

Air on a broken heart string.

Modest, almost invisible within the angular Nosferatu shadow play adorning the faded peach paintwork, the little nameplate skulked, black letters upon gleaming brass.

The Libretto Studio.

My curiosity was piqued, hardly a new sensation these past few days since arriving on Corfu to take up working residence in an equally modest but not cheap apartment in the Kantounia, near the Venetian Well. Not the only Venetian Well I was warned but distinctive enough that I should not readily get lost. I soon discovered how friendly Corfiots could be with a sad rat seemingly lost for all eternity in a maze.

The small weather-aged wrought iron chair, green once upon a time, now just faded verdigris, wobbled unsteadily beneath me on the uneven stones of the narrow terrace, one of four comprising the idiosyncratic bar. Filling a narrow space between a wall of ancient rough-hewn stone and a steep flight of steps it was my secret corner of the town sheltering beneath a rampant growth of purple flowers. The building opposite of the quintessentially Venetian school rose five floors high above ground level, each floor punctuated by a pair of windows to the right of the stepped doorway and one to the left. Not symmetrical but planned with human eye precision. Green shutters hid the lower windows whilst the shutters and windows of the upper floors had been thrown open. Whether to allow hot stale air to escape or to permit a cool breeze I could not say. A cloudless hot day September day had ceded authority to a balmy humid evening and if such an old building could not boast air conditioning I could empathise with the occupant's plight.

The glass of wine on the table before me lay untouched. Part of the ritual. How could I ever know if I were recovered and in control if I did not occasionally face the dragon of my previous intemperance. In a short while the Assyrtiko would have grown warm to tepid, be undrinkable and remain untouched. I had only to hold out such a short time. Another skirmish won, though not yet the battle.

What took place inside the Libretto Studio? A building which according to the tiled nameplates, housed a lady skilled in haute couture, a chiropodist, a lawyer and Madame Lucretia, Personal and discrete services ensured. Somehow, they seemed to fit together, this small and diverse carnival of souls.

And then I heard it.

A sound that was in the same moment wholly expected, this being a town with deep, Venetian roots and at the same time wholly unexpected, unless Madame Lucretia's personal services were so prized that a baritone might be moved to sing an aria in his ecstatic post-rapture delight.

The aria was not immediately familiar, though the baritone was crystalline clear, with the depth and body of fine Greek wine or the sea which we had crossed from Athens. My violin and I are no strangers to opera, or many of the famous classical arias, but this was ...different. Unexpectedly modern sounding, sung in English but transformed by the theatricality of opera. Familiar and strange.

My right hand strayed automatically towards the glass then stopped as I strained to hear every word above the strident brass filling the space behind. The breathless urgency of the repetition, with rising inflections and long notes held with ease told a modern tale of cultures clashing yet perhaps seeking some middle ground in Peace. Then it stopped. Not a word, not a syllable more. I felt as if a limb had been taken, to deprive me of that voice in such a cruel manner. I waited, hoping, and wishing for more yet none came. Now it felt strange, empty sound space filled with the babel of strangers around me.

My left hand was drawn towards the glass as my right hand grappled with my smartphone, fingers of one hand pressing furiously on keys, praying for a magic revelation from a jumble of words.

Nixon in China. I remembered.

Nixon's aria on meeting Chou en Lai and Mao.

My hand pulled back from the glass. Another small crisis averted.

Still, I awaited, but the performance was finished. Rehearsal, an exercise, teasing the bar crowd sitting below? No second act or encore. But I knew I wanted more.

My left hand hovered above the glass with mild intent but no conviction. Just then the brown, paint-crackled door opened and out stepped a man, mid-thirties, well groomed, stiff backed whom I just knew to be the singer. The waitress who had served me greeted him with the words 'Fabulous Rocco. Bellissimo.'

He accepted the compliment graciously in a flawless Boston accent, as my own would be if I had not been struck dumb. He pulled the door closed and turned to dismount the steps, just like Nixon disembarking Air Force One. Stately, confident, and not dis-similar in looks to the ex-President for whom a Chinese triumph would turn to ashes in his mouth.

Every inch a coward.

This was the face of a coward I knew only too well, even after a decade.

My left hand darted towards the glass, the strong, lithe fingers of a first violinist grasping as they would a life belt.

“Robert” I squealed before my brain could muzzle my lips. He turned, a stricken look upon his face. Trapped. A rat in a maze. Nixon trapped by Special Prosecutor Cox.

He had fled but had not escaped.

I took a long drink, damning myself to a fresh hell.

I cared not.

I had already decided he would not escape again.

There was a second rat in the maze with him. My eyes dared him to run.

He yielded and approached my table.

“Rachel. Long time.”

I drained the glass.

What the hell.

My hand was steady, my mind clear.

I signalled to the server.

“Drink Robert, just for old times sake?”

The earth refused to swallow him up.

Good. I was ready to do that.