Haunted Timothy Templeton

*Odd, when the line that separates pretension and belief vanishes. When the chasm closes, leaving confusion, doubt and fear. No, not strong enough--a sense of dread...*

The night air was heavy and damp. Dense clouds cloaked the moon, forging an eerily dark backdrop against the dimly lit streets of Boston. A horse-drawn carriage wobbled down the road, its wheels groaning against the cobblestone, dipping through uneven patches of stonework. Onlookers gazed curiously, reading the white cursive wording adorning the width of the carriage: ‘*Madame Templeton’s Psychic Readings.’*

From within, Timothy Templeton drew back the curtain, peering out into the thick fog of the night. He exhaled, knowing it would be many hours before he slept. A strange and unfamiliar discomfort had settled upon him that evening--an imbalance, a shift to the preternatural.

*Is it the lack of moonlight on this dark evening, or something more?*

He turned to face his mother, Ann Templeton, who struggled to alter her appearance in the darkness of the cabin, her harsh, pointed features accentuated in the shadows. She fussed over a laced hat, fitting it to her head and lowering its veil to cover her face. She pivoted towards her son, grinning beneath the black net.

“What do you think?” she asked, slipping her ivory hands into a pair of matching gloves.

“I think you look rather wicked,” he replied matter-of-factly.

 “Lovely, that is precisely the visual I was hoping to capture,” she chuckled, a sound both comforting and menacing.

 “Only four appointments this week, love. Then we can finally take that holiday I’ve promised, what do you think?”

Ann opened a small trunk of luggage, pulling out a wrapped case of vials, *she is quite the alchemist*, containing stale and highly flammable liquids. Timothy’s stomach churned at the thought. It was perhaps his least favorite task--managing their potions. *The odors*. Of course, they weren’t really potions at all, but their clients didn’t know that.

 *Does she sense my fear? If so, is it new to her, my unraveling, or has she tracked its progression. Have I?*

 “A holiday would be nice,” he replied at last, taking the case from his mother and sliding it gently into his briefcase.

A knock came then, repeating three times. The coachman’s alert. Timothy sat up a bit straighter, knowing they would soon arrive at their destination.

His mother passed him his top hat before blotting her face with white powder. The substance was thick and dry, but light enough to hang, suspended, like an acrid mist. She coughed as she proceeded to cover her face and neck with its dust.

“How do you feel about the country? We can always stay here, if you prefer?” she asked.

 Timothy knew what it meant should they remain in the city: sudden, urgent appointments with desperate, gullible clients, and long sleepless nights. He shook his head at the thought.

“The country sounds nice,” he mused, picturing himself indulging in restful sleep, unbroken, and suddenly longed for open space and star-filled skies.

“It’s settled, then! The country it is,” she said exuberantly, slamming her makeup box.

She reached out for Timothy, brushing off his shoulders, fitting his hat perfectly to his head. She leaned toward him and planted an affectionate kiss on his cheek--a rare display of motherly affection.

“Remember, the young lady of the house is hoping to communicate with her deceased sister. I did do my usual digging.”

Ann retrieved a sheet of paper from her purse, and held it beneath the quivering carriage lamp.

“Client’s name is Elizabeth White, a returning customer, actually,” she smirked. “You might remember her, though you were really quite young during our first visit. Her sister Adeline passed eight years ago from consumption, if I’m remembering correctly.”

Timothy nodded, racking his brain for a memory long gone, looking instead to the picture his mother held out for him. The image was grainy, clearly dated, a souvenir his mother had kept over the years. Two young girls, both smiling, embraced one another in a crooked hug.

*Do I remember you?*

“The girls were inseparable,” Ann continued. “Spent every summer together with their uncle in New York as children. The surviving sister still can’t get past the loss. Eight *years*. Imagine! And to call on us yet *again*,” she quipped, smiling wickedly.

“Not very hospitable, that first time. The girl’s mother had reached out to me in desperation then, unwillingly. Does any this sound familiar to you?”

It did. Timothy recalled the young girl, distraught and beyond comfort, the mother, with her sharp tongue and steely eyes.

“The mother was mortified lest her pastor discover that she sought communion with the other world. She was very abrupt. And now her daughter invites me to return! It’s all rather good for business!” she winked. “Hmm, what else is worth mentioning,” she voiced, skimming the paper as the carriage slowed to a halt.

*The regular routine. She’s detached, disdainful. But I’ve watched her careful arrangement of the candles in her room, changing every third day, without fail. Her alarm if they are moved even ever so slightly, such superstitions. She denies it, but I know.*

Timothy braced himself as the door flung open and Willy, their trusted driver, extended his boney, trembling hand.

“Well, you ready, Mr. Templeton?” his mother asked, moving past him and stepping out of the carriage.

“Ready,” he confirmed.

The two stood on the sidewalk, peering up at the impressive limestone manor before them. Rich, black shutters and ornate molding traced every window, climbing four stories. An intimidating iron fence ran the length and width of the property, but just beyond its teeth, a perfectly primped garden welcomed guests. Despite this, Timothy’s breath caught, and a chill snaked down his spine.

*How odd*. *Perhaps I’m catching ill, or exhausted.*

Willy sat the last of their equipment on the sidewalk beside them, and cleared his throat before asking, “My Lady Ann, anything else for you?”

 “That’ll be all, Wilfred. We’ll meet you here in one hour’s time.”

With that, Timothy unhitched the gate and allowed his mother to pass. She stopped beside him, shrugging her shoulders and flexing her neck.

“Now tell me, Timothy, what’s the motto of our craft?” she asked with furrowed brow.

“It may sound like witchcraft, but be assured,” he spoke confidently, “there is nothing to fear in parallel perception.”

“Ah yes. Well said, well said,” she murmured, brushing past him.

*The consummate professional. I’ve seen her diary, though, wish I hadn’t. I’ve felt her underlying fear of crossing some line, her rationalizations to suppress the doubts and fears. I offer her comfort, she explains. This is a performance. Even still, I can sometimes sense her fear.*

The home’s double doors opened swiftly and silently, revealing two formally attired men, each donning emotionless faces. They greeted Ann and Timothy in hushed voice. No words were spoken. The men hauled their items into the house.

The pair made their way into the main foyer, a large circular room with a sweeping staircase at its center. High ceilings drew Timothy’s eye upwards, cleverly focusing his line of sight on the strange engravings. He took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of flowers and cigars--an oddly beckoning combination.

Timothy’s gaze shifted with muted sound, soft steps. The lady of the hour gracefully descended the stairs, her smile stretching from ear to ear. *Young Elizabeth*.

“Miss Templeton! Thank goodness, I was worried you’d be caught in the storm!” she cooed to Ann by way of greeting.

Timothy followed her descent, studied her as she crossed the floor and embraced his mother.

*There it is again. That creeping dread that something is not right. Not as it should be. Incongruous. But my mother seems fine. I can hide it. It will pass.*

Timothy focused his attention on Elizabeth’s face. She was a plain looking girl, nothing memorable, until she turned towards him. Her eyes: remarkably bright, piercingly blue.

*An animal’s eyes. Perhaps a wolf? No, this is something else, something more sinister.*

“My darling, how happy I am to see you again after all this time,” Ann caressed Elizabeth’s cheek thoughtfully, and then turned toward Timothy. “You may remember my assistant, Timothy.”

  Elizabeth’s eyes met his, and the rest of her face disappeared.

“Nice to see you again, Timothy. I recall our first meeting. Do you?” The question lingered between them. “How are you this evening?” she asked after a moment. Timothy felt his cheeks flush against her warmth.

*How uncharacteristic of me*.

He consciously modulated his voice before responding.

“I’m well, Miss, thank you for asking.”

  “Oh, no need for formalities. Please, call me Lizzy.”

She snapped her fingers then, and he flinched reflexively. But it was a command to attention for the butlers, the two men, who, until now, had been awaiting further instruction.

“Please, see our guest into the dining room, won’t you, gentlemen?”

Ann bowed her head in agreement, a signal for Timothy to begin preparations. He followed the men down a short corridor and through an adjoining room, a formal dining space. Cream-colored walls held generations worth of family portraits. Their still, stoic faces gazed down at Timothy, almost expectantly.

“Sir, can we be of further assistance?” one of the men asked, raising a quizzical brow.

“No, thank you. I can take it from here.”

“Very well, sir.”.

The moment the door latched against the lock, Timothy got to work.

*Good, this helps. Focus on the routine.*

He quickly retrieved the crystal ball from its case and fixed it beneath the rich velvet cloth. He positioned the candles on the table and lit them. Next he placed the colored vials on the table, neatly, and in a row, before retrieving the wooden contraption. Removing it carefully from its case, he slid his hand beneath the table, fixing the piece along its belly, strapping the small stopper into place. Finally, he crept to the window and unhitched the lock, letting it hang slightly ajar.

He surveyed the room, ensuring he had left nothing undone. Pleased with himself, he made his way to the main foyer.

“Pardon me, ladies. The room is ready.”

“Ah, wonderful, Timothy. Elizabeth, shall we?” Ann asked. Elizabeth nodded in response, drawing in an anxious breath. Ann placed a hand on Lizzy’s arm as the ladies followed Timothy into the dining room.

Quickly assuming her seat at the head of table, Ann offered Timothy a subtle nod, ‘all is as it should be’. Lizzy claimed a seat to Ann’s left, taking in the oddities around her.

  “Timothy, close the doors, won’t you?”

  “Actually,” Lizzy interjected, “I’ve requested the company of a few friends, and my mother. I hope you don’t mind.”

Timothy stole a furtive glance at Ann.

*The mother? The skeptic? Strange that she would attend.*

Ann took it in stride, with pride, almost. She smiled, rolling up her sleeves before responding, “Of course not, darling.”

Timothy’s gaze persisted. He could see through her compassionate smile--the agitation and impatience. All well concealed from the client. As if on cue, the remainder of the party arrived. Unaccompanied, unushered.

*Where is the staff?* *Houses like this are well staffed. Where are they tonight? Sent off, perhaps, to keep this indiscretion quiet?*

The new additions included Lizzy’s mother, who looked on disapprovingly, a short, stout girl, likely the same age as Lizzy, and presumably her younger sister.

  “Mother, this is-“ Elizabeth started, but was quickly interrupted.

“Yes, yes. Madame Templeton. I do recall your last visit. Welcome back,” she said, reluctantly accepting the chair Timothy offered. The other two ladies sat down quickly, turning their attention on Ann.

  “This is my dearest friend Sarah Willington, and her sister, Mary. They are visiting from Virginia.”

  “Hello,” the two girls echoed in unison.

  “A pleasure to meet you both.”

Ann signaled for Timothy to close the doors, then she cleared her throat and reached for the first vial. Removing the cork, she tossed it back, grimacing against the pungent flavor.

“Hmm,” she purred, “shall we begin?”

The scene unfolded as it had countless times before: Timothy extinguished a portion of the candles, for dramatic effect, before providing each guest with a medieval-looking goblet--props his mother had found at a street fair.

The women considered the goblets, exchanging worried glances. Timothy knew the look, the merging of fear and excitement. Though, he hadn’t noticed how determined Lizzy looked--almost eager. Watching her filled him with guilt, and he tore his eyes away.

*Remember. Remember. She invited this*. *This is what she wants.*

 “Timothy, if you’ll please pour the elixir into each goblet,” his mother instructed, caressing the crystal orb affectionately. Timothy revealed the small vial he’d had in his pocket, carefully dropping a small dollop in each cup.

 “We’re not meant to drink that, are we?” Margret asked distastefully. “I don’t recall this.”

 “Mother, *please*,” Lizzy hissed.

 “It is perfectly safe, I assure you. You’ll find it has a rather pleasant flavor,” Ann mused, stretching her neck and fingers.

 “It does!” Sarah declared, the first to try it.

 “And how do we know it isn’t meant to poison or disorient us?” Margaret quipped.

 Lizzy slammed her hand down on the table. Though the protest had little effect.

“My darling, I’m only concerned for your wellbeing, is all.”

 Lizzy shook her head and reached for the goblet, raising it above her head. She turned to Timothy, *those chilling blue eyes*, before taking a sip. Marry went next.

 “Delicious!” she said, licking her lips.

 “It really is. May I ask what is in it?” Lizzy turned to Ann.

 “It’s merely an herbal concoction, it helps one to better experience the supernatural.”

 Margaret frowned, and then drank. Timothy suppressed a nervous grin, thinking back to only hours earlier when he watched his mother create that very concoction.

Ann clapped her hands together suddenly, drawing everyone’s attention. Timothy moved quickly to clear the goblets, slinking into the corner. He sucked in a deep breath, waiting as his mother prepared to execute her routine.

“Tell me, Elizabeth White,” Ann murmured, her voice low and malevolent, “who is it you wish to make contact with this evening?”

 “My sister,” Lizzy said, carefully. She took a deep breath before continuing, “her name is Adeline White.”

 “And for what purpose do you wish to summon your sister?” Ann asked, her voice now trembling.

 “I, I…” Lizzy’s voice trailed off. She looked to her mother, eyes pleading.

 “Ah, for goodness sake! She wishes for some sort of closure, of course. What else?” Margaret shrugged, turning away from her daughter.

 “Very well,” Anne responded.

 “And,” Lizzy quickly added. “I wish to know if she feels Mark is my most suitable match,” she spoke the final words carefully, anticipating her mother’s burning gaze.

 “Very well. Let us begin,” Ann said. “Did you bring the item we discussed?”

 “Yes, I have it.”

Lizzy retrieved a glossy lock of rich, dark colored hair from her pocket, held together by a pink bow. Margaret paled at sight of it.

 Ann took the hair carefully and rubbed it in between her fingers. The gesture made Timothy’s stomach churn; he enjoyed this next part the least. Ann began to chant, her voice hushed at first, but growing.

 “I summon thee, Adeline White, daughter and sister of this house to join us now, and to make your presence known.” A wind whistled through the room, inexplicably. “I call THEE ADELINE WHITE. JOIN US. MAKE YOUR PRESENCE KNOWN!”

 *She is so good. Maybe whatever small part of this she does believe is what seduces her clients, maybe that’s her secret. A persistent crumb of belief in every loaf of illusion. How does she hold it at bay? She’s stronger than I am. Don’t we all pretend, though? Are we better pretenders for believing a core element of the deception?*

 The far window in the corner of the room slammed open then, bringing with it a shuttering breath of cold, damp air, eliciting shrieks of terror from each of the girls. Timothy pinched his lips together, hoping to hide both his sudden shock and instant relief.

*Right on cue, Willy.*

Margaret looked toward the window, frowning.

  “How in the world did that window get unlocked? Young sir, please shut that immediately!” she barked at Timothy, who jumped up and closed the window, engaging the lock he had disabled moments earlier.

  “Quiet mother! Adeline? Is it you? Are you here?” Lizzy breathed.

  “Silence!” Ann hissed. “No one is to speak.”

Ann threw her head back, sputtering nonsense, before rolling her shoulders and allowing her head to hang. She maintained that pose for a few deafeningly silent moments, and then she lifted her head and murmured; a sound that Timothy had never heard from his mother, or anyone else.

*Is she ill?* *Is this a new voice she employs? Highly effective. Very unsettling.*

  “She’s here! Adeline, knock three times if it is you,” moaned Ann in the strange new voice, her eyes appearing confused and disoriented.

*What’s this?*

With that, a loud knocking came three times, rattling the entire length of the table. Lizzy inhaled sharply, reaching for her mother’s hand, her face placid.

*The skeptic*.

  “Adeline, your sister, she has some questions for you. I ask you to stay with us just long enough to answer them. I offer you my energy, my body, to use, to–.“ Ann’s words stopped abruptly. From her throat emerged a gurgling, a sort of choking sound. Her body began convulsing.

Timothy had never seen this, either--a notable deviation from her routine. His mother *never* deviated from routine.

*I remember the first séance,* my *very first séance. So well coached by her for the experience. But still, I saw her differently that day, not my mother, but someone else, someone so convincing. The feeling still haunts me.*

  “My goodness!” Lizzy said, but Timothy rushed to his mother’s side.

  “She is fine, I assure you. Adeline is attempting to enter her body. You must carry on with the séance, time is limited.” He knew the lines by heart, the sentences flowing out effortlessly, and convincingly, though he couldn’t ignore the erratic beating of his heart.

Lizzy nodded before asking, “Adeline, is it you? Are you here with us, Addy?”

Ann’s body came to life then, resembling that of a puppet, and a deep guttural voice poured from her lips.

  “My darling, Lizzy. How much you’ve grown.”

  “Adeline...is it you, is it really you?” Lizzy’s voice was barely a whisper.

Margaret stood up, backing away from the table in disbelief.

*Or was it revulsion?*

  “Do not be afraid mother, I mean you no harm,” Ann said in the same frightful voice, sucking in a ragged breath before. “I think so often of our summers in New York, dearest sister. You must return, for me.”

 “Oh, Adeline. I will! If it is your desire, I solemnly promise, I will!”

  “You are going to be very happy, little Lizzy. I see you with Mark,” Ann grunted, her voice breaking.

  “Adeline, how do you know?” There was no answer, only silence. “Addy? Are you still here? Adeline?” Lizzy whispered into the silence.

Ann once again began convulsing, and Timothy frantically reached for the last remaining vial.

*Okay*, *returning to script.*

The other women approached a panicked state. *Perfect*. He threw the cork off desperately and poured its contents into his mother’s mouth. She gurgled the liquid, flailing about dramatically, before slamming roughly into the dining table--all on cue.

Then-*this can’t be*. Timothy heard the muffled snickers of what sounded like giggling, and he turned to find the source.

*Nervous laughter?*

No. A young girl, not much younger than he, had somehow made her way into the room.

*How did that happen?*

He was so attentive. How had he missed it?

She had long dark hair, hanging down her back, held together with a pink bow. Timothy scowled at her, and she froze, catching his gaze, but lost in shadow.

Timothy turned furiously back to Ann, fanning her. At last she jolted upright, gasped desperately, and let out a ghoulish sigh.

 “Oh, oh heavens. Timothy, is, is that you?” she asked, her voice weak and raw.

 “Yes, I’m here Madame. The séance has concluded.”

  “Was it successful?” Ann asked, eyes fluttering.

  “Yes, yes it was a splendid success!” Lizzy cried. “Oh, thank you, Madame Templeton, thank you, thank you!” Lizzy jumped from her seat and reached for Ann’s hand.

“Excuse me,” Margaret said, anxious to leave, the Willington girls on her heels.

  “I truly cannot thank you enough. I feel, why, I feel relieved! To think Adeline is still here, is still present in my life. What solace it brings!” Lizzy beamed as she helped Ann to her feet.

  “Oh, darling. It is my duty, my privilege,” Ann assured her, stumbling for the door. “Timothy, be a darling and pack up for us, I’m afraid I must sit down.” His mother really did appear out of sorts.

  “Please! Madame Templeton, allow me to offer you some tea, or I can have the kitchen whip something up for?”

  “Tea, that would be lovely, darling.” Ann turned and winked at Timothy before disappearing from view.

With that, Timothy was alone again in the dining room. He made swift work of repacking their materials. He did a final turn about the room and was startled to find the same girl, *the laugher*, standing at the head of the table.

  “Very clever, your new additions,” she teased, smiling.

  “Excuse me?” Timothy stopped short. The girl was cloaked in shadow.

  “That wooden contraption. Is that your handy work?” she pointed at the case containing the stopper.

  “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” Timothy murmured. The girl threw her head back and laughed, an unnatural sound.

  “I’m no fool, Timothy Templeton. I see all now, you know. How is your mother feeling? That was quite the performance.” The girl’s voice filled the room. “Tell me, do you always get so nervous?”

  “Sir,” a voice came the hall, startling him. Timothy turned on his heels.

  “Pardon me sir, I did not mean to frighten you,” the butler said.

  “*This* girl,” Timothy gestured toward the corner of the room, but when he turned back, the girl had vanished.

*Where did she go?*

“What girl?”

“The young girl, I was just speaking with her!” Timothy cried, feeling a cold, panicked sweat permeate his hairline.

  “I’m afraid I don’t understand, sir. The only young girl in the house is Miss Mary Willington, of course. She’s retreated to her room for the evening.”

  “No, I just saw her, a different girl, she is wearing a blue dress. And, oh! She had a pink bow in her hair,” Timothy explained, sounding frantic. The man said nothing in response. The silence hung between them.

  “I’m sorry, sir. Why don’t I escort you to the main foyer? I will have your items returned to your carriage.”

 Timothy lingered, unsure what to do or how to feel. He’d never been so scared.

*Is it possible? Am I losing my sanity? After all these years of séances and ‘raising the dead’, has the act finally gotten the best of me?*

In the foyer, Ann said her goodbyes. Timothy lingered in the hallway, his eyes searching every dark corner, every possible hiding spot, hoping to glimpse the elusive young girl.

 “Oh, Timothy,” Lizzy said, stealing his attention just as Ann had passed through the front door. “I believe Madame Templeton left her purse in the dining room. Can you be a dear and fetch it for her?”

 “Certainly.” Timothy wondered how he’d managed to miss it.

 He moved swiftly to the dining room, which, unattended, sat in almost total darkness.

*It isn’t real.*

But what he saw next unnerved him. His mother’s purse sat in the center of the dining table. The same table he’d cleared only moments ago. He snatched the purse and stepped quickly through the door, into the hallway.

*It is done. Time to leave this place.*

He’d taken only a few steps when he heard the faint echo of whispering. *The girl?* Determined to catch the perpetrator, he ran down the hall. As he turned back toward the main foyer, what he saw chilled his blood.

 There they were, Elizabeth and the girl, walking away, hand-in-hand. Timothy’s heart stopped.

The girls turned then, and smiled, fixing him with four piercing blue stares.

What was that sound, he wondered, knowing it was air, trying desperately to escape through a constricted tube. His throat. He could no longer feel his hands. The blood had stopped flowing.

*So cold.*