

THE MUSE AND THE VIRUS  
by Louise Wynn

Characters:

CALLIOPE, The Muse of Epic Poetry and mother of Orpheus: eternally young, tall and serene, dressed in a flowing white robe with one shoulder bare.

VIRUS GUY, a middle-aged man with a paunch, maskless, wearing a t-shirt and baggy cargo shorts and an angry expression.

BARISTA: a college student, male or female, wears the usual apron over a polo shirt and khaki pants.

Setting: A coffee shop on a busy street in any town or city, yesterday.

AT RISE: CALLIOPE sits at a table writing on a tablet or laptop while sipping chai.

VIRUS GUY swaggers in, past a “Thank You for Wearing a Mask!” sign, and bellies up to the counter, where BARISTA is rearranging tea cakes and omelets and such.

BARISTA smiles tentatively and backs away as VIRUS GUY approaches.

VIRUS GUY: What’s a man gotta do to get a coffee around here?

CALLIOPE: *Looks up for a moment, then down again to write something on her tablet.*

BARISTA: Hello, sir, how may I help you this afternoon?

VIRUS GUY: What’s your special today?

BARISTA: We do have a delicious red raspberry tea with lemon. Would you---?

VIRUS GUY: I asked for coffee. Are you deaf?

BARISTA: Sorry, sir, I thought you asked for our special.

VIRUS GUY: Your special coffee. What’s the matter with you people nowadays?

CALLIOPE: *[Puts down her tablet and clears her throat.]*

VIRUS GUY: *[Turns.]* Hey, lady, what’s your problem? You don’t like the way I’m talking?

CALLIOPE: I’m just wondering if I might ask you to wear a mask.

VIRUS GUY: *[With an unpleasant chuckle]* You might. But would I do it? I doubt it.

CALLIOPE: I see. *[She picks up her tablet again and writes something on it.]*

VIRUS GUY: Whatcha doing? You taking notes?

CALLIOPE: *[Looks up from tablet, blinks.]* Sorry, sir?

VIRUS GUY: You taking notes? What's your problem, anyway?

CALLIOPE: I'm just working on a song, a poem I'm writing. Would you like to hear it?

BARISTA: Excuse the interruption, sir, but would you like to order your coffee now?

VIRUS GUY: Shut up. Can't you see I'm talking to this lovely lady here?

CALLIOPE: *[Looks at BARISTA]* Which one of those treats would you recommend?

VIRUS GUY: Did you hear me? I'm talking to you.

CALLIOPE: Sir, I'm talking to the Barista. *[To BARISTA]* That chocolate souffle looks divine.

VIRUS GUY: Hey! I'm talkin' to you!

BARISTA: *[To CALLIOPE]* Coming right up, Ma'am.

VIRUS GUY: Yeah, lady, I wanna hear your song.

CALLIOPE: Would you like your coffee first? And maybe a chocolate souffle? My treat.

VIRUS GUY: Why would you --- *[He leers at CALLIOPE]* Oh, I get it.

CALLIOPE: *[Very softly; VIRUS GUY doesn't hear]* I doubt very much that you get it.

BARISTA: So, that'll be a coffee and two chocolate souffles?

VIRUS GUY: Duh. Pay attention. What's wrong with you, you some kind of moron?

CALLIOPE: *[To BARISTA]* That would be perfect, thank you very much.

VIRUS GUY: So, hey, you, you gonna sing me that song now?

CALLIOPE: You do realize, don't you, that once you hear my song, your powers will diminish to nothing, and you will disappear from the knowledge of the people of Earth?

VIRUS GUY: Huh?

BARISTA: *[Puts coffee and two chocolate souffles, with dainty fork and napkin on each miniature plate, in front of VIRUS GUY and CALLIOPE.]* Here you are, Ma'am, anything else?

CALLIOPE: That will be all for now, thank you. Would you like to take a break? I can watch out for any new customers who come in, and ring the bell for you.

BARISTA: No, no problem, thanks anyway.

CALLIOPE: I really very highly recommend that you go into the back room, just for a moment or two. This won't take long, I promise.

VIRUS GUY: *[Has already finished his chocolate mousse and is halfway through his cup of coffee.]* What the hell is going on here, anyway?

CALLIOPE: If you're ready, sir, for my poem. I have a wonderful app on this tablet. Do you enjoy music? This app plays the accompaniment to the poem I have just written. Are you ready? *[She motions to BARISTA to leave, and BARISTA scurries through the double doors into the back room.]*

VIRUS GUY: Sure. Hit me with your best shot, ha, ha, ha.

CALLIOPE: *[Recites her poem to the sound, from the tablet, of a stringed instrument being strummed softly; after the first stanza, CALLIOPE becomes angry; and as she goes into third stanza, she becomes frenzied in sorrow and rage, until she is screaming at the "Lyssa" line:]*

If one so lovely as my own son  
Should lose his life at Fate's cruel whimsy  
Why should mortals now survive  
In sacrilege so ugly and foul?

Bring back Deimos, Phobos! Hecate,  
Where your power now? Medusa,  
Show us your image! Fates, rain  
Down destruction on such mortals!

Dear Cassandra, who foresaw the doom  
Of Earth's careless humans, find  
Lyssa, unleash her on---

VIRUS GUY: *[Holding his hands to his ears, shaking his head, gets up and storms out of the coffee shop, screaming in agony.]*

CALLIOPE: *[Breaks off her song as VIRUS GUY leaves.]*

BARISTA: *[Re-enters, just as CALLIOPE stops singing.]* Is everything okay here?

CALLIOPE: I'm good. You?

BARISTA: It sounded kind of scary for a minute there.

CALLIOPE: If you only knew, my dear. *[She drops a twenty on the table and picks up her tablet to leave.]* And thus shall Poetry and Song vanquish every demon.