

One-Woman Show, Ray Bradbury

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“How is it?” asked Levering. “Married to a woman who is all woman?”

“Pleasant,” said Mr. Thomas.

“You make it sound like a drink of water!”

Thomas glanced up at the critic, pouring black coffee. “I didn’t mean ... Ellen’s wonderful, there’s no denying that.”

“Last night,” said Levering, “Lord, what a show. On stage, off, on, off, a blaze of beauty, roses dipped in flaming alcohol. Lilies of the morning. The entire theater leant forward to catch her bouquet. It was as if someone had opened a door on a spring garden.”

“Will you have coffee?” asked Mr. Thomas, the husband.

“Listen. Three or four times in life, if a man’s lucky, he goes utterly mad. Music, a painting, one or two women, can send him stark staring. I’m a critic, yes, but I’ve never been so thoroughly hooked before.”

“We’ll drive to the theater in half an hour.”

“Good! Do you pick her up every night?”

“Oh, yes, I absolutely must. You’ll see why.”

“I came here first, of course,” said Levering, “to see the husband of Ellen Thomas, to see the luckiest man in the world. Is this your routine, every night in this hotel, waiting?”

“Sometimes I circle Central Park, take the subway to Greenwich, or window-shop on Fifth Avenue.”

“How often do you watch her?”

“Why, I don’t think I’ve seen her onstage for over a year.”

“Her orders?”

“No, no.”

“Well, perhaps you’ve seen the act so many times.”

“Not that.” Thomas lit a cigarette from the butt of his previous one.

“Well, you see her every day, that’s the answer. An audience of one, you lucky dog, no need of a theater for you. I said to Atterson last night, what more could a man ask?

Married to a woman so talented that onstage, in an hour’s time, a pageant of femininity has passed, a French cocotte, an English tart, a Swedish seamstress, Mary Queen of Scots, Joan of Arc, Florence Nightingale, Maude Adams, the Empress of China. I think I hate you.”

Mr. Thomas sat quietly.

Levering went on, “The libidinous side, the philandering side, of every man envies you. Tempted to stray? Don’t change wives; let your wife change. Presto! She’s a chandelier with ten dozen different blazes of light; the very walls of these rooms must color with her personalities. Why, a man could warm his hands at a flame like that for two lifetimes. Farewell, boredom!”

“My wife would be flattered to hear you.”

“No, but isn’t that what every husband wants, really, in his wife? The unexpected, the miraculous. We have to settle for much less than half that. We marry what we hope are kaleidoscopes, and wind up with one-faceted diamonds.

Oh, they gleam all right, no denying that. But after the thousandth playing, even Beethoven’s wonderful Ninth isn’t exactly a pulse-jumper, is it?”

“We’ve been touring, Ellen and I,” said the husband, finishing his pack of cigarettes and pouring a fifth cup of coffee. “Oh, some nine years

now. Once a year, we vacation, for a month, in Switzerland.” He smiled for the first time and lay back in his chair. “I really think you should interview us then, and not now. It’s a better time.”

“Nonsense. Always do things in the spell that takes me.” Levering got up and put on his coat. He gave his watch hand a flourish. “Almost time, isn’t it?”

“Oh, I suppose,” said Thomas, rising slowly, exhaling.

“Snap into it, man! You’re going to pick up Ellen Thomas!”

“Now, if only you could guarantee that.” Thomas turned away and went for his hat. Coming back, he smiled faintly. “Well, how do I look? Like the proper setting for a diamond? Am I the right curtain for her to stand against?”

“Stolid, that’s the word for you, stolid. Marble and granite, iron and steel. The proper contrast to something as evanescent as touching a match to some shallow cup of vaporent cologne.”

“You are one for words.”

“Yes, sometimes I just stand here and listen to myself. Absolutely amazing.” Levering winked and clapped Thomas on the shoulder. “Shall we hire a coach, detach the horses, and pull the wife twice around the park?”

“Once would be enough. Just once.”

And out they went.

Their taxi pulled up before the empty theater lobby. “We’re early!” cried Levering happily. “Let’s go in for the finale.”

“Oh, no.”

“What? Not see your wife?”

“You must excuse me.”

“What an insult! On her behalf. Come into the theater or I’ll flatten you with my fists!”

“Please, don’t insist.”

Levering seized his arm and strode off.

“We’ll just see about this.” He flung a door wide, steered Thomas through, muttering, “Quietly.”

Ushers turned in the dimness, recognized Thomas, subsided. They stood in darkness. The stage was lit with bright spots of rose and lavender and a color like green trees in spring. There were six white Corinthian pillars stretched from wing to wing. The theater was drawn into itself; not a breath stirred in the night.

“Please, let go,” Thomas whispered.

“Shh, respect, man, respect!” whispered Levering in return.

The woman—or was it women?—onstage moved from dark to light, to dark, to light again. It was indeed the grand finale. The orchestra played softly. The woman, alone, danced with shadows, starting at stage right, waltzing in a self-made dream, turning all crystal light, in prisms and flashes, hands up, face radiant, Cinderella at the ball, the grand whirl, the happy never-to-wake vision. Gone, behind a white pillar.

A moment later, appearing, another woman, dancing less swiftly, but still with a lilt, not Cinderella now, but a society lady, accepting life, a trifle bored and sad, face shaped of white bone, remembering some far time while moving with an invisible man who, by her very aspect, was a stranger indeed. The music whirled her on to another pillar, another vanishing, gone! Levering pressed to the standing-room barrier, staring.

The music whirled. And from the second pillar a third woman spun, sadder yet, resigned to the music, the sparks dying, her own diminishing in splendor, a town woman, a street woman now caught between this pillar and the next, flashing a fixed death smile in and through them, leaning on the air, arms wide, mouth wet and bright.

Gone again! A fourth, fifth, sixth woman! The music exploding in a carnival wheel of light! A chambermaid, a waitress, and, at last, at the far side of the stage, a witch, gray, weaving a flicker of tinsel in her bosom, only the eyes, faintly alive, burning coals, as she minced about, hands clawing night air, lips pursed, a silken death about her, turning to stare back down the years, across the chasm, like a tired, drained, and ancient beast, on hind legs, life done, still dancing, for there was nothing else to do.

It couldn't end there; not with beauty flown. The old woman stopped completely, stared across the stage to that first pillar where the bright maid had begun, long years ago. Then, crying out, but making no noise, the old woman closed her eyes, and with a vast effort of will, wished herself across the stage to that shining illusion.

It was such an effort of will that no one saw the old woman vanish, the stage remain empty some five seconds, and then, in an explosion of light, reappear again, gone backward in years. The maiden reborn with spring and summer grace, not touching the world but drifting through it in a downfall of blossoms and snow, the beauty spun forever around and around, as the curtain fell.

Levering was riven. "My God," he gasped. "I know it's sentimental claptrap, a garish display, but I'm trapped! God, what a woman!"

He turned to confront Thomas, who stood clutching the velvet rail, still staring at the stage, where now a spotlight appeared. Applause filled the theater. The curtain rose.

The glorious top, white and tireless, still spun there, all crystal snow and winter flourished forever as the curtain slid up and down, no music, only the great storm of applause, which spun the winter shape more wildly.

Tears rolled down Thomas's face. He watched the curtain rise and fall upon the flashing ghost, and the tears continued. Levering took hold of his arm.

"Here now, here!"

The curtain at last cut the uproar. The theater was dark; the audience, stunned, walked out, holding to each other. Levering and Thomas were silent as they made their way to the exit.

They stood outside the theater, by the stage door. Inside, a buzzer rang somewhere on the empty stage. The theater was dead and silent. At the buzzer, Thomas went to the door, opened it, went in.

A minute later, he came out, leading, half-supporting, a small woman, in the darkness. The woman wore a dark kerchief tight about her face, she was dressed in a lumpy coat, her face was without color, and there were lines of exhaustion in the cheeks and under the eyes. She did not see Levering and almost blundered into him.

"Darling, this is Mr. Levering, the critic. Remember?"

"What a performance!" cried Levering. "Wonderful!"

She leaned against her husband, who murmured, "A warm bath, a rubdown, then to bed, and a good night's sleep. Wake you at noon." She stared at Levering with no lipstick on her mouth, no color on her brows or cheeks or eyelids. She trembled.

She said something he did not hear, her words came in a tired rush, her eyes saw through and beyond him, in darkness. She half-hid behind her husband and he saw her mouth without paint and her eyes without color and her mouth moved and she said several things.

Some other night, some other night, some other night in the future, someday, sometime, perhaps, but not tonight, not tonight, sometime in the future. He had to lean to hear her, in the dark, hollow, empty alley.

How could she explain, how could she possibly explain to him, he was so patient, so kind, to come see her, to come here.

And then, as with an inspiration, he couldn't see what she was about, she seized upon an excuse, an object, and thrust it at him, confusedly, almost with apology. She let go and he held it, she gazed into his face.

Then the waiting cab drew her attention, the cab summoned it with its yellow lights and comfortable cushions and its traveling darkness and promise of leave-taking. Then, leaning, helped, she was taken away by her husband.

They abandoned the critic and she was finally in the cab, closeted, with its motor purring. The husband turned and looked across the distance at the critic, questioningly. There were tiny lines around the husband's eyes and mouth.

The critic nodded and waved. The husband nodded and entered the cab, shutting the door very quietly. The cab drove, with exaggerated slowness, away. It seemed to take five minutes, like a procession, to move down the dark alley.

The critic stood by the stage door and looked at her gift, her explanation.

A face towel. No more and no less. A towel.

He stood a long moment in the alley. He shook the towel a few times without looking at it. It was wet. It was absolutely soaking. He lifted it and drew a faint breath. It was rank with perspiration.

"Some other night," he said. Yes, he might come back ten dozen nights to receive the same gift, the same excuse. "Sly one, that husband, didn't warn me. Let it all happen. Well."

He folded the towel as neatly as possible and carried it in one hand, went out to hail a taxi, and let it drive him home. "Driver," he said, on the way, "what if you had a garden and weren't allowed to pick the flowers?"

The driver thought it over as he turned a corner. "Well," he said, "that'd be one hell of a thing!"

"Yes," said Levering. "You are right, driver. One hell of a thing."

But then it was late and the cab stopped, and it was time to get out and pay the driver and go into his apartment house, carrying the towel quietly, in one hand.

All of these things Mr. Levering did.

The end