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# GARBAGE NIGHT AT THE OPERA

A STORY BY  
VALERIE FIORAVANTI

**L***a Bohème*. A thing of beauty, sung in his own language, the soprano his own countrywoman. A taste of home. *Cinque dollare* for tickets for students. A treat for his Franca, who doesn't know her heritage, has too little music in her life. Massimo would change that today, at the matinee at *L'Opera* Metropolitan, across the river in Manhattan. They would listen to the beauty, take in the sadness that is still beautiful, cry for the woman dying on the stage, her last breath a song for love. Together they would cry for Donna—his wife, Franca's mother—and feel their grief a little lighter

for this beauty that is also sadness. After the music ends and the curtain falls they would leave the theatre and there would still be some light left before dusk. It wouldn't be too late for the subway ride home, for his mother-in-law to worry about Franca's bedtime, her safety as they walk home after dark, past the people who roam outside the neighborhood at night, with their cold, unflinching eyes.

Massimo clips the advertisement from *Oggi*, the Italian newspaper, as proof of the small price for students. He fears it is a misprint, but if he brings the clipping along it



Aaron Olson



must be honored. He has learned this much in his years here. He puts the clipping in his wallet, along with his photo card from the community college. He takes book-keeping there three afternoons a week, a work program for single parents the counselor found for him. Massimo is the only father in the class. He is good with his figures, although he struggles sometimes to understand the quick words of his teachers. He hopes another business will open soon where the cardboard factory closed. He is not the only father out of work.

Massimo must also prove Franca is a student. He thinks it should be obvious, but he knows papers are important in this country. He sits with the firebox open in his lap, but he hesitates to remove her birth certificate, fearing his wife would not approve. He shuffles the other papers, and chooses Franca's latest report card from her third grade teacher. He prays to Saint Cecilia, the patron saint of music, he has everything he needs to get them in. He wants Franca to have this chance to hear the music live, instead of the scratchy recordings he listens to only in the basement, exiled—by the ears of the other tenants who don't know music—to where the hum of the laundry machine drones day and night.

He pulls his suit from the closet, and the mothball scent clings to the plastic covering. He has not worn it in the last fourteen months. He holds it to his chest, tucks in his head and squeezes his large frame through the kitchen window, onto the fire escape where it can be aired. As soon as he unzips the garment bag, the memories of his wife's funeral escape like trapped moths. He ducks from them, focuses on the tasks to be done.

His suit sways roughly as he irons Franca's white blouse. He does this with the flat of his ironing board propped across the fire escape railing. His kitchen windows face another building, and the light that filters in is dim. Massimo hates to live by the lamp during daytime, so he works outside, making the shaky, bathtub-sized fire escape into a balcony where he can absorb whatever brightness the stingy skyline allows.

His view as he irons is brick painted tan to resemble the more durable brownstones of other neighborhoods. Massimo believes this trick fools no one. He has lived with this horizon for ten years, and the paint has always been in the process of peeling, with the specks of red peeking through, accentuated by brown streaks creeping from rusty drainpipes on the roof. In Ventozza, his home village, the old stone walls of their homes were always whitewashed and everyone repainted in the spring, after the March winds faded. Massimo cannot duplicate the light of his homeland, but he has tried to beautify, making little changes like running a creeping vine along his fire escape to introduce some green. The firemen brought ladders and chopped it away with their axes. They said it was a safety violation, wrote him a ticket, and warned him not to do it again.

He still has his flowers, which he coaxes to life in pots and boxes, but they have to be kept inside at night so they can't be used as target practice (this, apparently, violates no code worth enforcing). Each time he forgets and has to sweep up the broken shards and blossoms he comes closer to giving up, not replanting, scattering all his remaining seeds in the wind. He fears the probability of this day, the if slowly becoming when, like the slow drip of water eroding stone.

Franca pokes her head outside, lets him know she is home from her grandparents, who have an apartment two floors below them. Franca doesn't like the fire escape, with its iron slats her feet are small enough to slip through when she isn't careful, the way it trembles when the subway runs below their street. She doesn't mind having the lights running all day long, doesn't long to be outside all the time the way he does, although she usually likes being wherever he is.

He passes her white blouse through the window, tells her they are going to the opera. "Nana's doing wash now," she says.

"We're going into the city to see *La Bohème*."

"Oh," she says, turns from the window, changes her mind, turns back. "Do I have to take another bath?"

He finishes her pleated skirt and passes it through the window also. "No time," he says, with a sigh. He motions her away from the window and props the ironing board up against the side of the stove. Coming back inside is always harder for him, when he has to shimmy through the window, bring his feet down where he can't see. It is yet another thing he can't get used to.

He changes into his suit, and buffs his shoes a final time as he waits for her to be ready. She comes out in her robe, her white tights and black patent shoes visible, holding something wrapped in plastic high above her head. "Can I wear this instead?"

It is a blue jumper her aunt had sent for her birthday, too big and then forgotten when her mom got sick. Massimo puts the hanger against her neck to check the fit, which seems right. "Try it on."

The dress is still a bit large, but Franca prances around, obviously pleased. The color reminds him of his sister's letters, how she writes about the sky in Arizona, which she claims on a clear day goes on in all directions, larger than the whole of Europe. He knows she must exaggerate, but he would like to see it with his own eyes one day, introduce Franca to her Aunt Luisa. He used to hope to join her, help with the restaurant she still dreams of opening. His wife refused to leave her parents and her home, a point it was hard for him to argue against. Now even the letters postmarked Tucson, AZ fill his mother-in-law's eyes with tears, but he can't ask Franca to leave her Nana or willingly cause his wife's mother that much pain. Franca doesn't spend much time looking at the sky.

He fixes her collar, which is tangled in the straps of the jumper, and they leave. They walk the four blocks to the subway entrance, Franca's hand securely within his, her body tucked safely in the shadow of his left side. The train comes quickly, and an elderly woman slowly makes room for Franca on the bench. Massimo stands beside her, hums the overture in anticipation, which makes Franca smile and try to follow along. They transfer two more times before climbing their way above ground, across the street from the Lincoln Center.

They pass a row of banners advertising performances: ballet, orchestra, chamber music, theatre, opera, even movies, each specialty with its own hall or stage or screening room. The complex is built to resemble a European town square, but as grand as the fountain in the center or the tall arching windows may be, it all seems too shiny, lacks the weathered grace of what it is meant to imitate. Even as he passes judgement, Massimo is grateful to be here, and he urges his daughter forward as she stops and starts, trying to take in all that she sees.

There is no line at the ticket counter, which is a little wooden booth with a glass window, leaving only enough of an opening for money to be exchanged. The microphone the clerk speaks into eats her words, delivers only squeaks and static. Massimo points to Franca. "Two tickets for students, please."

More squeaks. Massimo slides his documents and ten dollars under the glass. The woman pushes it back to him, squeaks some more. Massimo points to his ear, walks around the side by the booth door. He has to knock twice before she opens it a crack and says, "Show's sold out."

Massimo shoves his foot in the crack before she can close the door again. "Please, I can fix for you, for two tickets." He tries to hand her the clipping, but she won't take it. "The inside is dirty, it needs to be cleaned."

"It's not dirty in here," she says, trying to pull the door shut with his foot still in it. "Get away from here before I call security."

"He means the microphone," Franca says impatiently. Massimo's eyes shift to the floor, which looks like marble. He doesn't like it when she has to speak for him, but strangers often misunderstand him. As young as she is, Franca has learned to adopt a certain tone, a sharpness that implies the fault is with the listener. To Massimo, this is a very American quality, although her mother, also born here, did not possess such surety. "My father is offering to fix it for you if you sell us the tickets to *La Bohème*. He can fix anything. Everyone who knows him says so. Everyone."

The woman seems charmed by Franca, lifts the edges of her mouth with some effort. "There are no tickets, sweet thing, the entire run is sold out. I can't help you, and I can't let anyone who isn't union touch any of the equipment here, no matter how useless it is." A buzzer

goes off, and the woman jerks her head back inside the booth. "I have to help these people." She leaves Massimo with his foot still jammed in the door.

Massimo hands the clipping to Franca. She reads it and shrugs, repeats what the woman told them, but he doesn't want to believe there are no more tickets. He pokes his head into the booth and sees the woman handing an envelope through the slot. "Those are tickets, no?" he says.

The woman jumps from her stool, points her finger at Massimo. "Look here, Mister. You have to get outside right now."

Massimo backs out of the booth, but still plants his foot in front of the door. "We stand," he says.

"That couple paid for those tickets months ago, with a credit card. All the tickets are long gone, and there's no standing allowed."

"He really loves the opera," Franca says.

"No, for my daughter." Massimo puts his hands on Franca's shoulders. "I want her to see. Don't make me disappoint her."

"I can't help you. Why don't you take her to the park? There's an entrance straight down 66th Street, and it's safe. You shouldn't stay after dark, but it's safe now." She reaches back for her purse and rifles through it, pulling out a pack of lifesavers. She peels back the wrapper, popping two greens in her mouth before she hands Franca the cherry one. She offers the roll to Massimo but he shakes his head, pinches Franca, who says "Thank you" on command. He pulls his foot from the door, his shoulders slumping as he turns away.

"Kids love the park, Mister. My husband takes the grandkid there all the time. There's this puppet show by the fountain, before you go down the steps. That's all he talks about for hours after he sees it, every time."

"*Grazie*," Massimo mumbles and leaves. Franca follows, taking his hand.

"The park sounds nice, too. We can listen to your records when we get home. I'll do my math homework upstairs with you."

Massimo smiles clownishly and swings her arm in jump-rope arcs as they walk. He can see the anxiety melt from her step, the tightness behind her eyes begin to fade. The last thing he needs is to see his failures cause her worry, trigger an impulse to make him happy at any cost. That is not a thing for children to do, and Massimo's chest pinches at the thought of her carrying so many adult burdens. They cross Broadway, and Massimo asks a policeman standing by the corner about the park. His wife's parents sailed to America, found an apartment in Brooklyn, and rarely strayed more than a few streets beyond their home. His wife was like them, had once been angry with him for more than a week for taking Franca to the Botanical Gardens by bus, to see the cherry blossoms in bloom. He still doesn't understand why that was so dangerous, but it is harder now to



go against her wishes when she can't argue back. The *policia* assures him it is safe, agrees that the puppet show is worth seeing, and gives them directions to the fountain. Massimo thanks him and takes Franca there to try and salvage their day.

The puppets, when they find them, are five mariottes that dance to blues music and pretend to sing along to the soundtrack playing from a boombox, their shaggy hair and loose limbs flopping to the beat. Franca watches them cycle through their act, three songs of about three minutes each—with time in between to pass the tip basket through the audience—for over an hour. She says it's like watching *The Muppets* without a television, but to Massimo it is the poorest of substitutes. It sickens him to watch, knowing his own child is pleased. He looks at his watch and tries to imagine what they would be seeing if they had their tickets to *La Bohème*. He places himself in the poor Paris apartment, with the artists burning pages for the fire, imagines Franca's growing excitement as she watches the performers, cranes her neck to see the musicians playing in the pit below the stage. Massimo is humming "*Questo Mar Rosso*" when the tip basket presses into his ribs. When he ignores the man with the basket, he is serenaded with an *a cappella* version of "Stand by Me" until he parts with two quarters.

To pass the time, Massimo chats with a man in a brown uniform, a park ranger from the patch on his sleeve, but all he knows of rangers is the hockey team. Ranger Steve is from Yugoslavia, a country only a ferry ride away from his own. He is also from the coast, and they begin to talk about the sea and the light they miss from home. *Stafan* has never been to the opera, but he likes his job caring for the park. Massimo says it is the largest bit of green he's seen in America, and this surprises his new friend. Massimo confides that New York was supposed to be a pit stop on his way west. *Stafan* reveals he has three young sons in New Jersey, and a cousin on a ranch in Montana he still dreams of joining.

*Stafan* guides them to the zoo on the park's east side, but they detour for a ride on the carousel they spy sitting on a hill in the distance. Franca rides a wooden horse with a golden saddle, its reddish-brown coat painted the same shade as her mother's hair. After, when they are searching for the path to the zoo, two women trot by on horseback. Franca's energy stills as she watches the horses long after they fade from Massimo's view. It's as if she never quite believed in them as real, breathing creatures.

The zoo's main attraction is a polar bear, and his lair is set up so you can view him from different heights and angles, both above and below the water. He is a beautiful creature, swimming from end to end, his white fur shimmering in silver streaks as he glides through an easy

breaststroke. The viewing area is well placed in the corner where the polar bear makes his turn, pushing off the glass with a hind paw larger than Massimo's head. This occurs at eye-level, and Massimo watches the tendons in his leg flex and strain, as the glass vibrates and then slowly absorbs the shock. He picks up Franca, so she can get a closer view, and together they watch the polar bear swim toward them, twist his trunk, and push off against the glass over and over and over again. They notice the black pads of his paw in contrast to his white fur, the shades of silver and charcoal as the muscles ripple his fur, revealing the underlayers protected from the water.

Franca's nose presses against the glass as she watches, turning away only if she has a new wonder to share. Massimo has a crick in his neck from holding her so long. He stretches his muscles, and as he looks up he sees two men tossing a beach ball back and forth across the water, and a third dangling a long stick with a large fish speared at the end into the water as the polar bear passes by. Massimo watches the rebellion of the polar bear, his refusal to take the food they offer if he will stop swimming his laps and play. The man with the stick becomes insistent, bringing the pointed end closer and closer to the polar bear, who does not stray from the lane his habitual swimming has created, and thus allows himself to be poked. Massimo can watch no longer. He puts Franca down and tugs her away against her will. "I want to see more," she says.

"No," he says, and points out the three men, but Franca twists away and runs back to the tank. Massimo lets her go. She is too young to understand what pains him. She joins him a few minutes later, takes his hand. "It's not the same now."

They walk north, toward the French garden at the very edge of the park—as if the French didn't learn this from watching Italian things grow—but the sun is starting to set, and even *Stafan* warned him to leave the park before dark. Massimo has trouble finding a path that will take them out of the park, because they all seem to loop back to where they started. He sees a couple in the distance, walking arm in arm, and cuts through the trees to follow them.

By the time they exit, near the Guggenheim Museum, it is dark and they are on the opposite side of the park from where they started. From his subway map, Massimo knows the line runs along Lexington Avenue, but he's not exactly sure where that is. He knows Lexington Avenue is east, so he crosses the street and walks away from the Park, trying to mask any confusion he feels. After crossing Madison, he sees an old dresser by the side of the curb. The finish is warped and stained, but the carvings are very fine. He knocks along the sides and inspects the drawers, but the dresser has only cosmetic flaws. He's pretty sure it's made of mahogany, and if so, he might be able to fix it up and

sell it for enough money to cover two tickets to the opera, paid for in advance.

He picks it up, and although it is weighty, he can carry it. He puts it back down and walks part way up the street to read the sign. Park is next, not Lexington. Franca is hopping over the cracks in the sidewalk, mumbling a jump-rope song. Until he knows exactly where they are, he must focus on getting her home safely. He leaves the dresser behind, but Lexington is the next block after Park, and when he turns the corner, he can see the green subway lollipops glowing up ahead. He goes back for the dresser, already sketching out plans for the work, debating which opera to choose.

They walk back toward the subway, but his pace slows. Franca skips along ahead of him, doubling back whenever he whistles that she's too far ahead. When Massimo loses sight of her and she doesn't come quickly back into view, he hitches the dresser a little higher and picks up his pace. When he sees her, she is eyeing a bicycle being brought to the curb. She waits until the man sets the bike down by his trash bins and bundled newspapers, then runs over to it as soon as he turns away.

"Don't touch that, it's broken."

Franca circles the bike. Three spokes jut out around a dent in the rim, but the rest of it, purple with a white basket embossed with flowers, white and purple streamers sprouting from the handlebars, seems fine. "It's just the wheel, right?" she asks.

"Won't work without the wheel."

"My father can fix it for me." Franca points to Massimo, and he nods. He holds the dresser in his arms.

The man says nothing.

"Is it okay if I take it?"

The man looks at Massimo, then back to Franca, but remains silent.

"I don't have a bicycle, and my father could make this one work for me."

"It's not too hard to fix," Massimo says. "It would be a shame for it to waste."

The man looks back toward his building, which has high steps and a door with a stained-glass window, as if searching for guidance. Franca looks along with him. "You can take it, I guess."

"Can you handle it?" Massimo asks.

Franca's body bobs yes. She grips the handlebars and jerks the bike into the air. It knocks her over and falls back where it began. Massimo sets the dresser down and helps her to her feet. He places his foot between her legs and nudges them further apart, so her feet align with her shoulders. He bends his knees slightly and gestures for her to do the same. Massimo picks the bike up and places her left hand on the bar beneath the seat. Franca says, "I'm ready."

"You can't expect her to carry that." The man pulls the handlebars from her grip, setting the colorful

streamers in motion. Franca jumps back, startled by his sudden motion. "She's just a little kid—it's inhuman."

Massimo glances at the dresser, thinks of the opera money, and sighs heavily. He hooks the bicycle under one arm, and takes hold of Franca's hand.

"I can carry it. I don't want you to leave the dresser."

"You can't leave that piece of junk on my property."

Massimo puts the bike down and moves the dresser over by one building.

"You don't live there either. Maybe you need to take your garbage with you and leave mine alone."

Massimo steps closer to this pinched man who protects his discards like a vulture. His arm cocks and his fingers curl under his thumb. The man steps back as Massimo plows forward. Massimo is not a tall man, but he is large in the shoulders and chest. Franca hoists the bike on its hind wheel and rolls it between her father and the man. "Look, I can wheel it this way." She smiles with her whole face. "We just live two blocks away, mister. Please let me take it, please."

"You live two blocks away from here?" the man asks, his voice cracking on *away*.

Massimo uncurls his fingers, stares into the hand that made the fist. He is a man who hates violence. When he doesn't answer, the man says, "I think I'm going to keep the bike."

Franca spins the bike toward the man and lets go. Massimo picks her up and puts her safely behind him as the bike skids across the cement. "You threw it away," she says, lunging out from behind her father.

Massimo points in the direction they came from. "We live that way. We moved because her mother died. She has no mother and she has no bike."

The man blinks, looks everywhere but into Massimo's eyes. "You can take it," he says and walks quickly away, inside.

"*Grazie*," Massimo calls out, although he wishes he could leave the bike where it is. Franca circles around her father, showing him she can handle the bike on her own, hopping with delight. He takes a closer look, and the bike is sturdy and well made. They have both chosen well.

They walk to the subway entrance. Massimo puts the dresser down at the top of the subway steps, but Franca picks the bike up carefully, bending at the knees, her legs firmly planted. "I can do it."

Massimo watches her take two careful steps down. She turns her head, says, "I want to do it myself," just as he is about to take the bike from her. She fights for solid footing as he prays for the courage to stand and watch. She sets the bike down after clearing the seventh and final step and dances around, her arms raised in victory. She looks up at him, and her eyes, a swirl of his brown and her mother's green, explode with light. □