

CASES

Fall Semester '92 was over, and Keith Batson had turned in his grades at the cow college outside of Amarillo where he taught music appreciation. He was in Paris now, after a nine-year absence, the guest of the *Magic Flute* company. The prestige surrounding this particular production of Mozart's allegorical jape added to the sense of glamour he felt in taking this trip. Wunderkind director Marc Desco's *Flute* had elicited hisses and bravos across the globe (and turnips in Buenos Aires) for its postmodern visuals, including a Queen of the Night dressed as Marilyn Monroe, and a Serpent who could be construed as the OPEC pipeline or the Berlin Wall or both.

Van Reeves was the Papageno and Keith's boyfriend of ten months, or to put a finer point on it, six dates spread over ten months. Keith was there on Van's dime. His French had held up, so he was relieved to be able to sing for his supper a little bit by helping cast members purchase trinkets and hire taxis, and he had been the one to translate the mostly rapturous reviews for everyone in the breakfast room. Now, navigating a noisy corridor in the bowels of the Bastille Opera on the night of the third of five sold-out performances, he was fretting about Van's vocal cords.

"Où est la loge de Monsieur Reeves?" he asked a stagehand who stopped chattering on headset long enough to point out the correct dressing room. Keith nodded to the singers playing Monostatos and Tamino, but, transformed by ego and bizarre costume pieces, they didn't seem to recognize him.

Keith knocked and entered. Van's eyes and lips were rimmed in black. His face was painted the orange pink of a Smithfield ham, a shocking contrast to his bald crown, which glowed silver under the artificial lighting.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

Keith, not expecting this neutral-to-negative greeting, reached back for the doorjamb. "I hadn't seen you all day. I missed you. I was worried about your voice."

"I don't allow visitors backstage before a show."

Why hadn't he known that? Theirs had been an epistolary beginning. That January, his friend Janice had lent him the money to storm the American Musicological Society conference in New York and try to land a decent academic post. One of his old buddies from the Indiana School of Music had an extra ticket for the infamous Marc Desco *Magic Flute*. Keith was more than prepared to inveigh against what he might see—his talent for naysaying had only sharpened since grad school—but then Van Reeves's Papageno had lent him new ears, touched, held, then released him as no singer ever had. His performance as the earthy bird catcher had basically commanded Keith to write out his vacated belief in the power of music. He had framed his testament, his first ever to an artist, rather as if Van were a votary to St. Cecilia, so he wasn't prepared for a frank letter of reply, or a meeting in Houston, or a surprise kiss in St. Louis, or a weekend in Philadelphia, or now, instead of another futile go-round at the AMS slaughterhouse, a holiday from his current half-life in Texas.

"I'm sorry," Keith said, with a "Don't shoot" lift of his hands. "So...I'll see you after then? Sing the shit out of it."

Van blew out his breath.

“Wait. You’re more than a visitor. I can—let’s see how this feels.”

Keith relaxed a little. “Kick me out when you have to.” He noticed Papageno’s orange bird boots, with talons the size and color of Spanish onions, set next to a folding chair. Van, standing on his prayer mat in sweatpants and ribbed undershirt, was barefoot.

“Aren’t your feet cold?” Keith asked.

“Socks and boots go on last. My feet sweat.”

That Keith did know. He tapped his own neck. “But still, your cold, your cords... *la voce?*”

“Crisis over,” said Van.

“Seriously?”

“Done, finished.” Van waved a powder brush in victory.

After the second performance, they had taken a long walk to the Île St. Louis, during which Keith reviewed his disastrous fellowship year in Paris. The men had struck a bargain before Keith would accept the plane ticket. Van’s job was to sing the shit out of Papageno; Keith’s job was to find and make peace with Gérard Doucin, an old boyfriend who, even after nine years, was still mysteriously standing in the way of Keith’s ability “to fulfill his early promise.” This phrase was a joke to Keith and his music pals, but Van, who didn’t cultivate irony and was unaware of the original direction of Keith’s promise, thought it was a riddle worth solving.

The next morning Van had woken up with a warning tickle and was rushed to a throat specialist in Montparnasse whose waiting room sported signed glossies of both Montserrat Caballé and Chaka Khan. For two days Van had remained in his room

meditating and dosing with herbal teas, leaving Keith unsure of his position on the other side of the accordion door separating their *suite à deux*.

Keith reached over to squeeze Van's thick forearm. "That's amazing. You're amazing." Because it was now safe to look, Keith tugged at a manila envelope beneath a hedge of drooping floral tributes. A pearly blossom dropped from a bouquet of cymbidiums onto his wrist.

He winced at the photo enlargements and thought how science had robbed the Muses of another sacred veil: whether speaking, humming, holding a note, or swallowing, vocal folds are a shockingly small and smooth gray-white oval, a two-inch, bisected ice rink sunk in a coliseum of weepy scarlet gristle.

"Can I keep one of these?"

"Huh?"

"May I have a photo?"

"Whatever for?" said Van, testy again. He had made it clear from his cloister that the images were but an instant's *impression* of a temporary physical *un-ease*.

(Management had naturally been more interested in the cancellation insurance angle.)

"For Music Appreciation II," said Keith. "One glance at your *erythematous pyriform fossa* and my kids will become Perfect Wagnerites."

Van laughed deeply from his chest. He thought Keith was an intellectual, a notion Keith, with his worn corduroy jacket, re-soled shoes, and adjunct status, encouraged. His students couldn't understand why he rode a bicycle in the terrible heat or lived in an apartment over Bledsoe Home Appliances. They weren't stupid. They just didn't know anything. Keith's envy of their futures, flat and square as the Panhandle, and of their

constitutional incuriosity, had made him begin to fear them. Certainly none of them had been impressed that he was flying to Paris to hang out with an opera company. If only he didn't need to teach summers too, for the insurance.

Van's dresser, an ageless stealth merchant in black, appeared. After dropping more costume pieces onto a row of pegs, she motioned to the decaying flowers. Van shook his head, and she left.

"You might throw some of them out," said Keith. "They can't be good for *la voce*. Or *il naso*."

Van cracked the knuckles of his stubby fingers. "Oh, you. How did your day go?" Before Keith could answer, the Queen of the Night poked her head in. The edges of her wig cap peeled up like fins. "Darling, be brilliant!" she screeched. "DG is out in force tonight. We must must *must* be recorded."

Van made a small face. "It will be what it will be," he replied

After she'd left, Keith watched Van press and hold his knuckles for a moment under his clavicles with his eyes closed. Keith, who'd been raised to believe that Deutsche Grammaphon would one day approach him with a contract, couldn't understand, nearly didn't believe, how Van took no pleasure from his celebrity.

"I want there to be a record too, you know," said Keith. "Your Papageno in perpetuity."

Van, who repeatedly told the press he was happiest singing Bach Masses in the choir of a little church in Boston, shrugged and wiped his hands on a towel.

The dresser returned with a valuables pouch. Van dropped in his wallet and passport, and then asked more pointedly about Keith's day—had he tracked down Gérard

Doucin? Keith hesitated, leaned over and saw his first letter to Van, postmarked Jan 21'92, tilted against the mirror between a jadeite Bodhisattva and a deckle-edged honeymoon photo of Sid and Ellen Reeves. Like many artists, Van traveled with keepsakes.

“Tell me,” said Van softly.

How to begin? Keith blew a cloud of face powder on the table towards the flowers. Cymbidium blossoms trembled, threatened to leap from their stems.

“I called his number twice and got the machine, but I hung up. I couldn't speak, in French *or* English.”

“Was it his voice?”

“Exactly his voice, flip and macho. Like he was playing with himself while he taped it.”

This racy note in Keith's narration was intentional. He and Van had yet to really click between the sheets. Van, in fact, had rolled himself in a separate blanket the times they'd attempted to fall asleep together. Keith worried that it might be a matter of too much experience on his part, and not enough on Van's. Maybe fame and a punishing schedule had isolated Van. Or—and this, he knew, was irrational—maybe Van understood in some profound Buddhist way that Keith had the virus. They'd been safe of course, and in six years Keith had yet to fall ill, but one of his goals for the trip was to come clean about his status. Van's vocal emergency had taken precedence for the time being. Keith's diagnosis had required no state-of-the-art images, no famous specialists, no holding an opera company hostage; it was a mere X in the wrong box on a strip of pale green paper.

Van, minding the clock, began stretching his mouth. Keith's students would squeal to see such disturbing vistas of gum, gullet, and tongue. "I took the subway," continued Keith. "Just making the change at Jussieu made my heart pound. I felt like I was in a cop show. The security combination on his building still worked. Six-one-two."

Van began a rapid run of sinus whinnies, but he was listening. Keith picked up an eyebrow pencil from the makeup towel. He used to line his eyes before going out to the bars; doubtless he was made up the winter night he'd met Gérard Doucin in the Jardin des Plantes, Gérard who had brought him no warmth, Gérard the first (and only) person ever to say that Keith didn't have the talent to be a composer. Keith's stateside scholarships, fellowships, and junior commissions, meant nothing. His talent wasn't slim, or slender, or modest, or promising: no, "*moche*"—"ugly, tacky"—was his response to the cassette tape of quartets Keith had made for him. Gérard, who wasn't even a musician, didn't care if his response drove Keith away. *Au contraire*: Gérard had read his protégé all too well. One *moche* had blown twenty-odd years of vainglory over like the first little pig's house, and the mocking, offhand tone behind Gérard's verdict drew Keith back, again and again, to his apartment on the Rue Monge, stripped his gears, crippled his judgment, degraded him wholly. At the end of that fellowship year, Keith returned to Indiana to complete his degree, but stopped composing music. Of this second secret, a source of shame greater than the virus, Van also had no idea. Keith had presented himself as an ABD musicologist who specialized in the works of Darius Milhaud.

Van had stopped his exercise, was looking at him, eyes and heart open and receptive. It was the way he looked when he sang Papageno. His ability, amidst the tinsel

of post-modern references, to project an inconceivable, supernal mercy had led Keith to write that first letter.

“Did you go up to his apartment?”

Keith retreated until his shoulders met the wall. “There was mail addressed for him on the landing. It freaked me out.”

“And so?”

“And so...I went across the street, and stood casing his apartment windows for a long time.”

“Did you see him?”

Keith shook his head no. “It got too cold out.”

Van reached for Keith’s hand. “There’s always tomorrow, baby. I have off, I can go with you. We can take him down together.”

Even over the phone, the balm of Van’s voice could bring Keith to the edge of confession, a healthier impulse, he knew, than playing that old tape of his quartets to his music appreciation classes. Despite a wealth of clues, his students never guessed. They were just passing through.

Terry, the stage manager, popped her head in. She clutched her throat—how was the voice? Van mimed laryngitis. Then he let out a huge “Hmmm-AAAAAAAH.”

In a ringing silence, Pamina ripped off a roulade. Tamino then held a G. Up and down the hallway, the singers began marking their territory more insistently, like zoo animals ready to be fed in the gathering dusk.

“Special delivery from Lord Socks,” said Terry, tossing Van a little package. It hit his chest and dropped into his hands.

“Oh fuck,” said Van. “*Tonight?* Fuck a duck.”

In ten months, Keith had never heard Van take that tone, or use that word. Terry stepped inside the room and followed Van’s eyes to Keith. The headset pushed above her ears was a handle for the bulging basket of her face.

“Hey Keith,” she said calmly. “We’re almost at places.”

“Who is Lord Socks?” Keith asked.

“An inside joke,” said Terry. “Van needs his time here, don’t you think, Keith?”

Keith would not be dislodged. “What’s the joke?”

“We’ve set up a chair for you in the wings, stage right. Like you asked.”

“You’re in the *wings* tonight?” said Van.

Keith turned to Van. His bald crown was turning crimson, making his head look like a ball of orange and raspberry sherbet.

“Remember how I wanted to see the backstage *Flute?* The magic behind the magic.”

“Can he do that, Terry?” asked Van. “I mean, with the unions?”

“He’ll be fine. But he might want to get moving.”

Van didn’t seem to want him anywhere now. “I’ll keep still,” Keith said. “I won’t applaud your entrance. I’ll applaud the Serpent.”

“But I enter stage left.”

“That’s why I picked stage right—to see you better.”

Van motioned for Terry to go. His other hand still held the mystery package. The men watched each other in the mirror and listened to the clamor of the orchestra through

the speaker above their heads. Finally Van, who didn't deal in secrets, sat down in the folding chair and pressed the balls and heels of his feet together.

"Lord Socks is a fan. If he is in the audience for an opera performance, or one of my recitals, he sends me a pair of black cashmere socks."

"What for?"

"To wear."

"Is he an investor or something?"

"No, just a fan. He says in a note—that he—that 'it would be most gratifying' to him if he knew that I was wearing the enclosed pair of hose while I sang."

It took a moment to parse, but Keith got it. "*Gratifying?* Wait—you mean like he gets off on it?"

Van looked very unhappy.

"Does he have an orgasm when you hit a certain note?"

"I don't know."

"Does he jerk off in the dress circle thinking about your sweaty feet?"

"How would I know?"

"Does he ask for them back? So he can sniff them? Or wear them? Or jerk off into them?"

"He doesn't want them back."

"Do *you* keep them?" Keith imagined a drawer full of black cashmere socks in Van's apartment in Boston, one he shared with three other Buddhists.

"Socks are socks," said Van, trying and failing to be humorous.

"Have you met Lord Socks?"

“He hasn’t asked to meet.”

“You mean, you would if he asked?”

“Calm down, Keith. I met you, didn’t I?”

“You asked to see me, not the other way around. Remember?”

Van pointed to Keith’s letter against the mirror. “You sent me something in the mail too.”

“I sent you a letter, Van. A letter of appreciation and gratitude.”

“Words, socks? Is there really much difference?”

The whirr of metal wheels interrupted them. The dresser had returned with Papageno’s headpiece, a three-foot birdcage shaped like a mushroom cloud and garlanded with crime-scene tape. Given the time, she could not be dismissed.

That Van could play the star and hold the curtain, if he chose, only added to Keith’s anger. He should have been the one opening gifts backstage, but then Gérard had intervened, and life, and a blood test—he snatched the package from Van’s hands and tore it open. The card fluttered to the floor. Stiff, expensive paper, with an embossed logo, girdled the softly spun socks.

“Turnbull & Asser. He’s a Brit—they’re the biggest pervs of all. You’ve got Lord Socks out there *and* Deutsche Grammaphon *and* Don Giovanni this summer and...and...”

Keith stopped—the dresser was jabbing at the face of her watch. Van closed his eyes and held his arms perpendicular to his meaty trunk. She lowered the chartreuse feathered doublet onto his wrists, then scrolled the garment up and around his arms. Terry began calling five minutes over the intercom in French, English, and German. The

dresser disappeared behind Van to begin lacing him in. With each tug, the skin of his throat jiggled.

“I don’t need any of it,” Van finally answered.

Buddhists, as it turned out, were able to state simple, yet preposterously accurate truths that had the power to command. Keith dropped to his knees onto the prayer rug, tore the paper sleeve with his teeth, and took a deep, cashmere breath.

“Lift your foot.”

Van, held in place by the dresser, batted his feet in refusal. He said he had other socks in his knapsack, he always brought extra socks, his feet were sweaty beasts, he didn’t want to wear Lord Socks tonight, or any night, or ever ever again.

But Keith held firm, slapped a calf, grabbed the closer foot, squeezed. Van relaxed his foot. Keith jerked the socks around the broad balls, the thick arches, the solid heels, then up the muscular ankles of the soccer player Van had been in high school. If he hadn’t discovered *la voce*, or vice versa, Van claimed he would have been just as happy selling cars in Dorchester. Keith didn’t want this to be true, but it was, it just was. Art surfaced in the oddest vessels.

“Ricola,” said Van suddenly.

“Wait a sec.”

Keith zipped Van into his bird boots. He stood and fed Van an herbal throat drop from a bag on the counter. He scrunched the foam-padded ring—the base of the mushroom stalk—that would rest on Van’s head. Fake magic atop the real.

“Will you need help with the headpiece?”

“Nope...goes on last. That aluminum stick...there...slides into a...into a slot...somewhere.”

After several last greedy sucks, like a nursing baby, Van let the lozenge drop from his tongue. Keith caught it in his palm. Van’s ability to relate to life offstage was running down like a battery. Art was pressing in, finding its frequency.

The dresser lifted the headpiece. Keith stooped to rest his forehead against Van’s neck, breathed in a scent of dry-cleaned feathers and fresh sweat. He had made it back to Paris. He had been living on nothing, with nothing, but still he wanted everything. There had to be a better way. If it worked for Van to recast dis-ease as *un*-ease, then maybe he could teach Keith to get a prescription for those drugs he was too afraid to read about.

“Guess what?” he murmured.

“What?”

Keith pulled a plastic case from an inside pocket in his jacket, then held it in front of Van’s eyes until he saw that they’d focused on it. “I want you to listen to this.”

“What is that?”

“A tape of string quartets. I’m a composer.”

“Really?”

Keith bent over, picked up Lord Socks’ note on the floor and set it facedown on the manila envelope of photos. “I mean, I was. I was a composer.”

Placing the plastic cassette case under the cymbidiums, Keith, who had decided while shoeing Van that the person who pens a fan letter has renounced his hopes of ever receiving one, adjusted his statement a final time, to the mirror and in the mirror. “I was *once* a composer.”

He was out the door before Van could respond. “Sing the shit out of it, darlin’,” Keith shouted from the corridor, Van’s first Texan. He heard a tremendous ‘Pap Pap Pap.’ The voice was gloriously, indisputably centered.

“—ageno,” finished Keith in the frenzied stairwell leading to the stage.

On the other side of the curtain, the audience applauded the appearance of the conductor. Onstage, a line of stagehands was supporting the bends in the thirty-foot Berlin-Wall-OPEC-pipeline Serpent with swaying wooden poles.

Keith twisted around to drape his jacket around the back of his folding chair. He took a cowhide case from a different inside pocket. To anyone paying attention, sunglasses would have seemed an odd accessory in the stage right wing of the Bastille Opera in the dead of winter. The pair of Ray Bans it originally protected was a gift from Anthony Edwell, a music publisher who had plucked Keith from standing room at a *Tannhäuser* matinee and given him the second of his parterre seats. After a fuck at his penthouse, the ebullient Tony said he couldn’t wait to listen to Keith’s tape. It was one of the many times in his twenties that Keith woke up in a man’s apartment thinking it was all going to start happening for him.

The second keepsake in the case was a brand-new photocopy whose archival folds would gentle over time. It had taken Keith three days of research to find the death notice:

Gérard Blaise Doucin, 3 September, 1949-17 November, 1986. As Keith suspected, Gérard had been part of the first wave, was probably already ill when his last letter arrived in Bloomington, a letter that, like all of his letters, was an outrageous conflation of pornographic and post-structuralist discourses.

The opera began. Each heavy chord in the overture, which scholars often claim refers to the knocking on the door of the Masonic temple, was a fresh goose to the nervous stagehands. The Tamino, a goofy, meat-headed tenor from Iowa named Jason whose life was built upon two freak inches of muscle in his throat, sauntered to the center of the enormous stage. He adjusted his dance belt, then his cape, to flirt with the third assistant stage manager.

Despite an international reputation for trashing the classics, bad boy director Mark Desco knew why Mozart had written every single note in his score; Van had said he wouldn't have worked with him otherwise. That night Lord Socks, Deutsche Grammophon, and their peers saw a visually provocative, gorgeously sung *Magic Flute*. In the inky darkness of the wings, Keith Batson, staring down the Serpent, pressed his knuckles against his clavicles and listened for mercy.

THE END