

## Stella Maris

Leena shivered as the briny autumn mist crept up and billowed around her, enveloping her in the scent of sea tide and death. Lost in grief, she gazed out at the tumultuous grey harbor off Astoria's pier 3. Searching the horizon for his vessel, yearning for the imminent return of her Papa, her Isa, was consuming her body, mind and spirit. The chilling fog stroked her face and blurred her vision. Squinting to sharpen her sight, she peered out at a ghost of light on the horizon. Did she see, no. Damn! This rotten fog was manipulating her mind's eye. She could hear the echoes, "Graveyard of the Pacific", "Surge tides bedeviling the vessels", "Flotsam from the hogsback". These were the town rumors that swirled around her like the thick haze and mist she stood in now.

Shaking her head briskly she turned her thoughts to more earthy memories. Leena, her parents and uncle immigrated from Finland in 1910 when she was just a young girl. The desire for a better and more fulfilling life drew the Mikka family to settle in "The Little Helsinki of the West", Astoria's Union Town. The large Finnish population earned the community this title and added to its validity each year.

Yearning for fair wages and honest work, her father Jere and her uncle Twain joined the Socialist Finns. They labored side by side for better working conditions for themselves and their community. Her mother, Helma, was a gifted actress and entertained the community for many years through the Finnish Theatre. Under her tutelage Leena began learning the discipline of acting. It was their deepest dream to perform together on stage, to bring to life the stories and music of their homeland.

Yet their dream was not to become a reality. Tragically in 1922, Leena's mother, lost her life in Astoria's Great Hotel Fire. Then again, just a year later in 1923 the family experienced another grave loss when uncle Twain died in the Socialist Club Fire. Leena cried, "Who is this God that tears at your heart and ravages your soul?!" Her mother, her dear Aiti and her uncle Twain, two guiding lights in her life had been extinguished and no hope, no prayers would reignite their flames. Now her father? "I can't lose my Isa, my Papa, he is all I have".

The evening's vigil was beginning to take its toll. She was chilled, her throat was scratchy and septic feeling and her thoughts were fuzzy. She pulled her red woolen coat more snugly around her neck and wrapped her arms around her waist. A strong cup of hot tea laced with bourbon and a warm crackling fire would give chase to her demons. Glancing at her timepiece, She was surprised to see it was midnight. The wharf was no place at this hour for a young woman alone. Especially in weather that would mask any sounds she might hear, or make.

She hastily brushed the blonde hair from her eyes and turned on her boot heel. The clap of thunder startled her and the flare of light caught her eye. It was there. Not the bow of the ship she had been hoping to see but an alluring and mysterious disc of light. It danced between the fog and the clouds, tangible yet intangible, absorbing yet illusive. She lingered, enthralled by the light.

“Pray”

The word resonated through her like an echo yet she heard nothing but the hypnotic slapping of the ocean waters against the moorings. Almost imperceptibly their rhythm swelled, increasing to a crescendo, beating against the pilings and rocking the pier.

“PRAY!”

Reeling, Leena stumbled and fell to her knees. Her heart was racing with an urgency she had never felt before. She grasped the railing in front of her and squinted hard trying to focus on the compelling disc of light on the rolling waves. The heavy mist had turned to rain that soaked her hair and mingled with the tears on her face. “Papa?” Her voice was a soft, pleading whisper. “Papa, I love you.” The words moved her heart and swelled within her, mimicking the surging tide that pounded around her.

Suddenly, the host of light surged as it burned through the fog and rain, gliding towards her with strength and intensity. As Leena watched in awe, she discerned a beautiful young girl coming towards her across the water. She was radiant as the sun, clothed in a simple gown of royal blue. A mantle of silvery grey draped her head and shoulders; and a crown of 12 iridescent stars adorned her head. The disc of brilliant light now resided in her breast. Faceted rays of crystal light burst forth from her outstretched hands, offering, beckoning. The host at her breast beat pulsing rays of light, that shot across the bay and pierced Leena’s heart with warmth and peace. As the wind raged and the surf pounded, Leena was wrapped in ethereal peace as a mantle of love enveloped her. From somewhere deep in her soul she cried out,

“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee!”

“Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus!”

The words continued to flow from her heart as she uttered a prayer foreign to her mind, yet intimate to her very being.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death.”

“Amen.”

The virgin, now close enough to touch, smiled at Leena with a warmth that steadied her heart and filled her spirit with faith and hope. The wind and rain calmed and the fog lifted. The once turbulent sea lay serene.

“Be still my daughter, your father lives.”

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