

One
1858 B.E.
(Before Erik)

The Opera Ghost really exists. It is not a creature of the artists' creative imaginations, the superstition of the dimwitted managers, or a product of the absurd and highly impressionable brains of the young ballet dancers. I am acutely aware of its existence...

I've seen it.

I *know* it. I know The Opera Ghost more than anyone else. It's haunted me for my entire life, and is a miserable force I can never escape from.

My name is Erik Carrière-Destler...

And I'm The Opera Ghost.

Yes, the feared supernatural apparition is just a gauche disappointment in the form of flesh, blood and bones. But nobody knows that. All they see is a spirit with glowing eyes that strikes fear into all who come across it. No one knows the person behind that ghostly glow.

And no one *can* know.

If I was like everyone else, The Opera Ghost wouldn't exist. I would be allowed to be myself without a need to hide from the cold, cruel world.

But things will never be that easy for me. I'll forever be forced to suffer a horrible, lonely life. In my nearly thirty years of existence, one thing is always clear- I'll *never* be like anyone else. I'm not normal, not in any sense of the word.

My appearance is the reason for society's scorn. I'm very pale and slender (not pretty slender, *emaciated* slender). My hands are bony, as are my feet. These sad excuses of extremities are a bit longer than average, which is probably to accommodate my towering height of six feet, four inches. I'm a walking skeleton! But being a skeleton isn't the worst part of how I look...

My face is.

For as long as I can remember, I've worn a mask. It's been made of different materials over the years- raggedy cloth, beautiful silk, nothing at all, leather- but it always covers most of my face. My lips are thin and don't have any color to them. (That's nothing a little lip rouge can't fix!). My jaw, chin and most of my cheeks were spared from the curse.

But the rest of my face...

I almost don't want to describe it. I wish I didn't have to. I wish I could describe a perfectly ordinary face instead. I wish my face was normal, just like everybody else's.

...I wish *I* was normal.

I have no idea why my face is the way it is. All I know is that it frightens people. And sometimes... it frightens *me*.

My father claimed a fire breather was too close to me and made burns on most of my face (ever heard of a little thing called 'child safety'?) and my mother said it's because I came out of her womb the opposite way (I've been unusual since before I was born, it seems!). Since my face is darker than burn marks and it's been this way since before I lived at the circus, I'm inclined to go with my mother's explanation. Coming out the wrong way would certainly explain my wrong facial features! (among *other* things...)

I was born on the twenty-third of September, 1858. My true self has been hidden away since that very day. My father was Gerard Carrière and my mother was Madeleine Destler. Because I'm still reeling from talking about... *a certain*

unsightly part of myself, I'll tell of my beloved parents. I might as well since no one else knows their story like I do.

Gerard was born in 1813 and became interested in tricks when a magician visited the inn he was staying at with his parents. The magician taught little Gerard the missing card trick, something that was passed down to me. He dreamed of being a magician, but was forced to work at his father's printing shop for many years. When Charles died in 1838, Gerard sold the shop and left Lisieux to pursue his dream career. He performed various card tricks and juggled at parties and taverns throughout the surrounding area.

In 1844, he joined Bernard Circus as a juggler. He was a master at it. He could juggle up to six balls at once! He worked for Bernard until they disbanded near the end of the forties. Mulheim Circus picked him up when he visited Rouen and he worked there for the rest of his life.

But he wasn't alone for long...

Madeleine was born in 1824 as the seventh of nine children. (Her poor mother!) She was a rascally child, always climbing on things she wasn't supposed to. It helped her stand out in such a big family! Her skills came in handy when a circus came to New Orleans, Louisiana. She ran away after completing school at sixteen years old and became a tightrope walker.

But Madeleine's rope snapped when the circus closed after 1845's season ended. Before she could find another circus, her parents trapped her in an arranged marriage. She and her husband- Timothy- moved to Edenton, North Carolina and tried to make it work, but they found their happy endings after getting a mutual divorce. Timothy continued to live by the coast while Madeleine was finally able to return to the circus in her dream place... Paris, France! Across the very vast pond, she evolved into a trapeze artist, a skill she perfected. After hopping between seasonal indoor circuses for a while, she joined Mulheim's troupe.

That was where she met the love of her life.

Gerard and Madeleine encountered each other during an otherwise average night at the circus in 1854. He caught a glimpse of her backstage and was entranced by her act. After the show, he said hello, she complimented his juggling skills and they bonded over William Blake's poetry. It was love at first sight.

Whenever they had time to spare, Gerard and Madeleine spent it in the company of each other. They adored being within each other's presence. The new manager must have noticed this, for he created an act for them in 1856. Their wedding was on Valentine's Day in 1857. The date was somewhat cheesy, but they were overjoyed to be married.

And they were *certainly* overjoyed to have a child. They tried multiple times (I know, absolutely disgusting), but luck just wasn't on their side.

...Let's just say they had a *very* merry Christmas that year.

Even though Madeleine was pregnant with a certain *someone*, she continued to perform. As if her part in the act wasn't already a spectacle!

But as the months went on, Gerard became increasingly worried about his wife's (and the *someone's*) health. In May- when she was roughly five months along- he requested a leave of absence until that little *someone* was born. Madeleine didn't want to at first, but the frequent dizziness and leg cramps after shows, the wriggling of a certain *someone* and the insistence of Gerard persuaded her to leave.

Yes, she was soaring through the air *with a little person inside of her*. Highly dangerous, but that didn't stop her from doing what she loved! (Maybe that's why I was a breech birth. I was upside down alongside her!)

The manager was a jerk and refused to let him leave as well (*He* wasn't the one having a baby, he reasoned), so Gerard made a deal with the manager- he and Madeleine would return to the circus when the season started up again. In the meantime, some acts would be extended. So Gerard and Madeleine settled down where the circus was scheduled to perform in April.

Saint-Martin-de-Boscherville is a commune about ten kilometers (or six miles) away from Rouen, a city known as the birthplace of multiple grand cathedrals and Joan of Arc's death place. Boscherville is known as the home of St. Georges Abbey, Aumônerie Manor, an arm of the Seine River...

And that's pretty much it.

The village has been around for centuries (the abbey was founded in 1113 and the manor was built in the Middle Ages), but there isn't much to say about it. There were around nine hundred people during my parents' time there, so it

certainly wasn't the smallest commune in Normandy. Even ones with *three* hundred people have more to say!

Even though there was hardly anything notable about Boscherville, Gerard and Madeleine loved it. They moved into a small house that they always described as 'romantic'. It had a white picket fence and lavender flowers on the windowsill. It was on Rue des Iris in a neighborhood known as... La Carrière! Gerard got a kick out of that, and Madeleine thought it was a sign that they were meant to live there.

St. Georges Abbey was always in view and lied just ten minutes away from the house (although it grew to be more than that as the months wore on!). The church bells were ringing when Gerard felt a certain *someone* kick for the first time.

Gerard and Madeleine knew their joint contract at the circus wouldn't expire for a couple years, but they seriously considered breaking it and living in Boscherville for the rest of their days. This quaint village life was such a refreshing change from the circus! But Mulheim's contracts are infamously difficult to get out of, so they relished in living domestic lives.

Years later, I would ask endless questions about that time. I wanted to know *everything* about those blissful months of normalcy. They told me about baking delicious cherry pies, watering the lavender phlox flowers, doing chores together, reading William Blake poems by the light of the fireplace and walking through the woods under the light of the setting sun. Their lives sounded absolutely enchanting.

...

One sunny summer afternoon, Madeleine took a loaf of bread out of the oven. She winced as she took a few steps to get to the counter.

"Is something wrong, dear?" Gerard inquired.

"Everything is fine," Madeleine replied. "My ankles are a little sore, that's all."

"Then *not* everything is fine."

"A small ache doesn't concern me. I need to keep up with supper. That onion soup won't make itself."

"Why don't you sit down?" Gerard smiled. "I'll gladly make our dinner for you."

"As long as you don't eat all of it." Madeleine joked with a smile in return.

She sat down on a cushioned chair in the dining area, frowning as Gerard slid his hand underneath. She asked, "What are you doing?"

"Ah-ha! We're having a girl," Gerard smiled. "The spoon never lies."

A spoon had been under the cushion! He went through dozens of other old wives' tests after that. Madeleine's complexion was clear (it's a boy!), she craved sweets (or maybe it's a girl?), her shoes didn't quite fit like they used to (boy), she walked with her left foot first (girl), she had morning sickness often (girl), her baby bump was low (boy) and she slept on her right side (girl).

She was rolling over from that side a few days later when salt fell into her eyes.

"*Gerard!*"

"We're having a boy!" Gerard exclaimed. "I was hoping you'd stay asleep a little longer so this wouldn't happen."

"How does salt in my eyes-"

"*It wasn't supposed to get in there...*"

"-predict our child's gender?"

"Whatever name you say first is the baby's gender," Gerard sighed. "But the results so far have been inconclusive. Five for girl and four for boy. Every time one gender starts to gain, the other catches up!"

Madeleine finished wiping salt from her eyes and sat up as she said, "Boy or girl, all that matters is that our child- whatever it may be- is happy and healthy," She gave a little smirk. "*Although...* I must admit I'm hoping for a boy."

Gerard smiled. "As am I, my dear! We'll have to wait and see if our prediction comes true... or if the old wives will have their way!"

...

The ninth of September was special for Aumônerie Manor. Every year since the Middle Ages, pilgrims had visited the chapel, hoping Saint Gorgon would bless them with a soulmate and children as well as being free from aches and pains. Afterwards, something called a turkey fair took place... and a funfair!

Of course, Gerard and Madeleine had to visit. Besides mingling with others, they ventured through the hedge maze, took a stroll in the orchard and admired old frescoes in the chapel (and said happy birthday to the Saint Gorgon statue!). Madeleine didn't dance during the evening ball, but they hummed its happy tunes while walking home with Gerard.

Just before departing, they made a wish in the garden well. Madeleine wished for their baby to be happy, healthy and oh-so perfect. Then Gerard flicked a coin into the well. It was too deep for them to see if it landed face up, which would make the wish come true. (Why do I have the feeling that it was face *down* instead?)

...

Two weeks later, a certain *someone* was ready to be born in the nautical twilight hours of the twenty-second. As the sun rose on the twenty-third...

Hello.

This is when the story starts to go downhill. I'm not just saying that because I hate myself, it's true.

The midwife, a neighbor named Marie Perrault, helped deliver this sad, pitiful creature. She screamed after it had been brought out into the world feet first (a sign of things to come) and exclaimed, "Mon Dieu! It's *dead!*"

And that's the end of that.

...*God*, I wish.

"Dead?" my parents echoed in horror.

Madame Perrault hurriedly cut the cord and the creature gave a soft cry. My parents gave a sigh of relief.

"Boy or girl?" my father asked.

"It's a girl!" Madame Perrault exclaimed. (Hip, hip, hooray!)

She stopped and looked a bit closer. (...*Oh?*)

"No, wait..." She turned the creature over a bit. "*I think* it's a boy."
(Disappointment of the century!)

(Wait... you *think?*)

"I can't really tell." Madame Perrault said with a puzzled expression.

A majority of babies are easily identifiable as either a boy or a girl, but some look like both genders or neither! I seemed to be in the 'both' category. So because stupid society doesn't allow dual gendered people to exist, my parents had to take a shot in the dark and assign a gender to me. (I cast my vote for 'girl'!)

"We've always wanted a boy." my mother said softly.

"Oui," my father agreed. "I'm sure he'll grow up to be a wonderful little boy."

Madame Perrault smiled. "Then that's what we'll go with. *It's a boy!*" (Darn it. Outnumbered one to three. It was worth a shot, I suppose...)

Even though it was a boy that looked like a girl at first (...but not second) glance, my parents were happy that their child was alive. (Even though it would've preferred to have been assigned female, but what choice does *he* have?)

"Would you like to see him?" Madame Perrault asked softly after cleaning him.

My parents nodded and she wrapped the child in a blanket before handing him to my mother. They gasped in absolute shock and repulsion! She gave an exclamation of fright at the terribly thin, horribly malformed monster in her arms...

And fainted.

At least she wasn't in one of those birthing chairs from the last century or two. She'd fall right on the floor! Maybe the creature would as well, hitting its head with such a hard 'bonk' that it died and this story wouldn't have to be told. Instead, her head sank onto the pillow of her bed. She was still holding the alive child in her arms.

"Madeleine!" my father exclaimed.

He looked down at his new kid and took in a sharp breath. Yet he managed to (somehow) stay conscious and revived his wife. Madeleine looked down at her child as Madame Perrault left the house, giving my parents some privacy. They looked down at the creature for many moments.

"*We made that.*" Gerard whispered.

"Yes," Madeleine agreed. "We certainly did. But we didn't make..."

They looked at each other, not wanting to bring up the horrific elephant in the room.

"We have to love him," Gerard said. "If we don't, no one else will."

"We'll love him with everything we have," My mother looked down at the creature. "What should we name him?"

"Gerard." was my father's prompt reply. (*Really?*)

My mother gave him a look and he asked, "Well, what were you thinking of?"

"What about... Didn't we make a list for this?"

"Didn't We Make A List For This Carrière-Destler? I like it."

My mother chuckled.

"Yes, we *did* make a list."

He fetched a piece of paper from somewhere. The front was filled with girls' names and the back had boys' names. They looked at the back of the list, wondering what boy name to choose for the creature.

My mother pointed to a name in the middle. "That one."

"Erik?"

My mother nodded. "Erik."

"As for his middle name... How does Charles sound?"

"After your father?" My mother smiled at my father's nod. "I like it."

My parents turned to the creature and said together, "*Erik Charles Carrière-Destler.*"

The creature made a little sound, affirming that it was indeed human and its name was indeed Erik.

Or, should I say, *his* name was Erik.

Or... *my* name *is* Erik! (Which is sort of awkward to say.)

My parents loved their new child immensely, but they were deeply unsettled by his (or should I say, *my*) face. They couldn't bring themselves to look at it, let alone touch it. So within the hour after my birth, within the walls of the little romantic house, my parents created my first scrap of clothing.

A mask.

It was made of an old rag, not at all like the leather masks I wear today. But it hid the horror beneath and that was all that mattered. Now they could properly love their child, who seemed normal on the outside...

Even though that was far from the truth.

...

That afternoon, my parents went to St. Georges Abbey. They were Catholic, so they wanted me to be baptized as soon as possible. Once he and my mother were past the abbey's blue gates, he tucked his arm under hers. She held a bundle of... *not quite* joy in her arms.

My parents silently walked through the courtyard. They stopped to gaze up at the church, which looked more like a castle. Its off-white walls and dark gray turrets of Caumont stone seemed to touch the clouds. I wonder if they imagined what the church was like when it was built over seven hundred years before. I know I would have.

As for baby me, I was quiet in my blanket. I had only made a couple soft sounds during the day and didn't move much (nor did I have the mental capacity to consider the abbey's historical significance as I lay in my mother's arms). My parents were worried that I wouldn't survive for much longer, which is why the baptism was undertaken so soon.

The door of the abbey creaked as my father opened it. He held it for my mother, who walked inside. Towering off-white columns and wooden pews surrounded her and I, her footsteps echoing on the gray concrete floor. Very soon, my father's louder ones joined her. The priest was doing something at the altar. He heard my parents coming and turned around.

"Good afternoon! You're three days early to Mass." he joked.

"Good afternoon, Father Mansart," Gerard said. "My wife and I would like to baptize our baby."

Father Mansart smiled. "Ah, your child has finally arrived! Come, let me see..."

"Him," Madeleine finished the priest's sentence. "We're *fairly* sure it's a him."
(Oh, *sure* you are...)

(I kid. They were sure that it was a him. ...Unfortunately.)

"His name is Erik." my father added.

"Ah, an eternal ruler is in our midst!" Father Mansart declared. "That name hails from the Old Norse world. Funny, since neither of you look Scandinavian."

My parents looked at each other with a chuckle. They walked down the aisle, meeting the priest at the edge of the altar. Father Mansart looked down at baby me, curiosity flickering on his face for a moment. Then he gave his usual cheery smile.

"What a *fine* boy you have," he said (emphasizing 'fine' to cover up that the boy *wasn't* fine). "In order to do the baptism, his face must be uncovered."

My parents looked at each other nervously.

"Can't you just sprinkle a bit of holy water on his mask?" my father asked. "I'm sure it would seep through-"

"I'm blessing your child, not a piece of cloth," Father Mansart reminded him. "Remove the mask while I prepare the holy water."

He left my parents. My father reached for the rag mask before retracting his hand. That nervous look returned. My mother touched the front of the mask while my father slowly undid the knot in the back. The mask was loose on my face, waiting to be pulled away.

"The holy water is ready." Father Mansart reported.

He was bringing out an octagonal font. It was set in a little alcove near the altar. Father Mansart brought back the rope leading to that area, smiling at my parents. (The poor man didn't know what was coming!) They smiled back, their beams far thinner than his. Then they went up the little step leading to the altar, walking across to the font. They gazed at the glistening water resting in the marble fountain.

"Please remove the mask." Father Mansart coaxed them gently.

It was time.

My mother tried to stop her shaking as she held me. My father couldn't cease his trembling, however, as he slowly removed the mask. Father Mansart's face went from curiosity to horror. The bright sunlight pouring through the church windows really brought out the nasty texture of my face, which made it even more appalling than it was in the little house.

"*Mon Dieu!*" Father Mansart exclaimed fearfully.

He clapped a hand on his mouth (probably sensing God tsking him because he spoke His name in vain) and stumbled backwards. His back hit a large cluster of stone columns as he stared at the creature in my parents' arms.

"...Can we bless a piece of cloth instead?" my father awkwardly broke the silence.

Father Mansart took a deep breath before hesitantly walking over to my parents. He looked down at my face as he whispered, "Never in my sixty-four years on God's Earth have I seen such an abnormality. How did this happen?"

"We don't know," my mother replied. "He was born like this."

Father Mansart put a hand on the golden cross necklace he wore. "God have mercy on this poor child's soul. I pray that you will cherish him as you would any other," He performed the baptism, saying some church things and prayers before declaring, "Erik, I baptize thee in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost." (Can I just be baptized in the Ghost's name?)

He cupped some holy water in his hands and poured it on my little head, repeating this two more times. My parents took a deep breath once the last water droplets fell into the font. Now I was safe from the throes of purgatory.

If only that water could have saved me from the throes of society...

...

Despite how frail and weak I was, I managed to survive into the next day. I lived through another day and the day after that and the day after *that*...

Say that until it reaches twenty-nine and a half years!

As the week went on, I started to make more sounds and moved around more. I wasn't loud like most babies are. My cries were quiet, which I'm sure my parents were thankful for. Yet my frame was still thin and pale despite maintaining a healthy diet.

That's another strange thing about me. No matter how much I eat, I can't gain weight. I couldn't back then and I can't now (Although I probably *did* gain weight as I grew up, but it wasn't noticeable). Some people would love to be like that, but I don't. I hate being a skeletal stick!

I'm sure my parents thought the same way. They wanted a chubby baby boy, not a skinny baby who was *fairly* a boy. Luckily, I was improving beyond my appearance, which was all that mattered to them.

By the time Christmas arrived, I was acting like a regular baby. A very quiet and strangely thin baby, but a regular one nonetheless. The holiday was a joyous time for my parents and I, probably the happiest time I had up to that point!

I'm not sure what presents my parents gave each other, but I know they gave me a new rag mask (a recurring gift for many years). Madame Perrault visited that evening with a gift for me- a string of silver bells. They were hung above my cradle, allowing me to hit them. The first time I did, a broad smile appeared on my masked face and I gave a soft coo.

"*Oh*, he smiled!" my mother exclaimed.

"His first smile and laugh!" my father noted happily.

"I knew it would be perfect," Madame Perrault pinched one of my toes. "Don't you think so, little one?"

I gave another coo, saying that I definitely agreed with her!

...

A merry sound floated through the air as my mother checked the oven one afternoon. A new year had dawned... as did mastering the art of the bells!

"Madeleine!" my father exclaimed as he rushed into the kitchen. "Come here!"

"Later. I don't want this cake to burn." my mother said.

"Let it. You *need* to hear this!"

My mother hesitated before leaving her meringue cake behind. She followed my father to their bedroom, where I was batting at the little bells. But they weren't being struck at random... they seemed to be a repetitive pattern. My parents looked at each other.

"Do you hear that?" my father asked with a smile.

My mother looked back at me. "This has to be a coincidence."

But it wasn't. My little baby hands had settled into a rhythm of apparent song.

"How in the world is this possible?" my mother asked as she gazed closely at my deliberate striking. "He's only four months old!"

My father smiled. "I think we have a little genius on our hands."

Aw, shucks. I wouldn't say *genius*, but I do have a very good ear for music. I always have. I understand the world of melody far more than the world of people.

The same was true back then! I was composing long before I said my first word. I created a variety of tunes over the next four months.

...

Before long, I played my swan song. It was early May...

Which meant it was time to say goodbye to Boscherville.

With carpetbags of possessions in hand, my parents stepped out of the little romantic house with great reluctance. The towering turrets of St. Georges Abbey watched as they walked down the dirt road and recalled their time in Boscherville. Madame Perrault was right behind them, holding me in her arms.

The quartet traveled to an open field, where the circus was located. Together, we watched a fantastic show under the big top.

But the spectacle faded after the performance.

"I wish you could stay in Boscherville." Madame Perrault said, a tear in her eye.

"We do, too," my father said. "But maybe we'll be back when the off-season arrives."

"Yes, we'll *certainly* be back." my mother reassured Marie with a nod.

I gave a little coo and Madame Perrault smiled.

"I'll see you soon, little one!" she said to me, giving my ear a little pinch.

And with that, the Carrière-Destler family left their beloved Boscherville for greener pastures.

...Even though some would say the departed pastures were far greener.