

OFF THE CLOCK

Scene 1

(A D.J. called the NIGHT OWL, in the dim shabby storefront local radio station, live-streaming. He's talking over rich low drone-like looped neo-R&B music. He has a late-night non-commercial radio voice going on—low, conversational, a little hip, a little funny—but authentic; this is his voice.)

NIGHT OWL

Damned. We are damned and we are dammed. One of those things will be different tomorrow. Tomorrow the dam will fall, as the damned have fallen. This is your Night Owl, coming up on two o'clock in the morning, at WSTR The Stream in Anders Falls. We are on the cusp of great things tonight, my probably almost non-existent listeners. Tomorrow the great falls will be set free for the first time in over a century. It will be a new day. Whether it will be a better one is not for me to say; I don't want to get anybody's hopes up. The world rolls on and we roll on with it, just like the water rolling over the dam. Long ago before the dam, the water rolled over the falls, and just upriver Captain Anders and his men snuck up and massacred a sleeping encampment of Indians, all different tribes here under a truce to fish the river, hundreds of people, women, children, everybody. Ground soaked with blood. One of the men did manage to kill Anders, but he'd won by then. And they named the town after him, how about that. It was a good river then for the fish; they used to say you could walk across the river on the backs of the shad and the salmon. But pretty soon they build the first dam, and that was the end, just about, of the fish in this river. Well. Stay tuned for the news—no, wait; no news till six a.m. Just me for another few hours. Just me, and the night and the damned dam and maybe one person out there listening, one night shift worker out there with my voice in their ear. I love you, night worker, you complete me, you know that. Hah. Well. I need to talk and maybe you need to listen. Of course, maybe you're just wishing I'd shut the hell up and let you listen to this music—but that's not going to happen. So... this thing happened, just a few years ago. There was a Servant Wench who later became the Lost Girl, a Barmaid who got lost too, an Artist of the Criminal Class, a Boatman, a Hermit... Hermit, not homeless. That's a lost distinction, I think we ought to bring it back, I think it could come in handy. Homeless is an absence. Hermit is a vocation. Anyway. I'll start with the Servant Wench, right before things got radically unstuck. Radically. Un. Stuck. Oh, listen to the Night Owl, I've got a story to tell you, while we wait for the sun to rise and the dam to fall.

(Lights up on Lenora, mostly called Lo, a teenaged girl standing alone wearing a work smock over thrift-store clothes.)

Scene 2

LO *(to the audience)*

Hi. So—Waitaminute—JAN-EECE! Freak, closing time and Janice is nowhere / in sight.

JANICE *(from off)*

WHAT?

LO
YOU GONNA HELP ME CLEAN UP OR WHAT?

JANICE (*from off*)

WHAT?

LO (*giving up*)

Sss. (*She goes on talking to the audience. She does not mime the actions.*) OK, whatever. Hi. So, this is happening. I'm telling you about it as it's happening, OK? I'm like narrating it. You'll see why. So, I'm at work. I roll a clothes rack over to the dressing rooms, and begin rescuing clothes. The plate glass windows in front are black, 'cause it's already night on the other side of them. It's like November. I can see my reflection but I don't look familiar. I'm singing to myself:

TAKE A DEEP AND MEASURED BREATH
AND LET IT OUT ONCE MORE
IT'S THAT MUCH SOONER TILL YOUR DEATH
COMES STROLLING THROUGH THE DOOR

I don't know where I heard that song. Maybe I made it up?

This is a big huge barn of a thrift store. You can see it all from wherever you're standing, one big low-ceiling room under the glare of the florescents. An ocean of stuff somebody didn't want any more, hundreds and hundreds of things. Or, I don't know, thousands I guess. Thousands of things to get left in fitting rooms or knocked off their hangers or put back in the wrong place, and then it's my job to fix all that. That's all it is and that's all I need it to be. I'm not ambitious to stretch my minimum wage wings. I'm not fulltime, just almost, 'cause they don't want to pay me benefits and I guess it's supposed to be like a side-job for a high school girl which I guess I sort of should be but I'm not.

It's closing time on Thursday night. The one late night. Nine p.m. Families come in after supper. Groups of girls, goofing around. Grown-ups one by one, looking like they worked late and they're beat but this is the only time they can come in to find that three-ninety-nine blouse they need for work so they can stop rinsing out the only two decent ones they've got every other night.

So Janice – it's spelled like Janis but she says it JaNEEce – the minute it turns nine Janice flips the Open sign around to Closed and starts flicking the overheads on and off to get the stragglers out. There's only one anyway, an old guy called Tom who had a stroke so he shuffles but he's not stupid, and he comes in every Thursday night and shuffles up and down the aisles, and he stops to chat when he comes up with his chipped thirty-nine cent coffee mug or whatever, so that's how I know his name and a lot more about him that is not, like, germane to this particular story. Anyway, Tom comes up with a Hawaiian shirt for four-ninety-nine, while Janice is flicking the lights on and off. I say, "*Hsst!* Janice! OK!" and she shrugs and goes in the back. I say, "Wow, fancy," about Tom's shirt, and he says some stuff I can't understand because the stroke made him mumbley, but I smile and nod, and he leaves, and I lock the door behind him and flick off the outside lights.

LO *cont'd*

I turn around to help straighten up. After a Thursday night this is a big job, it looks like a tornado hit. It's gonna take at least an hour. Where the freak is Janice? And there she goes, rushing down the central aisle with her jacket on and her flats changed to spike-heeled boots, and her mouth tight because she knows it's not fair to leave me on my own, but she's gonna, so she's mad at me. I open my mouth to say something and—

JANICE (*from off*)

I GOTTA GO, I DID MY SHARE, I CAN'T HANG AROUND HERE ALL NIGHT, I'LL STAY LATE FOR YOU SOMETIME IF YOU EVER GET A LIFE HA HA, BYE!

LO

—and she's on the other side of the door running tippy-toe because of the spike heels across the almost-empty parking lot and jumping into a rusted-out Mazda which takes off with a squeal.

I lock the doors again. Whatever. She's right. I don't have anywhere to be. When I'm done here I'll walk to the Cumberland Farms convenience at the gas station for a microwave burrito and some flashlight batteries, and I'll take them back to my car, parked down the darker end of the strip mall behind the Job Lot. I'll eat, then I'll get out of the car and brush my teeth with a bottle of water, spit against the Job Lot's wall. Get back in the car, lock all the doors, hunker down in the backseat under the blankets and read by flashlight till I fall asleep. I have piles of books. Books are cheap to free, so I try to keep up with current intellectual trends. Ha, just kidding, in *fantasy* – swords, sorcery, dragons, like that. I know that's not, like, considered, like, serious literature. Whatever. Anyway so that's my evening agenda and there's no hurry, except I'm hungry.

So. OK. That's, like, backstory. I've put you in the picture. This is where it really starts. Still in the thrift store, cleaning up. Now I'm in the way-back, with the long racks of household fabric stuff: blankets comforters curtains in fake silk and fake cotton and fake wool and fake down.

It's after ten by now. I been working since eleven and I can feel my eyeballs vibrating in time with the florescent overheads. I can feel the same vibration in my blood, not flowing, it's jerking through my veins, tiny little quivers. That's how tired I am. I'm on auto-pilot, stumping along, pushing through the racks, bushwacking through a polyester jungle, shoving the big hangers, untangling the fabrics, turning a set of drapes right-side-out and refolding them, on and on and on. My eyes are half closed, and I'm starting to sing again.

TAKE A DEEP AND MEASURED BREATH
AND LET IT OUT ONCE MORE
IT'S THAT MUCH SOONER TILL YOUR DEATH

I get to the end of the row. It dead-ends at the wall and that's where I usually turn and go back. But tonight— I see behind the last row, another row. There's another row of racks, that I never knew about. This is weird. I mean, it's actually extremely freaking weird. Is this a whole other department they never told me about? Does Janice know about this? I turn the corner, into the new row. There aren't any more florescent strips overhead, just some spillover light along the

LO cont'd

ceiling, so it's dimmer. It's still hanging fabrics, but they feel thicker, warmer, more real. I mean, like as though they were real silk, real cotton, real wool. And they're all hanging neatly, I don't have to fix anything. I keep walking, just running my hands along the material. Get to the end, turn the corner, guess what? Another row. They seem to be clothes again now, but they don't seem like cheap crappy stuff anymore. They seem like nice stuff, velvet, wool, leather, embroidery.

Another row. And it's similar stuff hanging, except it's in bad shape. Really bad. Damp, rotting, cobwebby, covered with dirt and bits of splintered wood. I stop touching it, but I keep going, because it feels like really the last row, sense of space opening up on the other side. So here it comes. Here comes why I'm telling you.

Get to the end of the row. Turn the corner. Walk into empty space. Stop and stare around. It's sort of like a church. And then I think it's like a theater. But it is definitely a ruin.

The ceiling's way overhead, high and rounded, like the inside of a giant barrel. It's smashed through with holes the size of cannon balls, a hundred of them. The walls are slashed through, like they were ripped by giant claws. Wind is huffing through the gaps.

To the right, looks like a church. A giant pointed arch, like where an altar used to be. A big round window in there, all smashed in.

To the left, looks like a theater. Curtains hang in rusty tatters. But where the stage used to be it's empty, the floor caved in.

I don't move. Doesn't look safe. Rain has come through the ruined ceiling, and rotted the floor, and you can see in places through to a cellar, filled with oily water.

So, huh. Hm. Huh. There are plenty of ruins in Anders Falls. Ruined mills, ruined factories, empty ruined storefronts. Ruined people. But I don't remember there being a ruined church or theater behind the thrift store.

And, oh. Hey. Here's something else. There's no lights on back here. How am I seeing all this? Well, I'll tell you. Daylight. Daylight through the holes in the ceiling, the slashes in the walls, the row of high pointy windows straight ahead. Nothing but sky, grey and wet, like an oyster. At eleven o'clock at night.

And when I look behind me, the way I came? No racks of clothes. No thrift store. Another row of smashed out gothic windows. More oyster sky.

I feel a little woozy for a moment. I think about fainting, that seems maybe appropriate. But no way do I want to hit that floor. So I just pick my way real carefully to the nearest window, climb through and hop down. I'm on a hill, above a wide fat river stretched out for miles and miles in either direction. Not a single building in sight. It looks like, maybe, like Anders Falls before. Before the dam? Before, like, us? It's like I've fallen out of the world. It's like I'm lost.

This. Is. Really. Good. News.