

# A Time of Empty Tales.

Original Libretto by Catherine E. Strong

## ACT I

*(The scene begins in darkness. The LOST ONE is alone on stage and slowly begins to awaken.)*

LOST ONE:

I wonder, have I lain here long? For how many days; how many nights?

Am I surrounded now by dreams? For how many days; for how many nights?

Has my blood been invaded with poison; for I am weary?

This slumber is so deep, it has dragged me to the door of the underworld;

I look through the lock and spy delights-- may I steal inside?

Might I have died; and how many times? For how many days; how many nights?

*(A dream sequence occurs. The KING and ADVISOR enter.)*

KING:

Kind Advisor, what wouldst thou make of my dreams this time?

Last night I became serpentine:

Long and writhing,

Dryly scaled, yellow-eyed;

And double-tongued as devils are;

Flaking from the chrysalis,

Leaving an empty cast.

As I slid from the shell of the cobra,

I was changed! Smooth as a mirror,

And clean as virgin silver.  
But woe! I was ensnared  
By a viper with bite of flame,  
And returned to nightmare.  
Stunned with venom, and cursed again.

ADVISOR:

Your dream describes your suffering:  
Imprisoned in this poisoned skin.  
In deadly festering disguise  
You are cursed to hide in.  
This dream doth illustrate  
Even Kings are slaves to fate.

KING:

I pray, do not look upon my shame.  
The Gods have buried me alive in scars.  
My corporeal grave; inflame.  
I dreamed of defying my stars;  
Of escaping my skin- as the serpentine king  
Escapes his scales without agony.  
To escape my own tale is my deepest fantasy.

*(There is a knocking)*

ADVISOR:

My lord, there is a doctor at the door, I see.

KING:

Bring him in!

*(The DOCTOR enters)*

Reveal your remedy.

ADVISOR: *(In regards to COVID-19 restrictions)*

But two metres please!

DOCTOR: *(With a manic flourish, holding a large book)*

Any plague, I assure thee, I can remedy,  
I have saved many kings and their lands from infirmity.  
Of physicking talents, I am the pinnacle,  
The Queen of Ruthenia called it inexplicable;  
I banished her sickness when she was so cynical,  
And the dukes of Cilicia all grew hysterical  
When I saved their good king with a medicine untypical.  
I assure thee, my lord, that my skills are not mythical,  
I have cured the rich, the poor and the pitiful,  
I shall show you my ways; I will make them empirical,  
And people call me the doctor of miracles!

KING:

But how shall you heal me?

DOCTOR: *(Holds up book)*

In this precious book I have endless secrets.  
Inside hides wonderful recipes and tricks.  
Your affliction is an easy fix.

I have concocted the medicine of miracles.  
See this drink; this liquid incredible,  
Shining sweet, with fine fragrance;

Your skin shall be equally radiant.

KING:

Wonderful! I require a taste.

*(Ghostly dancers enter playing as servants for the KING, and an elaborate spectacle takes place as the KING drinks the potion.)*

LOST ONE:

How familiar this seems. How do I silence dreams?

I know what is coming.

KING:

My skin shines, radiant and fine,

And clean as virgin silver. I am the kingly paradigm.

ALL:

He shines!

ADVISOR: *(Aside)*

I dreaded this day.

I stole power through my King's decay.

He listens to me; he does what I say.

But now he is healed, I shall be thrown away.

I mixed poison into his drink

To keep him scarred and bleeding,

And to plague his dreams and distort what he thinks,

So he is lost and relies on my scheming.

In this moment of purity,

I will be cast into obscurity.

*(ADVISOR turns to the KING)*

My lord! Beware dark magic from this doctor!

The curse may recur, ten times stronger.

KING:

Cursed again? Let me die first.

But this miracle drink should end any curse.

ADVISOR:

Look at it shining; flowing with evil mystery.

You cannot believe that this drink

Is not from a devil's cup.

It will make you mad.

You are already tempted.

LOST ONE:

Tormented!

ADVISOR:

Devil venom

Will turn you demented!

This charlatan invented

Your demise.

*(ADVISOR snatches potion away from the DOCTOR before he can give the KING more.)*

KING:

Is this true? This must be true. Advisor, you are right. I feel a fever.

Kind advisor, you are right always

And good-willed. I am frightened, I am ill.

DOCTOR:

No, my king, I have healed you. This man is lying.

ADVISOR:

The venom invades you, my King. I am sure.

LOST ONE:

I am lost in a realm of dark miracles.

I remember, I have been here before.

How can I bear to witness more?

I have seen myself dying on this very floor.

KING: *(frightened)*

I see Hell all around! If only I were blind!

Is this venom destroying my mind?

Such evil I cannot allow. Kill him, kill him now!

*(The DOCTOR is held by other ghosts who steal his book. The KING takes it for himself.)*

This magic could be mine. I will learn this doctor's secrets

And set myself free without price or penalty.

No evil sickness or madness, but healing bliss

Awaits me.

Execute the enemy.

*(DOCTOR is executed during music sequence. KING opens the DOCTOR's book, which is laced with poison, and the KING falls dead to the ground, poison spilling from the pages...)*

LOST ONE:

The pages are poisoned!

ADVISOR: *(Looking at the now open book in horror.)*

Laced in the cursed pages:

A fatal dose of his own medicine.

Here it reads:

*(The DOCTOR's head rises from his position, though presumably dead, with odd expression. His head alone seems mystically resurrected. DOCTOR announces in a strange voice:)*

DOCTOR:

Thief of secrets reading me,

Though I be a book to read,

I do not offer stories;

I open to avenge deceit.

I curse you for eternity;

From your flesh be forever free.

LOST ONE:

Free me; wake me. I long to be escaping.

Always trapped in dreams. I dream to be awaking!

*(Lights begin to fade.)*

ALL:

There be leaders and rulers who rule with evil sway;

They soon become as though they had never, ever been.

LOST ONE:

They had never, never, ever been.

*(Blackout occurs and all but the LOST ONE exits. She is left alone again on the ground. The FRIEND appears on stage.)*

FRIEND: *(emerging from the shadows)*

Child in the dark,

You are awake at last.

It appears your dream was haunting and terrible.

My lost one, my lost one.

Why do you shake with fear?

I am The Friend; I am near.

The Great One watches over us,

My lost one, my lost one,

So you must never be afraid.

Here is medicine for your aches and nightmares.

Here are the tales of the Great One's love.

Every night we read them together.

Every morning you forget.

This drink is immaculate healing;

Cool balm for your burning skin,

Though, no ointments or serums can compare

To the word of the divine.

This drink will soothe your body,

The words in this book will free your mind.

LOST ONE:

You are my friend? I do not want to drink.

I am so afraid.

FRIEND: (*Grabs her*)

This drink possesses the Great One's perfect healing.

See how it glistens. Watch closely.

Remember the exquisite taste and feeling.

LOST ONE: (*Captivated*)

Magical.

FRIEND: (*Lets her go slightly.*)

Drink more. Drink it again.

LOST ONE:

I can't breathe.

FRIEND: (*Forcing her*)

This drink is the key to life, without it you shall not survive.

It relieves all your pain.

I cannot lose you.

LOST ONE:

How can I trust you? I do not know you.

FRIEND:

You know me. You love me.

I guide you each day closer to Heaven.

I am the Friend of the Faith,

And your one companion.

LOST ONE:

I dreamed before of a girl who lost her way.

'I've lost my way', she would say,

'A long time I have gone away'.

You want me to stay. You call me the lost one.

I wonder, is that my name?

Am I the girl who lost her way?

I have so many dreams,

I cannot tell which are real.

I begin to feel light.

Friend! That drink you give me feels

Like a memory;

A warm tide of strength fills me.

*(The LOST ONE begins to get up)*

LOST ONE:

I remember, I am a storyteller.

I am the inventor of many worlds.

FRIEND: *(laughs powerfully)*

The inventor of worlds, she says!

Do not be delirious. You think you are God?

Sit with me again.

LOST ONE:

I have created many worlds

In my dreams; in my stories.

I tell tales of the visions I've seen.

I cannot remember myself, my name, my own life!

But I know every line

Of these tales in my mind.

FRIEND:

You tell your tales when you are dreaming.

You whisper stories in your sleep.

I watch you often describe:

Fishermen who fool great wizards,

And thieves trapped in caves

Of secret jewels and magic slaves;

A man whose wife is an evil ghost,

Who dines in open graves.

There is one where three apples of gold

Lead to death and disarray.

And the tale of the cursed king,

His jealous advisor and a doctor of miracles.

Magical, strange ideas.

What you dream fascinates me.

Mystical disasters, and fabricated love.

Though just one tale should be read:

The tale of The Great One: his glorious power above.

LOST ONE:

But my tales, these are the worlds that I know.

I can show you a night of inspiration.

LOST ONE: (*Aria*)

I am the author, you are the tale, bring me a page from your book.

Pages on pages, bound by their spine, tell me your secrets, and you'll be mine.

Once when I was young,

My stories were happy and I could sleep sweetly,

And when writing, my strange cast of characters brought me delight,

But now they torture my nights.

Haunted, I am haunted.

These stories in time become ghosts,

And they leave my mind haunted.

Haunted, I am haunted.

This cast I devise, all my tales, come to life

And are haunted.

Once when I was young, my spirit was breaking,

Hearing my characters longing for freedom from stories,

And dreaming of futures that never come true.

If I release them, I would die too.

Haunted, I am haunted.

These stories in time become ghosts

And they leave my mind haunted.

But to set them free, I must die.

These characters inside, they tell me I must die.

I must die.

My mind is haunted.

FRIEND:

Lost one, my lost one. Do not be deluded, I pray.

Your tales fascinate me, but you lose your way.

I will guide you back into the Great One's love.

I will teach you to serve him above.

You will learn to love him. Be small; be meek.

Stay small and beautiful.

Forget your dreams, and sleep.

LOST ONE:

I am exhausted; I am weary.

Give me more of the medicine, I beg.

The strength I felt was brief;

It has vanished like a thief.

FRIEND: *(Holding the medicine away from the LOST ONE)*

You have taken what is required.

Too much of this exquisite drink would be dangerous;

Too much of this radiance is fatal.

I am protecting you, I am careful for you.

If you drink too much you will die, and I will lose you.

May the Great One forgive you for this greed.

You must listen as I teach the will of the divine.

Remember you are mine to keep.

Remember your place, forget your dreams, and sleep.

*(The FRIEND exits.)*

*(GHOSTS enter, dancing sequence occurs, presenting to the LOST ONE a tragic vision of being trapped and overpowered. LOST ONE is still present on-stage.)*

LOST ONE:

Such terrible dreaming.

I am lost, I am captured. I can never trust him.

I know not who I am, or where I have been. I am lost.

Have I taken medicine or poison?

I must escape, and disappear from this place,

As if I'd never been.

As if I'd never been.

*(A manic dance sequence occurs with ghostly dancers around the LOST ONE. Some of the dancers are dressed as her fantasy characters. The DOCTOR, KING and ADVISOR are also momentarily present and join the parade. All but the LOST ONE then gradually exit.)*

LOST ONE:

My mind is powerful!

I can move souls.

I can trick you!

I can move you.

*(Sudden silence as the FRIEND re-enters with his holy book.)*

FRIEND: *(Opening book and standing over the LOST ONE)*

Listen, my lost one.

Listen to the Great One's word with me.

LOST ONE:

Won't you listen to my tales?

FRIEND:

Listen to these precious words.

LOST ONE:

Listen to me, listen to me! A night of inspiration is upon us!

*(A screen is lit as the rest of the stage goes dark. Behind the screen a few of the ghostly dancers begin to perform. As the LOST ONE sings, more ghostly dancers come around her and the FRIEND.)*

LOST ONE: *(joyful, inspired, in love with her storytelling.)*

I am inspired!

I am inspired tonight.

In the moonlight

I can feel my tales come to life.

Oh, night inspired: sublime power

Of mystery; of shadow.

This midnight hour

Kills Sleep: her mellow daughter.

This night knows the shades within me;

They are her colour; they are her kind.

Night inspired;

I recall the depth of dream in her eye.

I recall wading through her fog, never tired.

Oh, night inspired.

I am inspired! Inspired!

I am inspired tonight!

FRIEND: (*Enraptured*)

Enchanting.

LOST ONE:

Oh, night inspired.

FRIEND: (*Leans closer to her*)

You are enchanting.

Let there be a thousand of these nights.

LOST ONE:

Oh, night enchanting,

Oh, night inspired!

*(End of Act I)*

## ACT II

*(The FRIEND and the LOST ONE are alone together. The setting feels romantic.)*

FRIEND:

I am moving you; I lead you to my Lord;

Mine to subdue. Come and adore.

LOST ONE:

Listen to my stories, boundless as the sea.

Persuading you to love me is easy as can be.

FRIEND AND LOST ONE:

I am moving you.

FRIEND:

I lead you to my lord;

You are mine to subdue.

FRIEND AND LOST ONE:

Come and adore.

You are the inspiration;

My sweet possession

Evermore.

Rivalling Heaven.

Come and adore.

LOST ONE: *(Aside)*

Fall for me,

Fall in love with me;

Fall for my trick;

Fall for me.

*(All characters and ghostly dancers enter. Everyone appears to be in a mystical trance, joining the song.)*

ALL:

Love! Love! Love!

We are descending into love.

FRIEND:

The angels of love lead me astray

With sweetness that starts my spirit's decay.

Leave me spellbound.

Love has me lost.

ALL:

Love! Love! Love!

We are descending into love.

LOST ONE:

We are descending into deliria.

With you I find euphoria.

I am dazed with elation.

Love has me lost.

ALL:

Love! Love! Love!

We are descending into love.

LOST ONE:

Love is painfully bright.

FRIEND:

Love, it blinds our eyes.

LOST ONE:

Love, the pavilion of light!

FRIEND:

Are you as enchanted as I?

LOST ONE AND FRIEND:

Love, love has me lost.

ALL:

Love! Love! Love!

We are descending into love.

*(A few ghostly dancers lead the FRIEND off-stage)*

THE LOST ONE: *(Among the ghosts, singing wistfully. Psychedelic moment.)*

Tread carefully on the coast of Love.

The ocean, she carries the goddess of doves:

Aphrodite, here she walks again,

Treading seafoam and the souls of men!

LOST ONE AND GHOSTS:

Aphrodite is the violent god,

Cull them all, her flock of doves.

She gives Eros the weapon she calls Love;

And allows the Son of War to reap.

*(Ghosts disappear)*

LOST ONE:

*(Kneeling, she drinks more of her medicine.)*

He believes in my love.

He will never hurt me now.

I am the author of tonight.

Though now I am trapped,

My words have no cage.

I am his inspiration;

His sweet possession.

My simple plan unfolds.

*(Blackout. The LOST ONE exits. The FRIEND reappears alone and troubled.)*

FRIEND:

My god, turn your gaze from me.

My spirit is split; can you see my heart

Divides inside me?

In dreams of god, I see her face.

Will my soul lie outcast; disgraced?

Evil epiphany: A god eclipsed!

And who will pay the price?

Oh, earthly siren whom I love,

You have replaced my god above;

Her love is the devil returning,

Sweet venom burning.

Weaving misery,

Like silk from the spider,

She shrouds me in desire,

And I dream only of her above:  
Thief of god, and thief of love.  
I am the moth, who in stunned meander  
Courts the fire;  
Set alight for his desire.  
Her death will leave me purified,  
And calm the god I have defied.  
I caught the fire,  
But *she* falls upon the pyre.

*(The FRIEND exits. The DOCTOR, KING and ADVISOR return)*

ADVISOR:

My majesty, did you see  
Demons of deceit conspiring?

KING:

Indeed, demon, I see you often.

ADVISOR:

Not I! You are still angry about my little trick?

KING:

Curse you.

DOCTOR:

Cursed we are! The Lost One traps us  
In this dream.

ADVISOR:

While this mad Friend keeps her captive.

LOST ONE: *(softly, quiet as if far away...)*

I am the author; you are the tale...

DOCTOR:

How long shall we be tormented?

We are just dreams in her mind.

ADVISOR, DOCTOR AND KING:

Let us escape her mind.

ADVISOR:

Shirk off the dream,

Let us vanish like thieves.

DOCTOR:

Let us call her here in her sleep,

And convince her to set us free.

*(LOST ONE appears in mist)*

DOCTOR:

Child in the dark,

The author of our tale,

We welcome you this cursed night

To warn you of betrayal.

ADVISOR:

We spy you from the shade

Of our prison you have made.

KING:

Kept in nightmare;

Tonight, we are risen.

LOST ONE:

You come to haunt me.

I am the author; you are dreams only.

From the dark, have you spied my enemy?

I have deceived him, and he loves me.

KING:

Love can be misery; simple trickery.

DOCTOR:

You have planned your vengeance,

As has he!

ADVISOR:

Your murderous Friend, who keeps you in captivity,

Fears your love is vice.

FRIEND: (*From afar*)

I dream only of her above;

Thief of god, thief of love.

KING, ADVISOR and DOCTOR:

And who will pay the price?

LOST ONE:

Not I! Not I!

How can he murder what he loves?

One insanity begets another:

Senseless love has bred his senseless cruelty further.

Men in love are men insane.

KING:

In or out of love, all men are the same,

And sanity is a heavy chain.

DOCTOR:

You must be weary of it.

LOST ONE:

I am weary; all day and all night.

ADVISOR:

Free us. Release us.

You have kept us trapped so long,

And your time runs out.

DOCTOR:

You are wasting time!

ADVISOR:

Whilst we live, you lose your mind.

KING:

Soon you will be lost forever.

LOST ONE:

I lose my mind. I grow mad.

Should I vanish like a thief from my life?

ADVISOR:

Be not the author, tell not your tale.

DOCTOR: (*Handing the Lost One a bottle of his potion*)

Release us from the shade.

LOST ONE:

How do I free you? Mysterious shades of my own making!

How do I free my own soul and keep my life?

Must I die, and how many times? For how many nights?

(*Lights change, ALL but the LOST ONE exit.*)

LOST ONE:

How foolish was I to think I had power;

To think that my life was a tale I could write.

That there was medicine for my madness- (*sees medicine, has realisation*)

Medicines, poisons; all the same.

This is the doctor's game.

A spoonful of medicine;

More and more; enough to kill.

A spoonful of the cure,

And another, to make sure,

And then it is medicine no more.

*(The LOST ONE paints the potion onto the pages of the FRIEND's holy book, eventually pouring the whole of it inside. She then closes the book dramatically.)*

This book was already

So full of poison.

Now he pays the price.

*(The Friend enters, ghosts appear backstage. The FRIEND and the LOST ONE address the audience separately.)*

FRIEND:

My lost one, my lost one,

When you are gone, will you become ghostly

And rise at night to haunt me?

LOST ONE AND FRIEND:

After you are gone

I pray for peaceful sleep.

ALL:

After you are gone

I pray for peaceful sleep.

*(The FRIEND approaches the Lost One)*

FRIEND:

My love, my gentle storyteller.

Let me pour you a drink.

LOST ONE:

Please, my love, before we drink,  
Read for me a sweet passage  
From the holy book you keep.

FRIEND:

This brings me such joy;  
A final message before we drink.

LOST ONE:

A final message for tonight.

*(FRIEND begins to read)*

FRIEND:

‘You are Lost, afraid and fallen.  
I will guide you to the next life.  
I am transcendent. Hear my call,  
And you will be my acolyte.  
May my love fill your heart.’

This chill in my heart.

This pain in my breast.

*(FRIEND begins to die and the light changes)*

This chill in my heart.

This pain. This pain.

*(The FRIEND dies, poisoned by the book. The LOST ONE goes to the FRIEND’s body and takes his keys.)*

LOST ONE:

Lost one, my lost one. He is gone.

And I will steal away

As if I'd never been.

*(LOST ONE sees the medicine)*

Oh, the precious drink.

I remember the exquisite taste and feeling.

Before I go,

Just one final taste.

*(The LOST ONE takes the potion and drinks. Affected by the drug, the music changes and in a blackout the LOST ONE is left alone on stage. She then 'wakes up' again, as if from a trance.)*

LOST ONE:

I wonder, have I lain here long? For how many days; how many nights?

Am I surrounded now by dreams? For how many days; for how many nights?

Has my blood been invaded with poison; for I am weary?

Might I have died; and how many times? For how many days; how many nights?

*(END)*