

ASCONA

The trouble with growing old is that no one remembers how vital and accomplished you once were. Even if they do, what they see now is but a pale reflection of your earlier self. So either way you lose. Furthermore, if life's circumstances have constrained you, so that you never had the opportunity to find the fulfilment in your work that you'd hoped for – and to grow into the person you'd aspired to become – well, that's it. You don't get a second chance.

The latter case applies to me with particular relevance. You see, I had to leave behind a flourishing career, friends and family – an entire life – with only two days warning after Hitler came to power. In the midst of preparations for my first opera's opening in Berlin, a music-loving Gestapo officer warned me to become scarce – quickly. It didn't matter that an eminent critic had called me “the white hope of our generation in music” – winner of the coveted Mendelssohn prize at twenty-two for an composition which no less than Otto Klemperer conducted; working with the celebrated Austrian conductor Erich Kleiber on his astounding 132 rehearsals for the première of Alban Berg's “Wozzeck”; myself conducting the Leningrad Philharmonic for a time. When the Nazis took power, my contributions to German culture mattered not a whit. Of course, as a Jew, I was lucky to have escaped at all.

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After I fled, I made a home in a one-bedroom cold-water flat in Hampstead, London, where I've lived ever since. During the war I worked for the BBC's European Service, programming (and sometimes conducting) music broadcast to Germany, featuring works of Mahler, Mendelssohn and other composers forbidden by the Nazis, just to aggravate them. After

the war I wrote a new opera, which won the first prize in the Art's Council Festival of Britain. I thought I was on my way again.

A friend who had the inside track on the judging took me aside. "Jacob, they're not going to stage it, you realise."

"Why not?"

"It's far too melodic and sensual, even lush in passages. Don't you see? We live in an age of atonality."

"But it won the prize..."

"Ah, yes. But then they found out that not only were you Jewish, but, well, let's call your radical politics '*progressive*.' And lastly, that you're not even British."

The runner-up, one Peter Furyk, was bumped up to first place and his *Concerto for Strings* performed in the Albert Hall. My new wife, Clara, strongly advised me to accept our invitation to attend, so we did. I found the concerto pure re-tread Schoenberg, utterly unimaginative, without any musical sense that I could discern. I was embarrassed for Furyk, expecting a hushed silence with discomfited coughs at its conclusion. Instead the audience erupted in applause – even a standing ovation. Furyk took the stage raising his arms in victory as if he were a prizefighter.

The next day *The Times* gave the concert a rave review.

I paced back and forth in our little front room. "I know, it's not fair," Clara said.

"Fair? *Fair?* First he takes my prize, then his worthless piece is deemed a triumph. I mean, why bother?"

"You're not going to let what he does or doesn't do ruin your life, are you?" she said.

"Don't let the wretched man set standards for you, Jacob."

That was it. I snatched my overcoat and left the flat. I spent most of the day walking on Hampstead Heath, fuming. Of course, Clara was right. I returned home to apologise, but she was gone. A note said she would spend the night at a friend's. I passed the night alone and miserable.

Clara returned after work the next afternoon. I apologised for my appalling behavior. She also apologised. "I shouldn't be telling you how to live your life."

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I decided to protest the fact that my opera had been passed over. All this accomplished was to further alienate the musical establishment, which sealed my fate. No new works of mine would be commissioned, and existing ones wouldn't be on the list to be played. I became, in a word, invisible.

After that, when I sat down to compose, my mind went blank. I would stare at fresh staff paper and see only blank staves. No new notes came to me. .

You might think composing music is like writing prose or poetry. Consider how different music is. To start with, it has to be performed. The musical score is but an outline, somewhat as the film scenario is to the film. It needs to be interpreted. When an orchestral work is in rehearsal before the première, the composer is present to listen, and make corrections along with the conductor, because, for the first time, he is hearing what his creation actually *sounds* like. Before, it was a creation of the imagination. Now, it takes concrete form.

So, when my music fell out of fashion, and orchestras and ensembles would no longer play what I had written, I stopped composing. Meanwhile, though it should have mattered to me not at all, I had to endure Peter Furyk, and his puerile compositions, written in banal styles to suit the day, be performed everywhere to continuing acclaim.

“Furyk again?” Clara asked as I slumped in my easy chair, fumes practically rising from my head. She massaged my shoulders. “Don’t be so bitter – he’s a charlatan. Someday Britain will wake from its brainwashing.”

It never did.

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Though I managed to obtain a few conducting assignments, they weren’t enough to pay the rent. (My once flourishing musical career had shrunk to giving piano and voice lessons.) But for the salary of my dear wife, an assistant curator at the British Museum, we would have been homeless.

I don’t mean to describe my life as a picture of unrelieved gloom. Aside from the travails in my professional life – piano instruction for boys who would rather be outside playing, or singing lessons for girls whose mothers valued the idea of vocal training only as part of a cultured upbringing – I felt as many did in Britain in the postwar years: grateful to have survived the bombing and the end of rationing, and be part of the rebuilding. I was thankful to be in England rather than in Germany. I now felt more British than Germanic, and no longer an exile. If only England felt the same about me.

Still, I can’t tell you the number of occasions over the years that I ran across Furyk’s face polluting some magazine cover, or staring at me from a poster for an upcoming concert – reminders of the rewards he and his mediocrity received. It wasn’t the prizes – a pox on them – but the many instances his commonplace compositions got played before appreciative audiences. He would stand in the spotlight, taking his bows with the poise of a man who feels they’re rightfully earned. Every time I’d catch the end of one of his concerts on the telly, and subject myself to this spectacle, I would berate myself – why didn’t I write something again? Of course I wouldn’t get

the chance to be appreciated if I didn't put myself out there. Then I would sober up, remembering what happened the last time I composed a new piece.

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Then, in a dreadful accident at work (the lift she and two others were riding in collapsed) Clara died. This sudden loss of my dear wife of nearly thirty years sent me into paroxysms of uncertainty and anxiety. The skin all over my body broke out in a painful rash that lasted for months. I awoke at times wondering where I was. The walls of my flat, groaning with books and musical scores, seemed to lean inward, making the space feel cramped and inhibiting. My life took on a feeling of skating on thin ice which might at any time break beneath me, a fear which has never left me.

I think I might have imploded but for Elena, my lover for some time already. Though the passion between Clara and me had cooled, we still loved each other and had wanted to stay together. Clara had had her lover, too, a nice chap whom I befriended after her death. Now, with Clara gone, Elena became the emotional centre of my life. A small woman, she was almost as retiring as I, unlike the beaming, outgoing Clara. Elena and I made a quiet, unassuming couple.

It was a bit complicated: Elena was still married, and for a number of reasons couldn't leave her husband. But we managed. We dined together two, three times a week. Then she slept over at my flat. And, once a year, for thirty years, we escaped for three weeks to Italy. More specifically, to our haven in Ascona.

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Yes, I know, Ascona is in Ticino – in Switzerland. But located as it is at the northernmost tip of Lago Maggiore, its soul is pure Italian. For Elena and me Ascona came to represent a place out of time, an oasis of tranquility, a refuge. Somehow, we even stumbled upon a refuge within the refuge when we landed, that first, stormy night, at the *Residenza Serena*. We had

our own automobile that trip, thank goodness, as we drove from hotel to hotel, from *pensione* to *pensione*. Not a room was available, as a big festival was underway in Locarno. Until at last at the *Residenza*, where the Signora Maria said we were in luck – a couple had just left unexpectedly. Did we mind staying at the annexe, just a few blocks away? We would come back over for breakfast, *naturalmente*.

The annexe was in fact a small cottage with its own garden. Totally private. Elena burst into tears when we set down our bags inside. In over thirty years we have never *not* stayed there for three weeks in March or April, and we have come to feel part of Maria and Giuseppe's – the owners' – family.

So then, personal fulfilment has trumped professional disappointment, you might say? That would be too easy an equivalence. They are separate areas of life, after all. Yet a minor incident late in life did succeed in getting me as close as I might to coming to terms with my professional situation.

Whilst on my way to a rehearsal of Stravinsky's *Scherzo Fantastique*, I walked down one of the myriad passageways to the rehearsal halls as a procession approached in the opposite direction. As the group breezed by, I recognised my old nemesis Peter Furyk, surrounded by a bevy of young female acolytes. I turned to watch them recede, the girls' voices gushing, Peter's bouffant, perfectly coiffed silver hair above them. He was dressed in a three-piece grey pinstripe suit, crimson tie, and shiny black shoes. If I hadn't been aware that he was also on his way to a rehearsal, I would have said he was going to a sitting at a photographer's.

At that moment I knew for certain that he and I represented polar opposite ideals of artistic life. Happiness for me was to be found in the work itself, in the nitty-gritty of creation, in the shirt-sleeves and sweat of rehearsal and joy of performance. Though I'm not good-looking,

photos of me at work show a concentration – even bliss – that to my mind trump personal appearance.

That day I was released from the Furyk fixation that had tormented me for so many years. In the evening I took Elena to a celebratory supper at our favorite *bistro*, and after declaring my *steak au diable* to be Furyk-the devil, I stabbed it with my fork.

“Jacob!” Elena said.

I beamed at her. “I am a free man, Elena, no longer pursued by that destructive demon.”

Oh, how I wished we were in Ascona already! Instead of my dank flat, I wanted a room that wouldn’t take two hours to heat up, with Italian food for a month which we wouldn’t have to cook for ourselves.

“Just another week,” Elena reminded me. “I made our reservations for the boat train this morning.”

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Our stay in Ascona that year might have been the finest ever. A snowy February had given way to a balmy March. The apricot tree in our garden was already in bloom, with abundant fresh greenery on display everywhere in town.

We spent a good deal of time in the plot next to the annexe, where Maria, the proprietress, had her vegetable garden. Alongside her, we dug over the soil, hoed and weeded, and helped plant the summer crop. Though we wouldn’t be there to savour the resulting bounty, we were more than happy to contribute to the happiness of their many guests to come. And the work gave us both a needed outlet for the physical and emotional tensions our bodies carried.

The night before our departure, Giuseppe and Maria insisted we join them for supper in their kitchen. In gratitude for our help in the garden they had prepared a lavish meal of some of our favourite foods. We felt like royalty, and at the same time accepted as family. After the meal

we strolled down to the lake where, as often before, we rented one of the clunky old rowboats. I knew we would want to end the evening with some stargazing, so I asked the young man in charge to throw in a couple of extra cushions. He did so. "*Ma non troppo intimo!*" he said, wagging a finger at me.

I rowed us out quite far, so we could look back at brightly lit Ascona itself, as well as see the fancy villas on the hillsides. We tried to imagine what the rich were up to, but we felt richer than they would ever be. We had each other, and we had the galaxies above us. We lay back, as we often had done, and tried to identify as many constellations as we could.

After we had exhausted our astronomical knowledge, Elena snuggled next to me. "Jacob. Are you happy?"

"What a silly question. I have never felt as content in my life, darling."

"I'm so glad. We don't have a lot of time left on this earth, you and I. We should clear away the rubbish. Only good things, good people. No more bitterness. Don't you agree?"

I clasped her in my arms. "No more bitterness. *Si, amore mio. Si.*"

*

When we returned to London a miracle happened. No other word can describe it. Slipped under my door I found a letter:

"Mr. Goldfarb, I'd very much like to chat with you about your career, starting in Germany in the 1920s. I work for the Blue Note, and I'd like to feature you as the lead-off for a series on 'Entartete Musik'. Won't you please give me a buzz?"

It was signed "Dale Morden," a name I recognised as a significant critical voice; The Blue Note was England's premier journal of musicology. The next morning we met for coffee in Kensington near his office, the first of a good two dozen meetings that included our listening to my early recordings on wire (tape hadn't been commercialised when my early work was

recorded), broad discussions of the musical scene in Germany and Berlin, in particular, before Hitler, and what had happened to me after I landed in Britain. He found my story of neglect positively shameful – lamentable not only for me, but for England, who lost in me what he called “a peerless musician.” (I glowed inside when he uttered those words, believe me.)

The resulting story of my life and career spanned two issues of the magazine. It pleased me no end to see my early opera mentioned as well as the prize-winning compositions. Nods were made to my lyrical style, eclectic lushness and romantic expressionism, out of fashion for many years with the rise of atonality. (Oh, how I hoped Peter Furyk would read this!) Each issue also had my photograph, a pleasant head shot that Elena deemed “magisterial.” Now, at least, I would not die in total obscurity, a forgotten man.

I thought that would be the end of it, but I was wrong. Made aware of my existence, and of a body of unproduced work, it was as if the world of music wanted to make amends.

Within a period of a few months, I went from pariah to poster boy.

A record label flush with the proceeds of one of their best-selling groups decided to mount my entire musical back catalogue! Performances of long-forgotten works were programmed at major music festivals for the summer. Even the dear old Beeb tried to make up for their neglect by featuring my violin concerto and concerto for orchestra on separate programmes at that year’s Proms. Leipzig played my second symphony. My double concerto for viola and cello, written just before I left Germany, and its score only recently recovered, premiered at Tanglewood.

But more than the performances of older works – even to thunderous ovations – was the gift all this attention provided me. For the first time in over thirty-five years notes formed in my mind. They swirled, congealed under my guidance, and I wrote them down. I could compose again! Not only compose, but with unusual speed. Beginning one night that first September I

wrote what was my third string quartet (forty-three years after the second) in three days! I told Elena what I was up to, unplugged the telephone, and worked straight through, as though I were a young Mozart. The following week I slipped the score, barely dry, to Dale Morden for his suggestions, knowing he would be ruthlessly honest. He handed it back the next day, commenting on its remarkable virtuosity, style and verve, as well as its “soul.” Had I written this in the 50s, he wondered? (I had used old blank sheet music I’d saved from the old days, not to hoodwink him, but because I don’t throw useful things out.) “Last week,” I said, leaving him dumbfounded.

When word of this fresh creativity got out, commissions for new pieces from top performers came rolling in. I was living in a dream world, totally engaged, more than I’d ever hoped for.

Elena felt a bit upstaged, as though I’d taken a second mistress. Yet she understood I was making up for lost time. I tried to take her with me as much as I could. We traveled together to America when a programme of my chamber music played at the Huntington Library in Pasadena. And she accompanied me to Johannesburg for the première of the opera that had won the prize in 1950 but had never been performed.

The only drawback to these blessings was having to bow out of our annual trip to Ascona for the first time in nearly thirty years. Elena was disappointed but understood my situation. One March night we lay on a blanket on Hampstead Heath and gazed at the stars there, pretending the hard earth beneath us was the rowboat we would often take out onto *Lago Maggiore* to do our stargazing. Then it got too cold and we went back to my flat for a snifter of cognac. It was a small solace for missing out on Ascona, but it had to do.

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One day in early April, while there was still snow on the ground, an old woman dressed in black – some kind of street vendor with a middle-Eastern look – set up her stand across the

street from the entrance to my flat. I was about to put my key in the door when I heard a great clattering. I turned to see that my neighbor had fallen from his bicycle, his load of groceries spilled from his carrying bag.

I rushed to help him. He was unhurt, he said. I helped him pick up his provisions and, when I stood, I found myself in front of the vendor's stand. From the table in front of her, a motley assortment of leather goods, jewelry and the like, she selected a beautiful multicolored shawl and proffered it to me. She mumbled something in a language that sounded, to me, like Arabic.

My neighbor joined me and took the groceries I'd gathered. He translated the woman's mutterings. "She said the shawl will bring you luck."

"What if I'm already lucky?"

The man translated what I'd said for her. She answered, and he translated back. "Then you must buy it to keep your luck."

"I guess I don't have much choice, do I?"

When I gave Elena the shawl that evening she was thrilled. Its wealth of colors matched her amber eyes as well as the brown-red tint she used on her hair.

"Just feel it, Jacob," she said, holding it out to me. "Close your eyes. Now run your fingers through it." I did as requested. "Can't you feel the softness of the mohair, offset by whatever the shimmering spangles are made of. I don't know why, but it reminds me of the soft night air of Ascona, and our times on the lake admiring the galaxies." I took her in my arms and kissed her.

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The following year was even busier than the first. Mannheim, Berlin, Chicago. The première of a new concerto for clarinet and orchestra at the Lausanne Festival. Yo Yo Ma, no less,

playing my cello concerto with the New York Philharmonic at the opening concert of the season. More commissions left and right.

After a bleak London winter Elena and I were both more than ready for Ascona. The morning before our scheduled departure I went for my usual morning walk on the heath. I strolled to a high point from which to enjoy a view of the city. At a bench I wiped away the slush and took a seat.

Someone had spread bird seed on the ground, and the remnants now were being devoured in the melting snow by small brown birds – until a raucous magpie drove them off. I shooed him away, but he hovered on a nearby branch, just waiting for my departure to return to his meal. Perhaps because I felt a kinship with little brown birds losing their food, I took stock of where I stood professionally in my own life *vis-à-vis* two years earlier. All of this magic, this fulfilment more than made up for the neglect I had endured for so many years. Yet I still felt that some magpie might burst out of the sky and take it all away. It didn't matter if I deserved my good fortune or not, or that I now worked hard to perpetuate it. I was back to that sense of unease – of the tenuousness of things – that could grip me like shackles.

A woman, accompanied by a girl of perhaps nine or ten, stopped to sit at the bench next to mine. I smiled at the girl, and she at me. I nodded to the mother, and then, as I looked back in front of me, I caught sight of something that didn't seem possible. My eyesight being less than perfect, I fumbled for my spectacles. When I put them on I was thunderstruck. Far off, at perhaps two hundred metres, a woman clothed in black, on a camel – a *camel*, can you believe it? – rode straight into one of the Highgate ponds. Indeed, she was already half-submerged. I don't know why, but I felt certain this was the woman who sold me the shawl I had given Elena the year before. I stood for a better view just as the camel disappeared underwater without a fuss, as did the woman riding it.

“Did you see that?” I said to the woman at the other bench.

“See what?”

“The woman on the camel. In the pond. She just rode her camel into the pond!”

“Come along, Sarah,” the woman said to the child. “Now!”

I hurried down the pathway as fast as I could until I reached the pond. But I found no sign of a camel, or any witness to what I had seen.

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When I told Elena about this over dinner I asked if she thought I was losing my mind.

“I’d say it’s a good thing we leave for Ascona tomorrow. You’re overworked, Jacob. I can see it in your face. The anxiety.”

Not truly reassured, I let the matter drop. We made plans for the morrow and our rendezvous to catch the boat train. After dinner we set out for Elena’s flat, a short walk away. At her door she had her key in the lock when I surprised myself by putting my hand on her arm to stop her. “Elena,” I said. She turned. “Can’t you find a way to come over to my place tonight?”

“Jacob. Is something the matter?”

I searched for words but couldn’t find any. She looked down from the step above me, and bestowed a kiss on my bald pate. “Call me if you need to, anytime.” Then she went inside, and I walked home.

That night I turned on every lamp in the flat. I sat up in bed, fully clothed, holding my walking stick as a weapon, vigilant against...I wasn’t sure what – or whom – but I wasn’t taking any chances. I must have fallen asleep at some point because in the morning I had keeled over sideways in bed, and the stick was on the floor.

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Early the next day Ronald, Elena's son-in-law, telephoned to inform me that Elena had fallen ill overnight and been taken to hospital.

"It can't be. I saw her only hours ago. She was fine then."

"Pneumonia can be that way," he said.

At the hospital her physician told me that he wanted to keep her under observation for two more days. With anyone in their eighties one needed to be especially cautious.

Eighties. Hearing the doctor say that made me realise I would be ninety in two months.

"You go," Elena said. "When I'm discharged Ronald can take me to the airport. You go ahead and open the place up." She was adamant. If I went first she'd have an incentive to get better quicker. Reluctantly, I acquiesced.

In the past we had taken the boat-train to Paris, then switched to a train that would get us, eventually, to Ascona. Ronald thought it silly to spend that amount of time traveling when I could fly to Zürich, and in two hours by train be in Locarno – directly across the river from Ascona. An easy day's travel.

Under normal circumstances it would have been. But it turned out to be the devil's journey.

Bad weather prevented us from taking off, so we spent nearly three hours, like sardines, on the tarmac. Then, once aloft, we ran into such a fierce storm that we were diverted south, all the way to Africa! We landed in Casablanca, where police herded us off the aircraft to a flea-bag hotel. I was forced to share a room with strangers, two Bulgarians. No one was allowed any luggage, so no toiletries, nothing. We were each given a bottle of water and an orange, nothing more. The windows were locked and barred. The only English my roommates spoke was "Coca-Cola." They spent the night snoring and farting so loudly that it sounded like London during the

Blitz. In the morning we were rounded up like cattle and packed back on board the plane – still with nearly nothing to eat in twenty-four hours – and flown to Zurich.

Then, because we'd been in a country with a recent infestation of yellow fever, we couldn't be admitted into Switzerland without a valid vaccination. So, one-by-one, those of us without – all of us but one – were taken behind a curtain, the men lowering their trousers and getting a large needle stuck in their *derrière*. After that, customs officials ransacked our baggage looking for contraband we might have brought in from Africa!

By the time I arrived in Ascona the second afternoon, bedraggled, I asked the cab driver to swing by the annexe to the *Residenza*, so I could look through the hedge at our little Eden, with its apricot tree – a preview of pleasures to come. To my surprise – nay, shock! horror! – a couple lay on the two sun-loungers in the garden, only the backs of their heads in view. When the man stood, in regulation tennis whites, I was disconcerted for a moment, as I felt I recognised the bloke. Indeed, I did! Improbable though it was – why wasn't he staying at the Eden Roc or one of the other fancy hotels? – this was none other than Peter Furyk.

Impossible. I jumped back in the cab, and told the driver to hurry on to the *Residenza* itself.

What was Furyk doing in *my* annexe? I had booked it, sent in the money, fair and square. At the *Residenza* I ran inside.

“Giuseppe!” I said, marching into the kitchen where he and Maria, his wife, were cooking. “Please tell me, what's going on?”

With startled looks Giuseppe and Maria turned to face me. All colour drained from her face. She dropped the pot lid she was holding. It clattered on the tile floor, then rolled the length of the kitchen. Giuseppe's mouth hung open.

“Speak to me, my good man,” I said. “You haven’t rented out the annexe from under me, have you? I wired you the money for four weeks’ stay, beginning last night.”

Giuseppe still hadn’t found his tongue. Maria fell into a chair at the table and sobbed into her arms.

The banging side door diverted us. In strode Furyk, holding his racquet. He proffered Giuseppe his keys. “Will you see to it that the annexe is made up by the time we’re back? We’re expecting company.” He turned to leave.

“I say!” I called out.

He stopped, begrudgingly.

“The annexe has already been rented. By me.”

He turned back. “Excuse me. Just who are you?” He examined me as one might an insect.

“Jacob Goldfarb,” I said, standing proudly erect.

The name apparently meant nothing to him. He turned to Giuseppe. “Take care of this, will you?” He turned to me and said, haughtily, “Good day, Mr. Goldbug.”

“Goldfarb!” But he was already at the door, and left without further acknowledgment.

My mind reeled. Peter Furyk. The fucking bastard had stolen my annexe. “Giuseppe, how can it be that you, that you...” I was whining now.

“*Signore, per favore*, you must understand...”

Maria wailed at the table, inconsolable.

“Quiet, woman,” Giuseppe said in Italian. This just made her wail more.

He approached me. “*Signore Goldfarb*, please, sit down.”

“I shan’t sit down!”

“All right. But think of the past, please? Two years ago you are staying here, yes?”

“Yes. And every year for thirty years before that!”

Giuseppe reached out and touched my arm. “*Signore*, please. Try to remember.”

“Remember? Remember what?”

“Two years ago, your last night in Ascona, you and the *Signora* eat the dinner – *la cena* – with us – with Maria and me – here in the kitchen. We are so happy to you the both for your help in the garden. We cook for you favourite foods. *Cosciotto di agnello* – roast lamb, con *risotto ai funghi*. And favourite wine, *Amarone di Valpolicella*.” He kissed his fingers and smacked his lips.

Of course now I did recall the meal. How could I not? It was a most memorable evening.

“I see in your face now you remember.”

“Yes, Giuseppe. A feast. You and Maria were the best of hosts. The best of friends.”

Maria looked up at me between sobs.

Giuseppe looked relieved, and exhaled. “After dinner, *allora*, you go out for a walk, yes?”

I closed my eyes. “A starlit night, Giuseppe, yes – though a touch chilly. Elena went back to the annexe for a shawl. Then we strolled down to the Piazza, and ambled along the promenade.”

“Si, si...and then?”

I thought back. We had often taken a walk after dinner. “Then we came to the dock... And we rented one of those old boats. I rowed us out quite a ways. We lay back, as we often had, and tried to identify as many stars and constellations as we could.”

"And then?"

“I don't know. Why?”

“More you do not remember?” Giuseppe looked at me with inquisitive, expectant eyes.

I closed mine and slipped back in time to the moment I snuggled in the boat with Elena, satisfied as never before with my life – this even before the music world had rediscovered me and my miraculous “rebirth” as a composer. Elena and I agreed to give up all bad things. No more bitterness.

Yet here, as I opened my eyes in Giuseppe's kitchen, I had a sense of impending calamity. I began trembling, until my whole body was shuddering. I groaned without wanting to.

Giuseppe steadied me. “Do you not remember, *Signore?* The ferry boat. The big wave?”

The big wave. The shaking stopped. I froze as it all came back to me—

Something crashes into us broadside. Elena, in my arms, screams. A huge wave lifts the boat on one side. I hold her as the boat flips. It slams down, trapping us underneath. The screaming stops. “Elena!” I cry. No answer. Under the boat there’s no way to see. The water is freezing, the small airspace stuffed with cushions. I grope, find Elena’s head. Limp. It won’t move. Her shawl has snagged.

I try to unhook it. As I run my hand along it, I recognise its texture and remember Elena throwing it over her shoulders after dinner. It’s the multicolored shawl with the spangles.

All at once, even in my panic, I feel there is something wrong – fundamentally out of kilter. This is the shawl – yes, the very one – I’d bought from the enigmatic woman in my courtyard. Only I hadn’t bought it yet. I couldn’t have – that would be two years later. In the future. So how could it be here now?

Unless—

The hull tilts. Ice water pours in. No more air now. The boat pushes me down. I take in a lungful of water. Try to swim out, but I’m too numb. Breathe in more water. I clutch Elena.

In the kitchen, grasping Giuseppe, I see him through a blur of tears. I feel myself sinking. “Elena!” I try to call out.

“*Signore?*”

I can barely hear him. Now I can’t feel him anymore.

Unless—

I remember Elena saying I should give up the bitterness...

The room pitches to one side, then the other. It darkens even more. I’m sinking deeper.

And I remember assuring her, “Si, amore mio. No more bitterness.”

—Unless...

Unless, somehow, that future did happen...

My mind clouds as darkness turns to black. Blacker than the blackest ink I ever used to write my treasured music.

It is quiet around me now, the clamor of the kitchen gone.

There is only silence. Eternal silence.

*

Two years earlier an obituary had appeared in *The Times*:

Jacob Goldfarb, 87, classical voice coach and instructor, drowned last week whilst on holiday in Ascona, Switzerland. Born in Hamburg, Germany, in 1903, as a young man he had a notable career as a classical composer-conductor. His professional life in Germany was cut short by the rise of National Socialism, which forced him to emigrate. He lived in Hampstead, London for over fifty years. His wife, Clara Baum, an art historian, predeceased him in 1979. Though his opera won a prize in the Art’s Council Festival of Britain in 1950, it was never staged. Apart from occasional employment as a conductor, he worked in this country giving music and voice lessons. Among his pupils were Robin Feuer, Norma Traynor and Dwight Rabin, a member of the New York Metropolitan Opera Company.

Services will be private.