

**PART 7: Passing the Buck**

TENNIE

I'm Tennessee Claflin. I go by Tennie.

THE HOST

What are you --

TENNIE

Shhh, I'm in charge now.

THE HOST

What are you going to do?

TENNIE

Tell it. The story. What would you like to see?

THE HOST

Something to show Victoria --

TENNIE

We was thick as thieves. And you go and make a show about the one thing she did alone. You know I ran for Congress. I was also in charge of a military. I ran to be Colonel of the 9th Regiment. You had to run for the position. Last guy was Fisk, he was a finance guy. He bought the job and then he died because his mistress's boyfriend got mad and shot him. They wouldn't have me.

THE HOST

Right. Yes, but about --

TENNIE

But then this colored regiment made me colonel. The 85th cause I did a lot of work for the Blacks. Votes and equality. Don't hear much about that.

THE HOST

Victoria also --

TENNIE

Yes. Both of us. Thick as thieves. What about me?

THE HOST

What about when you ran that cancer hospital and --

TENNIE

Oh that. Huh. I guess. OK. Make that scene ... the hotel; My papa, Buck and me are talking.

*Scene changes to the Health Hotel. BUCK is with TENNIE.*

BUCK

Just give her more.

TENNIE

It burns.

BUCK

That's the cure! Medicine burns! It's why it's called medicine!

TENNIE

Medicine? That stuff comes out of a vat mamma and Utica stir all night. Ain't no medicine in that!

BUCK

And you think in ancient days of Jesus and Moses they didn't stir up in no vat? Vat's is the oldest possession.

TENNIE

Burned her tits clean off.

BUCK

She got cancer! She gonna die! You --

TENNIE

(Breaks from the scene.)

No. No. I'm not interested in this.

BUCK

What are you talking?

TENNIE

No thanks.

*ROXY enters.*

ROXY

Lord they kicking a fuss! Gonna send the sheriff!

BUCK

We need to scatter!

TENNIE

(Over the performance.)

No. None of this. Also, my mother spoke with a thick German accent. Did you know that?

ROXY

I did?

TENNIE

Yes. But I imagine explaining that would be too much work. We need to keep it simple. Right? Enough!

*Scene ends.*

THE HOST

What are you doing?

TENNIE

You don't want this. You put me in charge, I'll do it.

THE HOST

But don't you think you and Victoria's history of selling fake cures and --

TENNIE

We, what? That Victoria came from crooks and the dregs and pulled herself up to fuck her way to the top -

THE HOST

Whoa that's not -

TENNIE

True, she didn't always fuck as strategically as me. Sometimes she fucked to the side or lateral wasn't always to the top.

THE HOST

Can we not say -

TENNIE

Facts? One morning I was sitting naked, the newspaper -

THE HOST

I'm trying to keep the show all ages.

TENNIE

What's the problem? The newspaper?

THE HOST

You are ...

TENNIE

Naked? Is that an issue? The very sight of a naked woman is somehow perverse?

THE HOST

I'm not saying -

TENNIE

I'm not putting my legs behind my ears. I'm reading. But yes if a woman dares do anything it's through the lens of a telescope trained right on her erotics. Shame. Shame on me for not wearing the stifling endless layers!

THE HOST

Keep the focus on Victoria.

TENNIE

Yes, your majesty! Let us do a little scene at our brokerage house. That will be good insight into us. Scene start!

*Sound of ticking stock reader. An office.*

TENNIE

Check the margins. I'm wearing pants.

*Sound of banging on the glass.*

TENNIE

There's the men! They come to stare at us like we was aquarium fish. We a joke to them, but we earn in a day more than they'll see in a life. Wearing pants is illegal for a woman at this time.

THE HOST

You can't break the 4<sup>th</sup> wall and be in the scene, it's confusing.

TENNIE

I'm not confused.

THE HOST

Not you. Them. And in fact --

TENNIE

Fact smacked! You are too hung up on truth.

THE HOST

Tell me about Victoria.

TENNIE

She was brooding. I took to society well. I always could find a laugh or smile. She was all. Men liked her for sure. But they adored me. She was the mind, I was the body. Like at this one party ...

*Sounds of a party.*

TENNIE

There was mutton six ways. I only could count four, but. And the champagne.

*Sound of champagne popping. Being poured.*

TENNIE (cont.)

The music!

*Sound of a small trio playing classical music.*

TENNIE

And the deserts ... French cakes, little chocolate things.

(Eating.)

This cream whatever it is.

THE HOST

And when does Victoria enter?

TENNIE

Huh? Oh she's off giving a speech.

(To a waiter.)

I'll have some more of these fellows.

WAITER

Right away, ma'am.

*She eats more. Takes a big slurp of something.*

THE HOST

Wait! You're just doing this scene so you can eat and drink!

TENNIE

What? No! This is all - MORE CHAMPAGNE! - vital bits of information.

THE HOST

No! Stop it.

*The party continues.*

THE HOST

I said stop.

*The party continues.*

TENNIE

I'm in charge. The party continues. Sorry.

THE HOST

Please.

TENNIE

Ugh, fine. One more slice.

(Eats quickly.)

End.

*The Party fades away.*

TENNIE (cont.)

Victoria, my sister. You want to know why she ran? Her heart. Her mind. It's like the poor man. That speech she gave. That moment was important.

THE HOST

Great! Let's go to that moment!

TENNIE

Sure. Here he come now ...

*A street. Sounds of traffic. A man enters, ANTHONY COMSTOCK.*

THE HOST

Wait, that's -

COMSTOCK

Anthony Comstock! I will save this Republic from the sin of vice! I have personally destroyed a thousand pounds of pornography!

TENNIE

And I have my gun. And I go up to him and -

*TENNIE shoots COMSTOCK.*

THE HOST

No! That didn't happen.

TENNIE

Oh. Right. Maybe it was ...

COMSTOCK

Anthony Comstock! I will save this Repub-

*He explodes.*

THE HOST

He didn't explode.

TENNIE

Falling anvil?

COMSTOCK

Anthony Com -- Eep.

*He's squashed by an anvil.*

THE HOST

No.

TENNIE

Falling piano.

COMSTOCK

Smut is -

*He's crushed by a piano.*

THE HOST

Stop! No. Comstock died in his bed. He never gave up his crusade to ban erotica and censor people from talking about sex.

TENNIE

He should have died violently. He kept us locked up. He took our money, our newspaper, called us harlots. He put his thumb on the scales of justice. He ruined us. And thousands of others!

THE HOST

I'm sorry about that, but -

TENNIE

No. No. It's me. I'm not playing fair. I'm conning you out of your own little podcast. I'm playing a game.

THE HOST

Were any of the ghosts real? Demosthenes or the ones that told her she'd be president?

TENNIE

I'm a ghost ain't I? Nah, that's getting to the 4th wall again, right? Ah well, Ghosts were ghosts. Gave us some power, a point to being, a home.

THE HOST

Your time was ...

TENNIE

Marriage was forever and it was law. You got sucked up into a man when you got married. That was what free love was about. About equality. The sex was used to make it sound salacious, dangerous.

THE HOST

It was a messed up time.

TENNIE

Sure. But there were men who were more open. Mostly most people are basic normal people. Boring folk. And if you're dirt poor or Black or Indian or whatever then it's all worse, but shit is



always worse for some. We lived high some days, some days we ate mud. Same as you.

THE HOST

We can't get. About the poor man. From the speech.

TENNIE

Sure there's the street ...

*Sound of the street.*

TENNIE (cont.)

And the man.

MAN

(Flat.)

Help! I'm a man.

THE HOST

Come on.

TENNIE

Shhh.

*Very panto, put on. A puppet show.*

MAN

I am broken! I am hurt.

VICTORIA

Oh here I come! I shall save you!

*Very patriotic music plays.*

TENNIE

And then a dozen bald eagles carried her over to him.

*Sound of eagles. Flapping.*

THE HOST

Stop!

TENNIE

You don't want the direct true history from the horse's mouth?

THE HOST

I want the truth.

TENNIE

Right. Truth, truth. I can't.

THE HOST

You can! You know what I'm talking about.

TENNIE

Her speech. How she held him and gave him some bread. And he called her the devil, and such and such -- Then Vicky would pull back, a single tear in the corner of her left eye. And she'd choke on her words and say: 'I must be better. And that day I vowed to work for the poor instead of ever exploiting him.' And the crowd would jump to its feet screaming "Victoria! Victoria! Victoria!"

THE HOST

Yes just. Let us see that. The actual moment.

TENNIE

That never happened. There was never no man. But she told that story so many thundering times I wonder if her own grey jelly took it as gospel. But damn I'd laugh every time. She was so perfect with that tear. Every time. Her catch in the throat.

THE HOST

So it didn't happen?

TENNIE

Did anything happen? It's all made up! One way or another. What does George Washington's actual bones care if we venerate him or not! They say his teeth was wood, but his dentures were made of slave teeth. History is dark and can fuck off.

THE HOST

Please stop swearing.

TENNIE

You get those nostalgia folk who look back at the "nobler" times. Like that was ever it.

THE HOST

We're trying to highlight -

TENNIE

Worse still though is the anti-nostalgia. People like you. Or your audience. The *them* out there. You got men who listen, nod their head and think themselves enlightened and noble. Cause they never lynched a Negro or raped a woman like what was happening back in my time. They say "I'm good because I'm not that! I'm a good person and an ally." Because he is fine with them voting and not being strung up. Their racism and their sexism isn't so overt and open, so they think they are noble. But them is shit.

THE HOST

That's not --

TENNIE

You hold up my time to make your time look civil.

THE HOST

We are trying to learn from the past.

TENNIE

It's not better or worse. Just different. Most of all history isn't progress it's lateral it's side-ways. Things change and change ain't always better or worse most of the time it's just change.

THE HOST

So we shouldn't bother --

TENNIE

You bother all you want. In twenty years they'll look back at all these nice folk listening and holding up signs and pretending to do shit. The future people will list your nice deeds and talk about them with just as much anguish and horror as you do my time.

THE HOST

That's not what it's about. I'm not trying to judge you or what you had to do.

TENNIE

It's all a judgement. And what 'had to do?' Had.

(Sighs.)

If I fuck Vanderbilt for his money. Or a man for the shape of his mustache. Or because I'm bored; I'm happy; I'm sad. It's all the same. You are still stuck in the trappings of 'love.' Love is a good reason to fuck. But so is money. So is boredom. You put a value on everything and understand the price of none of it.

THE HOST

What are you saying then? We just burn it all down?

TENNIE

See there's your problem. You think there's an answer.

(Beat.)

Yes, I killed a woman. I burned off her breasts because breast cancer wasn't talked about because a woman's breasts were taboo subjects. We took advantage of the fact that women can't talk about their bodies. So we burned and killed her. Took her money. I did. Woman ain't better cause she's a woman. Ain't worse either. All is all in the end.

THE HOST

And Victoria ...

TENNIE

Named for the Queen. Named for the whole age. Vicky was who she was. If we can dance instead of remember or hurt, why not dance.

*Music starts up. The party scene comes back.*

THE HOST

If we forget history we're doomed to repeat it.

TENNIE

But then why is all them people who remember it still repeating it? Those who remember history are doomed to keep giving a shit about it.

THE HOST

I'm just trying to let people know --

TENNIE

You can't sell 'a knowledge.' What made her run? You trying to bottle that, sell it; that makes you the same snake oil man as my father. As me. You can't sell a bottle of answers or make a map that leads to a place no one ever been. Now let's dance.

THE HOST

So what do I do? I feel empty too. Like I have all these things I want to give and nowhere to give it. What do I do?

TENNIE

Dance!

THE HOST

Will that help?

TENNIE

Hell if I know. But it's like fucking, at least it feels good while it's happening. Most of the time.

*Music gets louder. Sounds of dancing. Laughing. A party. It swells and builds. And takes over.*

*THE HOST tries to talk over the sound but can't.*

*A sound of banging. The sound seems to quiet down and part like the red sea.*

VICTORIA

Enough.

TENNIE

Vicky.

VICTORIA

Give it back now.

TENNIE

Why?

VICTORIA

It's not yours. Our time is done.

TENNIE

Our time? *Our*. Your time. This is about you.

VICTORIA

No. It's about her. Calling us up and putting on a shadow play of our lives. A reflection of it. Pulling the details away until it's just a shadow box. The statues of Washington aren't built

for Washington they are built for the people to reflect him onto them. Leave them up, tear them down, the past is the mirror. And we must reflect.

TENNIE

I ain't doing nothing.

VICTORIA

Then I will. Let us reset it. Let's finish this.