

IN THE MASTER'S CELL

HENRY DIDN'T REALIZE it was the devil because she looked so cute. She was little in a fetching way, pretty and petite, & she came to him with those dark dewy eyes, and it was all about "Poor Alicia" and what they were doing to Alicia was just awful and Alicia was one of the best they had ever seen and it was just jealousy and sexism and she and everyone looked up to him and couldn't he help her?—etc.

But it wasn't really about Alicia. He realized this later on. It was about her.

As far as Alicia goes, it was just your usual case of bare-knuckled university politics. There was this Great Big Thing going on in the department, this background noise you wouldn't know about unless you were in the middle of it and had been for some time, perhaps not even then; a titanic struggle between the forces of "professionalism"—the Credentialists, as Henry liked to call them—who wanted everyone to have a Ph.D. like themselves, and those who just wanted the students to be exposed to the best teaching and the best music and didn't really care about degrees or think they were important.

Henry Larson was definitely in the latter group. He was a world-class violinist and leader of the renowned chamber group Forum. He believed passionately in the art and the love of music, the Magical Moment which he and his fellow travelers were seeking, playing together with one intent, one spirit, one soul. Yes, Henry was all about the music and the love, which is why he didn't usually allow himself to get dragged into departmental politics. He was also practical. Like most of his fellow professors, he needed the job. Chamber musicians aren't generally known for getting rich and they accrue a lot of expenses that other professors don't even have to think about.

In thirty-plus years on the faculty Henry had managed to arrange things so as not to get drawn into a single political battle. He would sit through faculty meetings with a pleasant smile on his face as if he were in tune with what was going on when in fact he wasn't listening at all—his mind was a thousand miles away—caught up in the *Trout* quintet or whatever; that was the real reason why he was smiling. In front of students he was hot; with his chamber group he was on fire, playing Brahms or Beethoven; but with his colleagues he was as bland as vanilla pudding, keeping a neutral expression while clinging tenaciously to the thought of the little remuneration that appeared in his bank account every month and not allowing his passions to be stirred by the Lilliputian machinations of his coworkers.

The thing was he knew his own danger. He knew how passionate he could be, underneath all the apparent calm and nonchalance and cultured polish, a threat to his own well-being. He had learned this lesson the hard way in his first teaching position at another school many years ago where he became outraged on behalf of some now-forgotten cause and reaped the whirlwind. So now he was careful to bury his passion. He would sit there trying to daydream, and they looked at him and didn't know quite what to think because they didn't know what he was thinking—which was the whole point.

To tell the truth they were a little afraid of him. Not many of them were performance artists—what one normally thinks of when one hears the word “musician”—and none of them had achieved his degree of notoriety. Okay, we'll just say it; they were jealous. Some almost hated him when he wasn't there and it was announced he was in Prague or Paris for yet another concert tour or workshop. They hated him because they were stuck in New York, and not even the good New York but up in the sticks, and no one would ever invite them to Prague or Paris—and they knew it.

Anyway, Henry buried all that passion and sat there all those years because the job was the thing that enabled him to do what he loved to do. He didn't have to go the commercial route as so many of his friends from Julliard had done. He didn't have to try to sell himself to dilettantes who wouldn't know good music if it came and knocked them on the head and who got their opinions from clueless newspaper reviews and program notes written by semi-desperate publicity agents.

The job was good to him. It was a bargain a lover could make with reality. He knew his stuff and had tenure. They let him try out new pieces on campus with his ensemble and gave him a reasonable schedule with some appreciation and theory in addition to his string students and workshops. Let's face it; he had a pretty good life there. He thought about old friends who were killing themselves to play in the five-thousandth performance of *Phantom* or whatever and grabbing any gig they could lay their hands on just to make ends meet, and he felt pretty fortunate. He had a nice little house. He and Gabrielle were comfortable, at least as far as the living space was concerned. He was content.

They were perhaps not perfectly content with each other, but that was a different story. That was a long story and a complicated story and it began when they were at Julliard and their mentors decided they needed to be matched up for the sake of their careers. They were matched, but they were not necessarily happy. They both had careers—separately—and they lived together—also separately. They did not quarrel. They never really quarreled. It wasn't that kind of relationship. Actually they had become pretty good friends down through the years. But first and foremost their marriage was a business arrangement, self-consciously made, and they approached it in a businesslike manner.

So all right, maybe that's partly why poor Henry was a little more susceptible to Margie's charms than he might otherwise have been. Margie was—well—hot. No, really.

She didn't look like a professor at all. Her male colleagues all agreed she was hot, when they were out of earshot of the harpies, and Henry could not disagree. He did not agree either—he did not indulge in that kind of classless talk—but he would just sit there and smile when one of the boys went off on, you know, a tangent.

He was quite flattered when she bundled into his office on that bright but frozen February day. It had never happened before, the pretty little Margie coming into his lair. He was sitting at his desk looking over abysmal student papers and there was a timid knock over the door and then there she was, walking in all by herself, and he had to pinch himself because to tell the truth there were times when he had imagined such a thing happening, idly as it were, even though he was a world-famous classical musician and honored professor who was often seen wearing tails and looking very sophisticated, for things are not always what they seem. Anyway, she had come to get his help—would he help her please? She looked up to him so much—everybody did—he was such a great musician and such a Presence in the department and an institution at the school. She hated to bother him with mundane things, but there was Alicia and what “they” were doing to her, and it was just awful.

Let's get one thing straight right now: it *was* awful. He knew what was going on. He didn't have to be told. They were trying to get rid of her—the hardasses, the little people with big titles and big honors and important committee responsibilities and impressive but meaningless CVs. They had let her into their little club because she had a stellar background in orchestra circles and they figured why not take a chance? Besides, she was a woman, and Hispanic to boot. But the thing was she was a mere M.A. Okay, so it was from a good school, but it still wasn't the *sine qua non*, the Ph.D. It wasn't “where the department wanted to go” as it sought to establish its credentials for the university establishment. So the Credentialists got together and they

stirred each other up and they got hot. They didn't realize the situation when they hired her—she was whisked in when they weren't paying attention—they had to get her out of there—she made them look bad.

Boy, did she ever! Somehow she got her grasping little hands on the orchestra when one of the trolls wasn't looking and did a concert at the end of October that would knock your socks off. It was challenging music—Bach and Schubert and Brahms—not the kind of pabulum Malcolm Faust, the regular orchestra conductor, normally did—and there was precision and true pianissimos and fortissimos and changes in tempi and an unusual grasp of the gestures of the music and sheer magic coming out of her wand. In twenty-five years it was the first time Henry had heard the orchestra sound like they were making music; except when he was conducting—but he was too modest to count that. Under Alicia they took on a challenge and delivered at a high level of artistry.

This was her second, fatal mistake: showing up the grandees who sat on Reputation and churned out the same warmed-over spit year after year. The hall was electric that night and some people knew it and the fraternity of the mediocre died inside; and then they came back stronger and more dangerous than ever, like Lord Voldemort, like the vampires they really were, just in time for Halloween, looking for some warm blood to suck. They themselves did not have warm blood; perhaps that was why they were bloodsuckers. Their blood was cold and their music was cold and this distaff upstart was not to be tolerated—“Not on my watch!”

Oh, they couched it in the best intentions. They always did. Maybe they even believed this stuff themselves. Who knows? Self-preservation is a funny thing. What set off the inquisition was a couple of whippersnappers from the viola section whining that Ms. Baptiste was a “slave driver.” Apparently she earned this encomium by requiring them to be disciplined and show up knowing the music, unlike

Malcolm, who believed in letting kids be kids. Also it was whispered that her bedside manner left something to be desired. She could be a bit brisk with them when they didn't perform to her standards. "Mean," even.

The Fraternity took up this whining and carried it on their shoulders to the city gates. Something was seriously wrong with the newest member of the adjunct faculty. She was expecting too much. She did not understand what kind of pressure these poor students were under. She was acerbic, not nurturing. She was treating them like professionals. She was Changing the Way Things Were Done, and why? To what end? To make tuition-paying students miserable? To show how tough she was? This storyline almost made Henry gag the first time he heard it. The poor suffering aggrieved students! What a joke.

First of all, if they gave back just twenty percent of the time they spent partying and hanging out and playing hearts they could probably memorize the entire chamber oeuvre of Schubert in one semester. Second, they were music majors, for God's sake! They were *supposed* to work hard on the music and get it right. Also they needed to get over themselves. These were people of modest talent and no appreciable accomplishment who had been coddled their entire lives and told how great they were and moved along from level to level as if they were actually moving along and had not leveled out long ago, probably somewhere back in tenth grade. Not a single one of them could get into Julliard. They should consider themselves lucky they were even getting a music degree from a recognized university.

Then the second wave of kvetching began. It was about the credentials, of course. They held back on this one all semester, keeping their powder dry, but now they could not help themselves. Alicia was incompetent to teach at the university level because she didn't have enough training. The faculty should have stuck to their guns and insisted on a doctorate, as they had agreed to do. Instead they had let

another substandard specimen creep in, and now she was Causing Problems.

Who was it coming from? Malcolm and his gang, of course. Malcolm was not a very good conductor, by Henry's lights. He was not even a musician. He could not play an instrument credibly, as if he knew what he was doing; Alicia played several. His performances were pedestrian, uninspired. The tempos never changed. Largo, andante, allegro, presto—it didn't seem to matter. It all came out sounding the same. But somehow—Henry was not quite sure how—Malcolm had cast a spell over the campus and the entire community. Malcolm was the one winning the prestigious university awards. Malcolm was the one the local papers came to when they needed someone from the university to help them look artsy. Malcolm was the one whom the students supposedly loved.

To Henry he was the emperor with no clothes. He was a good-looking guy, tall, blonde, always dressed to kill, glib, extremely personable when he wanted to be, very good with words, very good at making people think he knew things he didn't really know. Because he didn't really know them, not in Henry's view. He knew the buzzwords but he didn't know Music. It was all a show. And this was why he had to put poor Alicia in her place. She showed what a truly gifted conductor could do with the orchestra—and there was poor Malcolm, naked, his preposterous pretensions exposed. Only they weren't exposed, were they? Henry and his friends saw it—it was blindingly obvious to them—but who else? The truth was most people didn't know the difference between real music-making and Malcolm's kind of empty show. And that included most of the administration and even some of the music faculty.

Malcolm would get up there on the podium in his beautiful tails looking quite beautiful and he would swoop and he would look expressive waving his arms and he would smile at his charges and they smiled back in a knowing way right in the middle of the performance because they were

Sharing a Moment and wasn't it so charming? This relationship they had? The middle-aged women would swoon and say "Isn't he just like Toscanini?" And to tell the truth some of the men would swoon, too. This was why Alicia had to be crushed. She threatened to break the spell of this glorious illusion. She was unpretentious and not even much to look at and eschewed theatricality and barely moved her hands on the podium, like Jochum, but she made real music. People like Henry knew the difference, people who were respected, and they were talking about it. All the time. And for this unforgivable sin she had to be punished.

Now Malcolm may or may not have been a real musician, but like a good child of Oz he did have something Henry didn't have: a doctorate. He had been using this impressive degree as leverage against Henry ever since he arrived at the school fifteen years ago—subtly of course, never openly. But now he was using it openly against Alicia in order to protect himself from wagging tongues. If they wanted to be a great music department, they had to have standards, and in a university the Ph.D. *was* the standard. They had let Alicia in without one, and now they could clearly see where it led.

Henry just had to laugh when he heard this kind of talk. They were supposed to be a music school, dedicated to the art of music. Having a doctorate didn't have anything to do with that. People with doctorates weren't necessarily any smarter or more gifted or musical than people without them. It simply meant they had stayed in school longer. It meant having the fortitude to endure insufferable graduate courses with insufferable droning on and on by pseudo-intellectuals who often do not know what they are talking about. And it usually meant going to some big state school where they pass out Ph.D.'s like candy. Processing centers, Henry called them, though not when anybody from the school was listening.

It went to the very source of his frustration, the witch hunt they were perpetrating against Alicia. He had been

there for over thirty years basically going nowhere and not being paid attention to, keeping his mouth shut and smiling thinly during faculty meetings, being passed over, by and around in the department hierarchy—and he was the only one in the whole mad bunch of them who was an actual musician! He was the only one who had earned the exalted designation of artist; who knew and understood music; who had a national and international reputation; who had played in all the best halls and with many of the most famous classical musicians in the world.

He alone in the dreary stonefaced department of the dreary stonefaced state university had these credentials—and yet to the Credentialists it was almost like he was invisible! The irony was not lost on him. It couldn't be when so many of his friends insisted on pointing it out. Every now and then the department potentates would lose their rudder and let him conduct the orchestra, usually when Malcolm had better things to do or was on sabbatical, and that was always a big mistake because he was a passionate conductor, invested and skilled, who inspired the students to heights they did not know they could achieve; and when they played Tchaikovsky or Grieg under him it was more like a revolution than a concert, an event, and there were screams and whistles from the audience, even between movements, and people sensed Something Happening.

Of course they wouldn't ask him again for years afterward. Not until they forgot or got careless again. They wanted to push him aside, push him down. Not consciously, perhaps, but in actuality. He suspected he made them uncomfortable. After all, they were supposed to be music professors, but he was an actual musician. He knew what they were pretending to know. He didn't try to make them uncomfortable, by the way. Far from it. He was a loving guy by nature, a magnanimous guy and very supportive of others. But they were not supportive. That was not the word he would have used to describe the slugpit of jealousy and

nitpicking that constituted his workplace. Angry, perhaps. Depressed.

It didn't matter how supportive he was, it didn't matter how generous he was with his time or his praise or his attentiveness to people who didn't really deserve it; this positivity was never or rarely reflected back to him. For years and decades it had gone on like this, Henry pouring out his life-force for them every day while they sent iron in return. And then it was less and less every day because he began to feel worn out by it all. There were too many hurts and too many people he didn't really want to see. He began to look for ways to avoid being there. Funny thing, they resented that too. The same people who resented him when he was around also resented him when he was not around. They decided he was a "snob." He was a prima donna. He wasn't a team player.

All these years he had gone all around the world and he had played the great halls to glowing reviews and made critically acclaimed CDs—and in his own department it was like none of it ever happened. It didn't seem to matter how much he did or accomplished; they could never be impressed. They whispered about him behind his back. Even people he counted among his friends couldn't always resist the temptation to use their devious little muscle in an attempt to cut him down to size. There were betrayals. There was damage and awful things that could not be taken back or forgotten, no matter how hard he tried. He believed in the rule of seventy times seven, but sometimes it was too much for him. He was only human, after all. He was not a man of steel.

And don't you know they had taken it out of him over the years, piece by piece, his patience and his sunshine, piece by piece they tore it out of him and left him feeling older and less sanguine but not wiser—because he still let them get to him; he still allowed himself to be hurt. Picture him pock-marked in your mind. Picture him sitting in his beloved rocker in his office with pieces of his face gone

missing, and pieces of his soul, and you will be inside his head, because that is just how he felt from time to time. Especially on cold and desolate and sunless February afternoons in the depths of winter. He'd even had a dream about it once. He reached up to touch his face and a chunk of it fell away on his fingertips. It took him several minutes of waking-up horror to convince himself this was just a dream.

Anyway, Margie came in and she sat down and she smiled and he wondered what this was all about, because she had barely spoken to him in the past, certainly not alone like this, only at faculty gatherings, and then only fleetingly; so it must be something important. But she came in and she sat on the edge of the chair and she seemed a little edgy, and he was all attention. He was hers.

"You're probably wondering what I'm doing here," she said with a nervous laugh.

"I thought maybe you came to say hello," he said with his well-polished charm, giving nothing away, putting on his Wise Old Man face, wise old veteran of the department and sage and confidante—and careful! Little did he know he was playing right into her hands.

"Well, to tell you the truth this is hard for me."

"Hard? Why?"

"To come in here like this. I mean, you're practically a legend."

"Oh, come on."

"No—really. This is like the Inner Sanctum. Look at me—I'm shaking. I'm so nervous."

"There's absolutely no reason to be nervous. I don't bite," he replied laughing, although he kind of wanted to.

"That's the effect you have on people. You don't realize it, but you do. Anyway, I had to come talk to you. I'm kind of upset about something. And you may be the only one who can understand."

Hmm, this was interesting. "I'm flattered."

"So you know what they're trying to do to Alicia, right?"

“Not really.”

“You don’t know? You haven’t heard?”

“Well, I guess I’ve heard some rumblings,” he confessed. “To tell you the truth, I’ve been focusing on our concert at Alice Tully next week, so I haven’t been paying too much attention to what’s going on in the department.” (Okay, so he let himself indulge in a little name-dropping with this pretty girl.)

“You heard about the famous complaint from the students?”

“I understand some of the little dears were unhappy about having to know the music.”

“Right. Well, now they’re trying to get rid of her. Malcolm and Jeff and the rest of them.”

“Seriously? Get rid of her?”

“Yes! They were talking about it at the last department meeting, which you didn’t go to.”

“I was doing a workshop.”

“Yes, I know. They knew, too. Which is why it was on the agenda. They knew you wouldn’t be there.”

“Probably true,” Henry said with a sigh. “So what are they saying?”

“Oh, it’s the usual nonsense. First of all they’re saying she’s too hard on the kids. She’s trying to turn us into Eastman and we’re just a teachers’ school.”

“The usual. So we should aspire to be mediocre.”

“Well, *they* are mediocre, so maybe that’s why it’s so important to them.”

Henry looked at her in surprise. This was their first real conversation and already she was making a good deal of sense. It was gratifying to have others in the department who felt the same way he did about these things, especially about Malcolm, who had become his arch-enemy. It made him feel less isolated. He who usually played things close to the vest with people he didn’t know very well surprised himself by agreeing with her.

“That’s exactly why. They don’t want anyone in the department to excel because they are incapable of excelling themselves. But is that all they’re saying? Because I don’t think you can’t get rid of someone just because she hurt your feelings by doing a good job.”

“No, they went into the whole degree thing, too. You know, ‘she only has an M.A.’ and all that. Although an M.A. where she went to school is like a Ph.D. for them. They really have an obsession with it. Strange, though, there seem to be certain exceptions to the rule—like Randy.”

“Sure. If you’re one of the boys you get a pass. Or if you’re cool and you teach jazz percussion. So what else? Is that it?”

“I guess so. It’s funny—saying it to you here, it doesn’t sound like much. But they really are talking about getting rid of her.”

“And where is Bertram on all this?”

“He didn’t say a word. He just listened.”

“That’s what they call ‘leadership.’ I’m very disappointed in him. I thought he would do better.”

“Well, I can’t tell if he actually agrees with them. He doesn’t run things with a heavy hand, like Malcolm did when he was the chair. But he kind of agrees with them just by not saying anything—if you know what I mean.”

“Yes, because no one else spoke up.”

“Right,” she said, and he thought she blushed, but he forgave her. “The truth is, people are afraid to speak up. If you don’t have tenure you’re not going to speak up against them, not unless you’re crazy or suicidal, and if you do have tenure it’s just not worth it, because you know Malcolm’s going to go running to the dean.”

“‘Running.’ That’s a good way of putting it. They have the entire department cowed with this professionalism garbage. It’s the never-ending putsch that seems to keep reviving itself, no matter who the chairman is.”

“I think you should be the chair.”

“Oh sure,” he scoffed. “Like my master’s degree is any more impressive than Alicia’s. Besides, who needs that kind of misery?”

“But you agree it isn’t fair?”

“Of course it isn’t fair. It’s ridiculous. She did one of the best concerts I have ever heard here in all my thirty years. She obviously knows what she’s doing. But that’s the problem. She’s too good for them. She probably would have been better off doing poorly, as strange as that sounds.”

“They’re just jealous. Malcolm doesn’t like her getting all the attention and good feedback. He’s afraid she’s going to take his job away.”

“No, that’s not what he’s afraid of. He’s afraid of her taking his shine. He’s built up this thing here—I don’t know how—where everybody puts him on a pedestal and they give him the ‘Teacher of the Year’ awards and he goes into the Distinguished Conductors program and gets sent all over the state to spread his poison to unsuspecting high-school students. Of course he doesn’t want another conductor to do well. It exposes him.”

Margie’s mission was successful, far beyond her wildest dreams. The burr had been set and it wouldn’t let go. She walked out of his office smiling and then Bertram walked by and Henry saw the quizzical look on his face. He shook his head because he knew what was coming next. It would go around the whole department. Margie had been alone with him in his office.