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The Mezzo Soprano

Gail was desperate when she auditioned for *Trouble in Tahiti*. Her dream to be a great opera singer had stalled and at thirty-four she wasn't sure how to proceed. When Milosz Czarnecki, her voice teacher, suggested she try out for the starring role in the DePaul University mounting of the opera, the swirling darkness she been struggling against since childhood blurred her vision and she scowled with frustration. A college musical! Ridiculous, she told herself but reluctantly admitted she didn't have much choice.

A tall, thin woman with long legs and a sharp, jutting nose, she refused to dress up for the audition and paced the hall outside the studio in shapeless jeans and a flannel shirt to demonstrate how little she thought of the amateurish production. She wore no makeup save some rose lip gloss as she sang scales to warm up while waiting her turn behind the closed doors.

When she'd come to Chicago in 1974, she felt like she'd arrived in the promised land, delivered from the plains of Oklahoma by God, her husband Brad, and music. But now, three years later, her career had refused to take off, her marriage was falling apart, and she found herself spinning into the whirling void of her strange, disjointed life.

She stepped into the studio, mounted the stage, and sang with energy and passion. The director asked her to wait outside when she finished and found her sitting on the floor in the hall, eating an orange.

"You were wonderful," he told her. "You're our Dinah."

Gail jumped up and hugged the man. "Thank you, thank you, thank you," she said, shocked that she was so elated to have won the role in such a minor production.

He smiled and told her rehearsals would begin the following Monday.

Landing the role immediately caused problems. Brad, who was working on his doctorate at the University of Chicago's Divinity School, was incensed. "I thought we'd agreed that you wouldn't do any more shows until I get my degree."

"We did--but this may be my last chance to establish myself as a singer," she said, leaning against the sink in the kitchen, Nicholas, tired and fussy, in her arms, her eleven-year-old daughter Karen eavesdropping from the sofa in the living room. "Aren't you even a little bit proud of me for getting this part? It might be the key that unlocks the door."

Brad glared at her with annoyed impatience. "I'm glad you got the part, yes, but..."

"But what?"

"But I just wish you had your priorities in order. You're a minister's wife, not an opera star. I wish you'd start acting like it."

“I know I’m a minister’s wife. That’s why I get up and teach every day to support our family while you go to school. It’s also why I run out to that church every Sunday and sing with the choir so the congregation has another reason to hire you to replace Reverend Lipscomb when he retires. I smile at those fat ladies, eat their coffee cakes, and make small talk so you can get a job and don’t you forget it.”

“You won’t let me, that’s for sure, and while we’re mentioning things, let’s not forget how I take care of your daughter five days a week when you’re not here to look after her.”

“Don’t even suggest that I’m not a good mother after all I went through to have Karen and bring her up by myself. She’s a happy child and she has no complaints about me.”

“I wish I could say the same thing.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“I mean I feel like you’re taking advantage of me.”

“Why are you saying this? I thought you loved me.” She felt off balance, the darkness clouding the edges of her vision.

“And I thought you loved me.”

She considered this. Did she love him? Love him enough to put his needs before her own and create some shared happiness they both could enjoy? Or was theirs a relationship of convenience—he got the wife and family he needed to establish himself in a church and she got respectability and an escape from the straightjacket of rural life in Oklahoma?

“It seems like I’m the least important thing in your life,” Brad said, his teeth bared as he glared at Gail. “If you have any time or energy left, I get a peck on the cheek and earful of how hard things are for you. Lucky me.”

“Don’t be so petulant. If I was as distant as you say, Nicholas wouldn’t be here.” She grimaced in the thin afternoon light trickling into the kitchen through window in the air shaft as she put a bottle into Nicholas’s mouth. He closed his eyes and pulled hungrily on the nipple.

“One night of passion doesn’t make up for months of indifference.” He turned on his heel and went back to his desk. She shook her head and took Nicholas to the bedroom for his nap.

The chill in their relationship continued during the six weeks of rehearsals for *Trouble in Tahiti* so Gail was surprised when she came home from school the afternoon of the first show to find Brad in an ebullient mood. “Reverend Lipscomb and the Church Board made it official. They offered me their pulpit”

Gail’s eyebrows went up in surprise. “That’s wonderful, Brad. I’m so glad for you.”

“They want me to come out tonight to sign the contract. I’ll have to miss your show.”

“Really?” Gail frowned. “Can’t you go another time? I’d like you to be at the opening tonight--for support and all.”

“Sorry, I can’t. They might not like it if I put them off and I can’t miss this opportunity. At this point in my life, I have to do what’s best for my career.”

She was hurt by the cold distance in his voice. The tender concern which had first won her over was gone. “OK,” she said, wanting to say more but too upset to speak. She went into the bathroom, closed the door, and steadied herself against the sink, blinking away the shadows in the corners of her eyes. She finally lowered the lid on the toilet seat, sat down, and stared at the shower curtain. She felt numb.

She'd met Brad, a seminarian doing an internship at Calvary Missionary Baptist Church in Altus, Oklahoma, when she was singing in the choir on Sundays to earn a few dollars. She didn't really have much truck with religion but needed the money after that no-good Lester Epton had taken off and left her holding the bag as a single, unmarried mother in Elk City. She'd always wanted to sing and, refusing to be defeated by motherhood, she'd taken Karen and enrolled at Western Oklahoma State College to study music.

Brad was intelligent, honest and a reasonably nice looking man. He also thought she was beautiful and though that puzzled her, she didn't discourage him and didn't say no when he asked her to marry.

He wanted a family, a child of his own, and she'd told him she was agreeable to that; but in her mind it was something far off in a dim, distant future. But soon after they moved to Chicago, she became pregnant with Nicholas. She seriously considered an abortion. She didn't want another child—not when she finally had a teaching job she loved and the opportunity to pursue the singing career that had seemed impossible on the plains of Oklahoma. Another child, diapers, night feedings, teething—that makes everything more difficult and she didn't want to do it.

But she loved Brad. He had been good to her, rescued her from ignominy, and made an honest woman of her. She felt she was in his debt and knew how much he wanted a child of his own. She didn't want to be a bad wife and decided against the abortion, thinking this child would bind them together and deepen their love.

But it hadn't turned out like that, Nicholas being a difficult, whiny child who rubbed everyone's nerves raw. Brad expected her to care for the baby so he could study and she resented having to be the primary care-taker when all she wanted to do was pursue her musical career.

She'd wanted to sing opera since she first heard *Aida* on the Metropolitan Opera Radio Network one Saturday afternoon when she was eight, sitting at the kitchen table with her mother in Elk City chopping onions for a stew. The music was an anchor of sanity that promised to save her from the twisting chaos that had ripped open her toddler's heart the afternoon her mother swatted her aside to grab the bottle of gin from the coffee table.

Moving to Chicago, teaching music in the Communication Arts Center, taking voice lessons with Dr. Czarnecki, performing a solo concert at St. Clements, singing at the Lyric Opera in the chorus—she felt she was about to succeed at establishing herself as an artist. Caring for Nicholas interfered with her musical ambitions and she resented Brad's insisting it was a mother's job; he had more important things to do.

And now he wouldn't be at her show. She was devastated. She tore off a few sheets of toilet paper, blew her nose, and whispered, To hell with him. I don't need him around to hear me sing.

She sang well that night and took her bows, imbued with a quiet sense of accomplishment until she spotted her children and Brad's empty seat in the first row. Her mouth went dry realizing she was anchored to a life where music was not the sun at the center of the universe. She clenched her teeth into a cold smile, realizing she wasn't a great artist, a singer whose priority was music, and probably never would be. She shivered a bit and tried to shake the bitterness from her shoulders like an unwelcome, intrusive hand.

Dr. Czarnecki smiled his approval and the college students in the cast gushed their admiration for her voice. Dave Schmidt, a fellow teacher at the Communication Arts Center, gave her a congratulatory hug and told her she was magnificent. She thanked him with a grateful smile.

She dressed quickly and took Karen and Nicholas home, hoping to talk things through with Brad. But the apartment was empty. Fish swam across his computer screen. She felt like crying as disappointment swirled around her shoulders. But not wanting to inflict her troubles on her children, she forced herself to smile as she got them into bed.

“Are you OK, Mom?” Karen asked.

“No, baby, I’m feeling real confused, like I’m lost in the dark.”

“You’re not lost, Mom. You’re here at home with me and Nicholas, right where you belong.”

Gail looked at her daughter and smiled. “Thanks, baby. Give me a hug.” Karen threw her arms around her mother’s neck but Gail still felt disjointed and perplexed.

When she finally sat on the sofa in the living room which was dimly lit by the streetlight filtering through the blinds, she held her head in her hands, struggling against the gloomy vortex of her marriage, another door to the darkness that threatened to overwhelm her. The union with Brad had initially seemed like a boulevard leading to a stable, prosperous existence far from the prairie shack of her youth but had proved to be nothing more than a circular route back to the chaos of her life in Oklahoma.

She wondered if Dave Schmidt has experienced the same feelings as his marriage feel apart. They’d grown close, both young parents teaching by day and practicing their art at night. Dave was an actor, doing small theater and an occasional commercial. As fellow artists they seemed to understand each other intuitively which Gail found surprisingly satisfying.

But they'd shared some deeply personal experiences as well. When she'd been pregnant with Nicholas, Dave confided in her about his own frustrating marriage. "I wish I could talk Elizabeth into having a child."

"She doesn't want children?"

"She says she does, but not right now. She wants to finish her masters and then spend the summer in Europe. Says maybe in a couple of years. I've been telling her we're not getting any younger. I mean we're both thirty-nine but she says there's plenty of time."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Gail said. She'd had a sweet spot for Dave since the day they met. He was tall and thick-shouldered with coarse hair that lay on his head with a stiffness that was almost unnatural. It was his glass eye though that caught her attention and made her want to mother him.

"How did you lose your eye?" she'd asked.

"I was just a kid, fell off my bike into some bushes—a branch poked out my eye."

"It must have been painful."

"It was but the hardest part was dealing with the other kids after I got the glass eye. They called me Dead Eye, One Eye, Cyclops. It was pretty awful."

She admired his courage in dealing with both the injury and the aftermath but she respected him even more for his quiet, steadfast determination to have a child which eventually won over Elizabeth who got pregnant and had a daughter they named Irene.

Gail got up and went to the kitchen, grinning as she recalled the last time she'd seen Irene, a child with bright smile that caused people to pat her cheek and say, "What a beautiful baby." She made herself a cup of tea. As she stirred in honey, she thought of her grandmother who always

laced her tea with three spoons of honey. Her grandmother had raised her when she realized Gail's mother was a drunk, incapable of caring for a child. She'd cared for Karen too while Gail went to college but died just before graduation. Gail missed her and knew she'd give her good advice about how to deal with Brad if she were still alive. She shrugged. Too late for that, she mumbled to herself.

She went back to the living room and stared at the phone, wondering if she should call Dave and tell him her troubles. He hadn't hesitated to share his problems when he faced a major health crisis shortly after Irene's birth. "The doctor thinks it might be cancer," he told her in the faculty lounge. They were alone and the room was quiet.

"No, no, that's horrible news," Gail said, taking his hands in hers. "Are they sure?"

"No, that's just it. They want to operate to find out."

"An operation? What kind of an operation?"

"Exploratory." Dave said, his good eye staring into Gail's, his glass eye reflecting the light with blinding, unfocused brilliance.

"What does that mean?" Gail asked, moving her chair closer, her hands tightening on his, drawn by his need and by her own desire to be a good friend.

"The only way they can tell if what they are seeing on the x-ray is cancer is to cut me open, take it out, and do a biopsy. If I wait it might metastasize and kill me."

"What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to the doctor again this afternoon after work. Can you come with me, hear what he has to say? I need some support and Elizabeth won't be there."

"Why not?"

“Her father died of cancer and she can’t deal with this, says it freaks her out, but that doesn’t do me any good.” He blinked furiously, his good eye tearing, the glass one sparkling and unaffected. “I thought she loved me, would be there for me, but she’s not. It’s really disappointing.”

Gail nodded. She knew what disappointment was like. Its bitter taste had filled her mouth when Lester Epton ran off after knocking her up, when Vanderbilt’s Blair School of Music rejected her application for its voice program, and finally when her auditions at the Lyric failed to get her out of the chorus. She’d faced disappointment head on and she knew Dave needed someone to help him through this crisis.

“Sure I will,” Gail said.

She called Brad and asked him to pick Karen up from dance class. “This will really be a pain,” he told her.

“I know but Dave needs someone to lean on.”

“That’s why his wife should go, not you. You should make sure your husband gets freed up to do dissertation research.”

“Brad, don’t be petty. This is serious and it’s just this once. That’s what friends are for.”

“OK,” he said but before she could thank him, he hung up. She stared at the phone, her lips twisted with an awkward, conflicted smile.

When Dave returned to work ten days after his lung surgery, he was in obvious pain as he entered the lounge. Gail jumped up and helped him take off his coat. The other teachers immediately surrounded him with concern and questions.

“I’m still awfully tender but the biopsy was negative, no cancer,” he explained, sipping at the cup of coffee Gail put in front of him. “I would have stayed home longer but I’m out of sick days. I need the money now that we have the baby and Christmas is coming up.”

The bell rang and the staff dispersed to greet the children as they entered the school. Gail, her eyes cloudy with tears and moved by Dave’s determination to endure pain to support his child, looked at him with admiring fondness as he struggled to his feet. He smiled at her and she knew he was grateful for her help and that reassured her she’d done the right thing, even if Brad thought otherwise. She returned his smile and went to her classroom where the children were gathered around her piano.

He’s my friend, she thought, and picked up the phone. “I don’t know what to do, Dave,” she whispered into the phone, the shadowy gloom of the living room pressing oppressively against her. “It’s like Brad and I are going in different directions. Was it like this before Elizabeth walked out on you?”

“Sort of, I mean, I knew she never really wanted Irene; but doesn’t Brad understand you have to sing?”

“He says I’m selfish, that all I do is think about is myself and my career, not his.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

There was a prolonged silence. Finally she said. “I think so too. I don’t think I can take much more of this. Can you meet me tomorrow morning at that coffee shop on Irving before school?”

He said yes and they hung up. She lay down on the sofa and woke to find Brad shaking her shoulder. “Come to bed,” he said. “It’s three in the morning.”

She followed him into the bedroom and undressed, leaving her clothes in a pile on the floor. She got into the bed and they made love but she didn't have an orgasm. When she woke in the morning, he was tangled in the green blanket on the far side of the bed, Nicholas was fussing in his wet diaper, and Karen was already watching cartoons on the television in the living room.

Karen's eighth grade graduation was held in the school auditorium and began with "Pomp and Circumstance" on the p.a. Gail watched Karen come down the aisle in her cap and gown. She smiled at her daughter and then rearranged Dave's daughter, Irene, on her lap. Nicholas sat next to her, quietly reading *Curious George*.

She found a tear rolling down her cheek as Karen returned her smile and climbed the steps to the stage. She watched Dave who was in the aisle videotaping Karen with his new camcorder. He was such a typical man, a technology freak who loved pushing buttons, thinking that established him as someone who made things happen. The auditorium was bright but shadows fingered the corners of the room and Gail shifted uncomfortably in her seat.

Nicholas pulled her arm and pointed to the Man in the Yellow Hat, his favorite character in the *Curious George* book, That made her think of Brad who'd bought himself a yellow hat to please the boy. She sighed. She missed Brad, his euphoric raps about heaven and his ability to see Jesus in every flower and drop of rain. Silly stuff but inspiring; so different than the mundane reality of everyday motherhood—mother this and mother that—while trying to write lesson plans and shopping lists, rehearse the new songs for Czarnecki's next class, and schedule dental appointments. She fought her way out the dry dust of Oklahoma for this and the irony of her bland existence left her smile twisting into a wry, sad grin.

The divorce had quickly followed Brad's graduation but she'd barely noticed, absorbed by the operatic career that was stillborn, and the one-eyed flame of Dave's insistent affection. None of it was quite what she had expected but here she was in an uncomfortable chair, watching her daughter on the stage beaming, happy and proud of her accomplishments.

Dave returned to his chair and sat next to her. "She looks great, doesn't she?" he whispered.

"Yes, she looks wonderful with that lipstick and eye shadow. My baby's grown up."

"You should be proud of her—and yourself. You're a good mother." He smiled at her, his good eye focused on her face and sparkling with love, his glass eye staring over her shoulder as if it were unable to get involved in the conversation.

"Am I?" she asked, unsure what that meant, looking over his shoulder at the silhouettes that drifted along the back wall.

"Yes, you are," he insisted, amused by her uncertainty, "a good mother, a great wife, a memorable lover, and a legendary singer."

"Oh stop, Dave. You're being silly," she said with an uncertain smile and looked back to the stage where the ceremony swept her up in its gentle arc as the day moved forward into the amorphous shadows of the afternoon.