

It Ends With A Beginning

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Prelude

'Colin! Colin! Look at me! Don't fall asleep!'

Is there someone talking to me? It sounds so familiar.

Grandpa? Is that you? Am I in heaven now?

I tried to open my eyes, but I couldn't. I was knackered. It was so hot that I felt like I was melting.

Something was getting heavier in my hand. What was it? I used all my energy to open my eyes...

17th August 2009

The sky was bright and blue; the sun beamed through on the lawn as a few clouds flew gracefully above us following the summer breeze; daisies were blooming, adding colours to the plain green meadow; sparrows were singing as the dancing tree leaves echoed the birdsongs. It was the best kind of summer London could offer. Yet, the cheerful summer view became a stark contrast to the stillness inside the chapel. I knew it was going to be a long, hard day for me. I took a sneak peek at my watch. It was only 9:30 in the morning.

Everyone stood up silently as the priest entered the sanctuary.

He welcomed us - the mourners - with the first prayer, 'For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons... Amen.' Then had us all sit down.

I scanned the congregation and saw all those familiar faces – the church friends of the family, relatives who I hadn't seen for years, and the uncles and aunts who join the family gathering every Christmas. Grandpa's funeral was held on the lawn in front of the chapel

I used to go to with the family when I was young. Pictures flashed in my head as I examined the surroundings – playing hide-and-seek with the other kids while my grandparents and parents were attending the Sunday service; running around the chapel; accidentally crashing head-on into the communion table, and spilling all the wine and bread... This place reminded me of the sweetest time in my childhood, full of happiness and laughter. These memories turned bittersweet when I turned 12 years old, when I started refusing to join the family at any event as I wanted to be ‘cool’ and independent, not a ‘mummy boy’ anymore. Now there was nothing more than the smell of sadness left in the air. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath and stretched my stiffened neck to allow some fresh air in to my body while I mourned the good old times.

The priest invited Grandma to the pulpit. All of our eyes followed Grandma as she leant on her crutch and slowly walked up to the priest. Grandma cleared her throat as the pianist played a chord and the prelude began softly... Those familiar images suddenly flashed like an electric shock in my head again: Opera House; people dancing in costumes; the sound of the orchestra tuning; and the faces of the opera singers...

‘AH!’ I gasped. ‘Are you alright, Colin?’ Mum asked.

‘I’m fine... I think my... my tie is too tight.’ I loosened my tie as I wiped the sweat off my face and tried to calm my heavy breathing.

It was the fire that I have been dreaming of for years, since I first had memories. The one that flashed through my head whenever I heard the songs from *La Bohème*. Strange thing.

Grandma started singing *Donde lieta uscì*, one of their favorites from *La Bohème*, dedicated to her beloved.

Grandma was an opera singer when she was young. She quit after the fire at the opera house, where Grandpa and she met. She had married Grandpa and stayed home as a private singing coach. I remembered how much I loved listening to her singing when I was in primary school. Grandpa would pick me up from school every day since both Mum and Dad had been working weekdays. I would listen to Grandma teaching her students while doing homework on the living room table. She had sung like an angel to me. She was my angel.

Grandpa was a trombonist in the orchestra. He had never stopped playing for one single day. As Dad was not interested in music at all, he had passed his hopes onto me. Instead of trombone, Grandpa had taught me to play the flute. I was passionate enough to pursue it further and was doing my Music degree in Scotland. I couldn’t wait until the day I graduated and moved back to London. Here I was... in London... Grandpa’s funeral. Far from the glorious return I had imagined.

As Grandpa’s story went, the orchestra he had played in was invited to play in an opera production – *La Bohème*. There, he had met Grandma – the ‘Mimi’, the diva, playing the leading role. It was love-at-first-sight he’d told me when he first saw her on the stage. That was why they had bought tickets whenever the production was on in London, to renew this love they shared. I didn’t know how many times they had watched it together, but I surely

had at least watched it five times with them when I was very young. I supposed that explained the strange images every time I listened to it?

The song ended and I looked at Grandma's face. She looked a lot better than I thought she would be. She looked... content and peaceful.

The priest finished the funeral with a prayer. Amen.

All the mourners lined up to have a last glance of Grandpa. Mum and Dad sobbed quietly as they walked up to Grandpa's coffin. Uncle Joe and aunt Jane were crying out loud, dramatic as they always were. Guests were passing the coffin one by one; most of them looked mournful but calm. When the line of people was gone, I helped Grandma to her feet and walked her slowly to Grandpa. She placed her hands on the coffin. Grandpa looked peaceful with a flush on his cheeks. The make-up artist had brought Grandpa's face back to life as if he was only in a deep sleep.

Grandma gently planted a kiss on Grandpa's face, and whispered, 'Good-bye, my love,' in his ear.

18th August 2009

I went into Grandpa's study – his favourite spot in the house. It had been a year since the last time I was here. The room seemed a lot emptier without him. Last Christmas, I had a fight with Grandpa over my future. 'You are going to graduate very soon, Colin. You should think about the future... What do you have in mind...?' Grandpa continued, 'I can always recommend you to the orchestra you know.' I was so annoyed, it had been a topic we had touched on every dinner after I had started second year in university. 'Grandpa, can we get over this?! Why can't I just have a nice dinner with the family without being bombarded with questions every time?!' I left the dinner table and it became my last memory of him. I knew my tone had been too strong, but I didn't apologise because of... my pride. I should have visited Grandpa more often. Now, I wouldn't even get a chance anymore. Everything had changed, except me; I was still that boy who had left the dinner table not having a clue about my life. He'd been right about me.

Grandpa's study was tidy. I looked at the bookshelves behind the long writing desk; the sunrays passed through the skylight into the room. Everything was just in place like a year ago, as though he had never left. I sat down at Grandpa's desk; opened the first drawer on the left. There were his glasses, the pen he used to sign the school notes for me, and a book 'Woodwind History of the Century'. I closed the left drawer and opened the right one. I paused a little as I saw the flute box. I took it out; put it on the rosewood desk and opened the wooden box gently. The first thing I saw was a decades-old, yellowed newspaper cutting. The date was 18 August 1954, 55 years ago. The headline said 'Big Fire at London Coliseum, One Orchestra Member Missing'.

I picked up each part of the flute carefully and examined them. It was a concerto flute. Although it was very used, from my own experience I could tell it was a very expensive flute - high quality and handmade. I rubbed off the tarnish with my shirt and put the flute parts together.

Bach's Partita in A minor BWV1013 was what I had in mind at that moment, one of my all-time favorites. I held up the flute; head joint to my lower lip; took a deep breath and started playing. The sound of this flute was amazing, way beyond my expectation. I closed my eyes and began to drown in my own music...

I felt dizzy when I finished the song. Perhaps it was because I hadn't played in ages, since my recital in May in fact. I opened my eyes...

27th July 1954

'WHERE AM I?!'

My heart was pounding. My body stiffened as I held my breath. Before I could speak a word, I scanned the cover of the score on the sheet music stand in front of me, over and over again.



La Bohème

by Giacomo Puccini

Act I

Score for Woodwind

Name: Colin Williams

London Coliseum

28th July-17th August 1954



‘You alright, Sir? You look pale,’ said the man who was holding a trombone next to me.

‘NO, I AM NOT,’ I thought. I looked around the place. The wooden stage, the velvety seats, the golden interior, the ivory sculptures on the wall... they looked exactly like in the dreams I had had for years. I told myself that it must be a dream, yet everything was so real...

As I convinced myself it wasn’t a dream, I tried to calm down and asked, ‘Today is...?’

‘July 27th... You sure you’re feeling alright? It is the first rehearsal of this marvelous production today!’ the man said in an excited tone with his eyes half closed.

‘No, I meant what year... 19...54?’ That’s all I needed to know.

‘You are definitely not well, my old son. Of course it’s 1954!’ ‘By the way, I am Henry. Henry Bass.’ He held out his right hand.

‘HENRY BASS?!’ I shouted, not believing what I had just heard. It must be a dream... it must be dream... I kept telling myself. I closed my eyes tight and hoped I would be back in Grandpa’s house when I opened them again.

He said, ‘Um... yes. Henry Bass. I don’t think we have met before? Nice to meet you.’ When I opened my eyes reluctantly, his hand was still waiting for my shake. This was not a dream.

My heart was screaming, ‘HENRY BASS! GRANDPA! LA BOHÈME! 1954! YOU GOT TO BE KIDDING!’

I held my breath as I shook his hand with my wet palm, tongue-tied. ‘I am Colin. Colin Bar...’ I frowned as I glanced at my score, and corrected myself immediately. ‘Williams. Colin Williams.’

‘Ladies and Gentlemen! I hope you have all had a wonderful summer break. Welcome back for the new season. I am Christopher Thomas, your conductor, for any new member who is joining us for the first time. This is the first rehearsal with the singers so I hope you have practised hard at home,’ said the conductor, and then tapped the music stand with his baton.

The harpsichord played an A and the orchestra followed the tuning. Everyone sat up straight and started playing their parts as the conductor led the orchestra.

I rubbed my sweaty palms on my trousers, trying to concentrate. ‘Stay calm, Colin Bass, stay calm...this is not the time to panic,’ I whispered to myself.

I tried to keep up with them by sight-reading. There were only two flautists in the orchestra as usual and I was the 1st flute. There was no way to escape. Fortunately, I had listened to the opera a million times, which helped my sight-reading a lot.

That was the most intense rehearsal ever. Strangely, I felt great afterwards. How long had I missed this feeling? - The connection between me and the music. The music seemed to have calmed me.

‘Bravo everyone! I am really looking forward to the premiere tomorrow. I will see you at 11 in the morning. Have a good evening,’ the conductor announced.

I needed to sort things out. I needed to know what was happening to me. I slapped myself hard on the face. ‘Ouch!’ I was not dreaming... I scanned the place. It was exactly like where I had been dreaming of my whole life, the Opera house in my dreams.

Then I set my eyes on Henry. When I examined his face in detail, I was absolutely sure that was him – my Grandpa, but a much younger version without the wrinkles and the bald head.

What am I suppose to do now?

Have I just time travelled?

I need to know the way back!

‘Do you see her? She is an angel, isn’t she?’ Grandpa said. He didn’t look at me, but set his eyes on the stage.

‘What? Who?’ I said.

‘That lady.’ He tipped his head and raised his eyebrows as he gazed at the girl on the stage, who was reading her score and discussing something with another guy. The score blocked her face, but I recognised by the costume she was wearing that she must be the Soprano who played ‘Mimi’. The moment she put down her score, I was stunned as I recognised Grandma.

While I was still in shock, Henry interrupted my thoughts. ‘I am leaving now, Colin. See you tomorrow. By the way, you played well.’

Before I was able to react to it, he disappeared.

Was it real? Had I time travelled? It sounded scary, but exciting at the same time.

I HAD TRAVELLED BACK TO 1954!

28th July 1954

I came back to the opera house at 10:30 the next morning. The memories of ‘Colin Williams’ seemed to have embedded themselves in my head. I managed to get myself ‘home’ in this totally different London. Except for the fact that I hadn’t got the tube, but had joined the crowds on the bicycle ‘I’ had parked outside the opera house. It all seemed so strange but familiar to me, as if I had been there before.

I was examining the flute all night long. However ridiculous it sounds, it must have been some magic that brought me here. Tracing back to how I got there from 2009; I was playing the Partita in A minor BWV1013 on this flute in Grandpa’s study, so I tried to play that song again last night. When I finished, the words floated on the joint of the flute in front of my eyes –

‘It ends with a beginning.’

What did it mean?

‘Good job, Henry, Mary and Keith!’ said the conductor after the first tutti rehearsal.

Grandpa was really good I had to admit. I had always known his passion for music, but it was not until I saw it in person that I understood how professional he was.

Strangely, I did practise a lot for this show last night. I had never taken any performance so seriously in my whole life. I was very average at university. Perhaps I just didn’t care enough to practise as hard as my friends did.

Someone patted me on my shoulder and said, ‘Feeling better today, mate? Lovely pieces, aren’t they?’ It was Grandpa.

‘I am a lot better, thanks. I sucked at the rehearsal, but you were really good!’ I said.

He frowned and looked confused, ‘Sucked? What do you mean? Anyway, let’s grab some lunch.’

I stood up and walked towards the backstage exit. There was a man, a backstage worker I guessed, leaning against the heavy stage curtain. He was wearing a flat cap; a very worn white button-down shirt with his sleeves rolled up; a brown pair of trousers that looked slightly too loose on him; and a pair of old black canvas shoes.

As his eyes met Grandpa’s, Grandpa shouted, ‘How dare you smoke here again, Jerry! The smell has gotten into the curtain!’

‘Bossy Hen.’ The 5’2” tall Jerry rolled his eyes, threw the cigarette on the floor and left.

‘Such an inconsiderate goof!’ Grandpa said angrily as we walked to the exit. Someone was coming in from the backstage exit at the same time we were going out.

‘Sorry,’ said Grandpa as he crashed into someone. He looked up and said in a stunned tone, ‘Miss Webster... What a surprise... I am sorry. I didn’t see you coming in.’ Grandpa bumped into Grandma when he opened the door. His face flushed like a tomato and Grandma giggled when she noticed his red face.

‘No, don’t apologise. I’m fine!’ said Grandma and held out her hand to Grandpa, ‘Nice to meet you. Just call me Lily. Do you play in the orchestra?’ She smiled to him.

‘It’s my pleasure to meet you... Lily. Yes, I play the trombone. I am Henry and this is Colin, he is our first flautist.’ He glanced at me and continued, ‘Good luck for the premiere tonight. You sounded absolutely beautiful!’

‘Thank you! And you too. I will see you again in the afternoon.’ Grandma gave us a warm smile and left.

‘She took my breath away,’ said Grandpa with a big bright smile.

‘Don’t worry. You are breathing okay now. Let’s go. I’m starving.’ Yes, Grandma was gorgeous. It was so surreal to see the young Grandma in person. She was elegant, beautiful and serene.

We had lunch in a pub on the street next to the opera house. It was amazing to be able to have a meal with him again, something that I couldn’t have imagined happening again.

I asked him about how he got into music, as a trombonist.

He said, ‘I have always loved music, but my parents wanted me to be an engineer. I was fortunate enough to attend university. It wasn’t my choice to study engineering, but rather to fulfil their expectations. After university I worked as an engineer for a couple months, I resigned. I didn’t belong there. It wasn’t me at all.’ He took a swig of his beer and continued. ‘You may think I was an idiot to leave an extremely well paid job, but I knew I was meant to be a musician. This is me.’

‘So what’s your tale, nightingale?’ he looked at me.

‘Huh? Pardon me.’ I was confused.

‘Tell me your story,’ he said.

Oh... I remembered Grandpa using that phrase in the past.

I suddenly felt ashamed when I was asked this question by him, the man who I used to look up to when I was a boy. I had disappointed him. Now, he was in front of me, my same age, an ambitious young man who dared to dream and fought for what he wanted. I wasn’t even comparable to him.

‘My grandparents were musicians too. I was very close to them when I was young. My

Grandpa introduced me to music. It's the flute I play the best. I love it. I chose music at uni because I liked it, but also because I couldn't find anything else that I was good at.' I paused for a while and continued, 'Actually, I am not even that good at music!'

Grandpa grumbled, 'You were able to go to university and now you are in one of the best orchestras in London. It is your natural talent! If you really liked it, you shouldn't be so confused.' Deep down in my heart I knew it wasn't actually me in the orchestra. But I didn't say anything, so he went on.

'Trust me. You played well. Your grandparents must have been very proud too!'

'I don't think so. In fact, it's the opposite. My Grandpa died a few weeks ago. I disappointed him... I wasn't the grandson he had wanted. If only I could have the chance, I want to say sorry to him for running away from the Christmas dinner last year; for not going back more often to visit him and Grandma; and for not being the grandson that would make him proud. But it's all too late now.'

'It's never too late. I didn't like my engineering degree, but I made it through. I am sure he was proud of you. Do what you can do now to make them even prouder. Just follow your gut and stop doubting yourself!' he snapped at me.

It's never too late... Yes, he was right again! It's never too late!

That must be it! I am gonna make him proud. That must be the reason I am here.

I AM GONNA MAKE HIM PROUD!

The premiere was a huge success. The applause from the audience went on for 10 minutes.

I sat on the stage with the rest of the orchestra and the opera cast absorbing this extraordinary feeling. It's amazing; they loved our performance.

The conductor started pointing to those who performed well in the show tonight and had them stand up to accept the applause from the crowd. He first pointed to Henry, which was not a surprise, then the first violinist and then to me... ME?

My heart screamed. I swallowed the lump in my throat and stood up. They clapped loudly and some of them whistled as I stood. That was like a dream to me. I couldn't believe this!

I turned to Grandpa with tears running in my eyes. He returned an assured look with a big smile. I knew I had made him proud.

I KILLED IT!

I was still enjoying my first big achievement when someone shouted loudly from the backstage.

‘FIRE! FIRE!’

Everyone on the stage and in the auditorium started whispering to each other. Suddenly, people started screaming, as fire spread to the curtain, soon to the carpet and then to the wooden structure of the opera house.

It was chaos! Everyone tried to run to the exits at once. Even though the house manager was telling everyone to be calm and to follow the theatre staff’s instructions, no one was listening. The audience were pushing each other, screaming as they ran for the exits.

The backstage staff urged all the performers and orchestra members to leave the stage. The whole backstage was ablaze.

Most of the orchestra members were carrying their instruments, which made the evacuation even more chaotic. The fire spread to the right side of the stage, leaving one staircase on the left to exit the auditorium.

Grandpa and I were the last ones to get off the stage. As we were running down the stairs, a woman tried to squeeze past us back up to the stage. It was Grandma.

Grandpa caught her arm, ‘What are you doing?!’

‘I have to get my ring! Let me go!’ she yelled as she tried to shake Grandpa’s hand off.

‘WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE DOING?! LEAVE! NOW!’ Grandpa shouted and tried to pull her back.

‘That ring’s the only thing my Mum left me. I have to get it. Just let me go!’ Grandpa still wasn’t letting her go and held her even tighter.

‘PLEASE! It’s in my room. I will leave as soon as I have got it back!’ she begged him and shook him off. She ran toward the back of the stage.

‘WAIT!’ Grandpa shouted, dropped his trombone and followed her.

WHAT DO YOU GUYS THINK YOU ARE DOING?!

I had no choice but to follow them. I also dropped everything and ran after them.

Jeez... I am gonna die here, and I am not even 21 yet...

Thick grey smoke had enveloped the theatre; fire was swallowing the stage. That was the fire! The fire that had been flashing in my head my whole life! It all seemed to make sense now! It was a memory! A memory of the life I had had!

It was not the right time to explain things to myself though. The ceiling was falling down and the fire was spreading quickly. We survived every obstacle and arrived at Grandma’s backstage room.

They hurried into the room and found the ring immediately.

‘Cool! Run, now!’ I cried.

We ran as quickly as we could, but there were too many things in the way. I couldn’t see clearly as the smoke got thicker and thicker.

Grandpa was holding Grandma closely to him, the other hand covering her nose and mouth. The smoke was choking us as we tried to find our way out.

Suddenly, a huge wooden beam started to fall from the ceiling onto them.

‘CAREFUL!’ I pushed them forwards, but tumbled onto the floor with the beam falling on my legs. I could not move them.

‘COLIN!’ They tried to pull me out, but the wood was too heavy and it hurt me every time they tried.

‘It’s not gonna work. Just go and find someone to help,’ I said to them, but in my mind, I knew I wasn’t gonna make it.

Grandpa shouted, ‘Hang in there! I will be back soon!’ Then they ran out of sight.

“‘Orchestra hero sacrificed in fire, bravely saved his grandparents” is going to be tomorrow’s headline. *COUGH*,’ I joked to myself as I choked on the thick smoke. At least I had made him proud. I was ready to see him again.

I realised the flute was suddenly in my hand again. But this time, the writing on the joints floating in front of my eyes read,

‘What brought you here brings you back.’

There was a click in my head! Now was the time! I played the Partita in A minor BWV1013. All of a sudden, everything went white and I was so sleepy...

19th August 2009

‘Colin.’ Someone was calling my name in my dream. ‘Colin.’ Someone shook my shoulder and I woke up.

‘You will catch a cold here, my darling. I didn’t know you weren’t in your room last night. Go, sleep in your room,’ said Grandma, the old grandma in her usual tender voice.

Was it a dream?

I quickly ran to the desk. There was the flute case on it, but I didn't see the flute anymore. I searched every drawer in Grandpa's study, but couldn't find it. I sat in front of the desk again, grabbed that piece of old newspaper and read on.

'... Orchestra flautist, Colin William is missing... His flute was found in the remains of the opera house, but not his body...'

Then I got it.

It was the flute I had left behind.