

It was the photograph

in *The New York Times* that caught my eye that Sunday morning in May 2006.

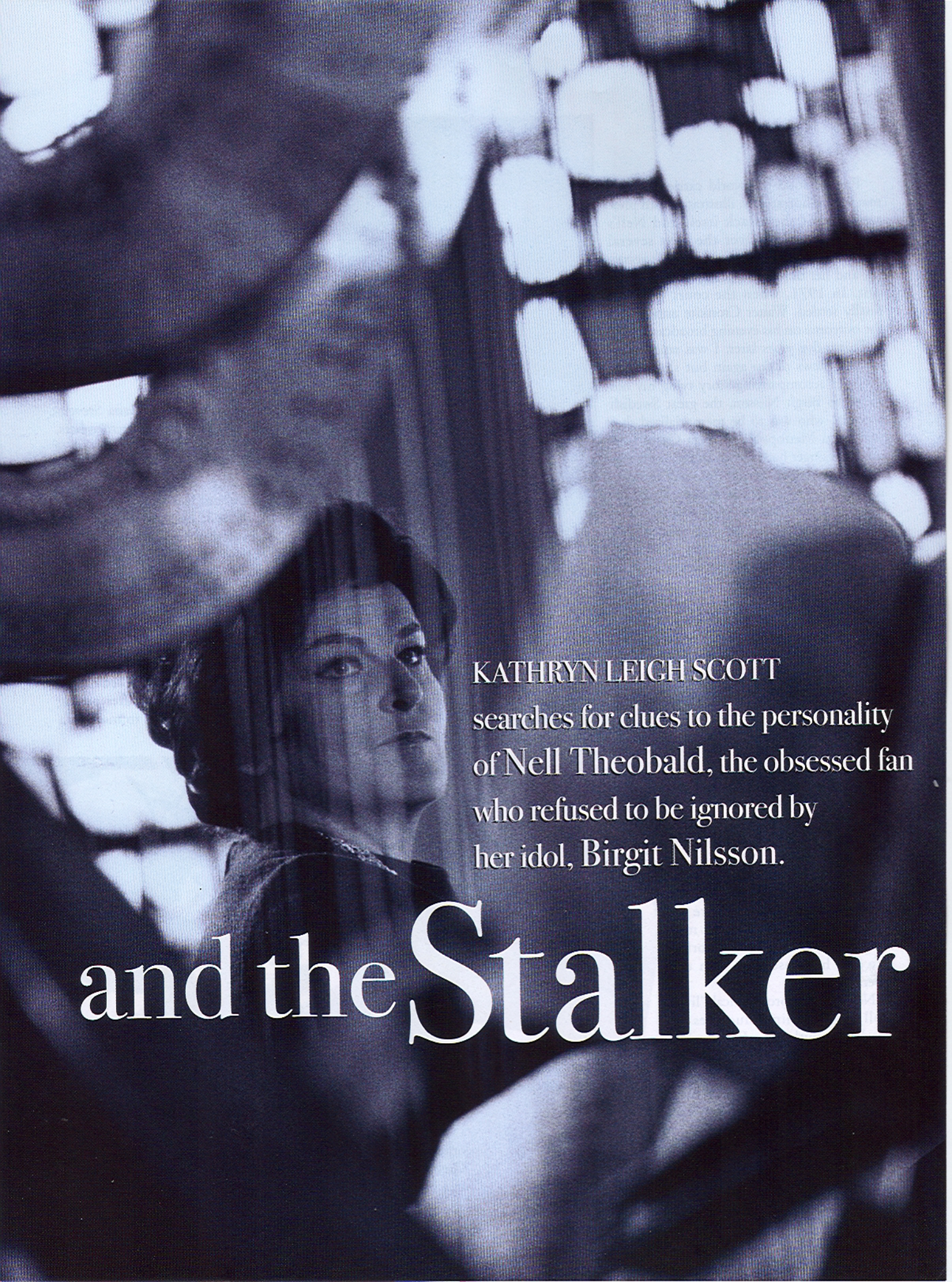
In a startlingly familiar news image I hadn't seen in some forty years, my old friend and former classmate, Nell Theobald, was wearing a jaunty Tyrolean hat, her arm draped across a drowsy-looking lion wrapped in satin ribbon like a Christmas toy.

My friend's life had been newsworthy since a fateful afternoon in April 1966. Nell, then a twenty-one-year-old model and aspiring actress, had been hired to pose with Ludwig the lion at a BMW exhibit during the preview of the International Automobile Show in the New York Coliseum. With a BMW news release trumpeting "A live lion and a living doll will add to the excitement at a press preview April 8th," the stage was set for disaster.



Nell Theobald, above, photographed in Munich during the height of her obsession with diva Birgit Nilsson, opposite page

The Star



KATHRYN LEIGH SCOTT
searches for clues to the personality
of Nell Theobald, the obsessed fan
who refused to be ignored by
her idol, Birgit Nilsson.

and the Stalker

Press around the world carried modeled-by-lion stories, illustrated with photographs of the attack itself and Nell's horrific wounds. Over the next several years, newspapers reported on Nell's recovery and her drawn-out personal-injury lawsuit. In 1971, when the court case was finally settled, Walter Cronkite announced the outcome on his evening broadcast.

Thirty-five years later, I was stunned to see that news photo again but shocked to read the accompanying story tying my old friend to Birgit Nilsson, the great Swedish soprano, who was to be memorialized that week in a Metropolitan Opera Guild tribute. The singer had written in her autobiography, *La Nilsson* (at that time still awaiting release in an English translation), that Nell was a Marilyn Monroe look-alike who had obsessively stalked her for nine years. While it may have been Birgit's story to tell, the *Times* photograph of the opera star was perhaps a tenth the size of Nell's picture with the lion. Once again, in her own macabre style, Nell was stealing the limelight.

In *La Nilsson*, the Wagner singer, who died on Christmas Day 2005, at age eighty-seven, devoted almost an entire chapter to Nell Theobald, referring to her only as "Miss N."

According to Nilsson, beginning in 1968, the beautiful model traveled the world not only to attend the singer's performances but to pursue her offstage as well. Nilsson claimed her reason for telling the story was that it "illustrated so well how reality and imagination can melt together, and the consequences of this for an artist." Nilsson's revelations were not wholly surprising to me, but there was more I wanted to understand about my enigmatic friend's short, colorful life and her obsession with the opera star.

Nell was the prototypical "living doll," with China-blue eyes and rosebud mouth, that Eleanor Ross, casting director at Grey Advertising, had sought for the BMW publicity stunt. I first met Nell in the crush of admissions day at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts (AADA) in 1963. With chestnut hair to her waist, sparkling eyes and a creamy complexion, Nell had the Southern-

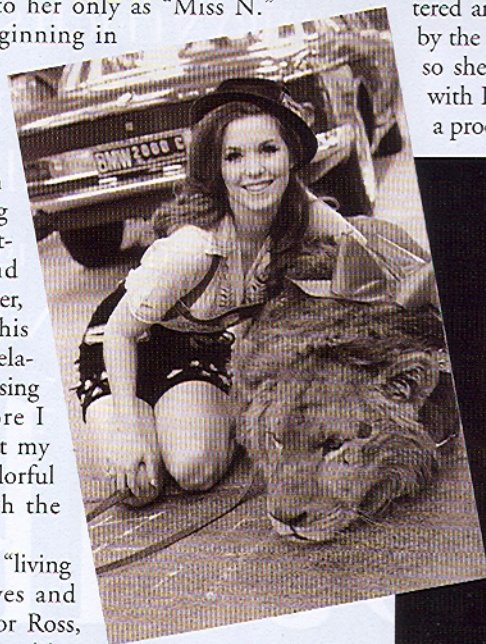


style charm and grace associated with private schools and a privileged upbringing. I was in awe when she wore cashmere twin sets and Pappagallo flats to rehearsals; the best most of the rest of us could manage were Shetland sweaters and Capezio's. I was also impressed when Nell told me that she was a protégée of opera star Risë Stevens, and that Risë and her husband, Walter Surovy, treated Nell "like one of the family." By her account, she was friendly with Risë's son, Nicholas Surovy.

"Nell had great charm," Diana Stevenson, another AADA classmate, remembers. "Men swarmed around her. She had a lot of brief affairs — she called them flings — with people like Johnny Carson, Jack Carter, Sid Luft and Jack Cassidy. But they were complicated, because they always seemed to involve whole families — like Sid Luft. She seemed to be part of his

entourage, traveling around with Judy Garland and involved with his kids, but not like a nanny. Same with Jack Cassidy."

I also knew Nell from the Playboy Club on Fifty-ninth Street at Fifth Avenue, where we both worked as bunnies while attending the Academy. I remember her as effervescent, slightly scattered and always picture-perfect. On the day she was attacked by the lion, Nell had been scheduled to work but called in sick so she could accept the modeling assignment. After posing with Ludwig that afternoon, Nell was supposed to meet with a producer about a Hollywood screen test.



Nell, just before and during the 1966 attack that would change her life



Earlier in the week, Nell, Diana Stevenson and some thirty other young actresses had been summoned for a casting call at Grey Advertising to pose with a two-year-old lion named Larry in a BMW exhibit. Nell got the job. In keeping with the Bavari-

FOLLOWING NILSSON'S FIRST PERFORMANCE AT THE METROPOLITAN OPERA IN THE FALL OF 1968, NELL WANGLED AN INVITATION TO GO BACKSTAGE.



Nilsson and tenor Franco Corelli during a personal appearance at E. J. Korvette in New York, promoting their 1965 recording of *Turandot*

an theme, Nell was costumed in lederhosen shorts, high heels and a Tyrolean hat. Larry was dubbed "Ludwig" for the occasion and paid \$400. Nell got \$200.

By mid-morning on April 8, writer Cleveland Amory, who served as director of the Humane Society, was racing to the Coliseum in response to reports that handlers, accustomed to dealing only with domestic cats and dogs, were yanking Larry's tail and using sticks to prod him out of his cage. Amory arrived to find the 225-pound lion, tethered only by the dog leash Nell was holding, "disgruntled" and "overwrought" by flash bulbs and jostling photographers. When a late-arriving CBS news crew asked Nell to kneel next to Larry and put her arm around him, Nell smilingly obliged. With cameras rolling, Larry turned his head and sank his teeth into Nell's left thigh, gnawing her flesh to the bone.

Neal Boenzi, a *New York Times* photographer, had stopped at the BMW display because he was "attracted by Miss Theobald, who had a rather nice pair of legs." Moments later, the lion attacked. "Her screams were terrifying.... She rolled over ... got up and started to run, screaming all the time, holding her leg together." It was Leonard Brook, the thirty-year-old handler who'd hired the lion, who finally managed to pry Larry's jaws open to free Nell's leg. Walter Winchell reported that Nell lay on

the floor in close proximity to the lion for forty minutes while waiting for an ambulance to take her to Roosevelt Hospital only one block away. Dr. James MacDonald, a plastic surgeon who operated on Nell's leg, said, "The whole lower third of that thigh was torn and ripped by the bite. She also had a puncture wound on the right forearm." The gruesome attack required four surgeries and kept twenty-one-year-old Nell hospitalized for forty-seven days.

William North of Grey Advertising had assured Nell that she could touch the animal without risk, and Max Hoffman, president of Hoffman Motors, who approved Nell as the model, had expressed no qualms about her safety. On June 13, 1966, after a brief visit to her family in Atlanta, Nell filed a \$3-million suit in State Supreme Court against six defendants — BMW, the Dawn Animal Agency, Grey Public Relations, Inc., Hoffman Motors Corporation, the Coliseum Exhibition Corporation and the animal's trainer, David Racz Sabo. In the meantime, Grey Advertising sent Nell a Workmen's Comp check for \$240, which she returned on the advice of her attorney, Robert Conason.

About a month after leaving the hospital, Nell performed in a sketch on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson*. She'd done about six shows with Carson in the two months before her accident. In September, she began rehearsals for a Broadway show,

Woody Allen's *Don't Drink the Water*. She understudied the ingenue role and played the small part of the Sultan's wife for union scale, approximately \$125 a week. Nell told a reporter that she'd gotten the job because of her talent, not her notoriety.

Shortly before the lion attack, Nell moved from her walkup at 1324 Second Avenue into a new high-rise at 245 East Sixty-third Street, no doubt lured by the building's name, The Regency Towers. Nell was passionate about the era of the French Revolution, claiming that as a child, she would play only with Marie Antoinette dolls — then laughing and saying hers came with a guillotine.

On Sundays, Eric Hansen, another close Academy friend, would accompany Nell, wearing a pink picture-hat with feathers, to an Episcopal church in the neighborhood known as "Smoky Mary's" because of all the incense. Afterward, they'd walk through Central Park and ride the carousel or go for a boat ride. "But she'd never go anywhere without full makeup and eyelashes, her hair done," Hansen recalls. "She was fun, but there was always something hidden, mysterious about her. You felt everything was a bit rehearsed, that underneath there was something missing. She'd have these friends, and you wondered how she knew them."

One of "these friends" was Nancy Van Pelt (not her real name), the manager of Nell's answering service, who had called the hospital every day to cheer her up and pass along phone messages. "She changed my life," Van Pelt says. "All of a sudden I'm exposed to glamour, gowns, opera and travel. I pinched myself, not believing this was my life, that I was doing these things. Nell managed to get not only the impossible tickets but entrée to receptions and private parties — and took me with her."

While the lion attack became Nell's calling card, garnering her the attention she craved, it also took its toll on her nerves. She couldn't sleep because of bad dreams, and she began gaining weight from compulsive eating. She became a patient of psychologist Dr. James A. Spingarm, who treated her for depression, with medication and hypnosis, for three or four months.

Before the accident, Nell did commercials for Lustre-Creme and Reynolds Wrap, making a living with modeling and bit parts. She also did a year's stint on the soap opera *The Doctors*. But as time went on, work became scarce, and her budding acting career virtually dried up.

By 1967, Nell was focused on becoming an opera singer. She took voice lessons four times a week with James Shomate, who also worked with Risë Stevens, Anna Moffo and Lily Pons. Nell plunged into language lessons and studied music for hours at a time, learning Mimì and Musetta in *La Bohème* and Liù in *Turandot*. She described herself as a "lirico spinto" but longed eventually to sing dramatic soprano roles such as Elektra and Salome. In an eerily prophetic interview, Nell told a reporter, "The greatest dream of my life is to sing Isolde. Then you can die!"

Nell had already heard Birgit Nilsson sing Isolde at the Met and become an ardent fan. She took every opportunity to meet her idol in person, cultivating men in the opera world — among them OPERA NEWS associate editor Gerald Fitzgerald — who were only too happy to escort her backstage and to private

receptions.

In the summer of 1968, Nancy Van Pelt quit her job with the answering service, drew funds from her Christmas Savings Club and flew to Europe with Nell. The two friends traveled everywhere to hear Nilsson sing, staying in such luxury hotels as the Imperial in Vienna and the *Vier Jahreszeiten* in Munich. Nancy rented a car, and they drove to Salzburg, Innsbruck and all through the Bavarian Alps. In Bayreuth, they exchanged their air tickets home to fly to Stockholm to hear Nilsson sing Salome, then on to Copenhagen, where Nilsson was to sing in the Tivoli Gardens. At Bayreuth, before a performance of *Die Walküre*, Nell and Nancy met Jerry Orecchia, a handsome thirty-six-year-old businessman from San Francisco. That encounter sparked a close friendship that, years later, would result in Jerry's becoming Nell's confidant and the executor of her estate.

According to Nilsson, it was also during the Wagner Festival in Bayreuth in 1968 that she first became aware of Nell's attentions. Every day, a bouquet of red roses arrived with a note containing lines apparently chosen from a novel and signed "L. Black." A friend of Nilsson's immediately surmised that her secret admirer was female and identified the novel — *Of Lena Geyer* (published in 1936), by Marcia Davenport, daughter of opera singer Alma Gluck.

In the novel, Lena Geyer (a character based on two renowned opera singers, Gluck and Lilli Lehmann) is worshipped by a young, orphaned American heiress, who uses her wealth to travel the world indulging her passion for opera — and to pursue her idol. Dressed in black, the young woman always sits in the same front-row seat, and before every performance she sends the singer flowers with notes signed "E. deH."

The singer, behaving as obsessively as the young heiress, uncovers the identity of Elsie deHaven, invites her for supper and eventually takes her on as her lifelong companion. Despite Lena Geyer's tangled romantic affairs, uneasy retirement and an accommodating late-in-life marriage, Elsie serves as the diva's shadow presence and inseparable confidante until the opera star's death.

Discovering this context for Miss N's flowers and notes was unsettling for Nilsson, particularly when she returned to New York in the autumn of 1968 and the ritual of red roses and notes signed "L. Black" resumed. Nancy Van Pelt confirms that Nell used FTD to send a dozen red roses to Birgit before her performances, and that *Of Lena Geyer* was her inspiration: "But she signed everything J. Black, not L. Black. Nell often used the name Jennifer Black to buy airplane tickets and check into hotels."

Using charm and guile, obsessive fans are adept at attaching themselves to opera stars, actors and other performing artists. These relationships are generally innocuous enough, but there have also been tragic consequences when deranged fans became dangerous stalkers. As one of the original actors in the cult television soap *Dark Shadows*, I've dealt with my share of obsessive fans, including one ingratiatingly obnoxious (and so far benign) admirer who has dogged me for nearly eighteen years. While I've gained some instinctive knowledge of what motivates this fanaticism, I am nevertheless shocked to discover that a friend, someone I knew quite well, should have succumbed to such



Nell (circled) walking with Nilsson's entourage in Stockholm, December 1968, shown here in a video capture from a news clip for Swedish television

obsession.

Following Nilsson's first performance of *Turandot* at the Metropolitan Opera that season, Nell wangled an invitation from Decca Records executive Terence McEwen to accompany him backstage. Later in the week, Nilsson received flowers and a note before a concert in Kansas City. After the performance, Nell appeared backstage.

A little over a month later, Nilsson and Nell were aboard the same flight from New York to Vienna. When Nell sent a letter to Nilsson requesting assistance getting tickets, Nilsson discovered they were both staying at the same hotel, the Europa. Nilsson responded cordially.

Dear Miss Theobald,

Well, I must say that I was surprised to receive your letter saying that you are here. The performance tomorrow is so hard sold out that it was impossible to get anything good (as far as seats are concerned). The ticket is in a box together with a couple from the Swedish government and the Ambassador of Sweden... who is such fun and very charming.... We do not have guest lists here in Europe and it is not permitted for the people to come backstage. I'll however tell the porter at the stage entrance (Kärtnerstrasse) that he can let you in.

Hope you'll have a pleasant stay.

Best regards

Birgit Nilsson

A second letter from Nilsson to Nell on Europa hotel stationery begins,

Dear Nell 1/2 hour or 15 minutes before the performance, a man (his name is Weigert) will be sitting in the room opposite the porter at the stage entrance outside Kärtnerstrasse. It is in the same

room where I write the autographs. He has 2 tickets in my name, and if you ask for one ticket he'll give it to you. If you give him 10 or 15 shillings he'll be very nice. Otherwise he is sour as a lemon. Greetings, Birgit Nilsson

When Nilsson boarded a flight from Vienna to Stockholm to perform at a Nobel Prize event, Nell was seated next to her. During the roughly two-and-a-half-hour flight, Nell confided that she was an actress and model based in New York, taking time off to travel to opera festivals. She was passionate about opera, was studying voice herself and aspired to be an opera singer — and would be staying in the Grand Hotel in Stockholm, where Nilsson was staying.

A Swedish newspaper ran a photograph of Nilsson and Nell disembarking, with Nell carrying one of Nilsson's small cases. Also, a Swedish film crew happened to be covering Nilsson's flight to Stockholm. Nell appears to be seated next to Nilsson and is later shown walking with Nilsson's entourage along the streets of Stockholm. However, cordial relations between the two women soured when Nell's check for her hotel bill bounced. Nilsson claims the hotel's general manager confronted her, having been told that she would be picking up the expenses for "Miss N."

After Stockholm, Nilsson arrived in Munich to perform the *Ring* cycle, only to discover that Nell had preceded her in checking into the renowned five-star hotel *Vier Jahreszeiten*. If Nell had harbored any shred of hope that she would be invited to assume an "Elsie deHaven" role in Birgit Nilsson's life, her dreams were dashed during a confrontation the following day. Nell told Nilsson she meant no harm and only wanted to be her friend. Nilsson responded that she chose her own friends, and Nell didn't qualify to become one of them.

This incident failed to mark the end to a troubling nuisance;

Nell's pursuit of her idol only escalated. John Wustman, the celebrated pianist who often accompanied Nilsson on her concert tours, recalls, "Once when we were flying to Orlando, Florida, Birgit said, 'Oh my God, there's Nell again.' We got off the plane, and she followed us to the hotel. So I changed our reservations, and we went to another hotel — and lo and behold, she followed us! After we went to our rooms, Birgit called me, very upset, and said, 'You won't believe it, but she's in the room next to mine. Can you do something?'"

"I called Nell's room and said, 'I need to talk to you. Please meet me in the lobby.' She came down immediately. I told her she just had to stop following Birgit, that it was upsetting her.

"Nell said, 'But I adore her. I just want to hear her. I admire her so much.' I said, 'Then admire her from a distance. Stop following so closely.'"

One day Nell invited Diana Stevenson to her apartment in the Regency Towers for what Diana describes as "an odd sort of confessional. She showed me diamond earrings from Tiffany's and said, 'Guess who these are from?' She said an admirer had sent the earrings with tickets to the opera. She was sort of coy, asking me if the admirer might get the wrong idea if she accepted them. Then, after a lot of cat and mouse, she told me they were from Birgit Nilsson. I was stunned. Nell gave the impression that she'd become an assistant to Birgit and that Birgit had escalated things." Nell told the same story to Eric Hansen, too.

Meanwhile, Nell's court battle dragged on. In 1971, after a two-week trial was completed, eleven men and one woman voted ten to two for a \$500,000 award. However, Justice Bernard Nadel ruled the initial award excessive, as it was "predicated in large measure upon elements of natural pity and sympathy, and such a verdict is equally as objectionable as one resulting from passion and prejudice."

On April 8, 1971, twenty-six-year-old Nell reluctantly accepted damages of \$250,000. That amount was still deemed excessive and further reduced by an Appellate Court to a \$200,000 settlement (equivalent to more than \$1 million today). "Nell didn't get that much money out of the lawsuit," Nancy Van Pelt says, "but she spent it on furs, jewels and traveling around to see Birgit."

Time and again, Birgit would spot Nell in the front row at a performance, or attend a reception and find Nell waiting for her in the receiving line. In the autumn of 1973, Nell managed to crash a top-drawer New York Philharmonic reception in Melbourne, Australia. To Nilsson's chagrin, when she and her husband, Bertil Niklasson, took an impromptu holiday in the Fiji Islands, Nell popped up on the beach done up in native dress.

Events took an even darker turn when Nilsson discovered that Nell was somehow gaining entry to her hotel rooms. Over time, various items, such as photographs, underwear, a gold bracelet and a diamond ring, went missing. "Nell's trick would be to wedge a bit of paper in Birgit's hotel door," Nancy Van Pelt says. "She would know Birgit had left when the paper was on the carpet. Then she would bribe a chambermaid, tell her she worked for Birgit and had forgotten something in the room. When she got inside, she would take things and go through her appointment book. That's how she found out Birgit's travel plans and managed to get the room next to Birgit and travel on

the same flights."

On a trip to San Francisco, Nancy watched Nell use this ploy to enter Nilsson's room in the Huntington Hotel. "She pulled me in with her. I just stood there shaking, watching her walk around as though she belonged there. Before that I'd taken her relationship with Nilsson for granted. It scared me.

"The funny thing is," Nancy notes, "when I'd go backstage with Nell after a performance, she would point out these other women hanging around Birgit." Nell would laugh and call attention to the way they jockeyed for position, jealously trying to gain favor with Nilsson. While Nell referred to them as obsessed fans, she never saw herself as one of them.

After the incident at the Huntington Hotel, Nancy flew back to New York, but Nell stayed on in San Francisco. Late one afternoon she invited Jerry Orecchia and his long-time partner, Nathaniel Lopez, to her room for drinks.

"When we arrived, Nell told us that Birgit had just left and gave the impression that Birgit had spent considerable time with her. The room was overflowing with bouquets of flowers that Nell said had come from Birgit. There was a glass of beer on the coffee table and a pair of Birgit's shoes under a chair. She made a point of showing us a picture of Birgit wearing those same shoes in rehearsal."

At age thirty, Nell was still a beautiful woman, with a stunning figure, but the changes in her behavior were increasingly clear to her friends. After parting in San Francisco, Nancy recalls, "I realized Nell was very, very disturbed." Despite eviction notices stuck to her door month after month, Nell still entertained in grand style, with the best French wines and champagne, her table laid with fine china and crystal. On Christmas Eve, 1975, smiling brightly and dressed in a glamorous red hostess gown, Nell was photographed in front of a mound of gaily-wrapped packages. On the back of the photograph she sent to friends, she wrote, "My last Christmas, 1975. My love to you."

Nancy believes that Nell knew all along that once her money ran out, and her life following Nilsson came to a stop, she would end it all. Nancy dealt with several incidents when Nell overdosed on sleeping pills and one occasion when she slashed her wrists. Then, in June 1976, Nell was taken by ambulance to Roosevelt Hospital, again for an overdose, and remained there in a coma for two weeks and spent another two weeks recovering in a psychiatric ward. Her doctors prescribed Dilantin (anti-seizure medication) and told her not to drink. "But Nell loved wine and champagne," Nancy says. "I tried to look after her, but she didn't want me around."

In February 1977, Nell gave Jerry \$2,000 to deposit in his account, with instructions to use the funds to look after her in the event of a "rainy day" emergency. That June, Nell flew to Vienna and checked into the Sacher Hotel, where Nilsson and her husband were staying. After hearing her idol in *Tristan und Isolde*, Nell returned to her room and prepared to take her life. In her suicide note to Nilsson, she wrote, "Seat number twelve in the first row will be empty tomorrow. Isolde's potion means Tod! Tod uns beiden! (Death! Death to us both!)"

Nell left a thick envelope for Nilsson at the reception desk, but

NELL KNEW ALL ALONG THAT ONCE HER MONEY RAN OUT AND HER LIFE FOLLOWING NILSSON CAME TO A STOP, SHE WOULD END IT ALL.

it wasn't until the following morning that Bertil opened it. The envelope contained Nell's will, which was signed and notarized, and a request that her ashes be scattered on Nilsson's farm in Svenstad, Sweden. Bertil summoned hotel staff, who broke into Nell's room. She was found unconscious on the floor and taken to the hospital.

Meanwhile, in San Francisco, Jerry Orecchia received a telegram from Nell telling him to go to Vienna immediately, because she was "in a desperate crisis." When he checked into Vienna's Sacher Hotel, Jerry was given an envelope Nell had left for him containing a suicide note, instructions, her will — and an opera ticket for Nilsson's performance in *Elektra*. Eventually Jerry was taken to a sanitarium to see Nell. "She was all dressed up, wearing a pink turban and matching silk suit. All she told me was that she had a ticket to *Elektra* and wasn't allowed to go. 'Please use my ticket,' she said. She was clearly in a very fragile state."

That night, at the opera, Jerry "looked to the stage and saw Birgit in the wings, peeking out from the curtains to see who was in Nell's front row seat." Nell had left a sealed letter for him to hand deliver to Birgit, but Jerry chose not to do it.

Nell's suicide note to Jerry read, in part:

Dearest Jerry —

.... That "rainy" day I always intended [has] come, and those funds I sent you I always intended to be used by you to see to my cremation ... and to deliver, hand to hand, 1) my ashes 2) my sealed letter and 3) my gold "pinkie" ring (Tiffany one I always wear) to Madame. At the present, until Wednesday A.M. at least, she is in Room #447 — you must arrive and speak to her personally, face to face, before then!... She may refuse — but you must stress that it is my last wish, and that if she doesn't accept scattering my ashes over her farm in Sweden, — she may throw my ashes, my ring and my letter — everything, into the nearest ash can.

Ironic, isn't it? That it's June again, that it's Vienna again, my city of dreams, Tristan, my opera of operas.... It was a decision I myself made — not being able to live without her, and not being able to live with her.... But it was never meant. I loved her so, I love her still — and will through eternity.

While Nell remained hospitalized for several days, recovering from the overdose, Nilsson went on to an engagement in Savonlinna, Finland. While there, Nilsson received word that Nell had once again been found unconscious — this time in Finland — and taken to the hospital.

On August 16, 1977, a physician with offices on Central Park South, who had been treating Nell for more than a year,

gave her three prescriptions for pills. He later told investigators that she'd been bitten by a lion years before and had had extensive surgery that still caused her pain and sleepless nights. At 4:30 A.M. on August 19, Nell checked into the Skyways Motel across from La Guardia Airport. The night clerk reported that Nell had been referred from the Travelers Motel, which had no vacancies. She requested not to be disturbed, not even for a phone call.

That night, at 11:30 P.M., the hotel clerk at the Skyways Motel called the police because there'd been no communication from the occupant in room 229. Officers from the 114th Precinct broke down the door and found Nell, wearing a white and pink dressing gown and a red ribbon in her dark brown hair, lying on the floor. Her handbag contained I.D. and \$74.25 in cash. Pill bottles and pills littered the floor of the room.

Nell Theobald was pronounced dead by Medical Examiner Dr. Lin in the early hours of August 20, 1977. An autopsy revealed acute mixed Amobarbital, Secobarbital and Flu-zapepam intoxication. Her death was ruled a suicide.

When Nancy emptied Nell's apartment, she found lingerie and other personal effects that presumably belonged to

Nilsson. There were also hundreds of letters, purportedly from Nilsson to Nell, all handwritten on Nilsson's distinctive blue letterhead, stationery that Nell had apparently stolen from Nilsson's room. Nancy says Nell had learned to forge Nilsson's handwriting and written letters to herself, even incorporating grammatical errors only a foreigner would make.

According to a suicide letter Nancy found in Nell's apartment, she had requested that her ashes be scattered over Vienna. "I spoke to a woman at the Austrian Consulate, whose nephew was going to Vienna, and arranged



The 1975 photo that Nell sent to friends, inscribed "My last Christmas"

for him to scatter them," says Nancy. "Looking back, I'm sure Birgit quickly realized that Nell was trouble, a fantasist who could be a liability, and tried to get rid of her. The more she pushed Nell away, the more Nell clung."

When Nell died, there was no funeral and no mention of her passing in any newspaper. It was left to her idol to resurrect her in her memoir. □

KATHRYN LEIGH SCOTT is an actress whose credits include the long-running television series *Dark Shadows* and the motion pictures *The Great Gatsby* and *Providence*. She is also the author of several books, including *The Bunny Years* and *Dark Shadows Memories*.