

Stage Play in Five Acts of Her: Matinee

by Rae Bryant

DRAMATIS PERSONÆ

She—Is a puppet.

I—Live inside her except when she lets me out to play.

We—Are always together.

He—Will be mentioned only once.

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ACT ONE

She stands on hardwood. Long porcelain arms covered in three-quarter sleeves hide near-faded bruises. Her mouth forms a perfect O framed with red clown lips. She learned the O from years of practice. Practice, he called it. She sings the vowel, pushing it from diaphragm and out through the theatre. She ignores the hands beneath her.

Stagehands watch from the trap door. They fondle and move her from the trapdoor. Their fingernails are dirt-caked and sharp and she ignores them, calls to her audience of one who sits in a red velvet seat. Cue me.

It is ironic, her watching me watching her, because we are the same, and I might cry for her if sentimentality had been a strength. I watch her jostle and feel nothing.

Ignore them, she says. It is her only line in this act and it is unnecessary.

She bends at waist so to push forward and spread herself deliberately, balancing and throwing out arms and hands curved like a porcelain doll's, palms stretched out, growing like tentacles over red velvet seatbacks. Like drifting seaweed, her fingers beckon. They pluck me from my seat, pull me, glide me to stage, where she stands me at her hip, denying me the space inside her head and I try not to

look at it, the space in her head, because I do not want her to think I want it.

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ACT TWO

We swoon under hot lights melting the wax of our face. We can smell the face wax. It melts like candy paraffin filled with pastel pink and green and yellow sweet sugar syrup glistening with the dew from our mouths. We cannot smile. The makeup will not let us. Our mouth is an infinite O and our eyes pierce through baked on mascara.

We are hollowed out and old and used, cracked from the stage lights, but between the cracking, beneath the grime, we are perfect. It does not matter. No one will want us soon. We are a dying art.

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ACT THREE

Say it. Say it out loud. Sing it to the world. Let me inside so I can help you. I point. There, look, you have an audience. The velvet seats fill with people she always knew but not really. She has hidden herself behind brocade and red clown lips for many years.

There is your mother. I point. Your father. I point again. Your brother, sister, cousin, second cousin, and your aunt who we all believed to be an alien clone. I go on, pointing out all the patrons who might listen. But she stands, mouth still, a maiden caught in stage lights.

Coward.

She tries to cry but her makeup will not let her form the face and so the tears fall in two thin lines between nose and cheeks, along her big wide O.

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ACT FOUR

I could have written her as is with long bushy hair, skinned knees, overhauls, blueberry stains on her fingers and teeth because she eats them too much. I love her better this way, blueberry-stained and wild.

I shuffle dance close to her, in front of her, to the side. I move to make her laugh, break the freeze. When I trip on purpose, she laughs accidentally in a short burst of air. Her arms fall to her side then wrap at her waist like they used to when she ate blueberries and laughed accidentally out loud and finally, I think, she will shed the brocade, crack the face, but as I watch and wait, her arms form again, stretching out in curves. She bends at waist. Feet spread over the trapdoor. The stagehands jostle her.

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ACT FIVE

Do you remember when I slipped in the snow and you stood laughing? I was not so mad about the groceries, and I did not hate you so much then, because I still loved you like *déjà vu*. I loved you so much that I wrote you in this play. Remember?

She does not move or wrap her arms, does not accidentally laugh or sigh. She says: You can come in. And she pulls at her ear and opens her head like a hinged trapdoor.

No. I want you to come out.

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ACT SIX: The unplanned act like one last try. A last call before closing.

Remember the time you laughed three times? The snow was nothing, a trifle, but you laughed because it was funny and then you laughed when we broke our ankle— I stop because I realize I've spoken of us again, we as in a collective.

Yes, it was funny, she says. He—. She stops short because he was only supposed to be mentioned once, a second mentioning was not in the script, and now I've added a third. She corrects herself. The person who will not be named stood in front of the train, between us and the train as it kept coming. That person did not move until we were safe.

That person broke our ankle pulling us to safety. That person broke other things, too.

We stop because the sentiment is like filling a shot glass at last call. Half full, half empty, clock ticking.

We jostle again, wince, crack our makeup a little more. A broken marionette with no strings. And we hold still, wait for the stagehands to remove their fingers and drag us, brocade heels over hardwood, to our place behind the red velvet curtain, where we will wait for the evening show to begin. All the best people will come to see us.

