

ACTS OF WITNESS

by
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The Dress
End Of The Male Narrative, So Sorry
Survival Of The Fittest

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OPEN

TITLE ON SCREEN: THE DRESS

EXT. HAPPY COTTAGE ADULT FAMILY HOME. DRIVEWAY - DAY

A middle aged woman, DAUGHTER, opens the passenger door of a parked car. Leans in.

INT. CAR

An OLD WOMAN huddles in the seat.

DAUGHTER
Come on, mom. Put your feet out.

Old Mother curls away.

DAUGHTER (CONT'D)
Here. Right foot first.

OLD MOTHER
(slurred speech)
Why should I?

DAUGHTER
You're home.

OLD MOTHER
This is not my home.

DAUGHTER
It's where you live now.
Come on.

EXT. DRIVEWAY

With sudden fury Old Mother marches toward the doorway. She jabs the air with her CANE. Daughter guides her by the elbow.

OLD MOTHER
Alright. I'll be a good girl. But
I do not live here.

The door with HAPPY COTTAGE HOME on it opens. Mother enters.

INT. BOOK LINED APARTMENT - DAY

The room is half packed up. Moving boxes. Sorted piles.

In a corner is a sewing machine, notions, fabric remnants.

Daughter and an old man, her FATHER, clear out drawers in a dresser. He looks on over her shoulder, a bag in his hand.

She pulls out woman's clothing, shakes out each, re-folds.

DAUGHTER

Give away?

He holds up the bag. She puts in the clothing.

Down to the bottom drawer. A shimmering, complicated, RAYON FABRIC appears.

Daughter's hand stops.

Together Father and Daughter lean closer as Daughter lets her hand touch and pull up the fabric. It unfurls, a DRESS.

Father and daughter pull back in simultaneous recognition.

The dress is a 1950's haute couture pattern, hand stitched except for two main seams and the back darts.

DAUGHTER (CONT'D)

Mom made this. I remember it.

FATHER

(with pride)

So do I. Your mother sure knew how to enter a room.

DAUGHTER'S FLASHBACK

INT. LATE 50'S MODERN LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The walls are lined with bookcases filled with books.

Intimate POV from the floor.

A child receives a good night kiss from a well made up, loving face. The face pulls away, becoming MOTHER.

A DELICATE WEB linking the child to mother stretches out.

The child, a LITTLE GIRL, 3, grabs at the web. It slips through her fingers, snaps back into mother's body.

Mother wears the DRESS from the drawer. It makes swishing noises as she places her hand on the doorknob. Exotic.

END DAUGHTER'S FLASHBACK

INT. BOOK LINED APARTMENT - RETURN TO SCENE

Daughter's not sure what to do with the dress.

DAUGHTER

What's it doing in a drawer?

She grabs a wooden hanger, hangs the dress on it.

FATHER

Take it to her. Show her, show everyone in that place what kind of woman your mother was.

INT. DAUGHTER'S HOME. BATHROOM - DAY

Daughter hangs the dress on its hanger on a hook. It rustles as Daughter exits.

INT. BATHROOM DOOR - LATER

Daughter passes by. The fabric rustles.

She looks in. Flicks on the light. The dress hangs there, ominous. She flicks off the light.

INT. BATHROOM - LATER

Daughter washes her hands. Her eyes fall on the dress.

She gives in, holds the dress up against her body. Shrugs. Why not?

She pulls off her T-shirt and sweat pants. Stands in her sports underwear.

DAUGHTER

(to herself, a last doubt)
Don't own a slip.

She unzips the side waist zipper.

Carefully tests the 3/4 length sleeve over her hand. The opening is tight but her hand slips through.

She lifts her arms over her head, squeezes her broad shoulders together to fit the dress down and over.

She tries the zipper. It won't close. Too tight.

DAUGHTER (CONT'D)
Doesn't matter. Not going to wear
it anywhere.

She looks in the mirror. It looks good.

She tries to lift her arms, move her legs. Can't.

Unsettled, she tries to pull off the sleeves. Won't budge.

She grabs the skirt, pulls. Halfway up the fabric gets stuck. The hand stitched seams threaten to split.

Her arms lock across her chest like a straight jacket.

Panic sets in.

She holds her breath. Twirls, the dress half on, half off, struggles to move the thing off her body.

DAUGHTER (CONT'D)
(stern mother to herself)
Stop it! Stop being silly!

With great effort she makes herself calm down.

DAUGHTER (CONT'D)
Slow down and think this through.

Her breath evens.

She bends over. Her hands hang down to the floor as she lets a one-with-the-dress moment come to her.

The slippery fabric falls, inch by inch, back over her head.

Her fingers stretch to catch the hem. She pulls the dress inside out over her head.

She turns the dress back right side out. Puts it on its hanger. Hangs it on the hook. Zips the zipper.

INT. HAPPY COTTAGE ADULT FAMILY HOME - DAY

Daughter enters. She holds a CLOTHING BOX.

DAUGHTER
Hi mom.

Old Mother sits in a chair. Recognition crosses her face.

OLD MOTHER
(with joy)
Oh Dollie! Where have you been?

DAUGHTER
I was here yesterday. It's okay
you don't remember. I'm here now.

OLD MOTHER
You're my daughter, aren't you?

DAUGHTER
And you're my mother.

Daughter places the box in Old Mother's lap.

DAUGHTER (CONT'D)
Look. I brought you something.

Old Mother opens the box.

She removes the dress from tissue. It boldly unfurls into
her lap. Come home.

OLD MOTHER
My!

She fingers it.

OLD MOTHER (CONT'D)
What fabric! And look at these
seams. They're stitched by hand.

DAUGHTER
Yes. I thought that was unusual,
too. A beautiful job, don't you
think?

OLD MOTHER
Yes. It's well done.

DAUGHTER
Do you remember it?

OLD MOTHER
Should I?

DAUGHTER
No.

Old Mother folds the dress, puts it back in the box, pulls
the tissue over.

Daughter puts the lid on the box.

Old Mother hands the box back.

OLD MOTHER
Are you my daughter?

DAUGHTER
Yes. Yes I am.

FADE TO:

OPEN

TITLE ON SCREEN: END OF THE MALE NARRATIVE, SO SORRY

INT. HO-DOWN TAVERN - DAY

From the packed dance floor steps SARAH, 40, light on her feet. She embraces Daughter.

SARAH
What a wonderful surprise!

Sarah fingers the lapel on Daughter's tailored tweed jacket.

DAUGHTER
My mom made it.

SARAH
What an artist!

DAUGHTER
She was.

Daughter presses a present into Sarah's hands.

DAUGHTER (CONT'D)
For your birthday.

Sarah unties the ribbon. Purple, mid forearm length lady's leather gloves unfurl into Sarah's hands.

DAUGHTER (CONT'D)
I've been sorting through my mom's clothing. My hands, too big.

Sarah pulls on one glove, then the other. They fit. She strikes a pose. Ta da!

DAUGHTER (CONT'D)
Perfect.

Sarah looks around. What to do with Daughter?

INT. BOOTH IN TAVERN - CONTINUOUS

MADISON, a boyish 28, sits alone with his drink beneath a NO SMOKING sign. An unlit cigarette behind his ear.

SARAH

Madison, this is my best
girlfriend. I just know you two'll
love each other. She's a writer.

Madison half rises. Takes her hand. Genteel.

MADISON

(Virginian accent)
Very pleased, I'm sure.

SARAH

Madison teaches at the University.
English.

Sarah dances back into the crowd.

DAUGHTER

I'm impressed.

MADISON

I'm just a T.A.

DAUGHTER

Still. Working on your Masters?

MADISON

(correcting)
Doctorate. What do you write?

DAUGHTER

Screen plays. These days. And no,
nothing you'd have seen.

MADISON

No.

DAUGHTER

And some poetry.

MADISON

(his eyes wander)
Of course. Poetry.

DAUGHTER

Whatever form fits. Career wise
not so good, but...

MADISON

...but you linger on the outside,
writing your alienation.

DAUGHTER

No. I stand both feet in the
margins writing the hope I'm unable
to forsake. And you?

MADISON

None of Thoreau's life of quiet
desperation for you, then?
(careful of her feelings)
Even with your lack of success.

DAUGHTER

I've always thought reading
desperation into it, however quiet,
deepens the blindness to our part
in nature's vibrant wonder.

He speaks over her head, at some imaginary class, perhaps.

MADISON

On the contrary, Thoreau puts
himself back in nature, argues
against the artifice of
civilization.

DAUGHTER

So like man, to disdain what he's
sacrificed all of nature for.

MADISON

Can men outlive their origins?
(quoting)
A wild man; his hand will be
against every man, and everyman's
hand against him.

DAUGHTER

But Melville carries his Ahab down
persistent crazy for revenge
strapped to a creature with no
memory of the maiming, poor thing.

His eyes flicker over her. She's caught his reference.

MADISON

The brutal fight for survival.

DAUGHTER

Learning the laws of nature not to understand but to overcome. And destroy.

A DELICATE WEB drifts from Daughter toward Madison. A wisping link of energy spun from their shared knowledge.

MADISON

Man must press on, exterminate the wilderness within.

DAUGHTER

Until the conversation stops again on the single theme, can we save the earth from ourselves?

Madison brushes at the web, but does not see it.

MADISON

(quoting again)

Madame, all stories, if continued far enough, end in death; and he is no true-story teller who would keep that from you.

DAUGHTER

Ernie? Hemingway killed himself!

Madison nods, rewarding a promising student.

MADISON

It's true, after such a hard fight that sad retraction at the end.

DAUGHTER

The very writer who narrowed to tissue the gap between self and the miracle abandons us. His tales life giving sustenance? Or a eulogy to meaning's scattering ash!

The web crackles off her electric.

MADISON

Pardon me, but that's easy for you to say. Your critical stance carries no weight. No one's listening.

The web hangs motionless in the air. Retreats.

DAUGHTER

I have lived my life surrounded by stories that do not speak for me.

MADISON

Would anything? Speak for you?

A woman, KIMBERLY, 28, appears. She and Daughter smile at one another. She sets a drink in front of Masdison.

KIMBERLY

Here, darling.

Small wisps of web flow from Kimberly toward Madison.

MADISON

You made me lose my thought.

She pulls away. Broken threads stick to her, drift down.

KIMBERLY

(playful)

Oh dear, not again. So sorry.

MADISON

(introducing)

My wife, Kimberly. This is...a writer.

DAUGHTER

We were discussing the end of the male narrative. Join us?

Madison blinks. What?

KIMBERLY

Thanks, but I think I'll dance.

She makes seductive eyes at Madison. Twirls away.

MADISON

I'll tell you a story.

DAUGHTER

I'm all ears!

MADISON

You are a boy, not near grown. Sent from your family, from a mother dear to you, to a military academy.

DAUGHTER

I've always felt so for that child.
(off his annoyed look)

(MORE)

DAUGHTER (CONT'D)

Even in the name of a fine
education.

MADISON

It's housed in a tower turned in on
itself. All around are high
windows with one-way blinds.
Behind them the Master sees all.

Madison holds Daughter with his gaze.

MADISON (CONT'D)

You never know when you're the one
he watches so you learn the lesson
of the perfect prisoner, to guard
yourself. You, the boy, are bound
inside this construct all your
formative years, your chance time.
A system touted for passing on the
achievements of man instead steals
your dreaming. The promise of
exchange, betrayed.

Daughter is unable to contain herself any longer.

DAUGHTER

Oh! That makes Foucault so real!
(off his deflated look)
That was your reference, right?

MADISON

That was my youth!

He defiantly lights his cigarette as he walks out the door.

Daughter looks to Kimberly. Kimberly shrugs, what's to be
done? And she continues to dance.

EXT. HO-DOWN TAVERN. SIDEWALK - CONTINUOUS

Madison smokes. Daughter exits to join him.

DAUGHTER

Our dramas spin a cycling return
but narrative, how the meaning is
passed on, evolves. A cultural DNA.

She waits for Madison to recognize her.

DAUGHTER (CONT'D)

Perhaps I don't value highly enough
how difficult it is marking turf on
that exhausted soil where men tell
their stories. I apologize if I
hurt your feelings.

MADISON

Oh. It's you.

DAUGHTER

Your tale of self imprisonment
while truth, runs us in circles.
For me, the juice would be in the
out forced by the betrayed promise.

MADISON

The out's a fight.

DAUGHTER

Fighting's for boys. Look more at
the scar and how the tissue breaks.

MADISON

Am I in danger of becoming the
tower?

DAUGHTER

That tower? Emptied. We're in the
remaking now and stand unarmored on
the body littered field in a tight
fisted shouting match over who is
heard. And what gives meaning.

MADISON

You think I'm a collaborator.

DAUGHTER

I think you're a good son trying to
make right on the wager your
presence is so unique it will bring
change.

MADISON

And you?

DAUGHTER

My faith the same as all shutouts.
That a knowing will come for what
we are and not for the shine our
capture lends. And that our
inclusion will heal. Like your
beautiful Kimberly.

MADISON

What's my wife to do with it?

DAUGHTER

You feel for her that upturned
force we name love but mostly frame
as threat.

She opens her palm. From it the web threads out to him.

DAUGHTER (CONT'D)

There, in its delicate keep lies
our chance to practice the let of
loss. Perhaps your interest in
towers would benefit a study of
our ancient impulse to imprison
those we love.

Kimberly opens the door. Exits. The women nod at one another.

KIMBERLY

Ah, here you are.

Relieved, Madison throws away his cigarette, puts his arm
around Kimberly's waist. A pulsing webbery spins with his
embrace.

MADISON

Let's dance, my darling.

He leads her back inside. Their trailing webbery barely makes
it through the closing door.

Daughter smiles.

FADE TO:

TITLE: SURVIVAL OF THE FITTEST

OPEN ON BLACKNESS

VOICE IN THE DARKNESS (V.O.)

Maybe because my tribe's genetic
long back is not from tillers of
the earth...

VOICE IN THE DARKNESS TWO (V.O.)

(interrupting)
...Bless them!

VOICE IN THE DARKNESS (V.O.)
 Yes, yes, bless the tillers...but
 for the purpose of this story my
 tribe's long back is not from
 tillers of the earth but from herd
 trackers blown cross continents to
 and fro with the tilt.

RIGHT FRAME. A SPOTLIGHT flashes on.

LITTLE FLAME DANCER. Ta da! Light on her feet. She wears
 the mid forearm length PURPLE GLOVES.

LITTLE FLAME DANCER
 (same as voice two)
 Our gods spoke a fire borne
 warning!

She twists away from camera to reveal she's a DOUBLE HELIX
 with two of everything.

Her second face, OP-ED, is now toward camera. A dark
 creature in spectacles. Of no certain age. She holds a large
 DICTIONARY open against her chest with crossed arms.

OP-ED
 (same as first voice)
 Keep up or be left behind!

Together they wear THE DRESS. Their action goes on
 simultaneously with the main action but is invisible to it.

LEFT FRAME. A deathbed becomes visible.

OP-ED (CONT'D)
 The endstory of those with broken
 bones, or born incomplete, or grown
 old. Left on the far side of the
 river, there waiting to be torn
 asunder by trailing wolf or bear.
 Or freeze if lucky.

On the deathbed lies the body of OLD MOTHER dressed in pretty
 pajamas. Her arms crossed on her chest.

A FAMILY, including FATHER, is in the room.

LITTLE FLAME DANCER
 (to Old Mother's body)
 You were left with love on the far
 side of the river to watch the
 tender sameblood go on beyond until
 only a great missing remained.

OP-ED

A let into the mystery so the story
of the all tracks on. Sacrifice.

LITTLE FLAME DANCER

The family fought for years against
it. Carried you with us under
great strain and burn of resource.

The door to the room opens. Double Helix twirls on the
breeze blown in.

The family turns. Daughter enters.

OP-ED

(at camera)

The old narratives burned into our
heart are past wearing, like our
mother's clothes, they no longer
fit. They can't explain, only bind.

Daughter crosses to the deathbed. Hugs her mother's body.

LITTLE FLAME DANCER

(to Father)

Maybe you did understand the
meaning of this leaving and its
coming before the rest of us.

OP-ED

The ground shifts beneath our feet.
Change shakes the whole.

CUT TO:

INT. FOOD COURT - SIX MONTHS EARLIER - DAY

Double Helix enters twirling, invisible to the action. The
room's packed with tables, some occupied.

LITTLE FLAME DANCER

(to camera)

Brace for the energy released from
the quaking of the plates.

At a table sit Father and Daughter. With them is Old Mother
as she was in the opening Dress story.

Father has a welt on his forehead. He does not look well.

OP-ED

(re: Father)

The stories he plotted his life by
are going to dust. He's traveled
beyond the reach of their meaning,
the sextant falls from his grasp.

Father and Daughter talk intensely as if Mother can't hear.
Old Mother's focused, animal-like, on eating.

FATHER

That place for your mother, I'm
reconsidering.

DAUGHTER

You signed yesterday.

FATHER

It's just too damn much money.

DAUGHTER

We know it's not about the money.

FATHER

That name - Happy Cottage Home!
Your mother doesn't belong there,
with those people. They don't have
any style. Your mother, she had
presence. She could enter a room.

DAUGHTER

Dad. Please...

Daughter wipes food from Mother's mouth. Mother smiles
reflexively.

Op-Ed rifles through her dictionary searching for words.

DAUGHTER (CONT'D)

The home is designed to care for
people like mom is, now. We won't
have to worry about her wandering,
falling, hurting herself. Or you.

FATHER

It's a one way road. Once your
mother's in that place, there'll be
no turning back.

DAUGHTER

(with rising dread)

You can't take care of her anymore.

Daughter runs her fingers through Old Mother's thin hair.

FATHER

I have a duty.

DAUGHTER

You've been a Hercules, pouring your life into her. But now she's pulling all of us down and no amount of wistful remembering her once shining companionship can change things.

OLD FATHER

I won't abandon her.

Daughter stands so suddenly her chair falls back with a BANG. Instinctively genteel, Father rises.

DAUGHTER

(offended)

No one's abandoning her!

OLD FATHER

I'm not saying you are.

Little Flame hops around as if her feet are burning.

DAUGHTER

(turning to leave)

You can just take care of everything by yourself, then.

OLD FATHER

Come on now, please, don't do this.

Old Mother, agitated by the charged atmosphere, stands. Father reaches for her.

OLD FATHER (CONT'D)

Sit down!

Mother raises her cane, threatens Father with it.

Op-Ed drops the dictionary. BANG!

DAUGHTER

Mom! Stop it.

Daughter grabs the cane. Mother's face a snarling imp.

Little Flame collapses to the floor. The dress TEARS.

Mother goes passive, lets go of the cane, sits.

DAUGHTER (CONT'D)

(to father)

Yours isn't the only loss. Who she
was is gone for me, too. What
remains of my daughterhood
swallowed by this fissure between
us.

Op-Ed, her sports underwear exposed, slumps to the floor
beside Little Flame, examines the tear in the dress.

DAUGHTER (CONT'D)

You never feared a thinking
daughter. For this single,
courageous gift I owe you
everything. But I won't sacrifice
myself, and those we love, to your
blinded wandering.

Op-Ed runs her fingers through Little Flame's hair.

LITTLE FLAME DANCER

(to Op-Ed)

Will the men in their rage at their
mortality, in their fear of
loneliness at our inevitable
leaving take us and the earth down
with them?

OP-ED

(up at Father)

We hold you to your long ago
promises to keep tilling the
mystery. Even at this late stage
walk the new ground opening beneath
your feet.

LITTLE FLAME DANCER

The mother I remember would not
have wanted this give away.

CUT TO:

INT. FABRIC STORE - 20 YEARS EARLIER - DAY

Little Flame staggers under the weight of carrying Op-Ed.

LITTLE FLAME DANCER

(to camera)

Daughter embodies dreams.

Little Flame pushes Op-Ed up on the CUTTING TABLE.

FABRIC ISLE

MOTHER, vibrant, early 60's, fingers the bolts of fabric, one eye on the task at hand, one eye on DAUGHTER, 30, pregnant.

DAUGHTER

How can Dad say that to me? Having a baby will end my life as a writer. Asking, who's going to take care of me now.

MOTHER

He's just concerned. He doesn't want your life to become burdened.

She pulls fabric up to Daughter's face.

MOTHER (CONT'D)

Wrong color.

DAUGHTER

What does he expect? That I'll live my life some sort of nun to literature?

CUTTING TABLE

LITTLE FLAME DANCER

(at Op-Ed)

Daughter fights against Father's frame of her into a narrative that would sacrifice her desire to have a child to her self as a writer.

OP-ED

But he had a family. Us. With mom.
(realizing)
That's his story, not hers!

Mother and Daughter move toward the cutting table.

MOTHER

You're a good girl. Try not to worry.

DAUGHTER

I'm afraid he'll turn his back on me, mom.

AT THE CUTTING TABLE Mother rolls out the bolt of fabric. Invisible to Mother, Little Flame rolls Op-Ed out of the way.

MOTHER
 (clear)
 He won't do that.

LITTLE FLAME DANCER
 (proud)
 See how she stands by Daughter.

OP-ED
 Because she shelters her own sliver
 of resistance to the plot she found
 herself in?

LITTLE FLAME DANCER
 Yes, and her generous heart allows
 the kernel to open on an
 unfamiliar, a daughter not exactly
 her and not a re-do. For this
 courageous gift we owe her
 everything.

Mother pulls a thread in the fabric to cut on the straight.

OP-ED
 But could he have been right? Did
 we dilute our voice letting life
 flow into the demands of love?

LITTLE FLAME DANCER
 Don't spread that malignant rumor.
 It tallies as loss our bodies' gift
 to carry life and speaks, again,
 about the men, not us, and their
 limitless jealousy.

Little Flame threads a needle with the pulled thread.

LITTLE FLAME DANCER (CONT'D)
 We know love stood guard gainst
 bitter in the dark days and the
 pull of it in the bright so molten,
 who could hold back the vivid warm?

Little Flame bends to sewing the torn fabric of the Dress.

OP-ED
 Might as well deny life itself.

CUT TO:

INT. DEATHBED ROOM. CONTINUATION - NIGHT

Double Helix stands separate bodies in separate dresses, same pattern and fabric as the original DRESS.

Little Flame picks up the dictionary from the floor, holds it propped on her hip, like a baby.

Mother's body is on a gurney in a cloth bag, not yet zipped.

Father tenderly pats Mother's folded hands, goodbye.

OP-ED

Even now he traverses his confusion
as best he can, points his feet in
the direction of the living.

Op-Ed has propped on her hip a portable sewing machine.

The UNDERTAKER zips up the bag. Rolls the gurney to exit.
The family follows.

Double Helix passes its hands over Mother's body.

OP-ED (CONT'D)

(in daughter's ear)

Let's figure the duty. Daughter is
something depended upon.

LITTLE FLAME DANCER

(in daughter's other ear)

Mom never abandoned you. Father
didn't either. And you have not
abandoned them.

As Daughter crosses out Double Helix absorbs, wisp-like, into
Daughter's body. The room dims into darkness.

OP-ED (V.O.)

Stand fluid this fluxing
indeterminacy.

LITTLE FLAME DANCER (V.O.)

Shake out winged feet. Balance the
reforming imagine of the new
ground!

EXT. HAPPY COTTAGE ADULT FAMILY HOME - NIGHT

The family watches the undertaker's van cross out of sight.

22.

END