

# When the devil comes for you

No matter how sudden and unexpected, bad news — in this case, concerning an old friend — never seems to come absolutely out of the blue.

The message from my sister was brief and uncharacteristically uncheerful: "Please call." And so, for the hour or so before I spoke with her, I knew something, somewhere was wrong. But there is no way to prepare. The news could hardly have been worse. And suddenly a beautiful September day goes abruptly flat. Unexpectedly, things are empty.

Particularly so, perhaps, if you have been enjoying the frivolous excitement of early autumn. Here in Toronto, there has been the film festival, with its stars and parties and gawkers. It's hard to imagine anything more frivolous or exciting. And there are the annual autumn openings and launches and vernis-sages — the whole pizzazz of a big city gearing up for a new season of music, dance, publishing, art, opera and theatre.

The publicity machinery that supports and sells this culture seems, at this time of year, to take on a life of its own. It's great fun — you could probably survive a month on free hors-d'oeuvres and wine — but it can obscure reality.

Sometimes it seems as if it's not the films that are important, but the galas and glimpses of stars. Not the books, but the signings and interviews. Not the music, but the symphony's new marketing strategy. Not the dance, so much as the latest gossip about the dancer.

All of which — when bad news comes — is a very easy balloon to pop. When things unexpectedly get



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## CHEAP SEATS

serious, the hectic blush pales very quickly. All the hoopla becomes suddenly silly: the solipsistic movie stars; the clever gossip columnists; the self-important authors; the gushing hangers-on; the smarmy bureaucrats; the cynical journalists; the amusing connoisseurs; the self-described intellectuals who would no more miss a party than try to create a work of art.

Suddenly, this thin, bubbly little world collapses. And, in my case, I sat for a while in an empty house, trying to understand what people are never able to understand. "You idiot," I said, aloud, to my old friend. Knowing, as I said it, that this could hardly come close to what had proven to be his private, unbearable reality.

But, in the face of what we can guess of this reality, if the hype of the arts becomes silly, the art itself does not. It's important, I think, to try to keep the distinction clear. This was brought home to me when I came upstairs from my basement office, still trying to make sense, somehow, of my sister's news. The radio was on, and CBC Radio Two was airing a Winnipeg Symphony performance of Ralph Vaughan Williams's *The Lark Ascending*.

As frequently played as it is, this beautiful and deeply spiritual romance, composed in 1914, was the perfect piece of music for me to encounter at that moment, and it stopped me in my tracks. It is exquisitely sad and exquisitely optimistic at the same time. I sat in the living room, thinking of my friend, and listened to that familiar and yet startling violin soar, exactly the way we picture a lark ascending, or a soul departing.

There is a scene in Robert Bolt's *A Man for All Seasons* when Sir Thomas More confronts the ambitious, opportunistic Will Roper, asking him to what lengths he would go to defeat the Devil. Roper (the first neo-conservative, I often think) replies that he would cut down every law in the land. And, says More, when the Devil turns on you, where will you hide?

I thought of this as I sat listening to *The Lark Ascending* — music that, at that time of day, and at that particular moment in my life, would be heard almost nowhere but the CBC. Sometimes it's worth remembering how fortunate we are.

And when the music was over, I thought: When we have finally starved our public broadcaster to death; when we have finally choked our symphonies and underfunded our operas; when we have finally strangled our programs of arts education; when we have finally forced our theatres and our galleries and our museums and our artists into the shallow confines of commercial success, where on earth will we find shelter, or solace, or wisdom, when suddenly and unexpectedly, reality turns and stares us in the face?

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