The Imitation Singer: A Short Story

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Misha Edel concentrated his gaze one last time on the black ,contorted mask that had made him famous. The snout, or some would say the curved trunk ,would have to be shortened, he decided, the jaw cover tightened to produce the sound he wanted.

He looked at himself briefly in the mirror. The mask made him appear like a hideous cross between a monkey, a pig and an elephant. He broke into an almost-smile as he recalled the fright he had caused at his first children's concert. He had started by imitating the voice of the Wicked Witch of the West – in the Wizard of Oz – but he had so startled the young audience, some of whom began to wail, that he had to calm them by twisting the snout and becoming Bing Crosby singing *"White Christmas."*

Tonight, at his final concert, he decided that he would run through several of his most famous roles – Placido Domingo, Jussi Bjorling (sophisticated audiences loved his subtle imitation of the great Swedish singer's Italian) and more daringly the mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne. Then, pivoting rather wildly, he would become the tempestuous Celine and belt out*"True Love."*

At the end, with what he hoped would be the show stopper, he would imitate Jackie Evancho – not the established cross-over singer of sixteen - but the little Jackie, who, at only nine, first stunned the TV world with the voice of a young adult.

Ending with Evancho was a concession. Deep down, he wanted so much to finish where he himself had begun, as the ten year old child prodigy auditioning at the famed Barbilo Music Academy -- his voice so tremulous but so pure. It was that voice he wanted to recover in his finale, the unalloyed, limpid sound of little Misha-le. But, try as he might, he could not manage it. When he tried to produce it, what emerged was vaguely recognizable to him but it sounded so distant, without sweetness or character, as if coming forth from a tin box.

How could it be – he asked himself -- that he could not find that voice? After all it was his own. Just a slight adjustment to the snout, a shorter intake of breath - would that not do it?

The high pitch could definitely not be the problem. For so many years, he had handled even female voices quite easily. He remembered well his first try at Anna Nebreko. The audience had gasped, even though he could privately recall several flawed phrases.

And the Maria Callas recital of five years ago, so much more difficult , had been so successful that several in the audience refused to believe it.

“Give me the mask” a man in the front row of the orchestra had demanded, his cry rising above the tumultuous applause. “This is a hoax; I want the mask.”

Several in the audience had tried to quiet the man, but he would not be stopped. Edel had broken into a thin smile and beckoned him to the stage, but his challenger had hesitated, shrinking , perhaps, at Edel’s willing compliance.

Challenges like this had happened several times before – particularly before skeptical audiences in Tel Aviv and in Berlin. He had had acoustical engineer, sculptors, specialists of many kinds examine the mask, as they searched for hidden amplifiers, sound modifiers, digital devices of all kinds – to no avail, of course.

In Berlin, he had even consented, ten minutes before his imitation of the famous countertenor Andreas Schol, to have an otolaryngologist thrust a tube down his throat to investigate for possible mechanical "aids."

Edel's imitations had gained him enormous acclaim, and until a year ago, he had reveled in the adulation. But now, as he reached 63, uncomfortable questions had started to nag at him. Exactly what were his audiences applauding? His astounding mimicry? Surely. Indeed, he had been told that several "experts" would rush home after his concerts to play audios of the singers he imitated and , then , triumphantly claim that "the great Edel" had distorted a phrase, struck the wrong pitch, or bellowed instead of crooned.

Nevertheless, his consternation mounted. If he had imitated the voices of ordinary folk, of someone in the audience --- would the appeal have been as great? Was it only his resurrection of great singers that was so stirring? Was he appealing, really, to his listeners' nostalgia?

As these disturbing reflections deepened, he yearned more and more to recover his own voice. If he could not regain the voice of little Misha -le, could he not, at least, find the voice of the seasoned, sophisticated Misha?

He first thought it would be easy . He would simply discard the mask, take a breath and sing. He tried one of his favorites, Bach's *"Bleibst Du Bei Mir."* He had performed it countless times, imitating great male and female lieder singers. But when he tried to find his own voice, his anguish only grew. He sang with

ease, to be sure, but the voice, although young and pleasant, sounded strange, foreign. It was like no other, surely, but it did not sound like him at all.

He tried again and failed again. His hands grew sweaty, and his throat tightened. He tried to calm himself. “You haven’t heard yourself in such a long time . . try to take it easy.” He tried another song, Mozart’s *“Das Kinderspiel* (the children’s game) and found himself almost terrified. He couldn’t recognize the voice at all.. It was coming out of him. It surely wasn’t someone else’s but it wasn’t his. He grabbed the mask. He tried again. The voice remained soothing and steady, with a slight vibrato, but, again, he could not recollect it.

“It has become contaminated by the others; I will purify it,” he reasoned. He dipped his hand into the small bottle of the special coagulant he had often used to thicken the inside of the snout, so that he would exhale less air. .

He felt momentarily relieved as he donned the mask, and, indeed, he easily produced a young male sound -- frail, slight, pristine , but it was yet another imitation, of whom he could not tell – but it was not his.

A kind of panic gripped him. He tried again and again, tinkering with the mask, adjusting his breathing, at times stretching or bending, contorting his frame, squeezing his midriff – but to no avail.

Exhausted -- at last, he gave up.

One the afternoon of the final performance, he stared one last time at the mask and then inserted a small razor blade into the lower part of the instrument. A quick touch of his finger and it would be over. He would do it immediately after finishing Jackie Evancho’s aria.

Rarely apprehensive before performances, he could barely hold down the honey and fruit mixture he customarily drank a half an hour before coming on stage. As he entered, he had to grip the mask to hide his quivering fingers.

The familiar, rising applause calmed him. He lifted the mask, pulled it over his face, and , in a moment, Bjorling's confident, powerful *"Nessum Dorma "* poured forth, then Placido's *Non Puerde Ser."* It wasn't Edel's best, but the audience barely noticed. He took the mask off, wiped his brow, and, in front of the rapt, silent crowd, began his customary on-stage rapid gluing and his fiddling with the snout. The mask was back on , and Marilyn Horne's mezzo soprano filled the concert hall. The applause was appreciative, adoring, but he knew that he had missed more than one phrase and lost more than one of the high notes. Worse, he noticed that, toward the end, the voice was not quite accurate. It was as if Horne had become an alto.

He wished desperately that there would have been no intermission. It only increased his anxiety. He found himself actually chewing on his mask as he waited to return to the stage. It was not the final moment with the razor that left his heart pounding. No -- In his super-meticulous manner, he had tested the razor's sharpness, worked on the mechanism, located the precise point on his throat. He would feel a fleeting moment of pain, then he would be gone. Rather -- what drove him to near panic was the fear that he was faltering. He had been acutely aware of the subtle but noticeable errors in his Horne imitation. . . . and what was to come later , toward the end of the performance, Celine's smooth but torrid *" True Love,"* would be far more difficult.

His foreboding was justified. He hit all the notes correctly, the phrasing was perfect, Celine's smooth , saucy voice rang out , but the truly powerful , sultriness was absent. The applause came, but it was milder, more hesitant,, somewhat subdued. This was Celine, to be sure, but a Celine without strength, without the sly, sexy confidence.

By the time, he reached the finale, he was sweating visibly. He reached for some water. Then pulling the mask to his face as tightly as he could, he thrust his

trembling hands into his pockets, shut his eyes and began little Jackie's " *O Mia Bambino Caro*." The beginning was astoundingly accurate, and as in the original Evancho moment, the audience, so swept away by the tiny girl's amazingly mature, adult voice, burst into applause. Then came the final phrases " *Babo, pieta, pieta"* and he stumbled badly. Suddenly, the audience heard neither the adult voice that so characterized Jackie Evancho's singing nor the child's ultra soprano.

What emerged was not the sweet voice of Jackie at all. As he tried to sing on, the voice was quickly changing, supplanting entirely the song of little Jackie. It was a boy's voice, still very young, a bit tremulous, yet lovely, quiet – It could hardly be heard beyond the orchestra seats.

The audience, so excited and adoring a moment ago, was stunned; there was murmuring, shocked whispering, " What was wrong? Where was Evancho?" He started to shake noticeably -- then, pulling his hands from his pockets, he completed the aria with as much strength as a young boy could muster. Then, Misha-le Edel sobbed with joy.