

The Whore and the Music Hall

Patricia Johnston

i

Trying to assess her chances of getting inside and out of the cold, Janey looked around the corner of the old building. The wind whistled along its front facade and lifted her straggling hair so that it billowed around her ears. How long had she been on the streets, she wondered. Ever since the fight everything had sloped downward, pushing her thoughts to the margin of the surreal. She shivered. The place looked deserted but she knew there were people inside. And warmth, and food. That was all that mattered. She tugged at her skirt; afraid it might be too short for this place. Her toes, protruding from her high heeled scooters, were numb and she wriggled them to get warm, but without effect. Above the entry, Janey saw a stone medallion of a charioteer cracking his whip over the horses, and a figure, a woman she thought, trapped beneath the wheels. She slipped forward and passed the warm glow of sandstone to the glass doors and peered inside. No one was paying much attention so she pushed it open cautiously and entered. But after a couple of steps a guard came up to her.

‘Where’s yer pass?’ He was large and boxerish with a blank bored look.

Janey smiled brightly. ‘I’m expected,’ she said. ‘I’m doing the make-up.’ She lifted her bag.

‘Don’t care what yer doing sweetheart, ya still need an entry pass.’

Slipping past him she called out, ‘Darling, I’ve been looking everywhere for you.’ And then ran off toward a gaggle of girls standing near the Ladies. Their faces reflected

expressions of vague acceptance. A tall blonde, holding a trumpet, raised her eyebrows.

‘Are you the replacement?’

Janey nodded. *Why not?* Her toes were already thawing.

‘Just go round the back. Toni’s waiting for you.’

‘Thanks.’ Janey tucked her hair behind her ears, and headed toward another set of doors. She could feel the eyes of the guard following her. *Come on, girl. Head up, back straight.* She knew he was watching her long racehorse legs and allowed her skirt to ride up. *Through. Now where’s the food?* In the main room it was warmer again. On stage a dark-skinned man picked up the mic and, in a deep baritone, began repeating, ‘uno, dos, tres, quatro.’ Was he Toni? And what was she supposed to play? A few brass instruments on stage reflected light from the fluoros above. At a pinch she could pretend she knew how to play the castanets or triangle.

On her next breath a salty tang filled her nostrils. Her stomach clenched. She walked over to the bar where bowls of condiments were spaced along the runners. Grabbing a handful of nuts, she forced herself to eat nonchalantly. The barman gave her sharp look.

‘You with the band?’

She nodded.

‘Name?’

‘I’m the replacement,’ she offered. Janey had a good smile and she tried it out again, this time adding a frank shot of interest. *Usually works.* In the moment that he was still making up his mind about her, she quickly turned toward the stage and said, ‘Can I help?’

Distracted eyes turned in her direction. ‘Yeah, just keep doing this,’ the man said.

‘Then I can sort out the wires.’

Climbing the stairs, she kept the smile in place. But God, she was tired. The nuts were sitting in a lumpy ball in her stomach. ‘Uno, dos, tres, quatro,’ she said, varying her tone.

Happy. Sad. ‘Uno, dos, tres, cuatro.’ Soft. Angry. Loud, excited, slurred. The guard came bursting through the double doors, giving her a death ray glance. Time for sultry. ‘Uno, dos, tres, quat...’ she came to a halt as he raced towards her up the stairs.

‘I know what you’re up to,’ he said. ‘Come with me, you little tart.’ She didn’t bother to wonder what he was angry about. In her recent experience, everybody was angry. He tore the microphone from her, hung it on its stand and grabbed her roughly by the arm. He dragged Janey along, half walking her, half carrying her, down a concrete corridor, bunker style, into a small and dirty office, and through that into some sort of largish cupboard. He pushed her hard against the wall, shock and fear making her quiescent. ‘Now,’ he said, his eyes running over her body and unzipping his trousers, ‘you can be friendly, or you can deal with the police.’

Her eyes widened. ‘I haven’t done anything,’ she said.

‘Oh, I think you have. I saw you take this,’ he lifted his own wallet, stuffed with notes, from his pocket and dropped it on the floor. ‘Yes, I’ll be filing a complaint, and I’ll hold you here until the coppers arrive.’ He leered at her, pushed himself hard against her, the unwashed stink of him and the rasp of his unshaven face sinking deep into her consciousness. ‘So what’ll it be? Me?’ he whispered hoarsely. ‘Or the coppers?’

She thought it must be a palace. The sandstone walls glowed golden, as if the light of the setting sun was always on them, and the huge columns rose right out of sight. Inside, she imagined, must live a handsome prince and a beautiful princess, with silk hangings on the walls, and servants carrying goblets of wine in a never-ending parade of glittering liveries.

‘What is that place?’ she asked.

Her mother ignored her, pulling her forward irritably. Lara tugged her hand loose and ran back, staring up at a glamorous lady who had emerged onto the steps. She stood smiling to herself in a shaft of sunlight on the steps, her dress a flow of brilliant greens and blues that made Lara think of the ocean. Nothing like her mothers grey neck to ankle garb. A hansom cab drove past, the horse kicking up clods that nearly showered her with dirt and dung.

‘Never mind,’ her mother, beside her again, shushed her in a low voice.

‘But what is it?’ insisted Lara. ‘It looks like a palace.’

Her mother snorted, but as she turned and looked down into her daughter’s guileless eyes, she relented. ‘It’s a – a music hall.’

Lara was entranced. A music hall. That was even better than a palace. And the beautiful lady must be a musician. She decided then and there that she would be a musician too, perform in the golden building and dress in fine clothes. People would come from everywhere just to hear her play.

She hated her convent school, but it allowed her to learn a musical instrument from the age of eight. She chose the viola, for no clear reason except that it attracted her with the same golden glow as the building. Her hands instinctively shaped to the practical strings and pegs’ with their strong workmanlike precision. She learnt to play eagerly, excitedly. Her other lessons seemed interminably long, listening to the nuns drone on about God and duty, pluperfect tenses and Pythagorean theorems, while Lara dreamt of notes bouncing against each other like the pollen dust she saw as she gazed out the classroom window. Each night she dreamt of the music hall, the applause and the other musicians, of sounds swelling from a diminuendo to a shattering climax, and of moving feet and bodies swaying to a mesmeric tempo. She practised before school and after, forgetting her companions and even her dinner, if her mother didn’t remind her. She felt that she was music itself, as if she was an ever-changing melody, a mere vehicle for the sounds she heard in her soul.

Lara was a small child; she grew into a small young woman. She never understood her mother's reluctance to return to the music hall, her obvious dislike of the very mention of it. After all, the neighbours loved to listen to her play. When far-flung family came for the odd visit, Lara playing her instrument was the first thing they asked for. She revelled in her skill. She finished school, left the convent. She lived inwardly, alone in her music. She had little interest in young men, friendships or the other things her mother encouraged her to explore. Her viola was in her hands most of the time; the shining nugget that came to life when she touched it, incarnating the music that flowed and capered in her head. One day she found her steps turned toward the part of town she remembered, where she had seen the music hall. She had never been back there and did not know exactly where she was going, but kept on in the direction she thought was right. The streets, so tidy near her mother's home, became gardenless and grubby; noisy patrons spilled from taverns and stared at her, their eyes narrowed in speculation. She clutched her viola case tightly, hoping it would protect its precious contents if she were pushed, or worse. Once when she stopped to ask a young bumpkin for directions, he had guffawed and ran off. Afraid she was getting lost, Lara decided to go back before the sun, already low in the sky, went down. She turned around, headed up the road and around the corner, and suddenly there it was. Glowing golden just as she'd remembered. A few women, brightly dressed, stood idly near the entry. She went eagerly forward, almost running up the steps. They stared at her, faces changing rapidly from boredom to surprise. She lifted her case and smiled at them, feeling charged and warm. Taking a deep breath, she pushed open the door and entered.



I'm bored. I'm always bored. I push aside the Tranquil Blossom Juice and look around. The only objects in the room are a few pictures of naked men and women, flesh posed enticingly

toward the viewer. Some glossy magazines, nothing serious, just the barest froth, are scattered on low tables. Words are painted on the wall – lick, wet, suck. I don't even see these things anymore. There's nothing to do but wait for my next client, watch the old fashioned television, eat and drink. There aren't any other girls around at the moment to gossip or talk with. I've sort of adapted to this way of life, not well, but enough to survive. After all, it's easy enough to see what befalls those who don't. They become carcasses in the snow, twisted bodies left for the Authorities to pick up on their weekly checks. Turning away from the high old-fashioned window, where the wintry sun slants in through the bare branches of the oaks, I do a circuit of the big room. At the very least they should have the new Neuro 5 so we can watch the latest shows. But apparently that's too distracting for the clients. It doesn't really matter; I barely even see what's happening right in front of me anymore, if anything ever is, which it isn't. All I see is the past, the orchard and stream of my childhood, as I pick the apples that hang swaying from the shifting weights of my brothers and sisters climbing in the branches. I believe, I hope, I tell myself the place is still there; still waiting for me.. Standing oh so solid, far away from the place I am now. Everyone here comes from far away, strictly no locals in this place - it might make the clients uncomfortable.

The music starts up again. Interminable, always the same tune, always the same run of variations. It's *supposed* to be a cute play on the name of the place, but it just doesn't crack it. One of the *intermons*, all plastic and 'life-like' comes in and does a sweep of the room, saying, as they always do, 'Be ready.' *Beastly robotic pile of junk, Who gave you the keys to the kingdom?* But aloud I answer, 'I will be.' It nods its cumbersome head, and leaves the room. The *intermons* are not the latest model; sometimes they make the old clicking and whirring sounds that's been eliminated for twenty years and more. Pretty poor, if you ask me.

On the shelf in the corner is a worn and dusty doll. I love that doll. I pick her up and find understanding in her eyes. I whisper that I could find my way back, that if only I could get out of here, they'll all be waiting for me.

'A client for Employee T1153,' says a recorded voice. 'Come to the Yellow Room at once.' Jerked out of my dream, I sigh. On the other side of the door, I nearly trip over the *intermon* who has just left; his head sprung open and coils spilling out on the floor. I step carefully around it as I run my fingers automatically through hair that curls on my neck, and head for my designation.

Next day I see the repairman arrive – another *intermon*, but this time the latest model. I'm curious; apparently this is a nearly extinct trait, mostly eradicated in the twenty first century. I run out to the office just in time to see him pick up the broken unit and carry it down the creaking corridor. I follow him to the maintenance room and watch while he works. He's quick but it seems simple, pull that out, push that in, turn that dial. I sit back on my heels and consider. I've never seen more than five *intermons* in the whole place; five to control twenty girls. I don't trust any of the other girls; they gave in to the monotony and boredom long ago and do nothing now but wait for their next client so they can drink the TB Juice after. I put my eye back to the keyhole. The repairman snaps the face in place. He adjusts the slant of the eyes and tightens the slack mouth.

I wait until the repairman is gone and then approach the office, holding my stomach and shuffling my feet like I've seen others do. 'I'm sick,' I whimper. 'I can't work.' I've thought this out. I only have to wait here and they will all come. One by one; they never operate together. Each is designed to work independently; the perfect unit. By lunchtime I could be finished. I'll take all the money in the office and won't it be sweet to open the door to the outside world? To pass through it, for the first time since I arrived three years before,

past the grimy charioteer and at last into freedom. And I'll never have to listen to that music again.

'I'll get you some juice,' says the office *intermon*. As he turns away, I grab his hair and jerk. He falls and I pull out the wire hidden behind his left ear. There's a 'pop' and a 'zzzzzztttt' as he runs down. Something ancient and vengeful happens inside me, like a dragon rising, it winds up through my body and out of my mouth in a burst of rage.

'You have the juice,' I hiss.