

Gaslight and Shadows

by

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From somewhere in the dark, a voice: "Are you nervous?"

On stage, Kathryn Lindsey self-consciously smoothed down her dress, offered a flickering smile.

"Just...a little," she admitted.

"Don't be," the director called from his place in the darkened house, beyond the glow of the stagelights. "Actresses haven't the luxury of being shy. And in any case—you're among friends here."

Kathryn smiled again, a bit more confidently now, and cast a glance at her waiting co-star. Valerian Frost, that slender beautiful diva of the Gaslight Theatre Company, answered with a pleasant enough smile, but there was a kind of wicked knowing glint in her cut-crystal blue eyes.

"I've never played a scene like this before," Kathryn explained to the actress, to the actors in the wings, to the faces lost somewhere in the shadows.

"There's a first time for everything," Valerian said gently, still smiling. "Especially when you've been at this as long as I have." She cocked her head, grinned cunningly. "You'll be fine. It's simply a question of how much you're willing to give to your art, how much you're willing to sacrifice. If a little modesty is all that's asked of you, then you've been lucky, I'd say."

Kathryn nodded. She'd known that this moment was coming, of course—they'd talked the scene a dozen times in the read-throughs, speaking the lines with modulating tones of innocence and passion until Clay, the director, had at last heard just the music he'd wanted. Now, though, it was time to truly bring this scene to life, to live in this moment, to make it as almost-real as the limitations of false light and proscenium arch would allow, and her skin prickled with anticipation.

"Can we take it from the top of sixty-seven then, ladies?" Clay called from somewhere in the musty dark, his voice reedy-dry, a ghostly thing in the gloom-shrouded old theater.

Valerian cocked her head at Kathryn, reiterating the query.

She was beautiful, Kathryn thought—hair like fire spun into silk, eyes like distant stars, skin like porcelain, curves and contours smooth-perfect, statuesque. Would that make this scene easier, or more difficult? Kathryn wasn't certain, but she nodded to Valerian, and then out to Clay.

"Good, then," the director called. "Places."

The two actresses swept apart, sliding into the spots where they'd enter the scene.

"Whenever you're ready," Clay called.

Valerian transformed at once, her soft beauty becoming hard, vaguely cruel, the predatory look of Sabrina Blake, her character in *Night Whispers*. Kathryn paused an instant, unable to keep from admiring the other actress's flawless transition into her role, the subtle shift of features. Then Valerian spoke, in Sabrina's soft but lofty tones, and the reality of the dank old theater faded some.

"It saddens me, Ashley, to see you drifting away from Ian... I wish there was something I could do, to help enliven things between you two again..."

The spell of Kathryn's awe crumbled then, and she settled into her own character, slipping it on like a costume that still needed tailoring.

"No... Sabrina, everything's fine between us. He's just been a little...distant, lately. It's that business with the Picasso, it's got him distracted. You can't blame him—those rumors it's a forgery could ruin him..."

And so it went, the scene that had thrilled and threatened her since the first read-through, the scene in which Sabrina Blake manipulated and seduced naive young Ashley De Lys, at once clouding her love for her husband Ian and luring her into a subtly erotic moment of vast terrible vulnerability.

It was Kathryn's first significant role since her graduation from Columbia, an original off-Broadway production penned by the unknown playwright Raymund Sillers, a darkly clever story of love and seduction, temptation and betrayal, of four lives destroyed by the sly cruel dealings of Sabrina Blake. Already, there were whispers in the theatrical world that the play might someday be brought to Broadway, but even if it wasn't, Kathryn knew she'd be seen here, perhaps even *discovered* here. The small company of highly talented unknowns was primed to be noticed—so the buzz went—ready to break into that Big Time on the Great White Way. Surely the critics would come in flocks, surely the cast would be noticed, surely they'd all move on to bigger shows, brighter careers, away from the hidden and decaying Gaslight Theatre in the shadowed alleys of West Thirty-Eighth Street and onto the stage of the Nederlander or the Winter Garden or the Majestic.

If she could find the courage to play this scene to its conclusion, to live in this one naked moment as if it were all there was.

She stood now, down stage right, waiting for Valerian to make the slow cross to her, waiting for the moment when her stomach always grew tight and her palms slick and her throat dry. They'd never played this scene through with the blocking before today, but she knew what would happen, how Valerian would descend and embrace her, wrap her up in those long gentle arms,

begin to kiss her until at last, she was to kiss back. There would be more, later, when the dress rehearsals began, but Kathryn could scarcely think ahead to tomorrow night. This scene was challenge enough for now; Kathryn's heart fluttered.

"You're so very lovely," Valerian was saying, in Sabrina's cool tones, "Ian's a blind fool if he's lost sight of that..."

Now she was close behind, now putting her arms gently around Kathryn, one down at her waist, one around her shoulder, fingers gliding through her hair.

"You deserve his undivided attention," Sabrina stage-whispered, "and if he refuses to give it, you should take a lover."

Now Valerian's hands began to slip and wander, stroking Kathryn's neck, brushing softly along the curve of one breast.

Kathryn caught her breath, managed to murmur her line. "I can scarcely keep my husband's attention...where am I to find a lover?"

Valerian leaned over Kathryn's shoulder, face to face, nose almost brushing nose.

"You mustn't sell yourself short, dear Ashley," she said softly, "you're young, and beautiful, and so...sensual... You'll find someone who appreciates you..."

Valerian's touch was cool and soft, and Kathryn thought again of how lovely she was, of how much this scene flustered and frightened her. Valerian's vivid blue eyes floated only inches from hers; fear trembled through her like static electricity, and she wondered again, for the hundredth time at least, whether or not she belonged here, in this dream-palace haunted by these talented enigmatic actors.

"You deserve to be...touched..." Valerian said, very quietly, "held, kissed, caressed..."

Valerian's fingertips slid shiveringly across Kathryn's breast; she felt her chest tingle sweetly, her nipples stiffen a little.

"Isn't that what you want?" Valerian asked, making the words dark, vaguely cruel, just the tone for Sabrina's mean cunning. "Isn't that all you've *ever* wanted?"

Weeping silent tears, so nearly real in that moment, Kathryn nodded.

"I know," Valerian-become-Sabrina hummed, "oh, I know..."

And the moment came, their eyes flickered closed, their lips met, pressed tight, lingered there together. The kiss seemed to last forever—Valerian's touch was cool under the hot stagelights.

"And—*blackout!*" Clay shouted from the house.

The two actresses opened their eyes, stepped apart with—almost—a hint of reluctance.

From the dark beyond the stage, a pigeon-wings fluttering of applause.

"House lights, please!" Clay called, and the dim glimmered away, yellow lamps glowing like starlight on the long rows of red velvet seats, on faded antique wallpaper. All at once the place was just an old off-Broadway theater again, smelling richly of cut wood and splattered paint and gathered dust.

"Excellent work, excellent," Clay said, reclining, arms draped lankly along the seat-backs on either side, making his long narrow shape look longer and narrower still, a splendid black spider in an antique web. "Valerian—you're a gem, as always. Kathryn...darling, I know you're terribly nervous... You must *use* that, make it a part of what you give us when you're up there... You're doing well, darling, splendidly... But just now, that fear is still Kathryn's fear. You've got to make it Ashley's fear. You see?"

Kathryn nodded, not sure whether to feel wounded or thrilled.

"Good," Clay said. "Now...notes..."

And, snatching up a piece of paper, he began to read off various complaints about timing and blocking and a dozen other petty things that would be easily corrected, and the long night's rehearsal wore on toward morning.

Kathryn paused a moment in the narrow, rot-ripe alley outside the Gaslight Theatre's stage door, and took a deep breath despite the rank air. Her heart was trip-hammering in her chest, her palms sweat-slick again, as they'd been on that night a week ago, when they'd blocked the last scene of Act I.

Tonight was the first full dress rehearsal of *Night Whispers*, and the daring erotic scene she shared with Valerian would take on a new dimension, would challenge her as it never before had. The thought of it set her nerves jangling, raised white goosebumps all over her skin.

But—was that all it was? Just that scene, just that moment?

No.

The more she considered that ticklish uneasiness, the more she understood that there were other things, too, a squabbling flock of uncertainties she couldn't put names to, couldn't explain even to herself. Something about this old building, with its antique seats and leaded-glass lamps and cut-crystal chandelier, a beautiful but neglected old place that always smelled vaguely of decay. And—something about her director, too, and about the cast, their strangely wizened youthfulness, as if long decades hid behind their cream-smooth features...odd notions, feelings she couldn't quite fix her thoughts on. That off-balanced sense that she didn't belong among them, that she was an invader there in those shadow-steeped dressing rooms, on that moaning ancient stage. Of course, she was new to the Gaslight Company, a fresh face in a group of people

who'd been together for some indeterminate long time now, but that wasn't all of it. Nor was it that they'd ever excluded her in any way—they all treated her splendidly, and Valerian was particularly kind, as good a friend as Kathryn had ever found in the world of theater, where people were so often willing to climb to the top by digging their spiked heels into your flesh.

There were just...nagging little details, ideas half formed, suspicions uncentered, questions she didn't quite know how to ask. All a lot of nothing, surely...but somehow Kathryn couldn't quite cast off the goosebumps.

It didn't matter, any of it. She had work to do, art to render with her voice and her body, reality to re-create. Shaking her head at herself, at her foolish nerves, she pushed her way through the stage door, into the Gaslight Theatre.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to do this," Kathryn confessed, as she and Valerian sat side-by-side in front of the mirrors, touching up their rouge and lipstick. Next week, there'd be a professional make-up artist to do the work, but for now they were on their own. It was no easy task—the lights surrounding the mirrors were old and dim, the dressing room draped in somber sepia light and bustling with shadows.

"The first time's always the most difficult—as for everything, right?" Valerian smiled. "Just remember: though it may be a bit embarrassing, your pride isn't important here. It's all a question of how much you're willing to give up to your art. How much are you willing to sacrifice, Kathryn? Your privacy? Your ego? More than that?"

Kathryn looked at her, but couldn't quite answer.

"The time may come when you're asked to give up everything for your art, Kathryn, love. Everything." Valerian said, gently. "You'd better decide before that moment arrives, or you might not answer correctly."

Kathryn nodded, slowly, feeling her heart pump hard in her chest, oh so aware of what was to come, soon. There would only be a handful of people in the audience to see—Clay, his assistant Saint Claire, a few stage hands and one or two producers she'd only ever seen as gray shades in the house, only ever heard as low muttered voices in the shadows on the dark side of the proscenium. Only them, and Adrian and Peter in the wings. And Valerian, of course. Valerian, there on stage with her, not only to see, but to smell and even feel the fear, the vulnerability of that moment. There would be no acting, then, no assuming a nervous tantalized naked anticipation, no pretending to tremble and sigh. The only quality of theater in the scene would be to remember her lines, to say what the script told her to say. But the rest—all the rest would be terribly, wonderfully true.

One moment of dread beautiful sacrifice for this art that was all she existed for.

Saint Claire, slender and gaunt, rapped on the half-ajar door. "Places for Act One, please. Act One places."

With a narrow ruby smile, Valerian rose and slipped out of the dressing room, becoming Sabrina Blake somewhere between the make-up chair and the door.

Heart timpani-drumming as it never had before, Kathryn followed her from the room, out into the backstage darkness.

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The first act of *Night Whispers* moved cat-easy, subtle and creeping, predatory. The actors glided darkly through their scenes, Sabrina Blake and Ian De Lys slowly weaving their cruel plot against their spouses and lovers, playing out their grave seductions with brilliant subtlety, dangling taut moments on secret looks, on sly glances.

And then at last the time was upon them, upon *her*—the time at the end of Act I when, cunningly, Sabrina seduced young Ashley, creating the deadly erotic connection which, in Act Two, would lead to the grim collapse of two marriages, and the final wicked cat-and-mouse game played out by Valerian as Sabrina, and Adrian as Ian.

Kathryn slipped into the moment of that scene, no longer Kathryn Lindsey at all but now only Ashley De Lys, no longer sharing that space with Valerian Frost but only with Sabrina Blake, no longer walking the stage of the Gaslight Theatre, but instead seeing only the grand living room of the Blake penthouse on Central Park West.

"You're so very lovely," Sabrina whispered to her, gliding nearer, drifting close like some beautiful phantom, "Ian's a blind fool if he's lost sight of that. You deserve his undivided attention, and if he refuses to give it, you should take a lover."

Now again Sabrina was behind her, one gentle hand around her waist, one sliding silkily through her hair, now gliding down Ashley's long neck, now ghosting over one quivering breast, bringing the nerves to life, tingling-cool.

"I...can scarcely keep my husband's attention," Ashley sighed softly, losing herself slowly in Sabrina's chill embrace, "where am I to find a lover?"

Now Sabrina turned her slowly around and they were face to face, her crystal blue gaze seeming to fill Kathryn-cum-Ashley's mind, and now Sabrina's long supple arms slipped up over the curves of her chest, and somewhere deep inside Ashley De Lys, Kathryn Lindsey realized that something was subtly different, that Valerian had changed the blocking ever-so-slightly, but it was unimportant because Valerian and Kathryn existed somewhere else now, in a place that wasn't even real here.

"You deserve to be...touched...held..." Sabrina said, her words small, soft, utterly private, words for Ashley's ears only, "...kissed, caressed..."

Her hands shivered over Ashley's chest now, wandering her soft curves with vague, almost idle passion, and Kathryn's heart beat out a kettle-drum rhythm in her chest, and her body cooled

with terrible unutterable desire, and her muscles all went piano-wire tight. This was the moment she'd been so very afraid of, the moment of pure terrible vulnerability, as Valerian-become-Sabrina brushed aside the pencil-thin straps of Ashley's sky-blue gown and slid it slowly away, exposing her there on the naked stage, milk-pale shoulders, cream-white breasts, rosebud-dark nipples...

For a moment Kathryn Lindsey stood in two places at once—in Sabrina's penthouse seduction high above Central Park, and in Valerian's equally cruel-sweet embrace somewhere in the back-alley brick labyrinth of lower Midtown. And now in both places she was half-nude and laid bare to the dread-wonderful exploitative touch of that beautiful other woman, the strange familiar creeping of gentle Valerian's fingers over her naked skin. And somewhere in between those two equally unreal places, she heard Valerian whisper, "How much are you willing to sacrifice, Kathryn? How much are you willing to give to your art?"

The words were nowhere in the script, but in that instant they were all that made sense, all that mattered, and Kathryn nodded imperceptibly and murmured, "Anything...everything..."

Valerian's grip went tight on her, pulling her exposed body in close, a tight and blackly intimate caress, as she whispered those lines that weren't simply lines anymore. "Isn't this what you want? Isn't this all that you've *ever* wanted?"

That edge of Sabrina-cruelty was gone from the words, but now they cut more keen and wicked than ever, because it was Valerian saying them, and Kathryn could feel all the sharp dark eyes of the other members of the Gaslight Theatre Company on her naked body, breathlessly awaiting her answer.

Very slowly, she nodded. There were tears crawling warmly down her cheeks now, tears that weren't Ashley's at all.

"I know," Valerian hummed softly, "oh, I know..."

And that great horrid moment came again, Valerian's lips meeting hers, pressing hard, mouth open in a deep unquenchable kiss, unbearable, perfect.

The stage fell black, and that passionate cool kiss became all that there was in the world.

Kathryn struggled up out of a cold gray mist, something like a faint or a long sleep, and stared up at the faces hanging over her, a sky full of pale autumn moons.

They all seemed to be there—Clay with his hollowed face and neat goatee, Adrian tall and gaunt, Saint Claire and Peter hovering in the gloom just behind...and Valerian, beautiful devastating Valerian, diva of the Gaslight, eyes clear as cut-crystal and breath-taking blue, lipstick ruby-bright against her porcelain skin.

Kathryn shifted some, tried to sit up, but her body was limp as old rags, and too heavy, and too cold. She was still half-nude and there was a bitter thick taste in her mouth, somehow familiar,

somehow alien. They'd draped her on an old forgotten stage piece, a red-velvet chaise from some long-ago production, and she guessed by the crumbling red brick on all sides and the naked wooden beams above that they were in a secret chamber under the stage, deep in the catacombs of the Gaslight Theatre.

Valerian smiled down on her now, a smile without warmth or humor, without cruelty or wickedness. A smile perfectly inhuman.

There were very sharp teeth behind that smile, teeth like needles.

Kathryn stared, spellbound, lost in that face. It was ancient beneath its facade of youth, a mummy's visage gazing bewitchingly from behind a wax death-mask. Those gemstone eyes gleamed as if they'd watched whole centuries shamble past. And yet she was beautiful, so maddeningly, devastatingly beautiful. In that instant of dark lucidity, Kathryn saw it all as never before.

"We've watched you for a long time," Valerian whispered blackly, "since the night you first took the stage at Columbia in *Married Bliss*. I knew then that you were meant to be one of us...we, who live forever to perform, we who have all of eternity to perfect our art. We have performed under Shaw, Chekhov and Anouilh. Adrian once worked with a young Noel Coward, Saint Claire understudied Moliere, and Clay trod the boards of the Globe with the Bard himself. Our art...endures. It is a gift we share with only a privileged few... The price is very high to do what we do, to become what we are..."

"What...are you?" Kathryn managed, the words tiny in that ancient thespian cathedral.

"No need to be coy," Valerian said, shaking her head. "You know. You've known all along..."

And now again Kathryn thought of all those strange uncertainties that had slunk and crept through her mind for the last three weeks, the uncanny antiquity of this theater and the way the company all seemed so much a natural part of it, as if they too were antiques kept polished and looking new, looking young, but also secretly showing signs of their age...the way they kept always to the shadows, always to the dusks and twilights and evenings, never once meeting during the daylight hours. She thought of the slight distant fragrance of decay that hung forever over the Gaslight, of Valerian's always-cool touch...

"You've proven yourself tonight, Kathryn," Valerian said, gently, blue eyes alight, "daring your sexuality, your vulnerability, your ego and vanity. You've given so much of yourself to your art...but do you dare give everything?"

She sank down, intimately close again, shutting out those other watching faces so that there might only have been the two of them in that forgotten cellar, in all the world, and Kathryn felt those long ivory teeth behind Valerian's gentle savage smile, waiting to break flesh, to open veins, to drain away life and give something back in its place, something black and strange and unthinkable.

"How much?" Valerian asked, almost silently. Perhaps only her piercing blue eyes posed the question at all.

Kathryn stared, frigid with terror, at the woman floating above her, young but ancient, innocent but murderous, impossibly beautiful and stinking of death. Would this be her companion, now and forever, her lover and her mentor eternally? Could that be her existence, exquisite in beauty and talent and never feeling another kiss of sunlight, another beat of her heart? All her life she'd heard it said—theater is life! Now she was staring it in the face, seeing it for something dead and deadly, art of the most impossible kind, of the ultimate pretense. Death which feigned life. Destruction incarnate, initiating creation.

The blood in her veins flowed like cold pine sap. Her naked flesh prickled with chills, tingled with longing, with fear.

Kathryn Lindsey drew in one long last breath, and arched her body into Valerian's embrace, exposing the long curve of her throat, her chest, her stomach.

Valerian kissed her cheek once, then her throat, her shoulder... She opened her mouth and sank straight-razor teeth into the warm soft undercurve of Kathryn's left breast, so near the heart. Kathryn's body went taut as violin strings, ringing with death-music, funereal strains.

One by one, the others in the company joined the murderous banquet—teeth fastened into Kathryn's throat, her left wrist, her right nipple, her inner thigh, a half dozen brutal kisses. The pain was exquisite, splendid, it sizzled through her dying nerves like cold lightning.

The warmth began to creep and surge out of her flesh, fading now, fading away, fading forever, and she mourned it even as it dwindled to nothing and the dread-pleasure consumed her soul.

She closed her eyes and waited for it all to be over, and for something else to begin.

—The End—

Originally appeared on the DNA Publications website, June 2000.