

Paula K. Speck

Only Opera

THAT WINTER, as Dan and I lay on two university-issue mattresses dumped side-by-side on the floor, songs of love and despair leaked out of the pipes and sighed from the air shaft: *Nessun dorma. Recondita armonia*. The ancient building's steam heaters hissed, its hidden pipes groaned, its joints cracked late at night. We huddled under blankets from Goodwill and, holding each other to keep out the New England cold that layered the floor, listened to stereos, guitar practice, shouts from the street, the booted feet of other students returning from late parties or library sessions. The arias darted out like mice in the silences: *Di' tu se fidele! Un bacio, un bacio ancora, un altro bacio!*

I met the singer when I took our sweaty, sex-stained sheets to the laundry machines in the basement. Nick was planning to go to law school when he graduated, as he had promised his parents. But he kept up voice lessons, confessed to the dream of becoming an operatic tenor. The students in the rooms on either side of his reported that they could scarcely hear, so he practiced in his room. He didn't know about the secret hollows in the old building's entrails that funneled his voice past their rooms straight to ours.

Nick was a big man with a round, self-deprecating face and a soft speaking voice that bore no resemblance to the strong, sweet, buttery tenor that surged through the pipes. In the laundry room, we spoke across a friendly distance about the personalities of the washing machines and the strange prejudices of the dollar-bill changer. I kept the secret of our front-pipe seats to myself.

With practice, I could identify each aria in the thicket of car horns, rock records, and shouts that thrust through the door, walls, and windows. At Nick's first note, I ran to the window on the airshaft and cranked it open. His voice pushed upwards, dislodging paint flakes and the soot of many winters. *Una furtiva*

lagrima. La rivedra nell'estasi. La dona e mobile. Or I stood in the shower stall. The pipe that led to the shower head was not to be relied on in delivering hot water, but it delivered that tenor voice with precision. *Amici in vita e in morte.*

Dan and I pretended to sing along, with operatic gestures. We clowned because we were sharing a room in defiance of college rules, because we were kissing under blankets on a chilly floor, and because we were making popcorn in the miraculously-unchoked fireplace of the hundred-year-old building, with butter kept overnight on the window sill. It didn't matter if the butter came powdered with an early morning layer of urban snow and soot. Everything was an in-joke in the first year of love. *Vesti la giubba: Ridi Pagliaccio!*

The next eighteen years fan out like pictures that I discover in a drawer and can't summon the energy to paste in a photo album: Dan and I lying in bed, back to front, watching Greta Garbo on the 2:00 a.m. movie; our floor carpeted with friends rolled in sleeping bags on our wedding night; Dan avoiding my eye across a room filled with men in suits and women in cocktail dresses; Dan wincing in sympathetic pain as the doctor inserts the amniocentesis needle into my swollen stomach; Dan at the end of a long lecture hall, his head emerging from a podium and a pile of papers; Dan pushing our daughter in a yellow bunny costume on a swing; Dan's hand hitting the side of my head and his face, red and startled, at the top of the long column of his body, looking down at me on the floor.

Addio, senza rencor; addio, o dolce svegliare!

Five years after our divorce became final, I glanced down an opera review and Nick's name leaped up. He was singing tenor in a touring production of the Houston Opera; it was a good review. I entered his name in a database and fished out a dozen other references. One interviewer reported that Nick had gone to law school and worked as a lawyer for a few years, singing on nights and weekends; finally, he had gathered his courage and his savings and joined a small troupe. Then he had a series of increasingly important parts in bigger theaters. Now, this role and a national tour.

The Massachusetts Review

The chilly room, the smell of burnt popcorn and snow and the sound of a tenor voice climbing through the pipes broke into my mind, battering down the years between. *E lucevan le stelle!* I wanted to pick up the phone and call Dan to tell him that Nick had escaped being a lawyer and was making it in opera after all. Only Dan would appreciate how delicious, how ironic, how right this news was.

With a lurch of the heart—*T'amo, si, t'amo, e in lagrime*—I remembered that Dan was the one person I could not call. A blister of tears swelled behind my eyes. One drop broke out, found a path out of my left eye, and tickled the side of my nose. With shame, relief, I let the fat lady in me step out, kneel over the lifeless body of her only, lifelong love, and give voice to long, hot, despairing, alto sobs.

Only opera tells life like it really is.

© 2002 | The Massachusetts Review