

DREAMS OF THE CLOCKMAKER

Written by

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WOMAN ON A STAGE

I gave up the act. Or was persuaded to. You see, even now, looking back, my memory of the whole affair feels... irrevocably clouded. I still can't really remember if the act was for real or not. You can swear you see things, but maybe you're just caught up in it. I know there was a lotta sincerity behind it...But was I seeing the future?

I don't think so.

I called it One Thousand and One Nights of the Shadow Lady. I had one thousand and one vials. It was to be a limited run. I only made it to night one hundred and forty-three. I was doing the act in one of those old, forgotten, out-of-the-way places. Large wooden beams, shadowy cobwebbed rafters. A crowd of maybe a hundred. I put the vial to my lips, but realize I've forgotten to unscrew the cap. At this point, I'd rather fake it than have to fumble with it in front of everyone, so I pretend. Hey, I've done this a hundred and forty-two times. I think I can pull it off. I walk down the aisle... I'm about to feign the striking of the trance when I look up... and I see a figure in the rafters. It's too far to see clearly, but-

It's... he's swinging a pocket-watch back and forth.

Ten: He smiles, but only for a moment. It's the smile of man with a great weight upon his shoulders.

Nine: I, too, feel a great weight upon my shoulders.

Eight: A terrible weight. My legs feel like loosened coils.

(MORE)

WOMAN ON A STAGE (CONT'D)

Seven: A tingling warmth rising from my feet.

Six: My body is sinking. I make for the stage door.

Five: Something is wrong.

Four: I feel as if I'm being sucked into the floor, which is very clearly made of tar. I try to breathe.

Three: My chest is so heavy. My lungs can't lift it any longer.

Two: I lunge for the door, but it's a hundred miles away.

One: --

Transition

I find myself in the bed of a truck. My head's on an oil-spattered pillow, and I'm surrounded by all manner of random bric-a-brac, My vials are gone. My hand unclenches and I realize I've been holding tight to the unopened vial from my final performance.

Where was I?

A faux-wood panel slides open, the driver leans back, looks me in the eye, and says: Welcome to California!

I'd never been to California before, so I was kind of excited. I can't really explain why, but I didn't feel like I was in any danger. And I wasn't. Not at that point.

Transition

A few hours later, I met the Clockmaker. That was how he introduced himself, so that's what I called him.

(MORE)

WOMAN ON A STAGE (CONT'D)

I was led by masked attendants down passageways, corridors, stairwells, what-have-you. I was trying to memorize every right and left turn, trying to drop some mental bread crumbs.

We arrived at the Clockmaker's lair. Mahogany, leather-bound books, mirrors. He was standing, waiting for me. He had a mask on.

CLOCKMAKER

I am the Clockmaker.

WOMAN ON A STAGE

Well, why have you brought me here?

CLOCKMAKER

I need you to read something for me.

WOMAN ON A STAGE

What do you need me to read?
How long are you going to keep me here?

CLOCKMAKER

As long as it takes.

WOMAN ON A STAGE

Why me?

CLOCKMAKER

Because you can see.

WOMAN ON A STAGE

Not without my vials, I can't!

CLOCKMAKER

You'll have them.

Transition

WOMAN ON A STAGE

The next morning, I'm led to the Clockmaker's lair.

I walk in as he's still placing the mask on his face and catch a glimpse of that man from the rafters. The Clockmaker. He's very delicate. Aristocratic. But with an unsavory air. He's younger than I thought, too...

(MORE)

WOMAN ON A STAGE (CONT'D)

Ten of my vials, at least, served up in a highball glass.

Transition

Let's talk about the vials. Where did they come from, right? Well, let me tell you about my Grandmother. Gramma was a bit of a free spirit. You think the Dust Bowl got Gramma down?- you gotta be kidding me. The Great Depression was Gramma's finest hour. She was the original Shadow Lady.

I was the spitting image of Gramma, they say. She'd drink it. Then she'd tell em whether or not they was gonna eat tomorrow. Whether or not they were gonna break an axle on their covered wagon and drown in the river.

She used to tell me she found the vials in a rug. Gramma grew up near a place called Alston, Oklahoma. Prohibition didn't mean much in a place like Alston, so Gramma and a couple of her schoolmates happened to be hittin a mason jar of corn whiskey out back of a place called the Worm Creek Tavern. Gramma was only thirteen or fourteen, but hard-livin begets hard-drinkin, and she and her buddies were riding the rail, they were on something of a real bender... for a couple a teenagers. She and her friends are laughin and jokin, yuckin it up when all of a sudden- silence. The hairs on the back of her neck begin to tingle. Gramma hears a language, the likes of which she had nevah heard before.. Now, Gramma later discovered that the men she heard were Frenchmen. Veterans of the Great War. But Gramma knew what French sounded like- and that wasn't French.

(MORE)

WOMAN ON A STAGE (CONT'D)

She pulled up a barstool and plopped right down beside them. Even on the stool, she wasn't looking these oddballs in the eye, she was at bar level. And right there, right before her eyes, resting on a foamy glass, is the meaty paw of one of the soldiers. Upon one of his hammy fingers is a ring. And upon the ring is a great panorama- evergreen trees, a quiet lake, a dazzling sunset. Gramma figures the ring is made of abalone or maybe even a butterfly wing, because it twinkles and shimmers so... but she soon grasps that there's no optical illusion at play here. The scene depicted on the ring is moving for real. Gramma gasps.

The eye of the Frenchman is bearing down on her. He's turning around and closing in on her like a saw to a piece of lumber. His eyes narrow and his nostrils flare. He knows what she saw... He knows what she saw, and he smiles.

She couldn't stay away... The soldiers were in Alston for a couple of weeks, and Gramma became their buddy. They let her get close- but not too close. Sometimes they spoke English. Sometimes they spoke French. Sometimes they spoke in the other. Finally, the time came for em to bid Alston adieu. On that last day, the soldier with the ring sent Gramma a telegram- rendezvous at the livery stable at dawn. She went. He was waiting... Pulled a rug out of rucksack. A rug, of all things. Now Gramma never got too specific about this particular section of the tale, but as far as I can figure, the rug depicted the same scene as the ring, and in the same manner, except on a much larger scale. A more comprehensive slice of a bigger picture.

(MORE)

WOMAN ON A STAGE (CONT'D)

Birds and mountains and lakes and rivers spiraling off into the distance, sweeping into a limitless horizon. He didn't even unfurl the whole thing. He reached into the rug, into the lake, made like he was yankin the stopper from a bathtub, and *just like that* a flutter of tiny vials surged forth from the rug and heaped up into a mound, right there on the floor of the livery. Gramma was speechless. So was I.

Transition

The Clockmaker asked me to tell him that story, many times over.

But I never told him.

Never told him where these came from.

He told me lots of things. He had dreams, you see. And I was a part of them, so long as I proved to be useful. He had friends in high places. They were gonna remake the world in their image. A lofty task. And they had the resources for it, or so I was assured- what they lacked, was foresight. I told him I wasn't even sure I could see the future. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more certain I became that I couldn't. The more vials I drank, the more questions he asked, the more he- it became clear that I could see only see what already was. Sometimes that meant telling people exactly what they wanted to hear. Sometimes it meant peeling the veneer off of the matter at hand and exposing what truly lay beneath.

In the Clockmaker's case...it was misguided. Gnarled. Misshapen. ... And their aspirations, their ambitions...

(MORE)

WOMAN ON A STAGE (CONT'D)

I decided that their ambitions would not leave the Clockmaker's mansion. Would not poison the world with their... persuasive cancer, their cordial venom. Their cold-hearted vision.

Transition

Each day, the Clockmaker brought an enormous pitcher, from which he would pour me a glasses worth of the fluid from my vials. And sure, we'd been running through the stuff at an accelerated rate, but there was still a great deal left in the pitcher. I'd say about four-hundred vials worth.

CLOCKMAKER

Drink it. Drink it now, I have questions!

WOMAN ON A STAGE

You know back when I did my gig, ya know the one you caught from the rafters back in Tennessee, they gave me a nickname after one of the shows. It's not as good as Clockmaker, but I think you'll find that it's still pretty fitting. A couple of fans challenged me to a drinking contest. I said, it's not fair to you folks, really- I drink for a living! They said, aw come on, that's just a tiny vial, once a night. So I said, okay... and I kicked all their asses, I drank em under the table. One of em staggered up long enough to say, 'So long as you're here, I christen thee Chattanooga Chug-a-lug.'

Well don't expect me to switch it out with Shadow Lady but I like it. It's got moxie. So now, Mr. Clockmaker, I'm gonna show you how I earned that nickname.

In a flash, I'd grabbed the pitcher, and before he could raise a finger, I drank it all down!

****Transition****

I could see EVERYTHING! It was like seeing the truth through backwards binoculars- the Clockmaker and his minions seemed so tiny and fragile now; the pillars of his great mansion were mere toothpicks. The Clockmaker squeaked like a little mouse, and I felt a great strength rising within me, waiting to be unleashed. All I'd have to do was raise my voice, and he'd be obliterated, dead, nothing. Nullified. Less than nothing. The mansion would be dust. I didn't know what would happen to me, but I didn't care. I SCREAMED!

****Transition****

For twenty-seven years, I've heard the expression, 'quiet as a tomb.' For the very first time, I really get what it means. I think my leg's broken. My eyes adjust to the light.

The Clockmaker's to my right. A mirror shard has punctured the base of his skull.

I can't really move. I can hardly breathe. I drag myself to a far corner; and there's nothing else to do but wait.

****Transition****

The paramedics said there had been a 6.3 quake, I'd been trapped for 36 hours, and I was lucky to be alive.

At the hospital, a nurse hands me a vile: Says I was clutching it when they brought me in. It's my last one. For all I know, it's the last one.

So here I am. Lady on a stage. I saw the future. I moved mountains. I gazed deeply into the abyss, and saw it all.

(MORE)

WOMAN ON A STAGE (CONT'D)

Or maybe I saw and did none of these things. Chalk it up to chemical reactions, stress, delusions, a well-timed earthquake.

I've had a lot of time to think about this, and, so, uh, without further ado...

Transition

I guess you get caught up in it...and it colors the way... which you perceive things. You spend too much time alone. And you convince yourself...

It's Gramma's story... The soldiers rug surrounds me on every side. It's beautiful. I'd give anything to have it last forever... It's fading... it's fading... it's gone.

END OF PLAY