

THE LOOKING GLASS

MELODY GRAVES

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The man next to me coughs pointedly into his kerchief.

Yes, yes I'm putting it away now.



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

I do not reply straightaway but edge closer to the piano, allowing my imagination to run free. “I cannot.” Yet I am unable to remove my eyes from the tourmaline shimmer of possibility.

Violetta parts the group, and everyone falls silent, noticing my stark white collar. She lifts the decanter, draws a footed glass, and pours a measure. I watch in fascination as she places a lump of sugar in a slotted spoon across the lip of the glass and trickles cold water over it until the sugar disappears. The liquid turns milky white, ready for consumption. She stirs it and hands the glass to me.

“I should not.”

“Just one sip, that is all I ask.” She raises the glass to my lips and pours the white venom into my mouth.

The veil over my eyes lifts, and the lascivious colors of the room ravish me with a force unknown to me. She is near; her painted face floats beside me, disembodied against a swirl of costumes and props, rich objects depicting ancient treasures and royal robes. Amongst the faces of the crowd I drink the milk of Vice’s breast as a newborn, sucking the juices of life from Her.

Violetta laughs as her stage companion, a dark portly fellow with strong brow and bony nose, catches her by the elbow and sweeps her into the dance. Someone is playing the piano, and my angel and her Caliban glissade away from me, the silk of her dress rasping like crushed cinnabar in a drum. I try to step away from the piano, but the ground beneath me rocks like a windblown dinghy, generating a profound nausea.

I did not come here to watch her dance with a brute. The absinthe courses through my veins; I imbibe more of it to strengthen the pulsating warmth under my skin. My face is aflame, and all I desire is the Muse that I cannot have.

Violetta has stopped dancing. There she is, looking at me, her dark hair cascading down her shoulder in a curl of raven silk. A chill creeps up my spine, and suddenly I crave the warmth of the liquor. I drink deeply again, and feel her magnetism luring me into a trance.

The music has faded into a low, rhythmic sound, like a Moorish drum pulsing across the desert. I feel light and airy, as if my bones have become insubstantial, transmogrified into the mists of dew upon the grass. Am I a ghost? I look directly at Miss Bianchi, and her eyes appear darker and larger now. There is an inexplicable depth to them. I drift closer, floating on an invisible current of air. I have no use for feet or legs. I seem merely an apparition, an inkling of my imagination, save for the absinthe in my veins, which has now become my blood.

“Come closer, Father. Let me have a look at you.” Violetta’s slender fingers beckon. Before my eyes, they seem to grow and lengthen into white tendrils, coiling around my limbs and drawing me into the cloister of her inner sanctum.

“You crave the absinthe, don’t you?” she says.

“It has done something to me.” I am aware I sound idiotic, but the words come dribbling out without my control.

“It frees you, doesn’t it? Helps you to see that which has been in front of you all along.”

“I feel . . . strange.”

“Let it help you find the truth of who you are.”

Dear God, I am in a dream. The coldness mingles with the emerald fire; Violetta owns me now, panting into my ear as she is.

“How wonderful you smell, Father. And I am so hungry after performing.” She places the most delicate part of my earlobe between her teeth, and the monster inside of me roars. I cannot hold the tide back much longer. Warm, salty mess it is. Milk of my own, it wants to feed a mouth as well. Now I know a mother’s desire to be suckled.

Violetta nips my ear, and in the recess of my brain, I sense her teeth grow pointed under my skin. I gasp, touching her arm, but the feel of her bare skin against mine paralyzes me. She poises her twin ivory daggers over me and maneuvers her head downward, where my pulse beats strong and fast.

“What are you doing, dear lady!” I dare not move for the fangs pressed against my neck.

“I am showing you what lies behind the mask.”

“Please stop, I beg you.”

“Why did you seek me out, Father? To see what I see, you must pay a price.”

She pricks me and draws blood. I smell the tang, infused with a metallic bitterness.

“No.” I try to push her away, but I am caught, immobilized by the web of her fingers. She withdraws, her lips a wet crimson stain.

“You would not be here if you did not desire it.”

“Please, stop it!” I cannot extricate myself, but I can reach my pocket. Violetta leans in to drink of my neck, and I lodge the silver cross in the perfect crevice between her pale white breasts.

“You fool! What have you done to me!” She recoils, clawing at the searing cross now branding its mark upon her skin.

She falls backward into the crush of merrymakers, swallowed up by the swirl of chaos behind her.

I am trembling violently, my mouth leaden. I button my coat with great difficulty, my hands faltering at every turn. I cannot even look at her; I do not know what has just occurred.

Caliban plunges into the crowd after Miss Bianchi, who has altogether stopped the festivities, and causes an uncomfortable hush to fall over the crowd. He assists her valiantly, helping her to her feet while managing not to inadvertently raise her petticoats. No one else seems to notice the blood on her face, the sharp bicuspid leer she gives me, or the scarlet mark on her chest. Instead, they all gape at me as though I were Jack the Ripper.

Despite my deadened legs, I stump along on them, fleeing like a dazed amputee the scene of some tragedy. The streets are dank, the cobblestones murder to my feet.



THE HOUSE IS DARK when I arrive. I enter the bedroom, and there she is, restful and silent, lit by the bluish cast of the full moon. On my side of the bed, neatly arranged, are my dressing gown and cap, and my slippers, paired up and waiting. Margaret stirs but does not wake. I see a bottle of laudanum on the night table. Perhaps her headaches have returned. As I recall, she's been a bit pale lately, but she never complains of illness.

She has laid a new candle and matches on my table so I won't have to fumble about in the dark for them. I take the candle with me to fill the washbasin, where I begin to scrub my hands, to rid the smell of Violetta.

I remove my shirt and sniff my collar. It stinks of Violetta as well, so I apply a stiff brush to it. The flame of the candle flickers with a sudden draft, and I notice my reflection in the looking glass. My shirt is covered in blood, my hands filthy with dripping chunks of gore. My face, pale as a corpse except for my blood-red lips. I open my mouth in astonishment and behold a set of jagged fangs.

The coldness brushes past me again, and I shudder in its wake.

“Darling, is that you? Where have you been?” Margaret’s voice floats, angelic and disembodied, across the room. I look beyond my reflection in the glass to see her, but she is invisible in the dim light of the candle. I turn my head to answer her, but only a hiss issues from me.

“Darling, aren’t you coming to bed? It’s quite late.”

Speech at last springs forth. “Don’t come in here! I’m—a bit of a mess.”

“What have you been mucking about in?”

“Nothing, dear. It’s just the rain. Ruins everything, you know. Go back to sleep.”

I turn back to the mirror, plotting my next move.

From the nursery, a startled cry. Colin. I’ve woken the poor boy up. Margaret will surely rise to comfort him. I cannot let her see me in this state! I lurch across the room, trailing pale drops of watery blood, down the hall and into the closet. I must hide, or all will be lost.

“Rafe, you’ve disturbed the baby!” I hear her sigh as the familiar creak of the bed accompanies her drowsy shufflings. She gathers our son to her breast and begins to jounce him, humming an old Irish hymn.

The absinthe still ensnares me. I can feel it, a smothering green-eyed tiger. My blood is too thin for this potion, my will too weak. What have I become?

Margaret’s lullaby resonates in my ears. How have I never noticed what a pure alto voice she has? I crack the door open a little and peer at her rocking Colin to sleep, her long chestnut hair blanketing her shoulders. What an angel she is, the mother of my son.

There she stands, plain and pale and sleepy, with her crooked tooth and bumpy nose, her eye that wanders off to the right. But in this light she is beautiful, blessed, and holy.

Colin falls asleep, and Margaret nestles him back in his cradle. I spy her looking for me, but she soon gives up and wanders back to our room. She almost climbs into the bed, but then she sees my shirt, half-draped over the washbasin, and goes to investigate. My cloak is on the coat rack next to the basin. My journal! I half-rise in a panic, trying to decide which would be less of a shock, to see me in this state, or to read of my obsession. I cannot move from my place in the darkness.

I see her, lit only by the warm yellow flame of the candle, raising the collar of my shirt to her nose. She smells Violetta's perfume. A frown flits across her face, and she sniffs it again. The glint of the silver cross on the cover of my journal distracts her, and she pulls it out of my pocket. My blood runs cold; my veins are ice.

She reads the last entry of my journal and closes it with a sigh. I hear the telltale signs of her muffled weeping and see tears running down her cheek. What a scoundrel I am!

Presently, after a few moments of this, Margaret grows quiet, her face still illumined by the glow of the candle. Behind her, the mirror remains dark. She wipes her face with her sleeve, then resumes scrubbing my shirt collar. A low, tentative hum emerges from her throat. The hymn grows stronger and stronger, filling me with such warmth, I feel as though my chest will burst.

My mouth feels smaller now, and I touch my teeth to find them in perfect order. I am whole again.

I never thought the simple sound of my wife's voice would be the sound to raise my soul from the dead.