

Everlasting Faint

The Story of the Opera

Greenbrier, West Virginia, 1897

ACT I

Eleven year-old Andy Jones visits the house of his neighbors, the Shues, then runs out screaming.

His mother Martha mourns the loss of her neighbor, Elva Heaster Shue. The town doctor, Dr. Knapp, arrives to examine Elva's body. Martha tells him that Elva's husband Trout is grief-stricken and acting unusual. Dr. Knapp attempts to examine Elva, but an emotional Trout won't leave him alone with the body. Feeling uneasy, Dr. Knapp attributes Elva's death to an "everlasting faint."

After Elva's burial, Martha visits Mary, Elva's mother. She gives her the white scarf that was wrapped around Elva's neck, mentioning Trout's troubling behavior during the funeral. Mary says that he wouldn't leave Elva's side or let anyone near the coffin.

After Martha leaves, Mary notices a spot on the scarf. She attempts to clean it off, but the water runs blood red. A familiar voice calls to her, then the spirit of Elva appears, starts to convey a message, and vanishes. Mary reflects on how women die at the hands of men.

Mary confronts Dr. Knapp, asking him to exhume Elva's body to look for evidence of foul play. Dr. Knapp assures her that the cause of death was correct and dismisses her concerns as grief. As he leaves to help another patient, Mary discovers the doctor's ledger; then Elva appears and reveals more about her death. When Dr. Knapp returns, Mary tells him that she knows that he never examined Elva's body, because Elva's spirit told her he would have seen marks. He admits that Trout did not allow him to do a thorough examination and agrees to exhume the body if Mary can have the case reopened.

Martha sits near Andy's bed and prays. Simultaneously, Mary prays and thanks God for the miracle of Elva's visits. Elva appears with the ghosts of two other women, Allie and Lucy, who detail how they were killed by Trout Shue, who was married to all three of them. Mary vows that she will find justice and that Trout will pay for his crimes.

ACT II

Mary visits the prosecutor, John Preston, and asks him to investigate Elva's death. Preston insists that the story of Elva's ghostly visits will weaken their case. When Mary tells him that Dr. Knapp admitted he had not examined Elva's body, Preston agrees to order an exhumation.

In a tavern, Trout and his companions drown away their sorrows. Preston arrives and tells Trout about his visit with Mary and the forthcoming exhumation of Elva's body. Trout insists that he wants to leave the past behind and move on with his life. Preston serves him with a court order requiring him to be present at the exhumation.

An autopsy is held at Dr. Knapp's office. As Mary looks on in distress, Elva appears to comfort her. Dr. Knapp finds marks on Elva's throat: her windpipe is crushed and her neck is dislocated, just as Mary had said. Trout is arrested.

In the courtroom, Preston questions Trout, who dismisses Mary as a nagging mother-in-law who never liked him. Mary testifies next, and Trout's lawyer, Mr. Gardner, tries to discredit her by mentioning her ghost stories. Mary assures him that the ghost's visits were a gift from God. The attorneys give their closing arguments. As the jurors file out, Mary and Martha pray, and Elva, Allie and Lucy appear. The jury finds Trout guilty of murder, and he is sentenced to life in prison. Mary rejoices that Elva has finally received justice.

The entire ensemble breaks character to reflect on the many crimes and injustices against women, remembering those affected, acknowledging their pain, and hoping for a better future.

~ Madison Opera, 2025