

**Prelude to the Performance**

*March 1991*

I insert my fare card and two wings open wide enough for me to pass through Farragut West station towards the Kennedy Center. Gleaming in the silver dress my grandmother found at the Jewish women's resale store and forty-five minutes away from my fifteenth opera, I am ready: I have listened to Puccini's *Tosca* three times with the libretto in hand and dreamt for a full week of the myriad ways the director might stage *Tosca* jumping off a building to her death. Having not yet received walking lessons in heels, I clack and thud at each step on the rust-tiled concrete until reaching the escalator that carries me towards dusk and my mother.

My grandmother takes my hand as we step into the city. A person who lives in a blanket at the top of the escalator asks us for anything. Grandmother's thick neck does not jolt to register his voice. *Tonight we are going to the opera, Judith*, she says, *and we'll respond to those voices there, not the street meshugener*. As we step past the bristly blanket, I notice his gums and wonder if teeth are a necessity for singing opera. I am young enough to see that he is like me, a lonely person living in the shadow of some grand and untouchable thing. I start to tell grandma how this guy never had a chance but she is already pulling me, spelling out the hazards of tobacco, and I do my best to keep up. I am eight and these streets scare me.

Together we pass the enormous fountain lit by rainbow lamps. My grandmother pinches my cheek and brushes a curl from my face. I curled it myself and felt proud until seeing it now in the water. It looks more like bedhead than an intentional choice. This always happens. I swear to myself I'll practice with the iron before *Die Rosenkavalier* in June, maybe even ask for my mother's help. Grandma's hair looks fine. She's adept at braiding her long whitish-blond hair and twisting it atop her head like a cinnamon roll. Her dress, however, is not fine—she wears a tight two-piece peach suit which makes her skin look ashy and her midsection look like she's sneaking coke bottles into the operahouse. I shrink to see my full form in the water where I more resemble a helmetless cosmonaut than an opera connoisseur—a term I learned last year. *Connoisseur*. I pass the word over my tongue and teeth like chewing gum. Grandma and I are a team bonded through my mother, who is probably doing vocal airplanes far inside the Kennedy Center's front doors, which we push open now to step on the red velvet carpet.

All heads wear a halo under the glow of these chandeliers. Everything is red, gold, ivory, marble—soft, smooth, and cold to the touch. I want to put my hands on everything. Unfortunately, grandma will not let go of my hand for fear that I might wander off, which I would. They talk loud, these people—the senators and supreme court judges and grandmother, who should know better. I only venture a whisper in this holy of holies where even the Jujube candies seem different and not just because they cost five dollars a box. I entreat grandmother to buy some and she offers me a Werthers from her jacket pocket. She does not understand.

The ticket takers wear vests like the heavy red proscenium curtains. They point left and tell us the second balcony is three flights up as if we were tourists. My

grandmother, a proud peach, tells them that we're here every show since her daughter sings here. They lose interest at the word "chorus," as if they could sing opera in this chorus, which I'm sure they couldn't. Grandmother continues to speak rather than leaving them to their finely-attired ignorance: *She's five foot eleven so you can't miss her, her name is Rhona P\*\*\*\*\*, but she used to sing under her maiden name Epstein.* My cheeks flush to hear my mother's secret name which clings to me like an unnoticed yet always there ghost.

My grandmother pulls me towards the elevators and I resist. I want to walk the long marble sets of stairs and feel the cold banister slide under my palm. Her feet are tired and she thinks I might get lost alone. We compromise, as we have since I was seven, to meet at the box level.

The marble steps lead to a world of grown ups who know how to dress, how to speak French, and how to lie. My mother once told me that many opera-goers don't actually enjoy opera. I hardly believe her, because this is my favorite thing in the world and why would anyone spend three hundred dollars on something that bores them? Why don't they give the toothless blanket man their three hundred dollars, so he'll leave and no one will have to see him and feel that life is unfair? But then I figure, if all the liars didn't buy tickets to the opera, then my mom would have no job and I would live on a blanket with Mom and our cats and guinea pigs—which the cats would hate, and mom would too. I'm not sure what the guinea pigs would think. Having a house is so much better than not. So I whisper a thank you to all the liars I pass as I rise.

On the first balcony I touch the ridges inside a painting of Hera, Aphrodite, Athena, warring over a golden apple—cool and rough, as expected. No one is looking, so

I put my cheek against the bronze frame for a second and close my eyes. I imagine my mother so close that she can stroke and smooth my hair. But she has a show to do. And the opera is more important.

I go two steps at a time up the stairs so as to match the stride of the long and upright adults alongside me. The banister is thick and I imagine I am gripping a slick python the whole way, keeping everyone safe, suffering for everyone's sake. There are no children here to keep the python at bay, so I squeeze extra hard. I wonder what will happen when I grow up; will I still see the world behind the apparent world? If growing up means becoming the kind of beautiful that doesn't stand out—whether wearing fabric colored and shaped like an eyesore as now or measuring five foot eleven with a voice that sounds like God—then maybe I never will.

At the top of the stairs there is a silver and aqua colored lounge with an enormous blue mirror behind the bartenders, which shows off their perfectly curled hair twice. I pray that if I can't be an opera singer when I grow up, to please please please make me a barmaid or waitress. I watch the beautiful parents forget their children as they sip from their thin martini glasses without smudging lipstick anywhere. Their faces are carefree, they don't think of the cathedral through the near-by doors where they will soon be sitting for three and a half hours, where they might recall all the ways that one could love imperfectly, and later die perfectly: The story of *Tosca*. They are not preparing their confessions as I am. I imagine myself tapping their tan, bare, beautiful shoulders and asking if they will adopt me, if I can join their family where the religion is as accessible as a quatrain spoken over Sunday's meatloaf, if they will dress me so I will never have to go to school wearing clothes that I know are laughable, if they will let me forget the

Epstein name's shudder-inducing relation to my small spirit, and if I might rest on their shoulder when the overture starts, rather than sitting completely erect and marking every turn of Puccini's greatness throughout each hour, which I will do, because I am the daughter of a tall woman in the chorus.

But my grandmother is shouting my name from the other side of the room. She doesn't notice that this is a place where people pay to be quiet and seductive. She has ruined everything. If these people were ever going to adopt me, they won't now that they see I have not actually been abandoned. I run to her with a clack-thud clack-thud and give her my hand, accepting my place in the universe once more and remembering my favorite secret, that my mother, the most beautiful woman in the world, is about to go onstage and sing the gorgeousness and terror of love into substance so that we can remember.