***Chapter 3***

**Slowly Gilbert Fabre maneuvered his car against the heavy Broad Street traffic. Proudly living up to a reputation of over a century, downtown Philadelphia has little night life worthy of mention. Even Broad Street, the city’s thriving North-South boulevard, appears deserted after 8 P.M.**

**The mild drizzle that had been falling since early evening endowed Broad Street with the allure of a vacant movie set. Gilbert briefly considered using his own parking space in the vicinity of City Hall; deciding against it he continued down Broad Street another three blocks to Locust. At the corner of Walnut Street, amid the dim reflections of lights coming from inside the Horn and Hardart’s cafeteria, Fabre waited for the traffic light to change.**

**A refined curtain of spray lay over the darkness as Gilbert pulled into a parking lot directly across from the Academy of Music on the other side of Broad Street . As he alighted from his car he was reminded, with that brief pang of regret that always accompanies such memories, of the last time he’d seen the Mediterranean coastline from the stern of a passenger liner at the age of 16. The surfacing of such stored-up impressions of his childhood cut keenly, like knife edges, strangely dissolving his prevailing bitterness with their healing pain. Added urgency drove his footsteps as he crossed Broad Street to face the challenges he’d been avoiding for more than a decade.**

**Gilbert hurried down Locust and strode to the stage entrance of the Academy, at the far back along its north face. Over a dozen applicants were milling around the front entrance. Most of them were a good deal younger than him, some by as much as 20 years. As a music student in the 60’s, he’d stood here, sometimes for hours, waiting in line to buy cheap tickets for seats in the cramped Amphitheatre, the peanut gallery on the 5th range of balconies of the auditorium at the top of the building.**

**He stepped through the door opening onto the street, then through the large metal door that separated the public areas from the grey backstage interior. Milling and around the lounge to his left he encountered about 40 other applicants. About three-quarters were in their 40’s or older, while most of the younger ones were college and music students. Some,from nervousness, ostentation or habit, walked about practicing scales and trills, interspersed with snatches of familiar opera arias.**

**Fabre’s earnest step relaxed as he strolled peacefully across the floor; there was no longer any need to be on his guard. These were his social and cultural equals, not at all, he reflected, like the riff-raff his job obliged him to rub shoulders with 5 days a week. He took off his raincoat and hat and walked towards the musician’s lounge.**

**Gilbert Fabre entered a large dusty, dimly lit room. Its furnishings, blue velvet sofas, broken down easy chairs and collapsible bridge chairs were shabby and old. Tattered photographs of former conductors and soloists hung suspended irregularly and obliquely along the walls. The water-stained, faded wallpapers were ripped and peeling. Large cracks, fissures really, weaved trajectories like streaked lightning through the scuffed linoleum. The clanking of the radiators, activated for ithis unseasonably chilly autumn evening , floated a percussive musical background music against the hum of conversation and the warm-up exercises of the applicants.**

**Someone handed him a brochure. The first paragraph indicated that the managers of the Philadelphia Orchestra had gone to great lengths to guarantee that the candidates for the Chorus were being taken “from all walks of life”. A glance around the large dusty room made nonsense of this pretension.**

**If anyone were qualified to make such a judgment, it was he. Gilbert Fabre knew quite a lot about the “many walks of life” from his 30 years as a case worker, assistant director then supervisor for the welfare department . It was hard to imagine that any person willing and able to make a commitment to attend 20 rehearsals and engage in two months of tours in order to sing in Vivaldi’s “Gloria”, Ravel’s “Daphnis and Chloe” and Casals “El Pessebre” would be working as a butcher at the Reading Terminal Market, or spend his days hustling drugs in the slum districts around North Philadelphia and Columbia Avenue!**

**The sartorial mode of your typical Philadelphian tends to conservativism, not at all what one would expect to see in a major American city. Gilbert and most of the people in the lounge did not fall outside these generalizations. Residents of New York need to combat the anonymity of a great world metropolis; tourists and immigrants from everywhere may be clothed in any imaginable fashion; student fashions govern much of what one sees in Boston; the residents of San Francisco or Los Angeles just enjoy showing off.**

**Their dress code in the Academy lounge on that night was dated, plain, conventional, unobtrusive. Virtually everyone there was a middle class professional, housewife, student or retiree.**

**Gilbert Fabre quickly assembled them in categories: educated housewives with some musical training; senior citizens with musical backgrounds, the kinds that fill up the rank and file of small community orchestras; music students, college students; elderly European immigrants. None were here on a lark. Without exception, music was the great love of their life.**

**Wandering about the lounge of a building famous the world over for its fine (if dry) acoustics, Gilbert’s footsteps reverberated with a gentle thud. He strode to a hook screwed onto the wall facing the street and hung up his hat, coat, and scarf; the hook pulled away the plaster behind the frayed wallpaper.**

**From there he went to join the line of applicants filing past a table stationed in front of one of the large bay windows. The prim woman sitting behind the table was young, scarcely out of college. To each side of her sat a staff assistant. She conducted herself with an appearance of businesslike efficiency that concealed confusion in handling her job. Her dress indicated a background of comfort, not luxury, her manner limited experience in dealing with people directly rather than through books.**

**Certainly she had to be Susan Spiegel, the same person that Gilbert had spoken with several times already on the telephone. Against the backdrop of the large window she seemed even smaller than he’d imagined her. Fabre regarded her with the automatic suspicion he reserved for anyone in their early 20’s in a position of responsibility. As the candidates passed in turn she wrote down their names and other information on a sheet, then handed them a routine packet of two white papers and a mimeographed form.**

**In due course Fabre's patience was rewarded and his name entered into Susan Spiegel’s directory. The 3 standard documents in hand, he walked over to a window, sat down on its ledge, and began reading them. The first sheet was a questionnaire:**

**Please answer these questions. They will help us in assigning you to an audition group. When you have finished, please return the completed form to the desk.**

1. **Have you had previous experience singing with a chorus? Please specify. Be brief**
2. **Have you had musical instruction? Describe**
3. **Have you had vocal training?**
4. **Please indicate your vocal range, if known.**
5. **Do you have a speaking knowledge of French? A reading knowledge?**
6. **Do you have any familiarity, even slight, with Catalan, the language of El Pessebre?**
7. **Name …Address …Home Telephone…. Work Telephone…**

**The second sheet was blue, and had been spiced with aesthetic trinkets. Without them one might have mistaken it for a hospital’s pre-operative waiver of responsibility. The words in 24-point block letters at the top were adorned on each side with G-clefs:**

**COMMITMENT VOUCHER**

**The undersigned hereby commits him/herself, upon acceptance by the Philadelphia Orchestra Chorus, to attend all rehearsals listed on the rehearsal schedule, and to give several days notice of his or her inability to attend, in these cases:**

1. **Dates which have been cleared with Aldo Falcone, the Chorus conductor, before the beginning of rehearsals in October (maximum of 4)**
2. **Serious illnesses or family emergencies**
3. **Accidents which may make it impossible to make a rehearsal**

**Absences from 8 rehearsals, whatever the reasons, shall be cause for dropping a singer from the rolls of the Chorus. This voucher will remain in the files of the Philadelphia Orchestra, and may be used as evidence in reaching any future decision to allow or deny the applicant membership in the Chorus.**

**Name ………………………………**

**The third sheet was the rehearsal schedule. Gilbert briefly studied it to assure himself that he would be able to almost all of them, with possibly a few negotiable exceptions. He lifted a copy of the Vivaldi Gloria from the pile on the green cloth covering the table and walked over to a disheveled couch pushed against the left wall. He sat down, completed the form and signed the voucher.**

**The dust cloud that arose as Fabre eased himself onto the torn couch tinged the air with an aura of musty age tinged with elegance. A less parsimonious administration would no doubt have trucked it to the dump long ago. Three other applicants sat next to him on the couch. To his left sat two college age girls, to his right a young man in his late 20's.**

**The two girls were similarly attired in heavy dresses, one green, the other black. The make-up pasted on their faces had a frosted quality of fresh plaster.Taken together they could have been a pair of dolls which had stepped out of the shop windows of one of the antique stores along the length of east Pine Street between 9th to 12th. They sat bent over their questionnaires, filling them out in silence, as if engaged in a difficult task requiring great concentration. They stayed close to one another all through the audition, and did not attempt to relate to anyone else in the room.**

**The man on their looked like he could be a teacher at one of the small private college in the outlying suburbs: Bryn Mawr, Swarthmore, Haverford, Beaver. In contrast to the two girls, his dress was reassuringly modern (which in conformist Philadelphia means that he was no more than 10 years out of date). His unpretentious blue-grey suit has recently been dry-cleaned, his shoes were polished, hair trimmed to a precise length, with just that minutely calculated daring which identifies the cautiously self-conscious young academic.**

**A middle-aged woman, her pale arms covered with blue green veins like clusters of ivy leaves, wearing a tight dress too short for her, and fat as a leg swollen with elephantiasis, had crammed herself into a lounge chair against the opposite wall and was fanning herself with the score of the Vivaldi. She made no pretense of concealing her irritation. Ridiculous, somewhat unpleasant, yet Gilbert conceded that people like her could possess a gorgeous operatic voice.**

**The Noise, steam heat and stuffiness quickly made the lounge oppressive. By rights there should have been a sign prohibiting smoking but, there being none, the little chalk-white sticks excreting their clouds of poison were in evidence everywhere. Gilbert, himself a chain smoker since high school, took no notice of the noxious atmosphere as he lit up a Camel. Cigarette smoking does not appear to interfere with a singer's voice; some of them, (including Caruso himself) actually depend upon them to clear their throats.**

**A group of half a dozen tall double-basses stood in their cases, at a far corner of the room. One could imagine them rollicking like intoxicated Wagnerian gods as they commented , somewhat derisively, on the foibles of the crowd of amateurs who'd so thoughtlessly invaded their private sitting room. One knew just from looking at them that they'd seen it all before: conversing in hushed tones, exposing everyone's pretensions with their gruff humor and merciless jibes, they stood aloof.**

**Gilbert gazed at them with fascination, amusing himself by a mental recreation of the musicians who played them from one concert season to the next. He could imagine them at rehearsals, during performance, on tour. In doing so he relied on his memories of seeing them at concerts, these stolid, unromantic, businesslike musicians with their big cigars and obscuring heavy coats.**

**He imagined them walking into this lounge, like tonight's crowd strolling about or relaxing in chairs and sofas, waiting to go on-stage at the sound of the bell. Rather than responding to the novelty of all the things he saw around him, they would have been indifferent, even bored, more concerned with making the next payment on the car, or the baseball scores, or how many years were left until retirement. Fashions change very slowly in the hidebound world of the symphony orchestras. In the daze of his meditation, Gilbert Fabre felt as if he were witnessing a century of musical life telescoped into a single night in this room.**

**The questionnaire and voucher had been filled in; Gilbert Fabre stood up and began strolling impatiently about the lounge, looking for familiar faces or old acquaintances. He’d the impression that someone he’d noticed 10 minutes earlier had stirred up old familiar memories.**

**He was right: standing over to the right, leaning against the windows was a man in his 40’s. He was handsomely dressed, in good shape physically, with none of the dumpiness or flab that he himself had acquired over the last decade. He was in conversation with a woman no doubt his wife, that Gilbert didn’t recognize. He walked over to the desk, handed in his questionnaire and voucher, then walked over to face this individual to get a better look at him.**

**When we see a familiar face after a long period of absence, our instinctive reaction is to forget all the painful or disagreeable experiences we've had with that person as we hurry over to greet him or her with enthusiasm. Sometimes it happens that we go most of the way to meet some former acquaintance, even going so far as to shake their hands, until we recall that we are expected to be their enemy. This can cause acute embarrassment. If it is not too late, we may try to undo our misapplied enthusiasm with the spontaneous adoption of a cold front or manner.**

**As he came closer, Fabre became increasingly certain that he’d met him before, that in fact he’d been one of his fellow students at the time, back in the 50’s, when he was studying at the Philadelphia Musical Academy.**

**Not exactly friends, they'd taken some classes together, gone to the same parties or out on the town with groups of other students. Fabre was normally very shy in approaching strangers with no pre-existent purpose in mind. With great hesitation he walked over to them. He need not have worried. As he came into sight of the couple, the man turned around, recognized him, and called out to him by name:**

**“Hey! Speaking of coincidences! Gilbert Fabre! I say! Philadelphia is certainly giving up its ghosts tonight! You are Gilbert, aren’t you?”**

**“Yes, that’s right … but I’m not sure of your name…Robert, is that right?”**

**“Come on! Gilbert! Gilbert Fabre! You always did have a memory like a sieve. You certainly would never have made it in grand opera. Patrick Clancy! How in hell could you forget a name like that?”**

**Patrick Clancy! Indeed, how could he have ever forgotten him? Patrick Clancy, a name that evoked both admiration and envy. Someone who’d never known what it was to worry about money; who’d studied with the best teachers; whose way had been paved with dollars; who could have worked himself up to a regular position with the Metropolitan Opera before any of the other students, Fabre included, could hope to be signed up as a stand-in for the chorus of the Philadelphia Civic Opera. And, as so often in real life, he’d nothing with his degree in music!**

**“Patrick Clancy! Of course! Aren’t you the fellow who used to hang around in the taprooms, playing the drunk Irish tenor and hustling free drinks?”**

**“That’s Gilbert all right – never forgets a joke! Forgets your name the minute your back is turned, but remembers some stunt we pulled off in the 60’s! Where did we do that, by the way? McGillan’s, wasn’t it?”**

**“Yes; that’s right. It was McGillan’s.”**

**“Is it still around? The pub, I mean. You have to excuse me, Gilbert, I’ve been away for 15 years.”**

**“Yes; it’s still there on Drury Lane. I never go there.”**

**“Sure, Gil, I know the kind of place.” Clancy adopted the tone of voice of a radio advertiser….” McGillan’s Olde Ale House! Just another one of those *oldee* watering holes in ye *oldee greene* and *plesaunte* town! Like the stupid hat of William Penn, right? Julie, I’d like you to meet Gilbert Fabre.”**

**“How do you do?” They shook hands. Clancy went on:**

**“While we were braying like donkeys at ye olde**

**Philye*delf*y-yuh M*yoos*ic Academy, she was putting the make on male dancers in Milwaukee.”**

**“Yes, and braying through the nose, Patrick.”**

**Julie was slender, pretty, well-dressed, about ten years younger than her husband and, like him, unmistakably from the world of money. She came from a world about which Gilbert knew nothing from first-hand experience, but a great deal through parties and receptions in City Hall.**

**She smiled, her face alive with curiosity: “What’s this story about a pub you used to go to?” Clancy explained:**

**“McGillan’s, Julie. It’s not far from City Hall. Groups of students used to go there after rehearsals. We would enter together, get roaring drunk at the bar, or at least pretend to, and start belting out familiar opera arias. Gilbert always brought down the house with a drunken rendition of Mephistopheles’ aria from Faust. You know, the one that goes.”**

**He began the song, but Julie stopped him: “I know it very well, darling. Milwaukee isn’t exactly the stiks.” Fabre recognized that they were playing out a familiar marital routine, whereby Clancy would try to embarrass her by singing in public and she would make him stop. It reminded him of similar scenes with his ex-wife. Suddenly he felt lonely.**

**“You must have made friends with some of the bouncers, too.” Julie teased**

**Patrick Clancy laughed, the kind of raw, self-conscious laugh that carries an edge of aggression:**

**“Gilbert was reminding me of the time when I came on strong with an imitation of John McCormick, hamming up one bloody old Irish tear-jerker after another: *Last Rose of Summer, Danny Boy, Wild Irish Rose*… The bar went wild. Not a dry eye in the house.”**

**“Nor a dry throat either, I imagine. Go on.”**

**“The management threatened to call the police. We left in a hurry without bothering to pay. I haven’t been back there since. Say, Gilbert, did you ever go back…?”**

**“Yes; I’ve gone there many times. I waited for about a year. The bartenders didn’t connect me with the incident, and I never reminded them of it. How about you? What have you been doing since we went our separate ways?”**

**“Oh; not much. That’s not unusual, is it? Remember, I was the laziest student in the history of the PMA! Not a care in the world … well, a year after I graduated my father set me up in a position as an executive trainee in one of the family’s paper mills in Wisconsin. Our family has been in paper and stationary for 4 generations. Do you remember, Gilbert? *Clancy Cardwares*? Rings a bell?”**

**“No, Patrick, I’m afraid not.” Fabre was feeling bored, restless. When would the auditions begin? He looked around to see what was happening in the lounge, then turned back to address Clancy: “It’s strange, isn’t it, how things work out in life? I was certain you were going on to a career in opera.”**

**“*Opera? Music?* Come off it, Gil! There isn’t any money in music! Got the wife and brats to take care of, plus an estate out on the Main Line near Ardmore. We’ve only been back in the Philadelphia area less than a year. After I pay the bills there’s always something left over; and my time is my own. Try weighing that against a few moments of hollow applause on the stage of the Met; if you ever get that far!” Clancy stepped aside to get a better look at Fabre:**

**“But, say, what about you, Gil? I’d the impression you would have cut off your right arm for a singing career!”**

**Gilbert winced, then shrugged. He felt that he looked stupid: “Oh, I drifted around for awhile. Couldn’t figure out what I wanted to do. The city was hiring welfare case workers. That was in the 60’s. All you needed then was a BA in any field, even music. I just hung out with the petty bureaucrats for many years and, well, now I myself am a ‘*big time* petty bureaucrat’!”, they laughed, “With a fancy title and my own office in City Hall.”**

**“I get the picture, Gil. Easy way out, wouldn’t you say? But, Gil! I bet you’d still sell your soul to be a singer, wouldn’t you?”**

**Gilbert turned away, smarting with anger. The Patrick Clancys’ of this world suck paternalism from their mother’s breast! Aware that he’d been a bit tactless, Patrick attempted an apology:**

**“Now look, Gil. I didn’t mean it that way. You yourself describe your job as a bit..well, dull.. that’s all I meant.”**

**“How the hell would you know, Patrick?” Fabre burst out, “You’ve never had to work for a living a day in your life!”**

**“I say, Gil! I didn’t expect that reaction from you! I…” As Julie started to remonstrate with Clancy, Fabre turned on his heels and walked across the room. Anyway, the auditions were about to begin.**