

*Vivian in Red*

One

Milo

She called me a vine; said I twisted into all her spaces, wrapped around all her branches. I remember she was missing one round-toe shoe, which made her stand at an odd, broken angle. Her hat was twisted into a ball of felt in her hand. She'd torn the hat from her head, turning her neat curls into a spray of hair something like a halo.

She said that to me, then she was gone out of my life, and for half a century I'd forgotten her, same as I'd forgotten the name of my Hebrew school rabbi and the minute details of what my father had really looked like.

Until yesterday, my God.

My son Paul had asked me to come in to the office to discuss business. Always business with Paul, holding down the fort at Milo Short Productions. So far, we're holding our own, even with the falling chandeliers and rotating stages and all that mishegoss, not to mention Mickey Mouse storming Broadway now with his productions of movie cartoons that mainly existed in the first place to plug cheap plastic toys. I mean, some of those songs are all right, but everyone's already heard them. Say "Tale as old as time" to anyone and see if they don't start singing along like Angela Lansbury as a teapot of all things. I prefer Mrs. Lovett and the worst pies in London, if it's all the same to you. Now Sondheim. That's writing for you.

If my granddaughter Naomi gets her way, we'll be making *Star Wars: The Musical*.

Anyhow, I was up early, and Esme knocked and said, "Good morning, Mr. Short, it's a hot one out there already," and began to make up the bed as I was fixing my tie in the mirror. My son David was forever telling me that I don't need to wear a suit to the office anymore, that a

shirt with an open collar is fine, and these awful tan pants he liked to wear. “You’ll overheat wearing all that,” he would tell me and I’d laugh, because you want heat? Try banging out tunes on a warped old piano in a tiny box of a room with an aging vaudeville act dripping sweat on you with nothing but a clacking metal fan stirring maybe three hairs on your head. Nowadays the buildings feel like the North Pole and it’s the contrast that’s a shock to the system, if you ask me.

Thinking of David made me start to feel my age properly. Eighty-eight years old I am, and David himself was fifty-seven, rest his soul, but there’s no age at which losing a child doesn’t knock you to the floor.

So I turned from the mirror and sang to Esme, “It’s a hot one already, fair to melt me down to size, you better go it steady, or end up eulogized!”

She tossed her head back and favored me with a laugh. “Oh, Mr. Short.”

“I probably wrote that in thirty-five or something. I don’t got any new ideas anymore. Just an old man and his greatest hits.”

She put one hand on her hip and smiled at me. “And you know exactly how charming you are when you’re modest. Would you like me to call for the car?”

“I think I’ll walk part of the way,” I told her, and began my slow amble out of the room. I’ve missed being able to hurry. I like going places, that’s why I’ll never leave New York. Everyone’s always going because there’s always somewhere to go.

Her smile fell. “It’s really hot, are you sure? I sure wouldn’t want to in this heat, and I’m a year or two younger than you are, Mr. Short.”

She bit her lip. This means she’s torn between what Paul wants her to do, and what I want her to do. It’s my company, my house, my legacy for lack of a better word, but Paul runs it most

days, yet I can put the kibosh on something if I don't like it. So who's in charge? It's poor Esme and the kids down at the office stuck in the middle.

“Just a few blocks. I am perfectly capable of getting a cab when I get tired. I have a wallet and everything. Hey, even an old goat like me needs some exercise.”

She smiled, shaking her head, and her thin shoulders drooped with defeat. For the umpteenth time I felt how bizarre it is, this slight girl from somewhere in Central America doing physical work in my house while I sit idly by, though as Paul tells me, she could no doubt wrestle me to the ground in under a minute. She's no weakling, this girl. And it's a good job. We take good care of her. What good is money if we can't take care of people?

I could hear her footsteps as she came to the stairs to watch me descend, which is awkward, because it takes forever and a half these days. I always go one step at a time: one foot down, then the other, so I've got both feet on a step at once. Always with a good grip on the rail. God forbid I fall and they make me move out of my room to the main floor or even worse, some god-awful soulless box of an apartment like those ones Paul buys and sells all the time in Midtown and the financial district. I love my grand piano across the hall in the library, and the big canopy bed that my wife picked out, rest her soul. A grown man alone sleeping under a frilly canopy is only strange if you don't feel like your late wife is still with you on the other side of it.

Step, step, step. I could tell Esme hadn't moved, and her stare was prickling the back of my neck. I watched my loafers slide across the dark red stair runner with its floral design, another thing of Bee's I could never bring myself to change, no matter how many times my daughter Rebekah sniffed at me about how outdated it was. “I'm outdated, too,” I'd fire back, “and it suits me fine.” It's a comfort to look around and see my Bee everywhere, in all these

things she lovingly selected, looking to me for approval though I never could see the difference between one shade of mauve and another.

It always felt like a milestone when I reached the landing without so much as a wobble, able to take a breath. That's one thing about being old, you revel in life's little victories. There's a picture on the wall of the landing, our wedding picture, with Bee draped in lace and me with my giant ears jutting out like wings off a stage, the yarmulke mercifully covering up the early bald spot that I didn't yet know was there. I'd had to stomp twice to crush the glass, so nervous I was, while Bee smiled next to me, serenity pouring out of her, waiting patiently enough because she knew I'd get it eventually.

Having gained the ground floor at last, I lifted my hat off its hook, stepped carefully down the stoop, and headed down toward the office. As was my habit, I glanced back at the stone façade of the townhouse, which I still think of as Bee's house. I can still see her face when she clasped her hands in wonderment, unable to believe it was really ours, just a block from Central Park and not so far from where we came as the crow flies, but it might as well have been across the globe. You'd think I'd have built the thing myself I was so proud.

Nope. Four floors, narrow rooms and all, I'll stay in my own house. It just takes me a while to get around, is all.

As I ambled down toward Midtown, I returned all the smiles the passersby sent my way, touching my hat brim even, which seemed to tickle them. I'm like a living museum piece—don't think I don't milk it sometimes. I've discovered this late in life that it comes in handy to be cute, and cute is something I've never been until lately. Apparently old men who dress like it's 1945 are a cute bunch.

Not that they recognize me. They may have danced at their wedding to my biggest hit song, or gone to see a show or movie made from a Milo Short Production, but not a one of them could name me or recognize my face, and that's okay with me. Composers are overshadowed by the star singing the song, and lyricists don't get half the credit composers do. Invisible is something I got used to, before I was cute.

I hadn't gone two blocks before I had to admit that Esme was right. It was brutal out there.

I settled onto a bench and fanned myself with my hat, and thought of dinner the night before. My granddaughter Eleanor was staring so hard at her plate it's like she thought it would sit up and start a conversation with her. I knew better than to just ask her direct so I grabbed Eva as she blew by toward the parlor to yell at one of her kids, and asked her what gives.

"Boy trouble," she'd muttered to me, the way a person complains about tax day or the snow in January, with a fatalistic, *what else is new?* shrug. I didn't let go of her forearm right off, so she had to elaborate. "Daniel moved out."

This here was a surprise; I'd figured he had a rehearsal or something, was why he didn't come over. Not that I was so excited about them living together with no wedding—poor Bee would've had a fit—but we all had figured an announcement was coming any day. And he was such a mensch, far as we could tell. For an actor, anyway. Poor Ellie couldn't catch a break. That mother abandoning them like she did, mother a term I use loosely, mind you. And then David dying on us way too young before Eleanor had a chance to even start her life.

It was one of the great-grands that got Eleanor to quit with the staring at her plate. Joel and his wife had twins and Joel being a doctor had gotten paged and Jessica looked like she was near to coming apart trying to deal with them. Then Eleanor scooped one twin up, and the baby

jammed a fistful of her hair into her little gummy mouth and Eleanor walked to the front window to watch the people and cars go by and the little girl just settled. She has that way, Ellie does. I meant to talk to her and say something wise like grandfathers are supposed to, but then she slipped away to go home to that apartment while the rest of us argued about whether Rudy Giuliani was ruining the city or saving it.

As a taxi went by with strange pulsing music coming out the open windows it was a reminder that I was expected at the office, and if I didn't turn up soon they'd send out an all-points bulletin for my whereabouts. I had to brace myself to push off from the bench, and I didn't feel much refreshed for the break. The July heat seeped into the shade even, crawled down my neck and wrapped around my chest. I'd have been better off staying upright. It took me an age to stand up again, so some fleet youngster jumped in front of me and hopped into the first cab that passed.

The next one came by quick and I figured it was my lucky day, then. Once I was inside, the driver turned so sharp I slammed into the door. Now that would have been ironic, if I got hurt or killed in the cab meant to keep me from dying of heat stroke.

But I survived the drive to the Brill Building. That's how we knew a music publisher was moving up back in the old days, when they made it to this place from the old Tin Pan Alley way down on Twenty-eighth. The Brill was always where I wanted to be, once I started coming up in the business myself.

I had to nudge through a pack of tourists taking pictures of the shiny doorway. Mostly the tourists don't upset me too much. They spend a lot of money on Milo Short Productions, and don't ever forget it, I always told my employees when I heard grumbling about how they stop in

the middle of the street and open up their maps, or lumber along in clumps covering the whole sidewalk.

But even I, sometimes, want to sock one in the head with a walking stick, though I don't use one. Makes me wish I did. I believe I would carry one with panache.

Anyhow, they finally parted for me, and I suffered through the blast of freezing air inside and made my way upstairs to Paul. His cute office girl greeted me like I hung the moon, again with the cute old man thing. Plus I'm the boss and all. I flirted with her, naturally.

To think I took all of that so casually, not knowing what was coming. But does anyone ever know what's coming? Ask Cole Porter if he knew a horse would crush his legs, maybe he'd have never gotten in the saddle.

Or maybe he would've still. Hard to say. I didn't really know him too well, and it's not the kind of thing you ask a person.

When I went into Paul's office, I was surprised by the presence of my oldest granddaughter, Naomi. "You look sharp," I told her, and she smiled because she took that I meant she looked fashionable, which she always did, usually in black, sometimes—like today—in a bold red. This was a girl who'd never wear a flower or pink. She might go crazy and wear a pinstripe. Naomi had cut her hair after graduation and I never got used to it, how short it was, when she'd had tumbles of curls down her back for her whole life. Even Naomi's bones looked sharp. Her collarbones poked out from the round neck of her blouse.

Paul told me that he and Naomi had been talking about an idea. They exchanged a long look before turning to face me.

"Pop, we want to put on *The High Hat* again."

“Nope. And you must really have wanted me to get some air and exercise to have me come down here for this. You could’ve asked me this on the phone, or at dinner, or remembered every other time I’ve told you I don’t want to rehash the past and saved yourselves the trouble.”

“Hear us out,” Naomi jumped in. She’d remained standing behind Paul’s desk, and now she stepped in front of him, upstaging him. “We could combine it with the release of your biography!” At this she spread her fingers wide, like she was about to break into jazz hands, and drew out the word: *bi-AH-graph-eeee...*

“That’s supposed to make it more appealing? Hi, have we met? I’m your grandfather, who doesn’t like to talk to strangers about myself. Remember me?” I stuck out my hand for her to shake it. They ignored me.

Paul leaned forward now, almost having to elbow Naomi out of the way to get back in view. “It wouldn’t be a stranger. I’m thinking of asking Eleanor.”

Before she turned away to the window, I caught a grimace from Naomi. She did not like this part of the idea. Clear as day she didn’t.

“Eleanor wouldn’t do it,” I answered. “Anyhow, so I tell my story to Eleanor but she publishes it so strangers can read all the gory details. Same difference. I’ll repeat my line in case you’re getting senile in your old age, kid, but I don’t intend to dig up my old ‘success.’”

“C’mon, Pop, how gory are your details?” Paul folded his hands, leaning forward toward me. “People love you. They would love your life story. Other people have written it and done a crummy job. Remember that putz who said Irving Berlin practically wrote your first song, just because you were in the same room once? And don’t get me started on how many people wrote that you came from nothing, as if your father couldn’t rub two pennies together, just because it made a better story than his tailoring business doing well for so long. Eleanor would do it up



right, and we'd premiere the show the same time as the book came out. Mark my words: Best Revival of a Musical."

Naomi had turned back from the window by then. "To put it plainly, we need a hit because we need the money. I'd love it if a fresh undiscovered property would be the next *Rent* for us, but that hasn't happened and the balance sheets show it. Production costs are through the roof, but people will only pay so much, and the number of seats in the theater never changes. The tourists are coming back again, thanks, Mayor Rudy, but they want family-type shows they know they'll like. Revivals are perfect, so why not yours?"

"I told you a hundred times. I didn't build this company to coast on moldy old revivals, and that includes my own moldy old stuff. Find something new. Find me a latter-day Sondheim."

"Sondheim's not dead, you know."

"I know he's not, but we can't afford him. I'm saying, stop dredging up the old."

Naomi thumped her index finger on Paul's desk, mussing the papers he'd just straightened. "People love nostalgia, even people who can't remember it firsthand. What about this? You could even write a new number. That would be dynamite. The press would go nuts. They love old people doing stuff that young people do. No offense."

I waved my hand at her: none taken. But I didn't budge and we went around in circles for a while, and they made me promise to think about it, then turned me down for lunch because they had a meeting.

Maybe that was why it happened. Because Paul and Naomi brought up *The High Hat*. With that song that I would never sing, never play, never listen to. A song unwritten, time unspooled... I was thinking in lyrics again. I shook my head hard, shaking away cobwebs and old times and buried things no one can change.

I was strolling back uptown, pondering whether to stop for a bite or get a cab home so Esme could make me a sandwich. Then what I saw made me stop so quick the top half of me wobbled forward, even though my feet had stuck down hard.

Her shiny dark hair peeked out from under her hat, and she had one gloved hand touching the brim, like she was adjusting it, or keeping it from blowing off in the wind. Her long dress was the scarlet of lipstick and stoplights; the hem was fluttering even though I didn't feel a breeze at all. When I raised my astonished eyes from her rippling hem to her smooth face and her red, red lips, she winked at me. Took those arresting green eyes, angled her delicate chin slightly away, and winked at me, with a tiny one-sided smile in the bargain.

And that's the last thing I remember seeing, because that's when everything went dark, and all I heard were cries of alarm and surprise, and at first I thought all of them had seen the same thing as me: Vivian, winking on Broadway and 52<sup>nd</sup>, looking as gorgeous as she ever did in 1934, but here in 1999, when she should've been ninety or dead.