

SONG OF ST. TESS

A play

By

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LIGHTS UP

A shaft of light falls on Tess entering from the back of the stage. She's dressed in a nightgown. She obviously hasn't slept well. But, she's still quite beautiful. She moves forward into the living room. She folds her arms against the cold and moves to the couch. She clicks on the lamp to a very dim setting. She picks up a large blanket folded on the couch and wraps herself in it. She sits on the couch and then curls up in a fetal position. Her light fades while another light falls on a 12 year-old girl sitting at the piano. This ghost-girl is dressed in white with a mask. The ghost-girl tinkles the piano keys. Tess is re-lit. She opens her eyes and raises her head.

Tess. Denise, don't you have school? *(But, as though she doesn't notice her mother's presence, Ghost-girl keeps tapping at the piano.)* Denise, you'll be late. *(Ghost-girl keeps tapping at the piano. Tess tries to get up. Denise continues playing.)* Denise.

Ghost-girl. *(eventually she stops playing and looks toward her mother)* I don't have anything to wear. You didn't wash my uniform.

Tess. Denise, what are you saying? *(Ghost-girl taps at the piano keys again.)* That's not true. Stop playing, dear. *(Ghost-girl continues playing.)* Denise, stop. *(Ghost-girl stops playing.)* You have to get ready for school. You can't sit here playing. Hurry, you'll be late.

Ghost-girl. The teacher always tells us we can't pray to Jesus in the morning if we don't have a clean uniform.

Tess. You have a clean uniform. I can get it for you. *(tries to get up, but can't)* I don't know what's wrong. I can't get up?

Ghost-girl. *(while tinkling the piano)* I can't get into my room to get my clothes.

Tess. Come over here and help me up. We'll look in your closet together.

Ghost-girl. Deena's in my room.

Tess. Yes, she moved in there when you died. Help me get up. I can't move.

Ghost-girl. *(stops playing, suddenly nervous)* I can't go to school. Don't make me go, Mom. The teacher told me I couldn't come to school without the right uniform.

Tess. I'll always get you a uniform...don't worry.

Ghost-girl. The teachers won't let me in the classroom when I'm like this.

Tess. Like what?

Ghost-girl. *(stands up. Her white clothes are all bloody below.)* The teacher says I'm pregnant.

Tess. Oh my God, what is that!

Ghost-girl. Am I pregnant, Mom? Is it falling out?

Tess. Oh, no, no.

Ghost-girl. Mom, I can't stop bleeding. I can't stop!

(Tess tries to get up, but can't. She sinks back down on the couch as the Ghost-girl's light goes black. Tess, trying to speak, can only moan under her breath during her sleep. She wakes with a start. Gets to her feet, unwraps herself from the blanket, turns off the lamp and exits backstage.)

BLACKOUT

LIGHTS UP

The living room is neatly furnished with a piano in the living room. The furnishings are simple and a little worn as though used by a busy family. A darkened hallway leads to back bedrooms. There's a door-less entrance to the kitchen. The front door opens. JOHN enters carrying a bag of groceries. Behind him TESS enters holding a Nordstrom bag in one hand and in the other a bunch of small wild roses, still dripping with rain. She places the bag on a table near the front door.

Tess: Look at these roses! One night of rain and look at the gift! *(Both disappear into the kitchen. Tess re-enters with a tall glass half-filled with water. She drops the roses in the glass and places it on the coffee table. John re-enters and leans against the kitchen entrance. Tess goes up and hugs him.)* Don't think I forgot that you planted those roses for me when you moved in 3 months ago...to the day. And the garden you put in the backyard, it's so full of wonderful flowers!

John. I've always been such an urban animal. Every other place I've lived was surrounded by concrete. I was shocked when the damn plants actually bloomed.

Tess. So, you're glad you came in from the cold life of bachelorhood.

John. I thought misery was normal until I met you.

Tess. Then we saved each other.

John. I guess I always wanted to live with you, only I didn't know it. *(pause)* I noticed you left the bed again last night.

Tess. I couldn't sleep. Why turn in bed and keep you awake? I went to the couch for a while to get sleepy again. *(She kisses him, breaks away and goes to the entrance table where she had left a Nordstrom bag. She brings the bag into the living room.)* I'm never quite sure about you, though. You've been getting into a...well...moods the last few days...I thought maybe you've been having second thoughts.

(John moves up to her and rubs her back)

John. I'm not having second thoughts...okay?

Tess. I believe you. But, you have been sulking.

John. I don't know...I'm just wondering about your sister-in-law suddenly showing up.

Tess. Ex sister-in-law.

John. Okay, ex sister-in-law.

Tess. *(She takes a sweater out of the bag and holds it up.)* I love the sweater! Thank you!

John. There's something wrong buying you a present when you're standing there.

Tess. Oh, that's silly. I know what I wanted. I told you. You bought it. Oh, don't let me forget...I have to pick up the cake from the bakery in a little bit. They're supposed to call, but you never know.

John. Why are you so involved with coordinating your own birthday party? Joyce and Deena said they'd do it.

Tess. Well, I'm just making sure things go right. My daughters get distracted. *(pause)* You know, at certain angles Deena reminds me so much of Denise. When I notice, I sometimes get teary. I don't like crying in front of her because I know she knows because she doesn't ask me why I'm crying.

John. She was the same age, wasn't she? I mean, the same age as Denise when she died?

Tess. *(nods. pause)* I also noticed Joyce this morning after her shower. She looks more and more like a woman. Sometimes I feel I have a younger sister and not a daughter.

John. She's changed in other ways too.

Tess. How?

John. It's her attitude. She's been colder toward me...more remote.

Tess. I think you're too sensitive. She's growing up. Her personality is forming.

John. I think it's something else.

Tess. Our getting married... is that what you mean? She's being forced to deal with it...the same with Deena.

John. Even more than that.

Tess. What are you talking about it?

John. You know what I'm talking about.

Tess. Oh, that again.

John. The way we met...what you did. My moving in and now this announcement...it's reminding them...sticking it in their faces.

Tess. 'Sticking it in their faces'...that's a little harsh. My marriage was rotting, John. I had to save my own life to save theirs. When Denise died, all that was wrong between Edward and me rose up like a monster. The girls will have to get used to it. They deserve to see happiness around them, not me bottoming out.

John. A lot of people don't see it that way. They just see a good mother committing adultery.

Tess. I'm not going to apologize for what I did. I've told you that. Are you too uncomfortable with that? Do you want to back off from the marriage?

John. (*snaps back*) God damn you! Don't come on to me like that! I'm not asking you to apologize! I only want you to listen. I don't talk about this much, so don't turn this around on me when I finally have something to say.

Tess. (*backing off*) I understand...sorry. I'm listening.

John. Oh, the hell with it. (*begins to walk off*)

Tess. (*grabs him*) No, no please. I'm sorry. Please...I am listening.

John. (*reluctant at first*) You left Edward for another man. That's unusual for a woman, with kids and all...even nowadays. And now that their Aunt Eva is coming...well... she's a reminder of better days. Besides, their sacred father is coming over for the first time since you dumped him.

Tess. Why do you keep saying “dumped him”?

John. You’re not listening. Why do you refuse to see connections between your ex, the girls’ attitudes, and Aunt Eva showing up?

Tess. I do see it. But we can’t hide what happened. Look, the girls are excited about Eva. She ran off after we met...with that man from Massachusetts. We were all surprised not to hear from her all this time. Maybe she left and didn’t call out of loyalty to her brother...I don’t know. But, if the girls...

John. All I’m saying is that the girls act different now.

Tess. It’s new for them. You gotta give them a break. You have to understand... Joyce, Denise and Aunt Eva...they were thick as thieves. The two girls loved Eva’s...uh...eccentricities...I guess...her quirkiness...her artsy interests. When Denise passed, Joyce and Aunt Eva became even tighter.

John. Why can’t Eva stay with her own brother, for Christ’s sake?

Tess. *(folds the sweater back into the bag...comes up to John and touches his cheek tenderly)* First of all she wants to see the kids. Edward’s got his new girlfriend around... three’s company.

John. Well, there’s fucking four of us here. I’m just getting settled in and now....

Tess. Please, it won’t be for long. Her man ran off with another woman. She’s had hard luck with men. She’s alone. It’s my birthday. I’m going to be nice to her. I’m sorry how you feel. But children have a way of forcing their ways into your life. It can’t be helped.

John. *(looking at his watch)* What time are they coming from the airport?

Tess. Well, Joyce drove to the airport with Deena about...I think the plane was due to land about two...Now, I’m not sure. I’ll call Joyce and make sure. *(takes out a cell phone from her pants pocket)*

Suddenly the door opens. AUNT EVA enters. JOYCE and DEENA are behind her each carrying a suitcase. Joyce closes the door. Tess places the cell phone on the dining room table.

Tess. Eva, welcome!

(They hug. Eva weeps softly.)

Eva. Oh my! Oh my! I can’t believe it! I’m here again!

Tess. It’s so good to see you.

(They clasp each other's hands, lean back, and regard each other's faces.)

Eva. You haven't changed...still prettier than anybody. And happy birthday! *(kisses Tess affectionately, then looks at Joyce and Deena who are still holding the suitcases.)* But these two...Tess, I thought Joyce was you and Deena was Den...and I was looking around for Deena as the little girl I knew when I left.

(John exits backstage taking up the suitcases from the girls. On his way down the hall, he snatches the sweater and department store bag.)

Deena. *(wildly happy)* Mom, Aunt Eva is taking us to the ballet!

Tess. I know. That's very nice. *(to Eva)* Come on in and sit down. You must be tired.

Eva. *(Putting her arms around the girls' shoulders, she moves into the living room with them.)* I've thought about you guys so much back East. I lived for those moments. Oh, but who wants to talk about that. I may never want to go back to stuffy old Massachusetts...they burn witches there.

Joyce. You can live here. We have the extra sunroom where Deena used to sleep.

Eva. Well, I tell you what...let me just visit this time, okay? Then we'll see.

Tess. Girls, let your aunt sit down.

(Eva sits with a sigh on the sofa. She feels the upholstery with her hand with satisfaction. Joyce and Deena stand near her.)

Eva. I remember this sofa...the coolish feel of the upholstery...

Tess. We all had many long nights of conversations on this thing, didn't we...drinking those Sonoma reds.

Eva. We sure did.

Joyce. Mom, on the way back from the airport, Aunt Eva showed us the bakery where she used to work. She worked there when she was my age. Now it's a Starbucks.

Eva. Yes, a Starbucks. But then it was little place...warm with good smells. The Sorenson sisters owned it. They had shocks of white hair and such strong hands. I remember their flour-dusted fingers guiding me with the doe on the rolling boards. You knew the place, Tess.

Tess. On West Portal...I remember the Sorenson's. Yes. It closed about a year ago. When one of the sister's died and...that was it... the other one quit. They had no children...so....

(pause)

Eva. I should've taken up the profession...it's a kind of art, isn't it? They were wiry old spinsters...like me now.

Tess. Oh, nonsense.

Eva. *(reaching over to clasp Joyce's hand)* Look at this... seventeen years old...a woman...pretty as I knew she'd grow up to be. And Deena ...*(to Tess)* ...beautifully thin, with these long coltish legs.

Tess. She looks like her father.

Deena. I still play piano and I'm on the 7th grade volleyball team.

Eva. Athletic too. Now that's a first for this family. *(Eva closes her eyes and raises her head as though in sudden reverie. When she opens her eyes there are tears.)* I can't believe I'm here again. Look at all of you!

Tess. Girls, why don't you go and give your Aunt some time here...okay? Joyce, please drive Deena to volleyball practice...and wait for her.

Deena. We're having a birthday party tonight.

Eva. I know. And I've got something for your mom...and for you guys too.

Joyce. What is it?

Tess. That's enough, girls. There's plenty of time. Go ahead and get going.

(Joyce hugs and kisses Eva.)

Joyce. Welcome back Aunt Eva.

(Joyce and Deena exit.)

Eva. The girls are so pretty. My God, I had an avalanche of memories when I saw them at the airport.

Tess. They missed you. Especially Joyce. You broke her heart when you left and didn't call.

Eva. Over two years...it doesn't seem so long when you're our age. But when I saw the two girls waiting at the airport, I knew how much I missed them and how long I'd been gone. I simply burst into tears. Oh my God, look at this place! It hasn't changed. And the piano...still here!

Tess. The girls still take lessons. But, Joyce has slowed down to a crawl on the piano. She's found a new love... the theater...does all the plays in school. But Deena still takes lessons from Mrs. Whitney.

Eva. Dear Mrs. Whitney...another lonely lady.

Tess. Lonely? That's not true...with all those students...she has a rich life.

Eva. So, Eddie gets the girls on the weekends...he told me. I called him from the airport.

Tess. Every other weekend. There are exceptions...special events...like this weekend.

Eva. I see.

Tess. He was upset. Bad-mouthed me in court. But in the end the judge thought it was better this way...the children with the mother. He's calmed down...doesn't throw accusations around anymore.

Eva. He felt pretty bad, I guess, when you started seeing...um...

Tess. John.

Eva. Yes, John.

Tess. Divorce is grueling, especially for the children.

Eva. With the mother...that's almost always the right place for the children.

Tess. Next weekend's his time. But, I thought since you're back, that it was only right to have him come over...with his new girlfriend. I'm also letting him take you and me and the girls to Mass and brunch of Sunday...if you want.

Eva. His girlfriend...her name's Brenda. Youthful, I hear. *(pause)* Are you jealous?

Tess. Of course not.

Eva. I only mean that the possessive impulse can lay awake like an ember.

Tess. *(a little laugh)* Look, Eva, I'm not jealous. I'm sincerely happy he's found a girlfriend.

Eva. You know, that's one reason why I came back, Tess. You're strong. You have children. That's what being a mother does for you. I'm here to take lessons. I used to be so jealous of you.

Tess. Jealous?

Eva. Oh yes. I had it badly.

Tess. I never noticed.

Eva. You were too busy. It would have been humiliating to be found out. Tess, I felt imprisoned in that apartment of mine at the butt-end of Fulton Street. Every day and night I looked out on the Golden Gate Park...it was depressing...the fog, the damp cold from the ocean, the parked cars rusting from all the brine in the air. The park there was full of the dregs...street people urinating and worse. I felt alone...drying up in my over heated apartment. I couldn't turn that damn radiator off.

Tess. You had us.

Eva. I know. But, I was so bitter about you.

Tess. Eva, I'm shocked by all this. I always thought your leaving had more to do with your loyalty to Edward. That was the only way to make sense about how suddenly you left. I was flabbergasted when I heard you moved back East to marry someone we never met.

Eva. Tess, you knew me. How many times had you seen me with a man? None. I didn't need them. I had friends who thought my life was wretched because my libido was so low. I simply was comfortable without men. I was even proud of it. But when you met another man, something churned inside me. I wanted one too.

Tess. What?

Eva. When I met Warren at a 4th of July barbeque in Marin, everything changed. He was an architect from Cambridge Massachusetts with the ego of Julius Caesar. He blasted over me like a storm. I'm very fastidious...or was. But I desired in him the very things that before turned my stomach about men; the body hair, the chest bathed in sweat, dirty clothes, filthy hands.... It was like an outbreak of fever. And you inspired it.

Tess. Eva, you can't mean that.

Eva. I don't like to admit it, but it's true. Then it happened... I wanted a baby. I wanted it more than anything in the world. I felt foolish telling anybody after my years of posing as a bohemian. When Warren went back East without me, I ran after him.

Tess. But why not tell us at some point...let us know?

Eva. I couldn't at the time. It seemed a good thing for me to break everything off, just cut the moorings.

Tess. Eva, I have to tell you...what you're saying to me sounds...so, so...

Eva. Selfish...self-serving. You're right. I was the queen of narcissism. For months I've been wondering what I was going to say when I saw you. So, I'm blurting it out...I was evil...a coward! I want to admit it and get it over with.

Tess. I'm not judging you.

Eva. *(she gets to her feet and paces)* One evening, Eddie called me in tears. And that's when he told me...about you and John, that you were leaving him, and he was leaving you, the kids, the house. And do you know what I felt? I envied you. You had a new lover *and* children. And I had nothing. I felt this even though my brother's heart was breaking because of it. Selfish...yes.

Tess. And you're coming back for what...forgiveness? Because I'm not in the moral position to forgive you.

Eva. Maybe. But you can count on me to be more self-centered than that. I needed to see you and the kids. I missed you guys so much I could hardly stand it. I'm just hoping you'll let me be part of your family again.

Tess. You're here aren't you?

Eva. *(She comes to Tess, reaches out and clasps her hand)* Yes, yes. Thank you. *(pause)* You know, I'm worried that you two have made a mistake.

Tess. You mean Eddie and me?

Eva. I always thought you might get back together with him.

Tess. Eva, I'm getting married to John.

Eva. Yes, I heard that. No church wedding this time, huh?

Tess. No.