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The Soprano

by Candida Lloyd

I have this memory. I think I dream about it sometimes. Many of my recollections have been replaced with photographs, so I no longer know if they are my lived experience or they have been superseded by an image taken by someone else behind a camera lens. However, there is no documentary evidence of one particular event, so I can be sure it is pure recall. Conjure it up in my mind and I am transported to another time and place. Another me.

Appearing on a stage in front of a large crowd is a common dream often interpreted as vulnerability or a fear of being exposed. But in my version, I stand there gazing at the audience without self-consciousness. A tiny figure dressed in a flimsy, pale gown; I look out at the rows of faces in the darkness. They see me with my white-blonde, glistening, well brushed hair and bare feet but I am invulnerable.

A large bosomy, woman in a corseted dress with a full skirt ushers me across the stage towards a bed and says in a loud, American whisper “Honey, lie down and pretend to sleep” and gives me wink. When she says this, she has her back to the audience so only we can hear.

I do as I am told, and then the lady turns to face the spectators and starts to sing in an operatic soprano voice. It is the loudest sound I have ever heard a person make and it makes my ears ring. Out of the corner of my eye I see her hold knife above her head. It looks as though she is going to kill me although somehow, I know she won't. As her song reaches a crescendo, practically a scream, she lets go of the knife and it clutters to the ground.

Then she gathers me in her arms and presses my face to her chest which heaves up and down with her vast intake of breath ready for the next note. I feel the warmth and moisture of her skin next to my cheek and the roughness of her corset. Spittle sprays all over me as she announces sounds, but I know instinctively that I mustn't be seen to wipe it away.

She takes my head in her hands and I see exaggerated anguish expressed on her face close so to mine. Her mouth contorts and opens wide to make the incredible sound that comes out of her. I am utterly compliant, partly because on some level, I understand that this is theatre but also because I am a child.

Later I go back on stage, holding hands with the lady opera singer (who I later find out was pretending to be my mother). She is smiley and cheerful and no longer looks like she wants to kill me. Again, and again she bows to the audience as they applaud and roar and stamp their feet. I look up at her. Radiant, smiling and clutching a large bouquet of flowers.