

Turpentine
By Mary Jones

Characters:

ELIZABETH SHIPPONS: a gallery owner and artist, mid-thirties

MARTHA RADDICH: a federal agent; mid-forties

Setting: a gallery, around 4 am. Ideally, this play would be operated with a minimum of lighting, largely in the dark and with flashlights or very low lights; however, pragmatism will likely overrule this.

The stage is dark; ELIZABETH is asleep, back against the wall or on the floor. There is a knock on the door. ELIZABETH stirs; the knocks continue. ELIZABETH looks at her watch. She goes over to the door, turns on the lights.

ELIZABETH

(to herself) What the hell? *(loudly)* Who is it?

MARTHA

(through the door) Emily sent me.

ELIZABETH

Excuse me?

MARTHA

Emily sent me!

ELIZABETH

You're too late! Do you have any idea what time it is? The show's been over for four hours!

MARTHA

This is the only time I could come.

ELIZABETH

Come back later.

MARTHA

Please, you must let me in.

ELIZABETH

Oh God—go away! I don't have time for this. I'm cold, I'm tired, and I'm not letting in some stranger at five in the morning!

ELIZABETH turns to leave.

MARTHA

(pause) "There is no lie I couldn't tell."

ELIZABETH

What'd you say?

MARTHA

"There is no lie I couldn't tell."

ELIZABETH hesitates, then turns back and cautiously unlocks the door. MARTHA enters, but ELIZABETH stops her before she can get too far into the room.

ELIZABETH

Guess Emily did send you. What do you want?

MARTHA

I want to look. I want to buy.

ELIZABETH

You picked a hell of a time—the damn sun's almost up.

MARTHA

I know. Look, I promise I won't get you in trouble. Can I see some of the paintings?

ELIZABETH

You're nuts! It's the middle of the night. Hell, it's not even night, it's practically morning.

MARTHA

This is the only time I could come. I understand it's very late, but I'm very determined to see these pictures, and don't want to jepordize either of us. I'm willing to compensate you.

ELIZABETH

Compensate.

MARTHA

Like you wouldn't believe.

ELIZABETH

Hold on. No offence, but I've got to pat you down, do security. You understand, right?

MARTHA

Yes, I do.

Also, where's your key?
ELIZABETH

Excuse me?
MARTHA

Your key—c'mon, I want to see where you've been.
ELIZABETH

What, suddenly you're a cop?
MARTHA

No—I'm just a very cautious businesswoman. What's to say you're not a thief?
ELIZABETH

Thieves don't knock.
MARTHA

Or a fed?
ELIZABETH

(*hesitating*) OK. You're right. Go ahead.
MARTHA

ELIZABETH pats her down, checking for a weapon, knife, etc. She feels something in the back pocket and stops.

What's that?
ELIZABETH

My wallet. And no, you can't search that. "What's to say you're not a thief?"
MARTHA

Oh. Right, sure. OK, now gimme your key.
ELIZABETH

MARTHA proceeds to produce her "key", a small electronic device, similar to a flash-storage. ELIZABETH takes an electronic device out of her back pocket—similar to a PDA—and plugs it in, downloading the data from the "key."

ELIZABETH

What were you doing down at the federal building?

MARTHA

Huh? Oh, I was renewing my passport.

ELIZABETH

Impressive. Not too many people can get one of those.

MARTHA

I'm a very lucky.

ELIZABETH

I should say so.

MARTHA

I'd like to see the paintings now.

ELIZABETH

Right. Well, over here we have a rather lovely—

MARTHA

No, not these paintings.

ELIZABETH

Why not? They're excellent pieces.

MARTHA

It's not what I'm looking for. Yes, these are very nice pieces—quite good technique. I'm sure they'd be lovely to display them in my home. But I'm looking for something a little more... provocative.

ELIZABETH

Provocative.

MARTHA

Yes. Something that would cause one to think. To see the world somewhat... differently

ELIZABETH

Something not academy-based.

MARTHA

I didn't say that.

ELIZABETH

Of course not.

MARTHA

You see, I have many paintings like these; they litter the walls of my home. I'm quite proud of my collection. But I've been finding it lacking. I've started my own... private collection. One only for myself. Pieces that I find challenging, pieces which cause me to think. I've heard you deal in such artwork.

ELIZABETH

Ma'am—

MARTHA

Martha, please.

ELIZABETH

Martha—I am trying very hard to run a legitimate gallery here. You realize how hard that is? The restrictions on gaining a license? The difficulty in even getting licensed artists to exhibit here?

MARTHA

I understand this all very well. I'm willing to pay you.

ELIZABETH

Well, obviously, you won't get these paintings for free (*nervous laughter*).

MARTHA

No, my dear. I mean I will compensate you so that you'll never have to worry about money again. Now—can I see these works?

ELIZABETH

Look, I really don't know what you want to see. You have to give me more information. I don't want to waste your time—it's late, the sun's nearly up, you'll be seen—

MARTHA

I want to see the unlicensed work. Listen, I know you had an exhibit earlier tonight. I just want to see—and purchase—what others have been able to see and purchase.

ELIZABETH

You realize why I'm uncomfortable.

MARTHA

Very much so. Listen, as I said, I will compensate you.

ELIZABETH

You know, this... these artists really need the money. They don't get to spend all day feeding on government patronage. They have day jobs, they have bills, children, medical expenses. They need a lot of money. Working on just one piece can take a whole year—

MARTHA

Yes, I understand that.

ELIZABETH

It's going to cost a lot. More than you're probably thinking. I'm going to need a deposit for you to look at the pieces. I mean, everyone else who was here paid to get in. You haven't even had to do that.

MARTHA

I can pay you whatever you request; it's not a problem.

ELIZABETH

That's unusual, these days.

MARTHA

You see, my father had the foresight several decades ago to see what was coming—the republic was dissolving at an alarming rate. Secret detentions, suppression of journalists, the torture scandals. He was part of it, you know—he worked in the old Department of Defense. But something soured his stomach—maybe it was the Balkan scandal, I don't know. He was able to funnel his fortune to some safe places—off-shore accounts and the like. I like to think that I'm using my father's money to complete his, ah, change of mind. Contributing to the freedom of information and expression in my own way.

ELIZABETH

Oh really.

MARTHA

Absolutely.

ELIZABETH

OK, I need at least a hundred upfront. As a deposit, so that you can see them.

MARTHA

Now, dear, you know what kind of times we live in. I don't carry that kind of money on me.

ELIZABETH

Well then how am I supposed to—

MARTHA

Elizabeth—may I call you that?—Elizabeth, you must realize my word is good. Why else would I come here at such an ungodly hour if I wasn't serious?

ELIZABETH

People are strange. Look, for all I know you're a fed.

MARTHA

You patted me down. I don't have a gun, I don't have a badge.

ELIZABETH

You were at the Federal building today.

MARTHA

I told you, I was getting my passport renewed.

ELIZABETH

Right, right. I forgot.

MARTHA

Elizabeth, I understand how much work you put into this. I understand that you see yourself as a, a guardian of the arts. I also understand that you need to be paid for your time, and these artists for their work. And I know it's dangerous work, both theirs to create, and yours to operate a second, secret gallery for illicit art while trying to run a legitimate business. You will be compensated.

ELIZABETH

You keep saying that.

MARTHA

Because I mean it. Now, can I please see the other works?

ELIZABETH

(hesitating) I'm not forgetting about the hundred. I really need that money—*(attempting to joke)* I mean, hey—I'm not doing this for charity, right?

MARTHA

You can trust me. I understand what you need. Here you are—early to mid-thirties, right? Unmarried? Widowed?

ELIZABETH

Widowed. M-my husband was killed in the war.

MARTHA

Exactly. We're here to help each other out—you're given the opportunity to provide me with art, and I'm given the opportunity to provide you and your artists with payment, with opportunity.

ELIZABETH disappears offstage and returns, producing a portfolio stuffed with pieces. The audience cannot see the pieces.

ELIZABETH

Um. This first piece is by an artist who used to work in graphic novels, hence the use of panels and text—

MARTHA

(gushing) Quite provocative. Oh, this is wonderful—the homoerotic subtext is—

ELIZABETH

Well, he was very upset with the Licensing and Decency Act—

MARTHA

I'd be very interested in meeting this artist. Maybe commissioning a work from him.

ELIZABETH

I don't know if that's possible. He's leaving the country soon. Moving to New Zealand.

MARTHA

Oh really. So he has his papers in order?

ELIZABETH

Well, um, I assume. I don't actually know.

MARTHA

Yes, let's. I have to say, this is all very, ah, enlightening. I wasn't sure what to expect, and this certainly goes beyond anything I could have imagined. Emily was right. It's all very...

ELIZABETH

Thank you. I'm sure if the artists were here they'd appreciate that. Now these next few pieces are by a woman—

MARTHA

(very excited, thrilled) My God, that's so—the detail of his face, the pain involved. The realism of the open wounds. Yes, I remember hearing about this—rumors. How did she get those images? How did she get them into the country?

ELIZABETH

Um, her son—you know how kids are, you tell them not to do something, but they do it anyway. He apparently had an internet connection for a while.

MARTHA

Even still, I thought sites like this were banned.

ELIZABETH

Again, you know, kids are pretty resourceful. They like to push their boundaries, see how far they can go.

MARTHA

I'm amazed she was able to do this. I love it, but I don't think I'd have the stomach for it.

ELIZABETH

Sometimes you're just disturbed by an image, sometimes you have to work that out of the system. She was upset by what she saw, obviously, and she didn't feel like she could keep silent about it. I mean, you're upset by it yourself—it makes you think, right? (*pause*) If you're really upset, we can move on.

MARTHA

My dear, I'm anything but upset. I find it fascinating. (*She takes the portfolio and starts leafing through it.*) The sadness of this one... Elizabeth, you just showed me a series of works, including a very disturbing collection of images which are, at the very least, of a highly seditious nature, likely illegally obtained. I admire your courage.

ELIZABETH

Um. Well, thank you. I have to admit, it's strange to hear that.

MARTHA

Really, you're few and far between. Let me tell you something—art isn't all about fat cherubs, still-lives, and statesmen. It's about the evolution of us, as sure as mating. I'd really like to meet the artist—in fact, I'd like to commission a piece from her. She is truly outstanding.

ELIZABETH

I really don't think that's possible.

MARTHA

I find that hard to believe.

ELIZABETH

For starters, she's not local.

MARTHA

That's fine—I can wait for her to come out. I'd really like to meet her and her son. I think it's very important. The things she could add to my collection—

ELIZABETH

I understand that, but it'd be very difficult for her to get out here, you see.

MARTHA

I can pay for the trip, it's no trouble.

ELIZABETH

I realize that, but—

MARTHA

And I can pay you for your time, for your trouble.

ELIZABETH

It—it would cost a lot of money.

MARTHA

Elizabeth, it's very important to me to keep the arts alive. These are hard days, you and I both know that, and it's difficult for independent artists to get a break. Don't you see what I'm trying to do? Don't you see I'm trying to help?

ELIZABETH

I don't even deal with the artists—I don't know if I can get a hold of her.

MARTHA

You've said that before. But you show their work, so you must have some way to get into contact with them. Elizabeth, I'm very well-off. I can compensate everyone involved, with very little cost to myself. Now—I must meet this artist.

ELIZABETH

How much?

MARTHA

A lot.

ELIZABETH

I want a figure. She'll ask for a figure.

MARTHA

Elizabeth, couldn't you use some extra cash? I mean, you can't be making that much here, right? *(pause)* Five thousand. Six. Ten. Elizabeth, this woman is fantastic. I would give anything to be her patron.

ELIZABETH

(hesitating) OK, fine, fine—I did it. I did the collage, I did the ink drawing, I did all of them, OK? OK? You promised to pay me. I need to get paid. Now—or nothing.

MARTHA

You did these works. Unlicensed. And an unlicensed showing. You're the artist.

ELIZABETH

Yes, yes, I did. I did. Oh god, don't look at me like that. I know how they look, I know what they are. It's not pornography, it's not revolutionary—it's just not legal. I have to—I have to make money where I can. It gets so cold here at night. I have to turn the heat down, it's so expensive. I can't sleep, I'm too cold, I have to do something. I can't sleep at night, so I'm up,

painting, cutting and pasting, whatever. And when you see things, things that disturb the hell out of you—

MARTHA

Fine, that's enough—

ELIZABETH

I can't sell. I can't sell—it's gotta be a lot of money. I'm tired and cold and hungry. I have to live in my own damn studio. I need a lot of money.

MARTHA

I said that's enough—

MARTHA proceeds to produce a wallet, which contains her badge.

ELIZABETH

Money? Great, great, that's great—

MARTHA opens the wallet, exposing her badge. She pulls the wires out of her shirt, showing them to ELIZABETH.

ELIZABETH

Oh. Oh God. Oh shit. This can't be happening.

MARTHA

Hands on the wall. Spread your legs. I said spread 'em. (*MARTHA proceeds to pat down ELIZABETH*) Elizabeth Shippons, you are under arrest for violation of section 370.2 of the Decency Act, creation and distribution of unlicensed and seditious art.

ELIZABETH

Oh god no—

MARTHA

Now, you can go out to the authorities peacefully, or you can stay here and watch them destroy your work. Which do you want to do? Do you really want to watch them destroy your life's work? Go out now and avoid—

ELIZABETH

This can't be happening. Oh Christ, this can't be happening.

MARTHA

Go out now, and they'll let things go easier on you. Don't put up a fight.

ELIZABETH

I can't, I can't—

MARTHA

You can't win here. Go out now. Stay, and you watch everything burn. Do you think you could handle that?

ELIZABETH gets up, trembling, slow. She hesitates, then slowly leaves the gallery.

MARTHA

(into her wire) I'm sending her out.

MARTHA lingers a moment, looking at the portfolio, before taking a piece for herself and hiding it amongst her things. She leaves.

END