

During wartime in 1944 a young grad student falls in love with a mysterious beauty who rents him a room. His infatuation leads him to abandon his doctoral thesis for a fantasy love affair, but lovestruck dreams lead him to real life tragedy.

NIGHT MUSIC: A Portland Melodrama

By Gehla S. Knight

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GEHLA S. KNIGHT

NIGHT MUSIC

A Portland Melodrama



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Portland, Oregon

1944

One



She had the saddest eyes I've ever seen. They shone like twin Earths rising over a lunar landscape, evoking a pulse of longing and remorse in a stranded traveler's soul. I had never seen eyes like those, as brilliantly blue as drugstore glass, deep enough to wade in. And every once in a while when you caught her staring at the photograph on the Philco console, they sparkled like a Hollywood close-up. Not lit by tears, just memories breaching the light of day. That's how I remember her. First the eyes. And lastly a melancholy burning in my brain that is smoldering still.

Delilah was thirty-three-years old when I met her. Not met her actually in the formal sense as people did in those days. We weren't even introduced. I saw the sign in the front window, set my bag down on the sidewalk and rang her bell. It was a Tuesday, and I had slept on the oak benches at the Bus Depot on Fifth Avenue rather than cross the river and catch a streetcar to my father's bungalow on

Fremont Street. Ever since my sister Carla had snagged a good paying job with The Boeing in Seattle and left home in March, Pop was alone in the house. I realized when the spring term at Willamette University ended that if I showed up on his doorstep with baggage in my hand and an empty belly growling, I would never be able to break free. And freedom was what I was seeking that incipient summer of 1944. Even if it meant only modest accommodations in a rooming house on Portland's West Side with a chance to steer my own independent course while I completed my doctoral thesis.

Rooms were hard to find with the War on. Every serviceman and his sweetheart were camping out in the city's nooks and crannies along Broadway and Front Street. There was no room for a graduate student, a 4-Fer legally blind in one eye where my cousin Willis Soto had caught me with a fishing hook when I was seven. So I was alone, feeling small and ashamed of my strapping, healthy body which Uncle Sam had deemed unfit for service when all my friends signed up.

Delilah came to the door with a white turban wrapped around her hair and those bold, blue eyes staring at me. I didn't even notice her mouth, how sofa-cushion soft it was as it widened into an aloof gesture not unlike a regret. She wasn't wearing any lipstick or rouge, just those incredible eyes shining like Streamliner headlights.

There was no compassion in her gaze. I felt as if she were seeing right through me. I even turned to look back down the steps to discover who was pressing on my trail, hot after the furnished room I wanted. No one there. No one I could see anyway.

"Are you here about the room?"

"Yes," I said. "I saw the sign."

"Well, I'm sorry, but I just showed it to a lady who wants it."

I was driven to persistence by a pain in my backbone, stinky socks and a crick in my neck from using my duffle bag as a pillow. "Could I just take a look?"

"Sorry, but she's already made a deposit." The door closed in my face.

I stooped to pick up my bag and glanced at the bay window fronting the street. She was there, one hand at her waist, her blouse unbuttoned at the bottom and tied in a giant slipknot over sloppy dungarees. All I could remember was being disappointed that some brazen lady had beat me to the room and how those empty-ocean eyes made me want to drown my depression in a pint of beer. I trudged to a tavern at the corner of Main Street and Tenth Avenue, sat at the bar with my bag under my knees and ordered a draft. The bartender didn't even look my way as he set my beer down. Halfway through the suds, I realized I didn't want liquor at all. My head was ringing, and my belly ached. I was hungry. Down and out. That's what it was, and some stupid woman had beaten me out of a room within easy walking distance of the library. It wasn't fair.

I left the last of my change on the bar, pushed open the doors and hit the pavement again with no particular place to go. For no apparent reason, I found myself back at the 1909 Broadway house with the green shutters and wrap-around porch.

She came out to the porch with a stack of newspapers in her arms and nodded toward the bay window. "Say, if you still want the room, you can have it. That lady got another place over in Sellwood with her sister-in-law and asked for her deposit back."

"Oh. Swell." I didn't know if I should put my bag down to help her with the papers. Before I could decide, she had brushed by me, deposited her load at the corner, and indicated I should follow her up the steps and into the foyer.

She pointed up the stairs. "It's up there, at the back. The bathroom's at the end of the hallway, but there's a sink in your room. No cooking though, okay? No hotplates or anything."

I was nodding as I climbed the stairs behind her. Her hips seemed bound in one direction as her arms swung to the other. She smelled like ammonia. Her body was the shape of the dressmaker's forms in department store windows. Perfect symmetry. She had long legs and delicate hands I admired as she gripped the banister during our narrow ascent. Her tawny skin glowed like ecru silk without a flaw or permanent crease. It seemed as if she had never laughed, never frowned. Not a single inspiration or troubling thought was

written on her face. It was impossible to read anything beyond those piercing, sad eyes.

“I change the linens every Monday, but you have to strip the bed yourself. Just put your sheets and towels in the hamper by the bathroom. Do you smoke?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Well, make sure you don’t smoke in bed. The last tenant I had nearly burned the house down. The spread has some holes in it, I’m afraid.”

“I’ll be careful.”

“And use the ashtray. Lord knows I have plenty. That’s how fires get started. People get lazy and careless.”

“Don’t worry. I haven’t burned up anybody’s house yet.”

She turned around and drilled me with a military glare. “I’m serious. There’s a fire extinguisher on the landing there just in case you need it.”

“Let’s hope not,” I mumbled, trying to mend fences.

She pushed the door open and stepped aside to let me pass. “Will this be alright?”

The room smelled of musty newspaper, moldy carpeting and cigar smoke. “It’s just fine,” I lied eagerly.

It was better than the bus depot. Dry and quiet. And cheap. I could afford cheap. I set my bag down beside the bed. It sagged in the middle like a slaughterhouse nag. The iron rails were painted rusty brown. A chenille bedspread in pale blue with blushing rosettes long ago scrubbed into senile decline hung like a shroud over the metal carcass. I could hear the springs trembling even before I sat on the edge and thumped the lumpy pillow which flattened like a flapjack beneath my fist. The bed squawked and clanged but surrendered without a fight as I lay back and tested it with a few good bounces.

“And I expect the rent on the first of the week. You can leave it on the kitchen table downstairs if I’m out. If you want any extra laundry done, you have to pay on a piece basis.”

“That’s fine. I can manage.”

She looked behind her at the smoky reflection in the dresser mirror. “Well, that’s it. I’ll have to have the first and last week’s rent in advance.”

“Okay. Sure.” I stood up, dug in my trousers and pulled out my wallet, as thin as a slice of deli ham. “That’s five dollars a week?”

“And laundry is extra.”

“Sure. Here’s five.” I handed her my carefully folded bills. “Could I give you the balance on Friday when I get paid?”

In an instant, she glanced down at my shoes with a Hershey shine, the rain-splotted pants and corduroy jacket with a front button missing. “I suppose that’ll be alright. I’ll go down and get you a receipt.”

She closed the door behind her, and I heard the sound of her steps on the stairway. A bus farted outside. Otherwise it was quiet. A good place to study with no annoying brats yelling and bickering outside my door. I was pleased with my good fortune as I sprawled back on the bed and shut my eyes.

When she returned, she laid a receipt for my five dollars on the bureau and handed me two fresh towels. On top were a bar of Palmolive soap and a safety razor. “The last tenant left these, so I guess they’re yours if you want.”

“Thanks.” I took them.

“Mr. Peeler was a beer salesman. Do you drink much?”

“Not really.” Couldn’t afford to. I was barely able to manage food let alone booze.

“What’s your name?” She was looking over my shoulder.

I glanced quickly in the direction of her stare. Nothing but a Coca-Cola calendar with the month of December hanging beside an old nail hole. “Nathan,” I answered, uncertain she was paying attention. The calendar had a picture of a slim, young woman wearing yellow earmuffs. “Nathan McCarthy.”

Her eyes never met mine. “I used to know a Gladys McCarthy. She was from Springfield. Would you be any relation, do you think?”

“No. I don’t think so.”

“I’m Delilah.”

“Nice to meet you.” It suited her perfectly—exotic, intriguing, sexy, beautiful. She was all of those things in her own way. As intriguing as foil-wrapped Christmas chocolates.

“Well, if you want to use the kitchen for anything, I leave it open until supper. You’re welcome to the coffee if it’s made, and there’s usually leftovers in the icebox if you’re hungry at night. But I don’t furnish regular meals, you know.”

“I understand.”

“It’s just that I have a lot left over, and it’s no use going to waste if you can eat it. The lady down the hall in Number 2 doesn’t eat much. Her name is Veronica Nigh, and she works at Kaiser. She’s the welding superintendent’s secretary, makes very good money but is so stingy she won’t even spring for a streetcar when she goes to Albina to visit her mother on Sundays. I don’t think it’s fair for her to take advantage if she can afford the automat.”

“Right.” I stood like a mannequin, afraid to move my long arms, feeling completely stupid, hoping she would complete her verbal tour and leave me alone. I had an urge to expel some of the pent-up, gaseous contents of my lazy bowels, shed my rumpled clothes and sleep away my miseries.

“Well, you’ll meet her. She’s home every evening at six. And she doesn’t like the radio played after ten.”

“I like it quiet myself. I study in the evenings.”

Her head tilted sideways to better examine my face, as if she’d only just noticed me. “You’re a student?”

“I’m doing research for my doctoral thesis.”

“That must be awfully important.”

“I don’t know that it’s so important really.”

“To keep you out of the service, I mean.”

“Oh.” I blushed with shame. My gaze couldn’t stay fixed on hers. “I’m practically blind in one eye.” Self-consciously, I adjusted my spectacles. I supposed they gave me a professorial appearance and masked my blatant youth.

She turned around and grabbed the doorknob. “Well, you’re lucky, Nathan. Whatever it is, if it keeps you out of the Army, it’s worth it.”

“Roman history.” I held her halfway in my space and halfway into hers.

“What?”

“That’s what I’m studying. Roman History. My doctoral thesis is a modern history of the First Monarchy Period.”

“Oh.” The blank eyes turned away from me as the door closed partly between us. “Kings and queens, you mean?”

“Only kings, I’m afraid.”

“I thought the Romans had emperors. Like Nero. He was an emperor, wasn’t he?”

“Yes.”

“And Caesar.”

“Caesar wasn’t really a single individual.”

“I read about him in school. He crossed the Rubicon. I remember that part.” She looked down and touched the tip of her nose, deep in thought for a moment. “I don’t believe I recall just why he did that, but it was significant, wasn’t it?”

“Yes. You could say that.”

“Well, that was Caesar who did that so I’m sure he must have been a real person.”

“That was Gaius Julius Caesar. But all the later emperors after Augustus were referred to as Caesar so the term applies to quite a few people.”

Her eyes brightened with sudden enlightenment. “You mean it’s like Your Highness? Something like that?”

“In a way.”

“And why is that important?”

“Well, you see, Rome had a monarchy in the beginning. Then there was a republic, and then the first triumvirate filled the vacuum after the chaos and anarchy stemming from Caesar’s rise to absolute power after the death of Crassus and the defeat of Pompey. Then came Julius Caesar’s assassination, the second triumvirate with Octavian and Lepidus ending with the defeat of Mark Antony and the imperial period although many scholars argue the representative republic had actually disintegrated long before.”

“Where was Caesar?”

“Oh. Well Octavian became Caesar Augustus.”

“Not Julius then.”

“Uh, no. That was Octavian’s great uncle by adoption.”

“Oh.”

“It’s interesting and instructive to learn how the monarchy evolved into a republican system of semi-representative democracy with an emphasis on civil law and legislative assemblies and then see how that failed in the end through military misadventure and political power struggles with Rome reverting to a tyrannical empire more repressive than the monarchy. That has important lessons for the present.” I took a breath and felt my cheeks burn with embarrassment. She must think I was the most bombastic, pedantic, over-stuffed windbag she’d ever met. “That’s the point, I guess. If there is one,” I mumbled.

“So Rome had kings in the beginning?”

“Yes.” In the midst of a great World Conflagration, how could anyone deem ancient history to be relevant? Doctoral academics were now at the bottom of the priority food chain, and my thesis along with hundreds of other liberal arts tomes would be buried on the scrap heap of postwar trivia. “I think there are important parallels to be drawn between the Roman Period and modern-day European monarchies. My thesis is directed at analyzing those similarities.”

“That’s nice to know then, isn’t it? Maybe someone will think that’s important someday.”

“Yeah... maybe.”

“Well, anyway I didn’t know Julius Caesar was adopted.”

I couldn’t risk any more bad manners to clarify my verbal rambling. And by the time I thought of a retort, she had already turned her back. The echo of my nervous laughter rebounded off the wallpaper when she shut the door. She had cut right to the bone and made me bleed. Who cared what I was laboring on in the stuffy library stacks? What difference did Roman kings make when so many young men my age were being mowed down like summer wheat on the killing fields of Europe and bloody beaches of the Pacific? It sounded like such an inane, trivial pastime. Education, historical review, expansion of the intellect at a time when kids

barely old enough to shave were being blown to bits by an Austrian paperhanger who flunked out of art school?

I sank on the bed and surrendered to its frumpy embrace.

Before I closed my eyes, I heard the sound of the front door opening downstairs, heavy footsteps plodding upward toward my door, thumps in the hall then the creak of a door opening. The walls shuddered as it slammed. My neighbor Veronica Nigh. I looked at my wristwatch: three past six. Right on time. As punctual as an Italian train.

I lay there for awhile, cataloging the noises in my new surroundings until I drifted off to sleep. When I awoke, it was cooler. Traffic swished from the street below signaling a break in the June heat wave. As I listened to the sound of the rain splattering on the gutter outside my window, I tried to quiet the hunger pangs in my belly and began to worry about where I was going to get the five dollars I needed by Friday. The truth was, I didn't have a job. I had lied. I had a slim prospect of a job, but I was hoping I wouldn't have to take it. I needed my nights free to study, and night clerk at the Roosevelt Hotel seemed like the best choice.

I stood up, unzipped my pants and kicked off my wrinkled trousers. My pockets were empty. The bureau mirror reflected a slovenly character with a bleary-eyed glare who bore little resemblance to the suave, aspiring intellectual I imagined myself to be. I needed to use that razor on my face before I went in search of a handout.

"Roosevelt Hotel it is," I resigned myself. Five bucks was five bucks, and there was something in those eyes of Delilah's that haunted me, made me want to avoid seeing them flare like spotlights, melting my defenses as I bared my baggy pockets and begged for an extension on the overdue rent.

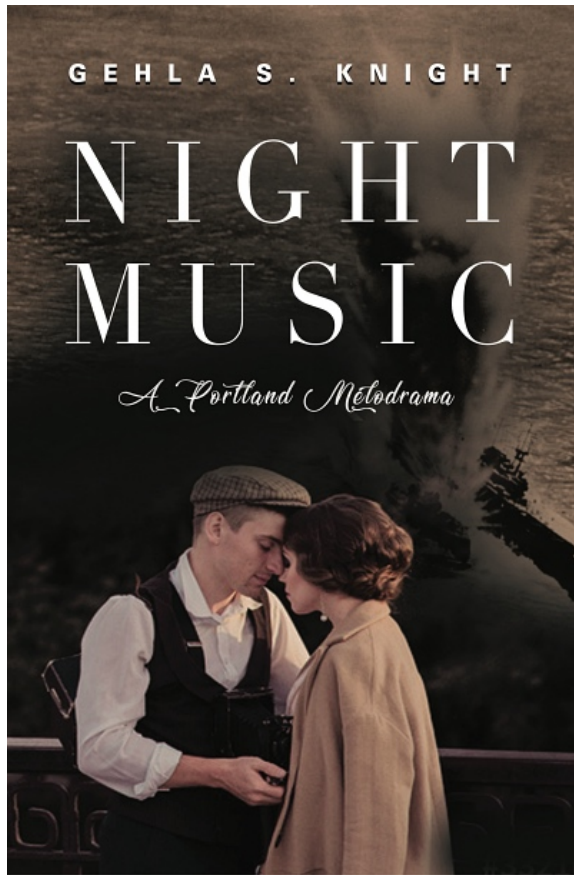
It was deserted downstairs when I let myself out. On the sidewalk, pulling my collar up to shield my face from the rain, I heard the front window rising.

She hollered down at me. "Hey, Nathan! You need a key!"

She threw it down. It was tied to a maroon, Bakelite shoehorn. The number 3 was painted in black India ink on one side. I picked it up, and she had gone.

I put my head down and walked quickly to the corner. If I was Number 3, and Veronica was Number 2, who was Number 1? I had seen the closed door at the head of the stairs. Maybe I'd be lucky. Maybe my other neighbor would be a teacher, a retired musician from the symphony orchestra. A soul mate. Or maybe a salesman. Hopefully somebody quiet.

I spurted across the street in the watery wake of a Chevrolet coupe and headed for the Roosevelt Hotel to meet my rendezvous with mediocrity.



During wartime in 1944 a young grad student falls in love with a mysterious beauty who rents him a room. His infatuation leads him to abandon his doctoral thesis for a fantasy love affair, but lovestruck dreams lead him to real life tragedy.

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