

Chapter 45

Fate Fulfills a Rash Vow
An Experience Too Strange for Words

Un grido io sento, suonar per l'onda,
Egli è un lamento di lui che muor.
Ciascun si taccia, nessun risponda—
Ei mi rinFAACIAAAAaaaaaaa can't get that fucking note,
Bruce.

Dame Barbara slammed her score on to the lid of the piano, turned to one side, and threw back her large square head, looking straight up into the flies for inspiration. When she looked back down her eyes met Margaret's.

"Hello, ducky. You're the mezzo are you?"

"M, yes. I guess."

For once Margaret did not mind being thought of as a mezzo. To sing with Dame Barbara! And Cinelli himself! For them—the two greatest bel canto practitioners alive—she would be a mezzo.

"Mr Cinelli said I should introduce myself," she added.

"Did he? And where is the fat wop?"

"A? Oh. . . he'll be here. . . soon. I guess. He told me two o'clock. Said he'd be here."

"Oh, Vinnie'll be late for his own funeral. Step over here, lovey, let me take a look at you."

They had let Margaret in at the back of the stage and she had been

waiting in the wings, wondering how to introduce herself to Dame Barbara, who was doing piano rehearsal out in center stage. Now she stepped forward diffidently. It was not far—the stage here at Wexford was tiny—but it seemed farther than it was because every step brought her closer to Dame Barbara, and to the realization that Dame Barbara was a very big person indeed. Margaret had known this in the abstract, of course; but it was one thing to hear trade gossip about the difficulties this diva had in getting male leads who did not look diminutive alongside her, and quite another thing to be standing beneath her—there was no other way to think of it—craning to look up at the broad, plain, beaming face of the world's best known coloratura soprano.

“So you're Vinnie the Guinea's little Chinese protégée. And a very pretty little thing you are.”

Dame Barbara's expression was kindly and amused. Suddenly it transformed itself into an intense schoolmarm frown. “Has he been bonking you?”

“What? I'm sorry? My English . . .”

But Dame Barbara, and her pianist, and her conductor (who had been standing far back in the stalls but had now come down to the orchestra pit) were all hooting with laughter, and the pianist played some strip-show chords, and Margaret realized there had been some kind of joke. Not sure whether or not she was being made fun of, she felt herself beginning to blush; but a door slammed backstage, the boards trembled, and Vinnie strode on from stage left.

“BAMBINO!” he roared, advancing on Dame Barbara with arms outspread.

“AMORE!” sang out Dame Barbara, striding forward to engage him. They met in a Jurassic embrace.

“This poor little soubrette. . .” Dame Barbara indicated Margaret. . . “has been telling me how you seduced her, you filthy dago. You and your pal Jug-Ears up at the palace. You should be ashamed, both of you! Slipping the one-eyed snake to an innocent little creature like this!”

“Che ingiustizia! I've not laid a finger!” Vinnie lifted a plump digit by way of denial, his face all mock indignation.

“It's not the fingers I'm talking about, ducky. We all know what you

greasers are like, don't we?" She favored Margaret with a wink as subtle as a fire curtain coming down.

The conductor, who was also Dame Barbara's husband, was on stage now. He greeted Margaret with a smile, a bow, and a courteous handshake. Then he turned to his wife.

"Darling, perhaps we should hear our Isoletta sing."

"Course we should." Dame Barbara beamed down at her again. "Have you had a chance to look at the score, sweetie?"

"No. I'm sorry. I . . . I just couldn't find one anywhere. Only a libretto . . ."

"Oh, it's all right, dearie. It's a rare piece. They always do these odd bits at Wexford. That's the fun of it. Gives us a break from Mimi and Tosca. We're all working from photocopies, matter of fact. Very naughty to do Mr Schirmer out of a royalty, but serves 'em right for not keeping things in print. Poor bloke only wrote, what?—ten operas, you'd think they could keep 'em printed up."

The poor bloke in question was Vincenzo Bellini, a bel canto composer of the early 19th century, whose opera *La straniera*—The Stranger—was to be performed here in Ireland, at the Wexford Music Festival, with Dame Barbara Bacon as lead soprano, Vincenzo Cinelli as tenor, and various lesser talents in the supporting roles—including Miss Margaret Han as Isoletta, the betrayed bride.

The conductor took a vocal score from his folder and handed it to Margaret. It was a stapled photocopy of an original at least half a century old, the words all printed in tiny, fussy script, hard to pick out from between the staves.

"Here," he said, "here"—pointing to a section near the back. "You just have this one solo. There's the andante, 'Ah! se non m'ami più', and a strongly contrasted cabaletta further down, ah, here. It's a show stopper if you do it well."

"Give it some feeling, love," said Dame Barbara, who had taken a seat on one of the chairs at stage back. "The poor sheila's supposed to be engaged to fatso here" (she jerked her head at Vinnie, standing beside her chair), "but she's found out he's double dipping. It's despair, sweetie—despair and a bit of rage. Men, you know what swine they all are. Think

despair. Bellini's not really all that hard to sing, you know, once you get in stride with that long legato line, but he needs a lot of expression."

When the time came to sing Margaret was more nervous than she could ever recall. She had sung cold before, sight reading from a previously unseen score—it had been a standard exercise at the Conservatory—but never in front of two first-rank international stars. She thought Dame Barbara was probably, on balance, non-life-threatening, and needed no more proofs of Vinnie's faith in her; yet still it was daunting, and she made two false starts. Once properly embarked upon, however, the aria was not as difficult as it looked in the smudged script of the score, and she felt, when finished, that she might even have attempted some grace notes.

"Blimey," said Dame Barbara. "That's a big voice for such a little lady. Where does it all come from?"

Vinnie nodded, beaming appreciation at Margaret. "I told you she was hexceptional. The size, it does not matter."

"Oh, that's what you fellers always say." Dame Barbara's laughter rolled around the theater.

"But for singers is true," Vinnie protested. "Bidú is no bigger, 'undred and sixty centimetri, I think."

"Sright," nodded the diva. "Come to think of it, Mary Garden only weighed seven stone soaking wet." (Addressing Margaret): "Sung in any of the big houses, have you, love?"

"Not really. Well, . . . I did *Mélisande* at Covent Garden. But otherwise. . . no, not really."

"Dunno about Covent Garden. Wembley Stadium'd be more your fach, sweetheart." Dame Barbara turned back to Vinnie. "Isn't there a bit too much there for *bel canto*? She should be singing Wagner, voice like that."

"No, no, the poor girl is nervous, that is all. She is a perfect lyric, perfect." Vinnie kissed the bunched tips of his fingers.

"Nice enunciation, anyway," said Dame Barbara, perhaps thinking she had been too critical. This was very high praise, touching as it did on what must have been a sore point with her. It was widely agreed that Dame Barbara, though undoubtedly one of the finest soprano voices of

the age, was weak in articulation. Opera fans had been joking for years about sitting through her performances trying to spot the consonants.

“I ’ad her study phonetics with Lubetsky,” said Vinnie. “E is infallible.”

“Yeah, you can’t beat a Jew for the technical stuff. No offense, Sammy” (to the pianist, who responded with some bars of “Hava Nagila”).

“I think we have found our Isoletta,” said Dame Barbara’s husband. “Now if I could just have the prima donna’s attention for a moment? The passage from your last da capo . . .”

Dame Barbara came to her feet with surprising agility and strode to stage front, brandishing her score. “All right, possums, let’s do some work. Tell you what, Tub” (addressing Vinnie again), “I’m going cross-eyed trying to read this flaming score. You Ities really know how to bugger up a bit of music, don’t you? Look at these sodding appoggiaturas . . .”

By late afternoon they had run through all of what Dame Barbara called the “tasty bits” of the score, and tackled some of the problems of stage positions, entrances and exits. Margaret, though exhausted, was in a delirium of pride and satisfaction, having had the master class of her life. She only feared there had been too much of it: too many priceless pieces of advice, too many pearls of operatic wisdom for her to remember. Sitting at dinner in the hotel afterwards, with Dame Barbara, Bruce her husband, Vinnie and Mr Rocco, she let them talk while she desperately tried to recall and catalog every word of guidance, every precious lesson from that long afternoon. Vinnie, however, insisted on bringing her into the conversation.

“When you know Bellini,” he said to her as they were finishing main course, “you will want to sing nothing else.”

“Don’t tell her that, Tub,” said Dame Barbara. “The girl’s got a career to make yet. You can’t build a repertoire from one composer.”

“But do you not think her voice is perfect for Bellini? She ’as the control, she ’as the legato, she ’as the color.”

“She has a living to make,” said Bruce, smiling across the table at her. “Bellini will get her three engagements a year.”

“One in Bogotá,” added Dame Barbara, “one in Nairobi, and one in Kookaburra Springs, Northern Territory.” She pealed laughter in appre-

ciation of her own wit, making the water glasses on the table hum agreement, *moiré* wavelets shimmering across their surfaces. “Not one of our most popular composers,” she said aside to Margaret.

Vinnie gave a shrug. “Of course. She must cast ’er net wide. I am only saying that ’er voice was made especially to sing Bellini. Of course”—another shrug—“we must all sing our way through the repertoire. I myself ’ave sung everybody, I think. I ’ave sung Mahler in my time.”

“Have you, love?” Dame Barbara registered astonishment. “Strewth, I didn’t know that. *Mahler*? You sure it was Mahler, not Mascagni?”

“Why, yes. In my younger days. I was glad to do any kind of concert work, you know.”

“How is it, to sing Mahler?” asked Margaret, not very sure who Mahler was.

Vinnie grimaced, putting up his hands to ward off evil. “Terrible, terrible! Dismal stuff. Impossible to sing well. For an Italian, any ’ow.” Everybody laughed. “But” (Vinnie went on) “as Bruce said, you must be prepared to sing *hanything*. Be. . . is it the same word in English?. . . *versatile*, yes. Be versatile. Still”—waving with a finger to make his point—“we all know that there is one composer who is best for every voice. For you, *bambino*” (addressing Dame Barbara) “it is Donizetti. For me, Puccini I am afraid.” He laughed. “I would rather it was Verdi, but it is not. For Susan” (naming an American soprano, subject of a conversation over the appetizers) “it is Mozart, of course.”

“For Callas?” Mr Rocco spoke up—for only the second or third time that evening, Margaret thought.

Vinnie laughed. “Such a talent as that is above all rules. Maria could sing this . . .” he lifted up the wine list “. . .and you would say it was a composition of genius.”

“Only she’d have needed five full dress rehearsals first, and have fallen out with three different conductors,” added Bruce. They all laughed again.

Margaret sat in bliss, letting the conversation flow around her. She loved this—the shop talk, the gossip, the private professional jokes. She wished she could participate herself; but she was too green, they all understood that. One day she would be able to join in. She would know

who was having voice troubles, whose marriage was on the rocks, which singer had fallen out with which conductor, who was impossible to get on with, which house's orchestra walked out on a rehearsal en masse, who was a lesbian and who was a pedophile, who ought to have retired five years ago. For now she only wanted to take it all in, and remember as much of it as possible, stacked alongside the afternoon's master class. Perhaps she could write it all down when she got back to her room. . . but she thought she was too tired.

She puzzled over what Vinnie had said, about her voice being made for Bellini. She had not actually found Bellini all that difficult, not as difficult as she had been given to understand. Poppy, when Margaret had gone to her to try to get a score for the opera, had been scathing: *Bellini? Aren't you over-reaching a bit, my dear? It needs a very mature voice to take on Bellini.* In fact, Margaret had the impression she had done well with the Isoletta role. She had been four times through her main aria, and really felt it would come naturally to her, with just a little more practice. So perhaps Vinnie was right, this was her composer—her *guiren*, as Chinese people said, her angel. Who was he, anyway? Who had he been, this Bellini? Margaret knew nothing about the man. She resolved to look up his life in *Grove* first chance she got.

“Here, sweetie.” Dame Barbara was tapping her arm. The dessert trolley had arrived. “Look at this—choux pastry, made in the kitchen! They brought a pastry chef down from Dublin for us. Go on, try some.”

* * *

So it was, by the misty quays of a provincial Irish town, that a dreamy, rather narcissistic young Sicilian, who had died of gastroenteritis at thirty-three, alone in a country house outside Paris a century and a quarter before Margaret was born, entered into and colonized a part of her soul.

Margaret heard Bellini's story there in Wexford, even before she had a chance to look him up in *Grove*. She heard it from her stage father, Il Signore di Montolino, in this instance a cubic Irish bass with a face like a half-finished clay model of a face, ruddy and shining.

**After Ten Operas We Shall Be
United For Ever**

To supplement his poor income while studying at the Naples conservatory, Bellini engaged to give singing lessons to Maddalena Fumaroli, the daughter of a prominent judge. They fell in love. When this became known to Maddalena's parents they banned Bellini from their house and forbade him to see their daughter.

The lovers continued to communicate in secret. After the success of his first opera, Bellini went to *presidente* Fumaroli and formally requested Maddalena's hand. The judge refused, pointing out that the young man's prospects were very little better than before, and that one successful opera did not prove Bellini capable of supporting even himself, much less a wife.

The following year Bellini's second opera was successful. Again he applied to Maddalena's family; again he was refused. Meeting in secret with Maddalena, Bellini swore to her that if two operas would not satisfy her parents, he would write ten.

"When I have written ten operas" (he vowed) "and attained *la mia gloria*, we shall be united for ever."

At age twenty-five Bellini left Naples for Milan, where his third opera was a sensation. Soon he was famous throughout Europe. One of his friends in Naples took it upon himself to present Bellini's suit to Maddalena's parents a third time. Now, of course, it was accepted. When Bellini received this news, however, he was no longer enthusiastic, being entirely absorbed with his career, and feeling that he had outgrown his provincial first love. He wrote a letter of rejection to Maddalena, phrasing it as tenderly as he could. On a subsequent visit to Naples, he made no effort to see her.

Notwithstanding this rejection, Maddalena kept faith with Bellini for six years, always hoping that he would return to her. At last she died of a broken heart. Seven months after this

melancholy event, Bellini's tenth opera was premièred in Paris; and seven months after that, having written precisely those ten operas, Bellini himself died, and the lovers were indeed united for ever.

The first performance of *La straniera*—the first anywhere outside Italy, so far as anyone could determine, for twenty years—was a roaring triumph. Margaret's solo, "Ah! se non m'ami più", was well received with a good long spell of applause, though of course the audience saved their hands and voices for Vinnie and Dame Barbara. It was not the applause, however, that made this night memorable to Margaret, nor the glory of being on stage with two great singers, but something much stranger and more personal. It was here, this night at Wexford, that she first experienced *flying*.

Flying was the term she settled on much later, after three or four episodes, when the phenomenon had settled itself firmly in her mind. That first time it was too strange to name.

Margaret's aria came in the latter part of the performance. Her character, Isoletta, has been abandoned just before her wedding, when her fiancé has fallen in love with the mysterious stranger who gives the opera its title. Alone in her room, Isoletta laments her fate. After a lovely haunting flute solo she utters a few lines of recitative, then sings the cantabile—the slow section—of the aria. It was just as she began this cantabile, or soon after, that Margaret had the *flying* experience.

It was not actually anything like flying. It was not anything like anything she knew. Indeed, it was not, properly speaking, an experience at all, in the sense of something that happens to oneself; for her strongest recollection of it after the event, was that she herself had *ceased to exist* independent of the music. There was no Margaret Han, no stage, no costume, no orchestra, no conductor. There was only the music, of which these other things were epiphenomena, mere aspects.

In spite of its strangeness, this experience—or anti-experience—was not alarming or disconcerting in any way. Margaret never at any point felt she might forget music or words, or lose control of her voice. She had never, in fact, been further from any such fear; for the music was every-

thing, eternal and invulnerable, all around her and *inside her*, flexing her diaphragm and intercostals for her and causing her tongue and lips to move. *The music WAS her, and she was IT.*

The applause at the end of the slow movement woke Margaret from this peculiar state of dissolution. Reality was suddenly sharp all around her. She was on the narrow stage at Wexford, slightly left of front center. In her nostrils were the familiar smells of stages everywhere: paint, mildew, dust, sweat, glue. The conductor, Dame Barbara's husband, was bent over his score, the parting of his hair a vertical white exclamation point in the light from his lectern. The audience, such faces as she could see clearly, were happy, clapping their hands and turning their heads to speak to each other as audiences do when applauding moderately. In the wings, two comprimarios—local Irish girls confusingly (to Margaret) named Eileen and Elaine—were waiting for their cue to rush on, to tell Isoletta that her sweetheart was on his way back to the palace to beg her forgiveness and marry her after all. Margaret would then express her joy and relief in a vigorous cabaletta: *Al mio sguardo un roseo velo veste il cielo. . .* (“It seems to me that a rosy veil has clothed the sky.”) Everything was normal, crystal clear and familiar. There was no disorientation. Further back in the wings, behind the comprimarios—the audience still applauding happily—she could make out Vinnie, his back to her, gesturing with his hands to someone she could not see. It was all quite real and solid, quite mundane, and whatever had happened in the previous few minutes was falling away from her like a dream.

Margaret did not speak of this odd experience to anyone. She had no words to describe it, even to herself—it was beyond words. It had, in any case, the character of something personal, something *intimate*, like one's most private thoughts. Not to be shared, not to be spoken of, even if the words could have been found.

The second performance (the festival management, determined to get as much mileage as they could from the presence of two superstars, had inveigled Vinnie and Dame Barbara into both opening and closing the festival) was filmed for one of the Irish TV stations, with perhaps a video to be made and marketed if the sound quality was good enough. The audience contained, among other notables, the Prime Minister of

Ireland and his wife. When Vinnie told her this, Margaret feared that the presence of so elevated a person might make the audience stiff, as it would have in China. In fact it was the liveliest, best-spirited house she had yet sung for. They seemed ready to applaud every entrance, every arioso, every gesture.

Margaret could not put from her mind that strange interlude in the first performance. She wondered if it would happen again; and wished for it, trying her best to duplicate the mood she had been in, her precise stage position, the very thoughts in her head. Of course she couldn't, and the effort distracted her so that she momentarily lost tempo. It was a tiny lapse. The conductor noticed—she saw him wince—but probably no-one else had, and Margaret took the lesson at once, and gave all her concentration to the aria. This time the applause at the end of the cantabile was even longer and more enthusiastic than before, and there were actually two shouts of *Brava!* from the hall, the first Margaret had ever had for herself. She tried to look, to see who had given them, but could make out nothing in the dim mass of faces beyond the footlights. Her exultation was dampened only a little by the reflection that the fun was now over and she would soon be back with Poppy and her schedules.

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There was a party for everyone after the last performance, held in the Town Hall. All the cast were there, and the Prime Minister his exalted self, and the organizers of the festival. Margaret felt rather at a loss, not being much used to these affairs. She stood at one side by the wall, trying to look agreeable, trying to look as if she was sipping at the drink Vinnie had got for her. Vinnie did his best to look after her, but too many people wanted to be with him, speak with him, shake his hand, have photographs taken with him. He smiled at her when he caught her eye across the room, and waved once, but could hardly do more.

The Prime Minister, a courtly man with the soft, musical speech of this country, came to her with his wife and another couple. They complimented her on “Ah! se non m’ami più”, and the man who was not the Prime Minister—a tall strapping fellow with a very unIrish tan—

lifted and kissed her hand, bending low over it, while his escort laughed and the Prime Minister smiled. They moved on, and Margaret returned to her pretense of sipping. She was actually afraid to take in much of the drink, though the smell of it was not disagreeable. She did not want to blush from the alcohol, to appear ridiculous in front of all these eminent people.

“I should like to hear you sing coloratura,” said a voice behind her. Turning, Margaret saw a large plump man of fifty or so, his face smooth and well-fed, his head bald but for a sort of tonsure of neat gray hair at back and sides. His voice had the same lilt as the Prime Minister’s, as the local people’s in the shops and the hotel, as the stage workers and scenery shifters.

“Oh, please tell me who you are,” pleaded Margaret. “I know the older gentleman there was the Prime Minister, but the other only gave me his name.”

The plump man chuckled at her frankness, and extended a hand. “Colman O’Toole, of this island. And various other places. The fellow with all the teeth is prominent on the television, here and in our neighbor island. You may very well be the only person in either place who does not know him.” He laughed, his extra chins wobbling.

“Are you very important, Mr O’Toole?”

“Sure there are not many that would say so.”

From the side pocket of his suit jacket Colman O’Toole took a great thick diary in a leather case closed by two press-studded tags. The thing was a filing system all by itself, with compartments and sub-compartments, dividers and transparencies, charts, calendars, notebooks, address lists and ephemerides all momentarily present to the eye as their proprietor somewhat laboriously located the correct enclosure. From it he extracted a business card, which he handed to Margaret. *Theatrical and Operatic Agency*, said the card, *225 Broadway, 17th Floor, New York, NY 10002*.

“The word ‘theatrical’ is of historical interest only. For some years past I have represented only singers. I wonder if I might make so bold as to ask: Do you currently have an agent at all?” Colman O’Toole laughed at his own audacity; but it was a free, merry laugh, with no sign of real embarrassment.

“No. I am part of the Royal Youth International Company. Mr Cinelli’s company, do you know? And the Prince of Wales’s, of course.”

“Why, indeed. I should have made the connection. And it is through Vinnie that you got this engagement, I take it.”

“Yes. He has been very kind to me.”

“His judgment cannot be gainsaid. You have a remarkable voice.”

“It’s very kind of you to say so. Actually I lost tempo this evening, just for a moment. I thought I would die.”

O’Toole nodded. “In the phrase ‘mi rendi il core almen’. Don’t be losing sleep over it. There were not three people in the hall would have noticed. Other than singers, of course. But your voice has a most unusual color. Were you trained first in Chinese opera?”

“No. The first aria I ever sang in public was ‘Porgi, amor’.”

O’Toole laughed again, his several chins trembling like a stack of bean-curd. “High ambitions for a beginning singer,” he said. “Have you performed in the States?”

“No. Belgium, Germany, Austria and Italy. That’s all. And England, of course. I was in *Pelléas and Mélisande* at Covent Garden, the part of Mélisande herself.”

“You will make a stir over there. They are keen, the Americans. Conservative in their broad tastes, but always interested in something new or striking. Especially in New York. The capital of a nation that doesn’t exist, who was it said that now? A paddy, for sure—Mr Wilde, perhaps.”

Margaret did not quite understand this last, but she liked this pink, genial man in his rumpled suit. “Is that where you live then, Mr O’Toole? In America?”

“Mostly. In New York. But I always come to Wexford.”

“I’m not sure whether the terms of my agreement—with the company, I mean—allow me to take an agent.”

As she spoke she saw Vinnie approaching from seven o’clock behind O’Toole. Vinnie was beaming at her and nodding, she could not understand why. Seeing Margaret looking over his shoulder, the Irishman turned.

“Ah, bless us, Signor Tenore. You were on best form this evening, Vinnie. Our damp Irish air is wonderfully softening to your voice.”

The two men embraced, Vinnie winking at Margaret over the other's shoulder. "E is a fisher of men," said Vinnie as they separated. "As 'e caught you in 'is net?"

"She should sing in New York," said O'Toole. "All the Wall Street tycoons will fling roses at her. That woman you've got in charge, how is it she has never got in touch with me? Such fine singers as this, and I've to traipse through all the brumous bogs of Hibernia to find them."

Vinnie looked thoughtfully at Margaret, just long enough to make her feel uncomfortable. "Per'aps you should engage 'er, Colman. She needs a good agent now."

Margaret looked from one of them to the other: O'Toole nodding gently, Vinnie with a faint smile hovering on his lips. He too was nodding, very slightly, agreeing with himself about something.

"Will the company allow it? Aren't I under contract with them?"

"I will arrange it, my Perlina. Colman is the best operatic agent in the world. Your career is ready to advance now. This is the man you need." Vinnie put up his hands as if to brake himself. "Supposing, of course, you yourself feel ready to face life as a free agent. Many auditions—many, Perlina. And only one in ten will be successful. You will become an expert at auditions."

"The dear man is right," said Colman. "It will not be an easy life. You are losing the security of belonging to a company. Casting your bread upon the waters. If you have no funds of your own you will have to get a job to support yourself, and spend your time sprinting from work to auditions and back. I take it you are single?"

"Yes."

"Then at least you will spare yourself the inconvenience of a divorce." Colman laughed. "But I am crying 'stinking fish' here. The advantage of being a free agent, of course, is that many opportunities will be open to you that you would not have as one of Poppy's flock."

"If it means I can sing soprano, yes. I feel quite ready."

"Don't hope for that right away. If your résumé says 'lyric mezzo', you must market yourself on that basis at first, while you look for opportunities to enlarge your repertoire. Those opportunities will come, you may be sure."

“Listen to ’im,” said Vinnie, nodding agreement. “’E knows the business better than *hanybody*.”

O’Toole delved once again into the encyclopedic diary, frowning till he found the place he sought.

“December Twelfth, Brooklyn Academy of Music. You are a Chinese citizen? Will there be trouble getting a visa?”

“I don’t think so. Our countries have good relations now.”

“Go to the U.S. Embassy in Dublin, or in London if you are going straight back. Find out. Call me at this number, leave a message.”

“Oh!” Margaret put her hands to her face. “It is so sudden! I feel I am losing my balance. What shall I tell Poppy?”

Now Vinnie was smiling his great Mediterranean smile. “Tell ’er you ’ave outgrown the company. Tell ’er you will now begin your career as a world-famous coloratura soprano. No, do not tell ’er. *I will tell ’er.*”

* * *

Margaret told Mrs Trott she would be going to America, and gave notice on her room. She felt sad to be leaving Ealing—the quiet leafy streets, where you could often walk quite alone in the middle of the day, the park with its bright chattering caged birds and the *pock pock* of tennis balls on the courts, waking in the morning in her own pastel room to the faint clatter of kitchen noises as Mrs Trott prepared Trevora for school.

“You’re going to be a big star, I’m sure of it,” said Mrs Trott, after congratulating her. “I shall have one of those blue plaques put on the wall: MARGARET HAN LIVED HERE, 1983-4.” She laughed. “We’ll have a party for you before you go.”

The party was only a visit to a restaurant; but Mrs Trott insisted they all dress up and “make an evening of it”, as she said. Proletarian Steve went with them, aristocratic Graham having faded away discreetly sometime that summer. The incomprehensible Irish boy had left for the summer but come back in September, and stunned them all this evening by emerging from his room wearing a suit and tie. Even unhappy Trevora got into the spirit of the thing, encouraged by a pretty new dress, and they all

drove off to the restaurant in Steve's car. The restaurant was Italian—"Opera's Italian, isn't it?" offered Mrs Trott by way of explanation.

Steve drank too much and began squeezing Margaret's thigh under the table. "I never really thought you was a mole," he whispered hoarsely into her ear with a blast of Chianti fumes. "But I *do* think you've got a lovely bum."

Margaret drank too much and flushed as red as the wine itself. Paul, the Irish boy, drank too much and was inspired to sing a sentimental Irish song in a wobbling baritone. Oddly enough Margaret found she could understand every word of the song, though Paul's spoken English was still, after a year's occasional acquaintance, as far from her comprehension as Old Church Slavonic. Once Paul had sung, of course everyone wanted Margaret to sing. She gave them "O mio babbino caro" from *Gianni Schicchi*, a short aria which she knew people liked to hear. Everyone in the restaurant stopped to listen, and when she had finished they all stood up and applauded, the manager coming over to kiss her on the cheek, which of course made her blush even more wildly.

Mrs Trott drank too much, too. She flushed to a degree, though nothing like as much as Margaret, and laughed a great deal, and at home afterwards in the living room of the house put a record on the gramophone. It was a current pop song, a cheerful thing sung by a woman with a narrow contralto range and a London accent very much like Mrs Trott's own:

Didn't we have a lovely time
The day we went to Bangor . . .

And Mrs Trott, still glowing from the wine, all unexpectedly began to dance, holding up her skirt at the knees, skipping and turning with an agility surprising in an overweight London office worker—head back, skirt up, laughing, laughing, intoxicated with the simple pleasure of bodily movement. Margaret was thus privileged, as all of us are half a dozen times in life, to witness a fellow human being in a moment of perfect happiness, debts and lovers forgotten, absent husband and neurotic daughter both forgotten, dancing as her ancestors must have danced

on the village greens of England, in a different time long before, when music began.

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From the Skibbereen (County Cork) *Eagle*, 11/5/84:

Opera: Bellini's *La straniera* at the Wexford Festival
reviewed by Prionsais Ui Haigeann.

The first and last offering at this year's Wexford Festival was Bellini's *La straniera*, for the performance of which we were favored by two international stars of the first magnitude, Dame Barbara Bacon and Mr Vincenzo Cinelli. Naturally, *toute l'Irlande* was present for the final performance and the festivities that followed. We were not disappointed. Dame Barbara, though now well past her magnificent prime, seems set fair to go on for ever, like the Great Wall of China. Mr Cinelli gave the impression of enjoying himself immensely. This was quite wrong for the part he was playing, which is a tragic role, but the plot of the piece was so absurd it did not matter, and Mr Cinelli succeeded in infecting the audience with his high spirits. A splendid time was had by all and Bellini, who is still too little performed—when did any major company last give us a *Pirata?*—had a well-deserved airing.

For this reviewer the high point of the evening was a thrilling rendering of the aria "Ah! se non m'ami più", by a new young singer from China, Miss Margaret Han. Miss Han's voice is large and very beautiful, as strong and clear at the ends of her range as in the middle, and wonderfully expressive, though not without some technical shortcomings (she lost tempo for an instant, but realized her fault at once and recovered deftly). She also possesses entrancing grace of posture, and a sincerity of facial expression that entirely confounds our stereotype of oriental inscrutability. Here she caught the spirit of Bellini very precisely—that odd defiant melancholy that sees

the dreadful loneliness of the human soul and the pitiful disaster of human life as ever redeemable and redeemed by compassion, friendship and love. A marvelous interpretation, that is ringing in my ears still.

I wish Miss Han well in her career, which (she is 26 years old) can only just have begun. It is, of course, hazardous to predict the future of a new voice, however striking. Perhaps Miss Han will allow early flattery to go to her head, and neglect her voice for the pleasures of success. Perhaps she will destroy it by overwork or inappropriate roles. Perhaps she will suffer some misfortune. But if she is wise, and lucky, and has a will of iron, she will be a great singer one day.