happiness and excitement at his realization seconds before he would express it with his "O ciel, domani!" Sally loved the effervescence of Alfredo's bubbly happiness, because it promised depths of drama to follow.

Sally loved the exchange of the flower scene so much that once she sat down and meticulously watched all available performances of Traviata to see how different directors tackled this moment. She discovered that even the most ridiculous productions could not ruin it. There was this 2007 performance in Paris which could not otherwise be redeemed even by the presence of Sally's most beloved tenor and the soprano who sang her part exceptionally well: the opera was set in the cloak room of a big theater which made no sense at all and played up Alfredo's youth and romantic inexperience to make it absolutely grotesque. And even there, the moment when Kaufmann-Alfredo received the flower was sweet and charming and made Sally smile. Sally's favorite interpretation of this moment was a recent production she saw in Chicago

when Alfredo playfully tore the flower apart to ensure his return the next day. It worked well with the spiraling movements of the violins which reflected his happiness-induced vertigo.

After Alfredo bade his farewell, and the guests started leaving, it was time for Violetta's big aria of the first act. It was a beautiful piece of music, but it was on a longer side, and that was worrying. While the coughing seemed to be under control this night, Sally couldn't feel at ease. The orchestra hushed, and Violetta's "E strano" — how strange — was sang almost a capella. Then the orchestra returned to follow her internal turmoil at discovering this sudden chance for love. It was such a timeless battle — she was asking if she should go for it with Alfredo or if she should step aside to protect herself from unnecessary suffering — the question Sally was familiar with way too well, and listening to that aria always moved Sally, even if she had heard it a million times before. Right now, however, there was something which prevented Sally from getting into it. She looked furtively to her left and to her right. The elderly couple on the right was holding hands with all their attention on Damrau; Eduardo, despite his unfortunate first impression, was behaving well: watching quietly, not fidgeting. The sound came from the row behind: it set Sally's nerves on edge, made her clench her fists and her jaw. It was the sound that glossy pages of a playbill make when they rub against one another.

Sally turned back to glare angrily: sometimes it even worked, but most of the time people were completely oblivious that they were ruining somebody else's experience by creating noise which was audible in the quiet moments of the music throughout the whole family circle. How did Sally miss this couple on a date when she was assessing potential damages? The woman in her early or late thirties, it was hard to tell, was dressed overly flashy for the family circle, and her date wore an incoherent tie with an even less coherent suit. The woman obviously was the one who demanded the visit to the opera, for she was glued to the stage with the opera glass, but the man was clearly bored out of his mind, even though it hadn't been even thirty minutes into

the performance. He was desperately looking for something in the playbill to entertain his obviously empty and probably not very capable mind. Slowly, because he probably imagined himself polite and thoughtful of others, he was turning page after page after page, which lengthened the characteristic “shrrrr” sound to eternity. Sally suppressed a groan. It was too early in the performance to get so annoyed, but there was nothing she could do — the sound made her shudder and interfered with the music created in the orchestra pit and on the stage.

Sometimes Sally liked to fantasize about opera tickets being sold to people only if they received a special license: like the driving license it would require a theory exam, but instead of the driving rules people would have their knowledge of the opera etiquette and elementary knowledge of music tested and they would only be allowed to pass if they did not fail a practical part of the exam — a simulation of a visit to the opera where they would be tested on sitting through a whole performance without disturbing a single person around them. Just once Sally would love to sit through the whole performance without being disturbed.

At least, even the absolute newbies in the opera knew that when the soprano on the stage did the voice acrobatics with soaring high notes and trills, it was time to stifle those coughs and put aside playbills. Damrau’s “Sempre libera” was really well done, and the ending of the act was very enjoyable. Of course, people started clapping before the last note died out. Sally forced herself to let this moment pass, even though it vexed her every time when people didn’t give her a chance to get a breather after she spent the last ten minutes hardly breathing. The sputnik chandeliers lit up, and the family circle sprang into life like a disturbed cluster of bees. To her left, Eduardo seemed to be interested in socializing:

“What did you think?”

Sally decided to be nice since he recovered himself a little after the first act.

“Not bad. Damrau is doing a good job, as always,” she said.

Eduardo started leafing through the playbill.

“She sings the main character, right?”

Sally tried not to look too surprised. Where did this friend of Wayne come from? Wayne’s friends of whatever caliber were usually acquainted with opera enough to know at least some of the big names. Did Wayne find this guy in the hangout of sports reporters?

Eduardo might have sensed her indignation.

“I’m really new to this, to be honest. I usually cover off and off-off Broadway. But Wayne said that I should get to know musical drama as well, because they aren’t going to keep a critic who only specializes in one kind.”

“So you’re Wayne’s friend from the journalism world, then?” She slightly emphasized “friend”, because the young man seemed cute enough to be Wayne’s current interest, but that would be very weird if he let him wander into the opera world without his personal supervision.

Eduardo blushed visibly:

“Well, I’m not a “friend” friend; just an acquaintance, really, but Wayne’s nice enough to offer me advice once in a while, and now this ticket.”

That was interesting. Sally wondered what possible stake was for Wayne in this. Not usually known for naïveté, sometimes Wayne allowed himself a fair share of wishful thinking. “What do you want from me, young lady — can’t an aging opera queen hope for a delightful miracle?” he would exclaim theatrically, when Sally pointed out to him that some of his crushes were straighter than Philip Glass’s melody lines. Whatever Wayne’s secret motivations were here, at least Eduardo seemed to be benign enough for an unassuming easy conversation.

Not threatened, Sally dared to ask the question she usually avoided because she didn’t really like to receive a negative answer to it:

“What did you think of the opera so far?”

Eduardo hesitated:

“It was interesting. To be honest, I really don’t know how to process it yet — this is my second time. And the first was when I was a kid. Something Mozart? I don’t remember much except that it was boring.”

“The Magic Flute,” Sally sighed. It boggled her mind why this opera was perceived as suitable for children. So much damage it had done, as the kids who were tortured by it were unlikely ever to return to the opera world as adults.

“Maybe. I really don’t remember. I was nine. You know, with this one, at least I heard some before.”

“Oh for sure, that drinking song is the most overused opera music in the world.”

In response, Eduardo hummed the melody of the Brindisi quite accurately.

“Yep.”

“Well, that and the rest of it. At the end of the act, when she sings on her own...”

“Sempre libera.”

“I guess that’s the one. You know I only now realized what it means, and I had no idea how much more meaning it added to the story in “The Lisbon Traviata.”

“Wait, you know about Lisbon Traviata?” Sally was both surprised and suddenly mildly disgusted at her own behavior. She once promised herself never to become a condescending opera snob, and that was exactly how she just treated the guy.

“Yes, I was lucky to watch the revival of it in 2010.”

“A revival? Of Lisbon Traviata? What do you mean?”

Eduardo laughed.

“Oh I get it — you are probably thinking about the recording itself, but there’s this play by Terrence McNally, with this opera-crazy character who is obsessed with the recording of it. When the play appeared in 1985, that recording was a collector’s item still.”

“Yeah, and now you can buy the mp3 of it on Amazon for 2.99.”

“Just 2.99?”

“I know, right? And I imagine people probably killed each other to get that recording in the play.”

“Not exactly.”

“Not killed or not for the recording.”

“The latter. It’s a good play. You’d like it — the opera crazy character reminds me of Wayne. McNally really likes opera — he always sneaks it into his plays.”

“I don’t know much about the spoken theater. Did he write anything else I might have heard about?”

“He did a bunch of things, including musicals. Let me see...”

Eduardo pulled out his phone. The phone lit right up, which meant that he did not fully turn it off for performance. Before Sally could stop herself, she blurted out:

“You didn’t turn your phone off?”

Eduardo replied apologetically:

“I know, it’s horrible. I was so much in a hurry that I just forgot. It’s good that I put it on silent during the day.”

Sally felt even more like a condescending opera snob she swore never to be. She was about to apologize, but Eduardo had already located the information:

“Oh look, he did a bunch of operas: “The Food of Love”, “Dead Man Walking”, “Three Decembers.”



“Dead Man Walking” rings a bell.”

“Did they do it here?”

Sally laughed.

Eduardo seemed to be quick to get things right:

“Okay, I see I said a dumb thing. But it would be really cool if they did. Don’t they do any twentieth-century music here?”

Usually Sally would lose interest around this question — sometimes dealing with opera newbies required more patience than she possessed, but tonight she felt so strongly how much condescension this attitude meant that she would not dare to end the conversation. Maybe because Eduardo knew something else she didn’t know well. She really did not care for spoken theater that much. She had no time for that. In addition, lots of talking without music made her uneasy, aching for melody. The stage felt empty if the orchestra wasn’t playing the part. Yet she respected people who were into that — she was in general very respectful of other people’s obsessions, especially if they didn’t interfere with hers.

“Well, they do a lot of pre-Second World War music, but not as much of the contemporary stuff,” she replied.

“That is so weird for me, because in my field new plays are all the rage, and they are constantly written and produced. So it sounds to me that the opera is not as dead as they claim, but is still not particularly alive?”

Sally cringed; he probably wasn’t wrong, but it hurt her that somebody who didn’t have that much interest in this art would feel so free to pronounce it dead.

“Wasn’t theater proclaimed dead when the film appeared?” she said, trying to restrict edginess in her voice.

Surprisingly, Eduardo laughed in response.

“And the film has been dead since “The Wire” and “Mad Men.”

“And TV is dead now that there is YouTube.”

“Which is in its death throes as well, because there’s Vine. Speaking of dying art, maybe you would know this play by McNally — it was turned into the movie “Frankie and Johnny”

“Frankie and Johnny”? Of course, I know that one. Al Pacino and some beautiful woman whose name eludes me. Early nineties or something. The most unbelievable teeth-brushing scene one could conceive of.”

“You really know it! It’s unusual — people prefer other romantic comedies of the nineties. There were so many.”

“When I was in college, my friends and I had romcom marathons. We watched everything. Literally so. I’m surprised I even remember the bit about teeth-brushing.”

“What was your opinion? I’ve been told before by women...”

The way Eduardo stumbled at the word “women” did not escape Sally’s attention. Most obviously, it was supposed to be singular and meant either the current or the ex-girlfriend.

“...that nowadays his behavior would not just be considered smothering, but predatory even.”

“Johnny’s? I need to watch the movie again for that, to be honest. Then, I was in my Al Pacino crush period, which means that I hardly followed the plot because all I did was watching Pacino exist on the TV screen.”

They both laughed. He was so very easy to talk to and behaved well during the performance. There was nothing worse for her than to be forced to socialize during the intermission with somebody who just drove her to madness fidgeting or scratching their clothes or doing anything else which interfered with music. Most of the times, Wayne got people right, she had to agree.

“By the way,” she said. “If you need a drink or a restroom, you’d better do it now. This production doesn’t have the intermission between the second and the third act, and that’s about an hour and a half.”

“That long?”

“Well, be grateful Wayne didn’t force you to see Wagner. Some of his opera’s shortest acts last an hour and a half, and there are usually at least three.”

“Incredible. Now that you said it, water is all I can think about. I’ll go get it. I promise I won’t be late this time.”

Once Eduardo left, Sally looked around. She felt suddenly in a very good mood, fortified with positive emotions enough to survive the annoying couple behind her. They didn’t leave, even though the man looked clearly as he would agree to be anywhere else but here. Maybe the second act would ease his suffering, thought Sally — there were several ensemble pieces in it which could move even those who were dragged to the opera under the threat of divorce. Ushers 22, 57, and 14 were back in their places near the railing. An old guy with lots of hair which stuck in all possible directions was talking to 14, while an old lady, vaguely familiar to Sally, was talking to 22. Definitely one of the regulars, she thought.

Eduardo was back almost right away.

“That’s very quick,” Sally said.

“You ladies have much more difficult time out there, for sure. The line to the ladies’ restroom is long. Very long.”

“Yes, it’s a legitimate concern. There are blog posts and separate threads on opera forums which are solely dedicated to the sad state of the Met Opera’s women’s restrooms. Opera people take things seriously.”

“Well, this one is understandable. Are we almost done with the break? What am I looking forward to next?”

“Pretty much everything.”

“You opera people do love your Traviata. And I thought that character in the play was an exaggeration.”

“Nope. I haven’t seen the play, but I would not be surprised that it could’ve been downplayed.”

“That would be scary.”

The lights in the auditorium started to dim, and Sally moved to find the most comfortable position, because she knew that throughout the second act she would hardly move. Eduardo took the cue to settle down too. He took out his phone, turned it off, and waved the lifeless gadget at Sally. She smiled in response. Then she turned back to the stage — the orchestra had finished tuning, and energetic Yannick was walking briskly to the pit.

“That guy is, like, super young for the conductor,” somebody whispered loudly behind.

Sally didn’t even need to turn to know that the man of the annoying couple was trying to engage his companion in a pleasant if untimely chatter.

“Uhuh” murmured the woman in response.

“But he’s not that young. He’s forty something,” the man insisted.

“We’ll talk about it later, honey, now let’s listen.”

The man grunted not very happily, but remained silent. Sally glanced at Eduardo to see if he heard this magnificent exchange, and he obviously did because when he smiled widely at her. It was probably the first time in a while that Sally had to suppress laughter at Traviata, or at most tragic operas for that matter.

## Fantasy Opera Season Archive III

[www.fantasyoperaseason.com/archives](http://www.fantasyoperaseason.com/archives)

### “Accident at the Met”

February 16, 2014. Posted by LaDivina

We have just been informed that a horrific accident took place in the family circle tonight during the performance of the double bill of Cavalleria and Pagliacci. According to the information that is available to us so far, there was an altercation between patrons: a woman pushed a man who fell over the ledge above the entrance. The man was taken to the hospital, and the woman was arrested. The performance was halted for about thirty minutes, but then resumed.

UPDATE: Alas, the man, whose identity yet remains unknown, died in hospital upon arrival. Let the media carnage commence.

UPDATE 2: As some of you have probably seen right now, the identity of the woman has been made public. We have decided to abstain from discussing her identity here, because she is one of the participants here, and we implore all of you who know her alias not to disclose it.

UPDATE 3: Since some of the participants could not resist the temptation to say things which should not be said, we have decided to restrict access to this discussion thread. It will no longer be available in the open access. Please, refrain from mentioning her fantasy opera user name in open access posts, for it will attract unnecessary attention from the media and general public. All mentions of the case in open access will be strictly moderated.

### Comments:

1 / ... / 6 / 7 /

02/18/2014

**LaDivina:** Oh my, lovelies, I leave the internets for mere hours, and I return to this?

IlDucadiMantova, I should say you didn't wait too long to spill the beans on the identity of the woman in question. I am not going to ban you this time, but consider this the second strike warning. I am leaving the thread in which you spew negative comments all around as a reminder to everyone what NOT TO DO. I am also unbanning Gerry-flapper2.0, because her offence is minor compared to what transpires in the thread.

Please, be respectful to each other as well avoid any ad hominem discussions of the people involved in the accident.

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** LaDivina, if I may, a suggestion: since we have SSH's real name and alias out of the bag at this point, and there is always a chance that you or TheRenaissanceMan might not be able to react fast enough when people disclose too much, why don't we move this thread away from the open access? Everybody who registered will be able to comment on it, but it will not appear on the website for everyone to see. By that we can guarantee that our discussions do not serve as a fodder for unnecessary speculations in the media and that we continue talking about the accident because, especially now that we know it involves one of our own, discussions of it are

unavoidable. By doing this, we will minimize the chance of this thread finding its way to social media, because once it is there, nothing could be done.

**LaDivina:** Great idea, friend. Thank you. Let me work on the update and then I will tinker with the settings.

**LaDivina:** Done.

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** Thank you! To be honest, I am quite shocked by the news, and I can only imagine what it has been for you in the past 24 hours.

**LaDivina:** Merci, mon ange. It hasn't been easy for sure.

**Zerlina1809:** Since this is no longer available publicly, just wanted to share. Went to Joffrey ballet performance three days ago, and a fight broke out in the first row of the main floor. Two women, well dressed, expensive purses and all. People tried to shush them, but it got so bad that the ushers had to escort them out.

**Papageno1:** Something in the air? The end of the world "Melancholia"-style is coming? Just sayin'.

**MVW:** At least, there was no danger of anybody falling, and that's how the murder was avoided? :)

**Zerlina1809:** I guess.

**Chicago\_opera\_buff:** While we are on the topic of fights, I remember a couple of years ago we had a huge fight between the audience members in the box at Chicago Symphony. One of the men imbibed a bit too much in the intermission and forgot completely (or maybe he didn't even know — they sometimes offer those box seats with a significant discount, so you never know who you are going to get — a connoisseur who would sit quiet as a mouse or a random "bought this to impress my date" character) that there is a rule about rotating seats in the box. So he rushes in when the music almost started, sees a man who sat behind him during the first half of the concert in "his" seat, and boom! — goes right at it. It probably wouldn't be that bad, but the other man decided to defend his right for the front seat as much as he could. They made quite a racket! There was a moment when one of them was almost hanging over the edge. Could've been another falling man story for us.

**operakid\_25:** Too soon?

**Chicago\_opera\_buff:** As I said, it was two, maybe three years ago.

**Chicago\_opera\_buff:** Oh wait, I get it. Never mind.

**Zerlina1809:** Chicago too! Is there something in Chicago's drinking water that we don't know about that makes audience members prone to fighting? I should be more careful when I go out to classical music venues here. You never know who you are going to sit next to! Anyway, how did the story end? Did they have to stop the concert and have an emergency intermission? Did they call the police?

**Chicago\_opera\_buff:** They had to stop, but for a short time. Once both of them were out of the box, the orchestra started playing almost immediately. It was CSO which means that whenever the management can avoid overtime, they'll do so.

**Scotto\_per\_sempre:** Sometimes these union restrictions are truly ridiculous. What's wrong with an occasional encore, or emergencies like this one? Traveling orchestras always

prepare an encore. There are moments when I feel unfulfilled without these additional five or ten minutes. Do unions ever think about audiences at all or only money? Because one would think that audience should come first, but it seems to be rarely the case.

**LaDivina:** Careful, my dear. I'm not in the mood to moderate a union fight on this thread. There is a separate thread for that. If you need to vent some union frustration, go there. I moderate it once a month, and only when I can find a hazmat suit that fits me.

## Chapter 5

### Usher

Season 2013-2014, March 7

JB always stopped at Ready Penny Inn for a pint after an evening performance. His coworkers preferred to hang out in a bar a couple of blocks from the Met, and JB sometimes would be cajoled to come, but then getting back home to Jackson Heights would be a nuisance. At times it felt that walking home on the train tracks would be faster. That's why he usually rushed to the subway after work to catch a 7 train before it turned into a promise of a train. Ready Penny was a relatively short walk from his apartment, it was open till 4, they served beer in frozen mugs and had the most decent Guinness in the neighborhood, which was probably not that difficult, as it was the only Irish bar in a neighborhood otherwise known as Little India.

While he sat on the train, he tried to remember who would be bartending today: Eddie was good for the night when one needed to be left alone, Maggie, chatty and happy, was good for the opposite, but Helen, JB's bartender crush for many years, was perfect for any night. She knew her regulars so well, that she only needed a brief scan of the person's face to decide whether to

pour a beer or reach for a bottle of Jameson. She talked when people wanted to talk and kept away when they didn't. JB loved watching her interact with customers and knew quite well that his own rule of talking only when talked to in the Met was the result of careful observation of Helen's ways. Once, when he exceeded his usual allowance of two pints and was getting quite tipsy, he blurted out that she was a great influence in his life, to which Helen responded with her loud, rolling laughter. Even her laughter was badass. He really hoped that Helen was bartending tonight — it seemed to be one of those nights.

Compared to most days, and especially to the night of the accident, tonight's performance was exceptionally uneventful: third and fourth acts glided smoothly, Werther's reading of Ossian's poetry caused an uproar which, as somebody from the regulars explained to JB once, should not be there, since there was no pause for applause in the score, and then Werther's death scene, bloody and disturbing, no doubt caused many an eye to shed a tear. When Mrs. Schaeffer and Maddy stopped by at the exit where JB stood, Mrs. Schaeffer was still dabbing her eyes with a tissue:

"Isn't he wonderful, Jimmy? Mark is missing out so much because of his stubbornness!" she said.

"I have to agree with that" JB replied carefully. Compared to Mrs. Schaeffer, though, her husband was as pliant as a man could get. Maddy smiled at his response as if, at least JB wanted to believe it so, she knew what he really meant. He wondered if he noticed a back smudge in the corner of her left eye, and Mrs. Schaeffer resolved that quickly:

"But it's for good, because now Maddy knows what we old people are blabbering about all the time. I warned her to wear waterproof makeup."

"Next time, Amanda, for sure" Maddy replied.

So the first time definitely went well.



“Speaking of which, Jimmy, does the Met have the backstage tours in March? I was telling Maddy, it would be such a fun thing for her to do.”

“They might be all sold out. You should check with the subscription services, maybe they can get you a ticket.”

“Are you still leading the tours? My friends from Colorado, remember? They were on a tour you led a couple of years ago, and they liked it so much! They said you’re the only guide who wasn’t condescending. The rest of them treated the people on a tour as four-year-olds who had never heard about the opera.”

“Unfortunately, that sometimes is the case.”

“I have your email — I’ll write you some time later this week to get the details. I don’t want Maddy to be stuck on a tour with one of those stuffy opera snobs.”

“No problem, Mrs. Schaeffer. Good night, ladies.”

He watched them till they got into the elevator. Maddy’s dress sparkled in the light of the chandeliers. Wayne left almost right after the performance with a curt “Bye”, but that didn’t mean anything: JB was absolutely sure that he would get the email about that fantasy opera thing later tonight, if the email hadn’t been sent already. It was very obvious that Wayne wanted him to be a part of that. A stop at Ready Penny was essential, because JB could sense that a normal person would be able to stomach the idea of fantasy opera only when it was accompanied by a cold pint. And, if lucky, the cool presence of Helen at the bar.

JB got off the 74-th Street on an autopilot: his body followed the familiar route through the loud, crowded streets while his thoughts were far away. A heavy smell of herbs and spices hung in the crispy March air. There was little snow, but the nights were still cold, and the real spring was yet to come.

When he entered the bar, it felt as if he had traveled back in time, so drastic was the change of scenery and smells and sounds. It was perfectly divey, a little bit too perfect almost, because somebody ratted out Ready Penny on yelp, and now during early evenings the bar would be frequented “tourists” as Helen called them — twentysomethings from Astoria or Park Slope or Manhattan in search of authentic dive bar atmosphere. Afterwards they would complain about the limited craft beer selection and the fact that regulars weren’t dying to talk to them on yelp, but still kept coming. JB suspected cheap beer was to blame.

Maggie was at the bar. She spotted him as he entered and proceeded to pour him a Guinness right away.

“Hi, JB, how’re you?” she chirped as she placed the pint on a coaster in front of him.

“I’m good, Maggie, you?”

“Not bad. Tonight’s a quiet night. I’m subbing for Helen.”

So he was right — tonight was Helen’s night after all.

“Hopefully, it’s nothing too serious.”

“Yeah, she just said she needed to sleep it off, so must be a cold. How’s work tonight?

More dead people at the Met?”

“There was a suicide.”

“Oh no!” Maggie gasped.

Maggie was in her late forties, but deadpan humor was not her thing at all. She believed everything she was told, if the person saying it had a serious expression on their face.

“Not a real one, Maggie. Met has been suicide-free since 1988.”

“Oh thank God! It’s not nice of you to make fun of this — I can’t stop thinking about that thing. How could anyone do that? He had a family. What are they going to do now?”

JB put his phone onto the counter hoping that would send the right signal to Maggie.

“It’s complicated, you know” he said.

“No, it’s not.”

For some reason, Maggie wanted a debate tonight. Thankfully, a couple of old time regulars came in and served as a necessary distraction. JB looked at his phone: the red signals of notifications were everywhere. In addition to sending him two emails, Wayne already sent him a friend request on facebook. “Am I getting involved with this too fast?” JB thought.

There was also an email from one of the union leaders, but JB knew already that it was about the union meeting. George told him earlier today that it was not to miss, because they were going to explain if there was a chance for a strike with the current state of bargaining. JB wasn’t a big fan of the meetings, they were poorly planned and the voting process during them with all those motions and seconding seemed excessive, but he promised himself to be better about it and not to miss yet another meeting because he overslept. But who scheduled union meetings in the mornings?

The rest of the emails was spam, so JB could not avoid Wayne’s letters any longer. The first one contained the link to the website called, appropriately, “Fantasy Opera Season” and the link to the rules of the fantasy opera. The second had a message from Wayne:

*“Mr. Beam,*

*Let me know whether you have received the links to our website and to the code...*

Code. A grand word for something which looked a wiki page to JB.

*You do not have to have an account in order to read most of the threads: regular chats about performances, reviews by our members, and other opera-related discussions are all open access. One can only access live chats during televised or streamed performances as well as participate in general fantasy opera activities if they register. Since the approval of a new member takes approximately a week or even longer, because we need an*

*agreement of at least two out of three current moderators of the website, I suggest you use our mutual friend's login information, since we have agreed that you will be taking over her season anyway. Her login is "quiet\_leonora" and her password is "ilnerevientpas". Definitely check out her season — you will see that her stats require a lot of updating, but before the accident, her season was very promising. I know the code might seem a bit tricky at first, so feel free to message me either by email or through facebook messenger (yes, I use it), or we can meet some time, so I could walk you through some of the most intricate parts.*

*Thank you again for agreeing to do this!*

*Best,*

*Wayne Hamilton*

*PS Should you be curious what our members think about the accident, there is a separate discussion for that. We had to restrict the access to it, after the open access discussion turned into a bit of a spectacle de merde."*

JB opened the fantasy opera season page in the browser. It prompted him to sign in right away, but he couldn't make himself do it. It felt fundamentally wrong. It was as if he was spying on somebody else's life, however imaginary that part of life for that person was. He clicked on a couple of reviews instead and looked through several performance discussions. On the first glance, sounded familiar — he heard similar discussions in the lobby and in the auditorium all the time. He finished his Guinness and signaled Maggie for another one. Then he opened the "code."

It was long. It took him quite a lot of scrolling down before he reached the end of the document. The second thing he noticed was the number of clarifications and markings "needs further discussion of the members". It definitely promised to be an exhilarating read.

“What’re you reading, JB?” asked Maggie putting a full glass in front of him on a new coaster.

“Just some stuff about fantasy sports.” He responded in hope the mere mention of it would bore Maggie away. It did.

“Didn’t know you were into that stuff. My fifteen-year-old does fantasy baseball and basketball. Sounds like an immense waste of time.”

“It is,” agreed JB and returned back to the wiki page.

The start was nothing to worry about: 10 operas a season, 7 if the number of participants exceeded twenty-five — clearly, fantasy opera was interesting to very few. Four pools of singers: superstars, established stars, young and promising, young ensemble members. The participants were allowed to select only one singer of the same voice type from the superstar list, four — from the established star list, five — from young and promising, and there were no limits for the ensemble members. So only one soprano, one tenor, one baritone, one bass, one countertenor from the superstar list? JB wondered if it seemed too restrictive. Ah, the clarification. So not only for him:

“\*Clarification: after certain consideration, it has been decided that the restriction will apply not to the voice type, but to Fach”

“Fach” JB said quietly. He liked to read German aloud. It had been a while since he had a chance to use it, so he rarely understood what he read, but he liked the sound of it still as much as he liked it when he reenlisted and was sent to the base in Partenkirchen. He learned enough German during language classes to get around. He knew that he could have maintained his German in a better shape if he did some effort.

Limiting the selection to Fach totally made sense, because it allowed a better choice within the same voice type: getting stuck with a Heldentenor superstar would hardly help if the

opera required a lyrical tenor, and otherwise. So far, so good. JB was expecting guidelines which were much more complicated.

What else? The same chorus and the same orchestra for the whole season. Good. Different conductors from three pools of superstars, established, and young and promising. Same for directors, set and costume designers. JB counted: if one was looking at a season of ten operas with an average number of five principal singers, different conductors, and the rest for each, that would mean calculating scores for at least 90 people. That sounded asinine.

“\*Clarification: the ensemble members for small roles can appear in all operas of the season. The rest are limited to three appearances, with superstars in any category to two.”

Slightly better, but still up to fifty people to follow. No wonder that only old people did it. And Sally. When did she find the time to do that? If she could afford to go to the opera as much as she did, she must have had a job.

He scrolled down to scoring. There was a ranking system for the sources from which the reviews came from. There was a ranking system for the individual reviewers. There was a forbidden list of sources and reviewers. Most names were completely unknown to JB, but one of the sources was way too familiar: New York Times. “What’s wrong with New York Times?” JB wondered.

“\*Clarification: after much deliberation, the members have concluded that although we do not possess any definite proof that the New York Times reviewer is the Met Opera’s agent, his reviews show the Met bias and thus cannot be used for scoring. He is too happy about everything.”

Okay.

1-5, with one being the lowest point and five being the highest, scoring system for keywords in reviews. “Secure top”, “strong middle”, “grounded low register” — the “review-

speak” which JB never really mastered. But at least there were concrete words to look for. How much time did it take them to come up with those lists? he wondered

“Penalty and Bonus Points”

What?

“Subtract 10 points from the overall score if the reviewer uses the word “earthy”

JB frowned. Definitely he was getting to the part which Wayne was identifying as tricky.

“Subtract 10 points from the overall score if the reviewer blames all faults of the performance on being “Regietheater”.

“Attention: If the reviewer uses the word “Eurotrash” earnestly, notify the moderators, so we could remove that reviewer from the list of approved sources.”

Wait, since when the word “Eurotrash” was not appropriate? JB heard it in use among the patrons and used it himself all the time. He opened his facebook messenger, and even though it was past midnight and was probably too late, he really needed to know.

“Since when “Eurotrash” is not PC?” he typed.

The answer came almost immediately:

“For at least five years. Glad you’re reading the code, Mr. Beam. Did you get to the part of the dead singer boost?”

A what? JB scanned the text, scrolling down.

“In the middle of the season, three of the best performing participants at the time can choose to use any of the famous dead singers in any of the roles. Not only the dead singer means maximum points on all counts, but the participants get additional points for each time the living singer in the same role is compared to the dead one they chose.”

JB was getting annoyed: it felt as if these people were competing against one another in who was going to complicate their little exclusive game the most. Wayne’s hopes to recruit more

“young blood” into this were obviously utopian. Sally was most likely an exception, and whatever kicks she got out of this were not something JB could enjoy. He hesitated as he was about to close the “code” for good. A notification for a new message started blinking on the screen.

“Have you looked at Sally’s season yet? If you look at it, the code will start to make more sense to you.

JB clicked to sign in, but the deed still didn’t seem right. Maybe after another pint.

He looked up from the phone to signal Maggie.

“Third one tonight, eh?” Maggie asked as she placed the glass onto the counter in front of him. “Your fantasy team’s not doing that well?”

That was something that Helen never did. Maggie, on the other hand, would quite often get on a high horse and start preaching the importance of keeping one’s drinking under control. She didn’t do it to everyone, but it did seem as if she was watching JB’s alcoholic intake quite closely. It wasn’t too surprising: something about JB appealed to older women’s maternal instinct, and he often found himself subjected to their extensive care, but with Maggie it already reached the stage when he was getting annoyed by it. After all, judging the patron for a number of drinks they consumed seemed a very unprofitable move for a bartender. But he knew how to distract Maggie from worrying:

“The weather’s been changing too much, and this was a long performance, so the knee’s not happy with me for that.” he replied. He felt a bit shitty playing his “injured vet” card with Maggie, especially since the buzz from the pill he took at the Met subsided only about an hour ago, but he honestly hoped that one pill would be enough for tonight, and with enough Guinness he would be able to fall asleep without taking another.



“Oh, you poor thing, I’m sorry!” Maggie cooed. “It’s been so cold recently that it doesn’t feel like spring at all. Isn’t it weird that our bodies know that? It’s as if we have a calendar inside or something.”

“It’s not about the calendar, it’s the weather changes — you know, when the atmospheric pressure drops, and things like that. My left leg really hates precipitation.”

Maggie nodded her head in agreement, and JB knew that the drink counting was temporarily forgotten. He decided that this pint would be his last before he went home, which still meant about half an hour to kill. He opened the fantasy opera season website again. Reading “the code” seemed out of the question at this point — he knew reading more of those rules would only annoy him now. When he drank, he always became more irritable. When he was sober, hiding anger or irritation was easy for him, but when inebriated, he had to watch himself: very small things could set him off.

Yet something kept him on this page, and he knew what it was. JB typed “quiet\_leonora” into the search line, and waited till the page of all messages by Sally in the open access threads opened. He looked at the results not in the reverse chronological order as was common, but instead, went to the very first instances when the quiet\_leonora had something to say on this website.

At first, the quiet\_leonora was, indeed, very quiet: occasional sentence here and there to say that she liked the performance of whoever was the singer the thread discussed, or a question asking for recommendations for most interesting performances or interpretations. Other participants were immensely pleased to share their knowledge, but it also seemed that nobody could ever agree what was the better version of everything, and so the discussions would often get out of control. The quiet\_leonora clearly kept out of the heated exchanges and only reappeared on the threads to thank everybody for recommendations.

The first time that the quiet\_leonora decided to raise her voice, or at least that's what JB imagined participation in the online battle was equivalent for, was in 2010, about a year after her first message on the website was published, and it was in response to a rant by a user "TheRenaissanceMan" who wrote several paragraphs on the topic of young people dressing up "inappropriately" to the opera. The rant was illustrated with a blurry picture of somebody's feet in red Converse keds.

The first responses were all gasps of disgust and proclamations of doom. The dressing style of 1950's and 1960's was pitched against the overly casual fashion trends of the twenty-first century, which clearly dated every participant. But then the quiet\_leonora joined the conversation:

**"quiet\_leonora:** didn't we have a discussion of how to attract younger audiences to the opera just a day ago? Don't you think that the very fact that you have noticed a young person at the opera calls for celebration? Haven't we reached the stage when we want them there so badly it doesn't matter whether they are wearing jeans and keds or oxfords and a formal suit?

**TheRenaissanceMan:** I think you are missing the point of what I am saying — which is common with young people nowadays, so I am not at all surprised. Let me repeat again what I have said above: opera outing is not an everyday activity, there are certain social conventions that one is expected to follow here. You will not wear pajamas to work, will you? So how could it be appropriate to dress casually to the only place which still manages to maintain the integrity of high arts? It is not: it is disrespectful and tasteless. And if those people do not understand, then it is safe to say that we do not need them at the opera at all.

**quiet\_leonora:** First of all, I don't like the condescension in the tone of your reply. Second, I think you are missing the point here. I have re-read your overly long rant, and nowhere have I noticed a complaint about the "Red Converses" misbehaving during the performance in any way. Red converses do not glow in the dark. Red converses do not unwrap cough drops for twenty minutes in a row. Red converses do not cough Mimi-style. Red converses do not comment on the action happening on the stage in loud whisper. Et cetera, et cetera, et cetera... To sum up, if the "Red Converses" were quiet and respectful during the performance, then this rant is nothing but "when we were young" kvetching. When you see my lime green converses in the third row of the Family Circle, spare me your judgment and disgust. I get enough condescension at the opera from the old people like you already.

**TheRenaissanceMan:** Lucky me, I will never have to subject my eyes to such a garish sight. I have had my seats in the Dress Circle since 1972, and until recently was mostly surrounded by men and women who know better than to make questionable fashion choices.

**LaDivina:** Oh woe us, the unworthy commoners of the Family Circle! Of course, we can never rise to the heights of sophistication that the heavenly inhabitants of the Dress Circle possess. How dare you, quiet\_leonora, to imply that a plebeian sans Jimmy Choos or Manolos and a Chanel purse can grasp the complexities of such operatic masterpieces as “La Cenerentola” or “Lucia”? Thank Wotan, our dearest little quiet\_leonora, you did not go as far as to suggest that one can understand opera without an Ivy League degree and a modest trust fund your parents set in your name years ago. Now that would have been utterly outrageous! Seems like you should be truer to your name than you currently are, quiet\_leonora.

**The RenaissanceMan:** I am done with this. The last thing I need right now is LaDivina getting all hysterical. You know that’s not what I said. All I am asking for is respect. Respect for something we all agree is sacred to us and should be treated with awe.

**quiet\_leonora:** Sure, enjoy sitting in your fashionably, aesthetically pleasing Valhalla and watch your beloved world to burn in front of you because when it was still possible to save it, somebody preferred to be insulted by footwear.”

That was a nice comeback, JB thought. Was LaDivina Wayne’s nickname? It sounded like Wayne — JB could picture him saying this with theatrical gestures and intonations to emphasize the depth of his pretended rage. It was nice of him to support Sally, otherwise she could have easily been silenced further by the others who upheld the opinion of TheRenaissanceMan, whoever that was. JB had to work in the Dress Circle a couple of times when he was subbing for one of the Dress Circle ushers, but he never felt comfortable there and was glad to return to his regular post afterwards. The percentage of mink coats in the Dress Circle was significantly higher than Family Circle’s dead animal count. No wonder red converses stood out there.

JB continued looking through the threads. The quiet\_leonora was getting feistier: there were more fights with “TheRenaissanceMan” and the like over “opera is not what it used to be” topic. JB got to hear a lot of those discussions at work, to the point that he would stop listening the moment the patron would start quetching.

Then he noticed a post published by Sally: it was most likely the first time she started a thread. The post was in response to the Met's announcement of the future season:

"Judging by the amount of grumpiness the new season caused, everybody has already compiled their "ideal season" in their heads. What would be yours? Let's start small: ten operas, one season, living singers."

The thread had hundreds of comments. JB scrolled down: several responses below "Leporello1965" suggested this needed to be an actual thing, and then "Midwestern\_loggionista" joked that this would be a valuable addition to the world of fantasy sports. Somebody mentioned "fantasy casting" and "NachRome1940" remembered doing something similar to this in the nineties, pre-Internet, which several other commenters immediately proclaimed superior to whatever the future fantasy opera season was turning out to be, because the old version required reading reviews in the actual newspapers, which had to be local versions in order to contain all of the reviews. Nevertheless, the idea definitely caught on: the discussion of the rules started several replies down, and the last message on the thread announced that LaDivina had created a separate thread to discuss "the code.". Several posts later came the announcement that it was agreed that the website would be changing its name from "Les\_Enfants\_du\_Paradis" — what was it with opera people and the use of French, JB wondered — to "Fantasy Opera Season." An update to the announcement introduced the moderators: LaDivina, quiet\_leonora, and The\_Grand\_Inquisitor.

After all this, she didn't want to participate anymore? JB had seen enough of the opera lovers to find it hard to comprehend. Maybe her season was worse than Wayne wanted JB to believe. Now JB felt like having a look. He was about to tap "sign in", as a new text came in. It was from Sheila, one of the ushers who worked with him in the Family Circle:

“Sorry to bother you so late, looks like I am coming with a cold, and I am scheduled to work during tomorrow’s matinee. Could you sub for me? I can’t afford getting really sick now. If you are still awake, let me know please.”

“Enchanted Island” was not among JB’s favorites this season. He actually organized his schedule, so he could avoid it as much as possible. He wasn’t a big fan of baroque music in general, but a fake baroque opera made of parts from different operas was even less appealing. On other hand, Sheila was a good person and had JB’s back a number of times in the past. He would feel bad if declined, he knew that.

“I’ll do it, no worries” he typed.

It was half past two, so if he hurried home now, then he would get at least six hours of asleep. It was not that bad. As long as he would fall asleep right away. No more fantasy opera season nonsense for tonight then. He had a Sunday off, so he could read all of the threads then if he wanted to. JB pulled a crumpled twenty out of the pocket of his coat and put it on the counter. He waved at Maggie and a couple of regulars whose names he never bothered to remember. Outside, the cold air burned his lungs as he breathed it in. He felt a twitch of pain in his wrists. That was not a good sign.

## Chapter 6

### Sally

Season 2012-2013, April 6-7

Sally had a love-hate relationship with the second act of “Traviata” because it usually brought her most pleasure as well as caused most anguish in the character of Giorgio Germont, Alfredo’s father. Germont the father sang some of the most beautiful arias in the act, and Sally’s

opera loving side treasured his presence on the stage, but Sally's naïve side, which rarely emerged at the opera, because Sally had long learned to appreciate the artifice of operatic plots, never stopped hating Alfredo's father for what he did to Violetta. It was not the fact that he came to Violetta's house to ensure she dumped his son, because his daughter's engagement was in danger while her brother cohabited with a courtesan. It was the way he presented his case to her that vexed Sally — the overall message was: "it is not about you, you have to sacrifice yourself because you will never be as good as we are, reputable humans."

Germont in this production was sung by Domingo, who had been trying himself in the baritone roles for a quite sometime with varying results. Sally liked this version of Alfredo's father — a bit too old probably, but very respectable, ever so slightly self-righteous in the moment when he plainly cut Violetta's protest that she could not leave Alfredo with his "E d'uopo" — "You must." Sally's heart always skipped a beat at that "must." It did tonight as well. There wasn't another moment in the whole opera where she felt more close to the main character: she knew very well what it was like to have no say in one's own future. That was how John chose to break up with her.

He called one day: she was waiting for his call, because it was about time they had their weekly dinner. He was travelling the week before, and she was starting to miss him badly. They were going out for about two years then. Sally thought their relationship to be very low-key: they saw each other once a week or once a fortnight depending on how busy John was, because in addition to teaching he travelled a lot for conferences and other academic-related gatherings. She never demanded more: very early on she figured out that John hated to feel smothered and that "smothered" for him meant what for most people was the normal level of attention, and so she was very careful not to seem needy in any way. She was happy to see him once a week and did not want anything else.

“Hi darling,” he said.

His low voice had this rumbling undertone to it. Every time Sally heard it, she felt warmth spreading in her chest.

“How are you, John?”

“Good, good. Do you have time right now?”

“Of course. I was waiting for your call.”

He hesitated.

“Listen, I’ve got some big news,” he said.

“Oh really? Is it about your book?”

“No, although that would have been big news as well. No, this is about next year. The University of Shanghai has invited me to teach there for a year or so. Two if things go well.”

“Oh.”

Her hands started shaking.

“It’s an amazing offer — I’ve been working with some of the faculty for quite a while now, and it’ll be a great chance for me to finish my research for this book.”

“When...” it was difficult to breathe, “when are you leaving?”

“Early August.”

She waited for him to say more.

“Look, I’ve been thinking that maybe we should spend less time together. There’s so much that I have to do before my departure, so I really have to prioritize my time better... Are you listening?”

“Yes” she chirped trying to sound as calm as possible. She wasn’t much of a crier, but this time tears just kept coming out of her eyes. And her nose was getting stuffy.

“I’ll be travelling for the next two days, but I’ll be back home on Sunday. Let’s get dinner and talk more. Five-ish. Can do?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, sweetie, gotta run. Talk soon.”

“Bye.”

Sally shivered: the memory was as real in front of her eyes as Violetta on the stage who agreed with tears in her voice to make a sacrifice that was forced upon her. It was amazing how Verdi wrote in tears into the melody of that aria. It was a very good aria to cry to.

Liz who was the only one who knew the details of this conversation asked her many times why Sally silently agreed with John’s decision.

“At least you could have asked him whether you two were breaking up officially!” raged Liz.

Sally didn’t need to ask — she knew that John was against long distance, because he had told her that several times before. And since the whole thing was so low-key, “breakup” meant very little. Very few people knew about this relationship, so it was mostly between John and Sally. John had decided, and confrontation had never been something Sally could do well.

On the stage, Violetta was crying and even then Germont had to tell her what to do: “Piangi, piangi, o misera,” — “Weep, weep, poor girl” Sally felt the tears coming. It frustrated her. Why was she so distracted today? It must have been the stupid email. Bad timing — Traviata and John did not go well together. She hardly listened to the final part of their duet, even though it was probably the best part.

Sally tried to shake it off. She always looked forward to the very end of the duet: when Violetta and Germont bade their farewell to each other, their singing together of “Addio” evoked the first time “addio” was sung in a duet in this opera: but that first one came right at the end of



the flower scene and was as full of hope of anticipation and excitement as this one was overflowing with sadness and hopelessness. Damrau and Domingo's "addio" was a good level of sadness, if only a little bit too reserved for Sally's taste. She liked it sung with more feeling than Domingo and Damrau did it — it was such a big moment. From then on, no one would bid farewell together: the moment of unity that existed would be totally gone, and Violetta would be completely on her own.

Violetta's break-up with Alfredo was the climax of the second act and the whole opera — Violetta's desperate cry "Amami, Alfredo, quant'io t'amo" — "love me as much I love you" right before she would tell him that she was leaving him for good. Not very logical, but very effective to produce emotion in the audience. Sally always teared up at this moment, and she was anticipating it today, waiting to take in every single note of that "Amami"

Sally never got to say her equivalent of "amami quant'io t'amo." His flight was the next day. They spent the evening together at his apartment. No one said anything about break-up. Everything was clear as it was. They ate take-out and watched TV instead of going out — he put his head on her lap and dozed off, and she kept stroking his back and looking at the images on TV without understanding what she saw. When she stopped caressing him because she would assume he was sleeping, he would mumble:

"Who told you to stop doing that?"

When she analyzed this later, she decided that it was his way to show that he was sad their relationship was over.

In the morning he woke her up and made her coffee. She stood in the kitchen, with a mug in her hands, and watched him make himself another coffee. That was his second, because he woke up at least two or three hours before her. His hands were shaking. When he was pouring the creamer into his mug, the mug slipped out of his hand and fell, coffee spilling everywhere.

“Fuck!” he shouted and threw the creamer to the floor with fury.

Sally didn’t say anything. She just stood there and watched him pick up the creamer and the mug, and then wipe the floor with the paper towel.

“It’s that kind of morning, kid” he told her.

Whenever Sally thought about that later, she knew that meant he was upset. Or that she wanted him to be upset. In the moment, that morning she simply felt numb. She was going through the motions, as the last moments of her relationship with John were coming to an end.

The clock on the stage which showed how much Violetta was left to live was running faster and faster. Sally knew how that felt.

When she finished her coffee, she went back to the bedroom, dressed up and gathered her things. He kissed her at the door.

“Travel safe.” she said.

“I’ll email you once I am there.” he said. “Talk soon.”

To think of it, Violetta’s break-up was not the only one which was full of contradictions. In Sally’s case, the relationship was about to end, but she and John behaved as if nothing was happening. She sometimes wondered what it would have changed if he told her — clearly— that it was over. Sally should have asked him about that a long time ago. If that email, which was on her mind all second act long, contained an invitation to catch-up coffee, she should take it and definitely ask him about their weirdo breakup. It’s been a while. Sally definitely deserved some answers.

Her mind continued racing: that was the part of being distracted at the opera she hated most. It was a special skill to remain mindful while the music was playing — something that ordinary people did not understand about opera. This skill required practice and training and that was why everybody became a better listener of classical music with time. But as in case with

many other activities that required focus and concentration, it was very difficult to go back to being mindful after one's focus was disrupted once. The irony today was that even the man behind her who was so fidgety during the first act was not as detrimental to Sally's concentration as her own mind.

It was very frustrating, and Sally did her best to gather her thoughts together before the second act ended in one of the most beautiful ensemble pieces in opera. She enjoyed the ensemble most when she was the least distracted: then, she could follow all separate characters singing, and the chorus, and the orchestra. Tonight, she could mostly concentrate on the three principle voices, especially the way Violetta's high soprano soared against the counterpoint of the the lower voice of Germont the father. Only in the very last ending seconds of the finale she could float together with the chorus and principles.

The absence of the intermission between the second and the third acts was a feature of the Decker production which was also vehemently hated by a lot of fantasy opera people. For Sally, grouping together these acts totally made sense, but today she knew she would really appreciate a breather in between the acts. She needed some time to get her thoughts together, maybe become distracted by a chat with Eduardo, who — she threw a surreptitious glance — was looking at the curtain intently, waiting for the last act to start. He didn't have to wait long: Yannick's baton flew up, and the prelude to the third act started.

The third act went mostly fine, except that coughing returned with a vengeance in Violetta's "E tardi" aria. Sally noticed that whenever operas were about the suffering of women with TB, the audiences seemed to come down with severe empathic cough which sounded like pneumonia. The cough would only subside for the finale and so did Violetta's, as she sang through her last breathing moments. When the opera ended, the auditorium exploded into

applause without allowing the orchestra to finish playing the last note. “Nothing new there,” grumbled Sally in low voice. She stubbornly waited before she could start to clap.

Eduardo was clearly one of those people who needed to discuss what they saw the moment it ended.

“This was really good! I liked it!” he said. “Did you?”

“It was good.”

She’d rather remain silent through the curtain call, but this didn’t seem to be the option.

“I liked the clock on the stage — in the first part I couldn’t really understand what it meant, but then in the second part, it totally worked. What a good idea!”

If only the disgruntled fantasy opera people could hear that. On the other hand, since Eduardo was an actual novice, maybe the opinion that it was an easy-to-digest Traviata had a right to exist.

“And that moment after she writes him a letter and tells him to love her — what a beautiful moment!”

Sally nodded. The cast had done their individual bows, and they were coming to the stage together. She looked around: a lot of impatient viewers had fled the Family Circle already. The couple in the row behind had already walked out. Sally felt like walking out too. She needed to catch the A train before it became unbearably local, because then the trip to Bedford-Stuyvesant would take ages.

The moment the curtain fell, she got up and looked at Eduardo, signaling that he needed to start moving.

“I’m so glad Wayne made me come. I really liked it.” he said

“That’s good. To be fair, he usually has a great intuition when it comes to identifying who will like a certain performance or not. He convinced me to see a couple of performances which I was absolutely sure I wasn’t going to love, but I ended up enjoying them a lot.”

“Are you going to walk to the subway?”

Eduardo seemed to need company. Maybe it was just the effect of the performance.

“Yes, need to get to Bedford-Stuyvesant before it gets too late.”

“Bedford-Stuyvesant! It’s quite far! I’m in Washington Heights, and it feels like it takes forever.”

At least, they were going in separate directions, so she wasn’t stuck with him for the whole ride. One of the reasons why Sally liked to go to the opera on her own was exactly this: she liked to be alone after the opera ended, because she still needed to digest the music that her brain captured. Depending on the opera, that digesting could take up to two days. Chatting right afterwards did not let the music settle. It broke it into small random chunks instead, and they would haunt her for days afterwards.

Another reason — however much Sally hated to admit it — was the email. Now that she had started thinking about it, she needed to open it as soon as possible. It had to wait till she got onto the A train.

On the way out of the auditorium, Sally noticed 22 listening and nodding to a patron who looked suspiciously familiar. Where had she seen him before? Was he of the fantasy opera people? But which one? Sally knew some of the participants of the fantasy opera season, but the people who used the site to comment in the threads were mostly online acquaintances. Only a few “devirtualized” in the past two or three years.

When Sally and Eduardo walked out of the Met, Sally stopped for a second and turned. It was her obligatory ritual — she never left without taking in a good look of the arches of the

Met's front and the chandeliers that burst into bright sparks, especially against the dark blue backdrop of the Manhattan night.

"What a beautiful building!" Eduardo said behind her.

"It is. I first started going to the Met because I liked to the place."

"How long have you been into opera?"

"Well, technically, my first visit was Tosca in 2007, but the real interest started five years ago."

"You should check out off-Broadway too. It's unfortunate no theater is playing "Lisbon Traviata" right now. You would like it."

Eduardo seemed to be genuinely nice. Sally wondered how he survived as a journalist, because at least according to Wayne, journalistic universe sounded like a gigantic jar with spiders. However, tonight she also felt like a spider, and she sped up to get to the train faster.

"I'll check out the play," she told him making sure to sound as genuine as possible.

She probably would feel bad the next day for trying to break away from Eduardo so insistently, but tonight her patience wore thin. All she need is to spend some time with the music in her head. Thankfully, the uptown and downtown trains ran on different platforms.

"It was nice to meet you! I'll see you again, I guess!" said Eduardo.

"Take care!" she answered, as she hurried down the steps to the downtown A and C train platform. Of course, her phone didn't have any reception on the platform, and there would be hardly any moment during her ride home when the reception would come back.

Sally opened the email at home. It was brisk in John's usual, I-love-non-sequiturs way:

"Hey kiddo, how've you been? How about some catching-up coffee some time soon? In town for the next two weeks or so, for sure. Got some news about Frank. Let me know if you'd like to meet."

—J”

The decision to meet was always presented as hers, and she had never exercised her right not to meet. It felt impolite to say “no” when she was given the opportunity to decide. The memories that remerged today started floating at the back of her mind again, and she wondered what it would feel like to say “no” to John.

But the email mentioned Frank, who had been in the rehabilitation center for the past few months after he broke his hip. Sally hadn’t been visiting Frank for a while and she felt guilty already, so if there were to be news about him, she should better go. She looked at her calendar: tomorrow her only busy time was morning dog-walking at the shelter, but otherwise, she did not have anything specific planned for the day. She knew that John might still be awake at the moment, so she responded quickly — just to be done with it. The response arrived right away: “Five-ish, Union Square Starbuck’s?”

She typed “Ok” and turned off the computer. She checked weather forecast for tomorrow and made a mental note to try new skinny jeans she had bought some time before and didn’t yet have a chance to wear.

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The weather next day did not cooperate with Sally’s routine of dog-walking. She ended up walking one dog out of three because the first two — a small Maltese mix named Pepper and a beagle Matilda — refused to go further than the closest intersection because of the rain. Only the third puppy — a pointer mix Spot — did not care for rain at all. All Spot wanted was to chase squirrels in the McCarren Park, but the squirrels hid because of the rain, so Spot ended up dragging Sally through all of the bushes to no avail. Spot was a very energetic, one and a half year old dog. Sally felt really bad for him — it was very obvious it would be an ordeal to find him new owners.

Even though Sally was soaking wet by the end, she needed the walk. It helped her not to think too much about the upcoming meeting and not to worry what John was going to tell her about Frank.

Sally's relationship with Frank was just as low-key and illogical as her relationship with John. It started when John and Sally were dating: John asked her to keep an eye on his elderly father while he was away. She had met Frank before, but never understood if they got any kind of connection.

"Frank likes you," told her John. "It would be of great help if you check on him once in a while. Just make sure you take him in small doses. He is a master manipulator."

The first visit was somewhat awkward. On the second one, Frank told her how he first caught John and his elder brother Simon smoking. On the third one, they shared a bottle of Boston lager. Frank was not allowed to drink much, but he enjoyed whatever minimum he was permitted to the full. And thus, the unlikely friendship continued.

Just like John, Frank seemed to be ignorant of the nature of the relationship that existed between his son and a Sally.

"Why are you hanging out with my son?" he would ask her and laugh his happy old man's laughter. "We should find you a boyfriend."

"Thanks, I am all set."

"You are? Who's the lucky guy?"

The word "trolling" had not been popularized on the Internet at the time, but if it had been, that would have been exactly what Sally felt Frank was doing. "Sometimes I am so tempted to reply: 'I am fucking your son, Frank. He's the lucky guy,'" complained Sally to Liz when Frank would repeat the same question over and over again each time she stopped by. Luckily, this was not the only thing Frank was constantly repeating: he also retold a number of family



stories once and again, talked constantly about his likes and disliked in jazz which Sally knew so poorly that it took her a while to learn at least some of the most often repeated names: Miles Davis, Thelonius Monk, Charlie Parker, and the structure for his book.

Frank was a sports journalist, but closer to the end of his life he understood that all he ever wanted was to write a novel. In the six years that Sally knew him, she had never witnessed him moving anywhere further than chapter one, but that chapter was written and re-written so extensively, that it was probably a work of art in itself by then. After his most recent fall, Frank was less interested in writing his book, and that was not a good sign. Sally felt a pang of conscience: she promised herself to visit Frank in his center next week.

Sally arrived at the Union Square on time, even though she knew that John was going to be late. It was not that he did it intentionally — he was prone to losing track of time when he was reading or watching TV, and also if he was in one of his insomnia spells, he would sometimes doze off and would have to rush out of his apartment when she called him.

Surprisingly, John was already inside, seated at the side of the café which faced the 17<sup>th</sup> street and not the Square. That was his preferred spot in this place. She gestured that she would grab a coffee before she would come to his table, and he nodded. The line wasn't too long, but it was enough for her to spend a couple of moments watching him. She hadn't seen him for half a year: he looked the same as before — tall, middle-aged, gray-haired. His eyes were blue, so bright and saturated with color that she for a while suspected him of wearing contacts. Then she saw Frank's eyes — which were almost as blue, only slightly dimmer because of age — and discarded her contacts conspiracy theory. His nose reminded her of some Roman emperor whose she could never remember — Claudius? Tiberius? — and John's chin could be considered to be slightly on the weak side, and she knew he was insecure about it.

She took her tall latte from the counter and walked to the table. He stood up to greet her. Recently, their greetings devolved into hand waving, but today she got a hug.

“Hi, darling,” he said. “You’re looking good today.”

“You’re not bad either. How’re you?” she asked.

“Life’s good, mostly. The book will be soon out of the press, so I’ll have to keep busy with conferences and things like that. Travel in summer most likely. How’s your life?

“Fine. Same old.”

“Work — puppies — opera?” he chuckled.

“Pretty much.”

“I would have never thought that opera would stay as your hobby.”

“Why? Was I not smart enough to get it?”

“No, it’s just that you seemed to be too grounded for it. Opera is a great artifice, and I used to think that you would not buy it.”

“Guess you were wrong.”

“I guess I was.”

John was agreeing with her so easily today. She didn’t want to think there was an agenda, but the past experiences showed that it was very unlikely.

“Are you doing that fantasy opera stuff you told me about before?” he continued.

“I am. We’re in the second season right now. We’ll end in May.”

“How’s it going this year?”

“Better than the last one — I did get better at understanding which singers would bring more points. If I only could get a better chorus, because mine this year is a disaster. The British reviewers ignore the ROH’s chorus as much as they could.”

“The R-O what?”

“Royal Opera House in London. It’s a good house, and the chorus is good, just the system of reviewing seems a bit against my favor. If I had the Met’s chorus, then I would get stable mention every premiere of the season, and that’s quite a lot of points. I’ve got some good singers, though.”

“Staging any Russians this year?”

“Onegin.”

“A bit too safe, isn’t it?”

“For starters, it’s fine. I have a bunch of other bold things, so having something nice sounding should be good in the long run.”

“You’ve become really good at this. You probably know everything about opera now.”

“Not really”

“But you sound like you do. Have you tried your hand at writing reviews yet?”

“No. Why should I?”

“You’re smart, you’re passionate about it. I’m pretty sure you won’t write worse things than some of those reviewers write.”

“We have a penalty in fantasy opera if reviewers overuse the word “earthy.”

John laughed.

“What context do they use this word in?”

“Anything — the interpretation can be earthy, the lower register, the mid-section, the acting. This word should be banned forever unless it is used in its literal sense.”

“Anything else’s happening?”

“That’s quite enough for me, if you think about it — keeping scores of the fantasy opera and moderating the site are like the second job. And I have a full subscription.”

“Hmm... you’re very devoted, for sure. Have you started hating singers for cancelling because they ruin your anticipation? That’s when I knew I should step away from opera.”

“I have no intention to step away. I am happy with the way it is.”

“Fine, you’re beautifully stubborn, so who am I to convince you to change your mind?”

“Don’t.”

“My thoughts exactly. Are the audiences as horrible as always?”

“Oh yes. Not getting any better. Yesterday I went to the TB ward opera. So many people were coughing up a lung at the same time, you have no idea.”

“Wait, which one of the TB operas was that? Boheme or Traviata?”

“Povere donna.”

“Oh, poor poor one. Isn’t it entertaining to think when one listens to the old recordings with all those coughs and furniture noises recorded that the only contribution to eternity that some of those people had ever accomplished was their cough which interrupted Violetta’s dying scene. Or the hellishly difficult aria in the first act?”

“Sempre libera.”

“That one. And the irony is that Callas or Nilssen worked their lives off to have those recordings, and this person forgot a lozenge and that’s the only physical trace of them we’ll have forever.”

“So true.”

Sally felt almost upset that she didn’t come with this idea. It was so smart. Now she would have to frame it with “one of my friends said”, if she was going to tell it to the opera buddies.

“Have you seen Frank lately?”

Oh right — the second half of the conversation, the one he clearly was getting at.

“Been busy with work and opera, so it’s been at least two months. How’s he?” she replied. She made sure it was impossible to hear the guilt in her voice.

“Not good. We’ve decided that we should move him to that seniors’ home Matt found for him in California. He would love the climate and the sun, and Matt lives very close to the place and doesn’t travel as much as I do, especially with all of the upcoming book events.”

“How soon are you thinking to move him?”

“In about a month. Come visit him. He misses you much.”

“I know that,” sighed Sally.

“Also...” John hesitated.

“I was wondering will you be in town in the next three or four weeks?”

“Sure, why?”

That was too soon for the next meeting. Did he miss her or something?

“I’ll be traveling, and I was wondering if you could be around to help Matt with Frank’s move. Nothing too serious, but if let’s say Matt would need somebody on the day they are traveling to the airport, or while they packing some of his things, he’d need some help. You know Frank refuses to travel without all of the drafts of his first chapter?”

Now the world became more normal again: he met with her because he needed to recruit her for help. It was not that he wanted to catch up with Sally so much, just asking for a favor.

“Of course, John, I’ll help Matt” she said.

“Thank you, darling. You’re so wonderful.”

Yes. Yes, she was. Only he didn’t believe what he said, which really sucked.

## Fantasy Opera Season Archive IV

[www.fantasyoperaseason.com/archives](http://www.fantasyoperaseason.com/archives)

### “Accident at the Met”

February 16, 2014. Posted by LaDivina

We have just been informed that a horrific accident took place in the family circle tonight during the performance of the double bill of Cavalleria and Pagliacci. According to the information that is available to us so far, there was an altercation between patrons: a woman pushed a man who fell over the ledge above the entrance. The man was taken to the hospital, and the woman was arrested. The performance was halted for about thirty minutes, but then resumed.

UPDATE: Alas, the man, whose identity yet remains unknown, died in hospital upon arrival. Let the media carnage commence.

UPDATE 2: As some of you have probably seen right now, the identity of the woman has been made public. We have decided to abstain from discussing her identity here, because she is one of the participants here, and we implore all of you who know her alias not to disclose it.

UPDATE 3: Since some of the participants could not resist the temptation to say things which should not be said, we have decided to restrict access to this discussion thread. It will no longer be available in the open access. Please, refrain from mentioning her fantasy opera user name in open access posts, for it will attract unnecessary attention from the media and general public. All mentions of the case in open access will be strictly moderated.

### Comments:

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02/24/2016

**Loge:** Here's a curious fact for you: from I have been able to learn from my sources, SSh. insists that she started a fight with the man (P.M. is his name, if you have been following the newspapers) because he was not behaving properly: he made loud noises, played with his phone, and was overall distracting. It has also been confirmed that he was quite intoxicated.

**LaDivina:** And as I said before, I continue to envy you your omniscience. How do you get this information?

**Loge:** It is all about sources and connections, my friend.

**LaDivina:** Let me compliment you on the choice of your nickname. Very fitting.

**Loge:** Danke!

**TheRenaissanceMan:** Not to condone the violence, which is not surprising in this case, because I did think she was deeply troubled, but I was wondering what operas you would feel justified to kill for, if they were ruined for you?

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** I thought we agreed not to discuss the person in question here.

**TheRenaissanceMan:** I've said only what most reports confirm.

**The\_Great\_Inquisitor:** Liebesnacht. Not that it didn't get ruined by Wagner himself, but that's in the score.

**Bill:** Hagen's dream.

**Gerry-flapper2.0:** Trio from "Der Rosenkavalier". Every time I go, there's somebody who is so tired of the performance, that they feel it's okay to walk out noisily, so they could get their precious coat before everybody else.

**NachRome1940:** Simon Boccanegra, father-daughter recognition scene.

**operakid\_25:** Sleepwalking scene from the Scottish play.

**Everybody<3Devereux:** From the world of crowd-pleasers, but I hate when there's noise during E lucevan when Cavaradossi goes diminuendo.

**Hojotoho007:** Too many to list. I'm actually surprised I am not on the news — I would like to harm so many people.

**Thefourth\_Rheinmaiden:** That one time when the girl next coughed through the whole Lohengrin. She is very lucky she survived.

**Madame\_Viardot:** Most of Don Carlo. Why come if you don't care about it? It's a masterpiece!

**MVW:** In similar note to what TheRenaissanceMan has just asked: to be totally honest, I'm a bit puzzled by the fact that she could get so disturbed by the noise at Cavalleria and Pagliacci. Maybe it is just me, and I am completely inundated with these operas, because of how many times I saw them before, but it's really hard for me to believe that somebody could feel so strongly about "Vesti la giubba". Speak about the crowd-pleaser! It's easier to say who didn't quote that "Ridi Pagliaccio" phrase in pop-culture.

**Thefourth\_Rheinmaiden:** You know, I agree. Wagner? Of course. Verdi — sure. Mozart — definitely, but verismo? Meh. People can dance in the aisles, and I would feel just fine.

**Madame\_Viardot:** To be fair, as I said above, Zalsvare was really in a very good shape that night: all the way until the interruption he sang as if his life depended on it.

**IIDucadiMantova:** Although I trust your opinion, Madame\_Viardot, I still find it hard to imagine that his performance was 100% believable because when you deal with the production as problematic as this one, I don't it's possible.

**Gerry-flapper2.0:** Oh no, did they dare to update the production? I wonder how much more time we can spend mulling over it.

**Loge:** I do not see anything contradicting about it. If you think of it, it is the climax of the opera: Tonio has lost Nedda, and so now he is about to lose everything — his love, his sanity, and eventually his life — I am sure those villagers would not bother with trials and prisons. I really love this aria — there's not a single note to spare, everything works towards the "Ridi" line. Never fails to send shivers down my spine.

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** I agree.

**TheRenaissanceMan:** And then, again, we love opera for its inherent ability to take on projections of our joys and sufferings. We don't know what she heard in the music at the moment.

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** And I again agree. What a strange day it is today!

## Chapter 7

### Usher

Season 2013-2014, March 10.

JB was almost on time for the union meeting on Monday. He crept into the room quietly just in time for the gathering to vote on something for the first time. He looked over the hands that people raised in agreement with some suggestion which he hadn't figured out yet and decided that it was safe to go with the majority. Once the counting was over, he learned that he just voted for the start of the strike preparation campaign. Although the bargaining wasn't in critical stage yet, the unions agreed that they needed to start scaring the management early. Fair enough.

After the strike preparation campaign idea settled, there was some discussion that JB didn't feel like following too attentively: he didn't get enough sleep, because he stayed up at Ready Penny till four the night before, and the union meeting started at 10. Morning people were JB's bane of existence.

However, when George asked to say something, JB forced himself to focus. George cared about the union a lot and rarely said things that didn't really matter. It was most likely that this day he was going to make as much sense as always.

"I think what we should concentrate on right now is making bargaining the news." George said, "I don't want to sound like I'm into conspiracy theories, but I wouldn't be surprised if Gelb and company have paid off their journalists which already eat from their hands to continue



writing about that murder case. The first week or two it wasn't at all surprising that they talked about the murder nonstop, but now we're going to move further into the bargaining process, and let's be real — nothing is really going to happen with that trial. I'm sure there'll be an agreement of some kind, and that's all. Yet, the newspapers seem unwilling to stop milking this cow, even if it stopped giving milk long time ago. It creates the buzz and will continue to distract people from the discussion of bargaining which we would like to have. We need significant coverage. We have nothing now. Granted there's no way we can get the NYTimes to write about us, but Daily Post, Village Voice, Timeout, even a parody in the Onion are much better than complete silence."

People grunted in agreement.

"Anyone knows anyone? We need connections. It'll be tough to pitch bargaining story without clout when all people want is more of the murder details."

There was a silence in the room. JB looked around — everybody suddenly became engrossed in their phones. It was like high school, but with gadgets instead of notebooks.

"JB!" called out George.

JB didn't expect to be the center of attention all of a sudden.

"Yes, George."

"That old lady who sits in the first row in your section, didn't she use to be a journalist of some kind before she retired?"

"She was. But what use will she be, if she hasn't been working for a while?"

"Doesn't matter. She must have tons of contacts left. Can you talk to her? You don't have to ask her to find somebody necessarily, but you can ask for her advice. Old ladies love you, JB..."

The crowd chuckled.

"... everybody knows that. She'll be happy to help you."

JB sighed. He really didn't want to bring asking for personal favors into his relationship with Schaeffers, but George was right, the union did need the coverage. JB thought he could email Mrs. Schaeffer himself to check on Maddy's backstage tour plans. Then, as the meeting continued with more discussion of what the union could do in preparation for the strike, JB got a better idea.

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Wayne agreed to meet the moment he learned that JB was willing to overtake Sally's season. JB suggested meeting at the café of the Philharmonic, and Wayne told he would get there in an hour or even sooner.

While JB waited for Wayne to appear, he read some more of the posts on the fantasy opera season website. If on Friday he mostly read the ones that contained comments from Sally, now he perused all of the threads, regardless whether Sally posted or commented on them or not. Some of these threads told quite a lot about the people who cared for fantasy opera. JB was currently reading a long thread under the post about the death of somebody who used to be a long time member of the Board of Directors. The name didn't ring a bell, but the death was relatively recent, and JB was racking his brain trying to remember the guy. Nothing. JB's memory never came totally back after all of the anesthesia and opioids he had to take in his life. Thread contained more than 90 messages: the guy must have been a good man, if the fantasy opera people had so much to say about him. It was unusual because the only person who the fantasy opera participants mostly cared about, and that was in the most negative sense, was Peter Gelb. Being the general manager of the Met was clearly an ungrateful position, and it seemed that not a single general manager lived through his time with the Met without being blamed for the death of opera at least once or twice.

However, what JB saw in this thread was something he already noticed in the other ones. After ten or so perfunctory messages that contained condolences to the family and general expressions of sadness over a person's untimely passing, the rest of the discussion switched to opera: most recent performances, TV and radio broadcasts, latest gossip about singers and conductors. Opera lovers lived up to their name — they cared little for anything else, but they really loved opera. This straightforward devotion was impressive and scary at the same time.

Wayne appeared on time, dressed up in a bright purple suit complete with a black bow-tie and black gloves. JB always wondered how Wayne managed to pull off such extreme bright colors with so much confidence. As Wayne came close, JB stood up to greet him:

"Good afternoon, Mr. Hamilton" he said mindful of the politeness game they played in the family circle.

"Hi Jimmy! How are you? Also, no need to be so official — you're not at work. Outside of it, I'm Wayne for you, and you're Jimmy." Wayne responded with a theatrical gesture of his right hand.

JB was sure that Wayne would not take off the gloves throughout their whole meeting.

"And also LaDivina for some people?" asked JB.

"Oh you're right! You have figured me out! You're a very intelligent young man, Jimmy, I hope you know that."

"With all due respect, putting together your love for Maria Callas and the way you talk is not exactly rocket science."

"And again, you're right. I am so incredibly predictable, but what can I do?"

Oh yes, right. The person who could predict Wayne Hamilton would be able to rule the world.

“But I’m glad you’re interested enough in our little fantasy opera website to read through some of the exchanges. What did you think about our girl’s season?”

“Well...” JB held this pause.

“Oh don’t be shy. You have seen enough opera and people at the opera to be able to make educated guesses about how any season would go.”

“No, what I’m saying is that I couldn’t login into her account.”

“As in “you gave me wrong login information, you old idiot?” exclaimed Wayne and reached for the phone in the pocket of his jacket.

“No, as in “it doesn’t feel right — it’s as if I were to commit an ID theft or something.”

Wayne slowly raised his eyes from the screen of his phone to look at JB.

“I am impressed. You’re a very conscientious and honest human being, Jimmy. I am very very impressed. Unfortunately, I am much less decent and honest, so I suggest we sign into her account immediately, so you can finally assess the season you’re are going to deal with.”

“This is what I wanted to talk to you about.”

“What exactly?”

“Well, first of all, if I were to participate in the season, I would only do that under the condition that I would change her name.”

“But why? Everybody knows already that she’s not continuing the season.”

“Still. I don’t think it’s right that these people are going to see her present on the website all the time, even though she’s out of the game at this point. It’s not right — both towards Sally and towards the participants.

Wayne didn’t answer right away. Then he nodded slowly:

“You might be right. Ah well. You’re surely not interested in being “quiet\_leonora”? Just think of it — such a quaint drag name. Very cute.”

“Hence, my second question: you really want me to overtake Sally’s season and before I can be convinced to participate, I want to know the real answer why.”

“Fair enough. Let’s sign in, and I’ll show you.”

JB took out his phone.

“Let’s do it on my phone, since I am the one to take over.”

“Sure. Do you remember the password?”

JB typed in “quiet\_leonora” and started to type the password.

“Surprisingly so. Probably not a good sign that the password looks so familiar.”

“Well not to everyone. It’s familiar to you, because you’ve spent a lot of time inside the opera house. Think Gounod’s “Faust”, think Marguerite when she finds out that she’s pregnant and Faust is nowhere to be found.”

“Ah, when she sings that he’s not coming back or something?”

“Exactly — *il ne revient pas* in French.”

“Still not the best of the passwords — full words, no numbers. Might be a bit too easy to break.”

“Seems true until you think about who would in their right mind decide to hack a website of crazy opera fans.”

“You can never know.”

“Fine, since you are changing the name anyway, feel free to change the password into something which seems more secure. My only request is, since many participants are used to playing with quiet\_leonora, could you at least keep the word “quiet”? It’ll be easier for everyone to get used to the changed name then.”

“Makes sense. I’ll come up with something. Now onto your reasons.”

“Oh sure. You’ve signed in? Go to the current rating of the participants, please.”

JB tapped on the link. A new page opened:

**“Fantasy Opera Season 2013-2014. Cumulative results (updated bi-weekly)**

Participant	Overall score
1. <b>IIDucadiMantova</b>	1450
2. <b>TheRenaissanceMan</b>	1389
3. <b>LaDivina</b>	1217
4. <b>Gerry-flapper2.0</b>	1006
5. <b>Bill</b>	998
6. <b>NachRome1940</b>	956
7. <b>operakid_25</b>	901
8. <b>Everybody&lt;3Devereux</b>	898
9. <b>quiet_leonora</b>	867
10. <b>Hojotoho007</b>	856
11. <b>Thefourth_Rheinmaiden</b>	834
12. <b>Midwestern_loggionista</b>	823
13. <b>Madame_Viardot</b>	805
14. <b>Mrs.HansSachs</b>	799
15. <b>Happy_Amneris</b>	788”

“See what’s happening, Jimmy?” asked Wayne

JB couldn’t help teasing Wayne who seemed so incredibly serious as he looked at the list.

“I know! Somebody dares to name themselves “Bill” without bothering to come up with a proper operatic allusion. That’s unacceptable!” he replied.

“Oh stop it, you can see clearly what I am talking about!”

“I’m not that sure. You seem to be doing well — in the top three, no less. Who is your dead singer boost?”

“I wasn’t in the top three midseason, so I didn’t get one. It isn’t that important right now. See the top two? Look familiar?”

“I definitely noticed TheRenaissanceMan. He’s convinced he knows how everything should be done.”

“He’s a rabid traditionalist who hates everything but Italian opera. The Duke is similar, only he’s also a misogynist, racist, homophobic prick.”

“His user name doesn’t seem familiar.”

“No wonder — we have to delete most of his comments.”

JB started to feel the similar annoyance he felt when he read the code.

“Look, with all due respect, but why don’t you guys just ban him from the site and be done with it? How come he’s allowed to play the season, if you hate him so much?”

Wayne sighed.

“Well, he has lots of rare records and he shares them with us. And has good intuition. We did ban him for a year before, but then he returned and for a while was as well-behaved as one could be. These days he’s been an incredible pain, especially once Sally stopped helping me with moderation. And since he’s also best buds with Fred, TheRenaissanceMan, moderating has turned into the nightmare. I can’t possibly allow him to win.”

“What’s the big deal? So he wins, feels superior for a week or so, and then goes to his fancy Hampton’s beach house for summer, because I’d assume he has one, and that’s it. Looks like you’ll still have the decent score.”

“Well, I guess you haven’t read the code fully.”

“You seriously expected me to?”

“Why not? In my opinion, it’s a very interesting read. Anyway, what you haven’t read is the amendment we added in 2012: the third moderator for the fantasy opera is appointed annually and chosen out of the top three winners of the season.”

“Are you the third moderator?”

“No, I’m the first one. I can step down only if I decide to.”

“Then why? You’re pretty much the king of this.”

“Well now, that Sally’s gone — and she used to be the second moderator, also not possible to change, Fred has become one. If his buddy the Duke wins the season — voila, I’m stuck with two insufferable people who might want to change the rules of the fantasy opera so it would fit their narrow-minded, conservative operatic needs.”

“There’s no way you can convince me moderate this. I have much better things to do with my time.”

“Like what? I hope it involves brushing up your German, so you could finally pass the language requirement to get that Bachelor’s which is what? five, six years overdue?” Wayne snapped.

“Listen, Mr. Hamilton...”

Wayne waved his gloved hands in apologetic gesture.

“I’m sorry, Jimmy, it came out of me so unexpectedly!”

As if JB was supposed to believe that.

“Look, I don’t want you to moderate.” Wayne continued. “I’ve had my eye on Janice — see our “Gerry-flapper 2.0” — for a while, or Bill could help, he’s very smart even if his fantasy nickname is uninspiring, which you have already noticed. What I need is to push the Duke out of the first place. I know Janice has more chances to improve her score, and if we can get Sally’s season back into play — see her score is still high even it hasn’t been updated for more than a



month, then even if Fred remains in the top-three, it doesn't matter. If I'm stuck with him as a moderator, it'll be fine if I have somebody who shares my understanding of what this is supposed to be."

"Gerry-flapper2.0 is a safe choice?"

"Well, the name says it all. No homophobia anywhere near in sight. I know, I know, you'll say but Geraldine Farrar wasn't gay!"

JB wasn't. He actually didn't now who Wayne was talking about.

"... but there've been numerous accounts of the fact that Gerry-flappers' admiration towards their idol wasn't necessarily platonic. Check out Janice's season: very exciting. She used cross-dressing as an organizing principle. All of the operas in her season have pants roles. I'm pretty sure some of her mezzos still have a chance to bring her more points than she has now."

"Fine, if I don't have to get involved with your fantasy opera politics, I can try to maintain Sally's scores until the end of the season. I have enough politics to deal with as of now."

Wayne smiled widely.

"Oh thank you, Jimmy, you're a very nice young man. Very kind of you to help out an old decrepit man in need out here. I mean, you know who that horrible Duke used as a dead singer boost? Her! Because we didn't write it in the rules, it doesn't mean there wasn't a silent understanding among everybody that Callas should be kept out of this."

"How dares he! Now I can see your reasoning much more clearly. To be honest, I find this dead singer boost bonus extremely unfair. It gives more advantage to the ones who are already winning."

"You're right. Somebody came up with an idea, and I really hoped I would be able to vote it off the code this year, but without a moderator on my side, it'll be very difficult to do that. I don't know if you have noticed, but the "opera used to be better" attitude is prevalent on the

website. Too many people miss the times when they were young instead of being more open-minded.”

“I did notice. Okay, I agree to participate in this if I get some help from you as an exchange.”

“What kind of help? You know I’m more than willing to practice some German with you.”

“Wayne.”

“I’m sorry. Go on.”

“We had a union meeting today.”

“Oh how’s that going? Bargaining looking good?”

“Not at all. Looks like if no movement happens by early May, there’ll be a serious chance of the strike in summer.”

“That’s horrible. Remember in 1967 the season was delayed because of the strike? Almost a month of performances was lost. But how can I help?”

“We need serious coverage in the media. The accident seems to overpower any other news that comes from the Met. Can you help us find people willing to write about it?”

“That sounds reasonable. I’m pretty sure the accident works best for administration as a smoke shield while they stripe you guys off your benefits and pension.”

“Among other things.”

“Of course. Much easier to cut the workers’ pay rather than control themselves and waste millions from the endowment money on that stupid Machine.”

“You can’t get over LePage’s Ring still?” smiled JB.

“I never will. It is horrible! How can one do that to Wagner?”

JB sensed the danger — criticizing the Met’s most recent production of Ring Cycle could take a long. He tried to bring the conversation back to the topic.

“If you could connect us with a couple of people, it would be very helpful. Then, we’ll get a clearer idea on how to move on with this.”

Wayne reached for his phone.

“Oh no, Jimmy, two people are definitely not enough for this. Let me see if I could get somebody who knows the New Yorker people. You need a piece in it, for sure. And Observer. NY Daily News maybe? I have someone there, so no worries. Have you guys done anything about your social media presence? Get your union on facebook and twitter. By the way, if you need more incentive to kick the Duke out of the top three: he hates unions. Now that you have signed in, search for what he used to say about labor politics before. We kept some of his most innocent comments to remind people how scary he could get.”

“Will do.”

“I’ll try to get you the contacts by tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Wayne. We need to win this.”

“Of course. One final thing: shall we look at Sally’s season before we part? It’s a bit unorthodox at best, and I think I can give some pointers on how to update it most effectively.”

“Okay.”

JB tapped on the tab named “My season.”

1. Die Meistersinger.
2. Pelleas et Melisande
3. Demon
4. Don Carlo
5. Cunning Little Vixen

6. Khovanshchina
7. Cosi fan tutte
8. Falstaff
9. Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk
10. Tristan und Isolde

Some of the titles didn't sound familiar to JB:

"Demon"? he looked up at Wayne.

"Russian. Very rarely done in the West. Think "Faust", but with Mephistopheles trying to seduce Marguerite. If done well, it's a gem."

"Cunning Little Vixen" doesn't ring a bell too."

"Janacek. It's beautiful and weird. I don't think the Met has ever done it."

This was an unorthodox season, indeed.

"You know," said JB. "In real life this would be probably a financial disaster."

"Of course, I know. That's why we do it. But just think about, what a dark, wonderful season it would be! So much good tragedy."

JB scrolled down to the description of each opera's cast. Most names in the production team section were completely new to him. Wayne clearly noticed:

"You see, the unorthodox part of her season is actually not the choice of operas, that's quite normal actually. Three Russians out of ten — well, that is pushing it, but just a little. There have been seasons entirely made of Wagner, and people did well with those. It's the production teams — most of these directors don't do opera in real life. These are mostly known for theater."

"You can do that?"

"See a clarification down there? She petitioned for including theater directors who never did opera, but are known for interesting productions last May, right before the draft. In reality this

doesn't guarantee success, as you probably know. I mean, some people have greater success with circus, and so be it, but since it's fantasy, why not? The trick for you, however, is that you have to be careful not to miss the reviews on those people, and they will be in different sections. For example, see she has McDonald for Pelleas? In my knowledge, he has never done opera, so you'll have to look for him anywhere else."

"But if he's not the operatic director, then what words and expressions am I looking for?"

"Oh, that's universal — for directors, everything comes down to whether the production is making sense. If it does, it does, if not — everybody will say it this way or the other."

"Last question: how to you check that people are keeping the right scores? I can't imagine it's possible for even three moderators to ensure that."

"Why would you do that?"

"You know, to make sure no one cheats."

"But why would they cheat? The ultimate goal is not to just win."

"It's not? Really?"

"Well, website politics aside, we are all here to imagine good things. If the person has a good sense of who they are choosing for their season, it'll come clear in the results, and we'll celebrate that."

"You contradict yourself."

"Oh don't worry, Jimmy, you'll get into it. Contradiction is essential in opera. Everything happens against all odds."

"If you say so. I guess I'm expecting more messages from you tomorrow."

"I'll do my best, Jimmy. Let's shake the administration a little. They'd know better than to waste so much money on meaningless productions!"

Not the Ring kvetching again. JB stood up. As he stretched his legs, his knee signaled its existence with sharp pain. He reached for his pill box, but then decided against it. Maybe he could wait it out for an hour or so.

“You’re going to the train?” asked Wayne.

“No, I need to go back to the Met.”

He didn’t really need to, but while Wayne was raging against the infamous Ring, JB had another idea. He decided to stop by the volunteer department and see what was going on with tours. He wasn’t scheduled for one any time soon, but maybe there was an opening because some other volunteer canceled or a possibility for him to squeeze a slot or two into the schedule. He watched Wayne walk to the 66<sup>th</sup> Street Station, then turned and walked across the Plaza to the Met.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Sally**

Season 2012-2013, April 9 – 13

By the time Sally got home after meeting with John, her guilt about not visiting Frank in the nursing home became overwhelming and could only be assuaged by scheduling a visit. She looked at her work calendar — nothing serious was coming up until the week after — and decided that she would leave work early on Friday and travel to the Upper East Side where Frank’s nursing home was located. During the height of the opera season, Sally would not do that, because a lot of good performances would fall on a Friday, but things slowed down in April in the opera world, as if preparing opera lovers for the desert which awaited them once the final

note of the annual Met Orchestra Gala died down, drowned in often untimely applause at Carnegie Hall mid-May.

Sally sighed. In the years during which her love for opera grew stronger and stronger, she came to dislike summer quite a lot, even though since childhood it had always been her favorite season. Every opera lover at certain had to learn how to cope with the opera summer break between the second half of May and the last week of September when the Met Opera's season usually started. The go-to method for quite a lot of people were opera festivals, but they tended to take place mostly in Europe which worked well for the retired rich patrons who tended to reside in the boxes and dress circle, and not so much — for everybody else, especially for those recently out of college, still figuring out their tremendous college loans. The only festival Sally could afford over the summer was Glimmerglass, but even then, it meant only four operas, which was definitely a very lean opera diet for the duration of almost four months.

As for European festivals, she was yet to experience those. She knew every single one she wanted to go to, not in the least because every single one of her older opera buddies pointed out to her that she could not consider herself a true opera lover without experiencing Glyndebourne, or Salzburg, or Aix-de-Provence. It wouldn't have been that bad if they hadn't also emphasized repeatedly that it wasn't that expensive and they couldn't understand why young people didn't travel abroad more these days. And then, of course, there was the adage of "Every true Wagnerian must experience Bayreuth" which made Sally gnash her teeth. To her questions as to how the recommenders of Bayreuth got their tickets, because waiting times for those averaged up to seven or eight years, it turned out that there was always some way for them to avoid the line — they either had acquaintances in the Wagner society who would get them the ticket or they were comfortable enough to pay twice or three times as much for the tickets (which was strictly forbidden but somehow magically worked for the people who would advise it to Sally). Some of

them suggested that her young age would be helpful if she decided to come and try obtaining tickets on the day of the performance which meant waking up at 6 am and waiting in line till the box office opened at 1:30 pm. Not surprisingly, very few of them actually did it, because that didn't sound like the most comfortable way to spend their European vacation.

So far, Sally did what she could: she became the member of the Wagner Society and applied for the tickets every fall since 2010 in hope that she would be selected. No luck so far, but there was an elusive chance this year because she somehow made it to the waiting list, which meant that in case the plans of the person who got the tickets fell through, she might be offered the tickets last minute.

"Basically," Sally explained it to Liz once, "I'm placing high hopes that somebody has a very shitty summer: it's usually grave illness or death. Die-hard Wagnerians don't give up their Bayreuth tickets for anything less."

Liz only hemmed in response.

Living in hope to make it to Bayreuth one summer also required meticulous vacation planning: so far, it meant that every year Sally asked for a week in August for her vacation, and had some day-offs accumulated in case she would need to drop everything and go. So far, it only led to being stuck without definitive plans for vacation every August during the high season.

"That festival better be worth it," Sally thought every year since 2010 when she had to scramble a last minute vacation somewhere else.

Of course, it would be worth it. Together with Verdi, Wagner was Sally's favorite opera composer. Once she learned to appreciate his lengthy, intense creations, she knew there was no way back to her Wagner denial years. She always looked forward to experiencing his operas, and to do that in the open-air theater which Wagner himself designed and at the festival that Wagner created was a dream that she really wanted to come through. In addition, she really admired the



fact that the traffic around the Bayreuth theater would be halted or re-routed during the performances, so as not to interfere with the audience's enjoyment of the composer's intricate scores.

Even the Met's new production of the Ring Cycle, which made a lot of the fantasy opera people and critics writhe with hatred, because the Machine that the director Robert LePage built for it took the whole stage and constantly malfunctioned, was something Sally really looked forward to at the end of the month. She bought her tickets for the second run, during which the time which separated the operas was minimal, because she wanted to experience an almost non-stop immersion into the world of corrupt Norse gods who often seemed even pettier and more flawed than Greek gods, although that would seem hardly plausible. The second run was two weeks ahead, and in the meantime Sally had only two operas to entertain her. This week she was going to see Handel's "Giulio Cesare," which was a monumental four-hour baroque affair, and the week after — "Rigoletto", the production of which she could hardly tolerate, but would go anyway, because the tenor who was taking up the role of the lecherous Duke of Mantua was a handsome egomaniac which fit the role beautifully.

At Giulio Cesare on Tuesday she ran into Wayne. He wasn't in the Family Circle because this was his quality time visit, but they ran into each other during the intermission: he walked up to the Family Circle "to see who was in there."

"Dress circle is very boring tonight, dear. Absolutely nobody to talk to," he told Sally while scanning the crowd in front of the bar. "How'd you like Daniels? I'm not yet sure what to make of his performance today, but aren't Dumaux and Abdeslam wonderful? So powerful!"

Sometimes discussing opera with Wayne was a one-way street: it wasn't that he didn't care for what the other side was thinking, but he was convinced that he was expressing a unanimous opinion, and thus, hardly needed any confirmation for it. Or the chatter could mean

that what he really wanted to talk about was coming afterwards and had absolutely nothing to do with the opera at hand. And so it came:

“By the way, if I dare,” he started.

“Here we go,” thought Sally. “Of course, you dare.”

“Sure, Wayne,” she said.

“What happened with mon chéri Eduardo last Saturday? My sources allegedly suggest that you pretty much ran away from him after the end of the performance.”

“What? That’s nonsense!” she responded failing to make her dismay sincere. “It’s a late performance, and you know how long it takes for me to get home past eleven. I simply walked in my usually pace to the train. It’s not my fault that men find it hard to keep up with my walking speed.”

“It wasn’t his impression,” insisted Wayne.

“Well, then his impression is wrong. I was perfectly nice with your new project, even though he came almost late to the beginning.”

Wayne laughed:

“Oh yes, he told that you gave him quite a glare.”

“Unfortunately, I have way too many chances to practice. I don’t know how your dress circle audience is today, but I’m sitting next to the man who keeps sucking his teeth. I’m not that easily grossed out, but that sound is ... ugh!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, that’s very unfortunate, indeed. But back to Eduardo.”

Obviously, Wayne wasn’t in the mood to let her go today that easily.

“What about Eduardo?”

“He’s cute, isn’t he?”

“I guess. Why?” And then the realization made everything as clear as day. “Wayne, not again! I thought we talked about your matchmaking before.”

Wayne waved his hands apologetically.

“I’m not matchmaking! I just thought that meeting another young person who loves this beautiful but nearly derelict art would make him more interested in it. You should check out his reviews — he definitely has a talent for it, and we could really use better opera reviewers.”

“Does he have any musical background in addition to talent?”

“I’m not sure, I need to find out, but seriously, if teenagers can write opera reviews nowadays and everyone finds them worth reading, why can’t Eduardo?”

“You haven’t gotten over OperaTeen yet? He’s been writing his reviews for two years already.”

“Did I say Eduardo’s cute?”

“Wayne!”

“Okay, okay, you’re so defensive about it as if I’m offering you to cheat on your spouse. You’ve been single for the whole time as I’ve known you. Don’t you get lonely? I know I do.”

Sally felt the irritation rising up in her chest. She could feel her cheeks started glowing.

“I don’t want to discuss this anymore. Please, let’s change the subject. For example, how awesome is Alice Coote?”

“Oh she is, she absolutely is!” Wayne hesitated. “Look, I’m sorry I raised this subject. It’s just that I was quite alone during my younger years, and it didn’t always feel okay. I’m not saying you need to date him, but I think his company might be a lot of fun if he gets converted to opera. Anyway, I’m sorry. I’m not again to talk about this again.”

It took her almost ten minutes of the third act before she could become focused again. Wayne was notoriously into matchmaking — this activity really fit his overall plans to dominate

the world through constructing an intricate net of human relationships, but Sally made it very clear to him after one attempt that she wasn't in any kind of relationship help. It made her wonder what the fact that he tried it again meant — did she ever give an impression that she wanted a relationship? Did she come out as desperate? She took significant pride in feeling that she was a self-sufficient singleton, and she hated to imagine that her close friends pitied her.

She messaged Liz next day:

“Do you think I give an impression of somebody in desperate need for a boyfriend?”

Liz responded with smiley faces at first, and only then with:

“Oh wait, you ask it seriously. Why?”

“Wayne tried to hook me up with a journalist friend of his.”

“Oh wow. That's interesting. Is he cute?”

“Wayne?”

“You know I'm not talking about Wayne.”

“Yes, very. And sweet. Knows lots about theater.”

“Well, maybe Wayne has a point.”

“Et tu, Brute?”

“What? You can't live your whole life hung up on that piece of shit.”

Liz hated John vehemently, to the point that Sally made sure not to mention their occasional meetings.

“I'm not. I am okay with being on my own now.”

“As long as it's true, I'm fine with it.”

Of course, it was true. At first, when Sally got over the break-up with John, she would try go back into dating once or twice, but very soon, it became very clear for her that the more she were interested in opera, the less the idea of dating for the sake of dating or fun remained

attractive to her. If she were to date somebody, she figured, she needed him to share her most important interest in life. And that was why R&D Dan was stopped early in his romantic attempts, and that was why other occasional suitors were disqualified: they insisted on discussing common stereotypes about opera with her and found the “fat lady” joke incredibly hilarious. With time, it also became clear to Sally that the level of expertise that she expected from a potential date was impossible in a young heterosexual male. Only opera queens and people past seventy could meet the required standard. So it only felt reasonable to stay away from useless dates, which left her exhausted and discontent.

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Upper East Side Nursing and Rehabilitation Center where Frank was put after his last fall was one of those establishments which failed to look any other than sad despite obvious attempts to mask its purpose by making it ‘pretty’. No matter how many flowers and neon-colored children drawings and paper decorations were put on every available surface of the place, it nevertheless reeked of hopelessness and dying. Every time Sally had to enter it, she convinced herself that she wouldn’t feel like crying inside, and every time there would be a point in her interaction with Frank when she could feel her throat close up and the nose getting itchy. That’s why, more often than not, she would prefer the dark cloud of guilt hanging over her for weeks to the actual visit which would be conveniently interrupted by the nurses or, if properly timed, by the arrival of dinner.

Seeing Frank, helpless and without any agency that was left to him in his old age when he was still living on his own at home, was very tough for Sally. It was his independence and refusal to care for what others might think about him which made Sally like him so much. The way he navigated the sidewalks of Stuyvesant town with his walker and always insisted on doing whatever he planned for the day was at times aggravating and exasperating beyond all hope, but

because he treated any inconveniences that occurred on the way of his plans — bumps on the road, steps, steep ramps, and cashiers who had trouble understanding his speech — with the sense of humor and lightness of which his middle son had much less, Sally couldn't help admiring his stubborn determination to live his life the way he wanted.

What affected him most strongly in the nursing home was that he was deprived of the ability to make his own decisions, especially when it came to the time when he was supposed to plan his meals and what he was allowed to eat. Frank loved food, good beer, and an occasional martini before dinner, and giving these things up for the usual nursing home mush took an incredible toll on him. He started complaining much more than he used to, became much less patient with nurses and helpers, and would constantly grumble about boring old people around him. That was on his bad days; on his good days, if one was lucky, it was still possible to catch the glimpse of Frank that used-to-be. On those days he would flirt with the nurses and even venture outside in his wheelchair, if there was somebody to accompany him, and if the person was somebody who didn't work for the facility, he would cajole them to go have dinner in an Italian restaurant nearby where he would sneakily drink half a bottle of beer, following it up with a lot mints, so that "nurses would not notice anything." He was very proud every time he would manage not to get caught with it.

Of course, Sally was the one who almost always ended up with Frank in the restaurant. She would try to be strong about not allowing Frank to order a drink, but failed every time, because she couldn't resist allowing him this much freedom — almost everything he could have. She was sure that this time would be no different.

At first, Sally's visit went its usual way: by the time she walked out of the elevator, Frank had wheeled his chair to the entrance to his room and was waving at her vigorously.

"Here's my girl!" he shouted as she came closer.

Sally leaned to hug him: he felt scrawnier than before, but she brushed off that thought, because she noticed his thinness every time she came.

“Hi, Frank!” she articulated loudly. “How’ve you been doing?”

Frank was very hard of hearing, but refused to admit it and get a hearing aid. Instead, he mostly read lips and oftentimes pretended that he understood what was said, which in a way made sense in Sally’s mind — if there was anything she learned in her visits to the nursing home, it was that at certain point of human life the content of conversations absolutely did not matter. Instead, it really mattered that there was somebody around who was there to say things or to listen, even if the story had been repeated thousands of times.

“I’m good, very good, baby.” he mumbled in his usual way.

Although Frank did have a mini-stroke several years, it didn’t affect his speech. He always mumbled his words, John told Sally once. Even more so, he added, sometimes Frank would force his mumbling to drive people mad because he didn’t want to say things people expected him to say.

Sally looked at Frank’s face: it also looked thinner, and there were more burst blood vessels on his cheeks than before. These and the bruises that he was getting easily were the result of being on blood thinners ever since his stroke. What she liked less were the dark circles around his eyes which seemed much darker than before and the overall dull yellowish hue of his skin which she didn’t remember him having.

“Are you feeling well, Frank?” she shouted.

“I’m absolutely fine, dear. I could walk out of here and go for a run in Central Park, if the nurses weren’t keeping me hostage. You know why? They’re all so much in love with me, they just can’t let me go. You know I could marry Sarah at the reception any day if I wanted to.”

Frank laughed heartily at his own jokes.

“Oh poor Sarah, she must be devastated by the news of you going away to California.”

Sally right away knew she shouldn't have said it. Frank stopped laughing abruptly.

“I don't want to go to god damn California.” he mumbled.

“But Matt lives here, and you'll love the weather — just at look outside, what a gloomy April we're having, it's horrible! And you'll see the kids more often; they must be so grown now.” Sally noticed that she had involuntarily switched to a higher pitch, the way one spoke with upset children and puppies. She caught herself mid-sentence and tried to re-adjust her tone in vain — Frank already caught it and frowned even more. John insisted that Frank suffered from selective hearing loss — he always heard what he needed to hear.

“I've heard all of this before. You know perfectly well I don't really belong there. I'm a New Yorker — what do I have in common with those phony LA people?”

Sally kept silent hoping the sudden change of mood will pass.

“And you won't be around. You know how I miss you, even here when you get too busy to visit.”

Sally's guilty conscience which seemed to quiet somewhat before, started acting out again.

“I'm sorry, Frank, work has been very busy.”

“It's okay, it's okay. I understand. It's just that I'm always so happy to see you, and it makes my day when you come.”

The paradox was that Sally knew perfectly well that she was classically guilt-tripped, but still allowed it to happen.

“Well, I'll come more often during this month, I promise. And even then, I fly to the West Coast once in a while for work. I'll tell my boss to consider me for the future trips, and if my



Bayreuth tickets don't happen, which is most likely the case, then maybe I can come to South California for my vacation."

"That'd be so wonderful. But I'll still miss you."

Since Sally already allowed herself to be tricked into a number of promises which it would be quite tough to keep, especially with her work and opera schedule, she needed to change the topic quick before she promised even more.

"Hey, Frank, why don't we put on some warm coat on you and sneak out to Luigi's for some stuffed shells and a beer?" she suggested.

"I don't know. Is it very cold outside?"

That was new — usually he was the one to suggest the trip into the world.

"It's okay. We'll only need to make sure you have a warm scarf on, so you wouldn't get a stiff neck — it's quite windy out."

Frank contemplated it for a bit, then agreed reluctantly. Sally found his coat in the closet and helped him put it over his gown. Because he was so tall, his gown could almost be considered a t-shirt, and so with the long shorts, Frank seemed dressed up enough for the venture outside. When she tried to put a scarf around his neck, he waved it off.

"It feels restricting."

"But you can catch a cold, you know how dangerous April winds are."

"Why does it matter?"

Sally let it pass, but put the scarf into her tote, just in case. Then she pushed Frank's wheelchair to the elevator. When they were passing reception counter, Sarah smiled at them:

"Sneaking out to Luigi's? Don't let him break waitresses' hearts too much, he's such a flirt!"

Sally was relieved to see that Sarah's initial cold greeting dissipated and she was no longer judged as strongly for failing to visit Frank for two months.

"I'll keep an eye on him, Sarah, don't worry." Sally replied.

When they exited the building, Sally started walking towards the gate which the closest to block where Luigi's was located.

"Are you sure you don't want a scarf, Frank? It's still quite windy."

Frank didn't reply at first. Then, he said:

"Honey, let's stop. I don't want to go."

"You don't, but why?" The high pitch started sneaking into Sally's voice again.

"I don't want to. I feel tired. Let's just sit over in the sun."

"Okay."

Sally pushed the chair towards a bench she could sit on. She took out a scarf and put it around Frank's neck. He didn't protest.

"Let's just sit here, in the sun." he repeated. "Now, tell me about any interested operas you've seen lately?"

Now that was a totally new development. Frank had never really asked her about opera before.

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Every time Sally visited Frank, she would always take a walk in the Central Park afterwards. She needed it to unwind, to let the heavy cloak of helplessness and illness and death lift away and allow her to breathe guilt-free again. It would've been even better, if she had an opera to go to tonight: then the fictional drama would take away the bitterness of the real one, but it was April, so there's nothing to see. So Sally walked instead.

She walked around the Reservoir, then walked south to the Columbus Circle. She was planning to walk more — maybe till 14-th Street or at least 34-th, but at Columbus Circle she felt very tired, and so after a moment of deliberation, she got on the A train which would bring her to Bedford-Stuyvesant. She hoped she didn't catch a bug at the nursing home — that would be very inconvenient, both for work and for Rigoletto next week. Unlike most people who for some reason felt absolutely fine going to the opera with colds, bronchitis, and what often sounded as pneumonia if not TB, Sally never allowed herself to come to the Met sick. She only did it once, when she was already recovering, but still had a post-cold dry throat, so she almost choked because she had to stifle the cough for a long time. It was "Lohengrin", and since the through-composition of Wagner operas did not have any breaks during the act, Sally's chances to cough without disturbing others were nearly non-existent.

Sally couldn't listen to opera on the train — she would really love to, but even the best ear phones did not give her protection from external noises. She tried a couple of times, but because music kept changing from hardly audible to eardrum bursting, she found herself constantly readjusting the volume and losing the focus on the music. That's why her favorite way to while away time on the train was either reading advertisements and what fellow passengers were reading, or people-watching. New York subway was a great place for people watching. The only trick was to learn how to look surreptitiously, without being caught as staring. Sally had mastered that trick quite well.

Tonight wasn't eventful for people-watching. It was a bit too late for people coming home from work, and too early for the return of people from partying in Manhattan. The car she sat in was hardly crowded. At West Fourth, a girl and a boy, both most likely in their early twenties, got on the train. They sat down in a distance from Sally, so she couldn't hear what they were talking about, but she could see them very well. The boy was telling the girl something funny, or

at least, the girl thought it was, because she was throwing back her head in fits of ringing, clear laughter. Once on the Brooklyn side, the girl had to get off first — she said something to the boy which made him stop speaking mid-sentence and offered her right hand to him for a handshake. In the pantomime that followed, the boy looked at the hand and shook his head. The girl laughed and offered her hand for the handshake again. This time, the boy didn't hesitate, and before he would lose the courage to do it, he leaned towards her, put his right hand on her shoulder and kissed the girl on the lips. The kiss looked intense, rushed, hungry, but there was also purity and innocence of the first one in it, and the joy in the way they both greened at each other when they separated.

Sally realized that she was no longer watching surreptitiously; instead, she was staring and smiling. She felt her cheek warming up, and as the boy leaned over for the second kiss, Sally turned away her gaze, slightly embarrassed for this uncalled-for bout of voyeurism. When she thought appropriate to glance back, the boy was sitting in his seat alone, texting vigorously. The girl must have got off at Broadway-Lafayette.

On Sunday she woke up with the fever and cough, and felt almost relieved when she texted Wayne: "I have a free ticket for Rigoletto for 04/16 because I'm sick. Find out if Eduardo would like to go. He can pick it up on Tuesday or Wednesday."

"You go sick to work?" was the only reply from Wayne, but Sally knew that got the information.

"Of course," she typed. "It's not opera."

## Fantasy Opera Season Archive V

[www.fantasyoperaseason.com/archives](http://www.fantasyoperaseason.com/archives)

### “Accident at the Met”

February 16, 2014. Posted by LaDivina

We have just been informed that a horrific accident took place in the family circle tonight during the performance of the double bill of Cavalleria and Pagliacci. According to the information that is available to us so far, there was an altercation between patrons: a woman pushed a man who fell over the ledge above the entrance. The man was taken to the hospital, and the woman was arrested. The performance was halted for about thirty minutes, but then resumed.

UPDATE: Alas, the man, whose identity yet remains unknown, died in hospital upon arrival. Let the media carnage commence.

UPDATE 2: As some of you have probably seen right now, the identity of the woman has been made public. We have decided to abstain from discussing her identity here, because she is one of the participants here, and we implore all of you who know her alias not to disclose it.

UPDATE 3: Since some of the participants could not resist the temptation to say things which should not be said, we have decided to restrict access to this discussion thread. It will no longer be available in the open access. Please, refrain from mentioning her fantasy opera user name in open access posts, for it will attract unnecessary attention from the media and general public. All mentions of the case in open access will be strictly moderated.

UPDATE 4: Anyone who continues to insist, after much discussion that has already taken place in this thread and the tentative agreement that has been reached in the process, that S.Sh. should be also sued for the interruption of the performance, will be temporarily banned for two weeks (first offense; second offense — for eternity). Please, find better things to waste your creative energies on: the return of James Levine to the Met this season, for instance.

02/26/2014

**Comments:**

1 / ... 10 / 11 /

**Operalover123:** You know, I have been reading this thread from the beginning, and I can't help noticing that every single one of you here is already exonerating this woman from any guilt! How can you talk about her as if she is the victim of that clueless audience member? How about his family? What about his wife? And, since you seem to be so much about the importance of being quiet during the performance, how can you look over the fact that by her deed, she did ruin the performance for everybody else (as was noted by the user Madame\_Viardot)? Hypocrisy much?

**operakid\_25:** Ugh. I'll let the rest to argue with you, but I wanted to say that contemporary Internetspeak won't earn you points on this website.

**Gerry-flapper2.0:** While I see what you are saying in regards to the fact that almost everybody in this thread admits that hypothetically there are cases when they would feel

justified to behave somewhat violently towards their fellow audience members, the word I would like to emphasize here is “hypothetically”, like in “fantasy” or “something which is very unlikely to happen.” You might be still new here, and thus you haven’t yet understood the real nature of fantasy opera and people who play it: we imagine a lot of things. Some of them are wonderful, and honorable, and respectable, and some — cynical and horrible beyond salvation. It is why we create season which would total financial and sometimes artistic disasters, and it is why we kvetch about other people’s perceptions of opera — because we want everything and everyone conform to our own ideal we have created in our imagination. This has nothing to with real life and what happened. Clearly, we know the borderline between fantasizing and making something happen in real life, but the tragedy that happened is a completely different story.

**Operalover123:** What I read in your response is basically: “It is fine to murder members of the audience, if they do not behave the way **I** think they should.”

**Gerry-flapper2.0:** It’s not what I said, but this is the safe space for fantasy as I mentioned above — you are free to fantasize whatever you want.

**Operalover123:** Oh that’s nice. Let’s go to the fantasy land instead of discussing serious issues.

**Bill:** Fine, let’s discuss the serious issues. What exactly do you want us to agree with?

**Operalover123:** That she’s guilty.

**Bill:** Nobody denies it here.

**Operalover123:** Oh really? Then I must be blind.

**Bill:** It’s not about vision impairment. It’s about reading comprehension.

**Operalover123:** Are you telling me I’m stupid?

**Bill:** Am I?

**LaDivina:** Bill, with all due respect, cut off the trolling. One troll is more than enough here.

**LaDivina:** Dear Operalover123, your account has been created around the same when the accident happened, and so I allow myself to assume that you are here out of pure morbid curiosity (which I admit is nothing to be ashamed of). But before I decide whether I should ban you for eternity or not, could you clarify for the venerable public here, what do you really want us to agree with, since it is quite obvious that SSh is definitely going to receive certain punishment, as will be determined by the jury of her peers.

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** if it ever gets to that point. I think they will come to a certain agreement before that.

**LaDivina:** Hopefully. The trick is that she is currently maintaining she is not guilty.

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** Are you joking?

**LaDivina:** I wish I could, Loggi.

**Operalover123:** Ha! Proves my point exactly! If she's such a cold-blooded murderer, not only is her place in jail, but also she should compensate the family and moreover, the Met should totally sue her for ruining the performance. I think every single audience member deserves their money back for the ticket.

**Gerry-flapper2.0:** Whoah. Did you miss breakfast today or something? Do you realize that about 90% of the audience does not understand opera enough to consider their experience ruined. Inconvenienced by the interruption — for sure, but almost all of them would be absolutely happy with the performance as long as the singers sang LOUDLY. Most audiences do not really hang on nuance.

**Operalover123:** Oh how wonderful: your response only proves my point that you are a bunch of snobs with double standards and absolutely no regard for human decency. What makes your love for opera better?

**LaDivina:** Look, you clearly came to the wrong place if you have a problem with the idea of opera snobs. Hold your tongue (or rather your nifty little fingers), or I will have to look for the mighty ban button.

**Operalover123:** [moderated]

**operakid\_25:** Oh wow, speak about ad hominem!

**LaDivina:** You homophobic piece of shit, get off my site.

**LaDivina:** it's not addressed to you, dearest operakid\_25, you should never leave, of course.

**operakid\_25:** I figured :)

## Chapter 9

### Usher

Season 2013-2014, March 10 — 11

Since JB ended up spending a whole day at the Met, it was a great relief that this night's performance was "Wozzeck" which had no intermission and which even with curtains calls and patrons lingering in the auditorium rarely lasted longer than two hours. That gave JB a good hour

of more time at Ready Penny, especially since Helen was bartending tonight, and JB was looking forward to a chat. He always needed one after *Wozzeck*.

It was one of the few operas that really got to him. To the point that he was glad to have an excuse not to see and hardly listen to the opera's ending. It wasn't the atonal music that affected him so much, even though that definitely required some getting into, but the intensity of the plot in which a German soldier *Wozzeck*, reduced by poverty to the state of dumb animal, submissive and ready to lick the hand of his power-hungry military abusers, in a fit of jealousy killed his wife Marie who cheated on him with a boisterous, slightly richer drum major. Of course, the opera would not be gloomy enough if *Wozzeck* hadn't immediately proceeded to drown himself in the lake, but the real blow came in ending scene in which local kids would tell *Wozzeck* and Marie's child, always shown as an outsider, playing on his own, that his mother was found dead. The chilling moment when the child listened to the news without any sign of comprehension and then continued to ride his hobbyhorse with the orchestra's quietly intoning his hopping movement made JB very grateful for the need to be ready for the Cinderella patrons to rush out of the auditorium. He always tried to block the orchestra's "hop-hop" out of his head, otherwise those notes, ringing in the subdued silence, would remain in his head for several days in a row. He couldn't have that: the next *Wozzeck* performance he was scheduled to work at was coming in just four days.

Monday was a quiet day at the Ready Penny — the "tourists" from other neighborhoods rarely made an appearance before Thursday, when the week got closer to its end. And so there was only JB and several other die-hard regulars at the bar tonight. He waved at Helen at the door, and by the time he made it to his usual seat at the bar, the Guinness was already placed on the counter.



“Thanks,” he said as he sat down, carefully positioning his left leg which had been the cause of a lot of discomfort for JB today.

“No problem, JB. How’s life?”

“Usual. What about you? Are you feeling better?” he asked somewhat pleased that he remembered to show that he cared.

“I’m feeling fine. Why are you asking?” Helen raised her brows.

“Didn’t you come down with a cold three days ago?”

“Ah that. Yeah, it was nothing serious. Totally fine now.”

She didn’t look totally fine, JB thought. There were dark circles under her eyes, and she seemed thinner than usual, which was difficult to imagine as possible, because Helen had a lean body with long thin limbs and had never had any trouble with putting on weight. JB hoped it was nothing serious. Hopefully some minor troubles at home. He didn’t know anything about Helen’s life, so he couldn’t even make a working assumption of what it could be.

“Well, we all need a day off sometimes” he added.

“True.”

As always, it was clear that Helen would not talk about herself. She knew her role well — she was there to listen, and she did it well.

“Anything you can entertain me tonight with, JB? Drama, gossip, prima donnas throwing shade at each other?”

“I think we have enough drama already, with the accident and all. It’d be nice for the Met to be mentioned only in the reviews for a while,” he answered, as he looked around to see if Helen’s services were needed elsewhere. Luckily, all other regulars tonight accompanied each other, so Helen could listen to him for a little, and performances like tonight’s made him crave human company.

“Has it ever happened to you when you tried hard to avoid someone, and of course, you run into them the moment when for a second you let your guard low and forget to monitor the area where you are likely to meet them?” he asked, hoping Helen would get interested enough to listen.

“Sounds very familiar. Especially when you owe something. Then, there’s no way you can relax for a second. Who did you run into today?”

Oh good. He recruited the most grateful audience he could find.

“My ex.”

“Jessy? I thought she moved to Chicago, didn’t you tell me this?”

“Well, the thing is that Jessy is the ex-ex.”

“Oh, I see. When did this ex happen? You haven’t mentioned her even once.”

“It ended in October. We went out for a couple of months before that.”

“Is she from work?”

“Yes. Her name’s Julianne. She supervises young professionals program at the Met. She’s very nice. And smart. And pretty.”

“You ended it?” Helen was always very quick to get the fundamentals of relationships.

“Yes, because you know, I woke up one day and realized...”

“It was a rebound.”

Helen was very good at that.

“How do you?”

“What? It’s obvious. So you avoided her because you broke up with her, and she probably was still quite into you, right?”

“Yeah. And the worst thing...”

“Don’t tell me you broke up with that poor girl over the phone? You did the adult thing, right? With meeting in person and talking and all of that stuff?”

“Voicemail.”

“JB, that’s really horrible!”

Helen’s disapproval made it even worse, of course.

“Well,” she said as she grabbed his empty glass and went to the tap to fill it, “then I hope today’s encounter was awkward as hell for you, JB. Because you definitely deserved it.” She put the glass in front of him without spilling a drop, even though her movements betrayed discontent.

“It was, and I did.”

“Good. I hope you didn’t choose to tell me this hoping for my pity. What were you thinking? Your previous relationship just ended, and you thought you were absolutely fine?”

JB didn’t try to object. He was glad that somebody said those things aloud, so he didn’t have to. It was probably because today was such a hectic day with all the meetings and everything, that he forgot that a young professionals event was taking place, which meant that Julianne would be sitting in the lobby doing her job welcoming and answering same dumb questions over and over again. He walked right into her desk, as he entered the building through the main entrance. If he remembered, then he would use the side entrance for sure. He knew the building well enough to get away from most unwanted meetings, except for today’s one, apparently.

Since there was no way to escape unnoticed, JB stammered a greeting to which Julianne barked a steely response. It was obvious that she had very strong feelings about his decision to break up with her and the medium that he’d chosen. After an awkward exchange of howareyous and Imfines, JB stammered some more, trying to flee gracefully, with a pretext of urgent meeting

at the volunteer department. Julianne's good-bye was heavy enough to bruise his brain a little. JB carried the guilt the rest of the day, and Wozzeck's music was of no use to soothe his conscience.

"So, because I am human, a very curious one, to be exact, can I see her picture?" Helen apparently wasn't that angry with him as to skip on details.

"I don't think I have any on my phone. And she blocked me on facebook."

"Rightfully so."

"Oh wait, there must be something on the Met's social media. They have finally realized they need to connect to the audiences under seventy. She does a lot of events like that." JB pulled out his phone. After some browsing, he found a shot of Julianne talking to a group of obvious yupsters. "Here she is."

"Let me." Helen reached for the phone. "Well, you remain faithful to yourself, JB, for sure." She chuckled as she zoomed in on the picture.

"What are you talking about?"

"She's so much your type."

"What? I don't have a type, don't be ridiculous."

"Oh really? Look at her hair — it's always long and gorgeous. And the eyes. You fall for those big, Bambi's mom beautiful eyes. Tell me I'm wrong."

"Yes, you are."

"Uh-uh." Helen put his phone onto the counter and pushed it lightly towards him.

JB felt like protesting more, but realized it would clearly seem like protesting too much. He took his phone and looked for a photo of Jess. It was not hard to find. He had them all in a separate folder which he considered deleting, but never felt strongly enough about to actually do it. The first photo in the folder was the last he took of her before she dumped him. It was in his apartment, she was sitting on a chair away from him with her legs stretched onto the windowsill.

Her dark brown hair was tied up in a loose knot. She was engrossed in her book, but she sensed him looking at her and turned when he touched the screen to take a picture. She didn't smile, just looked at him seriously. What JB couldn't see right away, he saw more and more clearly afterwards — every time he looked at that picture. Even though she hadn't told him yet, she was already weighing the pros and cons of the break-up, and there was enough discontent in her wide open eyes, which were a beautiful mix of hazel and green, that it was very probably that her decision was made right at that moment.

JB looked up from the phone:

"You know, you maybe be right. Maybe it is the type. I have never thought about it this way. I like to flatter myself that I look for individuality in every woman I fall for."

"Don't we all? Look, everybody has their type. I know the type of every person in this bar. I just thought it very amusing that you were completely unaware of it. Or at least, pretend to be unaware so skillfully."

"You know so much about us, Helen, and we probably don't know a single thing about you."

"That's obviously not my job. I'm like a therapist, but for working-class, because that's all they can afford. I dispense my medication," she gestured toward the tap, "and listen. Therapists don't share."

"I actually can afford therapy. There are like six visits a year that I can have for free at the VA."

"And yet, the rest of the time, you prefer this one, even if the side-effect might include permanent damage to your liver."

"They check my liver at the VA every six months. I'm fine. Do you do this job because you like to help other people?"

“No, I do it mostly for the tips. Listening is a good way to get them.”

“Mostly? What’s the rest of the equation?”

“To get out of the house.”

Before JB could ask why, Helen walked away to serve another regular who just came in and sat down at the bar. It was always like that — JB would probe a little, but she would always escape before any serious inquiries could be made. What was it about her home, he wondered, that she needed to an escape from it to a dive bar.

Helen did not return back to JB, which was fine, because he wanted to explore Sally’s season and attempt to update the scores, which were more than a month behind everyone else and thus, probably required hours of work. But first, he needed to change his name, because logging in as ‘quiet\_leonora’ continued to feel very wrong, even if he had already done it with Wayne.

What would be a good name for him? Clearly fantasy opera participants didn’t choose their names at random. Some of them referenced their favorite operatic characters, some — favorite moments or lines, others used names of real musicians, composers, writers, and quite a number of nicknames referred to obscure opera trivia which only very few people could get. It was like a secret code. And since the name was a statement, JB wanted to make a strong one. Wayne asked him to keep the “quiet” from Sally’s name, but nothing that would go with quiet came to mind. Actually, he had no ideas for his login name at all.

Then it came to him. JB went to profile settings and chose the option of changing his login name. He typed “Tantris\_112,” hesitated, deleted “112” and instead added “1CAV.” Hardly a minute passed after he pressed “save”, as he saw a notification in his private messages. “Wayne must be online 24/7,” thought JB as he opened the message which was, of course, from Wayne:

“May I compliment you on your new name, Jimmy? I see that instead of keeping the word “quiet” you have chosen to indicate that this login belonged to our friend through the reference to that fateful opera. It’s unorthodox, but still an interesting choice.”

JB wasn’t sure what Wayne was talking about it

“I didn’t reference anything related to her. “Tristan” is the first opera I’ve ever seen.”

“Your first? Wow. That must have been a rollercoaster. I’m not talking about Tristan, however. CAV stands for Cavalleria Rusticana, right?”

“1CAV was my division.”

“Oh different cavalleria, I see. Well, most people here won’t get the military allusion, but they’ll definitely grasp the coincidental operatic one, which works as well. If you have any questions about updating your scores, let me know. I am not going to sleep for a few more hours tonight.”

Before JB could reply to the last message, the new one appeared.

“By the way, nothing extraordinary, but an acquaintance of mine is doing an article for The Rolling Stone about recent orchestra lockouts, mostly Minnesota (you heard that it’s finally over, right?) and he promised to insert a sentence or two about the Met and the bargaining. It is not a full article, but it is a good mention, nation-wide. Could you ask your union’s publicity person email me a press release (I hope there is one), and I will forward it. And, while we are at it, tell your union people to get onto social media pronto. Such battles are mostly won online nowadays. Tschüss, mein Herz.”

JB ignored the German whose insertion into the message was obviously not accidental. Recruiting Wayne’s help was definitely worth it, and if JB had to bear an occasional reminder of his foreign language requirement, he was fine with that. JB opened his email to write to George

from the union and Mrs. Schaeffer, but the sharp pain in his leg, dulled by alcohol before, returned with so much strength, that he almost cried out loud.

“JB, another beer?” asked Helen. She might have noticed that he no longer was staring at his phone.

It seemed that tonight JB could no longer count on alcohol as a painkiller. If he was going to sleep, he needed a pill. He decided to do that at home. He could always send the emails and update the scores in the morning.

“No, thanks, I think I’m done for the night,” he answered reaching for a twenty in his wallet.

Helen counted the change even though JB would never take it and said:

“I’m sorry you ran into your ex today. It’s only partially your fault that women like you so much, Jimmy.”

“They do?”

“Of course. You’re good-looking, intelligent, and you don’t talk much, so they can never tell if you’re mysterious or just fucked up. That makes you hard to resist.”

JB looked at Helen: her face was serious, but he could see the smile in the corners of her eyes.

“Thank you. You’re very generous.”

“Nope. Just telling it like it is. Good-night, sweetie.”

JB mumbled his good-night and slowly made it to the exit. The pain was strong enough to make him limp. As he opened the door, he glanced back: Helen was standing at the bar, looking at him. That was interesting. Did she actually like him? No, impossible. It must have been the maternal instinct that he tended to inspire in most women. They all seemed to want to help him, even if he didn’t really need or want any help. Julianne wanted to help him. Jessy too, at first. By



the end of the two-year relationship, she figured it out. She said that she felt stuck, that she wasn't developing because he had no interest in developing, and therefore, she needed it out. When JB asked to clarify what kind of development she expected from him, the answer came loud and clear:

“You are going to be an usher all your life. You're fine with that. I'm not.”

That cemented it. JB felt no desire to object. If an usher boyfriend was not good enough for her, fine. There was nothing he could do about it, because he was going to be an usher all his life. He could not, and did not want to, imagine a different life for himself.

JB dragged himself home, took the painkiller and went to bed.

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He woke up next morning with the music in his head. He lay in bed with his eyes shut, trying to identify the melody which was so familiar, but he couldn't place it. Then it came to him: it was the ending chords of “Tristan und Isolde.” Thinking about it last night must have been the reason, since his pills often caused vivid dreams in which events of the day mixed together in the strangest fashion.

Wayne's surprise at the fact that Tristan was JB's first opera was not unusual. Every seasoned operagoer reacted the same way when they learned about it. Most of them were even more amazed that JB continued to be interested in opera afterwards.

“There's no way it wasn't traumatic as hell,” somebody told him once. “I am amazed to see that you were able to return back into the opera house. I definitely wouldn't.”

It was all pure chance and coincidence, of course. JB's base in Germany was only three-hour drive away from Munich, so it quickly became JB's go-to weekend getaway location. To his great surprise, a lot of people preferred to stay at the base, even though they had regular German

classes, and everybody soon picked enough German not to feel too American around locals.

People simply were not interested. That blew JB's mind. This was his chance to travel, probably the only one, and he was not going to let it pass.

When he was recovering, he used to think about driving with a dread, but once he was in Germany, he knew he needed to overcome his fear. He practiced and practiced until he felt comfortable enough on an autobahn. From that moment on, he drove away from the base every weekend that he had free. He befriended a civilian named Paul who worked for the Marshall's Center, and often Paul and his wife accompanied JB on his trips all over Bavaria and further. One time Paul came down with a very bad flu the night before the weekend when he and his wife were supposed to go to Bavarian State Opera in Munich and offered that JB would go with his wife instead, because she could not get there herself, as she was uncomfortable to drive on the autobahn.

"What was her name?" wondered JB aloud, as he walked to the kitchen to get some breakfast. "Anna? Alanna? Definitely something with an A."

Names and many other smaller details often escaped JB's mind. Sometimes he couldn't remember whole conversations, sometimes whole days, but that visit to the opera house in Munich he remembered in every tiny detail. Minus the wife's name, of course.

Before they left, Paul asked JB if he had ever been to the opera, to which JB replied that would be his first one.

"Well, you're in for some very special experience. It's somewhat slow, but I don't think it is boring. If you don't like it, feel free to wait at the bar. Once inside, my wife will be perfectly fine on her own. All she cares for is Wagner, and she will not notice your absence," said Paul.

"It sounds like a dare to sit through the whole thing. Challenge accepted." replied JB.

JB and Paul's wife drove in to Munich early, with enough time to eat some sausages and walk around the downtown area before they walked to the opera house. Even though JB grew up one borough away from the Met Opera, he had never been inside it, and thus, Bavarian State Opera was the first one he ever stepped into. It was nothing like the Met, as he learned later. There were statues, marble, stone carvings, and gold. Lots and lots of gold. He felt slightly out of place and underdressed, even though he did put a button up instead of his usual T-shirt.

As they settled in their seats and the lights in the auditorium were out, Paul's wife turned to JB and whispered: "Hold on to your seat. You might get swept away." She was immediately shushed, even though the conductor was still giving his bows. Later JB understood that Wagnerians in any country, but especially in Germany, were a strict bunch.

Once the orchestra started playing, he very quickly understood what she meant. Although everything in this opera was slow — it took good twenty minutes before any characters appeared on the stage, there was something about the music that JB could not get distracted even if he wanted to. It was the most weird feeling: it was as if he fell into the stream and it kept pulling him along, whether JB chose to fight it or not. When they returned into the real world after the first act, Marianne — that was the name, something with an A, indeed! — grinned at JB who sat in his seat blinking, as if he woke up from a heavy slumber.

"How are you holding up, JB? Hopefully, it's not too boring."

"No, it isn't boring, but it's so strange. I've never heard anything like this before."

Marianne laughed:

"It's the so-called unresolved cadences. They keep you on end expecting the resolution of the chord, but it never happens, and that's why your attention is constantly hooked."

Not that JB understood Marianne's musical jargon, but in one thing she was absolutely right. He was hooked.

“Well, when the cadences are finally resolved, you’ll definitely have to hold on to your seat. It’s pure magic.” added Marianne. “This is a very unusual choice for a starter opera, but maybe that’s the trick.”

And she was so right: although JB had no idea what cadences and their resolutions were, the ending — which as he later learned was the moment when those cadences finally got resolved — hit him with full force. He was grateful for the darkness in the auditorium, because his eyes became filled with tears, something which he didn’t experience in a long while, maybe since early teenage years. He felt sad and happy at the same time, but even more so, he felt light-headed and empty. As he later learned in one of his English classes, that was the most perfect example of catharsis.

On the way home, he suddenly felt a sensation — so familiar to any addict. He very clearly felt that he wanted more of that. He wanted to feel lost in that music again, wanted to be tortured and soothed by it simultaneously. He went to two more Tristans and every remaining opera of the Bavarian State Opera’s season. Paul and Marianne took enormous pride in creating a new opera addict. That, as he would learn later, was an essential desire of every opera lover — they all wanted to recruit new people to it.

The thought of recruiting reminded JB about the emails that he meant to write the night before. He told Mrs. Schaeffer that he scheduled three tours on March 19-21, and if she let him know when Maddy was coming, the ticket would be left in the box office. Meanwhile, he had several hours to kill before he had to go to the Met, which meant that he could no longer postpone updating Sally’s scores in the fantasy opera.

## Chapter 10

### Sally

Season 2012-2013, April 15 — 27

Sally still felt shitty when she met with Eduardo the night before the opera, but not as shitty she thought she would be, so the temptation to cancel the ticket transfer was quite strong. Even though this production of “Rigoletto” didn’t fully work for her, Sally liked Grigolo in the role of lecherous Duke — he absolutely nailed the part of a good-looking egomaniac, and she hated to miss the goose bumps moment of Rigoletto discovering his dying daughter. Even when the whole production was going to hell, that scene never failed to bring her to tears. No one, even Wagner, could portray daughter-father relationships better than Verdi. Luckily for Eduardo her throat was still too dry which made her cough way too often, and so she resolved to perform a feat of generosity and let Wayne’s protégé have the ticket. There was still time for her to catch up: she could always buy a standing-room for April 20, and her biggest treat of the spring — the second run of the “Ring Cycle”, with four operas performed within one week — was awaiting ahead.

When she entered the Starbuck’s near her office where they agreed to meet, Eduardo was already there. He was sitting in farthest corner, reading something on his phone. He swiped the pages with his right hand and with his left kept smoothing his unruly dark hair. He probably felt she was staring at him, because he suddenly stopped, lifted his head and smiled widely, when he saw her. Sally waved back and gestured towards the counter. She needed a hot tea. Her hands suddenly felt cold and clammy. She hoped the fever wasn’t coming back.

When her tea was ready, she walked to Eduardo’s table. He stood up to greet her:

“Hey.”

“Hey,” she replied and hurried to sit down, because this whole “standing up in front of the woman” chivalry made her feel a bit uncomfortable.

“So you don’t go sick to the opera?” he asked.

“No, it’s too dangerous — I might suffocate myself if I need to cough.”

Eduardo laughed:

“Familiar. I try to avoid plays when I’m sick too, especially the ones in small spaces.

Then everybody knows you are the one carrying the germs.”

“Speaking of which,” Sally reached into her bag, “This is your ticket. I recommend to wash your hands thoroughly after you touch it. I got this virus from a nursing home — so it must be really contagious.”

“Your grandparents? I mean, in the nursing home?”

“A friend.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“He’s ninety, so that’s not something extraordinary.”

“Mmm”

The moment of silence followed. Sally hated awkward silences of the pre-dates the most — there was something incredibly pathetic about two people sitting in front of each other, working out the strategy of conversation development. She debated if she should leave, because she did what she could already and was getting really hungry, or search her brain for more topics outside of the world of opera to discuss.

“By the way,” Eduardo pulled out a thin book out of this bag, “I happened to come across this in the dollar stands of Strand, so I thought it would be a small token gratitude for the ticket you’re giving me.”

Sally looked at the cover. It was “Lisbon Traviata” by Terrence McNally.

“Oh thank you! I already forgot about it — I should’ve made a note right there when we discussed it.”

“I hope you’ll like it.”

Overwhelmed with gratitude, Sally decided to continue the conversation:

“So, just in case, for tomorrow — the production is ... somewhat unorthodox. Well, a bit tacky really, but the cast is fairly good, so I highly recommend ignoring the visuals and listening to voices. Although you know, the acting should be good, so just try not to get blinded by the glare of neon lights.”

“Neon lights?”

“Yep. You’ll see. But I think if you are as good as Wayne claims you to be, you’ll definitely find ways to enjoy it.”

Eduardo blushed:

“Wayne’s very generous.”

“I trust his judgment, but I guess it wouldn’t hurt to have my own opinion. Where should I look for your reviews?”

Eduardo blushed some more:

“A bunch of places: Daily Post, Observer, Time Out, a couple of blogs, I have three in New York Times, so those are definitely the badge of honor. Just google “Eduardo Ming reviews” and stuff will come up.”

Sally took her phone:

“Let me correct your name in my phone book. What did you say? Ming?”

“Yes, M-i-n-g. Like a vase. I’m worth millions of dollars too.”

“That’s Chinese right? But you...” Sally checked herself, but it was obviously too late.

Eduardo laughed:

“Yes, I don’t look Asian. I’m usually hard to place. My Dad’s from Shanghai, my mom is Mexican. People often think I’m from South America, for some reason.”

Sally tried to apologize, but Eduardo waved it off:

“Don’t worry about it; it’s the challenge of dealing with us, racially ambiguous people. I think that’s what it’s called.”

Sally continued to feel horrible about her faux pas throughout the rest of the conversation. While Eduardo chatted about growing up in San Francisco, with two sides of the family culturally different and strikingly similar at the same time, she kept thinking that he was just trying to be nice. She started to fidget and check up her home. He noticed it:

“Need to go?”

“Actually, yes, I’m getting tired,” she mumbled.

“Hope you’ll feel better soon. And hope you’ll like the play.”

Sally wondered for a moment if she should demonstrate any further interest in his reaction to the opera, but decided it was too forward, especially after her earlier blunder. Instead she wished him a good time. Which, she thought to herself, was not that easy since this production attracted way too many people who didn’t know how to be quiet.

On the train she decided to take a closer look at the book. In the very first scene, two characters did nothing but discussed all versions of Traviata ever existed. Of course, Sally was going to like it. It was opera nerd paradise. As she was leafing through pages, a folded piece of paper fell out. She picked it up: it was an invoice. Eduardo didn’t buy this book for a dollar at Strand. He ordered it on Amazon, and its price was way more than a dollar. That was the kind of effort she definitely didn’t expect. Sally carefully folded the invoice and put it back into the book. Then she took out her phone and started typing a text.



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On Friday same week Sally's boss Tricia told her that there was an upcoming expo at Chicago, and Tricia wanted Sally to come with her. Sally knew that the expo was taking place, because she prepared most of the documents for it.

"I thought Maxi does the expos," she said feeling anxiety rising up in her chest.

"She does, but there will be several of our German partners there, and so I thought that having a fluent German speaker around would be a good idea. You maintain a lot of correspondence with at least two of them."

That was not good news. What it meant that there was not way for Sally to talk her way out of this trip, and the expo fell around the same dates when the Ring Cycle for which she already had tickets was happening. It was not fair! She bought the tickets nearly a year ago and she specifically chose the second round, so she could have every opera almost every other day. The third round was for sure sold out, so if Sally missed any of the operas in the second, that would be it for the season. Moreover, there were no plans to have the Ring at the Met next season, which meant that unless Sally travelled somewhere else, she wouldn't experience the Ring for a while.

"What are the dates?" she asked pretending to sound as casual as possible.

"Well, the bulk of the meetings falls on Tuesday, April 30, so I was thinking it would be a good idea to fly in Monday evening. There'll be enough time for us to relax and get ready for the long day ahead. Wednesday will be busy too. If everything goes as planned, we should be back Thursday afternoon. I really don't want to travel on Friday."

Sally had to stifle a sigh of relief. It wasn't that bad. The first two operas were performed on 25-th and 26-th and the last one on Thursday, May 2, when they were supposed to return, so now she only needed to wriggle out of the Monday flight, because the third opera in the cycle

was performed that night, and there was no way Sally was going to miss Jay Hunter Morris as Siegfried. Even if she flew from La Guardia, it was unlikely she would make it there for the last Delta shuttle — Siegfried ended past 11 pm.

“Can I, by any chance, fly in Tuesday morning? I’ll take the earliest Delta shuttle. I think the first one leaves at six.” Sally asked.

Tricia frowned:

“Why? It’ll be a long day. You need to be rested and well-prepared.”

“I can’t travel Monday night. For personal reasons.” Sally really hoped that vagueness would work, but it didn’t.

“What kind of personal reasons? This is a very serious trip, and I want you to be very serious about it.”

Sally searched her brain for good lies that might work, because she had avoided some work stuff before using opera as an excuse, and she knew Tricia was no longer in the mood to indulge it. Then she had idea: it was not something she would later be proud of, but the whole situation was an emergency.

“A friend of mine, he is in the nursing home here in the Upper East Side, is about to be moved to a nursing home in California. His son arranged his trip on Tuesday, and I promised a long time ago to have dinner with him Monday night. Frank is a dear friend. And you know, ninety and not in a good health — I don’t know when and if I’m going to see him next. It would be really horrible to disappoint him.”

It was bad to lie to Tricia in general, but bringing Frank into this, especially since she didn’t even know yet when exactly Matt was going to arrange Frank’s trip to California, was twice as horrible. Sally made a mental note not to use Frank as an excuse with Tricia again. But although Sally hated herself for doing this, she knew that this would be effective: Tricia’s father

was very old and refused to move in with Tricia or to some kind of assisted living, and thus, Tricia spent most of her time worrying about him.

It worked. Sally went back to her desk where she immediately busied herself with looking for ticket, trying not to feel too guilty about concocting such an elaborate lie. It wasn't the first time, however, when she had to lie because she was going to the opera, but she had no choice, because people had for some reason very low tolerance of her hobby. A lot of people saw opera as a decadent, indulgent art the interest in which didn't elicit much sympathy. It must have been the strange elitist status of it.

Sally debated whether to ask John when the dates for Frank's move were going to be finalized and for a moment indulged in a fantasy of avoiding it altogether by using the unexpected business trip as an excuse, because she could already tell that saying good-bye to Frank would be an emotionally draining experience. Sally was never good at good-byes and she particularly hated to be the one who stayed.

As she was about to type a message to John, she received a text from Eduardo who wrote her a short review of *Rigoletto*. It was quite close to what she expected: he liked most of the music and wondered about the staging. Sally found it incredibly ironic that Eduardo's first operas happened to be the least traditionalist productions one could imagine. He honestly tried to make sense of them, which only added to his overall delightfulness. It had been a long time since Sally became interested in a delightful person, and so she had an almost scientific interest in how this interest was going to develop. In the meantime, she bought herself a standing room ticket for the tonight's performance of *Rigoletto* while Grigolo's Duke was still as egomaniac as one could be.

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Already on the Monday of the week when the second round of the Ring Cycle was about to start, Sally could hardly focus on anything else. The anticipation was sweet torture. Texting with Eduardo, which was not too intense, but comfortably low-pressure and mildly flirtatious helped for a while, but by Wednesday, Sally could not even concentrate on that. Thursday dragged at a snail pace, and the second Sally's working day was over, she rushed out of the office towards the Met. It was the day of *Das Rheingold*, the first opera of the Ring Cycle.

There were many things to look forward to: there was a slow opening which mimicked slow rolling of the Rhine river, there were Rhine maidens, usually sung by the younger sopranos and mezzos with fresh, ringing voices, there was an evil dwarf Alberich who renounced love in order to steal the gold from the Rhinemaidens — she loved, loved, loved Alberich in this production, and then, there was Erde's warning about the gold, usually sung by a deep-voiced mezzo-soprano which would send shivers down Sally's spine, and then there was Loge, the ultimate trickster who possessed the magic of fire — she loved both Loge's theme music and Stefan Margita's portrayal of this character.

The best part, of course, was that almost always Wagner audiences were much better behaved, because Ring Cycle rarely attracted newbies. It was a nearly sacred experience for those in the know, it was opera lovers' annual pilgrimage, and occasional adventure seekers who would find themselves in the auditorium for the Ring hardly ever survived till the end. In case of *Das Rheingold*, they usually escaped in the intermission, if there was one; with other three, there were two intermissions during which the inevitable exodus happened. But as with anything Wagner, if the newbie or adventure seeker remained till the end, it usually meant love for life. One either loved Wagner or didn't. Indifference was only possible if one didn't know anything about Wagner.

Once in the Family Circle, Sally looked around: there were many familiar faces. Quite a number of Family Circle regulars preferred to buy the second round because the operas were performed so close together. Somebody on the fantasy opera website said once that if they worked hard on avoiding mundane reality as much as possible in between the operas, they almost achieved an effect of living through twenty hours of the most epic operatic action ever composed.

The 22 and 14 were in their usual places, and then there was an usher Sally hadn't seen before. 22 was much younger than 14 and the new one. Sally often wondered what made him stay in this job, even if it obviously didn't imply any idea of career advancement, but even more frequently she thought that she somewhat envied him his job. He saw so much more of the season than any of the regulars. Granted, he had the price to pay — the endings were ruined for him in most cases, and occasionally he would have to deal with difficult people during the performance, but other than that it sounded like a dream come true: three live experiences of the Ring over the season. What else could anybody wish for?

Most of the fantasy opera people did not like this production: Robert LePage, a director more famous for his inventive Cirque du Soleil performances, came up with an idea of building a gigantic structure of moving parts on the stage onto which all kinds of images were projected. The structure was known as the Machine and was hated vehemently by many during its first run because it failed to work properly. Almost every night there was a new glitch to be reported: sometimes the machine moved when it wasn't necessary, sometimes it stopped moving at all, several times they had to pause the performance to fix it, which of course killed the purpose of Wagner's carefully constructed 'through-compositions'. Wayne joked that the sure way to make Wagnerians riot was by interrupting Wagner's operas where interruptions were not written into the score.

Sally was glad she avoided seeing the Machine at its glitchiest. By this season, most of the problems with the machine were fixed, and except for occasional creaking, the machine worked just fine, but still was hated as before. The real reason was that it cost the Met an enormous sum of money, and since the Met had been reporting huge deficits at the end of each fiscal year and most recently announced that its endowment shrank nearly in half, it was very difficult, even for people like Sally — more willing to accept the Machine, not to wonder who needed such an expensive structure if it had way too modest payoff for the performance itself.

When it came to the Rheingold, nearly every moment in that opera was Sally's goose bumps moment. But more than anything, she waited for the ending in which Loge, sick and tired of the whole Norse pantheon, because Norse gods were as greedy and inconsistent and wane and lying as humans, only worse, would choose not to go with them to Valhalla — a fortress that would separate the gods from the rest of the world. Instead, Loge would turn himself into an element — the magic fire which he controls.

Sally tried hard to block reality on her way back home from the opera. Specially for this week she bought a pair of earplugs to wear on the train, so that she wouldn't have to experience any more music or loud noises like people screaming at each other for no reason or the train clanking and screeching. She wanted to bring the music that was now in her head home without spilling too much in the process and without getting unwanted additions. Then, at home she could continue playing most memorable parts of the opera in her head, prolonging the experience. She noticed a text from Eduardo when she was going to bed, but decided against checking it. She didn't want to lose the focus that she had at Rheingold today.

Next morning, there was another text from Eduardo, and Sally ignored it as well, feeling only a little bit guilty about it. She decided to check it during lunch, which would be not too close to the performance, so she could stop thinking about it by then. Eduardo called before lunch.

Sally hated talking on the phone, and so this call gave her quite a fright at first, and then that fright immediately turned into irritation — who would do that to person they only slightly knew?

“Hey,” Sally tried to steady her voice, but it always sounded shaky when she took a unexpected call.

“Hi, Sally, I’m sorry to bother you, I know you’re at work, but I was wondering if you saw my texts.”

Eduardo sounded apologetic enough, but still — he could see that she didn’t read his messages, so why ask that.

“I’m sorry, I haven’t. Very busy time right now. What’s in the texts?” she asked.

“I have a couple of free tickets for “Julius Caesar” at BAM. It’s an amazing production by RSC, I think you’ll really enjoy it.”

“When? Because I can’t tonight. Opera.”

“No, for tomorrow night. And it’s in your neck of the woods, so you don’t have to travel much.”

Sally thought about it for a second: it was very tempting, especially since she neglected BAM’s season unless it was opera, but with so much Wagner happening over the next several days, she didn’t know if it hadn’t been too much. Eduardo seemed to sense her hesitation:

“You can’t come?” he asked.

“I’m thinking about it. It’s just that so much opera is happening right now.”

“It’s all black cast, updated time and place.”

Sally was intrigued — the spoken theater version of Regie.

“You’re right, I should go. It does sound interesting, and I’ve been missing so much at BAM recently.”

“Perfect. Meet you in the lobby of Harvey Gillman at 7?”

“Sure. Thank you. See you!”

So much for the hope to focus on the opera. Several times during this night’s *Die Walküre* Sally caught her mind wandering, only 95% concentrated on the music and action. However much she tried to pretend it was no big deal, she knew it was — this “Julius Caesar” was definitely a date. And she wasn’t even sure if she wanted it to be a date. All of a sudden, way too much was happening at the same time. Maybe, she and Eduardo could be friends. It would be very nice to have a friend with so much knowledge of theater. It might not even be a date after all.

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Sally’s plan for Saturday was to rest as much as possible. She even decided not to go through her routine updating of the scores, because she didn’t want to turn on her computer. She needed to unwind after two emotional roller coasters of preceding nights and prepare her for yet one more: she looked up the production they were going to, and it definitely had the promise of being emotionally draining. She managed to stick to her plan until her phone signaled a text message. She opened it without looking, knowing for sure it was Eduardo.

Only it wasn’t. It was a message from John, notifying her that Frank’s trip was scheduled for Saturday, May 4. At first, Sally breathed a sigh of relief: she didn’t have to come up with more excuses, but then she remembered that she had opera that night.

“When are they leaving?” she texted back.

“I don’t know yet. Matt and decision-making have a dysfunctional relationship. You have opera Saturday night?”

“Dialogues des Carmelites. Can’t miss that one.”

“Understood. I don’t think they will have a late flight. Most likely they’ll leave in the morning. I think Matt would need more help Friday night than Saturday. Can do?”



“Yes. Sure.”

“Merci, ma chérie. You’re so wonderful.”

When they were still dating, John used to tell her how wonderful she was so often that at certain point Sally wanted to punch him in the face. Even now, when she thought, their relationship was long gone, “you’re so wonderful” made her blood boil. “If I’m so wonderful,” she wanted to shout in his face, “how come even my wonderfulness could not make you believe I am worthy of a long-distance relationship?”

Now that the idea of Zen Saturday went down the drain, Sally turned on her computer to update the scores of her season. The universe was kinder to her this week, so she earned quite a lot of points, and that calmed her down. Spending some time choosing the outfit which would be casually cute — when Sally needed to impress a man, she couldn’t simply dress up like most normal women did. Instead, she went through an elaborate outfit planning with the outcome which was supposed to be “this wasn’t planned; it just happens to look sexy without me putting any effort into it.” Of course, so much effort went into it that she almost missed the time when she needed to leave the house in order to arrive on time.

The lobby of the theater was crowded, and Eduardo wasn’t there. Sally had started to worry that they’ll miss the beginning of the performance, when Eduardo rushed in, waving the tickets.

“Sorry,” he said, still breathless, “got stuck in the tunnel again.”

“Tunnels seem to like you very much. Shall we go in?” Sally replied.

He was wearing a bow-tie and an argyle sweater. She was glad to see him.

Inside, once they were seated, Sally asked:

“Can I have my ticket?”

“Why?” Eduardo looked surprised.

“Just want to have one. I collect tickets for the events I go to. A hoarder in the making.”

Eduardo smiled and reached for ticket in his pocket.

“Here,” he said.

Sally looked at the ticket: it didn’t have the price on it.

“So it is a free ticket!” she exclaimed.

Eduardo looked confused:

“What?”

“Well, I was wondering if this was a free ticket or a “free” ticket — you know like that Lisbon Traviata book which is “from a one dollar stand at Strand.”

Eduardo blushed visibly:

“How did you find out?”

“You forgot to take out the invoice.”

“Damn.”

“All I’m saying that even for a friend, that “one-dollar” price seemed a bit excessive.”

“Oh,” said Eduardo. “I don’t want to be friends.”

And without skipping a beat, he kissed her. Then the lights in the auditorium were out, and the play began.

## Fantasy Opera Season Archive VI

[www.fantasyoperaseason.com/archives](http://www.fantasyoperaseason.com/archives)

### “Accident at the Met”

February 16, 2014. Posted by LaDivina

We have just been informed that a horrific accident took place in the family circle tonight during the performance of the double bill of Cavalleria and Pagliacci. According to the information that is available to us so far, there was an altercation between patrons: a woman pushed a man who fell over the ledge above the entrance. The man was taken to the hospital, and the woman was arrested. The performance was halted for about thirty minutes, but then resumed.

UPDATE: Alas, the man, whose identity yet remains unknown, died in hospital upon arrival. Let the media carnage commence.

UPDATE 2: As some of you have probably seen right now, the identity of the woman has been made public. We have decided to abstain from discussing her identity here, because she is one of the participants here, and we implore all of you who know her alias not to disclose it.

UPDATE 3: Since some of the participants could not resist the temptation to say things which should not be said, we have decided to restrict access to this discussion thread. It will no longer be available in the open access. Please, refrain from mentioning her fantasy opera user name in open access posts, for it will attract unnecessary attention from the media and general public. All mentions of the case in open access will be strictly moderated.

UPDATE 4: Anyone who continues to insist, after much discussion that has already taken place in this thread and the tentative agreement that has been reached in the process, that S.Sh. should be also sued for the interruption of the performance, will be temporarily banned for two weeks (first offense; second offense — for eternity). Please, find better things to waste your creative energies on: the return of James Levine to the Met this season, for instance.

03/01/2014

**Comments:**

1 / ... 12 / 13 /

**Leporello1965:** Ouch, that was intense. I wonder what Operalover123 (although now we would never know thanks to the mighty ban, but it's for the best) would suggest the Met should have done in case of the Macbeth suicide. I am, of course, dating myself here, but anybody else here was at the Met when it happened?

**NachRome1940:** I remember watching the broadcast on TV, it was such a bummer that it cancelled. It was one of the first live broadcasts — so exciting. I have never bothered to look into it, but I'm sure the Met lost a lot of money — I think then preparing that transmission was even more expensive than now with the cool equipment they have for Live in HD.

**Ulrica:** I was there. We were in the orchestra, somewhere in the area where the man fell! Thank God, it was during the intermission — that was probably one time I was really grateful (post factum, obviously) for the lines to the ladies' which kept me and Mr. Ulrica out of our seats much longer than we planned.

**Papageno1:** It's a good question, Leporello1965. I wonder if anybody then had the idea to sue the Met or to sue the relatives of the poor guy for the damages. Or people were less litigious then? Is it just us and our culture of suing for everything we feel we are entitled to?

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** If you're alluding to the famous McDonalds coffee lawsuit, then you should know that the woman had to sue not because she felt entitled to anything, but because McDonalds refused to settle her bill for medical expenses (she underwent several surgeries because of her third-degree burns as a result of spilling the coffee). It is actually not that easy to win a case against a corporation, even if it is a serious class lawsuit.

**Papageno1:** I didn't know that. Could you clarify for me then if there is a chance that the relatives of the man who died in this case can sue the Met — for some kind of negligence? For example, the ushers didn't react as quickly and their inaction is to blame for what happened as a result.

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** Unlikely. There's not enough ground.

**TheRenaissanceMan:** What about parents of Annie Le suing Yale. They already settled, as far as I know.

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** These are totally different matters, and I don't think it takes a lawyer to understand those. Annie Le's murderer was a known threat. Yale was his employer. It was less about the culture of violence and double standards as to sexual harassment, and more about negligent hiring.

**Dr.Dulcamara:** What if the family proves that the ushers didn't do it to prevent the altercation.

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** What if, what if... I don't think it is productive to dwell in the hypotheticals. Currently it is not the case and will see how it develops.

**Sills\_fan:** I can contribute nothing to the discussion of whether the Met is liable for men falling over the railing and dying, but what NachRome1940 said about being disappointed with the cancellation made me think — before people said what opera they would hate to have interrupted, but I would say that for me it is not the work, but the actual performance, or a specific singer. I know I have inundated all of you here with my adoration of Sills, but I am sure I would have been crushed if something happened during the NYCO production of Traviata with Sills, Stewart and Cossa in the 1970's (speak about dating oneself). I LOVED that production and I LOVED Sills in it. She was an amazing Violetta.

**Zerlina1809:** If I were able to see all Corelli's performances, I would have hated to have interruptions during those.

**Madame\_Viardot:** Rysanek as Klytamnestra. I glared so much at the smallest squeak from the people around me. How one can fidget during that?

**operakid\_25:** Mine would be AN in Macbeth recently. It is not that she isn't loud enough :), but have you noticed that her performances attract a lot of Russians who seem to care less for the performance and more for her presence. Last time I had these two women talking through the beginning as if it was still an intermission. When I shushed them, they looked at me as if I was a madman.

**Zerlina1809:** I admire you for shushing them, operakid! When she was in La Boheme here in Chicago, people would applaud when she entered Rodolfo's apartment. I understand that she is a star and all, but why not wait till her first aria is over — then you can go crazy as much as you want.

**IIDucadiMantova:** By the way, do you know that there is a pirate recording of 1974 NYCO Traviata — surprisingly good quality, although it was taped by the audience. I think I should have it somewhere. I'll let you know if I have.

**Sills\_fan:** That would be awesome, Duca, thank you! I would love to have a recording of it!

**Thefourth\_Rheinmaiden:** I would like to have it too, if possible.

**LaDivina:** Duca, mon cher, if you find it, could you share it with everyone — I'll create a placeholder in our music collection thread.

**IIDucadiMantova:** No problem.

**LaDivina:** Grazie mille.

**Gerry\_flapper2.0:** Anything Shirley Verrett. But since we seem to discuss a lot of Macbeth, definitely her sleepwalking scene. Why oh why oh why people think it is okay to breathe during that?

**Midwestern\_loggionista:** So, except for dear Madame\_Viardot who had to obey rules of matrimonial agreement and thus saw the opera from the Dress Circle, we really don't have a single person — one of us, obviously — who was in the Family Circle on February 16? I am not asking of pure curiosity, if anything.

**LaDivina:** Not that I know of.

03/07/2016:

**LaDivina:** I sent you a message, Loggi.

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Kulik, K.: Io: The Lost Part. In: *So to Speak: A Feminist Journal of Language and Art*, Summer 2013.

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