

A Sepulchre of Songs

by  
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Based on the short story by  
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*Lights go up on a bed center stage, with white sheets, and large white pillows at the headboard. There is a chair on one side, and a small table, upon which sits a potted plant. On the other side, there is a standing window frame. A CD player is on the floor near the bed. In an upstage corner, there is also a tall counter, the nurses' station, with a stool behind it, and a phone and files scattered on the counter top.*

*ELAINE enters. She is wearing a long bright shirt that hangs to the middle of her thighs, covering her shorts, with sleeves that stop just below the curve of her shoulders. She is barefoot. She circles the bed with a skip in her step. When she notices the window, she steps onto and across the bed, and goes to look outside. During the ensuing scene, ELAINE returns to the bed and pulls on long, opaque white gloves and stockings. When she stretches out on the bed, propped up by large white pillows, the gloves and stockings blend in with the white sheets so that her arms and legs seem to disappear.*

*THERAPIST enters in a raincoat, carrying a small briefbag.*

THERAPIST

I was first assigned to see Elaine at the Millard County Rest Home to get rid of her imaginary friends. I remember April, the head nurse, telling me what to expect.

*APRIL enters and hands him a file of hospital records. THERAPIST sets down his bag and opens the file.*

APRIL

She's kept these friends long after most children give them up.

THERAPIST

How old *is* Elaine?

APRIL

Sixteen.

THERAPIST

I'm guessing she's the youngest patient here.

APRIL

By far. She's a ward of the state. When she was five years old, she survived an oil truck explosion that killed both her parents.

THERAPIST (*nodding*)

The explosion that took her arms and legs.

APRIL

She doesn't have much more than a torso, so it's upsetting to see this little lump of a body surrounded by too much emptiness on the bed. But Elaine's a doll. She's stubborn, and she insists on being liked.

THERAPIST

And do you like her?

APRIL

She's my favorite face.

*APRIL exits and THERAPIST steps into ELAINE's room. Her head is turned away from him as she looks out the window.*

THERAPIST

Hi, Elaine.

ELAINE

*(She turns to face him with a big smile.)* Oh, hi! You're just in time. I was on my way out.

THERAPIST

Where were you going?

ELAINE

The Louvre called. They need a stand-in while they get the Venus de Milo cleaned. *(THERAPIST is flustered, unsure how to respond. ELAINE bursts out laughing)* Oh, wow, I'm going to have to break you in.

THERAPIST

Darn, and my degree says I'm fully trained.

ELAINE

Not at the school of Elaine.

THERAPIST

You're right. I want to learn all about you. And your friends.

ELAINE

Okay. They're imaginary.

THERAPIST

What?

ELAINE

My friends. So you can't meet them or anything.

THERAPIST

Oh. Are you sure? They might like me.

ELAINE

*I* might like you if you stopped talking craziness.

THERAPIST

So you know your friends aren't real.

ELAINE

Yeah, but I guess you didn't.

THERAPIST

Your file says you've talked about them for years. And you talk *to* them, as well.

ELAINE

Well, sometimes I have to convince Howard not to beat people up.

THERAPIST

Howard's one of your friends?

ELAINE

When I'm pretending. He's this stout little kid with a permanent milk crust around his mouth who really likes to hit things.

THERAPIST

Why does he hit things?

ELAINE

Because when I'm mad, somebody should hit stuff. Talking about him calms me down when I want to say mean things.

THERAPIST

Howard is how you deal with anger.

ELAINE

Exactly! But when I'm in a good mood, I let him be a sweet little goober.

THERAPIST

What about the girl who comes to play with you?

ELAINE

Fuchsia. She only comes inside if I get some new plant or bouquet in my room.

THERAPIST

Why is that?

ELAINE

Because she's three inches high and lives among the flowers.

THERAPIST

If you know these people don't exist, why do you still talk about them?

ELAINE

I know I'm too old for it. But my life gets really boring, and I try to entertain myself.

THERAPIST

Is it entertaining when people think you're serious, and call me in here and make *me* act serious?

ELAINE

I thought it was obvious I was telling stories. I mean, my best friend is a pig made out of ice!

THERAPIST

That's pretty common.

ELAINE

*(taken aback)* It is?!

THERAPIST

Where do you think porksicles come from?

ELAINE

*(Groans, but she is amused)* You're not acting serious anymore.

THERAPIST

Nope. Too hard. But we still have half an hour left. Can I hang out in here and pretend I'm still working?

ELAINE

Sure! We can curse and smoke.

THERAPIST

And read comics.

ELAINE

Do you have any?

THERAPIST

I'll bring some next time. Any requests? From you or the pig?

ELAINE

His name is Grunty. And we like The Sandman.

*ELAINE freezes, and THERAPIST steps away from the scene and addresses the audience.*

THERAPIST

I continued to see Elaine once a week, not entirely because I liked her so much. Partly because I wondered whether she had been pretending when she told me she knew her friends weren't real. But I felt they did her no harm at all, and destroying that imaginary world would only make her lonelier. She was saner than I would have been, in her place.

But she was losing her mind during the rain.

*The sound of rain begins. THERAPIST crosses to the nurses' station. APRIL sits behind the counter on a tall stool, and DOUG, another nurse, stands in front, leaning on the counter.*

DOUG

It's been pouring for days, and we have to keep the patients inside. The mood barometer here reads: Cranky.

APRIL

Elaine doesn't complain much, but it hurts her the worst. She depends so much on those hours outside.

THERAPIST

I've seen her being wheeled in from the yard. She smiles and looks so delighted I almost expect her to start waving at me and bouncing up and down.

APRIL

Her happiness is contagious.

DOUG

Yeah, once she's in her chair, we race down the hall and she yells "Faster, faster!" until we get to the glass doors. Then I slow way down and she sings the *Chariots of Fire* theme till we're outside.

*They all laugh, and then DOUG and APRIL freeze. THERAPIST moves to stand at the entrance*

to ELAINE's room.

THERAPIST

It rained four weeks, and I nearly lost her.

*ELAINE looks out the window. THERAPIST sets his bag down by the chair and takes off his raincoat. DOUG and APRIL exit.*

ELAINE

Raining, raining, raining.

THERAPIST

Don't I know it? I'm leaving puddles wherever I go.

ELAINE

Bad dog.

THERAPIST

I heard you were depressed. I'm supposed to make you happy.

ELAINE

Make it stop raining.

THERAPIST

Do I look like God?

ELAINE

I thought maybe you were in disguise. *I'm* in disguise. I'm really a large Texas armadillo who was granted one wish. I wished to be a human being. But there wasn't enough armadillo to make a full human being, so here I am. *(He chuckles; she smiles. Then she turns her head to look out the window)* I want to go outside.

THERAPIST

You'd get sick.

ELAINE

Not me. I've got a poncho.

THERAPIST

And later it can catch the drips from your runny nose.

ELAINE

Outer space is like the rain. It sounds like that out there, just a low drizzling sound in the background of everything.

THERAPIST

Not really. There's no sound out there at all.

ELAINE

How do *you* know?

THERAPIST

There's no air. Can't be any sound without air.

ELAINE (*scornfully*)

Just as I thought. You don't *really* know. You've never *been* there, have you?

THERAPIST

Are you trying to pick a fight?

ELAINE

(*starts to answer, catches herself, and nods*) Damned rain.

THERAPIST

At least you don't have to drive in it. (*He realizes he has taken the banter too far.*) Hey. First clear day I'll take you out driving.

ELAINE

It's hormones.

THERAPIST

What's hormones?

ELAINE

I'm sixteen. It always bothered me when I had to stay in. But I want to scream. My muscles are all bunched up, my stomach is all tight, I want to go outside and *scream*. It's hormones.

THERAPIST

What about your friends?

ELAINE

Are you kidding? They're all out there, playing in the rain.

THERAPIST

*All* of them?



ELAINE

Except Grunty, of course. He'd dissolve.

THERAPIST

And where's Grunty?

ELAINE

In the freezer, of course.

THERAPIST

Someday the nurses are going to mistake him for ice cream and serve him to the guests.

*(ELAINE nods but does not smile.)*

THERAPIST

Do you want something?

ELAINE

No pills. They make me sleep all the time.

THERAPIST

If I gave you uppers, it would make you climb the walls.

ELAINE

Neat trick.

THERAPIST

It's that strong. So do you want something to take your mind off the rain and these four ugly yellow walls?

ELAINE

*(shakes her head)* I'm trying not to sleep.

THERAPIST

Why not?

ELAINE

*(again she shakes her head)* Can't let myself sleep too much.

THERAPIST

Why not?

ELAINE (*sternly*)  
Because I might not wake up.

THERAPIST  
Elaine, that's not —

ELAINE  
Time out. All done. Don't you have a hot date to get to?

THERAPIST  
It's true, I am seeing other people today. My whole job is just one hot date after another.

ELAINE  
What about your girlfriend?

THERAPIST  
What girlfriend?

ELAINE  
I met that woman once . . . Becky, right? We were in the yard and she came by to pick you up for lunch or something.

THERAPIST  
I forgot about that. Becky and I used to date, but now we're just friends. Actually, she's the closest I come to having my own therapist.

ELAINE  
So you call your patients your dates and your girlfriend your therapist. You are a very confused man.

THERAPIST  
(*Laughs*) Maybe so. I'll try to figure it out before I see you next week. You take care now. (*He is almost out of the room before he turns around.*) And Elaine?

ELAINE  
Hm?

THERAPIST  
You *will* wake up.

*Lights dim on ELAINE, and a spotlight follows THERAPIST. While he speaks, he changes his jacket and tie.*

THERAPIST

And then I left, and to tell the truth I didn't think of her much. My job was one of the worst in the state, touring six rest homes in six counties, and visiting each of them every week. I "did therapy" wherever the administrators thought therapy was needed. Weekends I lived alone in a trailer in Piedmont, and I passed the weeks with highways, depressed people, and sandwiches and motels at state expense.

You don't end up as a state-employed therapist if you had much ability in college. As one kindly brutal professor told me, I wasn't cut out for science. But I was sure I was cut out for the art of therapy. Ever since I comforted my mother during her final year of cancer I believed I had a knack for helping people get straight in their minds. I was everybody's confidant.

So I got over the initial disappointment in my career and made the best of it. Elaine was the best of it.

*Lights up on ELAINE again. It is a week later.*

ELAINE

Where have you been?

THERAPIST

Locked in a cage by a cruel duke in Transylvania. It was only four feet high, suspended over a pond filled with crocodiles. I got out by picking the lock with my teeth. Luckily, the crocodiles weren't hungry. Where have *you* been?

ELAINE

I mean it. Don't you keep a schedule?

THERAPIST

I'm right on my schedule, Elaine. This is Wednesday. I was here last Wednesday. This year Christmas falls on a Wednesday, and I'll be here on Christmas.

ELAINE

It feels like a year.

THERAPIST

Only ten months. Till Christmas. Elaine, you aren't being any fun.

ELAINE

I can't stand much more.

THERAPIST

I'm sorry.