

Lamplight

P.E. Rowe

Lenore Etive listened as Alexandr Koloraev died each night. It was the most joyous part of her day, not because of any animus she may have held for her wayward, drunken neighbor, but because there was beauty in the process, particularly at the outset. Koloraev spoke English poorly and not a word of French, but in their brief early-morning encounters, Lenore had managed to piece together a few key elements of Alexandr's history—that he'd come to New Orleans quite a few years back with a composer named Rubenstein, that at one time he'd played regularly in both the Theatre d'Orleans and the French Opera House, and that presently, he mostly survived by playing in public houses and between races at the Metairie Race Track. Those humble performances provided Alexandr the income he needed to maintain his third-floor corner flat beside Lenore's on Liberty Street, and they kept him steadily supplied with the bourbon that was killing him by degrees as the months passed.

By the time he'd staggered up three wooden flights of stairs and lurched through the hallway, Lenore would be awake regardless of the hour, given the Russian's heavy footfalls. She'd hear the dull clack of his keys, through several attempts, getting thrust toward the lock, and finally the door would creak open and then slam shut, followed by the clicking of the lock once more. After a few moments of silence as Alexandr sat and opened his violin's heavily-scared wooden case, the Russian would tune. Lenore could usually tell how long he would play by the duration of the tuning—the longer it took Alexandr to tune, the

drunker he was, and the sooner he'd fall back in his chair, letting the bow slowly drop to the floor beside him. The violin, she presumed, rested there precariously on his shoulder until the first time he stirred, when, she imagined, he'd delicately place the instrument safely back in its awaiting box.

This night, Lenore heard almost no tuning, and there was very little time before the first few notes, which she knew by heart and had long grown enamored of since Alexandr's arrival the previous spring. In the first few weeks, the neighbors would cause an even greater racket than any violin could, cursing the damned drunken Russian to knock off the noise. On the rare weeks he was home on leave, Lenore's husband Archie was not nearly as tolerant of the music as she. But by then, the neighbors had shouted themselves hoarse to no effect, and Alexandr Koloraev's violin had become as the many steam-powered whistles of the ships moving up and down the mouth of the Mississippi or the constant bells of the streetcars or the raucous laughter, music, and shouting of the revelers a few blocks down in Storyville: it was another sound of the living city, a human retort to the crickets in the back swamp.

Koloraev was as sober as he'd been in weeks. The first notes leapt through Lenore's walls so crisp and precise it caused her to breathe a full, deep breath in anticipation. She awaited her favorite phrases as though Alexandr were reciting poetry directly to her in the darkness. On one prior occasion, when Lenore had stuck her head out her street-side window and awakened Alexandr napping against her heavy storm-shutters, she'd asked about the music. "Bach,"

he'd said with a guttural -CH- that was foreign to Lenore's ears. "It is Bach, my child."

She knew not whether she was relishing the double-stops in the Fuga Allegro or anticipating the staccatos in the Presto, but she knew it was the most beautiful part of her day. And Alexandr played each note of the first sonata so perfectly that night he could have been playing for the Czar if he hadn't been playing for Lenore. For several minutes, she listened as Alexandr brought Bach into the world, almost forgetting that she was hungry, that her sleeping daughter was just as hungry, and that she had nearly exhausted all possibilities of paying her rent before the end of the week, and that Archie's letter contained barely enough money to keep Lenore and their child fed for another week.

Twenty or so minutes into the performance, as Lenore had learned to expect, by the time Alexandr had hacked his way through the first half of the Corrente passably, his weary, drunken fingers—as much as his memory—began to fail the Russian artist. Lenore heard dissonance and then frustration. Alexandr cursed in Russian at the final note. She knew what was next. He began the Double Presto, stumbling through the first few bars before tripping over his own fingers. More cursing. Back a few bars. More stumbling and more cursing. He normally didn't get this far, and even when he did, the frustration didn't usually last so long. She didn't understand the Russian language, and she didn't understand Bach, but Lenore could hear him dying through the wall, the gift he'd struggled tirelessly to acquire becoming less and less perfect, leaving his fingers clumsier and less lively. She prayed as the notes became

sparser and more drawn out. Soon, they were both sleeping.

Some hours later, in the misty, diffuse light of the Louisiana morning, Lenore was roused again by her neighbors returning to their apartment on the corner opposite the Russian violinist's. Lenore knew both girls well, liked them, and found them inherently trustworthy despite their unsavory profession. The fact their names were prominent in Tom Anderson's blue books was a point of contention with Archie every time he caught Coira near the window chatting to the girls on the balcony as they hung out their laundry. Archie had only ever flown into a rage the one time he discovered Lenore had been leaving Coira with Geneviève on days Lenore was minding the Pontelliers' children while he was on deployment. The look he gave her answered the question she'd never dared ask, about where his thoughts were when his eyes were distant, and Lenore was sure that as tender as Archibald Etive was in his kindest moments, Private Etive had murderous memories of Wounded Knee, a fact which made it easier for Lenore to excuse his drinking in his harshest moments.

The quiet murmur of the girls' laughter through the walls roused Coira, who rolled over, stretched, and wished her mother a good morning. Lenore kissed Coira's forehead and stepped out of bed.

"We'll need to be off shortly, love," Lenore said, stepping toward the cramped water-closet.

"The Creole boys, mama?"

"Shush now and get yourself dressed, child."

Coira rolled out of bed, removing her nightgown and beginning to dress herself. By the time Lenore had re-emerged from the water-closet, the girl, hardly more than a toddler, had nearly buttoned her buttons straight and was seated at the footstool beside the bed awaiting her mother's hands. Lenore began to brush Coira's light-brown hair in long, steady strokes, bracing her little head against the few tangles, which hung just below the girl's shoulders. As she began to braid, Lenore could feel Coira sigh and inhale.

"Mademoiselle Tulette will have something for you to eat, Coira. I just need you to behave for her this morning. I'll be back in the afternoon."

"The Creole boys?"

"Are still in the country."

"Are they coming back soon?"

"That's what I'm going to find out, love. Hold still."

"I can behave, mama."

"That you can," Lenore said, pulling the hair on the girl's right side into three tight strands.

"Madame has scones and jam. And tea."

"And tea. Aye, she does."

Lenore tied off Coira's braid and sent the child off to the water-closet. She dressed herself and brushed her own hair back, donning a white bonnet once it was properly tied down. When she was presentable, she stepped through the open window onto the balcony and rapped on the girls' window, half expecting to get no answer. After a few moments, Clara opened. She was drunk, but not nearly so drunk as Alexandr.

"Good morning, Clara. Can I leave Coira with you this afternoon, if need be?"

"We'd be happy to take the little dear, Lenore. Any time. Did you—"

The bell from the morning's first passing streetcar interrupted, startling them both.

"Christ," Clara said, shaking her head in the direction of Liberty street.

"I haven't found anything, no."

"Anything from Archie?"

"Two whole dollars. Would you believe it? I don't know."

"Geneviève and I will feed your little bird, love. Just remember."

"I know, Clara."

"It's only drinks, Lenore. Miss Arlington's respectful, especially to married women."

"There's Archie."

"And his two dollars."

"I need to be off, Clara. Till later. Sleep tight."

"You too, love," she said, closing the window.

Lenore gathered Coira and ushered the girl downstairs onto Liberty Street. Lenore took little Coira's hand as she grew tired near Canal Street and hurried all the way to the southwest corner of the French Quarter, where the Lafayette Tea Room's large glass windows faced out onto Dauphine Street. Lenore led Coira around the back of the painted brick building, knocking on the rear entrance. After a few moments, the door was opened by a large mulatto cook wearing a dirty white apron with a clean white shirt underneath.

"Lucille's petit helper," the man said, smiling down at Coira. "*Bienvenue, petit mademoiselle.*"

"Good morning, Victor," Lenore said, as Coira played shy.

He turned and left the door open for Lenore and Coira, who entered the back hallway, stepping through the back corner of the kitchen to the annex where Madame Tulette was washing cups in a wooden tub.

She only half-turned toward Lenore, stating, "*Le midi,* Lenore."

"Not a second later, Lucille. I promise."

"Pro-meese. Pro-meese. *Si seulement le petit pouvait manger une promesse.*"

"That reminds me—"

"*Oui, oui,* Lenore. I will feed the girl."

"I'll be back at noon, Lucille. *Merci. Merci.*"

Lenore could see the older woman wiping her hands dry and turning toward Coira as Lenore started out the back toward Canal Street again.

Under any other circumstances, she wouldn't have considered spending a cent of Archie's two dollars on the streetcar in lieu of a twenty-minute walk, but she had to catch Pontellier before he left for work. She knew him to be an early riser by habit but knew nothing of the household goings-on since the tragedy. As Lenore walked, she rehearsed what she would say. She hadn't seen him when she stopped by to offer her condolences, leaving the only flowers she could afford with Celestine, who was back at the main house. She wondered if there was anything she could say to lessen the humiliation she'd felt at Iberville. She began to doubt he'd even see her. The streetcar bell

seemed to count down the time she had to gather her thoughts, her words. When she stepped off she reminded herself that he was a good man. She thought he was a good man, or else seemed it.

Lenore approached through the metal gate at the front, noting that she'd not entered through the front before. It was Ellen who'd brought her around the back three years earlier. Was it too forward to come this way now? She stepped diffidently toward the dark-green front door, onto the veranda guarded by four magnificent, white-fluted columns. She straightened her frock and rapped the knocker against the metal fitting on the door. It resounded. Lenore thought she must have been too forceful. Such a knock would sound rude.

The door opened. It was Celestine.

“Oui,” She said. “Lenore, are you—”

She didn't give the older woman a chance to say “mad.”

“I'd like to see Monsieur Pontellier, Celestine. It's important.”

“So important?”

“Is he still in?”

“He is,” she said. She bore a dumbfounded look on her face. “I don't know if he'll see you. He's just gotten out of bed.”

“I'll wait.”

“Indeed, you will,” Celestine said, stepping back far enough to allow Lenore to enter. When she shut the door she seemed uncertain, hesitating at the base of the stairs, “It seems a bit obscene to seat you in the drawing room like a guest. What guest would call at this hour?”

Just then Mr. Pontellier emerged at the top of the stairs. He was buttoning the top button of his shirt and paused to look down at the two women. He appeared to examine Lenore for a moment, furrowing his brow before asserting to Celestine, "She may sit; I'll be down momentarily," and walking back into the obscurity of the upstairs hallway.

Celestine led the way to the sofa in the sitting room, casting her eyes askance at Lenore's feet as she stepped onto the Persian rug. Lenore's plain gray frock was visibly dingy about her ankles, and she looked away to escape Celestine's gaze before being seated at the edge of the sofa beside an end table adorned with a lace cloth and a bronze figurine of a soldier in the process of being unmounted in a furious battle, or so it seemed at first glance to Lenore. She'd never noticed the figure before and was surprised by the emotion the horse's wide bronze eyes and flaring nostrils evoked in her. She stared for a few moments before noticing that she'd hardly had the chance to observe the room before. The curtains were floating inward beside her. It had been unseasonably warm, and the floor-length windows were wide open behind the ghostly-white muslin curtains. It was the only sign of life in the room, and the odd silence lasted an unnaturally long period. It occurred to Lenore that she'd rarely been in the home absent the presence of the two rambunctious little Pontellier boys, who were ever causing some kind of ruckus she'd been charged with tamping down. She stared at the painting above the empty fireplace. She stared at the fireplace. She turned her eyes back to the bronze horse, its face frozen in an eternal moment of abject terror. How had she never seen it before?

Pontellier appeared at the sitting room's entrance by the foot of the stairs. He was wearing a coat and tie now. She met his eyes, which seemed curious but visibly sad to her.

"Miss Lenore," he said, bowing slightly to her. "I shouldn't have expected to see you for some time."

"I came to offer my condolences, Monseieur," she said, pausing, at a loss for a way to explain her true intentions.

"At such an hour?" He paused as well, looking puzzled. "Why are you not with the children in Iberville?"

"You hadn't heard?"

He looked even more puzzled, and now disturbed. Pontellier stepped further into the room and sat. He was rubbing his forehead.

"Madame Pontellier—that is, your mother, Monsieur—she dismissed me."

He shook his head. "When was this?"

"Three weeks ago, Monsieur. I was only with them for two days after..."

"Have you any idea why she did such a thing, Miss Lenore?"

"I can't be sure, Monsieur, but on the evening of the second day in Iberville I asked her about the terms of my employment and whether I might bring my daughter. The following morning, she had one of the negro hands drop me at the railway depot with hardly enough money for the fare back to New Orleans."

Pontellier sighed.

"I haven't come—that is—"

He looked at her face now, studying Lenore's eyes. She was frozen by the probing glare it seemed.

"You should have come earlier."

"I didn't want to trouble you, Monsieur. Given the circumstances."

"What can I do for you today, Lenore?"

"I was wondering, sir, if you can tell me how Raoul and Etienne are, and whether they might be returning soon."

"I see," he said. "I suppose you'd be in need of work. Is that what this visit is about?"

She nodded. "Only as it needs to be, sir."

Lenore's eyes gazed down at the gray of her frock, which seemed conspicuously plain against the fine amber felt of the sofa and the elaborate patterns in the red Persian rug. Lenore fixated on the floor beyond her knees.

"I'm afraid it will be some time yet," Pontellier said. "My mother is a stubborn woman, and even when she hears about this from me, which she will, it won't make a bit of difference, you can be sure. So I suspect you'll be needing to seek employment elsewhere, Miss Lenore. I do apologize. I wish I had known."

He leaned forward to get up.

"Monsieur," she said, turning back to toward him. "I truly hate to have to bother you."

"I must be at work, Lenore. I'm afraid there's little I can offer you."

"A letter, Monseieur," Lenore said, "if it pleases you. That I might use you as a reference. That's all I ask."

Pontellier paused as he stood. He nodded.

"Certainly, Miss Lenore. It hadn't occurred to me, but you were very good to the boys. Indeed. If you'll wait, I'd be happy to draw it up directly."

"Thank you, sir."

Pontellier nodded again and then walked back upstairs toward his writing desk.

Lenore waited as the silence of the room grew around her. She noticed now that all the activity in the home had stopped. Not only were the boys gone, and Madame Pontellier, but, excluding Celestine, the servants were nowhere to be seen. The construction in the back room had halted — Lenore could only guess unfinished. There was no more hammering and no chatter of workmen. The only interruption in the minutes she waited were the few passing birds in the garden and the distant bell of the streetcar. As Lenore looked around, she noticed the only glaring absence from such a finely-furnished sitting room was a clock. Celestine entered once, passing by and paying Lenore so little attention as to make her brief appearance seem contemptuous. It had to have been ten minutes before Pontellier appeared again holding an envelope. Lenore rose.

"It occurred to me," he said, "that an acquaintance of mine has just had his second child and may be in need of a nurse while his wife is convalescing. I've written a brief letter of introduction to the Dorniers and a longer generic letter documenting your good service. I've also written a cheque that I hope will serve as compensation for my parents' ill treatment."

"I'm speechless, Monsieur."

"I can see," he said. "I've made the cheque to Madame Lenore Etieve. Your husband is Creole?"

"I beg your pardon, Monsieur Pontellier, but it's Etive. It's a Scottish surname."

"Ah. He's a Scotsman, your husband?"

Lenore nodded and looked down at the envelope.

"My bank is on Canal Street, and they should cash the cheque," Pontellier said, nodding. "The Dorniers' address is on the back of the first letter. I've addressed it to Madame Dornier, and I suggest you call on her this morning if you can."

Lenore nodded, "Certainly, I will."

Pontellier approached and set the envelope in Lenore's trembling hand. She curtseyed and bowed slightly, and it struck her as a clumsy gesture a gentleman like Pontellier would find comical and poorly executed by an imposter at the exact wrong time. He didn't laugh as she'd expected when she raised her eyes again. He nodded.

"I'm late," he said, turning toward the front door.

Lenore remained standing as he stepped out of the room, unsure whether she should follow, deciding that it would be less awkward to remain where she was.

"Oh," he said, turning back toward Lenore. "I almost forgot. I have an item that more rightly belongs to you than me."

"To me?"

"Yes, it would seem so. Can you call again tomorrow evening to pick it up, Miss Lenore?"

"Certainly."

"I look forward to hearing how things are with the Dorniers," he said.

Pontellier turned and exited the front door unceremoniously, leaving Lenore standing as puzzled as Monsieur had been when he saw her seated in his sitting room minutes earlier.

Celestine appeared behind her. Evidently, she'd been listening.

"When you arrive tomorrow evening, Lenore," she said, "be sure to come in the back."

Outside on Esplanade Street, the sun had risen just above the crests of the townhouses. It was already getting warm. Lenore walked a full block back toward the French Quarter before pausing to look inside the envelope. Pontellier's cheque was for ten dollars, which only represented half of the money she needed by the end of the week, but it was certainly a welcome and necessary contribution for which she was grateful. She quickly flipped through the envelope to find the Dorniers' address, which was clear across the city on St. Charles. It was still early, so Lenore decided she could make the walk.

It was twenty minutes before Lenore was rushing along North Claiborne. She began to sweat as the sun grew higher, and she knew the mud from the road would be catching on the hem of her frock. Briefly, she debated heading down toward the city to catch the streetcar but decided that the damage had already been done. She wouldn't look any less presentable if she continued the walk, so she did.

Lenore hadn't thought of the tragedy often, but as she passed the cemetery, she caught a glimpse of the whitewashed tombs on her left through the iron-gated gap in the cemetery's tall brick walls. Even in the heat, Lenore felt a chill and a deep pull in her gut toward the iron bars. There was something dreadfully constraining that

simultaneously pulled Lenore toward it as it terrified her. Despite the time, she paused at the mouth of this dead city of tombs—the same fading whitewashed concrete as the lower floors of her building—and in there, it occurred to her now, was Madame Pontellier, resting, awaiting the rising waters that everyone knew would one day wash all of this city away. That was it. The tombs were too close together. There wasn't space enough for a living body to breathe in there amongst the dead. Far down the long path that ran length-wise from the wrought-iron gate, a small party of mourners, packed tightly together, bore a wreath to be hung somewhere amid the maze of concrete tombs and crosses. Lenore pushed onward toward St. Charles, almost fleeing something it seemed.

By the time she was approaching the Dorniers', Lenore had become aware of the mess she'd made of herself. Her boots were filthy from the mud of the street crossings. Lenore crouched down to brush as much visible dirt as she could from the bottom of her frock, and she was aware that she'd sweated enough that a dim outline was visible beneath both arms if one trained their eyes on her long enough to seriously examine her. It was too hot not to sweat by then, and the one handkerchief she carried with her was nearly saturated. She didn't relish the idea of giving such a first impression but hadn't much choice. She straightened herself as best she could and proceeded to the Dorniers' front door.

The home was a stately brick manor nearly the size of the Pontellier house, and the area gave the impression of such wealth that Lenore guessed "modest wealth" was likely how the neighbors viewed the Dorniers' standing.

The footman greeted Lenore with far greater warmth than Celestine had and seated her in the parlor while he enquired whether Madame Dornier could see Mrs. Etive. As she sat, Lenore realized she was starving. One of the maids, an older, light-skinned mulatto, eyed her skeptically and then smiled, nodding politely when Lenore caught her eyes.

"Dreadful shame about your mistress," she said with a heavy Creole accent. "Hard times. Whole family."

Lenore nodded, but didn't quite know how to answer. The maid smiled politely again and retreated to the kitchen.

The parlor was cool enough that in the time she'd been sitting there—fifteen minutes, Lenore guessed—she'd thankfully stopped sweating. The footman approached and informed her that he would bring her up to Mrs. Dornier directly.

The footman seated Lenore in a chair opposite young Madame Dornier, who herself was seated on an opulent sofa that appeared to envelop the young mother in its collection of embroidered pillows. She was blonde and struck Lenore as rather radiant in the natural sunlight flowing in through the open second-story window. She was wearing a fine white gown that matched the white of the blanket in which Mrs. Dornier had swaddled the infant she held to her chest with an obvious maternal relish.

"*Français?*"

"*Juste un petit peu, Madame.*"

"English, then," Madame Dornier said with a warm smile.

She hadn't a hint of an accent, which made Lenore wonder about her origins. In fact, Lenore thought, she might not be from New Orleans at all. Lenore couldn't quite decide why, but she got the sense Madame Dornier wasn't asking the type of questions a Creole in search of a nurse would ask. Over a period of nearly half an hour, she mostly probed about Madame Pontellier's treatment of her, which Lenore assured Madame Dornier was more than satisfactory, and finally Lenore came to characterize it as friendly even.

"How so, Miss Lenore?" Madame Dornier, enquired.

"She was not as you would expect, Madame. She would invite me to sit for hours as her model while Ellen or Celestine looked after the children, and she was," Lenore paused, "companionable, I would say."

"What sort of things did you talk about when she painted you?"

"Nothing so particular, Madame."

Madame Dornier paused, and the warmth of the smile had slowly faded, though the smile had not.

"Did you think she was well? Madame Pontellier?"

"Well, Madame?"

"Yes, well, Miss Lenore. Was there anything that caused you to think Mrs. Pontellier was unstable?"

"I don't understand."

"How she died, you see."

"She drowned, Madame. Everyone knows this."

Lenore looked over at Madame Dornier, who seemed as frustrated as Lenore was confused. Madame Dornier adjusted the sleeping infant in her lap, looking down for a moment, almost inaudibly saying, "Shh, shh, shh," as if

addressing herself and not the infant, and then fixing her eyes back up at Lenore.

"She drowned."

Madame Dornier sighed. "Yes, dull girl, she drowned, but did it never occur to you, as it did to all of New Orleans, that it was Mrs. Pontellier's intention to drown?"

Lenore sat, her mouth open, staring at the open window for several seconds without answering.

"No, I don't suppose it did," Madame Dornier said. "I see why a woman like Edna might have kept one like you around."

"Madame, I don't understand why this would have any bearing on my ability to care for your children."

Madame Dornier adjusted herself ever so slightly and leaned her head back against the pillow behind her head.

"I'm growing tired, Miss Lenore. Will you fetch Lawrence for me and have him show you out."

"Of course, Madame. Straightaway."

"I'll have him send word to you as soon as I discuss the matter with my husband."

"Yes, Madame."

"You're quite satisfactory to me, dear girl. Monsieur Dornier, on the other hand, doesn't particularly like the idea of colored girls caring for his children, but I will speak well of you to him."

"Thank you, Madame," Lenore said, her face growing red as she dismissed herself.

Lawrence returned her letters on the way out, and he also handed her a small nondescript linen sack he told her was from the housemaid Madame Rethage. When she reached the street again, Lenore opened the sack, which

contained two roast beef sandwiches, an apple, and a note that read only, “*Meilleurs voeux, colombe.*”

By the time Lenore was back at the Lafayette Tea Room, it was quarter past noon, and the owner had already discovered Coira in his kitchen annex, seated beside an aggravated and apologetic Madame Tulette. In order to appease Madame Tulette, Lenore promised she would stand in for her the following day washing dishes, and she was met again with, “Pro-meese, pro-meese,” but she had no intention of disappointing Madame Tulette again. They walked out through the back kitchen door with four scones in Lenore’s linen sack and headed back toward Liberty Street.

When they arrived at their building, Lenore couldn’t help but notice the color of the white concrete façade, how it matched exactly the fading tombs in the St. Louis Cemetery, and she wondered why anyone in New Orleans would paint a building so. Even the brothels in Storyville were elaborate colors. Lenore thought about the cost of renting their tomb there and expected to spend the afternoon furiously seeking the means to stay another month.

Lenore left Coira with Geneviève, who was awake already when Lenore knocked on their window, fanning herself in the shady corner of the girls’ flat.

“*Ma Cherie,*” she said, welcoming Coira as the child stepped through the window from the balcony.

Lenore left the sack of scones for the girls and thanked them before rushing back out to exhaust the remaining job

possibilities she could apply herself toward. There was a hotel in the French Quarter looking for a maid, or so she'd heard, yet when she enquired of the hotelier, he looked her up and down and told Lenore the position had been filled. In the oppressive heat of the afternoon, she chased down a lead as a nurse only to be told by the family that she should enquire of a different family another half mile toward Metairie. In the late afternoon, she found time to compose a response to Archie, informing him of their dire circumstances, even as she knew he'd likely be out somewhere in the country and wouldn't even read the letter in time to send any help whatsoever. And it also occurred to her that he must have begun to spend their money at cards or on girls not too dissimilar to Clara and Geneviève. Perhaps both.

By early evening, Lenore was late again, and her blistered feet had begun to bleed. Still she didn't think of spending a penny to lessen their burden by way of a streetcar back to Liberty street. And there was, by chance, along Girod Street, a market advertising whole chickens for five cents, which was far too impossible a stroke of luck for Lenore to pass by. A few blocks further, she sat on the grass in a small open garden, a plain handbag in one hand and the dead chicken resting on her lap under her other hand. She closed her eyes, and in the distance, Lenore could hear the long whistling of the ships as they touched the mouth of the Mississippi. She thought of the very real prospect of eviction. There was the Catholic boarding house. And there were girls' dormitories in Storyville. She petted the chicken's feathery back. They weren't going to starve. And Archibald would be back in a few months. She wondered

if Clara and Geneviève would let them stay for a few days. Then Lenore remembered that the girls would need to be off to work, and she struggled to her feet.

At home, she found herself apologizing again, yet both Clara and Geneviève seemed not too aggrieved. Soon after the girls were gone, Lenore enlisted Coira's help in plucking the chicken, but the girl was exhausted and soon fell asleep on the carpet beside her mother. Lenore managed to usher her to their bed on the far side of the room with the intention of waking the girl when dinner was ready.

In the dim evening, Lenore lit the lamp, and there was something about the yellow glow of the burning oil that reminded her of the sunlight outside the cemetery. It hadn't occurred to her that Madame Pontellier had drowned herself on purpose. Sitting there, pulling feathers from skin, in silence, it was the first time all day Lenore had had a moment to think of anything. She couldn't fathom such a thing. Deserting Raoul and Etienne like that, not to speak of Leonce Pontellier himself. The sadness in the poor man's eyes. She had surely been acting peculiar, but what sort of choice was that? It was a morbid thought and troubling to think of. She wondered whether Monsieur Pontellier had thought such things. He certainly must have if Madame Dornier was to be believed.

After she'd cooked and eaten half the chicken with only the ringing of the streetcars to break the silence, Lenore sat on the dreary old sofa, basking in what little light remained in her fading lamp. From the balcony, if the Russian virtuoso or the prostitutes had been there to observe, the scene would have seemed worthy of a painter's dexterous

hand—the calm, tired face of a plain young mother, warmly lit, an amber-yellow hue reflecting from her clear skin, her eyes transfixed on the figure of her sleeping child, and the sense that there was nothing else of worth outside the frame of her settled world.

Hours later, the Russian master once again began to play.

The following morning, Lenore and Coira were met at the back door of the Lafayette Tea Room by the same large mulatto cook, whose smile dwindled as their presence became more familiar than novel. Lenore found it more useful to put Coira to work drying the odd dish rather than trying to police her to sit still. A few hours into the ordeal, the owner, a cranky old Irishman named Penn, stood silently behind Lenore for an uncomfortable length of time before stating, “Tell that Tulette woman you don’t want a child in your kitchen, and what do you get the next day but the child and the mother! And no Tulette!”

Lenore hardly looked over her shoulder, and certainly didn’t turn far enough to meet eyes with the man. She kept washing.

“I hope she’s compensating you for your time, woman, because I am certainly not.”

She didn’t see much of Old Penn after that.

Lenore and Coira took a short break for scones and tea, and they had a sandwich for lunch. By mid-afternoon, Coira had strayed from the kitchen enough that her courage had even endeared her to Penn. He tolerated her presence at the till beside him, and when he asked her why

she liked it so much at the front, she got a laugh out of the old man by replying, "I want to learn about the money."

"Don't we all," he'd replied.

Madame Tulette relieved Lenore late in the afternoon. Lenore's hands were still wrinkled from the wash basin by the time they'd made it back to the flat on Liberty Street. She was able to coax the girls into watching Coira that evening with another bag of scones Old Penn had bestowed on her as if it had been a sack of treasure and not the leftovers from the previous day.

Lenore washed up and did her best to remove the dirt that had again gathered in a ring at the base of her gray frock. She pulled her hair back into two buns, and upon inspecting her only bonnet and finding it unsatisfactory, decided that Monsieur Pontellier would have to tolerate her hair as it was. She set out for the house on Esplanade Street both curious as to what Pontellier could have for her, but simultaneously wary of the prospect of any further humiliation of the kind Madame Dornier had inflicted upon her.

Ellen met her at the door and greeted her far more warmly than Celestine had the previous morning. Ellen mentioned that Monsieur Pontellier had remembered their meeting and promised to be along directly after he left the brokerage. She seated Lenore beside the bronze horse again but spared her the indignity of inspecting Lenore's shoes as they stepped onto the carpet.

Then Lenore began to wait. By six o'clock, she was growing nervous about the girls having to leave for work. By seven she was certain that Geneviève would have put Coira to bed and stepped out by way of the balcony. No

doubt, she was deeply engaged with a Storyville customer already. And Coira, not yet five years old, was alone. Again, Lenore began to think of the boarding houses, her absent husband. How many streetcar bells had rung as she sat there waiting for Leonce Pontellier to humiliate her further? Ellen came in to light the lamps and offered tea, which Lenore politely declined. By eight she was hungry and had begun to cry; though, out of fear of Pontellier's sudden appearance, she was managing to keep from losing all composure as she might have done if such solitude had been guaranteed indefinitely. Lenore rose with the intention of finding Ellen just as heavy footsteps could be heard outside on the veranda.

Pontellier entered and Lenore could tell in his carriage that he was drunk, and she could see in that moment that he would never be of any real help to her and that it had been foolish of her to hope for such.

"Miss Lenore?" he said, casting his eyes toward the sitting room. "I had forgotten about you."

"So you had, sir."

"Yes," he said, stepping into the sitting room.

"I was about to leave, Monsieur Pontellier. I need to look in on my daughter."

"How did you fare with the Dorniers?"

"The Dorniers?"

"Yes, dear girl, the Dorniers. Did they employ you?"

"No, they didn't. They humiliated me."

"You're upset."

Lenore didn't answer.

"Humiliated, well," he said, grinning. "How about a drink, dear girl, before you run off? I'd like to hear about

the terrible humiliation the Dorniers inflicted upon your poor soul."

"Monsieur?"

"A drink?" he said again, stepping toward the liquor cabinet between the two bulging front curtains.

"No, sir. Thank you, no. I don't see how that's appropriate."

"Damn appropriate," he said, fumbling through the cabinet and pouring a single glass of bourbon. "Now, I'd like to know exactly just how petite little Madame Dornier humiliated you after I sent you over there in good faith."

"Did you, sir?"

Pontellier's head shot around. "I did," he said. "Yes, I did."

Lenore could see that he was genuinely wounded. There was a truth in his eyes that convinced her he genuinely cared about the feelings of his former quadroon nursemaid. She looked down.

"She asked me about your wife, Monsieur."

He turned to face Lenore, who was still standing at the sofa. "What about Edna?"

"At first it was about the things she required of me — how she treated me, how things were with her and the children. Things a mother would ask of a woman she would have caring for her children."

"And then?"

"She asked me about your wife's behavior, sir. It seemed she was far more interested in probing me for gossip than employing me."

"What did you say to good Mrs. Dornier, Lenore — about Lady Pontellier?"

"Nothing that satisfied her interest, sir."

Pontellier sighed and began to sip his bourbon. "Damn her," he said under his breath, and Lenore wasn't entirely sure exactly who he was meaning to damn.

"I left without any assurance of employment from the Dorniers, of course."

Pontellier nodded.

"I need to be going, sir," Lenore said.

"Wait a moment."

Lenore looked over at him. It seemed his mind was frozen on some topic unaccountable to him. He was just standing in the same spot, not quite looking at her yet not looking away. She began to touch her forearm with her right hand, not quite fully crossing her arms.

"I had a gift for you," he said. "I had Joe fetch it this morning. It's in the parlor if you'd suffer my presence a few moments longer."

"Monsieur," she said, tilting her head toward the door.

"Please," he answered, gesturing toward the parlor across the foyer.

She nodded, and Pontellier stepped toward the front table. Lenore could see it was his intention to light the way with the glowing lamp. She stepped toward the table.

"Please, sir," she said, and she bowed in a way just obsequious enough that it seemed the gesture of a servant and reflected nothing on his condition or his pride.

"Of course," he returned, gesturing with his free hand toward the parlor.

The orb of yellow light surrounded them as they progressed from the foot of the stairs through the foyer and into the parlor. Lenore set the lamp on the open table by

the entrance and lit a wick she pulled from the table drawer. She lit the two wall fixtures, and as the second glowed to life, she could see one of the familiar wooden panels Madame Pontellier used while oil painting. It was propped face-down against a chair-leg on the far side of the room. Monsieur Pontellier stepped toward it and casually flipped the panel around, setting it in the chair while observing the figure there displayed. Lenore didn't need to get close to see that it was she.

"It's an excellent likeness," he said, turning toward Lenore. "She wasn't without talent Edna, was she?"

Lenore nodded, but didn't care to step any closer.

"I'd like you to have it," Pontellier said, turning back toward the painting again and examining Lenore's likeness. "It's a beautiful picture. Quite life-like. This one struck me as much as any of the bunch she'd collected over in that bungalow of hers."

"Sir, please," Lenore said, shaking her head.

"Really," he said, turning toward her again. "I want you to have it, Lenore."

"Really, Monsieur, what should I do with such a thing as that?"

"Hang it on your wall, presumably."

Pontellier laughed and took a healthy sip of his bourbon. Lenore shook her head.

"Is that it too, Monsieur? It wasn't enough that Madame Dornier made a thorough fool of me? You'd have me hang a picture of myself on my own bare walls? Who does such a thing but a fool?"

"The Queen of England, perhaps."

He wasn't smiling, but Lenore couldn't help but think he was mocking her. She crossed her arms and he could see tears forming in her eyes. She was shaking her head.

"You misread me, Madame Etive. You misread me. I mean nothing by it, I swear. It's an honest gesture."

Lenore continued to shake her head, gesturing herself toward the painting with her arm. He stepped toward her and she put up her hand, stopping him in his tracks.

"What could I possibly want with this, Monsieur?"

He hung his head and turned back toward the chair. "I thought your daughter might someday appreciate such a warm likeness of her mother. Forgive me if I've blundered into something, Madame Etive. It wasn't my intention at all."

"I don't understand, sir," she said. "I really don't."

He nodded, and looked over at Lenore, "Apparently neither do I. But I hope you understand I offer it to you earnestly."

For a moment they stood staring at each other, both desperately trying to see truth in the other's eyes.

"I do," she said. "I believe you, Monsieur."

"Of all the people in this city..."

He sipped his bourbon and stared now at the painting as he had earlier in the sitting room, as if looking through it to some other place.

"I spared your feelings, sir," Lenore said. "Earlier, regarding Mrs. Dornier."

He turned to Lenore again slowly.

"She asked me whether I thought Madame Pontellier drowned herself on purpose. And I told her it hadn't occurred to me, because it truly hadn't."

"No?"

"No, sir. It hadn't."

"You have a good heart, Lenore."

"Monsieur Pontellier?"

"Too good perhaps," he said. "It's no matter then. I shall keep the painting for you. If you or your daughter would like it someday."

"Yes, sir. It's a very kind gesture. Very kind."

"I'm sure your daughter is waiting for you, Madame Etive."

She nodded and wiped her eyes, stepping toward the foyer. He hurried alongside her, setting the bourbon on the table as they passed the lamp, its bright glow casting an amber hue onto the blonde hardwood surrounding Lenore's long gray frock. Leonce Pontellier met her with the open front door and nodded as she passed.

"I am truly grateful for your honesty, Madame Etive," he said. "If nothing else."

"Monsieur," she said with a slight bow and a curtsey.

When he shut the door behind her, Leonce stepped into the parlor to extinguish the lamp, leaving the bourbon where it was. He approached the painting again, lifting it from the chair and flipping over the wooden panel, resting it face-down as Joe had placed it earlier—leaning against the leg of the chair. Leonce knelt to read his wife's inscription, written in brown paint at the bottom right corner in fine, short brush-strokes: *A Quadroon Maid (Linora) E.P.*

Korolaev was halfway into the Siciliana as Lenore came into earshot halfway up the first flight of stairs. She felt a sense of mild disappointment as she realized she'd missed the Fuga, though she knew it only by the name she called it—the second one. As she climbed the final stairs, she was mindful to step lightly so as not to disturb the violinist in the midst of such a peaceful movement. With her free hand, she felt for the keyhole in the darkness and inserted the key as silently as she could manage.

Inside, it was nearly as black as oblivion. A dull yellow hue from Alexandr's lamp reflecting off the balcony railing represented Lenore's only point of reference in the darkness. She tiptoed her way to the stove, feeling for the box of matches on the shelf by the wall where she also kept a wick and a pigfat candle. Lenore struck a match which seemed to ignite the room for an instant before settling to a dull yellow glow at the tip of her fingers. She lit the wide white candle, extinguishing the match on the bottom of the shallow bowl carved out by the heat of the candle's wick. She crept softly toward the bed, sitting when she reached her chair, setting the candle on the little footstool beside the bed, just close enough to cast a dull glow over the figure of her sleeping daughter.

She didn't even remove her shoes. Lenore just sat, listening as Alexandr's fingers danced their way through the Presto. Lenore watched Coira breathe in the candle-light. Her skin. Her hair. The life she could only ever hope for her child. They passed before her with each breath. She watched, listening, note for breathtaking note.

Alexandr was perfect. Lenore wasn't conscious of the time, but she was conscious of the effort she was making to

keep herself awake. When Alexandr got to the Double Presto, the mistakes Lenore had been conditioned to expect didn't come. The clean string of notes that penetrated her wall rang in such succession that all things seemed to flow into one. Her sore feet, the white-robed Dornier woman sneering at her, the painting in the lamplight, the taste of a scone and the streetcar bells. Lenore began to see beautiful images as she heard movements of music she'd never heard before. She couldn't be sure if it was a dream when a tremendous crash that shook her chest brought her upright in her chair. It was silent, but she thought that the noise had been real and had come from Korolaev's flat.

Lenore doubted herself when she observed Coira's figure in the dim candlelight, its yellow fingers flickering over her daughter's quiet little body, which rose and fell with each quick breath. Lenore waited, listening, wondering if such a crash would bring anyone to check its origin—or whether it had even happened at all.

Nothing stirred. Lenore observed the dull orange reflection of Alexandr's lamp on the balcony rails. She rose slowly, creeping through her open window to the balcony, kneeling as she stooped to peer into Korolaev's modest little room. By the yellow lamplight, Lenore could see him there on the floor, face-down and seemingly lifeless. She lurched back until her shoulders dropped against the metal bannister that kept her from falling to the balcony in a heap. Lenore froze, her eyes fixated on the scene before her, framed in the tall white window—the body of the former Russian prodigy, still, at the foot of the chair, his violin perched on the cushion unharmed, as though he had known, and his final act in this world was to protect the

one beautiful thing that remained of himself. Lenore watched until she was sure. She listened. She calculated. The cost of train fare to St. Louis and from there to Denver, a coach to the outpost, and the probability that a violinist who had played all the great opera houses with all the great composers wouldn't have an instrument worthy of his talent. She looked to the street below and then to the empty case inside Alexandr's flat. Lenore pulled open the window, stepped inside, and snuffed out the lamplight.