

Black plague

MAY 2026



Larissa had not expected the breakup to hurt so much. For four years, she had grown used to being someone's future wife, even if she had never said it aloud. Then, almost without warning, he was gone. At thirty-one, Larissa told everyone she was taking time for herself. She booked facials, bought new dresses, and pretended that freedom suited her. That evening at the opera house was supposed to be a small act of recovery. Larissa arrived early, took her seat, and opened the program without reading it. For a few minutes, she almost felt calm. Then the door opened. A woman stepped into the box, followed by an older man. They were Black, elegantly dressed, with a quiet confidence that immediately irritated Larissa. Larissa's fingers tightened around the program.

"I'm sorry," she said. "This box is taken." The woman checked her ticket. "Yes. I believe we're sharing it." Larissa gave a small laugh, the kind she used with incompetent staff. "No, I don't think so."

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The woman looked at her for a moment, still polite. "These are our seats." "There must be some mistake," Larissa said. The woman only smiled. "I'm Nadine," she said, extending her hand. "No need for this to be uncomfortable." That was when Larissa finally looked at her. The woman was beautiful in a composed, unbothered way. Larissa hated that most of all. She wanted embarrassment. Deference. Some sign that the woman understood the awkwardness of the situation and would quietly solve it by leaving. Larissa shook her hand quickly. She sat rigidly in her satin gown, furious at the insult, furious at the shared space, furious most of all that Nadine seemed completely untouched by her contempt. She told herself she would complain during the interval. Then the music took over. Wagner first, then Strauss. She thought of herself at sixteen, practicing violin. She thought of dance classes after school. Lost in memories, the applause startled her.

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She rose before Nadine could say anything, for a moment, the two women looked at each other. Her expression was unreadable. Outside, the rain had turned to a fine mist. A taxi was waiting near the curb. Larissa slipped inside with relief, already thinking of the warm bath she would take when she got home. Only when she settled into the back seat did she notice the dampness in her hair. "Typical," she muttered, touching one strand. The rain had loosened its perfect straightness, bringing out a soft wave she did not remember having.

She frowned, smoothing it down with gloved fingers, but the curls sprang back lightly around her face. The driver glanced at her in the mirror.

"Coming back from the opera, miss?"

"Yes," Larissa said, relaxed. "Wagner and Strauss."
"Nice." She gave a faint, arrogant laugh. "Not that you're an expert, I suppose." He did not answer.

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The taxi stopped in front of her building. The rain had grown heavier again. She clicked her tongue, irritated, then opened the door.

She stepped out carefully, one gloved hand on the door, the other holding the side of her satin dress so it would not brush the wet pavement. Her dress clung a little more tightly to her hips than it had earlier in the evening, but she was too cold to notice. She walked toward the entrance of her building. Her hair had become full and wavy now, tumbling over her shoulders in thick black curls that no amount of smoothing could flatten. The opera gloves still covered her arms, hiding the deepening hue of her skin. Her face had changed more openly. Her lips looked fuller, her nose broader, her cheekbones set differently. Larissa did not see any of it. She only felt strangely tired.

At the glass doors, the doorman looked up from his desk. He did not move.

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Larissa waited, one eyebrow raised. When he still only stared, she opened the door herself with her keycard. "Good evening," she said, irritated. The man blinked. "Good evening, madam." "You might try opening the door next time," she muttered. "Yes, of course," he said, still looking uncertain. Probably new, she thought. Weird. She was sure she had seen him before. She did not notice what he had noticed.

Her skin had deepened into a rich brown. Her face had softened and changed. Her hair had shrunk upward into tight curls around her face, thick and natural, no longer the sleek black mane she had styled so carefully. Even her dress clung to her differently now, shorter, tighter around the hips, more alive than elegant. Larissa tugged at it with annoyance. "What the hell" she whispered, noticing her legs looking surprisingly dark through the stockings. It must be the lobby light, she told herself, rushing to her apartment.

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She hurried to her dressing table, but the little mirror there was half in shadow. She saw enough to panic and not enough to understand: dark skin, wide brown eyes, curls, thick lips. Larissa backed away, knocking over a bottle of perfume. It hit the floor and spilled across the rug, sharp and floral. She turned on every light she could reach. The room filled with brightness. For a moment, she kept her eyes closed. Then she opened them. The full-length mirror showed a Black woman in an Africanized version of Larissa's opera dress, with a tight patterned fabric in blue, red, and gold, cut close to the body, shorter than anything Larissa would have chosen for a formal evening. Her gloves still reached past her elbows, absurdly elegant against her dark skin. Her hair had become a halo of tight, natural 4c type curls, rounded and full. Unfortunately she couldn't appreciate the beauty she now embodied, or the elegance of her outfit, shocked as she was by the fact that she was now a Black lady.