

Unmasked at Dawn

By

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SYNOPSIS

In 1972, in a small salon at a chateau on the outskirts of Paris, three icons linger after a night of excess following a masquerade ball: Baroness Marie-Hélène de Rothschild, the surrealist Salvador Dalí, and a glittering, intoxicated Elizabeth Taylor. What begins as a playful conversation, soon becomes an unmasking of confession and ego as they confront the cost of artifice, celebrity, and mortality. Inspired by a true event, *Unmasked at Dawn* is a one-act play about performance as survival, and the terror of silence when it ends, that feels uncannily of our time.

CHARACTERS

BARONESS MARIE-HÉLÈNE DE ROTHSCHILD - 40s. Poised, composed, intelligent. Elegance as armour.

SALVADOR DALÍ - 60s. Glittering bravado; on the surface, all flair and philosophy; witty, cruel. Beneath the spectacle, like the Baroness, he too is terrified of irrelevance.

ELIZABETH TAYLOR - 40s. Luminous, drunk, mercurial, raw, truthful/unfiltered.

Lights rise. A small salon at the Château de Ferrières, December 1972. Near dawn. The masked ball is almost over. The elegant room has escaped the worst of the excesses but still bears witness to what has passed: empty champagne coupes; abandoned masks; a couple of half-drunk magnums; a piece of taxidermy wearing a top hat. A few sputtering candles. From elsewhere in the château, the sounds of the night still linger.

The BARONESS stands, tall, still, with the unhurried authority of someone accustomed to being obeyed. Her gold stag's head mask rests on a table beside her. DALÍ lounges in a gilt chair with a sketchpad, drawing; his moustache, absurdly comic, looking for all the world as if he were the guest of honour.

BARONESS

I spend all night keeping the illusion alive, and yet by morning there she is. Silence always arrives like a critic, late but certain.

DALÍ

(eyes on sketch)

Then give her something to review.

BARONESS

I have, for hours. Every room is now gasping for air, exhausted. I have given everything to tonight's performance.

DALÍ

Then stop performing.

(a beat)

But, of course, that would kill you faster than the silence.

The doors burst open. ELIZABETH TAYLOR sweeps in barefoot, heels hooked in one hand, bottle in the other. She brings the scent of the party with her: perfume, smoke, champagne, decadence. The energy shifts instantly. For a moment, chaos from the corridor rushes in - masked shadows across the doorway, laughter, the distant sound of a saxophone, Richard Burton's thunderous voice echoing from another salon - then fades as the doors shut.

ELIZABETH

Oh, my darlings! Why are we riddle-diddling in here when outside there's still much merriment?

BARONESS

(enveloping her with a kiss to the air)

Ah, our Venus arrives.

ELIZABETH

Venus has been drinking too much gin with Bacchus and regrets everything.

DALÍ

Bah! Never regret anything that made you smile, cariño –

(he gestures - nay, sketches an invisible flourish in the air - towards the BARONESS)

– especially when our glittering hostess is the reason.

ELIZABETH

Oh, marvellous, we're doing philosophy. I'll fetch glasses.

She sets her shoes on a console, tips champagne into three abandoned coupes, hands one to her hostess, one to Dali, and then decides far easier to simply drink from the bottle.

BARONESS

Stay, Elizabeth. Sit. For once, sit.

ELIZABETH

If I sit, I may never rise again and then Dali will start carving me up as a swan that resembles an elephant.

Giggling, she drops heavily into a chair.

Or a goose. You'd have me as a goose, half-melted, or fused with the Baroness's leg.

DALÍ

That I will. You'll be a *confit* of fame.

ELIZABETH

Oh God, darling, not confit! Foie gras, please.

She snorts with laughter, takes a swig from the bottle; her tone shifts.

I have more in common with the fattened goose than you'd believe. Both made by suffering, but therein lies our flavour, eh?

Her lip curls. She shakes the bottle, watches the champagne fizz, her voice drops.

I was nine when I was put under contract. Nine. A machine started to turn, and there I was, a little cog in it, a teeny-weeny little cog.

(She raises the bottle suddenly, defiant.)

So let's raise a glass to poor little Elizabeth Taylor – and her bitch of a mother.

Silence. The room absorbs it. Finally –

DALÍ

The oyster needs its grit; the child needs her contract. Otherwise, no pearl, no star.

(Gently, almost admiring.)

Bravo, niña mecánica. The little cog learned to turn the whole machine.

ELIZABETH sighs, lets the anger go, and leans back into the chair, smiling again.

ELIZABETH

(to the BARONESS; words slightly slurred, messy) You, my darling, always throw a terrific party. I've just had the most delicious screaming match with Princess Margaret, absolutely off her face, bless her. I had to take cover behind Audrey Hepburn's birdy... birdcage, whatever it is, for fear the Princess might advance, brandishing her title like a *shay*..sabre.

(She sighs happily.)

It was simply marvellous.

BARONESS

One more amusement before I turn in.

(bright)

A game.

ELIZABETH

I'm listening.

BARONESS

Truth for truth. One confession each. No anecdotes, no press quotes, no charming rot.

DALÍ

What do we win? Besides the exquisite agony of honesty.

BARONESS

You win being seen.

DALÍ

That is the only prize.

ELIZABETH

And the forfeit?

BARONESS

If you lie, your mask stays on.

ELIZABETH

We aren't wearing masks.

BARONESS

(smiles)

Of course we are.

Salvador, you begin.

DALÍ

(cheerful deflection; then -)

A truth... hmm.

(He pauses, surprised by his own seriousness.)

I make art to drown the ticking. When the art stops, I can hear the time. It bites behind the ears first.

BARONESS

And when you sleep?

DALÍ

I don't. I dream awake so I can never stop directing the orchestra. I rarely surrender, even to rest, or else my vulnerability should swallow me.

ELIZABETH

I don't know what you're talking about, Salvador. You sound like a man trying to auction off his nightmares.

BARONESS

He is confessing to terror. He paints to silence the fear of being finite. He's not unique in it. Terror is the artist's tithe.

Elizabeth?

ELIZABETH

(confiding to the bottle)

I am trying to love a man the world loves more than I do. The world is winning.

(pause)

Is that the truth or just a damn good line? I can't tell anymore.

DALÍ

It's a good line because it is true.

BARONESS

And still not the marrow. But then you've always been good at bleeding beautifully in public.

ELIZABETH

Well, darling, it comes with the job. Someone has to make despair look desirable.

She stands abruptly, restless.

I'm sorry, my dear dovelings. I need a little pharmaceutical pick-me-up. Give me a couple of minutes with Mr Warhol and then I'll return.

She sweeps out and the noise of the party floods in - laughter, the distant saxophone, Richard Burton's baritone thunder. Doors close. Silence returns.

BARONESS

Listen to it.

Every party it's the same. Every week I fight it –

If I stop, even for a minute -

(a flicker of panic she smothers)

the silence wins.

DALÍ

Then don't stop.

He returns to his sketch, almost absently, allowing the BARONESS to 'reassemble' her emotions.

Sometimes I think Elizabeth is like a meteor searching for the right window to shatter.

BARONESS

And when she does, no doubt, you will paint the destruction and call it salvation.

DALÍ

Salvation is my signature. Everything else is housekeeping.

BARONESS

Draw, then. Draw me.

(a challenge)

No, draw what's left of me when my guests are gone.

DALÍ

What's left of you when your guests are gone? Is that really what you want? Careful, ma chère. I have been known to tell the truth.

He sketches, fast and hungry. The BARONESS stands where she can see him, but not the sketch.

DALÍ

Tell me your rules, Marie-Hélène. When did you learn to trap people with beauty?

BARONESS

Trap? No, darling - I free them. I offer sanctuary. People come to my parties because I offer escape from the dreary drizzle of real life. I keep the whole of Paris from realising it is asleep.

(smiles thinly)

Like you, I understand that if the world is strange enough, no one will see the rot.

DALÍ

And your fear?

BARONESS

Irrelevance. The moment no one is watching, I vanish.

(then, dangerously bright)

Do not make me sympathetic, Salvador. It won't suit either of us.

ELIZABETH slips back in. She watches without speaking, unseen.

DALÍ

Almost done. Hold your chin still. Think of nothing. Think of your first party.

BARONESS

I don't remember it.

DALÍ

Exactly.

He finishes with a quick diagonal stroke...

BARONESS

Well? Show me.

DALÍ

(doesn't move)

It's... unfortunate.

BARONESS

Show me.

DALÍ

No.

BARONESS

Show me.

He turns the sketch. She freezes.

BARONESS

That is not me.

ELIZABETH

Let me see, love.

(looks)

Oh, darling. It's him.

BARONESS

(to DALÍ, low)

You drew my disappearance. Yet even in my absence, you've managed to draw yourself. I see I am erased under the weight of your ego.

DALÍ

You asked for truth. For me, truth is always self-portrait.

BARONESS

You've gorged and called these bones 'art.' You've eaten me whole and left nothing but your reflection. Is that all I am to you - a muse, *unseen*, existing simply to reflect your 'genius?'

DALÍ

I drew what I understood to be true.

BARONESS

The truth is, you need me, Salvador. Without my patronage, my stage, your 'genius' is just noise in an empty studio.

ELIZABETH

Oh, for God's sake, you two, all this talk of truth. You're both addicts for attention.

You behave like two mirrors, arguing over who's the reflection.

She is hunting for another bottle, finds one.

News from the other world: Richard is drunk enough to be kind, which means he's being horrible to the furniture. A duke is asleep in the fountain. Brigitte Bardot tried to kiss a waiter

dressed as a cat, but he refused possibly because he'd prefer to kiss Mick Jagger, who is being an utter stallion tonight.

BARONESS

So the party survives without us.

ELIZABETH

It always does.

DALÍ

Your turn again, Elizabeth.

ELIZABETH

You don't want to hear it. Or, I don't want to say it. One or t'other works.

BARONESS

We want to hear it.

ELIZABETH

(sets bottle down)

All right. People say I am larger than life. They don't understand how small a thing life is. I'm just a goldfish in an enormous bowl. Everyone tap-tapping on the glass to see how I move.

(beat)

I marry men because I want them to make the tapping stop.

(another beat)

Yet it never stops. It just gets louder.

She takes out two cigarettes from a bejewelled cigarette case, lights both, offers one to the BARONESS. The BARONESS smiles, shakes her head. ELIZABETH shrugs, keeps both, exhales smoke toward the ceiling.

You know what Richard said to me earlier?

He said, 'All these beautiful people, Liz, they arrive in their terrific, expensive masks, and one by one they take them off.

And it's not because they're hot, or drunk, or careless.

It's because they realise the masks aren't hiding them at all.

They're showing them something worse, a truth they can't bear.

Who they are when the pretending stops.'

She draws on the cigarette, watches the smoke.

I didn't understand it then. But I think I do now.

Do you not find it exhausting being us? The act of being us - it's simply exhausting.

DALÍ

Every day. But if we stop performing, we disappear.

BARONESS

And none of us knows who, or where, we'd be then.

ELIZABETH looks at the two cigarettes, decides she doesn't want them after all, and crushes them both out in an ashtray.

BARONESS

The music is thinning.

DALÍ

Or maybe the walls are napping.

BARONESS

Enough whimsy. One final confession.

(sudden flare)

I don't want to die.

They weren't expecting that, but they still hold it, letting the simple, stark truth of it settle.

ELIZABETH

(softly)

Of course you don't. None of us do.

Perhaps one of them is about to speak when a sudden burst of music erupts from elsewhere in the château, then abruptly cuts off; silence; then a distant squeal of laughter, and nothing...

DALÍ

Dawn is sharpening its knives.

BARONESS

And we have been suitably bled.

(to ELIZABETH)

Go to your Welsh poet. Rescue the furniture.

ELIZABETH

He'll forgive me in the morning, which makes tonight worse...

(a pause)

Shall we say farewell then? A sunny adieu. Bonne nuit.

BARONESS

I'm not in favour of farewells. But yes.

DALÍ

Before we bury the night, one more ritual.

He gets up, picks up an abandoned glittering mask from the floor, places it on a table, then places a flickering candle next to it.

To whatever exists under the mask. May it survive us.

ELIZABETH

To the room. May it forget what we said.

BARONESS

To beauty. May it continue to hoodwink us.

They drink what's left in their glasses. ELIZABETH crosses to French garden doors and opens them. Pale light, first birds.

ELIZABETH

Don't you just love how the sky keeps on turning up, doing its thing.

(to the BARONESS)

Thank you, my dear, sweet friend, it's been a wonderful party. Your mad, bad, guests have made for wonderful playmates.

She holds the BARONESS's cheeks lightly in both hands, kisses her mouth; then to DALÍ -

ELIZABETH

Keep the drawing. One day it'll be worth what it cost you.

DALÍ

It already is.

ELIZABETH

(tracing his moustache with her finger)

Oh Salvador, you were always your greatest creation.

Elizabeth exits, stepping through the garden doors, barefoot, into the light. The BARONESS and DALÍ remain. The BARONESS lifts her gold antler mask, considers, then sets it down. They start toward the door when -

BARONESS

When they ask about tonight –

DALÍ

They will.

BARONESS

Could we tell them I was divine.

DALÍ

(softly, almost kindly)

You will merely be remembered, Marie-Hélène.

(He lightly kisses her cheek)

Just another image that melts.

She almost laughs, almost strikes him. Does neither. Instead, she returns to the table and lifts her gold mask, slow, deliberate, and places it over her face. The gesture tells us everything. Then she turns and she and Dali head out of the room into the now silent corridor. And their exit lands like the closing of a door on an era.

ENDS