

St. Vitus' Dance

I.

In April, a plague took over our city. Masses of men, women, and children danced in the square. Their bodies moved in spasms, muscles clenched and twitching. Their sweat drenched the stones they stood on. They smeared phlegm on the bronze statue of the bear. They left their shit to fester in the streets. They prayed to St. Vitus to cure them, kneeling through seizures, crying out for forgiveness. But the dancing went on for days.

When my sister started dancing in the square, I had to mark my own doorway with straw. I didn't leave my home for two weeks, but once the time passed, I snuck out to watch her from the Observational Deck (a supermarket patio from across the street, which we re-fashioned with binoculars and informational pamphlets). I wanted to skip town, but the city council put up riot squads and barricades. The plague spreads through sweat, said the health council, but they also knew nothing about the situation. Every day, men in white protective suits shot little boxes of prepared food to the dancing supplicants. The health council took notes on the victims' body weights, using the binoculars on the Deck. I let them know my sister's starting weight was something like 120lbs. She was always skinnier than me.

II.

The seer-woman, the old woman with the sunspot on her cheek, a sunspot like a cooked egg, slid the cards toward me. We sat opposite from one another, plexiglass between us. She sat there like a bank teller, sliding those cards through the little slot she cut out.

—Pick nine, she said, three for the past, three for the present, and three for the future.

She put up nine white-gloved fingers to the plastic, but the barrier barely reached halfway to the ceiling, so I could hear the old hag just fine. I slipped my cards out from the splayed-out deck and arranged them on the table, three by three. When I flipped them over, I saw a boy hung from a tree, his foot tucked behind him, his head wrapped in sunlight. I glanced up at the old woman. Her teeth were crooked like a dog's. In the cloud of the plastic, I saw myself, faint and pale, and I ran my fingers through my hair. The seer-woman lived in a room with paisley cloth and chandeliers, with lines of lit candles set up along the floor, wax dripping onto the hardwood. The whole place smelled like burning sage.

—You've witnessed tragedy, she said. This looks like your mother here. Is she a widow?

—No.

—Then a close female friend. Someone who looks out for you. You've never been too close to any men, not romantically. You're an artistic person. You dance?

—Yes. Ballet.

—And you're roiled in some existential trouble. I see disturbance. But it's not so clear.

In the candlelight, the old hag's wrinkles cut into her face, and little pools of white hung in her eyes, but she could see my future.

—We're all in existential trouble. That's nothing new. Get to the good stuff, I told her.

—The past and the present need to be read, so you can encounter yourself. Right. Look, you will find a sacred object. And here's you, right in the middle. She's running away from

something. Look at her skirts, how they're lifted up. You can see the chemise. It's good to see yourself. It gives me a clearer reading. This is the Hanged Man. He means something like martyrship, or sacrifice. You will be forced to give something up, so that you may grow.

—I like all the things I have, I said.

—I use the same cards as Mlle. Lenormand once did. She divined the deaths of Marat and Robespierre and St-Just. You'll be sacrificed.

—I knew it. You're saying I'm going to be killed?

—I love the Hanged Man. He brings rejuvenation. It's nothing bad. Please, pass me back the cards.

—Okay. Well, I don't believe you.

The old witch coughed, hacking spit into the crook of her arm.

—Do you know where I can find a holy medal? I asked.

—I don't deal with that sort of stuff.

—Okay. I get it.

I slid the cards back over to her.

—Why are you still taking appointments?

The old seer-woman glanced up at the ceiling, at the underbelly of her chandelier. Her grey roots had come out in her hair.

—What do you care?

—I'm just curious.

—I provide an essential service. I had someone from the health council over here just yesterday.

—I'm terrified of you, I said. She nodded and I left the apartment. Walking down her apartment's kaleidoscopic stairs, I knew I had to find a holy medal, so that I wouldn't get sick and die.

III.

After I left the seer-woman's apartment, I walked towards downtown, or the half of it that wasn't closed for plague dancing. Stores' windows advertised their infusions, vitamins, and anti-perspirants. The streetlights were all red. A siren shrieked. Plastic straws littered the sidewalk. A man in black cloth stood on the steps of the church and yelled at me. I waved back from the sidewalk and I didn't come any closer.

—Hello, Father, I said. His face was white and scarred with acne.

—Hello. I'm stationed out here to hand out devotional medals. Would you like one?

—I think I'm supposed to receive some sort of holy medal.

—I have rubies and gold medallions. I have some St. Vitus pendants and a few plague medals with St. Sebastian on them. I blessed them this morning.

—I'll take anything.

—Great. That's what I do, too. If you don't mind, we're asking for donations. We're getting hit bad by this. No mass, no offertory collection, that's what I keep saying.

—I'll do it when I get back home.

—Okay, that's fine enough. That's great. Thank you.

—My sister is sick.

—I'm sorry to hear that. God will watch over her in the square.

—What if she doesn't believe in Him?

—Pascal said that, if one kneeled and moved her lips in prayer, then she will believe.

He tossed the medallions over to me and they clattered onto the concrete. I picked one up, the Virgin Mary etched into the pendant, but it was light-weight, a cheap knock-off of something older. The church I stood in front of was the church that my sister and I attended every week before we turned fourteen and began watching television instead. The pews were upholstered with a cheap fabric from the '70s and the stained glass was off-colored and bulky, like a middle-aged woman's craft project. I thought about sitting on the church's public toilets, my body growing numb, crouched in sewer air. I thanked him again.

IV.

I ate lunch on the Deck and watched my sister flail. I saw a little girl, cheeks flushed, her hair tied up in two loose braids, her knees knobby and pink, jump about the bull. I saw an old man shake on the ground, sweat leaking from his shirt. A young man on the Deck asked me who I knew in the pit. I pointed to the young woman spinning in an amateur pirouette. He told me his father was the one kicking, like a folk dancer. When we were younger, my sister and I, we played in a band together. This was after we stopped going to mass and instead, she spent her collection moneys on a synth, and installed all these space sounds, these paranoid alien noises. I didn't know how to sing, and I read, in a soft-spoken voice, Mina Loy poems instead. During her little instrumental breakdowns, when she messed with the bass track, I danced, spinning and crouching and leaping. When we played a butchered-up *Rite of Spring*, I convulsed alongside her. At the end, a girl dances to her death, sacrificed to usher in spring.

—Do you think a God controls us? I asked the man.

—You mean, why are they praying? I don't know. I would think the dancing would be enough.

—When my sister dies, I'm going to bound her in linens and set her on fire.

—Alright, he said. I'm afraid of you.

I nodded.

Down below, my sister bent her knees and then jumped up. She was not well-choreographed, but I began to mimic the thrashing of her limbs, practicing her mirror image. Tense, I held my chest out, and then sent my legs into spasms, crumbling to the floor. I stretched my hands out, bands of sunlight hitting my downy arms, and jerked my body into a seizure. I crouched, my elbows bent near my ears, and jumped in place. Something primal lived inside me. I spun, and spun, and spun, the image of the room tripling, over-lapping and blinking. I reached up and jumped, and jumped again, my legs kicking, and I saw the young man run out. My thighs chaffed, sweaty.

V.

<https://vimeo.com/378652279>