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# MONOLOGUE

## BAG LADY

BY DANIELLE BRAME WHITING

### ELANOR

*Elanor shuffles onto the stage, up stage to down stage, assessing each chair that dots the stage as she does. The chairs represent different seats on a bus and Elanor is trying to assess their viability. On her back is a hiking sized back pack, around her waist a bum bag, and looped over her arms are five plastic bags a piece. She moves to the most downstage chair and, satisfied, sits, placing the plastic bags around her feet. When she begins to speak she is counting her bags and reassuring herself.*

One, two, three, four, five six, seven, eight for the past. Eight for the past and two for the future, one for the present and a contingency.

*She notices the audience.*

This is how we balance our life. Eight for the past and two for the future, one for the present and a contingency. This will ensure that you have enough, but so much that they can find you. Enough to remember, but not be remembered. Enough to protect you, but not so much that they detect you. Plan for the day and always have a backup. Just in case they find you.

*She moves about in her seat, testing each part that touches her. Looks over each shoulder, attempting to mask the action as she does. She takes a compact mirror out of her bum bag and uses that to look back up the aisle. Satisfied she puts the mirror away, nodding and re-addresses the audience.*

Why are you so interested in me? The way you are looking at me as if I have something that you need, or want, if only you could figure out a way to take it. I don't. I threw all of it away when it became too heavy. That's who you are, isn't it? You're one of the "takers". You've been looking for me.

*Elanor takes some time to visually analyse the person she is looking at before she speaks again.*

Your eyes are too far apart to be one of them. It was the first attribute I noticed about the "takers" when I was eight years old. My parents had taken me down to the city, to the state library.

*Elanor pulls a teddy bear out of one of the bags and wraps it in the crook of her underarm. Hooking her legs up onto the seat so she can kneel up. Her voice becomes much younger.*

The ceilings are so tall here, covered in patterns and pictures. Everything is made of a weird echoing, clicking material. You can hear the men and ladies moving around. They are so noisy, but they don't know they are being noisy and none of them are paying any attention to the patterns. The swirlies are joined in threes and those threes are parts of a bigger three and I say out loud, "ninety-nine a side." And then a man's voice interrupts me, laughing, "That's correct," he says, "there are ninety-nine trivireities a side." I look for his face but it is nowhere as agreeable as his answer. His hair was a kind of dull yellow mat that sat flatly on top of his skull and the tip of his nose was bright red, like maybe he was secretly a clown on his day off. Except his feet weren't that big and I remembered the clowns at the circus that my nanna took me to had extremely big feet. The main thing I remember, the observation that made me think this man might not be so agreeable, was just how closely his eyes sat beside the bridge of his nose. It reminded me of a goldfish in my kindergarten teacher's office, except the eyes were smaller and beady. He had a thick moustache on his top lip and there were breadcrumbs caught inside. The man took me to a room with other children and we were given a lot of puzzles to complete. It was all quite easy and the patterns in the tests so predictable that I decided instead to observe my peers and their trainers. In them I saw more intricate patterns. The girl in the pale blue dress would stare at her puzzle intently, slowly leaning further forward the closer she came to a solution. However, she would not make her next decision until she had looked up to the trainer who was hovering close by. If the trainer was smiling, nodding or talking, she would make her decision known. If they were not, she would lean back in her chair and start considering her options all over again. I deduced that the young girl in the pale blue dress was desperate for positive interaction. Later in the session, when the man with the clown nose and goldfish eyes came to ask me if I needed any help, stopping short when he realised I had finished all of his silly tests, I asked him why the girl was like that. He smiled, crumbs from his moustache dropping past his chin, and told me I was a very clever girl. He sat on the floor next to me and asked me to tell him what I had noticed about everyone else in the room. After that he walked me back to my parents and gave them a must-do list. That's what I called it because everything on that list included the words "Elanor you must do this". Elanor you must do this extra math class. Elanor you must sit in the room with these doctors and take all of their tests. Elanor you must see this psychiatrist so you can understand people better. Elanor you must find more to do than stare.

*Beat.*

Staring makes people uncomfortable they told me, but people were always staring at me. Weren't they teddy mickles? Staring at me and teddy mickles while we sat there waiting for them to leave the room.

*Elanor puts Teddy Mickles back in a bag and settles back into her present-day self.*

Your eyes aren't too close together. You are looking at me, but I was wrong, it's not the same. You don't look at me like you are going to take something, you look sad. I've seen that look before, too. It's the same look my friends would give me when I told them I couldn't play. They were the first thing the "takers" came for.

*Elanor suddenly sits up quite straight. Her eyes dart around as if sensing some unwanted attention. She collects her bags and begins moving to another seat, walking shakily as she does, almost falling...*

Norman, you can see a lady walking here. Mind the bends, please.

*Shaking her head, Elanor finishes her exodus to another seat. Then counts her bags.*

Eight for the past and two for the future, one for the present and a contingency.

*She looks back at her audience.*

Norman is the most unsteady of all the bus drivers on the O'Finnegans line; Takes the corners like he's in a race. He's a nice one though, a real gentleman. He has that sad look like you. I also saw that look in the eyes of the people who liked to buy plants.

*Elanor pulls a small cactus out of one of her bags.*

When I wasn't fulfilling the 'Elanor must do this' list, I spent a lot of time at my parents garden centre. They sold flower plants and food plants and tree plants, but my favourite were the cactus plants. The cacti don't need much attention from anyone and can often be overlooked because they're not the prettiest of creatures.

As soon as we arrived at the garden centre I would take my notebooks and pencil case into the cactus section and climb underneath the display benches and be left to my own company for hours. From this vantage point I could watch the patterns. By the age of ten I had established three kinds of patterns typical to my parents customer base, two of which were motivated by a pre-determined decision, and the third influenced heavily by the structure and design of the premises.

One night at dinner, when my parents asked about my day's productivity, I outlined for them a theory on how a redesign of the garden centre layout, and some simple changes to the way they were interacting with the customers, would increase sales. I did not realise it at the time, but the garden centre was not doing well at all. In desperation my parents took the suggestions of their ten year old and implemented every single one. They not only turned the business around, within

five years they had opened five more garden centres and had seen to my early graduation from school and entry into a university undergraduate program.

*Proudly.*

That's right, by the time I turned eighteen I was well into completing a thesis on retail psychology and the book that it produced was an international best seller.

*Elanor performs the bus stopping rather jerkily and sees someone unwanted boarding the vehicle. At least she thinks they are. She is holding her breath because this person brings up negative and unwanted memories for her. She summons up the courage to pick up her bags and scurries to a chair further up the stage. She sits quietly arranging the bags mumbling to herself, trying to calm herself down.*

Eight for the past and two for the future, one for the present and a contingency.

*She looks up.*

45 Norman. 45.

*It's a warning that all the bus drivers know. 45 means she thinks that there is a "taker" on the bus. As she delivers the following description she appears to be examining the alleged "taker". When she begins talking again, it is about him.*

From back stage I studied his profile. The lights accented the outline, but they also masked some of the detail. His hair was a dark brown that had a subtle wave decorating the crown. The arms of his glasses looked wiry and thin, and pushed a little too hard into his temples. His suit was a dark blue and its shape betrayed its quality, but only if you got close enough. All of this could easily disappear into the mundane if it were not for his smile. One side would creep a little too high, toward his ear, while the other barely moved. It was as though the right side of his face needed to make up for the secrets his left side refused to divulge. It was insincere and almost menacing. I would have placed no trust with him had it not been for the university's endorsement. I would have run many miles in the opposite direction. The smile here is different. There are no notes of subtext or greed.

*She relaxes.*

36 Norman. 36.

*Elanor pulls an award out of one of her bags.*

After my book was released I was expected to travel all the time to talk about its contents, make friends with strange people who had more money than sense, and accept awards. The university insisted that a manager called Maxim go everywhere with me. At first he was nothing more than a constant presence in the background who would make sure we were on time. However, the longer the tour went on, the more control he seemed to take of my daily movements and decisions. For

example, he didn't like the way I was being introduced at events and made it mandatory in the contacts that he do all introductions. He felt that some interviewers were taking advantage of their platform by manipulating me into saying some very controversial and wildly inappropriate things. To counteract this I agreed to include him in my interviews and allowed him answer all of my telephone calls.

It was Maxim who uncovered the greed of my parents. They were taking advantage of the popularity of my book and making money through its connection to their business success. At the same time as he made this discovery my parents went to ground. They stopped calling too avoid the consequences. There must always be consequences. Under Maxim's advice I sought to emancipate myself from my family and sever any claim they might have to my accomplishments. This was achieved with no real bloodshed on my side of the fence and, as such, I refused Maxim's offer to litigate my family for any attempt to gain publicity from my name, or income from my systems. I felt the point had been made and sent them a card to wish them well in a future that would not include me. They had become "takers" and there was nothing that could be achieved by reuniting. Of course, it did not take long before Maxim also became a "taker".

A kind old makeup artist in a small New York television studio took advantage of the time we had alone to compliment me on the paycheck I'd negotiated for this particular interview. I scoffed informing her that she was mistaken. The amount she had quoted was fifty thousand more than I'd been paid. Unfortunately for Maxim, she was able to assure me that she had heard it from the studio boss directly. When Maxim came to escort me to the interview I gave her a grateful nod and asked him to lead the way. The show I was invited to that morning was delivered live on air. As I was introduced I took a deep breath,

*She breathes deeply.*

And I moved to my place on their stage.

*She stands up on the chair with the award in her hand.*

With the scripted welcome out of the way I jumped in before Maxim had a chance to take over, "I would like to announce to your audience today my sincere thanks to my manager, Maxim, for his diligent work during this tour. It is unfortunate that this will be our last appearance together. In all partnerships there comes a time when differences in opinion must be addressed, and we have come to such an impasse. In this instance it is an impasse that cannot be overcome. You see, where I am of the opinion that my standard fee for an appearance remain as it had always been, Maxim believes in adding an extra 500% and pocketing it for himself. You are a clever man, Maxim, and I've no doubt your plans will allow you to achieve much. It will simply no longer be achieved off the back of my own work."

*Elanor steps down from the seat, but remains standing.*

I watched him exit at the fastest pace he could manage whilst retaining some composure. It was the last time I would see him. It was also the last time I would see my possessions as he stole most of what I had brought with me and left the city.

*Elanor sits down.*

Were it not for the kindness of the old makeup artist, I'm not entirely sure how I would have made my way home. She escorted me back to the motel, helped me file the theft report with the local police, and walked me through what I needed to do to have my plane ticket reissued. I asked her what I could give her in return and she replied,

*Elanor takes on the physicality and vocal performance of the 75 year old makeup artist.*

“Only this, you clueless young genius. That you will watch out for the “takers”. You need to promise me that you will always do for yourself. Don't be countin on no man to organise this for you and def'nit'ly don't be giving him control o' yoh money.”

*Elanor pulls a shawl out of one of her bags, replacing it with the trophy and holds up the shawl for her audience.*

She gave me this to remember her. She said whenever I feel like I'm giving away some part of myself, I'm to look at this and think about the help I needed on this day. Think about the “takers”.

*Elanor wraps herself in the shawl for comfort and smiles straight ahead, peacefully, for a few beats. Slowly staring off to her right she notes a building up ahead and calls out to the driver.*

Steady on now, Norman.

*Elanor grabs all of her bags and moves further back to a seat that favours the right side of the bus. Places her bags down and performs her counting ritual.*

Eight for the past and two for the future, one for the present and a contingency.

*She looks to her audience.*

Now don't look so worried. Norman is just slowing the rig down so I can observe the house properly. It's the baby blue one up ahead. The one with the white trim and the pretty green hedges and that welcoming big old verandah. Looks like a beautiful home, doesn't it? It was. It was a beautiful home full of so much love, but it's also where I forgot about the shawl. I put her away and forgot about her and I paid a heavy price.

That is the house my husband and I bought together on the very day we were married. He had been one of my phd mentors, but he became my whole heart. Albie was a “giver”. He didn't have a taking bone in his body. He'd managed to get both married and divorced, with a whole life of

fathering in between, before I ever laid eyes on him. Albie was considerably older than myself, but in all other areas we were completely compatible. The day we were married, I'd met him down on the lake for a walk and we passed by that house. I sighed telling him that I wanted to live there someday. "Well why don't you?" He asked. "You can afford it, little Miss Moneybags."

*Elanor giggles.*

That was his nickname for me.

*Beat.*

But I couldn't go live in a house like that when I was all alone. I felt it deserved a family. "Would I be enough of a family?" He asked me. We went down to births, deaths and marriages and we got married. Then we came straight back to the house, knocked on the door and offered way more than it was worth to the land valuers. That house was meant to be a safe haven for our happiness. We became quite the research partnership, publishing academic papers and at least four books together on organisational structure and psychology. Perhaps that's not interesting to anyone else, but we loved it. We refused to give public lectures unless it was together and we co-taught all of our classes, much to the university's chagrin. We were quite the pair, my old seafarer and I.

*Beat.*

It was a quiet wintery morning. The kind of morning when one wants nothing more than to stay under the covers, head dug deep into the pillow. I heard our coffee machine finish percolating and quietly shuffled out of my covers and into a gown and slippers to prepare us a breakfast in bed. Coffee and fruit toast, our favourite wintery breakfast. I was likely at it for around twenty minutes before carrying his tray back into the room. Standing at the end of our bed I giggled at how still he was keeping. He loved to pretend that he was still asleep and then pounce on me when I least expected it. That's a fine thing when my arms are empty, but not that morning. In my pretend school marm voice I warned him the coffee was scalding and he'd wear it if he was not careful.

He stayed as still as he was able.

I put the tray down on the dresser to be safe and moved around to his side of the bed. Half his face was dug down into his favourite thick fluffy pillow. His sparse tufts of grey hair were poking out from the blanket in all directions, a bit like a mad professor. I knelt down next to his peaceful face and was so filled with all the love he'd given to me over the years. If you've never had that moment I suggest you look out for it. It's an unconscious pause you take to understand everything you feel for one person, everything they feel for you, and it fills you until you overflow and tears, happy tears, full of these overwhelming feelings just flow down your cheeks unrelentingly. There is nothing like it and that's not a bad thing.

I let myself just be there for a few minutes feeling it all before reaching out to stroke his cheek. I loved running my hand down his face. His handsome, loving, kind face.

It was cold.

He'd left me.

*Elanor takes time to work through the memory and recompose herself before continuing.*

*When she does there is a certain toughness introduced into her demeanour.*

He left me and when he left, the “takers” descended. His children, the university, my parents and siblings. Their first attack was an underhanded flanking under the guise of compassion. Vases of flowers, baskets of fruit, casserole dishes of meat drowning in unidentifiable gravy. These were their tickets into my safe haven. Things began going missing. Albie's favourite shirt and his reading slippers. A photo of we two picnicking down by the river. The night of his funeral, after the last “taker” said goodnight, I pulled the shawl down from the closet, wrapped it around my shoulders, and locked them all out. I bolted the doors and nailed down the windows. I would not let another “taker” in.

*Elanor pulls binoculars out of her bag and looks at the house through them as she continues, kneeling up on her seat.*

Then the attacks began by email and telephone. Paper after paper that needed to be signed. Doctors knocking at my door claiming they were in possession of my best interests. Lawyers on my answering machine telling me that I had to give half of my money to Albie's children. My parents outside my window telling me they needed to protect me from Albie's devil offspring.

*Elanor removes the binoculars and places them back in the bag. She crouches low and moves behind her chair as she talks.*

One night, I crawled around my house selecting all of those things that had the most value to me. Careful not to be seen through the windows. Already I had been withdrawing money from my accounts. I had heard Maxim was back in town. He is more than clever enough to get into my bank accounts. It became clear to me that he was working with the University and Albie's daughters to get their hands on whatever they could. They had taken Albie. They had taken my happiness. Now they were trying to take me.

*Elanor peers up and over the chair. She is satisfied that they have cleared the house and no one was there looking for her. She stands and begins picking up her bags.*

Eight for the past and two for the future, one for the present and a contingency.

*She looks towards her audience conspiratorily.*

I have a home.

Years ago, Albie and I, we quietly bought a large parcel of land in the middle of the bush under a series of shell companies and pseudonyms. You can only get to it by foot. Every other day I make my way out of the bush, a different path each time, and I find a bus stop and begin my day's travel. People think I am crazy and give me a wide berth. Except the bus drivers. They are all givers and secret keepers. The "takers" don't recognise me like this. They don't know who Elanor really is and that is just how I like it. I'm free now. Elanor can do what she wants and spend all day sitting underneath a bench of cactus.

*Beat.*

I'm getting off the bus now. You're not to follow me. It's important we never meet again, do you understand? But before I go, I need you to promise me one thing... that you will never give in to the "takers". They will suck out your life force and steal your joy. They make the world a very scary place and you don't need that, okay. You need to give and be with other people who give. You need to find your Albie and spend your days laughing. You need to promise me these things and I will know, I will know, I will know if you break your promise.

*Beat.*

29 Norman. It's time.

*Elanor looks about her shoulders to make sure no one is following her and then she exits the space.*

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