

DOC'S AT MIDNIGHT

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Thirty indoor and outdoor venues on sixteen acres, an acropolis of the arts. Squatting broadly on what used to be called San Juan Hill, where African-Americans and Puerto Ricans once tried to live until they were eminent domained out. A pair of star-crossed fools meet again in misadventure involving blackmail and murder, the continuance of a story that started decades before. The woman limos through two hours of traffic to be here. The man is already there, waiting, ferrying a handcart stacked with boxes of light bulbs.

When she turns and sees him, nothing happens.

She looks right through him, doesn't register the handcart. She wears a dark purple trench coat, a black dress underneath, a large quilted leather bag. Her eyes do not want to settle on him. Perhaps she does not recognize him. To be fair, it has been forty-something years since the trial, and he may look a bit different now, thicker skin on the wide, swarthy face he was once both conceited about and ashamed of. But his hair has never been better.

She must be here for the opera. *Eugene Onegin* tonight. She is still *oh so pretty*. How old must she be, he wonders — sixty, sixty-one? Time has been kind to her. Of course, it would be. She looks polite, refined, well bred, mature. But what is that he sees in her eyes that are looking beyond him? Pain. Expectation. Or is he imagining that?

He must talk to her. He will probably never have this chance again.

Just as he steps forward, some kid, some delinquent appears from the crowd and grabs her leather purse. She resists, but the kid tugs hard and the purse comes free and the kid stumbles — the bag seems heavy — then flies. A bird.

She screams in agony.

He forgets the handcart and takes off after the kid. He waves frantically at Mr. Bramley, the security chief, who is standing nearby. Mr. Bramley has seen the whole thing but is not moving. He smirks.

The kid is past the fountain and down the stairs, already disappearing down Columbus Avenue. So fast. Embalao. A rocket in his pocket.

He tries to keep up. He is short but fast. He used to run, dance, fly up and down these streets all day long.

But that was a long time ago.

The last he sees is the kid's red high tops disappearing into a mob of tourists. Gone.

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He looks at Mr. Bramley, who is still standing in the same place.

“I coulda told you it was no use trying to play hero,” Mr. Bramley says. “Especially if you don't fit the part.”

“He robbed her.”

“If she wants to make a complaint, she can.” Mr. Bramley walks away.

Out of breath, he searches for her in the milling crowds.

There she stands by the fountain as if she were its statue. She stares out at nothing, but as he approaches he sees the recognition (also anger, hatred) in her eyes before she turns away.

What can he do? He just ran for her purse, tried to get it back. He needs to explain, has to talk to her. He stands in front of her and waits. She is silent for a very long minute.

“Chino,” she says, spitting it out.

“Maria,” he says. “You hurt?”

She won’t look at him directly, as if she’s not sure what to say. Then she says, “No.”

“Sorry. He was so fast.” He did not know how to say what he needed to say, so he sticks to practical advice, the first thing he can think of. “You cancel your credit cards, no? That’s what you do.”

“I needed that purse!” she says. “Not the purse. What was in it!”

“I want to help. Can I help you?”

“I do not want your help.”

He saw then that her shin was bleeding, must have been cut when the kid yanked the purse.

“You’re hurt. I can—”

“You don’t understand,” she spits out. “There was twenty thousand dollars in that bag. Twenty thousand! In cash and jewelry, Chino.”

When she says his name, it’s like a curse.

“In cash? You shouldn’t—”

She sighs. “I don’t carry around that kind of money. I’m not stupid. I’m being blackmailed.”

“Que que?”

“It’s none of your business, Chino. Go back to whatever it is you were doing and leave me alone.”

#

A lifetime ago, he had sworn he loved this woman. But it had been forty years since he had killed the man she loved. He did it to prove that he loved her, to show his bravery, and to save her from that comemierda.

In the end it was for nothing.

He had come from a devout Catholic family in Ponce, Puerto Rico, the oldest of ten siblings. His mother had been very strict and when he was bad she made him kneel on a box grater for hours. Half of the children worked on farms, hard work under a stubborn sun. Then the U.S. came in with their Operation Bootstrap and the farm jobs disappeared. His cousin Guiso had gone to Nueva York and came back with nice suits and pictures of his gringa girlfriend. So Chino’s family put together all the money they had and sent him, seventeen years old, mas pelao que la rodilla de un cabro and thin as a sugar cane, to the big city.

Taking a plane for the first time he was so scared, he prayed to God that it would crash to ease his panic.

In Manhattan, he stayed with Guiso and his parents in a tenement on West 63rd, above a grocery store. They were nice to him, but he was another mouth to feed and he knew it. He tried every day to find work. But his English was bad and his skin was brown, and he realized fast that no one wanted to hire a boy like that.

And he grew lonely. Guiso, who went out every night (no sign of his gringa girlfriend), told him he was too much of a jibaro for the city.

One day in front of the luncheonette on the corner, Chino met a handsome morenito named Paco smoking a cigarette. Paco asked Chino if he wanted one and Chino said yes, though he couldn't stand smoking. He just wanted to talk to the boy.

Paco told him about the gang of Puerto Rican boys he ran with. When Chino met them, they all seemed so sophisticated, so sharp. He fell in with them easily. For money, they did gorilla work, shaking down people, sometimes breaking and entering. But they helped him with his English and shared all the money they made on the streets. They ran together, took every meal together, even went to church together. They were just like family.

Then there was the fighting. Growing up with six brothers, Chino knew how to give a punch and how to take one. In San Juan Hill, they were always rumbling, sometimes against the blacks, sometimes alongside them. But always against the white boys. For territory, for pride. If the white boys beat up one of yours, you beat up one of theirs. If they cut one of yours, one of them got cut. That was the law.

Guiso saw him on the street once and tried to call him out, got into his face. "Chino! What are you doing with these degenerates?"

"No me jodas, charlatan," Chino said.

"Sinverguenza!" Guiso went to push him.

Chino, always small and fast, ducked under Guiso's hands and punched him twice in the gut. He left Guiso spitting on the floor.

He had to find a new place to live after that, ended up staying in a basement in the building of one of his gang brothers. He would stay there alone most times, chain smoking and

listening to rock and roll records. Sometimes Paco would visit him. He would come in disguise so no one would know. Half their fun was in peeling away the layers, smearing his makeup.

The cops called him a delincuente. They made him a special example out of him. Maybe it was his size. Maybe it was his brown skin. Big, bad Lieutenant Schrank, who always stank like stale beer and meat, would find him walking by himself on the street, pull him over, take him to the station. There he would be grilled for hours and hurt in places that wouldn't show right away.

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“You're going to bleed all over your nice shoes,” he says to Maria. “At least let me bandage that.”

She says nothing, ignores him.

Chino decides on drastic action. He stands back and bows dramatically, and as he bows he rips his dark toupee off his head and doffs it like a hat. Cool air on his open scalp.

“It's nice to meet you, mademoiselle,” he says.

“Mademoiselle! You're a fool.” There is the slightest suggestion of a smile on Maria's face. It disappears quickly, but she is clearly more relaxed.

“Come,” he says. “Ven conmigo.”

She lets him lead her to a staff entrance and past the costume department, which always makes him think of Paco, and down to the locker room. He gets alcohol and band-aids and on his knees he covers her wounds.

“My husband is a successful man,” she says out of nowhere. “A doctor. Mami always said to marry a doctor. We have two beautiful daughters, Natalie and Marnie. One of them is a

teacher. She's poor but she's happy. The other one — she wanted to be actress ever since she was a little girl. She has no luck. Always needs money. She meets these men. For fun. For I don't know what. And one of them, this Mike, he says he took pictures of her doing . . . terrible things. Now he wants money or her life and my husband's life will be ruined. No parent should have a favorite, but Marnie was always his favorite. She can do no wrong in his eyes. And no father should have to see his daughter shamed."

"Where is your husband?" says Chino. "Why isn't he here?"

"He's back home in New Jersey, asleep with his scotch by this time. Oh, they knew not to go to him. They knew I was the one to deal with."

Chino notices that she is not crying. This is not the same Maria he knew from years ago. She's made of concrete and steel now. Maybe he is the one who did that to her.

"I was supposed to give him the money at midnight, under the highway," she says, "and he was going to give me the pictures."

She bought a ticket for the opera as an excuse to tell her husband. She didn't like opera, didn't like music much anymore, she says, and she had purposely avoided this area of the city since she had moved away. She had planned on going to sleep in her seat and then to meet this Mike.

"But now the money is gone. What luck!" she says. "What lousy luck!"

Chino thinks about her situation. He wants to help her, must help her.

"This Mike, it's just him? He has no gang or a crew or the Mafia?"

She laughs at this. "It's just him. He's just a dirty man-child."

"Does he have backups, copias?"

"No. I think he just wants money quick."

“Espera. I have an idea,” Chino says, taking her hand. “Arise, Maria, arise!”

Back in the costume department, he sits her down and asks her to wait as he ducks into aisles of robes and capes and dresses.

When he comes out, he twirls and says, “What do you think?”

“Your bra is crooked, and so is your wig. Is this . . . is this what you do?”

“No, but I had a friend who liked to dress up, and that gave me the idea.”

“Well, the dress is close to mine. It could work. You need a new purse and something as heavy so that it feels full of money.”

“Por supuesto.”

“Ai, Chino. How ironic that I would need to turn to you after all these years.”

He sits close to her. “All these years I wanted to talk to you.”

“There was no point, Chino. I wouldn’t have listened. I was too angry.”

When she finally looks him in the eyes, she is crying. And in her look is not anger, desire for revenge, or pity. In her eyes is understanding. She put a hand on his.

Before they leave, he gets her a new coat from costumes and picks up a pointy pair of shears from a work table.

#

The last war council he went to was at Doc’s Drug Store, at midnight.

Chino was quiet because he was always afraid the white boys would make fun of his accent. Then that mamabicho, Tony came into the store and tried to get them to stop the rumble. They almost started throwing down right there.

He would do anything for the gang, anything for his family. With the gang, Chino felt like he had a purpose, felt like he belonged.

But they would have thrown him out if they had seen inside his heart.

When he first saw Maria, it was in church. She was just fourteen, dressed in blue and white, looking like La Virgen. By this point, Chino had his own suits and was going to the local dances, and in time he saw her there, started hanging around her. He liked looking at her, liked dancing with her, being seen with her. It wasn't exactly love, but he felt like she belonged to him.

Then she fell head over heels for that carifresco. That set Chino off. Even if he didn't love her the way he thought he should, Maria was his, no one else's. And then that comemierda killed their gang leader, and that gave Chino even more reason to make the guy pay.

And one day in the schoolyard he did. He shot him.

The last time Maria ever talked to him she was screaming over the cold body and telling Chino to shoot her too.

He didn't run. Schrank took him away and started beating on him before they even got to the car. Closing an eye, busting an ear. Three other cops had to pull him away.

At the trial, Chino never said a word in his defense. He knew he had to pay for what he did.

In the joint, Paco used to visit him, write him long letters. But Chino was stuck with plenty of time to think, too much, and he came to realize his attachment to Maria had been a front, a way of hiding from himself. He didn't shoot the white boy to save her. He did it to save himself and everything he was trying to hold on to, the idea that he belonged, that he was one of

them. He had wanted to tell her that, had written her long letters. They all came back *Return to Sender*.

Chino knew he could never have God's forgiveness for killing a man, but if he couldn't have Maria's either, he lost all hope. And then Paco's letters stopped coming, and he stopped visiting. What was there to live for then?

After that, it seemed like he looked for a fight every day in the joint, wearing his anger like a cape, waiting for a shiv to come kill him. But to his torment he survived. After two dimes and a nickel of time, Chino got out. He had enough of being a delincuenta, had no ambitions to be a hoodlum. He never looked up any of his old friends to see if they were alive.

He took low-paying jobs until he lucked out with this maintenance gig at Lincoln Center, has had it for ten years. He has a locker in the basement a few blocks from where he used to sleep out on the fire escape on summer nights. They talk to him a lot about retirement, but why should he? What would he do all day? He lives alone in a tiny apartment in Washington Heights, and when it gets hot he still likes to sleep out on the fire escape. And when he prays he still kneels on the two box graters, staring up at the Lord and an old picture of Paco.

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Chino normally avoided the West Side Highway. It had been industrial, abandoned when he was coming up, a perfect place for their idiotic rumbles. But now, forty years later, they were finally starting to clean it up, make it decent.

At ten minutes to midnight, he walks in wide, flat pumps under the highway, near 68th Street. In the distance the Twin Towers shine in the dark. He wears a dark wig, heels, and

Maria's purple trench coat. He holds a purse that is not as fancy's as Maria's but is the same shape. Inside are two bottles of cleaning liquid that weigh about as much as twenty thousand in hundred-dollar bills and jewelry

Chino follows the instructions Maria got from Mike and waits. He has sworn against violence for years, has avoided anything illegal or immoral since he left the joint. Now he knows he might have to go against all the promises he made to God. He crosses himself and says, "Lord forgive me."

Soon, a tall, athletic-looking guy walks into the underpass.

Chino keeps his face in the shadows. The disguise is not meant to work for long, only long enough for Chino to get close.

This Mike looks like a pendejo from way back. Why had Maria's daughter fallen for him? Maybe everyone in the family have bad taste in men.

"We'll make this quick," Mike says. He holds up a big envelope and waves it.

That's when Chino steps into the light.

"What the f—?"

Chino reaches up, grabs Mike by the collar, shoves him down. He is still strong. His body still remembers the violence. Like an old song you never forget.

Mike tries to get up, but Chino chops him in the throat.

He holds the scissors to Mike's throat until there is blood at the tip. "Leave the pictures. Go home alive."

"Where's the woman?" Mike says. His breath smells of beer and meat.

Then a voice behind Chino speaks a single word: "Spic." And a bullet rips through Chino's side.

Off balance, he gets a boot in the face.

Down on the pavement, he sees that the one holding a gun looks like Mike, but taller, more built. Both faces look familiar.

“Where the fuck is she?” this one says, pointing the gun. It is old, a revolver. A Smith & Wesson 28. A police weapon.

“Our plan is fucked,” Mike says. “Who expected him to wear a dress?”

“Shut the fuck up!”

The second one gets close. Too close. Chino still has the scissors in his hand, is still quick enough. He whirls and stabs the scissors deep into this one’s ankle. The guy yelps like a dying pig.

Mike jumps back up, and Chino kicks him in the balls, sending him down. The gun? It is not in the other’s hand. There is too much darkness on the ground to see.

Chino bends picks up the envelope. It makes him dizzy, but he is smart enough to start moving away, to get out of there. But he checks and there are no pictures inside. “Carajo!” He moves back steps on the ankle of the second one.

“The pictures?”

“You stupid wetback,” the shooter says. “There were never any stupid pictures.”

Chino bends to pull out the scissor. An arc of blood spurts out as the man screams like a pig again.

Chino holds the scissor against the man’s side and searches his pockets, finds a wallet.

The driver’s license reads: “Simon Schrank.”

“You fucked up our grandfather,” says Mike. “They threw him off the force because of you.”

This is news to Chino. He had not thought to keep tabs on the officer who nearly made him blind. “You wrong. What he did to me, that’s why they threw him out.”

“He killed himself! He blew his brains out!”

“With this gun?” Chino says, seeing it now on the edge of the darkness. “But why Maria?”

“Fuck you!” one of them says.

Chino gets on his knees slowly, picks up the gun. He slowly gets back up. It is not easy. He does not know how many times he will be able to do that again. “She testified against him. Something like that, right?”

“Fuck you!” says the other.

“You expected both of us. But how did you know I would come?”

And then he sees: outside of the edge of the shadows, the kid who took Maria’s purse. Red high tops. In his hand is the quilted leather bag. He drops it and books. Embalao.

“We’ll kill you!” says Mike.

“With bottles, knives, or guns?” Chino says, emptying the bullets onto the ground.

He leaves the grandsons there, cringing on the blacktop. Blocks away, he tosses the gun into a recycling basket.

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Maria is waiting for him by Amsterdam and 62nd, where they used to be a soda shop owned by a Puerto Rican. Where he once bought her an ice cream float.

He hands her back the light purse. “It’s empty.”

“Que será, será,” she says. “Chino, you’re hurt!”

“Like old times. I been hurt worse.” But he slumps against a lamppost and then down to the ground.

“You remember Paco,” he says, “from back in the day?”

“Paco? No, it was so long ago. Wait! Yes! Paco. Of course.”

“I never saw him again. I think about him every day.”

“Oh, Chino. I’m so sorry.”

“I’m sorry, Maria. So sorry. For everything.”

She touches his face. “We can’t do anything about it. It’s in the past. Let it stay in the past, Chino.”

She says his name with tenderness now, like a beautiful sound.

And then the moon veils itself with clouds, and a soft rain begins. Let us no more revisit these streets of sorrow, that is the end of Maria and her Chino.