

In Search of Past Melody

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“It partook [...] of eternity.”
Virginia Woolf, *To the lighthouse*

I won't be late, Peter thought.

When he opened his eyes, he shivered. "Quick," he told himself as he sprang out of his double bed. Time flew by as rapidly as the tasks ahead. Peter knew what he was to do that day, like any other. "First, the article for Mr Rusbery. Theoretically, it will get along fine. What about the report for next Friday?" he wondered, as he put on his suit. Each day, more work. It was a goal Peter had set for himself. His success in life was deeply rooted in this principle. As a columnist for the well-known newspaper *The musical gazette*, he had a heavy workload and a challenging job. His advice was worth gold, for he shaped the whole musical world with his criticisms. Peter knew he was listened to by thousands of people. Each day, his creativity was put to the test as he addressed even more requirements. How long had he been doing this? Months, years? Whatever. It was not the point. Each day was more ambitious, but Peter felt optimistic.

He swallowed some toasts, a cup of coffee. He was ready to go. The world was open to his devouring curiosity.

He rushed outside.

At last, the uproar of the street. People talking loudly, cars honking: Peter enjoyed the dazzling morning chaos. Each day felt like a rebirth, and he was a link in the chain. Everyone must be so busy today. The thought made him smile. Quickly, he hurried to the metro and got into the train. Restlessly, he took his articles out of his briefcase. It fostered Peter's unconditional confidence. He had reached his destination. Slaloming through the crowd with remarkable ease, he had a clear target. Outside, he hardly glimpsed at the facade of his newspaper building and went in. At the reception, Peter zoomed past the hostess, greeting her with a breathless "Hello", and vanished into the elevator.

Thirty seconds, maybe. The waiting was not that long, yet it weighed on him, each second more heavily than the previous one. Meeting Mr Rusbery was an ordeal. He dreaded his judgement: it was cutting, yet fair. Dynamic, managerial and merciless, he was cut out for the job. Peter found him inspiring and fascinating. Writing something "proper" was a relief. Each week, the same ritual.

He knocked on the door.

"Mr Rusbery?"

"Yes! Come in!"

“Good morning sir!”

“Good morning Peter!” Mr Rusbery said cheerfully. “How was the concert at the auditorium?”

“It was fine. Actually I didn’t expect such a clear voice from the singer. I fully enjoyed every minute of it. The instrumentalists provided a beautiful and unique accompaniment. It was accurate and meaningful!”

“Well I’m happy you could find inspiration for your article!”

Mr Rusbery always took the temperature. It made him sound like a comforting tyrant. Peter was not naive, but he enjoyed displaying undeterred optimism, even if he sometimes struggled and ended his articles late at night.

“Concerning this week,” said Mr Rusbery sternly, “I’m asking you to attend the first night of Puccini’s work *La Bohème* in the Petrovna opera tonight. Rumour has it that we’re heading for something great. The producer works in close collaboration with Maxim Trofimov, one of the best conductors. Needless to say that I demand a complete and thoughtful analysis. The media and the public pay close attention to our reviews, and this may be one of the main events of the year.”

“Alright,” Peter responded vigorously. “I’ll do my best.”

“Thank you! Have you got something for me?” Mr Rusbery asked innocently. “Oh, that’s great.”

Peter gave him the article with a strained smile.

“I haven’t got enough time to read it today, but I’ll e-mail my opinion by the end of the week! See you next Monday then!”

“See you next week, sir. Thank you for your trust.”

Unexpectedly, the test had come off well. Profoundly emotional, Mr Rusbery grew sometimes irritated for a minute thing. Peter felt his success as an omen foretelling an agreeable week, and he was intrigued by the piece he was to review. As a specialist of Mozart, Haydn and early Beethoven, he had not dealt with more contemporary operas for a very long time. He decided to take a stroll across the city to forget about the stressful meeting.

The air was balmy. He could feel the warmth of the sun caressing his face. It meant hope. He wished he could have captured this moment. His inner world innervated the myriads of impressions he perceived - the naive and fidgety kids hurrying to school, the old couple plodding wearily through the park. He had completed his mission bona fide. Calmly, he took a deep breath. It was only the end of the morning, and he finally seized the day. He wandered for a while.

Back home, he found Marine, waiting for him. Reassuring as always. She had been a cornerstone in his life since their first encounter. She was a beautiful dark-haired woman with brown eyes, the sort of beauty that arouses fascination through an invisible mist of mystery. Peter had met her in high school while she was studying law. They had become closer thanks to music, a passion they both shared. Marine had been playing oboe for years. The first night Peter had seen her, she was with her college orchestra. They performed the Concerto for oboe by Mozart, and she executed the solo part during the second movement. Peter had never forgotten this sheer moment of elevation, when the violins gave way to a god-blessed melody. Getting her attention had been his personal victory. When they finally dated, Peter understood how constant his feelings would be. She soothed his restlessness. She combined her natural quietness with imposing manners. Her aptitude to argue effectively without losing her calm was inspiring for him. Her beauty, he had once thought, does not only partake of a certain configuration of lines and colours. It is so much more. She seems to be, through time, a sensible figure of Harmony.

“So, how was it?” she asked.

Peter told her about the meeting with Mr Rusbery, the opera he would attend the following night, his routine. She listened carefully, seated in her armchair, while he was pacing up and down.

“Fine,” she responded. “Then I may also go out tonight. Shall we meet after work?”

“Of course!” Peter said. “I wouldn’t leave you out!”

She beamed. Peter blessed such moments. The feeling of being supported was of utmost importance. Through the unvarying principles he followed, his love for Marine was a paradigm of constancy. It reflected his confidence, mirroring what he wanted to be. He kissed her soft, tamed, silky cheek.

This week would definitely be a happy one.

The following night, the whole city was plunged into a light mist. Peter was already all dressed up, and the opera would only begin in an hour. He was waited tonight. He enjoyed striking a pose. He was going to attend an opera both as spectator and as a critic.

This April evening was like a daydream. The lampposts displayed visible halos of light under a veiled moon. The street had quietened, as a token of respect for the silent harmony of the moment. Peter's slow and regular footsteps struck the only rhythm that could be heard. He kept advancing through the blurred forms around him, until, round a corner, there appeared the imposing Petrovna opera.

It was a palace of ornamented lights. Its impressiveness could only be sensed at night, for only darkness, by contrast, enhanced its extravaganza. Dionysos and Apollo seemed to gather into this unique structure. Opera-goers were packed in front of the building: it would open its doors in five minutes. Peter went through the crowd and sat down on a step. And now, the first act, he thought. The première was always dramatized: from the columnists flaunting their badges to the embellished upper-class: everyone seemed to be acting their parts in this social play. Peter enjoyed being a spectator for a moment. He relished the peculiar atmosphere. He would soon be seen as one of the most powerful people attending the opera that night.

The doors opened: quickly, the crowd gathered to climb the main stairs. Peter followed suit. Once in the great hall, he paused. A large glass chandelier illuminated the room. It sharpened every colour and magnified every feature. Clothes, bracelets, necklaces were heightened by the dazzling light. Peter took off his coat. He caught the attention with his badge pinned on his jacket, which read: Peter Howsworn The Musical Gazette.

He picked his ticket at the reception and went back to the hall.

The room was still overcrowded. All over the place rose a hubbub of laughter and shouting. The agitation reached its climax right before the opening. Peter picked a program. *La Bohème*. When was the last time I heard a full performance of this opera? He wondered. He glimpsed at the crowd. There were neither colleagues, nor friends. The faces looked unfamiliar. Tonight he would be on his own. Well, at least I've got my badge, he thought.

A voice resonated: doors were open. People rushed to the two ushers. Dressed alike and symmetrically posing on either side of the hall, they were like the guardians of the auditorium. Peter handed out his ticket.

He climbed the stairs. They were a transition between two worlds. The bustle gave way to religious silence. Before and after him, everyone walked in quietly, aware of their privilege to be allowed to penetrate this sacred place. Peter joined his seat and surveyed the whole place at a glance. He stood mouth agape. It was, without a doubt, a paradigm of holiness. The candelabra shaded the room with a subdued light.

Peter took his notebook and wrote “Puccini, *La Bohème*. Opera Petrovna, Maxim Trofimov”. Once all the spectators were seated, the musicians took their place, one by one, in the orchestra pit. People went quiet. The transition between the mundane and the musical was now achieved. The conductor appeared. Ovarions here and there, the success to come was obvious. The oboe gave the “a” with its strong timbre. The other instruments prolonged its note. Peter closed his eyes, waiting for the meaningful moment of sheer silence that preceded the opening. Here it was.

The conductor raised his baton and the curtain rose. With the indefinable circumvolution he painted in the air, the opening was on. Peter felt immersed in the sound. He was not able to stand still. Beating time with his fingers, moving his head in keeping with the melody and tirelessly writing on his notebook, he did not miss a single note. Rodolfo was embodied by a tall brown-haired man, whose manners matched his role as an anguished poet. Mimi was a small and skinny woman, but fitted perfectly the dramatic soprano type. Her rich, emotive and powerful voice easily rose above the orchestra. The first two acts went by in no time.

The curtains closed. Peter was curious as to what was to follow. His scribbling on his notebook bore witness to his optimism. The music resumed. The third act was to be decisive. Mimi would understand how dire her life was. The rupture with Rodolfo was impending:

“I came happily from my
little nest, to respond
to your call of love.
Yet, now Mimi must return
there all alone, to make
imitation flowers of silk.
Farewell then, with no ill-will.”

Mimi heatedly recited.

Suddenly, a sharp pang seized Peter. When was the last time I heard this melody? He wondered. He quivered.

So many times... At home, in the familiar living-room, the vinyl would always play the same tune at spring. His Mum would be around, singing cheerfully, spreading her love. The warmth soprano voice embellished the whole place. It always foretold happy days.

“Mum! Why are you always listening to Puccini?”

“It’s springtime Peter, be happy!”

“I don’t care. And I don’t like your music. How can you be attracted by her shouting?”

“Sweetie, I think you’re too young to appreciate it. Please, be kind to me and do not call it shouting.”

Grumpy, he would leave the living-room and climb the stairs to his bedroom. Seated at his desk, he would take a novel and listen to a record of Rubinstein playing Chopin’s *Nocturnes*. Peter could stay hours in his bedroom. Going outside was a nightmare. He did not often appreciate the company of others, preferring the world he had constructed. Should his parents enter without knocking beforehand, it felt like a violation of his privacy. His room was akin to a temple, and everyday he communed with himself.

“How is it possible?” Peter closed his notebook. He was looking at the stage, but the notes he was hearing were indistinct. They flowed, meaningless, for Peter’s mind did not grasp the world anymore.

“How can I have become the man I am?”

The pang had turned to angst. Peter had just realized the huge gap separating his teenage self from his actual persona. How could the fragile adolescent have become such a paradigm of success, devouring the outside world? The dissonance was existential.

It was the end of the third act, but Peter was frozen stiff. The critique no longer meant anything. Deep inside him was something more pregnant, something eating away at him. He had lost himself.

When *La Bohème* ended, applause echoed everywhere in the auditorium. Peter joined the spectators mechanically. His eyes were gazing at the stage, but reality remained blurred. Peter picked up his briefcase and headed towards the exit. He followed the crowd instinctively, looking at his feet. He crossed the hall and its indistinct hubbub of sounds, and went out.

Marine was there, waiting for him. Wearing a long beige trench with a bowler hat, she blended into the misty night like a dreamy apparition.

“Oh here you are, love! I’ve been missing you so much!” She embraced him. “Did you enjoy the performance? You seem to be over the moon!”

“Yes,” he responded curtly. “Let’s go home right now, shall we?”

“Well... Sure... Was it that bad?”

“No, the opera was fine. Please, let’s go.”

On their way home, Peter kept silent. Marine, occasionally, heaved a sigh. This spring night appealed to the lovers, but this time, they did not respond to it. As soon as they arrived, Peter silently took off his jacket and went to bed. Calm, at last. He could think more clearly.

“Are you all right, Peter?” Marine asked him.

“I’m sorry, Marine. Tomorrow will be a better day.”

“Good night, then.”

“Good night.”

Peter writhed in his bed. His whole being was clinging to one idea. And this thought was killing him. He had lost himself.

The next morning, he packed a few belongings and turned off his mobile phone. On a small sheet of paper, he wrote: “I will be back soon. Love you. Peter”

First he planned to go to his parents’, then to the sea. These two meaningful places would help him understand what was going on within himself. He took his car. He answered the call for freedom. A stranger to himself, he did not realize what he was actually doing. Leaving his wife, his job, his *routine* was a huge dive into the unknown.

It was a two-hour drive to his family house. The house had remained empty since his parents had passed away, and Peter had always refused to rent it. His bereavement was too recent. His brother, Richard, used it as a holiday home, as he was working abroad.

Peter drew near. The property was in a quiet neighbourhood. From the outside, the house was inconspicuous - a “humble dwelling” as Mum would call it. The blinds were closed. Peter parked his car and opened the door. He went upstairs: his bedroom would hold the key. It was at the far end of the corridor, on the right.

On opening the door, Peter felt engulfed by his past.

His eyes surveyed his youthful bedroom. After so many years... Now that he had become an outstanding columnist, a major public figure, a paragon of hard work and success, this moment of sheer privacy with himself was an epiphany. Everything had remained the same. The room revealed a discreet and introverted youth, someone deeply and profoundly sensitive. His single bed on his right fully occupied half of the room with its large black wooden structure. “Mum loved wood,” he thought. “She always wanted to make this place as heart-warming as possible.” And wood contributed to the reassuring and peaceful atmosphere. On his left, against the wall, stood a prominent bookcase filled with books. Peter felt a heartache, for he had cared for them, more than his parents, in the folly of his teenage years. Baudelaire and Maupassant had given him more food for thought than his mother’s advice. On either side of a unique and large altar were two columns, while, in the middle, philosophical works encompassed a bronze copy of Rodin’s work “The Kiss”. All the books, constitutive of his romantic and introverted mind, were arranged according to a precise order - Shakespeare was not to be mixed with contemporary bestsellers. And all converged to this geographical point. There he was, at a minute distance of this overwhelming knowledge which had been shaping him for years. Within reach stood an imposing wardrobe that was both ugly and formless. It almost reached to the ceiling, like a skyscraper, without the myriads of windows open to the external world. It was not meant to be here, he thought. Still, looking back with irony at his early years spent in his native house, he definitely found that time constitutive of his tastes and manners. The wardrobe had appeared out the blue and been included into his monk’s room. On its right, facing the door, his desk remained anchored to the parquet floor as a beautiful extension of it. Its surface was clear of any work in progress. Carved into the wood, there only remained undistinguishable letters, lines and forms which belonged to some former works. This desk, the condition of his hard labour and success, was noble and sacred. It synthesized years of thoughts, remanences of beliefs altering one after another, in the never-ending stream of his thoughts. Hung on the wall were fragments taken from inspirational ideals:

*“Weary with toil, I haste me to my bed,
The dear repose for limbs with travail tired;
But then begins a journey in my head,
To work my mind, when body's work's expired.”*

Hither and thither, Montaigne making an apology of the ‘inner citadel’ and the virtues of loneliness coexisted with Shakespeare, Woolf, or Schumann. Perfect structures revealing the poetry of life in its diversity, those tokens were light white suspended truths which had nurtured him.

Oh dear... This place meant a lot to me, he thought.

This room was emblematic of his teenage personality, yet it epitomized its present self. Peter stayed there for a while, confronting his past. Cut off from his work and his friends, he was no longer prey to social routine. His mind was its own focus. He sat on his bed and closed his eyes. Time went by.

Later, he left the house.

He felt he had just lived a sheer moment of privacy. Shaken to the core, he had renewed with his teenage self. Submerged by his past, he felt the urge to go outside. There was one place he needed to return to.

Salvey Port, by the Atlantic Ocean. When his Mum asked him to spend some days by the sea, he would always take a notebook and too many books he would not even read. The Port was humble and its inhabitants discreet. But his parents’ property was gigantic as it stretched to the sea. Peter did not feel afraid as there was often nobody around. He would merely tell his Mum, by midday, that he would come back at night. He spent the whole afternoon walking on the beach, sitting into a dune, or reading his poetic ideals. And he always returned to the inn with a radiant smile on his face.

Peter took his car and played a recording of Chopin’s *Nocturnes*. It seemed now that he was back to those days when he lived at his parents’.

When he drove past the Port Salvey road sign, he felt deeply soothed. Returning to a place of meditation close to large expanses was a real blessing, the answer to all his questions. On his road to the inn, he went through the fishing harbour. The view of some three masts next to little rowing boats was inspiring, for it synthesized the sea ambience Peter loved. He parked

his car in front of the lodge and got in. The whole interior had changed, but it kept its warm and cheerful atmosphere. Peter asked for a room. He dropped his belongings and went out.

Instinctively, he headed towards the beach. There was now no need to rush. He had plunged into a timeless area. Many shops were closed, and man's presence was scarce. The boats were bobbing on the sea. Peter followed a little path away from the centre. It wound between sand dunes that blocked the view of what was beyond. All around were tall green grasses, nourished by the sea spray and slightly bending in the wind. Nature possessed the whole place. The harmony of these green fields was undisturbed. He paused in between two dunes. The sound of the breakers echoed to his ears: he had reached the beach. He took off his shoes, feeling the sand on his bare feet. A strip of sand expanded as far as the eye could see. Peter walked for a while. Nothing had changed since his teenage years. There were no signs of civilization. Peter felt he was on a pilgrimage, for the path he was following had been trodden dozens of times by the adolescent he had been.

Immersed into a world of memories, he faced an infinite number of questions. In the end, who was the real Peter? His certainties had faded away. He strolled for hours and hours, looking at the sand, his thoughts matching reality.

The ritual went on for four days. Every morning, he woke up at dawn, picked up some food and went by the beach.

He had walked all day long. He was now at the end of his quest, yet it seemed a deadlock.

Peter faced reality: he would not be able to understand himself. The more he probed into his past, the more he was confused.

Have I really lost myself? He thought. Over the years, day after day, I have perpetuated this rupture. Sheltering behind my wish of constancy, I deluded myself. My job, my friends... Marine... Such an impressive track-record. But, in the end, what for? Sheer self oblivion. At ease but still feeling uneasy, isn't it ironic? He wondered.

“Unless...”

Peter smiled faintly. His heart pounded. The key was obvious. He walked up the beach, went back to the inn in a state of elation. He grabbed his belongings and took his car. Unshaved, exhausted and pale, he was hardly recognizable. Yet, he was possessed by an unconceivable joy. He switched on the radio. Puccini, really? Oh, my dear friend, I cannot thank you enough. He laughed.

At the end of the afternoon, Peter pulled up in front of his house. Marine was home, for her car was parked next to the hedges. When he pushed the front door open, she rushed to him:

“Is that you, Peter?”

“Marine, I’m sorry.”

“What happened? Why are you that filthy?”

“I’ll explain everything. But please, can you give me a minute?”

“You’ve been away for days and you’re asking for more time? What’s wrong with you?”

“Please, I’ll be back in a moment.”

Peter went upstairs. In the bathroom, he took off his coat and gazed at his face in the mirror. He smiled. Then, he walked into his bedroom. Next to his bed, he found a blank notebook on his night table. He sat down at his desk. He took a pencil, opened the notebook and wrote:

*Amongst a world in everlasting change,
Each day the same appears. For our eyes do see,
A disordered chaos they do arrange.
Thus I am as I’ve always wished to be.*