

The Understudy  
Cara Ehlenfeldt and Jason Cady

Manhattan, 1970s

ACT I

RECITATIVE

PAT DICKSON

I have mixed emotions as I write this tale of Donna Pearlbottom's final case. No, the esteemed private eye was not murdered. In our line of work, death is as common as the morning sun. But this story will shock you.

We had just wrapped the celebrated case of the *Bel Canto* Mob family. Donna had a rental in Fire Island. Spring hadn't reached New York, but she liked the off season. I asked if she planned to go alone,

DONNA PEARLBOTTOM

I'm taking Wittgenstein and Sophocles.

PAT DICKSON

Those were her kittens. I looked forward to a quiet week. I'd catch up on sleep and the scotch and sodas I had missed over the last month. At 5:00 I closed the Venetian blinds. But a man with bovine eyes and a Brooks Brothers suit rushed in.

SFX: Door with hanging bells opens.

PAT DICKSON

I showed him the closed sign.

RICH LEXINGTON

Please! You got to help me.

PAT DICKSON

Donna, the most articulate private eye in the Lower East Side, had a lexicon that lacked the word "no." She dropped her umbrella. I stubbed out my cigarette, and lit a fresh one.

SFX: Cigarette lit.

PAT DICKSON

His name was Rich Lexington. He told his story, threw down a C-note, and we walked to his Cadillac.

SFX: Door. Rain. Footsteps. Car.

PAT DICKSON

He ran the Flat Iron Opera Company. It was your typical avant-garde theater. A packed house every night. Lots of cash changing hands. But their books were in the red. They'd be bankrupt by summer. An embezzler was sucking them dry like Arizona in July.

SFX: Car door opens and shuts. Footsteps.

PAT DICKSON

We pulled up to the theater, and went straight to his office. A woman with a silver-streaked black mane and 6-inch heels followed us in.

SFX. Loud heels. Door.

WANDA

You must be the private eye. I'm Wanda, the impresario.

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

I'm Donna Pearlbotum, and this is my operative, Pat Dickson.

PAT DICKSON

I shook her flaccid hand. She brandished a long cigarette holder and galloped into a tirade.

ARIA

WANDA

Picture a horse running in a field  
—are you picturing the horse?—  
If the horse trips on a stone  
—it ends bad for the horse.

The opera's the horse  
The thief is the stone  
The narrowing gap  
Between the horse and the ground  
That's where we are right now.  
The whole opera-horse could go down!

Picture a window, immaculate glass,  
—are you picturing the window?—  
Imagine the glass, smashed with a fist.  
—that's my office window.

My office is marred  
 My window is shards  
 My prized rolodex  
 Dispossessed  
 Of its cards  
 God knows the mind of that rogue.  
 She could be calling everyone we know!

PAT DICKSON

The case looked even bigger. Was a vast conspiracy sabotaging them? The stolen rolodex said blackmail. Wanda urged Donna to go undercover.

WANDA

You could be Susanna's understudy.

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

The soprano?

WANDA

Yes.

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

I don't understand.

WANDA

An understudy is a backup if the singer gets sick.

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

I know understudy means.

WANDA

So, you'll do it?

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

There's just one problem: I can't sing.

WANDA

Don't worry. Susanna's never missed a show.

PAT DICKSON

Donna could not say no. Would this end in tragedy like the time she went undercover cutting hair? A woman had wanted a perm and left bald with her scalp scalded, another wanted a shag hairdo but got a pageboy.

Donna watched the singers and crew and uncovered some clues. Wanda and Rich were having an affair.

RICH LEXINGTON

Let's go to your place to discuss a... *funding source?*

WANDA

I'll clear my schedule—yes, of course.

RICH LEXINGTON

Of course.

WANDA

Of course.

PAT DICKSON

Manny, the stage manager, had gambling debts.

MANNY, THE STAGE MANAGER

Look at them laughing over “of courses.”

But who needs love when you can bet on horses?

PAT DICKSON

The whole staff was disgruntled. Except Tony, the tenor. He was grunted. Pickles, the piano player complained about missing back pay and about back pain messing with her ability to play. Missy, the mezzo, wanted to form a union. She played a male role in the show but got paid less than Tony.

ARIA

MISSY

When I was young, I used to smoke  
 But it's bad for the lungs and the throat  
 So instead I just fume, and ruminate  
 On whether to resist or ingratiate.  
 I can't play along—I instigate, say,  
 “Don't raise your voice or they'll lower your pay.”  
 They won't fire me for pressing the issue,  
 Instead they'll just give me more notes.

I'm always too loud or too quiet  
 They say I don't sing like I mean it.  
 And honestly, if they could pull it off,  
 They'd probably give me notes on the thoughts  
 I'm allowed or not to hold in my brain.  
 Because the one note I'll never take  
 Is to act like this is all okay  
 Or relax and laugh it all off.

When I ask why Tony gets twofold  
 You'd laugh at the reasons I get told  
 Men like him have more experience  
 More skill, more draw, more stage presence.  
 They can do something I can't.  
 But look at me, I'm wearing pants.  
 It turns out a man couldn't do this!  
 Yet somehow I can but I make less!

I quit smoking, but I can't quit this fury.  
 I could quit opera, but not society.  
 And in truth, I need compensation.  
 And I can't just give up on civilization.  
 But I've got my voice, it sings and rages  
 It does more than emanate sweet sounds on stages  
 It's worth more but they'll never admit it  
 And it turns out—so am I. Dammit!

PAT DICKSON

I laid low that week. By opening night I was eager to see the show and scope out the joint. I had never seen an opera. I sat in the front row and flipped through the program.

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

Pssst!

PAT DICKSON

Donna peeked out from behind the curtain, horrified. I tiptoed over to her.

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

The soprano got food poisoning. I have to sing.

## ACT 2

### RECITATIVE

PAT DICKSON

I could not follow the plot of the opera. It wasn't just the chic nonsense of its avant-garde sensibility. I worried Donna would look foolish and blow her cover. I was proud to live in the shadow of her sharp mind. Her triumphs felt like mine. But there I was: trapped in the front row to watch what could only be her biggest flop. I gasped when Donna glided out on roller skates.

## ARIA

A virtuosic, coloratura aria. Donna's execution is perfect.

## DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

I felt butterflies once  
 A long time ago  
 They beat their quick wings in my chest.  
 I'm feeling this feeling  
 I've felt long ago once again.  
*Aaah!\**

My heart once shone like a lamp  
 But it blazed too hot.  
 It zapped the butterflies dead.  
 In the dust of their wings,  
 I never wanted to feel again.  
*Aaah!*

I'm suddenly green  
 I know what this means  
 Chrysalises hang from my ribs.  
 And maybe this feeling  
 Is still that same feeling,  
 But now I recognize it  
 Like a reconciled friend.  
 I'm falling for this feeling  
 And maybe this time it won't end.  
*Aaah!*

\* "Aaah" designates coloratura stuff.

## RECITATIVE

Applause.

## PAT DICKSON

The applause was rapturous. I beamed with pride and rose to give a standing ovation. No one else stood. I sat back down as fast as a dream fades in the morning. I was still in thrall to her singing when Missy skated out in a soldier's uniform.

## ARIA

Missy gives personal commentary, in italics, to form a one-singer duet.

## MISSY

War is our mistress, we march for her  
She lords above us without demur

*This opera is absurd, a string of gendered lines  
They cast me in this role to try and hurt my pride*

She needles and bites like a stone underfoot  
But duty compels us to tread her route

*My tongue is tied by words, my chest done up in binds  
But neither man nor woman here, I breathe between the lines*

Whatever she asks, we calmly oblige  
Lest her fury send our gunshots wide

*I'm in a third space between song and sex  
In between notes, my personhood rests*

We know her caprice to be deadly  
Yet still we follow her readily

*Here this wandering melody hangs unresolved  
Until it breaks, drops me back into the world.*

## RECITATIVE

## PAT DICKSON

Missy looked as mad as a Russian bear in a tutu. Over the week she had fought Tony and antagonized the co-workers she wished to unionize. But was she the crook? Manny had a fresh black eye and a fat lip. Would Donna catch his hands in the company's coffers? Would the long arm of the law be less harsh than his loan sharks? I mulled this over until the tenor leapt off his deathbed to bellow his last breath.

## ARIA

## TONY

Death, my small black raincloud  
Lingers, pendent, overhead  
I keep my eyes fixed downwards  
I fear your billowing, fear  
Your shadow-wings outspread.

And now the storm grows thunderous  
The world fades into gray.

I remember how a man meets death  
 He keeps his eyes fixed forward  
 Like he doesn't feel the rain.

## RECITATIVE

PAT DICKSON

It impressed me that he could still pontificate after getting stabbed, shot, and bludgeoned. Yet I felt relief that it finally ended as I had failed to follow the non-sequiturs that filled the opera. The cast came out for a curtain call. Donna was the star yet she bowed behind Tony, the tenor. He was front and center blowing kisses when a sand bag fell on his head.

SFX: A thud. Gasps. Screams.

PAT DICKSON

Why a sandbag hung over the stage I'll never know. An ambulance rushed him to Arkana Hospital.

SFX: Ambulance siren.

PAT DICKSON

He came back in a casket. Was the sandbag meant for Donna? Who knew she was sleuthing the crew?

## ACT 3

## RECITATIVE

PAT DICKSON

After Tony's wake Donna summoned everyone to Rich's office. He looked as troubled as a mad cow as he poured us whiskey. Donna cracked her knuckles and got right to the point.

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

Flat Iron Opera is almost bankrupt thanks to a thief *in this room*.

Manny, Missy, and Pickles do a spit-take.

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

Pickles is missing back pay. And Missy feels mistreated and wants payback.



MISSY

But, I never—

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

And Manny has gambling debts.

MANNY, THE STAGE MANAGER

Who are you to accuse me? Really. Who are you?

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

This may surprise you: I'm not really a singer. I'm Donna Pearlbotum, Private Eye.

They all gasp.

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

Rich hired me. Wanda had me go undercover as an understudy. Funny casting choice, don't you think?

WANDA

I'm a modern impresario. I don't follow worn-out rules.

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

You thought my singing would give me away, so on opening night you stuffed Susanna's taco with Ex-Lax.

WANDA

That's absurd!

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

But, you didn't know that Missy taught me some vocal warm ups, and how to breathe from my diaphragm.

Donna sings up and down five notes, with piano accompaniment, then modulates up a half step and repeats.

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

After my flawless debut you tried to kill me, but I took my bow in the wrong spot and the sandbag hit Tony.

MANNY, THE STAGE MANAGER

Wanda, is that true?

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

But, I was on to you. Ever since you faked the office break-in.

PAT DICKSON

Wanda's eyes darted about like a wild stallion. She threw her whiskey, pulled out a Colt 45, and confessed.

ARIA

WANDA

A creative vision requires precision  
To speak the language of angels and kings  
But daily I battle with horses and cattle  
You whinny and low much more than you sing

You make excuses, idiotic mistakes,  
Complain about not enough bathroom breaks.  
For years I've braved my creative pains  
While you whine about the hazards of roller skates!

You're all horses this show is tethered to,  
Galloping on your own tangents  
Thanks to you, it's yanked limb from limb  
And left in a pile of ham shanks!

You're the ones with metaphorical guns!  
The bloody sand is on your hands!  
So I've taken my fee, what's owed to me.  
You can't comprehend art's demands!

RECITATIVE

PAT DICKSON

Wanda aimed her gun at us as she hoofed backwards out the room.

WANDA

You think you're so sharp, but I'm no *foooooooool!*

PAT DICKSON

Wanda tripped on a roller skate. Her gun went off and hit a chandelier that fell and crushed her to death. Why a chandelier was hanging backstage I'll never know.

RICH LEXINGTON

Wanda! My sweet pony.

PAT DICKSON

Rich fell apart like raw hamburger. We finished our business and left. But Donna had one more bombshell.

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

I shall quit sleuthing to pursue singing.

PAT DICKSON

I begged her to reconsider.

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

My dear Dickson, I'm sorry, but *that* I can not do.

PAT DICKSON

She had finally learned how to say no—though her wording was awkward. I asked what she would do if her gigs were too few.

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

I can get a part-time job cutting hair.

PAT DICKSON

She left the “Pearlbottum and Dickson Detective Agency” and became Donna Pearlbotum, Prima Donna. I took over, got my P.I. license, and became Pat Dickson, Private Dick.

ARIA

DONNA PEARLBOTTUM

A gun fired at me once  
A long time ago,  
My heart almost leapt from my chest  
I dodged bullets back then,  
Then again, and again, and again.

I could net all the clues  
But my covers got blown  
I didn't know how to pretend  
But now I balk knowing  
That this show is going to end.

I'm suddenly green  
So what does this mean?  
Is my singing the real thing?

Maybe this is my calling  
And here I am falling  
The song is my own,  
Not pretense or sham,  
My whole self resonates, perhaps  
This is—at last—who I am.

THE END.