

RECITAL

Roger Zelazny

The woman is singing. She uses a microphone, a thing she did not have to do in her younger days. Her voice is still fairly good, but nothing like what it was when she drew standing ovations at the Met. She is wearing a blue dress with long sleeves, to cover a certain upper-arm flabbiness. There is a small table beside her, bearing a pitcher of water and a glass. As she completes her number a wave of applause follows. She smiles, says "Thank you" twice, coughs, gropes (not obtrusively), locates the pitcher and glass, carefully pours herself a drink.

Let's call her Mary. I don't know that much about her yet, and the name has just occurred to me. I'm Roger Z, and I'm doing all of this on the spot, rather than in the standard smooth and clean fashion. This is because I want to watch it happen and find things out along the way.

So Mary is a character and this is a story, and I know that she is over the hill and fairly sick. I try to look through her eyes now and discover that I cannot. It occurs to me that she is probably blind and that the great hall in which she is singing is empty.

Why? And what is the matter with her eyes?

I believe that her eye condition is retrobulbar neuritis, from which she could probably recover in a few weeks, or even a few days. Except that she will likely be dead before then. This much seems certain to me here. I see now that it is only a side symptom of a more complex sclerotic condition which has worked her over pretty well during the past couple of years. Actually, she is lucky to be able still to sing as well as she can. I notice that she is leaning upon the table - as unobtrusively as possible - while she drinks.

All of this came quickly, along with the matter of the hall. Does she realize that she is singing to an empty house, that all of the audience noises are recorded? It is a put-on job and she is being conned by someone who loved her and wants to give her this strange evening before she falls down the dark well with no water or bottom to it.

Who? I ask.

A man, I suppose. I don't see him clearly yet, back in the shadowy control booth, raising the volume a little more before he lets it diminish. He is also taping the entire program. Is he smiling? I don't know yet. Probably.

He loved her years ago, when she was bright and new and suddenly celebrated and just beginning her

rise to fame. I use the past tense of the main verb, just to cover myself at this point.

Did she love him? I don't think so. Was she cruel? Maybe a little. From his viewpoint, yes; from hers, not really. I can't see all of the circumstances of their breakup clearly enough to judge. It is not that important, though. The facts as given should be sufficient.

The hall has grown silent once again. She bows, smiling, and announces her next number. As she begins to sing it, the man - let us call him John - leans back in his seat, eyes half-lidded and listens. He is, of course, remembering.

Naturally, he has followed her career. There was a time when he had hated her and all of her flashy lovers. He had never been particularly flashy himself. The others have all left her now. She is pretty much alone in the world and has been out of sight of it for a long while. She was also fairly broke when she received this invitation to sing. It surprised her more than a little. Even broke, though, it was not the money she was offered but a final opportunity to hear some applause that prompted her to accept.

Now she is struggling valiantly. This particular piece had worried her. She is nearing the section where her voice could break. It was pure vanity that made her include it in the program. John leans forward as she nears the passage. He had realized the burden it would place upon her - for he is an aficionado, which is how and why he first came to meet her. His hand moves forward and rests upon a switch.

He is not wealthy. He has practically wiped himself out financially, renting this hall, paying her fee, arranging for all of the small subterfuges: a maid in her dressing room, a chauffeured limousine, an enthusiastic theater manager, a noisy stage crew - actors all. They departed when she began her performance. Now there are only the two of them in the building, both of them wondering what will happen when reaches that crucial passage.

I am not certain how Isak Dinesen would have handled this, for her ravaged face is suddenly in my mind's eye as I begin to realize where all of this is coming from. The switch, I see now, will activate a special tape of catcalls and hootings. It was already cued back when I used the past tense of the verb. It may, after all, be hate rather than love that is responsible for this expensive private show. Yes. John knew of Mary's vanity from long ago, which is why he chose this form of revenge - a thing that will strike her where she is most vulnerable.

She begins the passage. Her head is turned, and it appears that she is staring directly at him, there in the booth. Even knowing that this is impossible, he shifts uneasily. He looks away. He listens. He waits.

She has done it! She has managed the passage without a lapse. Something of her old power seems to be growing within her. Once past that passage, her voice seems somewhat stronger, as if she has drawn some heartening reassurance from it. Perhaps the fact that this must be her last performance has also stoked the banked fires of her virtuosity. She is singing beautifully now, as she has not in years.

John lets his hand slip from the control board and leans back again. It would not serve his purpose to use that tape without an obvious reason. She is too much a professional. She would know that it was not warranted. Her vanity would sustain her through a false reaction. He must wait. Sooner or later, her voice has to fail. Then . . .

He closes his eyes as he listens to the song. The renewed energy in her performance causes him to see her as she once was. Somewhere, she is beautiful again.

He must move quickly at the end of this number. Lost in reverie, he had almost forgotten the applause

control. He draws this one out. She is bowing in his direction now, almost as if . . .

No!

She has collapsed. The last piece was too much for her. He is on his feet and out the door, rushing down the stairs. It can't end this way . . . He had not anticipated her exerting herself to this extent for a single item and then not making it beyond it - even if it was one of her most famous pieces. It strikes him as very unfair.

He hurries up the aisle and onto the stage. He is lifting her, holding a glass of water to her lips. The applause tape is still running.

She looks at him.

"You can see!"

She nods and takes a drink.

"For a moment, during the last song, my vision began to clear. It is still with me. I saw the hall. Empty. I had feared I could not get through that song. Then I realized that someone from among my admirers cared enough to give me this last show. I sang to that person. You. And the song was there . . ."

"Mary . . ."

A fumbled embrace. He raises her in his arms - straining, for she is heavier and he is older now.

He carries her back to the dressing room and phones for an ambulance. The hall is still filled with applause and she is smiling as she drifts into delirium, hearing it.

She dies at the hospital the following morning, John at her bedside. She mentions the names of many men before this happens, none of them his. He feels he should be bitter, knowing he has served her vanity this final time. But he is not. Everything else in her life had served it also, and perhaps this had been a necessary condition for her greatness - and each time that he plays the tape, when he comes to that final number, he knows that it was for him alone - and that that was more than she had ever given to anyone else.

I do not know what became of him afterward. When the moral is reached it is customary to close - hopefully with a striking image. But all that I see striking now are typewriter keys, and I am fairly certain that he would have used the catcall tape at the end if she had finished the performance on a weak note. But, of course, she didn't. Which is why he was satisfied. For he was an aficionado before he was a lover, and one loves different things in different places.

There is also a place of understanding, but it is difficult, and sometimes unnecessary, to find it.