

The Barking of Cerberus

A One-Act Play

by

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The Barking of Cerberus (A One-Act Play) / synopsis:

A woman and a man trapped together in a windowless room attempt to come to terms as to why they are in this room and what it means as they discuss their pasts and the “mythological” present that seems to surround them. And where is their unusual location? A mythological murder mystery.

The Barking of Cerberus

A One-Act Play

CHARACTERS:

WOMAN

MAN

[The characters can be any adult age, but both WOMAN and MAN should be within a few years of each other.]

SETTING:

A windowless room, with a single door that has a gold handle. Six chairs in a row in the centre of the room. [Note: This play can also be performed with four chairs in a row in the centre of the room.]

TIME:

Indeterminate.

WOMAN, *sitting on a chair and flipping a gold coin into the air.* MAN *lying on the floor.*

MAN

(Starting to cough and move. Spits out a gold coin that lands on the floor near him) What happened? Where...? Where am ...? Where am I?

WOMAN

I thought you'd never wake up.

MAN

(Sees the gold coin and picks it up. Stands up slowly) I had the most awful dream.

WOMAN

Yes, you were tossing and turning. At least while I was watching you.

MAN

(Touching his upper body, searching for wounds he thought he had) I dreamed someone stabbed me.

WOMAN

I seem to remember having a distressing dream like that.

MAN

Someone stabbed you?

WOMAN

Or I stabbed someone.

MAN

You aren't bleeding either.

WOMAN

In the dream I was bleeding.

MAN

(Starting to flip his coin) You could take off your clothes and I could have a closer look.

WOMAN

(Stops flipping her coin) For someone who has just had a terrible dream...

MAN

Come to think of it, you weren't wearing anything in my dream.

WOMAN

Was I really in your dream?

MAN

I'm not sure. But there was a woman who took off her clothes. (*Stops flipping his coin and makes a stabbing motion*) She had a knife...

WOMAN

Not the most wholesome dream.

MAN

Stabbed me over and over...

WOMAN

Well, you've healed quickly, haven't you?

MAN

Was I sleeping long?

WOMAN

Seemed like forever, but you're all bright-eyed and alert now.

MAN

I don't feel alert. (*Walks toward the door. Looks at the door handle.*)

WOMAN

(*Stands up and goes to the door*) Get away from the door.

MAN

You giving orders now?

WOMAN

I think it's in our best interests not to open the door.

MAN

That a fact?

WOMAN

What year is your coin?

MAN

(*Inspecting his coin*) The year I was born. Isn't that something?

WOMAN

(*Holds up her gold coin*) Mine has the year I was born.

MAN

I want to leave.

WOMAN

We can't leave.

MAN

(Attempts to open the door) The handle is cold...very cold.

WOMAN

It might be a good idea if you left the door alone.

MAN

What's wrong with this door. *(Kicks the door hard)* Must be stuck or something.

WOMAN

Just get away from the door.

MAN

(Looking around the room) I wish we could see out.

WOMAN

We aren't given that privilege. Maybe it's a blessing this place is windowless.

MAN

Where are you getting this information?

WOMAN

From my dream.

MAN

You're quite the dreamer, aren't you?

WOMAN

I'm not certain if I was still dreaming or awake when I sensed we shouldn't leave this room.

MAN

Doesn't look like a place I want to spend much time in. *(Touching the door handle again)* Not as cold now...warm even. Quite odd. The gold is lovely, though, isn't it? Like my coin.

WOMAN

Leave it as is.

MAN

(Trying unsuccessfully to turn the door handle) As is?

WOMAN

Yes, leave the door as is.

MAN

What do you mean?

WOMAN

What do you mean, *What do I mean?*

MAN

Do you mean like in an 'as is' car...the clunker, falling apart kind?

WOMAN

No, not that 'as is...'

MAN

Maybe you meant 'is as...' *(Stops trying to turn the door handle)* This door won't open.

WOMAN

Good, that is the way it is meant to be. As is.

MAN

Is as.

WOMAN

Is as is meaningless.

MAN

So is 'as is' when you think about it.

WOMAN

So are a lot of things.

MAN

What are a lot of things?

WOMAN

Meaningless.

MAN

Meaningful, too.

WOMAN

Meaningless or meaningful, what's the big difference?

MAN

There is a big difference.

Between 'as is' and 'is as...'
WOMAN

Our relationship is 'as is...'
MAN

I hate that word.
WOMAN

Something else that perturbs you.
MAN

That word *relationship* is overused and nebulous and nondescript.
WOMAN

Stop being so wordy.
MAN

Sometimes I could—
WOMAN

Could what?
MAN

You know.
WOMAN

(*Walks over to WOMAN*) No, I don't know.
MAN

You want me to threaten you?
WOMAN

You've already threatened me.
MAN

I didn't say the words.
WOMAN

You would never harm me.
MAN

Wouldn't I?
WOMAN

MAN

Maybe that's why we're stuck in this lousy windowless room.

WOMAN

We are here because...

MAN

Because why?

WOMAN

I don't understand why we're here. Only that it's worse if we leave this room. So let's make the best of it.

MAN

I take you 'as is.'

WOMAN

And I take you 'is as.'

MAN

(Sits down two chairs away from WOMAN) I had a very bad sleep.

WOMAN

It was fascinating to observe you toss and turn.

MAN

I turned and tossed.

WOMAN

You are so contrary.

MAN

And you're not?

WOMAN

No, I am not.

MAN

In your opinion.

WOMAN

I hear barking... *(Stands up.)*

MAN

I don't hear any barking.

WOMAN

(Moving toward the door) A three-headed dog is barking.

MAN

You don't believe that myth.

WOMAN

Some myths might have their basis in actuality. In things beyond our understanding.

MAN

What is that dog's name? Not Fido or Rover, was it? Spot, perhaps?

WOMAN

(At the door) Cerberus...

MAN

You know your mythology.

WOMAN

That movie we saw together had a three-headed dog.

MAN

What movie?

WOMAN

I remember you grabbed my knee in fear and squeezed until I yelled at you to stop.

MAN

That's not something I would forget doing.

WOMAN

(Touching her knee) I still have a scar to prove it. Your nails dug into my knee.

MAN

Was that dog named Cerberus?

WOMAN

No, it wasn't.

MAN

Rover? Fido? Spot?

WOMAN

Fluffy.

MAN

(*Moves to another chair*) What kind of name is that for a dog?

WOMAN

As good as Spot or Fido or Rover.

MAN

If you say so. But what was the movie?

WOMAN

(*Retuning to the chairs, but does not sit down*) It was one of those Harry Potter movies.

MAN

I've never seen a Harry Potter movie.

WOMAN

I know for certain you saw at least one of them. You were sitting next to me.

MAN

(*Lying down across several of the chairs*) I'm not going to argue with you, about movies or a three-headed dog. People remember what they want to.

WOMAN

(*Starting to walk around the chairs*) As a child I had a dog named Nothingness.

MAN

Sounds like the name of a dog that would bite you.

WOMAN

Nothingness never bit anyone. Nothingness was a drooler and a licker, not a biter.

MAN

Why would a child name a dog Nothingness?

WOMAN

My father was reading *Being and Nothingness* when my mother brought the puppy home. I was a curious and mischievous little girl.

MAN

Nietzsche wrote that, didn't he?

WOMAN

Why would you say that?

MAN

Because he wrote *Being and Nothingness*.

WOMAN

(Stops in front of MAN) Jean-Paul Sartre did.

MAN

I'm certain it was Nietzsche.

WOMAN

Would you like to bet on that?

MAN

What do you have to bet?

WOMAN

(Holds the coin in MAN's face) My gold coin.

MAN

(Sits up, annoyed) Nietzsche.

WOMAN

Jean-Paul Sartre.

MAN

It's a bet.

WOMAN

Give me your gold coin.

MAN

You haven't proven who the author is.

WOMAN

You can't prove who the author isn't.

MAN

Doesn't seem we have any way to prove who wrote *Being and Nothingness* until we leave this room.

WOMAN

And we shouldn't leave this room, not for Nietzsche or for Jean-Paul Sartre, the author of *Being and Nothingness*.

MAN

You can't verify that.

WOMAN

I can verify from memory that my dog was named Nothingness.

MAN

Why didn't you name your puppy Being?

WOMAN

I liked the sound of Nothingness.

MAN

That's the absolute worst name I've ever heard for a dog.

WOMAN

Noth-ing-ness...

MAN

I can't believe a ten-year-old would pick Nothingness as a dog's name.

WOMAN

My ten-year-old self adored that name. Here, Nothingness... Fetch, Nothingness.... Roll over, Nothingness...

MAN

I had a dog when I was ten just like you. Unfortunately, after a couple of weeks, it ran away.

WOMAN

Sad...

MAN

Actually, I had two dogs and they both ran away. The second dog I got a month after my first one ran away and it took off within a week.

WOMAN

Very sad.

MAN

I got over it.

WOMAN

You remember their names?

MAN

Of course I remember.

WOMAN

You've forgotten a great deal.

MAN

Not the names of my two dogs, which was the same name used twice.

WOMAN
How imaginative.

MAN
It helped ease the confusion for a little kid of losing his pet.

WOMAN
What was the name?

MAN
Rover.

WOMAN
You're joking.

MAN
I was ten years old.

WOMAN
My dog was Nothingness and I was ten years old.

MAN
I prefer Rover to Nothingness for a dog's name.

WOMAN
There, the barking has stopped...for now. (*Walks toward the door.*)

MAN
It never even started for me.

WOMAN
It will. It has to.

MAN
Maybe I'll bark back.

WOMAN
(*At the door*) We will have to deal with—

MAN
With what?

WOMAN
With the barking. With everything.

MAN

(Stands up) Makes no sense to me. This room. No windows. A bunch of empty chairs. Barking dogs I can't hear. A door I can't open. It's all clear as mud to me.

WOMAN

That's such a foolish image.

MAN

You have a better image?

WOMAN

(Takes a step back from the door) We should not concern ourselves with trying to open this door, regardless of the imagery we use.

MAN

Why don't you just open the door a smidgeon.

WOMAN

Cerberus is outside the door.

MAN

Something that doesn't exist?

WOMAN

Cerberus exists, believe me.

MAN

Open the door.

WOMAN

You already tried...futilely.

MAN

Maybe there are two Cerberuses.

WOMAN

In mythology, Greek mythology, there is only one three-headed dog.

MAN

But in actuality...real life.

WOMAN

This is actuality...real life. And I assure you there is a three-headed dog.

MAN

(Walks toward the door and WOMAN) Get your head...your one head...on straight.

WOMAN

I have a photograph of Cerberus.

MAN

Only one photograph?

WOMAN

It was dangerous to take the photograph. I had to run faster than I had ever run. Faster than Hermes.

MAN

(At door) When was this?

WOMAN

Before I came here.

MAN

That was a long time ago.

WOMAN

Much too long ago.

MAN

So, let us leave.

WOMAN

(Removes a photograph from a pocket and offers it to MAN) Have a look at the evidentiary photograph...

MAN

(Taking the photograph) What a joke of a false photograph.

WOMAN

An authentic photograph.

MAN

(Staring at the photograph) There are no three-headed dogs.

WOMAN

Spot...Fido...Rover—a trio of dogs, a trio of heads, a trio of names.

MAN

You are making fun of me.

WOMAN

What about three-headed Fluffy in the Harry Potter movie we saw?

(MAN *rips up the photograph and throws the pieces to the floor.*)

WOMAN

That does not change anything.

MAN

(*Goes to the chairs and starts to move them around*) We could rearrange the chairs.

WOMAN

(*Approaching MAN and the chairs*) That also does not change anything. Maybe Herakles or Orpheus will be here. They could deal with Cerberus.

MAN

Why didn't you name your dog Cerberus?

WOMAN

I am not Herakles or Orpheus, in case you didn't notice.

MAN

You said you ran faster than Hermes. I heard you say that.

WOMAN

A figure of speech.

MAN

(*Continues to rearrange the order of the chairs*) Maybe I should have named my dogs Hermes. You would have liked that.

WOMAN

Rover seems to suit you. Your dogs, I mean.

MAN

Hercules or Orpheus wouldn't have been bad names for my dogs.

WOMAN

I referred to him as Herakles, not Hercules. The ancient Greek name, not the Roman one.

MAN

It's all Greek and Roman to me. That sounds funny, doesn't it?

WOMAN

I think you might have had a sip from Lethe.

MAN

That a drink? A fancy liqueur?

WOMAN

One of the five rivers between Hades and the world of the living and breathing. The river that represents forgetting and the erasure of all recollections.

MAN

I am not forgetful. I remember things very well.

WOMAN

Does that include the Harry Potter movie you don't remember seeing and what you did to my knee you don't remember doing?

MAN

(Sits down angrily) It is you who is not remembering things correctly.

WOMAN

(Standing behind the MAN's chair) I learned the names of those five rivers when I was ten years old.

MAN

What a crazy thing for a ten-year-old to learn. Certainly a busy year for you and your dog.

WOMAN

My mother taught me the names.

MAN

Not your father? Or was he too busy reading *Being and Nothingness?* By Nietzsche.

WOMAN

I wish Nothingness were here. I would have him bite you for your sarcasm.

MAN

You told me that your dog didn't bite.

WOMAN

I could teach Nothingness.

MAN

You can't teach an old dog new tricks.

WOMAN

I wonder if I could teach you new clichés.

MAN

Should I bite you for your sarcasm?

WOMAN

(Rubbing her knee) Wasn't it enough that you scarred my knee?

MAN

(Stands up and goes to the door) I hope other people will be here soon.

WOMAN

(Following the MAN to the door) Not so soon.

MAN

Sooner or later, how's that?

WOMAN

Accurate enough. *(As she pulls him away from the door and back to the chairs)* Let me teach you the names of the five rivers.

MAN

I don't want to know the names of the five rivers.

WOMAN

You will need to know their names, each and every one.

MAN

There are no rivers in here. There is nothing in here.

WOMAN

The chairs for any visitors we might get. A door handle of gold.

(MAN runs to the door and unsuccessfully attempts to open it. His hands are in pain and he looks at them, as if they have betrayed him.)

MAN

Now it's cold and hot. Too cold and too hot at the same time. This door handle just doesn't compute...not in my world.

WOMAN

Phlegethon and Acheron and Cocytus and Styx, the most famous of the five, I'd say, and of course, I shouldn't forget, the aforementioned Lethe.

MAN

(Walks back to the chairs) You are mispronouncing the names of those rivers.

WOMAN

How would you know? You told me you didn't know their names.

MAN

I know about the River Styx. Yes, sticks and stones...

WOMAN

(Resumes flipping her coin) A pun on your fearfulness.

MAN

I am not fearful.

WOMAN

You are terrified.

MAN

I don't want to be here.

WOMAN

(Sits down on a chair) The barking of Cerberus is getting louder.

MAN

(Sits down on a chair at the opposite end from WOMAN) I don't hear anything.

WOMAN

You will. You will very soon...

(WOMAN and MAN sit at opposite ends of the row of chairs, staring forward and flipping their coin as the stage darkens.)