
When I Hear the Song My Beloved Once Sang

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(Illustration by Arturo Escorza Pedraza)

From time immemorial, within the night's impenetrable barrier have dwelt the deepest fears. Night's dark blanket has intensified human sorrow and the sense of hopelessness. It has turned the most ruthless warrior into nothing but vulnerable prey. Nevertheless, under the cover of darkness, the intimate language of lovers always finds shelter.

One cold, autumn night, the maple tree's branches were singing a sorrowful song, swaying in the wind and haunting the sole inhabitant of an old Victorian mansion located on a nameless piece of land. Many generations had inhabited that home, and many old memories infected the corridors and rooms over the decades. In one of those rooms, a tormented man relives in his mind the saddest hours of his life.

Julia, the woman who fervently devoted her life to him, departed on a trip of no return and embraced the caress of the earth's dust to join it forever.

For Vincent Romano, the whole world was now a deserted wasteland, not worthy of living in any longer.

The many glasses of Scotch he had drunk and the smoke of the cigarette between his fingers were clouding the man's gaze as, through his window, he watched the will-o'-the-wisps fluttering among a distant ruined cemetery's tombs, the final resting place of many forgotten people.

There are two deaths: one when the body dies, and the second when people forget you existed; the second is the worst death.

The ancient corridors of Vincent's mansion creaked everywhere, and from the old bookshelves of mahogany wood occasionally fell some of Julia's favorite titles. "Is that you?" asked he, in whispers; but a cruel silence was the only answer to his question.

For endless hours, an old phonograph played the saddest music known to man, from Bach to Schubert, from Lully to Schumann—the pieces she used to sing with her wonderful soprano voice. He was listening to the soundtrack of their life together, and every single note resembled deadly thorns of roses sticking in his heart: "*Hör' ich das Liedchen klingen, Das einst die Liebste sang*" (when I hear the song my beloved once sang). Every aria, every *lied* was talking about her... about them. *If another life exists after this, maybe we can meet again*, he thought; *or even better, maybe there's time left to reach her and to cross the Styx together.*

He showered and carefully shaved. The phonograph, his sonorous companion, played the notes of Samuel Barber's painful *Agnus Dei*, which served as a musical background while he dressed in his best suit, the tie she had given him

several years ago, and her favorite cologne. He would try to find her.

He was ready. He opened the drawer of his night table, revealing the instrument of death, his one-way ticket to the journey to find his beloved. He picked it up and looked at it. Dubious and trembling, he opened his room's balcony doors to observe the moon and the forest for the last time and said goodbye to them: "Beloved world, sweet life, I have no complaints. But there's nothing more I can desire. I have much fear, but at least I have to try." After shedding a single tear, he closed his eyes and was ready to cross the threshold between life and death. Suddenly, three loud knocks at the front door of his manor startled him.

It's her! he thought.

Immediately, he descended the staircase as quickly as he could and swung the main doors open wide as soon as he reached them. Outside, facing him, he saw the figure of a lean man who was dressed impeccably in a dark suit with white gloves and a hat that hid his facial features. The man was standing in front of a splendid black car. Confused, Vincent asked, "Who are you?"

The man looked up, revealing a wrinkled face and pale blue eyes, and with a very low and firm voice, answered, "I am the taxi that has been ordered for the Master of the house."

"There has to be a mistake. I have not ordered a taxi."

"There is no mistake, Mr. Romano. A lady ordered it," answered the man.

Vincent felt his blood freeze. Speechless, he nodded and got into the car's backseat. The mysterious man began to drive and headed towards the road, crossing the dense forest around the manor, leaving it very soon behind. Suddenly, the car started to increase its speed

vertiginously, while bright blue flames surrounded the car.

An abrupt and dissonant explosion of tinnitus deafened his ears; thousands of geometric figures filled up his vision, and the colors of everything were mingling. The road lights, the moon, and the stars were slowly joining to become a single bright spot on the horizon. Vincent wanted to scream, but what proceeded from his mouth were not sounds but a multicolor spectrum. The old driver's pale blue eyes watched him from the rearview mirror, unperturbed.

Vincent tried desperately to open the car door to escape, but it was impossible.

Suddenly, he heard the ring of church bells, a multitude of unintelligible voices, formless chants, and children screaming. Everything was a huge crescendo forming a symphony of absolute terror, each sound leaving a different flavor on his palate. Terrified and shaking, Vincent closed his eyes until the noises began to dissipate and become clearer and more discernible.

He noticed then that the blue flames surrounding the car had disappeared, and through the windows, he saw scenes from his life passing by: his mother carrying him in her arms, the funeral of his wife, those happy holidays in Bora Bora, the teddy bear he liked so much when he was a kid, the day he and his wife graduated from college, his first kiss, his parents' death, and even the moment when he opened the door to that strange old man. It was a rapid succession of moments, each lasting only fractions of a second, without chronological order and appearing in all directions, 360 degrees around the car—a plethora of confusion that almost led him to madness. In those moments, time ceased to exist, and there was no way to distinguish up from down. Everything was happening at the same time, and there was no longer any road ahead or sky above.

Gradually, the lights that had gathered on the horizon began to separate and allowed him to see forms of nature once again. Abruptly, the car stopped, and the terrifying voice of that old man uttered the words, "We have arrived." The man nailed his penetrating gaze in Vincent's eyes, and declared, "You have to pay for the trip."

Vincent, confused, reached in the pockets of his pants and found nothing. Then the driver, with his long, thin finger, pointed to Vincent's chest. Vincent checked the hidden pocket of his coat and found a golden coin, which he gave to the old man. Vincent departed from the car, and the strange man drove away at a very high speed, quickly disappearing on the horizon.

Disconcerted and not aware of his location, Vincent walked among trees, bushes, and rocks while skirting the banks of a mighty river, completely in darkness. He spent a long time just looking for a path until he noticed, with terror, multitudes of human-shaped shadows walking towards the water, whispering unintelligible words.

After a long trek, he reached the top of a hill from where he could see, once again, scenes of his life; but now he saw a new scene: himself on the balcony of his mansion saying, "Beloved world, sweet life, I have no complaints. But there's nothing more I can desire. I have much fear, but at least I have to try." And after the single tear was shed, the instrument of death in his hand cut off his life as fast as the wind extinguishes a candle's light.

Filled with terror, Vincent understood what had happened. *So, I crossed the threshold*, he thought. He was submerged in the blackest night and could hear the shadows' meaningless murmurs. Fatigued, he collapsed to the ground, in panic.

Gently, a soft music began to overcome the cacophony, a beautiful voice singing so heavenly with the power to comfort the terrified man. He

had to follow the sound of that voice! Running and stumbling for a long time, he saw a sea of small burning candles showing him a path.

When he came close enough to the source of that peace, he saw a celestial figure smiling at him. It was the same sweet smile that flooded his life with tenderness and love. Standing there was Julia, his wife, giving him her hand. "I waited an eternity for you," she said.

Vincent fell on his knees before her and kissed her hands. She helped him to stand again on his feet, took his hand, and whispered in his ear, "Do you trust me?"

"With my eyes closed," he answered.

Julia smiled. Holding hands, they went walking along the path of lights until their figures were lost in the darkness. Ω

*"There is no lonelier man in death,
except the suicide, than that man
who has lived many years with a good wife
and then outlived her.*

*If two people love each other,
there can be no happy end to it."*

—Ernest Hemingway