

"Marguerite"

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EXT. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE - DAY

Lincoln Center's Metropolitan Opera House. The one and only.

Rain pounds the building's venerable glass facade. Thunder punctuates muffled music coming from within.

A banner reads "OPENING SEPTEMBER 13th: SCOTT JOPLIN'S
"TREEMONISHA".

Below this: "STARRING MARGUERITE WOOLSLEY IN HER TRIUMPHANT
RETURN".

INT. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE STAGE

A production in dress rehearsal. The set suggests a southern plantation in the 1840s. A chorus of TOWNSPEOPLE menaces three CAPTIVES. A massive black BASS steps forward.

BASS

(Singing.)

Dese are de guilty men, dat carried
Treemonisha away.

TOWNSPEOPLE

(Singing.)

Punish them! Punish them!

INT. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE - ORCHESTRA SEATS

MARKHAM (50), the director, takes notes. The LIGHTING
DESIGNER sits behind him.

MARKHAM

Eighteen through thirty down to
seventy.

The lighting turns ominous.

PIZZIGONI (70), the producer, sits in front of Markham. The weight of a Metropolitan opera's success or failure hangs on his face.

PIZZIGONI

Light it as dark as you want,
they'll still hear her.

MARKHAM

Give her a chance.

BACK ONSTAGE

The chorus dances around the captives threateningly.

CHORUS

(Singing.)

Yes, we will punch and we will kick
them! You must beat them hard!

MARGUERITE (O.S.)

(Singing.)

Stop!

The chorus freezes.

From the wings steps Treemonisha, played by MARGUERITE WOOLSLEY, an electrifying gorgeous black woman in her early sixties. Her age shows even under stage makeup, but cannot dim her presence. She sings like an angel...

MARGUERITE

(Singing.)

You will do evil for evil if you
strike them, you know. Just give
them a severe lecture...

BACK IN THE SEATS

Markham leans in. A flash of hope lights Pizzigoni's face.

BACK ONSTAGE

A flutter of nerves crosses Marguerite's face.

MARGUERITE

(Singing.)

And let them freely GO!

Silence spreads across the theater as "GO!" escapes her lips: the note she hits is not only clearly wrong; it's not even close. In fact, she hits several notes, some of which crack.

The chorus realizes they're staring and push on.

BACK IN THE SEATS

Markham sits back, eyes in his lap. Pizzigoni stands and leaves, furious.

PIZZIGONI

Put her in something low cut. Maybe
they'll like her tits, cause she
sure as shit can't hit a high "C"
anymore, Markham.

BACK ONSTAGE

A tear forms in Marguerite's eye.

THERESE, a chorus member in her 20s, notices it.

Marguerite realizes she's been spotted; she withers Therese with a glare.

INT. HALLWAY - LATER

Marguerite, in street clothes, leaves her private dressing room and heads for the stage door. As she passes the chorus dressing room, she hears laughter within, then a voice...

VOICE (O.S.)
(Singing.)
And let them freely GO!

The voice mutilates "Go!" in a stark imitation of Marguerite. The cast laughs uproariously.

She steps back, closes her eyes, and says in French Creole...

MARGUERITE
Fierté commence à palîr, bientôt
vous tout sentira ma méchanceté.

Thunder crashes. The building's lights flicker.

VOICE (O.S.)
What was that?

Marguerite hurries off.

As she nears the door, she passes a set of rehearsal rooms, from which she hears a woman singing effortless octaves.

Marguerite peers into the rehearsal rooms until she finds...

INSERT - MARGUERITE'S POV - REHEARSAL ROOMS

... Therese playing octaves on a piano and effortlessly vocalizing each note. Her finger taps high C, and her voice matches it with no strain.

BACK TO SCENE

Marguerite watches for a moment, transfixed, then leaves.

Markham enters from the hall's far end, on his cell phone.

MARKHAM

She says she's sick, I don't know!
Give her time. She's Marguerite
fucking Woolsley.

(Beat.)

Let's cross that bridge when we
come to it.

Suddenly, Markham hears Therese's high C. He peeks in on her,
then returns to the phone.

MARKHAM

Trust me. It's a crossable bridge.

INT. MARGUERITE'S PENTHOUSE - NIGHT

The door opens. Marguerite flicks on the lights. The
penthouse is an art deco Architectural Digest photo shoot
waiting to happen.

She drops her handbag on a side table next to a picture of
her and President Clinton outside the Kennedy Center. A
gleaming medal hangs around her neck.

Several unopened bills also sit on the table, each stamped
"URGENT", "FINAL", "PAST DUE".

She walks as if in a trance to her sofa, passing framed
repros of opera programs bearing her name, opening night
publicity stills, mementos of glory all around her.

Before her stands a giant window overlooking Central Park.

She doesn't see any of it. If a hole to hell opened in the
floor, she'd crawl in it to hide in a heartbeat.

PHILLIP (O.S.)

Madam?

She turns to find PHILLIP (50), her butler, professional
servitude defined.

PHILLIP

Does madam require anything before
she retires?

MARGUERITE

Cognac.

Phillip takes a bottle from a liquor cabinet, pours a glass,
brings it to her.

PHILLIP

Mister Bendelius called, madam. He said it was in reference to the mortgage.

Marguerite takes the glass, sips.

MARGUERITE

I'll call him tomorrow.

PHILLIP

He asked me to tell you he can be reached tonight, madam.

MARGUERITE

I'll call him tomorrow.

PHILLIP

Yes, madam.

Phillip turns, passing a picture of Marguerite as Desdemona, locked in embrace with Pavarotti's Otello. A genuinely nostalgic smile lights his face.

PHILLIP

Madam, I am greatly looking forward to seeing you onstage again.

MARGUERITE

Good night, Phillip.

PHILLIP

Good night, madam.

He leaves.

She sighs, takes a deep breath, and tries to vocalize up to high "C". She cracks at "E".

Marguerite sips her cognac and stares blankly at the maw of Manhattan's night.

INT. MARGUERITE'S PENTHOUSE - MORNING

The sun peaks over Central Park. A near-empty bottle of cognac sits on the table. Marguerite has not moved.

A crow lands on the window's ledge. Marguerite walks to the window, opens it. The crow stares at her.

MARGUERITE

J'ai besoin de plus.

The crow flies off as if shot at.

INT. MARGUERITE'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Marguerite stands before an immense reproduction of a "Carmen" program bearing her name. She swings it open, revealing a wall safe.

In the distance, she hears drums. She opens the safe.

A Voodoo shrine sits within. Candles, animal skulls, incense. She removes a thick yellowed book and a necklace of bones.

She starts to close the safe, but stops...

A pearl box sits in the back, half-hidden. The drums beat louder. Her hand starts for the box...

MARGUERITE

It's not that bad.

Marguerite crosses herself, then slams the safe closed.

INT. MARGUERITE'S PENTHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Marguerite lays the yellowed book on the coffee table.

She reaches under her shirt and pulls out a small leather bag on a thin string. She removes it, dons the bone necklace.

She looks out to the ledge. The crow is back. Along with a dozen of his friends. She nods to the crow.

MARGUERITE

Merci.

FADE TO BLACK

EXT. MARGUERITE'S BUILDING - MORNING

A bustling Manhattan summer day.

Marguerite passes the doorman, who tips his hat to her. She is vibrant. No one who passes can help but take note of her. She hails a taxi, gets in.

MARGUERITE

Lincoln Center, please.

The cab pulls away. As it does, a series of passersby turn in disgust from something on the ground.

Thirteen dead crows on the sidewalk.

INT. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE STAGE

Rehearsal flies at a breakneck pace. Marguerite, the center of it all, sings with passion.

She leans into and gloriously belts her high C on...

MARGUERITE
(Singing.)
And let them freely GO!

INT. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE SEATS

Markham turns to see Pizzigoni standing at the back of the house. Markham flashes his producer an A-OK sign. Pizzigoni shakes his head in disbelief.

INT. MARGUERITE'S DRESSING ROOM

Marguerite removes her makeup. A knock comes on the door.

MARGUERITE
Come in!

Therese opens the door sheepishly.

THERESE
Miss Woolsley?

MARGUERITE
Hello, dear. Come in.

Therese enters, still not quite believing what she's doing.

MARGUERITE
I'm sorry, this is awful of me, but
I don't think I know your name...

THERESE
Therese.

MARGUERITE
How lovely. French?

THERESE
My parents are from Louisiana. I
was born in Queens.

MARGUERITE

Where's that?

THERESE

Um... across the bridge. That way.

MARGUERITE

Oh, how stupid of me. I'm from New Orleans, of course, when I'm in New York I hardly go further east than Park. What can I do for you, dear?

THERESE

I just... I had to ask you... how?

(Beat.)

Your voice today, it was... and that C you hit in act three, I've never heard anything so...

MARGUERITE

How does the old broad keep the pipes clear?

THERESE

Oh, Miss Woolsley, I would never...

MARGUERITE

S'all right, dear, I'm teasing you. It's really the simplest thing.

(Beat.)

Practice.

THERESE

That's it?

MARGUERITE

That's all there ever is.

THERESE

(Laughs.)

Well, I can certainly do that. Thank you, Miss Woolsley.

Therese notices the leather bag around Marguerite's neck.

THERESE

Wow. That's N'Awlins. I don't see many gris-gris bags in New York!

Marguerite's hand goes to the bag.

MARGUERITE

Never far from home.

EXT. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE - AFTERNOON

Marguerite walks out of the opera house onto the large courtyard that stands before it. She stops, surprised.

The entire cast, Markham, and Pizzigoni await her, giving her a rousing ovation.

INT. MARGUERITE'S PENTHOUSE - NIGHT

Marguerite enters like a whirlwind.

MARGUERITE
Phillip, darling, call Rao's! See
if my table is free!

Marguerite walks to the window, throws it open. She looks to the ledge.

No crows.

She taps her gris-gris bag.

MARGUERITE
More than enough.

She shuts the window.

INT. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE STAGE

Final dress rehearsal in full swing. Marguerite sings gloriously.

MARGUERITE
(Singing.)
The folks are coming to husk our
corn, I hear them singing a very
sweet song. See, there they are
now, almost here, I'm glad the day
is clear!

INT. IN THE WINGS - CONTINUOUS

Marguerite hurries offstage. THREE DRESSERS disrobe her and put her into her next costume... which Marguerite realizes has been altered to be exceptionally low cut.

MARGUERITE
What is this?

DRESSER

The producer brought it in
yesterday, ma'am...

MARGUERITE

Fine, fine, hurry...

The dressers finish. Marguerite starts back onstage.

DRESSER

Ma'am!

Marguerite turns. The dresser points to the gris-gris bag
around her neck, now fully visible. Marguerite freezes.

DRESSER

Ma'am, you're on...

Marguerite takes off the bag and hands it to the dresser.

MARGUERITE

Put this on my dressing room table.
Be very careful.

The dresser nods. Marguerite hurries onstage. Therese appears
behind the dresser.

THERESE

I'm heading to the dressing room,
I'll take it with me.

The dresser hands the gris-gris bag to Therese, who
disappears into the dressing room.

INT. MARGUERITE'S DRESSING ROOM - LATER

Marguerite enters.

STAGE MANAGER (O.S.)

Ten minutes to places for act two.

MARGUERITE

Thank you, ten!

Marguerite finds her gris-gris bag on her makeup table,
places it on her neck, and begins changing costumes.

INT. IN THE WINGS - LATER

Marguerite hurries to her place. She spots Therese, smiles at
her. Therese smiles back, but curtly...

Marguerite knits her brow, but then the lights come on full and she rushes onstage.

INT. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE STAGE

Marguerite enters amidst a singing chorus.

CHORUS

(Singing.)

Treemonisha, we are glad to see you
home again.

MARGUERITE

(Singing.)

Thank you...

The singers, orchestra, dressers, tech crew, even... no especially Markham... freeze in horror.

Marguerite's voice is dry, cracked, toneless.

MARGUERITE

(Trying to sing.)

Thank you... to scare the conjurors
away from me...

It comes out worse. Markham hurries onstage.

MARKHAM

Everyone take ten... Marguerite?

But she runs offstage, through the wings..

EXT. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

... and into the street.

EXT. ALLEY - MOMENTS LATER

Marguerite ducks into an alley, crosses herself, and opens her gris-gris bag. It is empty.

She suddenly notices her hands; they're aging. Before her eyes, wrinkles and veins appear in her skin.

Marguerite runs out of the alley and into the city.

INT. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE - EVENING

Everyone sits in the house, unsure what to do. Pizzigoni and Markham stand at the back of the theater.

MARKHAM

No, no one can find her. We've
tried her building seven times...

PIZZIGONI

She has no family?

MARKHAM

Not that I know of, certainly not
in New York.

PIZZIGONI

You do what you have to do. I told
you to understudy her from day one!

MARKHAM

She would've walked...

PIZZIGONI

What the fuck has she done now? We
built an entire fucking opening
around her, now this? Fuck her!
Fuck this! And fuck you!

Pizzigoni storms out. Markham takes a deep breath, and...

MARKHAM

Therese!

Therese rises from her seat near the lip of the stage.

MARKHAM

Can I speak with you?

Therese slips a gris-gris bag into her pocket and walks to
Markham.

FADE TO:

EXT. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE - NIGHT

A new sign hangs over the entrance: "OPENING SEPTEMBER 13th:
SCOTT JOPLIN'S "TREEMONISHA". In much larger print below this
reads "STARRING THERESE MICHELLE IN HER TRIUMPHANT DEBUT".

Therese's picture hangs on a call board outside the theater.

A shadow appears over the photo.

Distant drums begin to play.

The glass shatters.

A gnarled hand takes Therese's picture.

The drums continue into...

INT. MARGUERITE'S PENTHOUSE - NIGHT

A sliver of light appears as the door opens... then disappears as it closes.

INT. MARGUERITE'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

The "Carmen" program swings open... so does the safe...

EXT. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE - SIMULTANEOUS

Therese walks out of the opera house onto the courtyard. She stops, surprised.

The entire cast, Markham, and Pizzigoni await her, and give her an ovation.

INT. MARGUERITE'S BEDROOM - SIMULTANEOUS

A gnarled hand takes out the book, a vial of powder... then reaches past everything else to the pearl box in the back.

The drums grow louder.

EXT. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE - SIMULTANEOUS

Therese tries to pass her well-wishing cast mates, but Markham stops her and gives her a huge, heartfelt hug.

MARKHAM

You're going to be wonderful tomorrow.

THERESE

Mister Markham, thank you!

MARKHAM

Get some rest. You'll need it.

INT. MARGUERITE'S PENTHOUSE - SIMULTANEOUS

Marguerite's gnarled hand opens the window, sprinkles the vial of dust on the ledge.

Her reflection stares back at her in the window pane.

Her face is ancient skin stretched over bone. Her eyes have recessed into her skull.

Her teeth glare at the world in angled, yellowed defiance. A few strands of hair wave in the wind. She is a mummified, half-rotten corpse.

The drums grow louder.

Crows land on the ledge, drawn to the dust. A dozen. Two dozen.

Marguerite sits at the table and opens her book.

Tucked into its pages are dozens of opera programs. One reads "Micheline DuBois is Carmen - The London Opera - September 3, 1920." A tin-type that looks exactly like a young, ravishing Marguerite stands on the cover.

Another program reads "Royal Vienna Opera House - 1899". Another picture, another name. More programs appear as she turns the pages. Dates from 1867... 1843... 1799...

Marguerite stops flipping. Her hands move to the pearl box.

INT. THERESE'S APARTMENT - SIMULTANEOUS

Therese undresses, turns off her bedside lamp, gets into bed. She lays the gris-gris bag on her night stand.

INT. MARGUERITE'S PENTHOUSE - SIMULTANEOUS

Marguerite opens the pearl box.

INT. THERESE'S APARTMENT - SIMULTANEOUS

Therese closes her eyes, lays her head on her pillow.

INT. MARGUERITE'S PENTHOUSE - SIMULTANEOUS

From the pearl box, Marguerite removes a vial of red powder and a long, terribly twisted blade. In the pearl box she lays Therese's picture.

She looks to the ledge. Easily three hundred crows sit there, silent as the grave.

Marguerite sprinkles the red powder onto Therese's picture.

INT. THERESE'S APARTMENT - SIMULTANEOUS

Therese's eyes open. Something doesn't feel right... and...

Are those drums?

INTERCUTTING - PENTHOUSE AND APARTMENT

Marguerite stabs the blade into the throat of Therese's picture.

Therese's back arches in a horrific spasm. She tries to scream, but no sound escapes.

The drums grow louder, faster... violent.

A demonic howl from the bowels of hell escapes Marguerite's lips. The crows join in their mistress's scream.

Blood bursts from Therese's mouth. She reaches for her gris-gris bag. Its just at the tips of her fingers.

Marguerite twists the knife in Therese's picture. Her howl modulates with each turn, growing in pitch, deepening in timbre.

An ungodly force wrenches Therese from her bed. She flies against the wall, body twitching, bleeding from her nose, eyes, ears. She tries to scream, to find a sound in any part of her body. She cannot.

Marguerite cuts a circle in Therese's throat. Her wail turns clearer, almost musical. The powder on Therese's picture glows red.

Therese's eyes betray the agony her voice cannot. Her hair bursts into flames.

Therese's picture bursts into flames. One by one, the crows on the ledge combust as well. Marguerite's hands begin to grow smoother, her skin clearer...

And Marguerite's wail turns into a perfect high C.

EXT. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE - MORNING

Markham sits at his desk, opens the New York Times. On the cover, right over the fold: THREE ALARM FIRE CONSUMES SOHO BUILDING.

Pizzigoni bursts into the office.

PIZZIGONI

Is that the Times?

MARKHAM

Yes, why...

Pizzigoni grabs the paper, points at the fire story.

PIZZIGONI
That's Therese's building!

EXT. METROPOLITAN OPERA HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

Markham and Pizzigoni sprint for the street.

PIZZIGONI
Nothing inside was recognizable,
not a fucking thing!

MARKHAM
Oh my God, did you call her?

PIZZIGONI
Yes! Not even a ring!

As they run for a cab, a limousine pulls up. The doors open,
and out steps...

Therese.

Markham and Pizzigoni freeze.

MARKHAM
You're all right!

THERESE
Of course I'm all right...

Markham embraces her.

MARKHAM
You didn't stay in your apartment
last night?

THERESE
No, I stayed with a friend. Why?

PIZZIGONI
It's all right. Come inside. We'll
tell you inside.

They turn to go. Markham stops and looks at her for a minute.

There's something different about her this morning... in
fact, she almost looks a little bit more like...

THERESE
Oh, just a minute...

Therese ducks her head inside the limo.

Phillip sits behind the wheel.

THERESE
Curtain's at eight.

PHILLIP
I wouldn't miss it for the world,
madam.

The limo drives away.

Therese smiles at Markham. He smiles back, dismissing his
crazy thought.

The three of them enter the Metropolitan Opera House. The one
and only.

FADE TO BLACK.