

Prologue

The snow is a bright new blanket across the distant fields, its cover reflecting the light of the full December moon back into the frosted air. He glances back at the farmhouse. Two blue spotlights shine up from the ground bathing the rough sandy-coloured stone in a warm glow. It's not the busy multi-light display that is the order of the season for so many houses, but – as he could have predicted – a most accurate measure of mood and shading. Visual phrasing. Dynamics of the eye.

The dog runs on ahead. Though the farm is her home she will not stay close tonight, busy as she is with her tasks of sniffing, pawing and running; with instincts which, even after a life of domesticity, all too easily outdistance the duties of a loyal pet. He tries to call for her, to keep her close for his own comfort's sake. And though at times he thinks she briefly cocks her ear in recognition, her enthusiasm for the night prevails and, just as quickly, she is back at full speed, bounding up the lane.

He turns to follow but hesitates at the sight of the barn in front of him and for a moment is lost in its dereliction. Now but a shadow of its history; a skeleton of wooden beam and crumbling stone, it was once home to livestock and machinery, ventilated for summer with well-measured barn-board; heated in winter with the steamy breath of dozens of cattle residing within, it had been almost organic the way it had lived, and – he notes yet again – the way it had died, slowly receding into the very ground where it had for generations been so rooted. Now only the silo remains, paradoxically straight and strong, its smooth stone walls still reaching for the sky.

His thoughts turn to the concert hall so far away. They will be seated by now, he reasons. Positioned adequately, he hopes, to feel the soloists' presence but still far enough removed to receive the full blend of the choral work. That would be his preference, at least.

His spell is broken by the dog's impatient bark as she claws away at some loose stones along the barnyard's fenceline. He looks back once more, then turns away from the light.

Sinfony

EMERSON PLACE PRESENTS

MESSIAH

An oratorio in three parts

by

George Frideric Handel

(1685-1759)

The Toronto Chorus and the Metropolitan Symphony

Walter Engels conducting

Sarah Ibramovich, concert mistress

Margaret Calloway *soprano*

Gloria Devereaux *alto*

Neil Raynsford *tenor*

Trevor Messon *bass*

The unseasonably warm weather had mobilized the city that afternoon. Eating and drinking establishments had hastily dusted off their outdoor furniture, unwound their awnings and umbrellas, swept up and hosed down their patios of any remaining sludge still clinging from winter's grip, quickly readying themselves for the onslaught of workforce that would soon emerge from office and tower dragging behind it the suddenly unnecessary weight of trench coats and parkas as its members doffed ties and loosened scarves, so ripe for the option of a drink or a meal in the unexpected sun. Once out, the liberated masses would join the joggers and bikers, the power walkers and stroller-pushers, already heeding climate's call, scurrying from their skin-bleached hibernation in shorts and sneakers as they crowded the parks and sidewalks and footpaths with flushed faces and heavy breath. By late afternoon playgrounds would be teeming with the giddy, pent-up energy of toddlers and preschoolers for whom the long winter had represented so great a portion of their young lives. Young and old, rich and poor, from the penthouses and condos right down to the underbelly of the city. Yes, the downtrodden too – the begging and the homeless – had returned to take up their warm-weather positions from balmy days past. Returned to their street corners, their fences, their park benches, to their preferred locations only snow and frostbite had ever bid them reluctantly abandon. Back from the warmer, safer confines of hostels and shelters. Back home.

Perhaps this would be his starting point, Peter decided, as he sat patiently at his favourite table of his favourite bistro; a discussion of the existing social conditions of 18th-century Ireland – the backdrop prevalent at the time in the country where Handel's *Messiah* had first been performed. How the resident poor had been displaced from their land by English landlords, persecuted for a Catholic faith by an insistent and intolerant brand of Anglicanism so championed by that usurping class. How, once disenfranchised, they had roamed aimlessly, eventually migrating to the cities – the largest, of course, being Dublin – where they soon formed an impoverished stratum of significant size. And indeed, hadn't a good number of the early performances of *Messiah* only been allowed by Church powers on the proviso they be sanctioned as fundraisers for the religious charities that tended to these poor classes? And didn't it seem the pertinent introduction, given the fact Peter himself had almost stepped on a homeless man sprawled in a heap across the sidewalk, just as he was stepping into the patio to get to his seat? Moreover, since Kyle was meeting him directly

from his seminar class, there was little doubt some hotly-debated theory about social work would still be dominating his thoughts anyway.

For him to relax – truly relax and appreciate the concert the way Peter hoped he would – the way Peter himself always did – he would need to be eased into the evening slowly. Last month's attempt at opera over at the O'Keefe had taught the young music major as much. Poor Kyle, rushing in from a fruitless day in the university library, grumpy, nothing to eat, and suddenly plopped down beside that uptight couple for a whole night of *Rigoletto*, when the poor man had never so much as been to a classical concert before in his life. The good news, with which Peter now consoled himself once again, was that the whole fiasco had proved just how much Kyle cared for him, phoning the next day to apologize, asking him not to give up on a bitchy social scientist's musical education; asking for patience. "Baby steps to culture," as Kyle had put it.

And so they agreed to try again, this time with the promise of a few pints of Guinness, a nice meal at a safe and comfortable establishment, and lots of time to sit and chat so Peter could offer some background and history to the music they were about to take in. And what better primer to the world of choral music than Handel's grandest oratorio?

He glanced over at the hunched shoulders, the weathered cheeks of the man he had almost tripped on and wondered for a moment whether his beloved Handel might have been forced to step over some similar-looking figure, on his way into Fishamble Musick Hall, back in 1741. He watched as the man fumbled with a roll of quarters, aligning them, counting them, wrapping them, returning them so carefully to the tired grimy folds of his overcoat. Taking them out again. Counting them once more. He wondered how many others had walked by the man. How many more people than the coins he now lovingly tallied had stared straight ahead, increasing their foot speed when they heard his plea for spare change, averting their eyes as they busied themselves with some phantom immediate concerns in their pockets or purses? How many had even considered stopping, to toss a quarter down, even say hello or ask how he was doing? "Strange the polarized reaction of a passing city on her homeless," Peter recalled Kyle's insightful words from back on their very first date two months ago. "The unconcerned write them off as a menace to society. The romantic presents them as misunderstood poets and geniuses. Truth is they float around

somewhere in the middle. And to insist on placing them in one camp or the other, well it's really just asking them to perform, isn't it?"

This was why he loved Kyle, he decided. Kyle was in the middle of this spectrum and yet in no way weighed down by either end. He was at once the idealist who refused to be hardened by the scale of his city's social ills, and the generous and tireless activist who would never sacrifice an individual's suffering for some abstract theory of the greater good. "Every person is deserving of telling his or her story," he had said back on that first night out, and indeed Peter had heard the mantra from his boyfriend's lips many times since, listening as he debated and defended his particular motivations to friends and peers, in coffee shops and at house parties. Everyone is deserving of telling his or her story. If it could be true, Peter mused freely now, then his beloved Kyle – grad student by day, shelter worker and social agency volunteer by night-after-night – he, by his very resolve – was these stories' means. Their voice. Their audience. Their concert.

~DECEMBER 11, 2010~

Allison Page glanced to the seat next to her and let out a long low breath of satisfaction. She had done it. She had successfully urged, guided and manoeuvred the legendary Margaret Calloway back to the concert hall that she had herself christened twenty-eight years before. And while the implementation of her plan had proved far more strenuous than the fleeting notion that had first inspired it – all the way from home, down the length of Highway 10 and into the middle of Toronto, then parking, then arranging some dinner – the sense of accomplishment certainly warranted a moment's reward.

Allison marvelled at the sight of her. She was now somewhere in her late seventies – Maggie had never found the need to divulge the specifics of her age – and though now shrunken with the illnesses of age and dwarfed by the plush upholstery of her chair, Allison still found a presence there.

Still saw a dancing in the eyes, still felt the passion of her most musical soul. They were the very qualities that had enchanted the young woman since she was a child. Qualities she herself had aspired to. Or at the very least, as some liked to remind her, had aspired to be near. Maggie appeared alert, which was a good thing. Better still, her body seemed reasonably comfortable, any shakiness or weariness that the three-hours-plus car ride might have wrought having subsided with the woman's anticipation of the first bow strokes of the grand work which had, above all other performances, so defined her professional career.

Allison had picked Maggie up at nine-thirty that morning, her minivan outfitted meticulously for transporting the woman's frailty. There were blankets for the cold, a warm thermos of tea ready in the cupholder, pillows and cushions for stuffing beneath and around any part of the body that might require gentle bolstering. There was the sectioned tray laid ready with her daily medications to be administered throughout the trip as outlined by Rita, the live-in nurse, who had, at the eleventh hour, reluctantly agreed to the preposterous idea that had sponsored their day. And of course there was the boxed set of CDs, Handel's *Messiah*, at the ready for the car stereo, should Maggie wish to hear some selections as a teaser for the night ahead. It was their favourite version, the Philips 250th anniversary recording. The one they had enjoyed for the past ten years, ever since Allison had returned home to take the position of music teacher at the local secondary school and had assumed the directorship of the local community choir, infusing it with repertoire beyond the English shanties and barbershop harmonies that had greeted her upon her arrival. And indeed the CDs proved a good idea. The two had listened through most of the oratorio, Allison singing along to the alto chorus lines comfortably from memory, and Maggie, for her part, mouthing breathily her favourite passages from the soprano's solos, occasionally waving a bony arm and calling out hoarse instruction, as if the recording were subject to her directions. "Not

too fast,” she would mutter time and again, almost like a plea, as she gently but repeatedly pushed the air in front of her with the palms of her hands, just as she always did whenever the two of them got together to listen to music. Over the last several years those occasions became institutionalized into a Saturday afternoon tradition, with Allison driving out to Maggie’s home, putting on the tea and getting her friend lounging comfortably on the sofa in her parlour, sometimes for a radio broadcast from the Met in New York, sometimes a selection of Maggie’s choosing from the Calloway record library in the lower hallway. And just like it did on almost every one of those occasions, the music inevitably overtook the woman as she rode along down the highway, leaning back in the car seat, her eyes closed in a blend of concentration and bliss, her hands moving to caress the music out of the air. “Yes ... yes, not too fast ... not too fast ...” Maggie Calloway did not like her music rushed.

Allison glanced over one more time, just as the concert mistress entered and raised her bow to signal the orchestra’s preparation, nodding for an oboe to supply the long lean note by which all the other instruments would perfect their pitch. Maggie’s elbows had found the armrests of her chair. Her fingers were folded together and cradled her chin. Her expression was equal parts aged and childlike; proof positive that the evening was indeed a success. All the impediments to their adventure, all the many mitigating forces that had at first conspired to curtail Allison’s optimism could now safely recede. The day was unalterable. The sense of doing something profoundly meaningful was all that remained. She had brought the great Margaret Calloway back to see the concert stage that Allison’s mentor had once graced herself ... with nothing more to await but the genius of George Frideric Handel, about to unfold before them.



Hello. You've reached the Toronto Distress Line. This is Corrine speaking.

– *Is Andrew there?*

No ... I'm Corinne. But if you'd like to talk I'd be glad to-

– *I want Andrew. Andrew 03.*

Is this Eli? ... hello ...?

– *Is he there?*

Eli. You know the rules. We can't divulge who works at the call centre and we can't fulfill requests to speak with specific people. However, if you wish I can have a conversation with you for a few minutes.

– *Fifteen minutes. I get fifteen minutes. They said last night.*

Did you phone us last night, Eli?

– *But the bastard hung up after eleven.*

I'm sure they didn't mean to-

– *I have a clock right here.*

Well I promise not to cut you off early, Eli.

– *Fifteen minutes?*

Fifteen minutes. No more, no less.

– *Unless I was in real trouble, correct? If there was some sort of danger?*

And are you in danger, Eli? ... Hello ...?

– *Fifteen minutes. Promise me.*

I already did promise, Eli.

– *I have a clock right in front of me.*

Yes, you mentioned that. So, what would you like to talk about tonight?

– *I was downtown this afternoon. Where they're going to build the new concert hall.*

You mean Emerson Place?

– *Yes I do.*

And how does it look? Have they started construction yet?

– *Its design will be for large symphonic and choral works with a focus on acoustics and sightlines.*

I suppose it will.

– *... with an opening scheduled for April of 1982. The first concert will be the annual performance of Handel's Messiah with The Metropolitan Symphony and The Toronto Chorus under the direction of Walter Engels.*

And do you like classical music, Eli?

– *Choral music.*

I'm sorry?

– *I'm talking about choral music, you idiot.*

Now Eli ...

– *Every ignorant jackass just jumps to the term classical music. Do I know anything about a concerto? No. Did I say anything about a symphonic work? No. I said Handel's Messiah. Which is an oratorio. And an oratorio by definition is choral music, you ignorant fool!*

Eli, I'm going to ask you to calm down or our fifteen-minute deal is off.

– *Do I like it, she asks. What kind of hopelessly innocuous question is that? Like I could just take or leave the whole thing! Like I have some sort of goddamn choice in the matter!*

ELI!

– *I know what you idiots do down there, you know. I know you have a file on me. I bet you're taking goddamn notes right now!*

Eli, if you can't compose yourself-

– *Goddamn files. Do I like it, she asks.*

This is your last warning.

– *Goddamn idiots.*

OK we're through here. I'm hanging up. Good-bye, Eli.

– *What? No, please ... wait!*

Not when you're being abusive like this.

– *No. I'm sorry. Please don't hang up. It's so hard to get through. Please, it's so goddamn hard. I'm sorry ...*

Can you compose yourself?

– *No ... I mean, yes. Look, I just need to talk to somebody sometimes.*

I know. And that's OK ... that's fine.

– *There's just so much tension.*

Well then, let's talk about that. Because you know what, Eli? When you aren't being abusive, you show a tremendous amount of courage. Just by recognizing your need to talk to someone. That's a very brave thing. Do you realize how brave you are, Eli?

– *I'm just alone. That's all.*

And loneliness is a terrible thing. So many people have a family member or a friend they can call. Maybe a clergyman or a work colleague. You're very strong for calling here, Eli. I want you to know that ... Eli ...?

– *I saw the new hall today.*

So you said, yes.

Its design will be for large symphonic and choral works with a focus on acoustics and sightlines ...

Yes, you mentioned that too.

