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THE DRUNKEN SISTERS

THORNTON WILDER

The three FATES are seated on a bench largely hidden by their voluminous draperies. They wear the masks of old women, touched by the grotesque but with vestiges of nobility. Seated are CLOTHO with her spindle, LACHESIS with the bulk of the thread of life on her lap, and ATROPOS with her scissors. They rock back and forth as they work, passing the threads from right to left. The audience watches them for a time in silence, broken only by a faint humming from CLOTHO.

CLOTHO: What is it that goes first on four legs, then on two legs? Don't tell me! Don't tell me!

LACHESIS: (*Bored.*) You know it!

CLOTHO: Let me pretend that I don't know it.

ATROPOS: There are no new riddles. We know them all.

LACHESIS: How boring our life is without riddles! Clotho, make up a riddle.

CLOTHO: Be quiet, then, and give me a moment to think. . . .
What is it that . . . What is it that . . . ?

Enter APOLLO, disguised.

APOLLO: (*To the audience.*) These are the great sisters—the Fates. Clotho weaves the threads of life; Lachesis measures the length of each; Atropos cuts them short. In their monotonous work of deciding our lives they are terribly bored, and like so many people who are bored, they find great pleasure in games—in enigmas and riddles. Naturally they can't play cards, because their hands are always busy with the threads of life.

ATROPOS: Sister! Your elbow! Do your work without striking me.

LACHESIS: I can't help it—this thread is s-o-o l-o-o-ong! Never have I had to reach so far.

CLOTHO: Long and gray and dirty! All those years a slave!

LACHESIS: So it is! (*To ATROPOS.*) Cut it, dear sister.

ATROPOS *cuts it—click!*

And now this one; cut this. It's a blue one—blue for bravery:
blue and short.

ATROPOS: So easy to see!

Click.

LACHESIS: You almost cut that purple one, Atropos.

ATROPOS: This one? Purple for a king?

LACHESIS: Yes; watch what you're doing, dear. It's the life of
Admetus, King of Thessaly.

APOLLO: (*Aside.*) Aie!

LACHESIS: I've marked it clearly. He's to die at sunset.

APOLLO: (*To the audience.*) No! No!

LACHESIS: He's the favorite of Apollo, as was his father before
him, and all that tiresome house of Thessaly. The queen Al-
cestis will be a widow tonight.

APOLLO: (*To the audience.*) Alcestis! Alcestis! No!

LACHESIS: There'll be howling in Thessaly. There'll be rolling
on the ground and tearing of garments. . . . Not now,
dear; there's an hour yet.

APOLLO: (*Aside.*) To work! To work, Apollo the Crooked! (*He starts the motions of running furiously while remaining in one place, but stops suddenly and addresses the audience.*) Is there anyone here who does not know that old story—the reason why King Admetus and his queen Alcestis are dear to me? (*He sits on the ground and continues talking with raised fore-finger.*) Was it ten years ago? I am little concerned with time. I am the god of the sun; it is always light where I am. Perhaps ten years ago. My father and the father of us all was filled up with anger against me. What had I done? (*He moves his finger back and forth.*) Do not ask that now; let it be forgotten. . . . He laid upon me a punishment. He ordered that I should descend to earth and live for a year among men—I, as a man among men, as a servant. Half hidden, known and not known, I chose to be a herdsman of King Admetus of Thessaly. I lived the life of a man, as close to them as I am to you now, as close to the just and to the unjust. Each day the King gave orders to the other herdsmen and myself; each day the Queen gave thought to what went

well or ill with us and our families. I came to love King Admetus and Queen Alcestis and through them I came to love all men. And now Admetus must die. (*Rising.*) No! I have laid my plans. I shall prevent it. To work. To work, Apollo the Crooked.

He again starts the motions of running furiously while remaining in one place. He complains noisily:

Oh, my back! Aie, aie. They beat me, but worst of all they've made me late. I'll be beaten again.

LACHESIS: Who's the sniveler?

APOLLO: Don't stop me now. I haven't a moment to talk. I'm late already. Besides, my errand's a terrible secret. I can't say a word.

ATROPOS: Throw your yarn around him, Lachesis. What's the fool doing with a secret? It's we who have all the secrets.

The threads in the laps of the SISTERS are invisible to the audience. LACHESIS now rises and swings her hands three times in wide circles above her head as though she were about to fling a lasso, then hurls the noose across the stage. APOLLO makes the gesture of being caught. With each strong pull by LACHESIS, APOLLO is dragged nearer to her. During the following speeches LACHESIS lifts her end of the strands high in the air, alternately pulling APOLLO up, almost strangling him, and flinging him again to the ground.

APOLLO: Ladies, beautiful ladies, let me go. If I'm late all Olympus will be in an uproar. Aphrodite will be mad with fear—but oh, already I've said too much. My orders were to come immediately, and to say nothing—especially not to women. The thing's of no interest to men. Dear ladies, let me go.

ATROPOS: Pull on your yarn, sister.

APOLLO: You're choking me. You're squeezing me to death.

LACHESIS: (*Forcefully.*) Stop your whining and tell your secret at once.

APOLLO: I can't. I dare not.

ATROPOS: Pull harder, sister. Boy, speak or strangle. (*She makes the gesture of choking him.*)

APOLLO: Ow! Ow!—Wait! I'll tell the half of it, if you let me go.

ATROPOS: Tell the whole or we'll hang you up in the air in that noose.

APOLLO: I'll tell, I'll tell. But— (*He looks about him fearfully.*) promise me! Swear by the Styx that you'll not tell anyone, and swear by Lethe that you'll forget it.

LACHESIS: We have only one oath—by Acheron. And we never swear it—least of all to a sniveling slave. Tell us what you know, or you'll be by all three rivers in a minute.

APOLLO: I tremble at what I am about to say. I . . . ssh . . . I carry . . . here . . . in these bottles . . . Oh, ladies, let me go. Let me go.

CLOTHO and ATROPOS: Pull, sister.

APOLLO: No! No! I'll tell you. I am carrying the wine for . . . for Aphrodite. Once every ten days she renews her beauty . . . by . . . drinking this.

ATROPOS: Liar! Fool! She has nectar and ambrosia, as they all have.

APOLLO: (*Confidentially.*) But is she not the fairest? . . . It is the love gift of Hephaistos; from the vineyards of Dionysos; from grapes ripened under the eye of Apollo—of Apollo who tells no lies.

The SISTERS confidentially to one another in blissful anticipation.

LACHESIS and ATROPOS and CLOTHO: Sisters!

ATROPOS: (*Like sugar.*) Pass the bottles up, dear boy.

APOLLO: (*In terror.*) Not that! Ladies! It is enough that I have told you the secret! Not that!

ATROPOS: Surely, Lachesis, you can find on your lap the thread of this worthless slave—a yellow one destined for a long life?

APOLLO: (*Falling on his knees.*) Spare me!

ATROPOS: (*To LACHESIS.*) Look, that's it—the sallow one, with the tangle in it of dishonesty, and the stiffness of obstinacy, and the ravel-ravel of stupidity. Pass it over to me, dear.

APOLLO: (*His forehead touching the floor.*) Oh, that I had never been born!

LACHESIS: (*To ATROPOS.*) This is it. (*With a sigh.*) I'd planned to give him five score.

APOLLO: (*Rising and extending the bottles, sobbing.*) Here, take

them! Take them! I'll be killed anyway. Aphrodite will kill me. My life's over.

ATROPOS: (*Strongly, as the SISTERS take the bottles.*) Not one more word out of you. Put your hand on your mouth. We're tired of listening to you.

APOLLO, *released of the noose, flings himself face down upon the ground, his shoulders heaving. The SISTERS put the flagons to their lips. They drink and moan with pleasure.*

LACHESIS and ATROPOS and CLOTHO: Sisters!

LACHESIS: Sister, how do I look?

ATROPOS: Oh, I could eat you. And I?

CLOTHO: Sister, how do I look?

LACHESIS: Beautiful! Beautiful! And I?

ATROPOS: And not a mirror on all the mountain, or a bit of still water, to tell us which of us is the fairest.

LACHESIS: (*Dreamily, passing her hand over her face.*) I feel like . . . I feel as I did when Kronos followed me about, trying to catch me in a dark corner.

ATROPOS: Poseidon was beside himself—dashing across the plains trying to engulf me.

CLOTHO: My own father—who can blame him?—began to forget himself.

ATROPOS: (*Whispering.*) This is not such a worthless fellow, after all. And he's not bad-looking. (*To CLOTHO.*) Ask him what he sees.

LACHESIS: Ask him which of us is the fairest.

CLOTHO: Boy! Boy! You bay meek. I mean, you . . . you may thpeak. Thpeak to him, Lakethith; I've loht my tongue.

LACHESIS: Boy, look at us well! You may tell us which is the fairest.

APOLLO *has remained face downward on the ground. He now rises and gazes at the SISTERS. He acts as if blinded: he covers and uncovers his eyes, gazing first at one and then at another.*

APOLLO: What have I done? This splendor! What have I done? You—and you—and you! Kill me if you will, but I cannot say which one is the fairest. (*Falling on his knees.*) Oh, ladies—if so much beauty has not made you cruel, let me now go

and hide myself. Aphrodite will hear of this. Let me escape to Crete and take up my old work.

ATROPOS: What was your former work, dear boy?

APOLLO: I helped my father in the marketplace; I was a teller of stories and riddles.

The SISTERS are transfixed. Then almost with a scream.

SISTERS: What's that? What's that you said?

APOLLO: A teller of stories and riddles. Do the beautiful ladies enjoy riddles?

SISTERS: (*Rocking from side to side and slapping one another.*) Sisters, do we enjoy riddles?

ATROPOS: Oh, he would only know the old ones. Puh! The blind horse . . . the big toe . . .

LACHESIS: The cloud—the eyelashes of Hera . . .

CLOTHO: (*Harping on one string.*) What is it that first goes on four legs . . . ?

ATROPOS: The porpoise . . . Etna . . .

APOLLO: Everyone knows those! I have some new ones—

SISTERS: (*Again, a scream.*) New ones!

APOLLO: (*Slowly.*) What is it that is necessary to—

He pauses. The SISTERS are riveted.

LACHESIS: Go on, boy, go on. What is it that is necessary to—

APOLLO: But—I only play for forfeits. See! If I lose . . .

CLOTHO: If you looth, you mutht tell uth which one ith the faireth.

APOLLO: No! No! I dare not!

LACHESIS: (*Sharply.*) Yes!

APOLLO: And if I win?

ATROPOS: Win? Idiot! Stupid! Slave! No one has ever won from us.

APOLLO: But if I win?

LACHESIS: He doesn't know who we are!

APOLLO: But if I win?

CLOTHO: The fool talkth of winning!

APOLLO: If I win, you must grant me one wish. One wish, any wish.

LACHESIS: Yes, yes. Oh, what a tedious fellow! Go on with your riddle. What is it that is necessary to—

APOLLO: Swear by Acheron!

CLOTHO and LACHESIS: We swear! By Acheron! By Acheron!

APOLLO: (*To ATROPOS.*) You, too.

ATROPOS: (*After a moment's brooding resistance, loudly.*) By Acheron!

APOLLO: Then: ready?

LACHESIS: Wait! One moment. (*Leaning toward ATROPOS, confidentially.*) The sun is near setting. Do not forget the thread of Ad—You know, the thread of Ad—

ATROPOS: What? What Ad? What are you whispering about, silly?

LACHESIS: (*Somewhat louder.*) Not to forget the thread of Admetus, King of Thessaly. At sundown. Have you lost your shears, Atropos?

ATROPOS: Oh, stop your buzzing and fussing and tend to your own business. Of course I haven't lost my shears. Go on with your riddle, boy!

APOLLO: So! I'll give you as much time as it takes to recite the names of the Muses and their mother.

LACHESIS: Hm! Nine and one. Well, begin!

APOLLO: What is it that is necessary to every life—and that can save only one?

The SISTERS rock back and forth with closed eyes, mumbling the words of the riddle. Suddenly APOLLO starts singing his invocation to the Muses.

Mnemosyne, mother of the nine;
Polyhymnia, incense of the gods—

LACHESIS: (*Shrieks.*) Don't sing! Unfair! How can we think?

CLOTHO: Stop your ears, sister.

ATROPOS: Unfair! (*Murmuring.*) What is it that can save every life—

They put their fingers in their ears.

APOLLO: Erato, voice of love;
Euterpe, help me now.

Calliope, thief of our souls;
Urania, clothed of the stars;

Clio of the backward glances;
Euterpe, help me now.

Terpsichore of the beautiful ankles;
Thalia of long laughter;
Melpomene, dreaded and welcome;
Euterpe, help me now.

Then, in a loud voice.

Forfeit! Forfeit!

CLOTHO and ATROPOS *bury their faces in LACHESIS'S neck, moaning.*

LACHESIS: (*In a dying voice.*) What is the answer?

APOLLO: (*Flinging away his hat, triumphantly.*) Myself! Apollo the sun.

SISTERS: Apollo! You?

LACHESIS: (*Savagely.*) Pah! What life can you save?

APOLLO: My forfeit! One wish! One life! The life of Admetus, King of Thessaly.

A horrified clamor arises from the SISTERS.

SISTERS: Fraud! Impossible! Not to be thought of!

APOLLO: By Acheron.

SISTERS: Against all law. Zeus will judge. Fraud.

APOLLO: (*Warning.*) By Acheron.

SISTERS: Zeus! We will go to Zeus about it. He will decide.

APOLLO: Zeus swears by Acheron and keeps his oath.

Sudden silence.

ATROPOS: (*Decisive but ominous.*) You will have your wish—the life of King Admetus. But—

APOLLO: (*Triumphantly.*) I shall have the life of Admetus!

SISTERS: But—

APOLLO: I shall have the life of Admetus! What is your *but*?

ATROPOS: Someone else must die in his stead.

APOLLO: (*Lightly.*) Oh—choose some slave. Some gray and greasy thread on your lap, divine Lachesis.

LACHESIS: (*Outraged.*) What? You ask me to take a life?

ATROPOS: You ask us to murder?

CLOTHO: Apollo thinks that we are criminals?

APOLLO: (*Beginning to be fearful.*) Then, great sisters, how is this to be done?

LACHESIS: Me—an assassin? (*She spreads her arms wide and says solemnly:*) Over my left hand is Chance; over my right hand is Necessity.

APOLLO: Then, gracious sisters, how will this be done?

LACHESIS: Someone must *give* his life for Admetus—of free choice and will. Over such deaths we have no control. Neither Chance nor Necessity rules the free offering of the will. Someone must choose to die in the place of Admetus, King of Thessaly.

APOLLO: (*Covering his face with his hands.*) No! No! I see it all! (*With a loud cry.*) Alcestis! Alcestis!

And he runs stumbling from the scene.

CURTAIN