



The limousine door opened, and a bombardment of flashlights struck the stooping figure emerging.

One hand shielding his eyes, the other perfunctorily waved to the gathered journalists.

“Thank you,” the man murmured as he rushed into the church.

“Mr Foresta, one question, Mr Foresta...” But he was already inside.

His name was Giovanni Foresta, the famous tenor.

Well, Giovanni Foresta was a name given to him, not by his parents, but by his agent, ten years ago.

His parents named him Jim Woods, but who remembered?

When he was in his early twenties, Jim Woods gained some popularity with his recordings of the great English renaissance songwriters, Morley, Tallis, Dowland, and others, but it wasn't until he was "picked up" by star making agent Fritz Wichter, who changed his name to Giovanni Foresta, that he rose to fame; and Jim Woods sank into oblivion.

In his still young career, Giovanni had been a star at all the famous houses, from Milan to London, from Sydney to New York. By some connoisseurs, he was compared to Caruso or Pavarotti.

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Fifteen years earlier, music teacher Harry Tubbs had taken the initiative to perform Bach's *St Matthew's Passion* on Good Friday.

In the small town, he had already a modest circle of fans attending the quarterly performances of cantatas in the local church, supervised, and conducted by Harry for more than ten years.

But the challenge of the Passion was considered by many as too ambitious.

However, Harry proved them all wrong. It was an immense success, and since, was repeated annually.

Harry succeeded in attracting soloists of high quality every year. Soon, the church became too small, but Harry refused to move to another location.

After a few years, the performance was televised live, and broadcast by all local channels.

*

Harry remembered Jimmy Woods very well.

Some twenty-five years ago the skinny black-haired boy's mother knocked on his classroom door, asking him if he would listen to him.

The boy was six at the time.

Harry was amazed by the clarity of the child's voice and made him sing in the school choir.

Little Jimmy much liked the praise he received for his solos.

When the boy moved to secondary school, Harry lost sight of him.

That was until the name of Jim Woods popped up in the local newspapers after his recordings of Renaissance vocal music.

From then, Harry followed his career.

*

For many years, Harry had attempted in vain to book the great Giovanni Foresta for his Bach performance.

His requests were politely declined by Jim's agency.

Last year, instead of approaching Foresta's agent, Harry had sent a letter to Jim's mother, and a few months later, much to his surprise, he received a phone call from a representative of the Fritz Wichter Agency, a nice young lady confirming that Mr Foresta was available and prepared to take part in Harry's project.

When a few weeks later papers arrived, it appeared that the requests and demands as they were noted down, were quite reasonable.

Prior to the concert on Good Friday, Mr Foresta will only be available for one rehearsal with orchestra and choir, during which only Mr Foresta's parts will to be studied.

Tucked away in the envelope was Giovanni Foresta's business card, with a personal note written on the back: *Mr Tubbs, really, really looking forward to this. Best regards, Jim(my).*

*

"Mr Tubbs! How great to see you again! You haven't changed a bit!" Cordially, Giovanni Foresta shook Harry's hands.

"My sweet mummy!" Giovanni exclaimed as he hugged the old lady standing next to Harry. "Quite a homecoming, huh?" Giovanni gently squeezed his mother to his chest.

Harry said: "We're so proud to have you, Jim. This is Andrew Gardiner. He waved his hand towards a middle-aged man standing next to Giovanni's mother.

“Andrew’s been my assistant for years, couldn’t do without him! He’s my rock; whatever you need, ask Andrew!”

Giovanni smiled at the man. “Pleased to meet you,” he said.

“Andrew’s a choir member; has a wonderful voice! A tenor, like you,” Harry went on.

“Ah, I see,” Giovanni said politely.

“Can I get you something to drink, tea, coffee?” Andrew asked.

“Just water, please, no bubbles,” Giovanni answered.

*

The vestry had been turned into a makeshift private dressing room for the great Foresta.

Giovanni, Harry, and Jim’s mother sat around a small table.

Giovanni moved a large vase with flowers from the table to the floor.

“Easier to talk that way,” he said.

“It’s so great to be here,” he continued, “although I don’t remember ever singing in this church.”

There was a knock on the door.

Andrew Gardiner came in with a pitcher of water and three glasses. He put the tray on the table.

“Here you go,” he said.

“So you sing, too,” Giovanni started the conversation, “are you from the area?”

“Oh, yes,” Jim’s mother answered. “I’ve known Andrew ever since he was a little toddler. He was quite a celebrity here, you know.”

Giovanni looked up at Andrew. “Really?” he said.

“Well,” Andrew said with a modest smile, “gotta go, duties waiting!”

He quickly left the room.

“Andrew’s always busy,” Harry said. “Wouldn’t know what to do without him. He takes care of everything: instruments, scores, clothing, even the catering. He’s an absolute miracle.”

Giovanni nodded. “So important to have someone like that on the team,” he said.

He turned to his mother. “What’s that about him being a celebrity?” he asked.

“Ah, well, that was before your time.” She looked at Harry. “Andrew is, how much older than Jimmy, fifteen years?”

“Yes,” Harry answered. “It was very much the same as with you, Jim. One day his mum came to me asking me to listen to him. My god, what a voice. He must have been six or seven, just like you. He was in my school choir, doing solos, like you did. He loved to sing.”

“Yes, but his parents were terrible,” Jim’s mother added.

“Especially his mum,” Harry said. “She really pushed him hard. She dragged him to every parish in the vicinity to have him sing there.”

“One day I heard him singing in a church some twenty miles away. He had many solos, too many and too difficult, I thought.”

“When you closed your eyes, it was just amazingly beautiful. But I never saw a boy more unhappy. He was only nine or ten!”

“After the service, he shied away from everybody. But his mother was more than happy to take all the praise. It was all about her.”

“Of course, she came up to me, ‘*oh, Mr Tubbs, wasn’t he great?*’. She reacted rather stung when I asked her if perhaps it wasn’t a bit too much for such a young boy. *Really, Mr Tubbs, I really wouldn’t make him do things he wouldn’t want.*”

“After that, I don’t think we ever talked, and if she would see me on the street, she’d turn her head.”

“And then, what happened?” Giovanni asked.

“Well, when he was eleven, he stopped coming to my choir. I understand he was on the street a lot, getting into trouble with the police and such.”

“Yes, him and a group of his friends were a real nuisance,” Jim’s mother added. “Drugs, alcohol, vandalism. Such a waste.”

“Then, a few years later, his mother passed away, and he completely went off the radar,” Harry continued.

Jim’s mother said: “I remember that, because she died a few weeks after Jimmy was born.”

“There were all kinds of rumours, that he had moved to the city, even that he got involved in organized crime, the wildest stories. But the fact is he was never seen or heard of again,” Harry said.

“That was until...?” Giovanni asked.

“Well, out of the blue, actually,” Harry answered.

“Some twelve or thirteen years ago he was at one of my quarterly cantata performances here in the church. Afterwards, he came up to me, with his wife, asking me if I remembered who he was. Of course, I did.”

“He asked me if he could attend a rehearsal, and that’s how it started. The kindest guy you could imagine. And his wife too. She doesn’t sing herself, but what a sweet lady!”

“Francis,” Jim’s mother agreed, “such a sweetheart!”

“Well, that’s quite a story,” Giovanni said.

“You know,” Harry went on, “There are things that happen only once in a lifetime. From the moment he joined the choir he was welcomed by the other singers like a long-lost son. Everybody loved him, and not just because he was such an amicable guy,

but because he could carry and lift the whole group.”

“No matter how good choir singers are, they all like someone they can use as a reference. In every section, soprano, alto, tenor, bass, there’s always one singer who, as it were, sets the tone. Now here was someone who did not just carry his section, but the entire choir. It was incredible!”

“Afterwards I told him: *It’s still there, Andrew! We really love to have you, and I’m sure I’m not only speaking for myself.*’ He said that through the years, he never lost the love of singing.”

“I said: *Well, I can hear that! You might even do some solos.*’

“And then he said: *Well, Mr Tubbs, I just prefer blending in.*’ Blending in, I’ll never forget that.”

*

“That was a great rehearsal,” Andrew Gardiner said, entering the room. “What a voice!”

“Ah, yes, Giovanni Foresta,” his wife Francis answered. “What was he like?”

“Well, poor Harry,” Andrew said. “He had a tough time sometimes. A guy like Foresta knows exactly what he wants, of course.”

“Poor Harry, indeed,” Francis said. “Fierce fights, huh? Any bloodshed?”

Andrew laughed. “Nobody died in the process,” he said. “It was ok, in the end *it was all strictly business,*”

he said, mimicking Marlo Brandon's voice from *The Godfather*.

"There was enough mutual respect. A great rehearsal."

*

After Giovanni Foresta had been picked up from the church by his limousine to be dropped off at his hotel, Andrew had briefly spoken with Harry, whose face looked a bit bloated, red, and sweaty.

"Everything ok?" Andrew had asked.

"Oh, I love this work, Andrew!" Harry replied, "I really do!"

*

When the phone rang, Andrew said: "Can you answer, Francis? I'm just going to have a quick shower."

While Andrew was upstairs undressing, Francis came up the stairs with her hand on the phone.

"It's Foresta," she whispered. "He sounds a bit, well, lispy."

"Lispy?"

She just pushed the phone into his hand.

"Hello?" Andrew said.

"O hello," said an unsteady voice at the other end, "Giovanni Foresta here, Jim Woods. Just wondering if we could meet and have a drink."

“Now?” Andrew asked.

“Yes. You can bring your wife; I’d love to meet her.”

“Well, ok then,” Andrew stammered, taken aback.

“I’m not sure about Francis, but I can be there in an hour or so.”

“Great,” answered Jim.

Andrew rushed downstairs, wearing just a towel.

“He asks us to come over for a drink,” he said.

“Well, you go, then,” Francis said. “I’ll stay here with the boys.”

Their two sons, eleven and thirteen years old, were sleeping upstairs.

“Can’t you call your mum?” Andrew asked.

“Ok,” Francis smiled. “I’ll ask her.”

*

At the lobby counter, Andrew asked: “Mr Foresta’s room?”

“Mr Foresta is waiting at the bar,” the young lady said. “He said he was expecting you.”

Giovanni looked up from the bar to greet them.

“Mr and Mrs Gardiner,” he said cordially.

“Andrew, please,” Andrew replied as they shook hands.

“Francis, pleased to meet you,” Francis introduced herself.

“Jim Woods,” Jim answered.

“Drinks?”

Andrew had soda water, and Francis a light wine, as Jim ordered himself another whiskey.

“That went great this afternoon, don’t you think?” Jim said.

Andrew agreed.

“It was as if I was a young kid again,” Jim continued. “Good old Mr Tubbs, really made me feel at home.”

Andrew nodded.

“He’s such a great teacher,” he said.

Jim ordered himself another whiskey and said: “I understand you were a Tubbs-talent once as well.”

He emptied his glass in one gulp.

Andrew replied, modestly: “Well, sort of, perhaps...but I’m quite happy where I am. I love singing in the choir.”

Jim waved his hand to the bartender.

“More water, or wine?” he asked.

“Coffee, a black coffee would be nice,” Andrew said. “And for me,” Francis added.

“You don’t drink alcohol, Mr Gar., erm, Andrew?” Jim asked.

“Not really, no, but I had my share,” Andrew said with a smile.

“You know,” Jim said with a slight lilt, “Tubbs was not lying when he said you have a great voice. I could tell immediately. You develop a special ear for that. A voice made for early music, just like mine at the time.”

On the way back home, Francis noted: “He sure knows how to drink!”

“It must be a stressful life,” Andrew replied.

“A lonely life, too,” Francis said.

*

A friendship developed between Giovanni Foresta and Andrew and Francis Gardiner, although it must be said that it was mostly fed by Giovanni.

Whenever he was in the country, he would combine visits to his mother with meeting Andrew and Francis.

He sent postcards to them, and CDs with his latest recordings, always with a personal note.

Andrew and Francis grew fond of the famous singer and were quite honoured when, through the Wichter Agency, they received an invitation for Verdi’s *La Traviata* at the San Francisco Opera.

All expenses paid, including flight and three nights in a luxury hotel.

They joined Giovanni on several occasions there, and met with people of his *entourage*, enthusiastic

young people who behaved like a group of close friends.

“He’s a lovely man, but he drinks too much” Francis remarked. “He’s lonely.”

*

Andrew put the newspaper aside.

“My god,” he sighed.

“What’s up?” Francis asked.

“It’s Jim, Andrew replied and pushed the newspaper into her direction.

Famous opera singer found dead, the heading said.

“They found him in an hotel room in Sidney. He was only fifty-four. Seems he took his own life,” Andrew said.

Francis shook her head and said: “So sad, so sad, so lonely.”

*

They were sitting in brown leather chairs at the hotel lobby.

Jim Woods’s mother was there, now well in her eighties, and Harry Tubbs, a retired music teacher, but still active with his Bach performances.

Next to Harry was Fritz Wichter, a stout man in his early sixties, renowned theatrical agent.

And Andrew Gardiner, a friend of Jim Woods’s who was about the same age as Mr Wichter.

Mr Wichter opened a folder containing a pile of typewritten papers.

“It was Giovanni’s wish,” he said with a foreign accent, “to be buried in his hometown, and have the service in *his own church*, as he always called it.”

He added: “It may be too small, but we will find a way.”

Jim’s mother was crying, and Harry put his arm around her shoulder.

“We will solve that, you don’t have to worry,” Mr Wichter continued.

“But there is one, very personal wish,” he said as he pushed one of the papers into Andrew Gardiner’s direction.

Following Mr Wichter’s finger, Andrew read: *I would like my dearest friend Andrew Gardiner to sing at my funeral, accompanied by my other friend, Gianluca Bertolucci.* Next to it, an unsteady hand had written *only if he himself wants to do it.*

Gianluca Bertolucci was a famous lutenist.

All were now looking at Andrew.

There were tears in his eyes.

“Gianluca is already in the country,” Mr Wichter said quietly.

Andrew stared at the sheet of paper, unseeing.

He heard the sweet soft, trembling voice of Mrs Woods: “Only if you really want to do it, Andrew.”

*

The delicate sound of plucked strings resonated through the silent, but fully packed church.

The instrumentalist was seated before a flower-adorned coffin.

The middle-aged man standing next to him sang, in a clear tenor voice, John Dowland's words.

*Come, heavy Sleep, the image of true Death,
And close up these my weary weeping eyes,
Whose spring of tears doth stop my vital breath,
And tears my heart with Sorrow's sigh-swoll'n cries.*

From the front pew, Francis heard her husband sing. She sat next to Jim's mother, who was sobbing. Francis gently squeezed the old woman's small, bony hand. *So sad, so lonely*, she thought.