

The Tell-Tale Heart

by

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Adapted from the short story by Edgar Allen Poe

THE TELL-TALE HEART

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THE TELL-TALE HEART

For Shelley

THE TELL-TALE HEART

Character Breakdown:

ELIZA CLEMM, 33, a small and nervous woman

EDGAR CLEMM, 68, Eliza's father, an invalid confined to a wheelchair

A NURSE, 35, a professional and staunch matron

AN ORDERLY, 28, a brutish and frightening-looking man

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A room in the New York City Lunatic Asylum on Blackwell's Island, 1843. A narrow bed, two simple wooden chairs, and a small table are present. In the darkness, the audience hears the VOICE OF ELIZA CLEMM.

ELIZA. *(Voice only.)* True. Nervous. Very, very dreadfully nervous I had been, and I still am. But why do they say that I am mad? My senses have sharpened with age—not dulled. Above all is my sense of hearing the most acute. I hear all things in the heavens and in the earth. I hear many things in hell. *(Beat.)* Many, many things in hell. Demons, those voices are. *(Beat.)* How, then, can they say that I am mad? *(Lights up to reveal ELIZA CLEMM, a small and nervous woman in her early-thirties, wearing a camisole straitjacket. She sits in the center of the bed and stares blankly the audience. After a beat, she speaks.)* How, then, can they say that I am mad? *(The sounds of a bolt unlatching and a creaky door opening are heard from offstage. A staunch and professional NURSE, carrying a tray containing a medicine bottle, spoon, and cloth, enters and moves to the small table to set the tray down. A large and brutish ORDERLY follows the Nurse into the room. Both move to opposite sides of Eliza and speak to her.)*

NURSE. *(Ordering.)* Stand up.

ELIZA. I will not.

NURSE. Stand up, I say.

ELIZA. Will you be kind enough to explain why I should?

NURSE. You're due your medicine.

ELIZA. I shan't take it.

NURSE. You shall. Doctor's orders.

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ELIZA. I am not in need of it.

NURSE. The state of New York would beg to differ.

ELIZA. I am unlike the others here. You can't talk to me as you do them.

NURSE. (*Referring to the Orderly.*) If you don't do as I say, I shall give our bouncer here permission to use force upon you.

ORDERLY. And I won't be very gentle, I can promise you that.

NURSE. It will be a bad time for you here if you don't do as you are told, Eliza.

ELIZA. (*Pleading.*) Pray, believe me when I say I do not belong in such a place.

NURSE. I'd say anyone who murders her own flesh and blood belongs here on Blackwell's Island.

ORDERLY. You're in an insane place. Where you'll never get out of.

ELIZA. But neither of you understand my reasoning for the deed.

NURSE. Your reasoning for the deed is of no concern to us. So, it will best serve you to do as you are told, Eliza.

ELIZA. (*Haughtily.*) Please. Refrain from using my Christian name! I am not familiar enough with either of you for that.

ORDERLY. (*To the Nurse.*) Well, we have a regular Joanna of Castile among us, eh?

NURSE. (*To the Orderly.*) Joanne the Mad, is she not?

ELIZA. (*Defiantly.*) I am not mad, I tell you!

NURSE. (*To Eliza.*) We only use first names for the lunatics here. It's standard procedure when dealing with the mentally ill.

ELIZA. But I am not mentally ill. Why do you not believe me when I tell you that?

NURSE. If you continue to show signs of defiance, you will be strongly recommended for one of Vincenz Priessnitz's plunge baths.

ELIZA. (*Unfamiliar with the term.*) Plunge bath?

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NURSE. Highly effective for those who suffer from overexcitement and elevated motor activity.

ELIZA. What is it?

ORDERLY. (*Enjoying the moment.*) It's when I drag you to the baths, and I rip your clothes off of you and throw your bare body into a tub of ice-cold water.

NURSE. As your teeth begin to chatter, another brute of an orderly discharges a bucket of frigid water over your head. Your limbs will be blue with cold, that's for sure. (*Scared, Eliza looks at both of them. After a beat, she stands.*)

ELIZA. Beastly! That's what the two of you are. Beastly! (*She is standing.*) I do not belong here. I am not mad! (*A thought.*) Perhaps if I spoke to a doctor regarding my case.

NURSE. All of the doctors here are quite busy, and they don't have the time to consider your mad ramblings.

ELIZA. But I am not mad, I tell you!

NURSE. (*To the Orderly.*) Hold her. This wretched girl may try to bite me.

ORDERLY. Yes, 'em. (*The Orderly roughly grabs Eliza from behind and pins her against him with one arm. He uses his free arm to hold her head steady. The Nurse moves to the tray on the table to get the medicine bottle, spoon, and cloth.*)

ELIZA. Why do you both fancy me mad? How it is that my acute sense of hearing makes you think me a madwoman? (*The Nurse approaches her with the medicine bottle, spoon, and cloth.*) Pray, what is that?

NURSE. (*Pouring the medicine into the spoon.*) Your medicine, of course.

ELIZA. (*Scared.*) No! Please! The most terrifying visions haunt my dreams when I take it.

NURSE. Nonsense. It will help you to rest.

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ELIZA. No. No, it does the exact opposite. It makes me terribly anxious.

NURSE. *(Bringing the full spoon to Eliza's mouth.)* Open up, now. *(The Nurse forces the medicine into Eliza's mouth. Once the medicine is in, the Orderly holds Eliza's mouth closed so she is unable to spit it out. The Nurse wipes the excess from Eliza's mouth with the cloth as she speaks.)* Swallow it all down. *(Eliza swallows.)* There's a good girl, now. *(The Nurse and the Orderly help Eliza sit back down on the bed.)*

ELIZA. It was not madness that made me take the life of the old man. I had no want to see his brains spilled upon the floor in front of me in a grotesque heap. Nor did I wish to see his limbs detached and lying in thick pools of blood. The cleaver dripping and causing rivers of dark red around my feet!

NURSE. *(To the Orderly.)* She'll be out soon.

ELIZA. *(Referring to the straitjacket.)* Please. It's not the most comfortable.

NURSE. What? Your confinement?

ELIZA. *(Nodding.)* Can I not be released from it for a little while?

NURSE. *(Returning items to the tray.)* No, you can't.

ELIZA. Just a little while? It's been so long, I don't even remember the last time it wasn't a part of me. *(The medicine begins to take its effect. The Nurse assists Eliza in lying back onto the bed.)*

NURSE. But you may bring harm to yourself or, more importantly, to others when you awake, Eliza.

ELIZA. *(Drowsy.)* Oh, no! I promise I won't.

NURSE. I'm afraid not.

ELIZA. *(Falling asleep.)* Why, then, do you say that I am mad?

NURSE. *(Adjusting Eliza's pillows under her head.)* There's a good girl, now. *(The lights alter into shafts of light representing a dream. In this surreal light, the Nurse and the Orderly exit. Eliza stands and easily*

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slips the straitjacket off. She lays the jacket on the bed and speaks directly to the audience. At first, her manner is one of self-control.)

ELIZA. Observe how calmly I can tell you what you wish to hear. *(Lights up to reveal EDGAR CLEMM, an old and cantankerous man in his late sixties, asleep in a tattered wheelchair. A worn blanket covers his legs.)* Upon my thirtieth birthday, my senses had become much more acute. Above all was my sense of hearing the most sensitive. I heard things that most did not. *(Quick breathing sounds are heard. Eliza reacts to them.)* The quick and shallow breathing of the mice within the walls. *(Faint scratching sounds are heard. Again, Eliza reacts to the sounds.)* The faint scratching of a bird's claw landing on the rooftop of our tenement building. *(Both sounds continue under.)* A tiny crumb from a slice of bread falling off of the platter and onto the heavy, wooden table in the kitchen. *(A heavy thud is heard, and all sounds end abruptly. Eliza looks out to the audience with grave concern.)* But the worst, of course, was the terrible beating. The terrible beating of the old man's heart. *(Edgar stirs and awakens.)*

EDGAR. *(Sleepily.)* Eliza? Where are you, girl?

ELIZA. It is impossible to say how first the idea to kill him entered my brain. But once conceived, it haunted me both day and night. What would lead me to such a deed, you ask? Money? No, the old man had none. Hatred? No, the old man was my father. What daughter could hate her father to the point of destroying him? No, no, it was his heart. The incessant beating that drummed loudly in my ears upon so many dreadful occasions. *(The sounds of a bolt unlatching and a creaky door opening are heard from offstage. The Nurse and the Orderly enter as they did before. The Nurse carries a lit, but shuttered, lantern and a butcher's cleaver. The Orderly carries a white kitchen apron.)*

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NURSE. *(More spiteful in her demeanor. To the Orderly, referring to the apron.)* She'll need the apron to keep from staining her clothes. Put it on her.

ORDERLY. *(More lecherous in his demeanor.)* I usually take their clothes off of 'em. Not the other way 'round.

NURSE. Do as you are told. Brute!

ELIZA. *(Referring to the Nurse and the Orderly.)* I heard many, many things in hell. Demons, those voices were. Sent from the devil himself to torment me. *(The Orderly comes up behind Eliza and roughly puts the apron on her.)* Pray, what are you doing? What is this?

NURSE. Your confinement.

ELIZA. How does a simple kitchen apron serve as a confinement?

NURSE. Did cooking for and serving your father day in and day out for so many years not constitute a confinement? The old man kept you confined for years. Had you not noticed, Eliza?

ELIZA. Yes. Yes, I noticed.

EDGAR. *(Getting angry. From his chair.)* Eliza? Where are you, you stupid girl? *(The apron is on. The Orderly stays close as the Nurse moves towards Eliza and offers her the lantern and the butcher's cleaver.)*

NURSE. You'll need these for the deed.

ELIZA. *(Taking the items.)* The cleaver. Yes. But the lantern? What do I need the lantern for?

NURSE. *(Referring to Edgar.)* You checked on him nightly, did you not?

ELIZA. Oh, yes. Yes, I did. *(The Nurse and the Orderly come very close to Eliza and speak to her. Eliza becomes less self-assured during the following.)*

NURSE. For was it not the beating of the old man's heart that drove you mad?

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ELIZA. I am not mad.

ORDERLY. For was it not the beating of the old man's heart that drove you mad?

ELIZA. I am not mad.

NURSE/ORDERLY. *(Together.)* For was it not the beating of the old man's heart that drove you mad?

ELIZA. I am not mad!

NURSE/ORDERLY. *(Together.)* For was it not the bearing of the old man's heart that drove you mad?

ELIZA. I am not mad!

NURSE. But you would have been if that beating was allowed to continue.

ELIZA. Yes, yes. That beating. It was a wretched sound that came into my ears each time the old man became excitable. *(The low beating of a heart is heard. Eliza reacts to it.)* A low, dull, quick sound; such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. *(The heartbeat increases.)* Each time I heard it, my fury increased. *(Heartbeat louder.)* It was then I made up my mind to take the old man's life. *(Heartbeat louder.)* And, thus, rid myself of that hideous sound forever.

EDGAR. *(Loudly.)* ELIZA! *(The heartbeat abruptly stops. Beat. Eliza sets the lantern and cleaver down on the floor and steps towards the wheelchair to address Edgar. In this memory, Eliza is very meek.)*

ELIZA. I-I'm here, Papa.

EDGAR. Just like your mother. Never present when I am in need of you.

ELIZA. I made you some lunch, Papa.

EDGAR. Why did you not come when I called? Why did you keep me waiting?

ELIZA. I'm sorry, Papa. I did not hear you calling.

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EDGAR. ‘Tis ‘cause you never listen, you stupid girl. Just like your mother. Never was one to listen, the stupid woman.

ELIZA. (*Trying to ignore him.*) Are you hungry, Papa? I made you some soup.

EDGAR. In one ear and out the other. That’s how well you listen, stupid girl. In one ear and out the other.

ELIZA. Papa, let me get you some soup.

EDGAR. In one ear and out the other.

ELIZA. Papa-

EDGAR. Where were you when I needed you, girl?

NURSE. (*To Eliza.*) You should not anger your father like that, Eliza.

ORDERLY. (*To Eliza.*) You should not anger your father like that, Eliza.

EDGAR. You should not anger me like that, Eliza!

NURSE. Eliza!

ORDERLY. Eliza!

NURSE. (*To Eliza.*) Perhaps he’ll beat you with his leather strap. Like he used to, Eliza.

ORDERLY. (*To Eliza.*) Perhaps he’ll beat you with his leather strap. Like he used to, Eliza.

EDGAR. Shall I beat you with my leather strap? Like I used to, Eliza?

NURSE. Eliza?

ORDERLY. Eliza? (*The low sound of the heart beating begins again. Eliza reacts in disgust.*)

NURSE. (*To Eliza.*) Or perhaps he’ll use his wooden cane to beat you about the head and shoulders with, Eliza.

ORDERLY. (*To Eliza.*) Or perhaps he’ll use his wooden cane to beat you about the head and shoulders with, Eliza.

EDGAR. Shall I use my wooden cane to beat you about the head and shoulders with, Eliza?

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NURSE. Eliza?

ORDERLY. Eliza? *(The heartbeat increases, and Eliza reacts to it.)*

NURSE. *(To Eliza.)* There was the cupboard he locked you in for days and denied you food and drink until you were too weak to talk, Eliza.

ORDERLY. *(To Eliza.)* There was the cupboard he locked you in for days and denied you food and drink until you were too weak to talk, Eliza.

EDGAR. Shall I lock you in the cupboard for days and deny you food and drink until you are too weak to talk, Eliza?

NURSE. Eliza?

ORDERLY. Eliza? *(The heartbeat is louder.)*

NURSE. *(To Eliza.)* Whatever punishment he uses, he won't be very gentle, I can promise you that, Eliza!

ORDERLY. *(To Eliza.)* He won't be very gentle, I can promise you that, Eliza!

EDGAR. I won't be very gentle, I can promise you that, Eliza!

NURSE. Eliza!

ORDERLY. Eliza! *(The heartbeat is louder.)*

NURSE. *(To Eliza.)* You're in an insane place!

ORDERLY. *(To Eliza.)* An insane place!

NURSE. *(To Eliza.)* Where you'll never get out of!

ORDERLY. *(To Eliza.)* Never get out of!

EDGAR. You're in an insane place, where you'll never get out of-

EDGAR/NURSE/ORDERLY. *(Together.)* -Eliza!

NURSE. *(To Eliza.)* You must be a good girl, now!

ORDERLY. *(To Eliza.)* A good girl, now!

EDGAR. You must be a good girl, now-

EDGAR/NURSE/ORDERLY. *(Together.)* -Eliza!

ELIZA. *(Hands up to the sides of her head.)* STOP IT! *(The heartbeat stops suddenly. Beat before Eliza speaks to Edgar.)* You'll feel better

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after you eat something, Papa. *(She moves away from Edgar and addresses the audience.)* The heartbeat was enough to drive anyone mad. But I was able to stop it before it took with it my sanity. *(Referring to the Nurse and Orderly.)* They, the voices in my head, think me to be mad. But the mad are very weak. I am strong. I took control of the situation and resolved myself to do something about it.

NURSE. *(To Eliza.)* And you proceeded with your plan.

ORDERLY. *(To Eliza.)* Proceeded with your plan.

ELIZA. Yes. Oh, you should have seen me. You should have seen how wisely I proceeded with my plan. For every night, about midnight, I turned the latch of the old man's door and opened it. When I had made an opening sufficient for my head, I put in a dark lantern, all closed so no light shone out. And then, I thrust in my head. Very slowly, so that I might not disturb the old man's sleep. *(She picks up the lantern.)* And then, when my head was well in the room, I undid the lantern cautiously. Just so much that a single thin ray fell upon the old man's face. *(She demonstrates opening the lantern. As she does, a ray of light illuminates Edgar's face. He has fallen asleep in the wheelchair.)*

NURSE. And you did this for seven long nights.

ORDERLY. Seven long nights.

ELIZA. Yes. Seven long nights, just at midnight.

NURSE. But you could not hear the beating of his heart.

ORDERLY. The beating of his heart.

ELIZA. No. I could not hear the beating of his heart. For without that sound, my fury remained unignited. It was not the old man I wanted gone, but the sound of his horrible heart.

NURSE. *(With growing excitement.)* But on the eighth night.

ORDERLY. *(With growing excitement.)* On the eighth night.

ELIZA. *(She looks at Edgar's face. With growing excitement.)* Yes. On the eighth night, I was more than usually cautious in opening the door. A

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watch's minute hand moves more quickly than did mine. Never before that night had I felt the extent of my own powers. I could scarcely contain my feelings of triumph. To think that I was there, opening the door, little by little, and he never knowing of my secret deeds or thoughts.

NURSE. The mad are weak.

ORDERLY. The mad are weak.

NURSE. But you are strong.

ORDERLY. You are strong.

NURSE/ORDERLY. *(Together.)* Are you not?

ELIZA. Yes. I am strong. As such, I was able to revel in my triumph over the old man. For the first time, I was able to realize myself as a strong woman. A woman who could destroy the one sound that was determined to drive her to the brink of insanity.

NURSE. But you say you are not insane.

ORDERLY. You say you are not insane.

ELIZA. I am not insane! *(She holds up the lantern.)* His room was as black as pitch, and so I knew that he could not see the opening of the door, and I kept pushing it on steadily. I had my head in, and my thumb slipped upon the lantern's tin fastening. *(Eliza's hand bumps the lantern. Edgar suddenly stirs awake.)*

EDGAR. *(Sleepily.)* Pray, who is there?

ELIZA. *(Quietly.)* I kept very quiet and quite still. I said nothing. I dared not move, and my lantern kept still while illuminating the old man's face in the darkness. *(During the following, Edgar begins to groan.)* Presently I heard a slight groan, and I knew it was the groan of mortal terror. It was not a groan of pain or of grief. It was the low stifled sound that arises from the bottom of the soul when overcharged with fear. *(The groan becomes louder.)* I knew the sound well. Many a night,

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just at midnight, when all the world slept, it has welled up from my own bosom, deepening, with its dreadful echo.

NURSE. You knew that the old man must be able to feel your presence in the room.

ORDERLY. Your presence in the room.

ELIZA. I knew the old man must be able to feel my presence in the room, as the moaning grew in intensity. (*The groaning grows even louder.*) The moaning grew louder and louder. So much so that, for a moment, I found myself admitting that I preferred the beating of his heart to this miserable sound. And now a new anxiety seized me—

NURSE. His moaning may be heard by a neighbor in the tenement!

ORDERLY. A neighbor in the tenement!

ELIZA. His moaning may be heard by a neighbor in the tenement. I knew I must act quickly, or I may likely lose my nerve and allow the terrible heart to live on. And keep beating. Suddenly, to my delight, the very thing I despised about the old man proved to be my salvation. (*The heartbeat is heard. It grows quickly in intensity and, during the following, the groaning fades.*) There came to my ears a low, dull, quick sound, such as a watch makes when enveloped in cotton. I knew that sound to be the beating of the old man's hideous heart. The beating grew louder, louder! Louder than the groaning. So loud, in fact, that I thought the heart must burst.

NURSE. If only the heart would have burst, you'd be free of that maddening sound!

ORDERLY. That maddening sound!

ELIZA. If only the heart would have burst, I would be free of that maddening sound! (*Heartbeat increases.*) I kept still. I scarcely breathed. I held the lantern motionless. In the meantime, the hellish tattoo of the heart increased. (*Heartbeat increases.*) It grew quicker and quicker, and louder and louder every instant. The old man's terror must

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have been quite extreme! I could contain myself no longer! With a loud scream, I dropped the lantern to the floor and leaped into his bedchamber. *(Eliza screams and throws down the lantern. Its shutters fly open, and the stage is filled with shafts of flickering light coming from the lantern's candle. Eliza snatches up the butcher's cleaver and advances on Edgar who, due to the throwing down of the lantern, is plunged into shadows. The heartbeat grows even louder, and the light from the lantern's candle flickers brightly once, then quickly goes out. The stage is plunged into darkness, and the heartbeat abruptly stops. Beat. The lights come up to reveal Eliza standing alone in the center of the stage. Her white apron is stained red with blood. She holds the bloody meat cleaver. The wheelchair sits empty across the stage from her.)* I can remember shrieking and flinging myself upon the old man. Nothing more until I awoke from my angry stupor, and I found his dismembered body lying in front of me. The head, arms, and legs were a bloody jigsaw puzzle that I could not master. *(She kneels.)* I do not recall taking the old man's life. As I looked at the old man's remains laying on the floor before me, I thought, for a moment, that the deed must have been committed by someone other than myself. But who else could have done it? A burglar? Nay, I found no traces of a burglar.

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