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She Left the Loom, She Saw the Water Flower Bloom

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Abstract

She Left the Loom, She Watched the Water Flower Bloom

By Anneka Rose

She Left the Loom, She Saw the Water Flower Bloom is a memory play, following Elizabeth Siddal through her life. Finding herself in the center of the Pre-Raphaelite artistic movement as a painter's model, Siddal is desperate to become an artist in her own right. Siddal takes the audience through her hardships and celebrations. From falling in love to battling addiction. We see the world through Siddal's eyes for the first time. Pain becomes unbearable, color takes on new meaning. We watch Siddal slowly unravel as we get to the end of her story. She Left the Loom, She Saw the Water Flower Bloom explores female artistry, ownership of work and body, and the toll of unrelenting pain.

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Table of Contents

She Left the Loom, She Watched the Water Flower Bloom

She Left The Loom,
She Saw the Water Flower Bloom.

Characters:

(as told by Wikipedia)

Elizabeth Eleanor Siddall (25 July 1829 – 11 February 1862), better known as Elizabeth Siddal, was an English artist, poet, and artists' model.

Gabriel Charles Dante Rossetti (12 May 1828 – 9 April 1882), generally known as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, was an English poet, illustrator, painter, and translator, and member of the Rossetti family.

Sir **John Everett Millais**, 1st Baronet, (8 June 1829 – 13 August 1896) was an English painter and illustrator who was one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

William Holman Hunt (2 April 1827 – 7 September 1910) was an English painter and one of the founders of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

John Ruskin (8 February 1819 – 20 January 1900) was an English writer, philosopher, art critic and polymath of the Victorian era.

Time/Place:

1849-1862 Victorian England

With moments between life and death, I guess you can call it Legacy

Notes:

Use of line breaks and punctuation (or lack thereof) is intentional

Ruskin and Hunt can be played by the same actor.

Content warnings for depictions of suicide, violence with sexual connotations, and addiction.

“She left the web, she left the loom
She made three paces thro' the room
She saw the water-flower bloom,
She saw the helmet and the plume,
 She look'd down to Camelot.
Out flew the web and floated wide;
The mirror crack'd from side to side;
'The curse is come upon me,' cried
 The Lady of Shalott.”

- *Alfred, Lord Tennyson, "The Lady of Shalott"*

.

*to all women-identifying artists,
hold onto your fire.*

*and, of course,
to Lizzie.*

Darkness.

Then, the screech of a chair.

Someone sits down.

Charcoal on canvas. First it's smooth and graceful, following contours of an unknown figure. We can almost see what's being drawn just from the sound.

Then the sketching becomes quicker, sharper, more frantic. Almost violent.

A drum beats a dark, unsettlingly slow rhythm, but as the scraping of charcoal becomes more urgent, so does the drum...

Until we've come to a crescendo. The sharp echo of a cymbal sounds as:

Lights flicker. Elizabeth Siddal's "Lady of Shalott" strikes like lightning. Lizzie sits at the easel, looking back.

Lights come up. She's entranced, almost as if she's not aware of us, but she is. She just doesn't care. Yet.

LIZZIE

Geniusness is a funny thing.

There's no map, no pattern, no manual.

It's not even a word, but it should be.

Geniusness: noun. The state of having great ideas, but no one bothers to listen.

Or maybe they listen and they know you have great ideas but they just don't want to admit it. And who's "they"?

Mmm I'm not sure yet, it's a work in progress I guess.

What I do know is that geniusness has no concept of time. It grows like a fire, constantly needing to be fed, threatening destruction if one thing falls out of place. Some achieve it when they're young, some during their career, some when they're dead.

A genius is someone who retains geniusness, and is recognized for it.

I'll never be a genius.

Not because I'm without talent or a mind capable of creating the outrageous, not because I'm too sane to create masterpieces. No, I am. Crazy, at least, just a little. Enough to get the job done.

But see, I'm a woman, if you haven't noticed. And a very attractive one.

It's just fact.

Ask the Brotherhood. My looks got me into their world, but they all thought I looked better on the canvas than behind it. They may have been right

She gets up from the easel. The spotlight follows her.

LIZZIE

I mean I couldn't paint anything like the Brotherhood, I can admit that. But while they were running around London with the freedom to think radically and an education that broadened their minds and tightened their grip on the brush, I sat still, waiting for that spark. Perhaps if good art was focused on emotion, on distorting reality for the sake of raw, unadulterated feeling, rather than natural depiction. Nothing's natural about this world anyways.

A deep drum rolls. Lights up on MILLAIS, ROSSETTI, and HUNT. They sit in chairs all

*facing each other. LIZZIE circles their
conversation.*

ROSSETTI

They're all the same now

HUNT

Each one an imitation of the next

MILLAIS

The Academy has only one vision for the highest levels of art

ROSSETTI

And so, we get these mundane, lifeless works

MILLAIS

All labeled masterpieces

HUNT

There's no room for expression

ROSSETTI

God forbid us artists actually show our hand in the work

LIZZIE

Oh please

MILLAIS

Look at Tennyson and Chaucer. There are no rules in their writing

HUNT

They write what they see, what they know

ROSSETTI

What they feel

MILLAIS

And people flock to their pages, entranced by their words.

ROSSETTI

So what makes poetry different from painting?

HUNT

Well for one, it's ink to the page rather than paint to canvas

LIZZIE

Good one!

ROSSETTI

Mere medium shouldn't divide two forms of art

MILLAIS

You read poetry. You don't read a painting

ROSSETTI

You could, if your painting told a story

HUNT

Both are creations of the artist's mind

ROSSETTI

We paint the way poets write

MILLAIS

We could, but we'd be laughed out of the Salon

ROSSETTI

What's a little societal outcasting for an artist?

MILLAIS

Outcasting I could handle, but bankruptcy I could not

HUNT

So what do you propose?

ROSSETTI

We form a society. Of only the most genuine artistic minds. A brotherhood.

MILLAIS

And what do we do in this brotherhood?

ROSSETTI

Paint, write, discuss the ancient and contemporary men who see art the way we do.

HUNT

Ruskin does always advocate for the accuracy of nature.

HUNT

Ruskin has the power to change the course of art as we know it. One positive review from him will turn heads

MILLAIS

So we paint what is true

ROSSETTI

With absolute conviction

HUNT

And we only paint with genuine intention and ideas

ROSSETTI

Yes, any subject matter that does not move us will never move an audience

MILLAIS

We must still look back to what has already been done. Nothing in art can be entirely original

HUNT

Alright, so we study the work of artists prior to the ones that seemingly solidified artistic law

HUNT

All teachings from Raphael

MILLAIS

A master

ROSSETTI

No one is debating that, but no imitation is going to award a man the same title.

HUNT

Mundanity has plagued the Academy, the Salon

ROSSETTI

Mundanity will kill us all.

LIZZIE

Artists. They're soooooo dramatic.

MILLAIS

So let us look to before Raphael

HUNT

Pre-Raphael?

ROSSETTI

That's it!

MILLAIS

What?

ROSSETTI

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood.

HUNT

The PRB.

LIZZIE

So original

ROSSETTI

May we together forge a revolution

HUNT

To achieve fame

MILLAIS

And money

ROSSETTI

And women! Come, brothers, there's much work to be done.

They rush out. ROSSETTI grabs Lizzie's brushes as he leaves.

LIZZIE

Hey! Those are mine!

And so, the Brotherhood was born. I wasn't there, so I don't know exactly what was said, but I imagined there was a fierceness and hunger, and egos large and strong enough that they thought they could change art.

And they did.

They slowly collected friends and family members that shared their sentiment.

I don't have a story without them. And I hate it.

But without them, you wouldn't even know my name.

LIZZIE finds herself in the middle of the men, who circle her, studying her. Not with a scientific eye, but with hunger. Drums, like a heartbeat.

ROSSETTI

Miss Elizabeth Siddall.

LIZZIE

Please, call me Lizzie.

HUNT

Walter was right

MILLAIS

She is a stunner

ROSSETTI

She is perfection.

*They get closer to her, inspecting every
inch of her body, as if she were a statue in
a museum.*

HUNT

She's not beautiful

ROSSETTI

Too tall, too boyish

MILLAIS

Breasts non-existent

HUNT

No hips either.

ROSSETTI

Tell me, Miss Siddall

Why do you not wear a corset?

They get as close as they can without touching her, because, well, that would be inappropriate.

LIZZIE

I find them uncomfortable and unnecessary.

HUNT

So you settle for a shapeless dress?

LIZZIE

From the moment I cut the cloth, yes.

MILLAIS

You made these clothes?

ROSSETTI

Ah! She has skilled hands, lads

We're in good company

LIZZIE

I draw too.

ROSSETTI

Do you now?

LIZZIE finally moves out of her designated spot, her feet no longer glued to the floor by the men's unwavering stares. The drum quiets.

LIZZIE

I would be happy to show you some of my work.

ROSSETTI

How charming.

HUNT

Your hair is magnificent

*ROSSETTI admires her copper hair, maybe
he even smells it. It's heavenly to him.
Something has been unleashed within him.
Probably a new fetish.*

LIZZIE

I've been told it brings bad luck.

MILLAIS

Not for us

HUNT

It'll turn every head to the canvas.

*Lights go down, spotlight on LIZZIE.
Spotlights come on each HUNT, MILLAIS,
and ROSSETTI as she mentions them.*

LIZZIE

I was not born beautiful. I became beautiful after their work got popular. And their work did not become famous until after John Ruskin declared it good. Ruskin had a chokehold on

the art world. His word was practically law to the public. Critics hold such power, don't they?

And so, these men set off, hoping to please Ruskin enough for a positive review. I sat for all of them.

William Holman Hunt, who was enamored by my looks, until Ruskin said my face was too common, and then he painted over me.

Dante Gabriel Rossetti, we call him Gabriel, who... well, let's just say we were equally enamored with each other, for a time being.

And John Everett Millais. The youngest to have entered the Academy at eleven years old. A prodigy, possibly a genius, but that's not for me to decide.

So, who do I owe my little taste of fame to? The Brotherhood? Ruskin?

Depends who you ask, but they'll all say they saved me. At least, that's what they want you –

MILLAIS

Stop moving.

LIZZIE

Sorry.

Lights up. Millais sits at the easel. He has brushes. A bathtub, water warmed by oil lamps underneath. He paints LIZZIE as if she were in it.

LIZZIE

I bet you all want to see me in there, all wet and quiet.

Like GOD WILL THIS WOMAN EVER SHUT UP?

Oh, all your twisted minds think the same.

That's okay, my mind is just as messed up.

But you'll have to wait to see me in the tub, that's part of the big finale!

For now, just imagine me in an elegant silver dress submerged in water only heated by oil lamps in the dead of winter. Can you picture it?

“Ophelia” by Millais appears.

As she continues, the oil lamps slowly begin to dim and go out, one by one.

LIZZIE

She look familiar?

MILLAIS

Ophelia’s death was a tragic story.

LIZZIE

And you find beauty in tragedy?

MILLAIS

I hear judgment in your voice.

LIZZIE

I see her death as somewhat heroic.

MILLAIS

What version of Shakespeare are you reading, my dear?

LIZZIE

The same as you.

MILLAIS

The poor girl was driven mad by pain and could see no other remedies besides death.

LIZZIE

She had a choice. She chose freedom in its totality.

MILLAIS

Freedom? She was mad!

LIZZIE

Yes, but there was method in her madness. She had opinions on the matter. She gave the queen flowers. Fennel, columbine, and rue, symbols of flattery, infidelity, and repentance. And she says the violets, the faithfulness, died with her father.

MILLAIS

You don't need to explain the floral symbolism. I assure you I am well aware of such language.

LIZZIE

So you agree that she had her own judgements, that she looked down upon the corruption she had witnessed.

MILLAIS

That doesn't make her suicide an act of heroism.

LIZZIE

But you consider Hamlet to be a hero?

MILLAIS

A tragic one.

LIZZIE

But he spends the better part of the story debating action. Ophelia takes it for herself. She had no escape from her unjust world, so she chose peace rather than a life of torment. She chose to climb that willow tree. I value action over inaction.

MILLAIS

To take one's life is a sin. Not a sign of strength. The queen concocted a whole story in order to cover up Ophelia's terrible demise and allow her a proper burial.

LIZZIE

And therein lies the tragedy.

Her death became a lie. Her story was no longer hers, it continued on. A life's story should always stop at the death.

MILLAIS

What about legacy?

LIZZIE

When has a woman ever been granted a legacy, Mr. Millais?

MILLAIS

Hold still. I'm starting the face.

LIZZIE

The lamps went out and I didn't say anything.

At this point I was still trying to make a name for myself. I wanted to be seen, and in order to be seen, I couldn't be heard. So I sat still and let Millais paint me in the freezing water until I got a bad case of pneumonia.

I was shivering so violently, I thought my teeth had surely cracked and my body, my skin was this disgusting blue. A blue like molding lemons, a blue like ink stained fingernails. I never knew blue could be so ugly.

Quite pathetic, isn't it? I almost died because I was too scared to say I was cold.

Thankfully the doctor gave me the perfect cure:

Laudanum, a mixture of opium and alcohol. Sounds safe, right?

Given to patients in physical and mental pain, a treatment for everything from menstrual cramps to morning sickness. It was the cure for "women's troubles". Any woman aware of her place in society was dependent on this stuff. Thank you, modern medicine.

She lifts a bottle of laudanum to the audience. Cheers. She drinks.

Blue light swallows her.

She shivers, her body sinks as if gravity has become intensely stronger and it takes all her energy to stand straight.

Finally, it all lets up, and she shakes it off.

LIZZIE

Do you find my near death frightening, do you find it tragic, or do you find it beautiful?

These artists,

they love their dead women.

The drum rolls, taking LIZZIE's attention.

Footsteps.

LIZZIE

Oh! Oh my!

Ladies and gentlemen, it is my honor to welcome the man of art himself, here to give his latest critique.

It's John Ruskin!

RUSKIN takes center. He opens his mouth and an orchestra begins to play.

He closes his mouth. The music stops.

He shakes his head. He doesn't like the song choice.

He begins to speak, and the orchestra begins again.

RUSKIN

Dear Mr. Hunt,

In regards to your latest work, "Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus",

*"Valentine Rescuing Sylvia from Proteus"
by William Holman Hunt.*

LIZZIE

Oh! I love this one!

That's me, I'm Sylvia. Hunt called me his Sylvia the moment he saw me. I was perfect for the part.

RUSKIN gives LIZZIE a look.

LIZZIE

Sorry, go on

RUSKIN

There's truth in this painting. The leaves, the trees. They're vibrant and lively. A splendor in color and your use of light awakens the countess of Julia. Your acuteness to nature lends to the storytelling in this painting. I have to say Mr. Hunt, as an avid appreciator of Shakespeare, this retelling is almost perfect to the page.

LIZZIE

Almost?

RUSKIN

I, however, question your choice of model for Sylvia

A violin screeches.

LIZZIE

Excuse me?

RUSKIN

Her face is... too common

LIZZIE

Oh you—

The orchestra drowns out her words.

RUSKIN

How do you expect any man, fiction or not, to fall in love with a face so unremarkable?

LIZZIE takes a sip of laudanum.

RUSKIN

A word of advice. I see promise in your ability to bring truth to art. That's something I believe a lot of aspiring artists will never be able to find, in my experience with the academy. But in order to find truth, every detail must be meticulously chosen and depicted. Including who you have sit for you.

John Ruskin.

Violins buzz as LIZZIE's face in the painting is wiped away.

LIZZIE

What? What? No!

I was your Sylvia! You coward! You can't just erase me, I'm here!

I'm here

I'm here

LIZZIE drinks the laudanum.

LIZZIE drops to her knees, the laudanum weakening her. She catches herself on a stool, resting her arms.

Lights shift. ROSSETTI's studio. ROSSETTI is behind the easel, he absorbs her while he paints. There's only a few lines on the canvas. He's just started.

A fireplace burns with low flames.

ROSSETTI

You are not particularly beautiful, Miss Siddall.

LIZZIE

Hm?

ROSSETTI

Where did you just go?

LIZZIE

Sorry, my mind must have wandered. What did you say?

ROSSETTI

I said you're not particularly beautiful.

LIZZIE

Oh. Yes, I've been made aware.

ROSSETTI smiles.

ROSSETTI

Still, your sickly demeanor...

LIZZIE

Does my ill complexion please you?

ROSSETTI

Very much so, yes.

LIZZIE

I'm glad.

ROSSETTI

Please take no offense. I find you the most intriguing.

LIZZIE

I would assume so.

ROSSETTI

You do?

LIZZIE

Your eyes have been directed more towards me than the canvas, Mr. Rossetti.

ROSSETTI

Just making certain I get every detail perfect, right to the last wrinkle.

LIZZIE

And now I know you're just speaking nonsense.

ROSSETTI

Oh? And why's that?

LIZZIE

Because I may look ugly and sickly, but time hasn't caught up to me just yet. I'm still smooth.

ROSSETTI

And quite observant.

Lights shift. Time passes. A full sketch is done now. The flames grow.

LIZZIE

Mr. Rossetti,

ROSSETTI

Oh won't you call me Gabriel, Lizzie?

LIZZIE

Gabriel, may I ask you a question?

ROSSETTI

You may ask me anything you want.

LIZZIE

Do you think there's room for a woman in art?

ROSSETTI

You are here, aren't you?

LIZZIE

I mean behind the easel.

ROSSETTI directs his attention back to painting, rather than listening.

ROSSETTI

Oh. Well, I suppose in some aspects. My sister sketches in her free time. Has even produced a couple of charming watercolors.

LIZZIE

I mean as a career. Will She ever be able to exhibit?

ROSSETTI

Women as extraordinary as yourself deserve to be observed, not criticized.

LIZZIE

I think I'd like some critique on my work. It could be quite useful.

ROSSETTI

Believe me, they're all vultures out there. You hang your work on a wall and they swarm it just to pick you apart. They're never pleased, never satisfied, never willing to call something revolutionary. Someone of your disposition would not be able to handle such a gruesome world.

LIZZIE

I think you underestimate me.

Would you at least look at some of my sketches? Perhaps –

ROSSETTI

Take it off.

LIZZIE

Pardon?

ROSSETTI

The outer layer. I want to see the curvature more.

She begins to disrobe, but she struggles.

LIZZIE

My hair. I think it's caught a button.

ROSSETTI

Stand up.

ROSSETTI walks over and inspects her dress. He untangles the button, and, standing behind her, slowly lowers the dress to the floor.

One hand still has hold of her hair. He tugs her head back and wraps a hand around her neck. The other travels down her side, over the natural curve of her body and down to her thigh. He speaks into her neck.

ROSSETTI

Where did you get such magnificent hair?

LIZZIE

My grandmother. She used to call me her fire child.

*LIZZIE's voice is calm, but not seductive.
She may be a little frightened, but it excites
her.*

ROSSETTI bites her neck.

ROSSETTI

We have work to do, Lizzie

*He shoves her back down to her kneeling
position. The fire grows and crackles.
Lights shift. Time passes. He's beginning to
paint.*

LIZZIE

You cannot be serious

ROSSETTI

I am, Lizzie

LIZZIE

You'd have me believe you have not even thought about another woman

ROSSETTI

Not since I've met you

LIZZIE

And what about that... woman of the night?

ROSSETTI

I take it I've been a subject of conversation

LIZZIE

The others

They find amusement in your various escapades. I think they sometimes forget I'm in the room, with ears that work perfectly fine.

ROSSETTI

Well you cannot blame a man of my nature—

LIZZIE

You're nature?

ROSSETTI

A man of the world, with a lust for life and beautiful things.

LIZZIE laughs.

ROSSETTI

You find that amusing?

LIZZIE

You just speak very highly of yourself

ROSSETTI

I know what I can offer this world. I know what I can offer you, Lizzie.

LIZZIE

And what exactly can you offer me, Gabriel?

ROSSETTI

Tell me. Have you ever danced in the rain?

LIZZIE

I can't say I have.

I try not to spend too much time in wet clothes.

ROSSETTI

Well then we'll have to change that. You haven't truly lived yet.

LIZZIE

What's so special about it anyways?

ROSSETTI walks over to LIZZIE and whisks her into a ballroom dance. They glide across the stage. She laughs and hollers sounds of pure joy.

ROSSETTI

Imagine it:

The clouds roll in, everyone runs for cover, the entire city is cast in this faint blue light like an anemic blue like someone took the thinnest blue watercolor and swiped it across the city, and then it's just you and me. Soaring through the streets, soaked to your bones, doing everything you're told not to do. But what's the harm? Break the rules a little bit, Lizzie. You've never experienced such freedom until you're dancing in the rain. It's the type of freedom you want to share with someone else.

They stop, breathing heavily, and stare at each other. They bathe in each other's arms for a moment, dizzy from attraction.

LIZZIE

We should get back to work.

*LIZZIE returns to her modeling pose and ROSSETTI returns to his easel. There's still a thick tension in the air as they work silently for a moment.
LIZZIE shifts in pain.*

ROSSETTI

Are you uncomfortable?

LIZZIE

My knees
they're beginning to bruise again

She shifts again. ROSSETTI watches her.

LIZZIE

It's as if once I notice it, it only grows stronger

ROSSETTI stands and circles her. She shifts again.

ROSSETTI

Stay still, Lizzie

LIZZIE

I'm trying, but the pain

ROSSETTI

I said sit still

He takes her head in his hands and forces her to look out. All we see is pain and then hunger. She stills.

ROSSETTI

Allow me

He brings a small pillow to her and helps her stand. ROSSETTI places the pillow and watches LIZZIE descend once again, never letting go of her hand.

ROSSETTI

Miss Elizabeth Siddall,
I hope I've made it quite clear by now
that I love you

LIZZIE

And what do you know about love?

ROSSETTI

I can assure you plenty

LIZZIE

I don't think you know the first thing

ROSSETTI

And you do?

LIZZIE

I've read about it
plenty of times

ROSSETTI

And I am not illiterate either.
Marry me.

LIZZIE

What would Mr. Millais and Mr. Hunt say?

ROSSETTI

Why? Do I need their blessing?

LIZZIE

They may find it a... conflict of interest

ROSSETTI

Then only sit for me. Only me.

He bends down and kisses her. She melts.

The fire begins to die.

ROSSETTI

You are my only subject. I could never imagine painting another woman.
And I'll take you dancing in the rain.

Lights shift. LIZZIE stands and stretches.

LIZZIE

I love a good love story,
don't you?

It's so...

mutilating.

Have you noticed they can never keep their word? He said he would only paint me. Until Fanny came along with her red hair and fuller curves.

And the first time the sky began to drip after he proposed? When the city turned blue, there was no music to dance to.

And I knew this. I knew he would give me hollow words to hold onto in exchange for my loyalty, affection, and body. Because that is the currency of love.

It was a gamble with fate that left me penniless.

She takes a sip of laudanum.

Drums. Faint blue light. LIZZIE's body takes on a mind of its own. It glides across the stage, like it's chasing something. But bones and tendons and joints and muscles don't seem to be in communication. It's the most graceful stumble you've ever seen.

LIZZIE gathers herself.

Lights shift. MILLAIS and RUSKIN take in "Ophelia".

LIZZIE

Now this could be interesting.

MILLAIS

Your silence frightens me.

RUSKIN

No need to be frightened, John. You know I'm an admirer of your work.

LIZZIE

(kiss ass)

MILLAIS

Yes, well. It's hard to predict what you will respond to.

RUSKIN

You and Mr. Hunt are quite taken by Shakespeare

MILLAIS

We find the subject matter compelling and the imagery fertile.

RUSKIN

Ophelia, such a tragic story.

MILLAIS

Indeed

LIZZIE

Yeah yeah, you're getting turned on by the dying maiden. Come on! Let's get on with it!

RUSKIN

My dear boy, this is spectacular.

MILLAIS' body relaxes.

MILLAIS

Thank you, Mr. Ruskin.

RUSKIN

You were expecting me to criticize it?

LIZZIE

Uh, duh.

MILLAIS

Well, Hunt told me about your critique on his model. I was afraid the use of Miss Siddall as my subject would warrant the same response.

RUSKIN

Ah, well

RUSKIN reviews Lizzie again.

RUSKIN

I told Mr. Hunt his model was too common for Sylvia, but I must say you do her justice. Perhaps I was putting too much blame on her face and not enough on the hand that drew her.
You manage to capture her tragic essence with ease.

LIZZIE

Should I be flattered?

MILLAIS

She is a stunner, I assure you that.

RUSKIN

You said her name was Miss Siddall?

MILLAIS

Miss Elizabeth Siddall

RUSKIN

And how did she find herself in the center of your “pre Raphaelite” escapades?

MILLAIS

She was introduced to us through a friend who saw her working in a hat shop

RUSKIN

And now she will be seen by everyone. She might have stumbled into celebrity

MILLAIS

I’m not sure. You see she’s agreed to marry Mr. Rossetti, and part of that arrangement is that she may no longer sit for anyone other than her future husband.

RUSKIN

Ah, the artist and his muse. What a dangerous game.

I must admit, your portrayal of her has me most intrigued.

MILLAIS

I do not want to speak on the behalf of Miss Siddall,

LIZZIE

But you’re going to anyway

MILLAIS

but I do believe she thinks of herself as an artist in her own right.

RUSKIN

Does she now?

MILLAIS

And has a hunger to learn, I can assure you that. I would not be surprised if you were to hear from her.

RUSKIN

A hungry woman is a dangerous woman, if not fed properly. If she does write, I'll be sure to restrain any hazardous behavior.

Lights fade on RUSKIN and MILLAIS.

Deep blue light. LIZZIE glides across the stage, almost as if she's floating, but everytime it looks like she could just take off into the air and leave us to fend for ourselves in the theater, an arm breaks, a leg snaps, the drum cracks. And she's grounded.

LIZZIE

I'm used to having an audience, but you all are special. I hope you know that.

You're actually listening to me, I think you might even be rooting for me, if that isn't too presumptuous.

I've accepted the fact that every move I make will be turned into a story or will be erased to make room for something more entertaining. So I think that while we have time together, I'd like to tell you some of the bits as I've seen them, if that's alright.

ROSSETTI and LIZZIE sit at the dinner table. LIZZIE's food is untouched.

ROSSETTI chews, watching LIZZIE.

She plays with the flame of a candle on the table.

ROSSETTI

Eat.

She doesn't respond.

ROSSETTI

Have you gone deaf now?

She pushes away her plate.

ROSSETTI

I have not seen you put a morsel of food in your mouth for the past two days.

Now eat, or I will open your mouth and do it myself.

*She picks up a fork and stabs a bit of food,
but brings it nowhere near her mouth.*

LIZZIE

You haven't posted any of my letters, have you?

ROSSETTI

Your letters?

LIZZIE

I'm not a fool.

ROSSETTI

It would have done you no good if those letters had gone out

LIZZIE

That's not your decision to make

ROSSETTI

I'm protecting you from ridicule!

LIZZIE

You said I was talented.

ROSSETTI

I said I saw potential in your sketches.

LIZZIE

Then why won't you let me write to Ruskin?

ROSSETTI

You are mad.

She drops the fork, it clangs on the plate.

ROSSETTI

Why do you need to learn how to paint?

LIZZIE

Because I want to.

ROSSETTI

And I am just obliged to fulfill your every desire?

LIZZIE

I am merely asking you to let me learn, just as you did.

ROSSETTI

Ruskin will laugh you out of this house.

LIZZIE

Maybe I will go to his house then, if you'll not let me write to him.

He immediately stands at the threat.

ROSSETTI

And make an embarrassment out of yourself and of me?

LIZZIE

And who might I ask is going to connect any embarrassment I bring onto myself to you?

ROSSETTI

All of bloody England! You are only seen with me. You only sit for me. You are mine and anything you do in the public eye is a reflection of the integrity of my manhood.

LIZZIE

Then why won't you marry me?

ROSSETTI

I cannot have this conversation again.

LIZZIE

Why not? You proposed to me, remember?

ROSSETTI

Yes and now I am starting to think I should not have. Now eat.

She picks up the fork again and waves it around, taunting him.

LIZZIE

Not until you agree to something.

ROSSETTI

You make me question my own sanity sometimes.

LIZZIE

Send the letter, or marry me. Tomorrow. Agree and I will put this in my mouth.

ROSSETTI

You incessant woman.

LIZZIE

Or I can sit here until I starve.

ROSSETTI

Fine. The letter will go out tomorrow. Now, please for love of God, EAT.

LIZZIE slowly raised the fork to her lips. She chews, never breaking eye contact with ROSSETTI, who is hovering over her. She gives him a smile, then spits the food in his face.

ROSSETTI

You intolerable, insufferable woman!

And you wonder why I don't marry you.

LIZZIE now stands and inches closer to ROSSETTI.

LIZZIE

Do not talk to me as if I am a child.

ROSSETTI

When you act like one, I think such tone is granted!

LIZZIE

Why are you so hesitant to allow me to learn?

Do you fear Ruskin?

ROSSETTI

The hunger has gotten to your head. Do not ask such foolish questions.

LIZZIE

You do, don't you?

She picks up the candle and plays with it.

ROSSETTI

Don't be ridiculous

LIZZIE

You shrink at his name. Your pride vanishes at the thought of his critique.

ROSSETTI

I do not!

LIZZIE

Has little ol' John Ruskin gotten under your skin?

She pours hot wax onto his arm.

ROSSETTI

For God's sake, Lizzie! That burns!

LIZZIE

Do you not want me to improve?

She pours again, he flinches in pain, but does not move.

Do you not want me to make a name for myself?

She pours again.

Do you fear that I will stop sitting for you and you will be forced to find inspiration elsewhere?

She's about to pour the wax onto her own chest when he grabs the candle from her and slams it on the table.

ROSSETTI

I MADE YOU

Do not take that as a dependency on you. You think too highly of yourself

LIZZIE raises her hand to slap him, but he catches it. She struggles to get free, but he doesn't release her. She tries harder, but to no avail. His eyes are blank. She lets out a scream, but he silences her with his lips.

He kisses her aggressively, as if trying to consume what's left of her. Eventually she gives in and lets him. It's passionate and

*hateful and somewhere deep down, there's
love in the kiss too.
The sound of a fire gasping for air.*

*LIZZIE stumbles out of it towards the
audience. She catches her breath and wipes
her lips.*

LIZZIE

I'm sure you've heard plenty of times how there's a difference between fucking someone and making love to them. And it's heartbreaking when you get one but you want the other. The thing is, with Gabriel and I, one of us is fucking and the other is making love and I have no idea who is doing which. And that, my friends, is truly devastating.

She drinks the laudanum.

You know Ruskin's a pedophile. So is Millais. They probably all are if we're being honest with ourselves. They're not exactly who history would like them to be remembered as. Just keep that in mind before you judge me on how I handle my own affairs.

*She stumbles out of the light.
Lights out.*

*Paper shuffling. Quiet, masculine (maybe
too masculine), judgemental murmurs.*

*Lights up on Rossetti's home. LIZZIE sits
across the room. She tries her best to look
ladylike and presentable, but her body is
tired and it can't hold a decent position for*

too long. She's pale and her eyes hold pain, hunger, and fear.

On the other side of the room, RUSKIN and ROSSETTI go through her portfolio of sketches. They speak under their breaths, just loud enough for LIZZIE to know they're talking about her work, but not loud enough for her to know what they're saying.

This goes on for a while. The two men inspect each drawing pointing out flaws and techniques. Perhaps they even mask the fact that they're impressed by a few. They occasionally look over to LIZZIE for confirmation that she's the one who drew these sketches or to make sure she's still paying attention to their judgment. LIZZIE sits, perfectly silent, awaiting trial.

RUSKIN

Miss Siddall, I must say your drawings show promise. You've had no previous education?

LIZZIE

No, sir. Everything I've done has been from books and my own mind.

RUSKIN

Well therein lies our first challenge to overcome. If you intend on becoming an artist–

LIZZIE

I do, sir! With every bone in my body, I do

ROSSETTI

Lizzie. Do not interrupt.

My apologies, Mr. Ruskin. My fiance is easily excitable.

ROSSETTI shoots LIZZIE a look. She repositions herself.

LIZZIE

Yes, sir, I do apologize for my outburst

RUSKIN

Quite alright.

As I was saying, in order to be a great artist, you must stop using your imagination and focus on what is real and what you can see.

LIZZIE

I don't think I understand

RUSKIN

Your ideas are too large for a canvas. You have to hone your mind, control it, corral it until you only see the essential.

LIZZIE

But I think my ideas are essential

RUSKIN

You have much to learn, Miss Siddall. You're still naive to the world around you.

ROSSETTI

He's right, Lizzie. Grand ideas are dangerous for a new painter.

LIZZIE

But wouldn't common ideas conceive common compositions?

ROSSETTI

During our lessons you must stop asking such foolish questions.

LIZZIE

But you will teach me?

RUSKIN

I will teach you.

LIZZIE & ROSSETTI

What?

RUSKIN

I will give you a stipend every month and weekly lessons.

LIZZIE

You'll... pay me?

RUSKIN

But in return, all the work you produce will fall under my ownership.

ROSSETTI

Lizzie, you won't see an opportunity like this again.

LIZZIE

But I want it all to be mine.

ROSSETTI

Think of it like he's a patron. He's offering you money for God's sake.

RUSKIN

I'd advise you to listen to him. Most of my colleagues believe there can be no such thing as a paintress. To do this on your own would end in failure.

LIZZIE

But you believe I can be a painter?

RUSKIN

In all my life I've never met a lady that could paint.

LIZZIE

A lady or a woman?

*RUSKIN smiles, like he's watching a bird
with a broken wing trying to fly.*

RUSKIN

Take the offer, Miss Siddall.

*She tries to think, weigh out her options,
but the men's eyes burn into her.*

ROSSETTI

Lizzie.

LIZZIE

Alright. I accept your offer, Mr. Ruskin. Thank you.

She extends her hand out to shake his and seal the deal. He looks at it, smiles again, and takes her hand to his lips.

RUSKIN

Here is your first month's pay. 150 pounds.

LIZZIE

I... this is more than I would make in a year.

RUSKIN

Use it wisely. I'll see you next week for your first lesson.

A pleasure, Mr. Rossetti.

ROSSETTI

And mine, sir.

RUSKIN exits.

As soon as he's gone. LIZZIE cheers and screams and runs into ROSSETTI's arms.

LIZZIE

There's so much to do now! I have to go buy supplies, start practicing, oh I should send a letter to my mother she'll be thrilled

ROSSETTI

There's plenty of time to do all of that

LIZZIE

Gabriel, now we can finally get married!

ROSSETTI

How's that?

LIZZIE

I'm a student of John Ruskin himself now. Ruskin is giving ME money to paint. Ruskin will be the owner of my work. I've just made a name for myself. Enough of a name that you can go introduce me to your family, don't you think?

ROSSETTI

Perhaps, let's see how your lessons with Ruskin fare first, eh? I don't want you to be disappointed when he decides this agreement isn't worth his time.

LIZZIE

When he decides?

ROSSETTI

If, darling, I meant if.

LIZZIE

This is the start of our lives, Gabriel

ROSSETTI

Why did you choose the life of an artist, Lizzie?

LIZZIE

My grandmother taught me

It was her dying wish.

ROSSETTI

How unbelievably depressing

LIZZIE

There's beauty in everything, Gabriel. And where there's beauty, there's art. You taught me that.

ROSSETTI

I wish you had chosen something more gratifying.

LIZZIE drinks the laudanum.

Lights dissolve into eerie movement. Music begins to play, almost as a whisper. She's getting weaker.

LIZZIE

I lied to him. It wasn't my grandmother who made me want to become an artist. But I think I'd like to keep the real reasons to myself. I'm allowed a little privacy, aren't I?

I began my lessons with Ruskin and was quick to find out that he had little interest in actually cultivating my talent into geniusness.

I'm not sure why he agreed to teach me or even pay me for that matter.

He was never encouraging, not once. He teetered between being completely indifferent or downright mean. He'd berate me like a child or give me one-word critiques.

"Terrible" "Boring" "egregious" "rudimentary" and the worst of all, "lovely"

Because he never meant it as a compliment. He said lovely the same way a bouquet of roses is lovely. They may smell sweet, but they've been severed from their only connection to the earth and you know that they'll die soon. It's a lovely that's ephemeral.

I think Ruskin found pleasure in having a front row seat in watching me fail.

That's not why you're here, is it?

Before we can answer, music grows.

ROSSETTI takes LIZZIE and they waltz

around the room. It's elegant and refined.

*They find themselves in front of the easel.
LIZZIE sitting and ROSSETTI behind her.*

ROSSETTI

Your anatomy is wrong

LIZZIE

It's difficult without a model

ROSSETTI

But you have one right here

*ROSSETTI's hand glides down LIZZIE's arm
and takes her hand in his. He guides her
hand across her body.*

ROSSETTI

See? Feel the curve, draw the curve

*LIZZIE feels her body underneath his hand
and sketches with the other.*

ROSSETTI

That's it

LIZZIE

Better?

ROSSETTI

Much

Music swells and they're swept into their waltz again.

RUSKIN and MILLAIS enter, joining the dance. They hold paint brushes.

LIZZIE

Switch places with me

ROSSETTI

What?

LIZZIE

I want to see how you would do it. How you would paint it.

They twirl back to the easel. Now ROSSETTI sits and LIZZIE stands behind him, holding onto his hand as he raises it to the canvas.

LIZZIE

Why do you do that?

ROSSETTI

Do what?

LIZZIE

You hesitate before touching the canvas, like a stutter in your hand

ROSSETTI

It isn't a stutter

LIZZIE

Then what is it?

ROSSETTI

It's my mind

Mapping out the perfect placement of each stroke

LIZZIE

Your mind is a beautiful thing, then

And once again they're whisked into a waltz.

As the music grows louder and intensifies, their dance becomes rigid and LIZZIE finds herself unable to break away.

Eventually the men surround LIZZIE, who dances by herself. Music is crashing, it's violent. The brushes paint the air and soar across the room. They dance with LIZZIE and eventually fall into her hands.

ROSSETTI

Ruskin is coming today.

LIZZIE

I'd much rather have you teach me.

ROSSETTI

You'll do much better with him as your teacher.

LIZZIE

But you're nicer

ROSSETTI

Kindness won't make you a better painter

LIZZIE

At least you look at me as if I have potential, not just some pathetic plaything

ROSSETTI

Don't let him get to you.

LIZZIE

He treats me like I'm purely entertainment. I'm amusing to him.

ROSSETTI

Then amuse him. It's what's best.

She sits at the easel, eager to paint, and she lets her body find rhythm in the brushstrokes. As paint touches the canvas, her body folds and unfolds.

But this is not how a woman should paint.

RUSKIN and ROSSETTI each take a hand, MILLAIS holds her body still, guiding her brushes across the canvas. At first she's confused, then frightened, then angry. She tries to fight the urge to fold and unfold, for this is not a picture she wants to create.

*RUSKIN takes the canvas away and she
tries to chase after it.*

It's not done.

It's not right.

It's not hers.

ROSSETTI

My fire child.

*ROSSETTI sweeps her across the room,
back into a waltz, but now it's a dance
between puppet and master.*

Red begins to engulf the space.

Paint brushes still fly and stroke the air.

*LIZZIE becomes tired, unable to hold
herself up. Her hair floats in a sea of red,
like a downwards turned flame.*

Church bells ring.

*ROSSETTI carries LIZZIE's limp body to the
altar. RUSKIN officiates while MILLAIS
keeps LIZZIE standing. RUSKIN motions for
them to kiss. MILLAIS pushes LIZZIE
forward so that she falls into ROSSETTI's
arms. He kisses her, but she can't kiss him
back. She can't do much of anything
anymore.*

*He sweeps her away into one last waltz as
his feet still follow the 1,2,3*

1,2,3

1,2,3

1,2,3

1,

*LIZZIE falls in a chair. ROSSETTI hands her
the bottle of laudanum. She drinks.*

Lights out.

*Spotlight up on LIZZIE. She sits.
She's sick. And pregnant.*

LIZZIE

I finally got Rossetti to marry me.

Only seven years in the making, and me moving out of his house to tend to my ailments. I wrote to him all the time, though.

To remind him that I was sick, to remind him that I could die at any moment. Only when I told him that by the time word got to him that I was going, I would already be dead, did he come and get me.

He likes it when I flirt with death. He loves a dead woman, but you can't fuck one, so he'll settle for a nearly dead one.

But does that mean he only nearly loves me? He's such a tease.

But then we married

And now we're going to have a family

She puts a hand to her stomach, and then sips the laudanum.

LIZZIE

I think I could be a good mother. I'd like to know what kind of child my body would make. I think of it like my own little masterpiece. My own creation, something organic, something only my body could do.

Ruskin champions nature, well this is as natural as you can get.

Who else can create a living, breathing work of art? I think it'll be beautiful.

*She convulses in pain. Contractions. The baby is coming.
Drums.*

LIZZIE

i hope it has something of its father in there. I pity any child who takes solely after me.

That's a hard life for a child. I hope it sees beauty in the world like Gabriel does.

But I really hope, more than anything,

that it has red hair.

I'd love my own little Fire Child.

She puts her feet up. A MAN positions himself between her legs. ROSSETTI watches from a distance. She begins pushing.

A soft blue light engulfs the stage.

She convulses in pain

Final pushes.

The baby is coming.

Lights out.

The baby doesn't cry.

LIZZIE

Why is he blue?

Gabriel? Gabriel?

Why is he Blue?

no

no

no

NO!

Lizzie weeps in the darkness.

*As any mother would for a baby they never
got the chance to meet*

*Lights up. LIZZIE sits on the floor next to a
bottle of laudanum and an empty baby
bassinet. She rocks it and coos. She sews a
little onesie for a newborn.*

The fireplace holds blackened logs.

ROSSETTI enters.

ROSSETTI

Lizzie...

LIZZIE

Shhhh

You'll wake him

ROSSETTI

Lizzie there's nothing there

The baby

LIZZIE

Is sleeping

He's just sleeping

Do you think this will fit him?

ROSSETTI

He's dead.

LIZZIE

They grow so quickly I'll probably have to make a whole new set in a month or two.

ROSSETTI

Lizzie, he won't grow. He's dead.

LIZZIE

Do you have to speak as if there's no beauty left in the world?

ROSSETTI

It's just the truth!

LIZZIE

Oh you and your brotherhood always going on about the truth

What's so special about the truth anyway?

It doesn't change anything, it doesn't fix anything. It just sits there and looks you in the eye
and and and

ROSSETTI

Truth is the foundation of our civilization

LIZZIE

Well maybe i don't want to civilized

It's too much work nowadays

ROSSETTI

You talk nonsense

You should get some sleep

*He tries to help her to bed, but she breaks
away.*

LIZZIE

Do you still want to paint me, Gabriel?

ROSSETTI

Of course

LIZZIE

And write poems about me?

ROSSETTI

All my greatest poems are about you

LIZZIE

And only me?

ROSSETTI

Forever

LIZZIE

Now who's acting uncivilized?

A man that preaches so much about truth and you allow such a blatant lie to fall from your tongue!

ROSSETTI

What lie? What are you talking about?

LIZZIE

You're getting bored of me

ROSSETTI

Nonsense

LIZZIE

You'll find a new muse

One that's younger, prettier

ROSSETTI

When you're well enough to sit again, I promise my love, I'll paint you

Why don't you paint again?

You haven't picked up a brush since the birth

LIZZIE

There was a time that you didn't want me to paint

ROSSETTI

I wanted to protect you from this world

LIZZIE

You only said I could paint after Ruskin started paying me

ROSSETTI

That's not true

LIZZIE

Are you jealous that I have Ruskin as a patron?

ROSSETTI

He's not your patron. He's your owner.

LIZZIE

Well if he owns me, then what part of me do you have?

ROSSETTI

Go to bed, Lizzie

He begins to walk off, but LIZZIE grabs a candle and throws it into the empty cradle. It catches fire.

ROSSETTI

Are you mad?

LIZZIE

Shhh he's sleeping

She leans over, as if to touch her baby, but she burns her hand.

ROSSETTI pushes her away and puts the fire out. When he turns back to LIZZIE she's hysterically laughing.

ROSSETTI

Are you trying to kill us?

She doesn't respond. She laughs and examines her hand.

ROSSETTI

Lizzie! Listen to me!

LIZZIE

Gabriel, look!

Look at my hand. The blisters, the redness

Look at how the skin bubbles and discolors there

Here, you should paint it

She extends her arm out, as if offering it to him.

ROSSETTI

I'm not painting that. It's revolting

LIZZIE

There's beauty in everything, my dear.

ROSSETTI

I won't follow you into this delusion.

LIZZIE grabs him and falls to her knees.

LIZZIE

Please, Gabriel

Paint me now.

I can do it, I'm strong enough

I'll sit, however you want me to

I'll look however you want me to

I'll do my job and I'll do it well, please

Please paint me

ROSSETTI

Do it yourself.

Lights out.

The fireplace roars.

Lights up.

ROSSETTI and RUSKIN peer over some papers.

She sits across the room, separated from her own drawings by two men who loom over them with vague faces, careful not to give anything away.

After a silence that feels a little too long,

LIZZIE

It's um just a sketch. I haven't painted it yet

RUSKIN

Lovely.

LIZZIE

Lovely?

RUSKIN

Mmm.

LIZZIE

Just... lovely?

RUSKIN

What else do you want me to say, Miss Siddal? It's a simple, charming composition.

LIZZIE

Well, perhaps some guidance, some critique, anything more than a one word summation, especially a word like "lovely"

RUSKIN

Does the word offend you?

LIZZIE

If I wanted to be lovely, I would have taken up embroidery

RUSKIN

And you may have been better off

LIZZIE

Unfortunately, stitching leaves and flowers onto fabric doesn't interest me

ROSSETTI

Lizzie...

RUSKIN

Why Lady of Shalott?

LIZZIE

I'm not sure, I was reading Tennyson's poem and I felt... connected to her somehow?

RUSKIN gives a pitiful laugh.

RUSKIN

Your so called connection to the story led you astray

ROSSETTI

I think what Mr. Ruskin means is that there are inconsistencies in the composition

RUSKIN

Thank you Mr. Rossetti but this is a conversation between your wife and I. My student.

ROSSETTI glances at LIZZIE then turns his back to her and talks in a hushed voice, as if LIZZIE can't hear across the small room.

ROSSETTI

My wife is... in a fragile state. Criticism, however accurate it is, I fear may lead her into one of her episodes.

RUSKIN

Is this true, Miss Siddal? Are you in a fragile state?

She shoots a look of betrayal towards ROSSETTI.

LIZZIE

I...

I've been unwell after the pregnancy, but the doctor gave me some medicine

It's been helping

RUSKIN

Good. Because handling a paintress is a challenge enough, let alone a hysterical one

LIZZIE

I assure you, I'm still... sound of mind.

RUSKIN

Well then, as I said, your emotions got the better of you in this one. Like your husband said, there are inconsistencies in the composition. The story says she can only look through the reflection of the mirror to see the outside world. That's her curse.

LIZZIE

Right until she sees Lancelot and looks out the window.

RUSKIN

Yes, and Lancelot is in the mirror, but not out the window.

LIZZIE

Well, I don't think he's necessarily that important in the story.

RUSKIN

Not important in the story? My dear you may want to give the poem another read.

LIZZIE

No what I mean is, in this moment, we're focusing on her. Who for the first time has risked her life to merely look out the window and see the world. Yes, Lancelot is the reason she

turns her head, but do you really think when her eyes finally saw the world for the first time from the tower, she was only focusing on one man riding by on a horse.

RUSKIN

It's a tragic story.

LIZZIE

I guess we have different interpretations.

RUSKIN

Use your mind. Not your heart. I know you have one, dear. Use it.

LIZZIE

You're right. I'll change it.

ROSSETTI

It's a good start, Lizzie

RUSKIN

It's an amateur start, considering how much time I've invested in our lessons.

ROSSETTI

Well, I don't think –

RUSKIN

Miss Siddal, time after time, we have the same discussion. I thought I had gotten to you in time. That we could harness your talent, but it's been muddled with hysteria and sentimentality.

LIZZIE

Just because I don't fit your idea of what an artist should be doesn't mean I don't have the potential

RUSKIN

And that may be so, but if you want to be successful, then I suggest you make those changes.

LIZZIE

And why should I make such changes if it's completely in my own right to interpret a story however I see fit?

RUSKIN

Because this is a moment painted, over and over again, by countless artists who are far more successful than you will ever be. And I believe that the fact that yours is the odd one out, is just further evidence that you are misguided.

LIZZIE

But they were all men, correct?

RUSKIN

Yes

LIZZIE

So I am the only woman that you've come across who has drawn this scene.

RUSKIN

Yes, but –

LIZZIE

Do you not think that I may have a different perspective on the scene? That perhaps I can see myself as the Lady in the tower who was cursed to live out her days with nothing but a

reflection of the world, forced to weave on a loom scenes that she sees through a mirror, knowing that if she turns around and takes in all the beauty the world has to offer, she'll die? Do you not think that I perhaps know what that's like? That if I were that woman, I'd turn because of a man going by, but then I would see a world that I want to participate in?

ROSSETTI

Lizzie...

LIZZIE

Perhaps you've forgotten that I live in a different world than you do, Mr. Ruskin. That the way I live is much closer to being cursed in a tower than any of these other artists.

RUSKIN

You silly girl. We all live in the same world. We just have different rules. And if you're so eager to break those rules, then I encourage you to paint like a man.

LIZZIE

Get out of my house.

RUSKIN

You'll never achieve anything if this is how you act. You've failed the test, Miss Siddal

LIZZIE

The test? The test to listen to your ridicule and say yes sir, no sir at your command?

RUSKIN

The test of whether or not you're able to hold your composure.

LIZZIE

As I said, get. out.

RUSKIN

As you wish.

Good luck with your woman, Mr. Rossetti. She will be a handful until the day she dies.

And with that he leaves.

ROSSETTI sits, in defeat, too exhausted to have another argument.

LIZZIE takes a sip of laudanum. And then another. She revels in it.

And then she looks out to us.

LIZZIE

I think in every woman there is greatness.

Greatness – the ability to be more than just yourself.

Unlike genius, which feeds from the opinions of others, greatness lives within. It's internal. It starts off as a seed and is fed and watered daily until it blooms into a burning desire, a sadness, an anger, a flame that sits at the base of your throat and turns on its axis like the earth.

It's what makes us turn around and look out the window. We want to see the greatness bloom.

Elizabeth Siddal's "Lady of Shalott"

Lights shift.

The fireplace smokes.

LIZZIE sits on her knees as ROSSETTI paints her, but she's tired and weak and can barely keep the position. Eventually, her body gives in.

ROSSETTI

Stop moving

LIZZIE

I'm tired

ROSSETTI

You're always tired nowadays

LIZZIE

Yes well it's exhausting being your wife

ROSSETTI

Not as exhausting it is to be your husband, now get back in position

LIZZIE

Can we take a break?

ROSSETTI

We've barely started. You've never needed breaks before

LIZZIE

I guess I've changed

ROSSETTI

I've noticed

LIZZIE

Don't say it as if there's something wrong with me

ROSSETTI

There's always something wrong with you

LIZZIE

You disgust me

ROSSETTI

What happened to the old Lizzie? The one who loved to sit, who gave the painting life instead this pathetic attempt to mimic someone else's vision

LIZZIE

She must have died.

ROSSETTI

Well I mourn her loss

LIZZIE

You mourn your own loss

ROSSETTI

You sleep all day, you don't eat, you haven't painted anything of substance since last time Ruskin was here

LIZZIE

I told you, nothing has spoken to me

ROSSETTI

I gave you everything, I allowed you to do anything and this is what you've left me with
A childless woman who can't even live up to the name she's built for herself

LIZZIE

If I were to have another child, would you love me then?

ROSSETTI

You never wanted that boy to live, did you?

You sicken me.

LIZZIE

It hurts, Gabriel! It all hurts so much

ROSSETTI

And life is pain, and if you cannot find the beauty in that, well there's no helping you

LIZZIE

I'm trying, I promise I'm trying

ROSSETTI

Not hard enough.

Now I'm trying to get the figure right, so get back in position

LIZZIE

I can't

ROSSETTI

You can't even try to do this

ROSSETTI marches over and roughly puts her back in position, she yelps in pain. He takes her face in his hand.

ROSSETTI

I promised to paint you until the day one of us dies, but if you cannot do one simple task then I will find someone who will

He goes back and he paints. She tries to stay for as long as possible, until her bones are too weak to hold her up any longer and she crumbles.

ROSSETTI

My god, you are useless!

LIZZIE

Let's try again tomorrow. Tomorrow I'll be rested and I'll be ready

ROSSETTI

There's no use

You can no longer perform your duties.

She frantically moves to ROSSETTI, standing between his legs, seductively stroking him.

LIZZIE

Do I not pleasure you like a dutiful wife should? Do you need me to do more?

And again she kneels, but this time of her own volition. ROSSETTI straddles her sunken face in his hands.

ROSSETTI

You have become an embarrassment to this house and my name. So no, you have not fulfilled your duties as my wife. And you never will.

He throws her off of him and stands.

ROSSETTI

You convinced me that you were something greater than what you are. I fell for your act of being something special.

You're a disease, Lizzie. And you're killing me.

LIZZIE

Maybe you're just weak

He grabs his coat. As he exits,

LIZZIE, still on the floor, watches him leave.

She struggles to stand, but when she does, she spits in his direction.

She hobbles over to the bottle of laudanum and takes a big gulp. And then another.

It travels through her like electricity running through her veins and she forgets how weak she was before, but now her mind is becoming more frail and her movements more erratic.

She frantically rummages for a piece of paper and scribbles something on it.

She studies it. She hides it in her dress.

The drums begin to beat.

Lights go red.

The MEN appear.

RUSKIN

Time's running out Lizzie

MILLAIS

Show's almost over

ROSSETTI

What are you going to tell them?

MILLAIS

The truth?

RUSKIN

A lie?

MILLAIS

How will your story end?

ROSSETTI

Get back into position, Lizzie

MILLAIS

Stay still

RUSKIN

Don't speak

LIZZIE

I don't want to!

ROSSETTI

It's your place

MILLAIS

Your calling

RUSKIN

Your fate

MEN

Sit, Lizzie, sit

The drums are violent.

A loom appears.

*The MEN force LIZZIE to sit. She resists
and fights until her hands fall onto the
loom and she begins to weave, possessed,
cursed.*

Doing what she's good at.

The MEN speak behind her.

RUSKIN

You wanted this

ROSSETTI

Isn't this what you asked for?

RUSKIN

Be grateful

MILLAIS

Don't be greedy

ROSSETTI

A greedy woman

RUSKIN

Is an ugly woman

ROSSETTI

Are you ugly, Lizzie?

MILLAIS

Sit up straight

ROSSETTI

Smile more

RUSKIN

Not that much

MILLAIS

A giddy woman

ROSSETTI

Is a dishonest woman

RUSKIN

Are you dishonest Lizzie?

MILLAIS

Sit still

RUSKIN

Don't speak

ROSSETTI

Your hair

LIZZIE

I've been told its bad luck

ROSSETTI

My Fire Child

RUSKIN

You're falling behind

MILLAIS

You're not trying hard enough

ROSSETTI

Be grateful

MEN

WE MADE YOU

MILLAIS

Smile

RUSKIN

Not that much

MEN

TRY HARD

SIT STILL

DON'T MOVE

DON'T SPEAK

DON'T THINK

ROSSETTI

Just draw

RUSKIN

Be grateful

MEN

Who are you, Lizzie Siddal?

MILLAIS

A stunner

RUSKIN

An ugly woman

ROSSETTI

A greedy woman

MILLAIS

A lady?

MEN

Are you a lady?

RUSKIN

A wretched lady

ROSSETTI

A detestable lady

MILLAIS

An insufferable lady

RUSKIN

A miserable lady

MEN

A lady that is no lady at all but a woman

A woman that is no woman at all but a mind

ROSSETTI

Use your mind Lizzie

RUSKIN

Find truth

MILLAIS

In line

ROSSETTI

In shape

RUSKIN

In color

MEN

What color are you Lizzie?

Green?

MILLAIS

Too natural

MEN

Yellow?

ROSSETTI

Too joyful

MEN

Red?

RUSKIN

Too dangerous

MEN

You want to be red

But you've been painted blue

A beautiful blue

An irreplaceable blue

An indescribable blue

A blue that makes the sky irrelevant and the ocean an imitation

A blue so powerful you can't take it in all at once

No, a sipping kind of blue

A blue that's rare

RUSKIN

Rarity

Something impossible to find

ROSSETTI

Scarcity

Something in desperate need to be found

MILLAIS

Are you rare or are you scarce?

MEN

Do you need to be found?

Where are you?

Who are you?

Who are you?

Who are you?

LIZZIE

SHUT UP SHUT UP SHUT UP

Who am I?

I'm Elizabeth Siddal, with one L because it's more elegant. I'm the woman with red hair that haunts every Pre-Raphaelite painting. I'm the granddaughter, her fire child, of a woman whose last breath was a sigh of relief. I'm the wife of Dante Gabriel Rossetti, a man that no longer loves me and no longer wants me. I'm the woman who gives birth to the dead.

She finally turns to them.

Everything, all at once, stops.

She has turned away from the loom.

*She sees us, the audience, the world she
wants to participate in.*

She smiles, bright and glowing.

*She looks down at her hands, covered in
red. She tries to wipe them off. It doesn't
come off. She's permanently marked.*

She looks out to us.

*She takes out the note, and gives us one last
smile.*

*She lies on the ground, motionless, the note
in her hand.*

*The music starts again, the men dance
again, celebrating a new dead woman.*

*Eventually, everything begins to fade.
ROSSETTI enters.*

ROSSETTI

What are you doing on the floor?

Lizzie?

Nononono Lizzie! Wake up! Lizzie!

Lights go down.

In the dark:

ROSSETTI

HELP

HELP

HELP

Cemetery Bells.

Digging up the earth.

Lights come up.

ROSSETTI stands over an open casket next to a freshly dug up grave. He holds a book.

ROSSETTI

I'll never stop painting you. I have every contour of your frame cemented in my mind.

Always.

He puts the book in the casket.

ROSSETTI

You loved my poetry. More than I ever will. Take it with you.

He turns away as the casket is lowered and covered.

He sits in his home and paints.

LIZZIE enters, dancing circles around him.

He paints and paints, and each time he's done, LIZZIE replaces the canvas with a new one.

Until finally he's had enough. LIZZIE exits and he's alone, surrounded by portraits of his dead wife.

He walks in one direction and he's met with Lizzie's face. He goes in another and is stopped again. He's trapped.

ROSSETTI

You wretched woman!
Oh Elizabeth Siddal. You haunt me.
You've taken my livelihood.

LIZZIE'S VOICE

Have you tried a new muse?

ROSSETTI

There is no other muse. Brush in hand, all I find is you on the canvas.
I wish I had mourned you more.

LIZZIE'S VOICE

It's been seven years. It's time to move on, darling

ROSSETTI

I will not forget you. I could never forget you.
Elizabeth, what have you done to me? If I could bury myself with you, I would. Let our flesh melt into one and disappear into the earth. Let our casket become a puzzle of bones that no one can decipher.

What good are memories when only one is here to hold onto them? I'm consumed by every moment of you, every scent, every smile, every ounce of pain.

He takes a candle.

ROSSETTI

What a joke I've become! Broken over a woman that was shattered from the start. Her hair knitted around my heart, sewn into my lungs, and knotted in my brain.
Elizabeth, you did this to me! You've made me weak, you've made me guilty.

LIZZIE'S VOICE

You sound like me, darling

ROSSETTI

My fire child!

LIZZIE'S VOICE

That was never your name to acquire.

ROSSETTI

Fire child!

LIZZIE'S VOICE

You never asked for permission to steal it from me.

He pours the candle wax onto his chest, as if possessed. He screams.

LIZZIE'S VOICE

Find beauty in pain, darling.

ROSSETTI

You've left me here to lie, to deny the truth in your death in order to honor your life. That was your final punishment. To leave me here in shackles of guilt tethered to a burning desire for more. I wanted more!

And no brush stroke will ever correct that.

LIZZIE'S VOICE

Why don't you try writing again?

ROSSETTI

I haven't been able to write a single verse. I used to be good, but now I'm just... mundane.

LIZZIE'S VOICE

So go back to it.

ROSSETTI

Back to what?

LIZZIE'S VOICE

The old poetry, the good verses. The truest words you've written.

ROSSETTI

They're no longer with me.

LIZZIE'S VOICE

Burned?

ROSSETTI

Buried. They're-

LIZZIE'S VOICE

With me. Do you want them back?

ROSSETTI

No, it's sacrilege.

LIZZIE'S VOICE

Then I suppose you'll stay mundane.

ROSSETTI

Your burial was a lie.

LIZZIE'S VOICE

No one will remember you.

ROSSETTI

I burned the note

LIZZIE'S VOICE

You've become nothing without me

ROSSETTI

I gave you a proper burial

LIZZIE'S VOICE

You don't deserve being remembered.

ROSSETTI

I MADE YOU

LIZZIE'S VOICE

And what do you have to show for it?

ROSSETTI

I won't let you take everything. I'll take it back.

LIZZIE'S VOICE

Be careful, darling. A dead woman never forgets.

ROSSETTI sits in his home as lights fall on two MEN walking quietly with shovels and an oil lamp to LIZZIE's grave. On another part of the stage, the bathtub appears.

The MEN dig.

The drum sounds a slow rhythm. As they dig deeper, it begins to sound more like a heartbeat.

MAN 1

All this for a book?

MAN 2

Gabriel needs it

MAN 1

It seems unholy

MAN 2

No one will know.

They get to the casket and open it up. The two MEN gasp and stumble back.

MAN 1

She's...

MAN 2

Her hair...

MAN 1

It's continued to grow

MAN 2

She looks... alive!

Lights flicker.

Millais' "Ophelia" flashes.

LIZZIE suddenly emerges from the bath, gasping for air. She's soaking wet.

And slowly, she climbs out of the bathtub, like rising from the grave.

She's angry.

The MEN bring ROSSETTI the book. They exit.

LIZZIE

A life's story is supposed to end with death.

WHAT ARE YOU STILL DOING HERE?

Let me lie!

Let me disappear!

Let me be!

God, they couldn't even let me decay. The story just had to keep going.

Poor, sad, weak Lizzie Siddal died too young. BUT! Her body stays! Her hair still grows!
Seven years and she's still beautiful as ever!

Fuck that!

And Fuck you for entertaining it.

IS THIS WHAT YOU WANTED?

You sit there and you praise them. Rossetti, Hunt, Millais, Ruskin, all of them! Call them geniuses, call them great.

And go on, tell me jealousy isn't a good look for the dead.

Rip open my heart and let the marigolds grow for envy.

Let each freckle on my skin erupt into calla lilies for beauty.

Grind my brain into coriander for merit.

and forget-me-nots! Never forget forget-me-nots! Forget-me-nots everywhere! They'll grow from my nails, emerge from my stomach, and transform my hair into a wreath, a bed to lay on.

I'll pluck every petal from the dainty aster until the stem bleeds take snapdragons from the root and plant them under my skin decapitate every prideful amaryllis that springs from my neck and watch my head bounce into the river as I make my way to the willow tree.

I can diminish my existence into any garden and I still won't be left alone.

WHY COULDN'T YOU JUST LET THE STORY END?

She turns to ROSSETTI.

And you.

How DARE you! How dare you whimper my name like a pathetic child in our bed, how dare you cry for forgiveness, how dare you paint my face until I become nothing more than common to you. You took away my last bit of rarity, Gabriel. Why couldn't you just let me lie!

ROSSETTI slowly turns his head and looks at LIZZIE.

ROSSETTI

You were pregnant, Lizzie. You killed our child.
Again.

He exits.

LIZZIE, frozen, doesn't look at us. She can't.

LIZZIE

You weren't supposed to know that.
It was supposed to be a secret.
I mourned her! I did. I mourned her like I mourned my son.
I mourn myself too.

LIZZIE is engulfed in fire. It embraces her.

She would've grown to be just like her mother.
No soul should live that fate.
I set her free!
Oh my dear, please forgive me.

She cries and rocks back and forth until she realizes she's being watched.

Right, well

Thank you for coming but I think it's time for you to go

I hope you got what you came for. I'm sorry if I was a disappointment, but this is all you're going to get.

Could you – could you please just go?

I don't want you here anymore.

There will never be an end, it'll keep going as long as you keep watching

Aren't you tired? I'm tired. I'm so so tired.

LEAVE

GO

NEVER COME BACK

You've done enough, you've seen enough

This space is mine. I created it. I built it.

Not yours, mine. You are MY guest, so GO

A dead woman stays where she wants.

Let me climb the willow tree.

She stands, her clothes sticking to her skin, her hair matted. She's dripping wet. But she's never looked more beautiful.

She's finally free. She basks in the light, letting it feed her desire and her tattered soul.

She's blooming.

Lights shift

Busy murmurings.

We're behind an art museum. We see the paintings by Rossetti, Millais, Hunt, and other Pre-Raphaelites, but they're all inverted like we're behind them. We are the gallery wall. In the middle, Ophelia hangs front and center. We see the feet of museum goers, flocking to see the stunning yet tragic woman with red hair. They stop and take pictures, talking about her startling beauty, almost as if she's real. On the side, there's a small exhibit of Elizabeth Siddal's work. Some finished paintings, her sketch of Lady of Shalott. No one pays any attention to them.

But as the room empties and these headless bodies move on to a new gallery in the museum, a little girl's legs wander to the "Lady of Shalott" and she sits, coloring book and crayons in hand, and begins scribbling.

Lights out.

End of play.