

"Lush and striking....A heady, strange, and beautifully-written novel about how stories give form to worlds."

—*Kirkus Reviews* (starred review)



# RADIANCE

A NOVEL

CATHERYNNNE M.  
**VALENTE**

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**CATHERYNE M. VALENTE**



**A TOM DOHERTY ASSOCIATES BOOK • NEW YORK**

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*For Heath, who taught me about light  
and my father, who taught me how to get the shot*

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## Chronology

(Some dates are approximate due to known issues with reconciling standard and sub-light transit calendars.)

- 1858:** Conrad Wernyhora and Carlotta Xanthea launch the *Tree of Knowledge* from the Hawaiian islands, Earth
- 1872:** Violet El-Hashem born in Marrakech, Earth
- 1876:** Hathor Callowmilk Corporation founded
- 1883:** Percival Unck born
- 1891:** Mary Pellam born
- 1902:** Proserpine, an American colony on Pluto, is destroyed. Cause unknown.
- August 1908:** Mary Pellam's first significant role (*Meet Me on Ganymede*, dir. Hester Jimenez-Sterling)
- 24 March 1914:** First episode of *How Many Miles to Babylon?* broadcast throughout the inner Solar System
- 29 October 1914:** Severin born in the Lunar city of Tithonus
- 6 January 1915:** Premiere of *The Red Beast of Saturn* (dir. Percival Unck)
- 25 January 1916:** Erasmo St. John born on location in Guan Yu, Mars
- 1917:** Enyo, a Russian mining settlement on Mars, is destroyed. Cause unknown.
- 3 July 1919:** Premiere of *Hope Has No Master* (dir. Percival Unck)
- 1921:** Severin sees Mary Pellam for the first time in *The Seduction of Madame Mortimer* (dir. Thaddeus Irigaray)
- 1922:** Percival Unck and Mary Pellam wed
- 1924:** *The Abduction of Proserpine* (dir. Percival Unck) released
- 3 July 1924:** Anchises St. John born in Adonis, Venus
- 14 January 1930:** The *Achelois* sets sail from Tithonus Harbour for *The Miranda Affair* (dir. Thaddeus Irigaray) wrap party
- 1936:** *Self-Portrait with Saturn* (dir. Severin Unck) released
- Christmas 1937:** Erasmo and Severin become romantically involved
- 1938:** *The Famine Queen of Phobos* (dir. Severin Unck) released
- 1939:** The *Stone in Swaddling Clothes* departs for the Outer System
- 1940:** The *Clamshell* built
- 1940:** Fifth Venusian census, the last to record the village of Adonis
- 1941:** *And the Sea Remembered, Suddenly* (dir. Severin Unck) released
- 1943:** *The Sleeping Peacock* (dir. Severin Unck) released
- June 1944:** Moscow Worlds' Fair / The *Clamshell* departs for filming of *The Radiant Car* (dir. Sparrows Drew) (dir. Severin Unck)

- 16 November 1944:** The *Clamshell* lands at White Peony Station for *Radiant Car* principal photography
- 
- 21 November 1944:** *Radiant Car* film crew sets out from White Peony Station
- 1 December 1944:** Crew arrives in Adonis, Venus, first contact made
- 2 December 1944:** Auditory phenomena commences
- 3 December 1944:** Severin disappears
- 1946:** Erasmo St. John debriefed by Oxblood Films
- 10 October 1947:** Severin's funeral *in absentia*
- 1951:** Severin's funeral
- 1959:** Production begins on *The Deep Blue Devil* (dir. Percival Unck)
- Spring 1959:** Posthumous publication of Erasmo St. John's book *The Sound of a Voice That Is Still*
- 1960:** Major rewrite on *The Deep Blue Devil*, retitled *The Man in the Malachite Mask* (dir. Percival Unck)
- Winter 1961:** Major rewrite on *The Man in the Malachite Mask*, retitled *Doctor Callow's Dream* (dir. Percival Unck)
- Summer 1961:** Major rewrite on *Doctor Callow's Dream*, retitled *And if She's Not Gone, She Lives There Still* (dir. Percival Unck)
- December 1961–October 1962:** The action of ~~*The Deep Blue Devil*~~ ~~*The Man in the Malachite Mask*~~ ~~*Doctor Callow's Dream*~~ *And If She's Not Gone, She Lives There Still* takes place

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## Locations

The Moon	
Mercury	
Venus	
Earth	
Mars	
Jupiter	
Saturn	
Uranus	
Neptune	
Pluto	



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Being unable to retrace our steps in Time, we decided to move forward in Space. Shall we never be able to glide back *up* the stream of Time, and peep into the old home, and gaze on the old faces? Perhaps when the phonograph and the kinesiograph are perfected, and some future worker has solved the problem of colour photography, our descendants will be able to deceive themselves with something very like it: but it will be but a barren husk, a soulless phantasm and nothing more. “Oh for the touch of a vanished hand, and the sound of a voice that is still!”

—**Wordsworth Donisthorpe, inventor of the kinesiograph camera**

Light makes photography. Embrace light. Admire it. Love it. But above all, know light. Know it for all you are worth, and you will know the key to photography.

—**George Eastman**

Talking pictures are like lip rouge on the Venus de Milo.

—**Mary Pickford**

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## Come Forward!



*Come forward. Come in from the summer heat and the flies. Come in from that assault on all senses that pummeling of rod and cone and drum and cilia. Come in from the great spotlight of the sun sweeping across the white sands, making everyone, and therefore no one, a star.*

*Come inside and meet the prologue.*

*It is dark inside the prologue. Dark and cool and welcoming. Whatever is to come, the prologue welcomes you absolutely, accepts you unconditionally, receives you graciously, providing all that is necessary to endure the rest. The prologue is patient. She has been told often that she is wholly unnecessary, a growth upon the story that the wise doctor must cut off. She has time and again found the doors to more fashionable establishments closed to her, while tables are set with candles and crystal for a top-hatted in medias res, a pedigreed murder at midnight, a well-heeled musical number. This does not trouble the prologue. She was fashionable when plays still began with sacrifices—and you catch her in her cups, she will tell you that any show that jumps into the action without a brace heifers burning centre front still strikes her as a rather tawdry affair. The prologue is the mother of the tale and the governess of the audience. She knows you have to bring them in slow, teach them how to behave. All it takes is a little music; a soft play of lights; a flash of skin; a good, beefy monologue bring everyone up to speed before you expect them to give a witch's third tit who's king of Scotland.*

*The prologue is where you take your coats off. Relax. Leave your shoes at the door. Invoke the muse, call down whatever royal flush of gods you want pulling the action between them. O Muse, Goddess. Sing, Speak, Weep. Give unto me the song of rage. Hand over the arms and the man on the double-quick. Hit that horn and play me the voice of the many-minded traveller who could not go home. Keep a front-row seat for that masked demiurge, a plum spot for that jazzy old Word in the Void, or let it be on your head.*

*So come in. Let your eyes adjust. We need your eyes. Let the chartreuse pop of the sun's afterimage fade into the blackness we have thoughtfully provided. The floor creaks underfoot: slick, yielding wood, green as an olive in a martini, fresh from the forests of Ganymede. You can smell it lightly under the lime polish. Ashes and copper. Let the dark scoop your ears clean, scrub out the bubbling champagne-cacophony of the world you have only just left behind. We need your ears. And we want your hands as well. We are all primates, after all. We love to touch; we love to interfere with objects. Nothing is real until you can touch it. Your sight will sharpen in time; the shadows will lift and separate like curtains. You will find pages under your eager fingers: pages, phonographs, objects*

great and small but mostly small, resting on pillars of Uranian saltrock carved into cresting, foaming gnarled waves, trusting their flotsam to your keeping.

---

Come in, come in, there is so much to see.

No sitting down, though. We need you standing. There's a projector here, just there—have a care, sir—to your right. Another—mind your hems, madam—to your left. But you will find no screen. You're not to see it. If you'll gather in ... yes, just so, all in a row like good little daisies. Tall folk to the rear, small folk up front. Now, if you are comfortable, we can begin.

This is a story about seeing. This is a story about being seen. All else is subservient. The ears assist; the hands comfort. The only verbs that matter are verbs of vision: look, see, watch, observe, gaze. Behold. Witness. The eye is our master, and the eye worships light. That which makes light good, that which takes it is to be feared. We have taken it from you, but we will give it back again. Make of that what you will.

God—if you will forgive such sweeping pronouncements so early in our acquaintance—is an eye.

It would be better if you would consent to disrobe. Skin is the most intimate and perfect of screens. But having come from so many ports and climes, we do not expect your taboos concerning modesty to match up perfectly with ours—why, thank you, miss, you are most kind. And sir, we are greatly obliged. The matron seems to be having some trouble with her costume; if you could assist her, young lady? Thank you. You have all proven yourselves wonderfully gracious and liberal-minded. You are an audience we do not deserve. Perhaps it is a relief after the heat to shed silk and leathers. Nevertheless, we are thoroughly impressed. We shall endeavour to make ourselves equally naked, equally bare, equally vulnerable to iris and pupil, whose bites are ever so much fiercer than teeth.

The clatter and whirr of the projectors pick up like wind across a long desert. Look down. You can see a woman with dark hair and unhappy eyes moving silently on your bellies, your breasts, your thighs, your feet. Upside down, shorn of colour, flickering. Bent and cut up by the curves of your bodies and the age of the film. You see her as you see anyone in this world: distorted, warped, reflected, refracted, contorted, mutilated by time.

Perhaps you recognize the scene. It was once a famous film, after all. She was once a famous woman. I hear you say her name, sir—but this is our show, pray allow us to reveal things in our own time.

Observe: It is daytime in the movie on your chest. The crew is setting up the morning's shoot. The director of photography, a great, broad-chested fellow with a smart moustache, shaves in a mirror nailed to a cacao-tree. The looking glass hangs at a rakish angle, half-sunk into furry black bark. You will know by the tree that he stands upon the surface of Venus, not far from the sea. It is late summer. A spot of rain glimmers on the lens.

Yes, my dear fellow, you know his name, too. You are just awfully clever.

The DP uses a straight razor inlaid with a scrimshaw of fossilized kelp. You will find it along the east wall. Do not be afraid; it has not dreamed of sharpness since its profligate youth. The blade belonged to his grandfather, a merchant sailor who played the bassoon—a most impractical instrument for a seaman, but how the old man loved his pipe! The scrimshaw shows a sea serpent, each scale lovingly etched, as round as fingernails. The director of photography is shirtless, his skin as dark as unshot film, his face angular and broad. He catches a glimpse of the woman in his mirror and

*whirls round to catch her up. He kisses her with a resounding smack you cannot hear, smearing shaving cream on her face. She laughs noiselessly and punches his arm; he recoils in mock agony. It is a pleasant scene. Some phantom discontentment pops like a flashbulb in her eyes and obliterates itself into love.*

*Observe: It is evening in the movie on your legs. A small boy, head bent, dressed in the uniform of a callowhale diver, walks in small, tight circles in what was once the centre of a village called Adonis. The houses and outbuildings look as though they have been gored with great horns: lacerated, burnt open. Long, squalid lashings of what appears to be white paint spatter the ruins. But it is not pain that Adonis, the lost city, destroyed, obliterated, without reason, without warning. A mystery that pulled a woman across the stars and down into its scarlet seas. The boy does not look up as the camera watches him. He does not see himself being seen by the film crew, by the audiences to come, by us. He does not see his echo; he does not hear his projection. He simply turns and turns and turns, over and over. The corrupted film skips and jumps; the boy seems to leap through his circuit, flashing in and out of sight. Clouds drift down in long, indistinct spirals. Celluloid transforms the brutal orange of the Venusian sun into a blinding white nova. Beyond him, pearlescent islands hump up out of the foamy sea. Qadesh: callowhales, a whole pod, silent, unmoving, pale.*

*Now. Gaze, behold, witness: A third projector judders on, seeing but unseen, hidden in the curtain. It fires its beam at the laughing couple, the shaving cream, the razor that once belonged to a bassoon-loving grandfather. Image over image over flesh. The woman seems to step out of her lover's arms and into a ballroom, becoming suddenly a pouting, sour-faced little girl practically drowning in the starched lace and crinoline of one of those old Gothics we love so well—would you care to name it, sir? You know so much; I will not believe for a moment you do not recognize The Spectre of Mare Nubium, the marvellously morbid masterwork that earned its director, Percival Unck, his first Academy Award. Your fine chest sports the classic ballroom sequence, wherein the blood-soaked villain receives his much-deserved comeuppance. The little girl can be seen crouching miserably near the rice-wine fountain, chewing her fingers and spitting the nails at the whirling dancers. The grand dresses of the waltzing ghosts pass over her face like veils.*

*Please, ladies and gentlemen! Your protestations destroy the dark quiet of our little universe. I can see you leap quite out of your skin. You must be prepared for these interruptions, invasions, intersections. They are necessary. They are the exhalations of the dead. Humans do not proceed in an orderly fashion from one scene to the next. Memory lies underneath happenstance; hope and dread sprawl on top. Our days and nights are their endless orgies.*

*Now, listen: Our phonograph scratches up a man's voice and a small girl's, the very girl who at this moment is flickering silver and black on your thighs, sinking her face into balled fists under the murderous Clarena Schirm's banquet table.*

*“How many beginnings can a story have, Daddy?”*

*The man chuckles. It is a nice chuckle, tobacco-velvet, a chuckle that says: Oh, the questions my kid asks!*

*“As many as you can eat, my lamb. But only one ending. Or maybe it's the other way around: one beginning but a whole Easter basket of endings.”*

*“Papa, don't be silly,” the child admonishes in a voice accustomed to getting its way. “A story has*

to start somewhere. And then it has to end somewhere. That's the whole point. That's how it is in real life."

---

The man laughs again. You like his laugh. I like his laugh. We cannot help but feel well disposed toward a man with a laugh like that, even though it is not really his, but a laugh he learned at university, copied meticulously from his favourite screenwriting professor as you and I might copy from our neighbour during an exam.

"But that's not how it is in real life, Rinny. Real life is all beginnings. Days, weeks, children, journeys, marriages, inventions. Even a murder is the beginning of a criminal. Perhaps even a spree. Everything is prologue. Every story has a stutter. It just keeps starting and starting until you decide to shut the camera off. Half the time you don't even realise that what you're choosing for breakfast is the beginning of a story that won't pan out till you're sixty and staring at the pastry that made you a widower. No, love, in real life you can get all the way to death and never have finished one single story. Or never even get one so much as half-begun."

"Papa, you're babbling. Ada says you have to stop that. She says you're full of hot air."

"I'm full of many things, I'm sure. Very well, you do so love rules! I shall make some up for you at the spot, so that my little moppet is not forced to wander the world in a soup of stories without laws. A tale may have exactly three beginnings: one for the audience, one for the artist, and one for the poor bastard who has to live in it."

A bright cascade of giggles splashes out over the crackle of the phonograph. The child lowers her voice to a whisper: "I like it when you swear."

And at that moment the child leaps out of the phantasmal throng of dancing ghosts, out of the frame, out of The Spectres of Mare Nubium, and shimmers into the shape of the Venusian boy, her serious expression so like hers, turning in endless circles on a grey lawn.

Her name is Severin Unck. She is ten years old. She is talking to her father, Percy.

She is dead. Almost certainly dead. Nearly conclusively dead. She is, at the very least, not answering her telephone.

Welcome. This beginning is your beginning. We have saved it specially for you. Shall we?

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## Oh, Those Scandalous Stars!



***Places, Everyone!*, 3<sup>rd</sup> July 1919**

### **Editor's Note**

My darlings, if only I could have brought you all with me! Just gathered you up in my arms out of your parlours and kitchens, still in your aprons and overcoats, and spirited you to the glittering premiere of Percival Unck's latest thrilling picture, *Hope Has No Master!* How I would have loved to play Father Christmas and appear on the cobalt carpet with a sackful of my readers—nay, my *friends*—so that you could see the brilliant and the beautiful for yourselves, spilling out of their long cream-coloured limousines, cars clean and bright and glittering as though they'd just passed through a storm of diamonds instead of our lowly lunar raindrops.

Well, if *I* am not Father Christmas, who is? Gather round! The beard is quite real, I assure you. Here is an orange for each of you girls and a plum for each of you boys! Watch me string up the stars for you like lights on a tree, each one prettier than the last.

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***Limelight*, 12th October 1947**

My hungry gossip-hounds, today there can be no happy games of fetch between us. I come you hat in hand to report the doings of the day, but I take no pleasure in it. My hat is black and I know that yours is, too.

I personally attended the strange funeral of Severin Lamartine Unck, born 1914, aged but thirty-one (if the sub-light transits are all rounded down, as one ought to do for a lady) and passed out of our hard, bright sphere too soon. Whatever the truth, her gravestone will forever read thirty-one, and thirty-one she will, in all likelihood, remain. Her filmography stands tragically firm at a scant five: *Self-Portrait with Saturn*; *The Famine Queen of Phobos*; *At the Sea Remembered, Suddenly*; *The Sleeping Peacock*; and her final, deeply upsetting work *The Radiant Car Thy Sparrows Drew*.

A sea of black greeted your humble whisper-collector as the empty coffin was interred in the marble halls of the newest edifice in Tsukuyomi Cemetery, the hastily built Unck family mausoleum. Poor Percy must have thought he would have more time to see to such affairs, that his daughter herself would attend to them for his own eternal rest.

We assembled as if for a shoot ... which of course it was, in a manner of speaking. Extra dramatic faces, chosen professional mourners to round out the big crowd scene. Black, black everywhere. We did not know whether or not to cry—what was to be our cue, our script? What sort of Unck flick had hired us on: the father's, or the daughter's?

---

Now look there, children—Maud Locksley and her dashing companion, Wadsworth Shevchenko, fresh from the set of his sure-to-enthral historical epic, *Cross of Stone*. Maud ravishes as always in a sleek strapless number that rustles silver in the popping lights. When she turns, flashes of the palest pink feathers flutter beneath the hem. A slim triangle of dyed crocodile scales soars up to a daring rosette of amethyst and devilish croc teeth at the point of the gown's plunging, bare back. How she smirks over her rounded shoulder! The smirk that cost a thousand contracts, if you know what I mean, and I think you do. Wadsworth's charcoal arm never leaves her waist, his trim, severe Eichendorff suit revealing its own surprise as the power couple pose: The tails of his tuxedo descend into a weave of raven feathers, stiffly, glossily pointing earthward. Our coal-tressed leading man finishes it all off with an onyx lapel pin in the shape of a lunar peony. I'm certain we can all envy Maud Locksley her journey home—save that a little bird informs your humble Father Christmas that Master Shevchenko's burning gaze strays ever so occasionally from her charms to those of his co-star, Dante de Vere. But we know better than to listen to little birds, don't we?

---

We suppose she is dead, though none of us can be sure. She is not *here*, though she is not *there*, either, so far as anyone can tell. What transpired that awful autumn on those far Venusian shores? What happened to her? Did she share the horrid fate of the ruined village, the very one she sought to uncover and explain? We cannot know. We know only that we will see her no more, and that, my loyal readers, must break every heart in two.

We all came together Saturday last to pretend we know what happened and can feel certain about burying her. The seven ex-Unckwives and erstwhile stepmothers of the young Severin stood at his side, their beautiful faces drawn in the refined sort of grief only those who have been trained since birth to live upon the screen can produce, reflecting our feeling back to us like lunar emotions, softer and more silver, colder and more delicate.

And would I shock anyone if I nodded my head toward an eighth statuesque figure who had been standing a fair way off, a black veil shielding her face from any eyes like mine that might guess at some maternal similarity to the vanished documentarian in the angle of her nose or the heft of her hair? To that very filmmaker whose fairy-tale coffin, all empty crystal and plush red pillow (with no head pressing the velvet, no feet beneath the shroud), decorated with ivory sparrow wings and onyx myrtle boughs, lay before us, prayed over by all the radiant mortals Severin ever loved.

I do believe she would have loathed that coffin.

---

But tear your eyes from the twin comets of Locksley and Shevchenko and look upon the real stars of the evening! Percival Unck and his *devastatingly* adorable daughter, Severin. Not quite five years old, she runs boldly onto the carpet, laughing, her black curls bouncing, the tiny bustle of her red velvet Barbauld dress stitched with rough garnet chips that do not *glitter* so much as *burn* against her childish waist. She'll be a beauty one day if her father has a thing to do with it. She reaches back and beckons for him. He is, as always, shy and bemused, wearing a positively *scrumptious* red suit to match his girl. Notice the ivory-plated Venusian myrtle flower tucked into his lapel—perhaps hinting to us as to the setting of his next masterpiece! Unck adjusts his scarlet-tinted glasses and follows his daughter, the long tails of his own late-season Eichendorff fluttering with sparrow feathers dyed a spectacular orange. (I, for one, am positively enchanted with the new avian direction in men's fashion this season. I expect I'll be putting in for my own double-breasted parrot suit soon enough!) Little Severin dances up the aisle, reaching into her silk purse to throw real Venusian tamarind blossoms before her, a little goddess managing handily her own worship. Her giggles and her smile track into a dozen microphones and cameras, certain to be pored over by yours truly *and* yours truly's competition for evidence of the child's mysterious mother—which starlet, which studio head's wife, which socialite's untoward Saturday night gave us this disarmingly impish companion to Tinseltown's greatest director?

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Severin's long-time lover, the cinematographer Erasmo St. John, was present and accounted for, shockingly thinned down from his once-prizefighter physique. His winnowed hand clutched the fingers of that boy we have all begged to interview, even for a minute or two—that child brought back from Adonis in Severin's place, the creature we here in Tinseltown must face instead of our old friend. As of the writing of this column the child has not yet shown any ability to speak whatever. What frustration for our little community, for whom speaking is a necessity of life. We could sooner stop breathing than stop telling our life stories—and yet he says nothing, and St. John will not compel him.

Having reported a lifetime ago upon the premiere of *The Red Beast of Saturn*, when our Percy first appeared with a little bundle wrapped in graphite-coloured silk swaddling designed by Foscolo, I hold the decidedly odd position of having documented most of the famous documenter's life. But I am afraid that this old woman must draw her account of that wretched soul to a close early, being overcome by the whole business. Would that it had unfolded in some other way, some way which did not conclude in a rainy Saturday and a hollow glass box.

I adjourn. Though it is my custom to close by inviting you all to share the empty seat in my box, that seat must be reserved for the dead tonight. Look up at that persistent little limelight in the evening sky: Venus, who alone knows the secrets we poor chattering monkeys covet so

**Halfrid H**

**Editor-in-chief**

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I have my own thoughts on the provenance of Severin Unck, my darlings, but I'll never tell. Any  
Father Christmas worth his holly holds something back for next year.

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It's five minutes to curtain, the lights are low, and I must find my seat. I remain slavishly yours,

**Algernon B**

**Editor-in-chief**

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# PART ONE

## THE WHITE PAGES

My soul burns to speak of strange bodies transformed!  
O gods in heaven, you ardent lovers of mutation,  
become the breath inside me  
and draw up my song, untroubled, unbroken,  
from the first beginnings of the world  
to this very moment and this very day.

—Ovid, *Metamorphoses*

For an actress to be a success she must have the face of Venus, the brains of Minerva, the grace of Terpsichore, the memory of Macaulay, the figure of Juno, and the hide of a rhinoceros.

—Ethel Barrymore

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*The Radiant Car Thy Sparrows Drew*  
(Oxblood Films, dir. Severin Unck, 1946)



**SC1 EXT. RED SQUARE, MOSCOW—DAY 1 LATE AFTERNOON [12 JUNE, 1944]**

[Open on the pristine streets of sunny Moscow, lined with popsicle-carts, jugglers, dazzled tourists. The streetlamps are garlanded with lime-blossoms, sunflowers, carnations. The joyful throng crowds in fierce and thick; the camera follows as they burst into Red Square. The splendid ice-cream towers of the Kremlin beam down benignly. The elder TSAR NICHOLAS II, his still-lovely wife, and their five children, hale in their glittering sashes, wave down at the cannoneers standing at attention on the firing pad at the 1944 Worlds' Fair. The launch site is festooned with crests and swinging summer lanterns, framed by banners wishing luck and safe travel in English, Russian, Chinese, German, Spanish, and Arabic.]

SEVERIN UNCK and her CREW wave jerkily as confetti sticks to their sleek skullcaps and glistening breathing apparatuses. Her smile is immaculate, practiced, the smile of the honest young woman of the hopeful future. Her copper-finned helmet gleams at her feet. SEVERIN wears feminine clothing with visible discomfort and only for this shot, which she intends, in the final edit, to be ironic and wry: She is performing herself, not performing herself in order to tell a story about something else entirely. The curl of her lip betrays, to anyone who knows her, her utter disdain for the bizarre, flare-skirted swimming-cum-trapeze-artist costume that so titillates the crowd. The wind flutters through her black silk around her hips. She tucks a mahogany case—which surely must contain George, her favourite camera—smartly under one arm. All of her crewmen strap canisters of film, a few steamer trunks of food, oxygen tanks, and other minor accoutrements to their broad backs. The real meat of the expedition, supplies and matériel meticulously planned and acquired, logged, and collected, was loaded into the cargo bays overnight. What Severin and her crew carry, they carry for the camera, for the film being shot of this film being shot.

The cannon practically throbs with light: a late-model Wernyhora design, filigreed, etched with forest motifs that curl and leaf like spring ice breaking. The brilliant, massive nose of the Venusian capsule *Clamshell* rests snugly in the cannon's silvery mouth. The metal beast towers over Saint Basil's, casting a monstrous shadow. Most of its size is devoted to propulsion. The living space within is surprisingly small. That etched silver forest will be jettisoned halfway to Venus, destined to drift alone into the endless black. But for now, the *Clamshell* dwarfs any earthly palace built for the glory of man or god.

They are a small circus: the strongmen, the clowns, the lion tamer, the magician, and the trapeze artist poised on her platform, arm crooked in an evocative half-moon, toes pointed into the void.

CUT TO: INT. *Clamshell* cantina, NIGHT 21:00 ERASMO ST. JOHN and MAXIMO VARELA pour vodka for the CREW and laugh uproariously::**FILM DAMAGED, FOOTAGE UNAVAILABLE SKIP DAMAGED AREA SKIPPING SKIPPING ERROR SEE ARCHIVIST FOR ASSISTANCE]**

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## From the Personal Reels of Percival Alfred Unck



[A camera is on. The screen is black, for the camera is skewed toward the wall, a clandestine attempt to capture the child without her knowing she is being recorded. Occasionally, flickers of silver interrupt the darkness—echoes from the screen showing more lively activity somewhere behind the device that picks up the following quiet conversation.]

**PERCIVAL UNCK**

Now, in any film it is important that you know who is telling the story, and to whom they are telling it. Even if no one on-screen talks about it, the director must know, and the writer, too. Now, who is telling this story?

**SEVERIN UNCK**

Daddy is telling the story!

**PERCIVAL**

[laughing] Well, Daddy made the movie, but Daddy is not telling the story. Look at the characters and how they speak to each other. Look at how the film begins, how the very first scenes shape everything else. Now, who is telling the story?

[There is a long silence.]

**SEVERIN**

The camera is telling the story. It's watching everything, and you can't lie to it, or it will know.

**PERCIVAL**

My girl is so clever! No, the camera witnesses the story and records it, but it is outside the story. Like a very tiny god with one big, dark eye. Baby girl, look at the lovers, and the villain, and the dotting father, and the soldiers, and the ghosts. Which one of them is the authority? Who controls how the story is told? And who is the audience, for whom all these wonderful things are meant?

[Another long silence follows. There is a rustling, as of a little girl twisting her lace skirts while she tries to work out an answer.]

**SEVERIN**

They are all telling the story to me.

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**Preproduction Meeting, *The Deep Blue Devil* [working title]  
(Tranquillity Studios, 1959, dir. Percival Unck)**



**Audio recorded for reference by Vincenza Mako, screenwriter**

PERCIVAL UNCK: If you want to know about the beginnings of things, you have to talk to the dead.

I know how that sounds. The dead should do endings. Surely that's their squat. In the space after the story, they're kings and queens, ruling with bony hands, pulling epilogues, last acts, climaxes, pulling *finality* from declining action like spinsters at black wheels.

I wouldn't know. I've always been aces at endings. At the *Fin* I'm like a ball player, balance hips over knees, brandishing my bat, pointing to the outfield, pointing like I've been doing from the first word spoken, the first frame shot, at the revelation I intended to hit all along. Lean into the last scene; you can hear the whiff and the crack of my swing. If anything, I've always been *too* eager to get to the ending. I'll throw the haunted, wild-eyed gamine from her tower too soon, slaughter soliloquizing retinue complete with bicyclists and bears five minutes in. Endings are lush and lascivious, Vince; they call to me. All spread out on satin inevitabilities, waiting, beckoning, promising impossibly, obscenely elegant solutions—if you've been a good lad and dressed the house just so, for its comfort, for its *arousal*. All the rest of the nonsense a story requires is just a long seduction of the ending. You throw out murders and reversals and heroes and detectives and spies, juggle love affairs and near escapes and standoffs with marvellous guns, kidnappings and sorcery and comic relief and gravediggers and princesses and albino dragons, and it's all just to lure an ending into your bed. The right ending can't resist a spread like that. She sidles up like she's lived there all along, sleepy-eyed, hair a fright, asking the antihero for coffee and be quick about it, wouldn't you? There's a love.

But I'm rubbish at beginnings. Listen to that mess. My metaphors all rumbled about my ankles. So I talk to the dead. They're the only ones who can see the whole story. All they've got is stories. *Look, say the ghosts, she was doomed all along because of how it began. You watched her to death. She started disappearing as soon as she was born. Just to get away from you. No one could have gotten out of this thing alive. Not with Acts I-V stacked against them like that. If Hamlet couldn't swing it, what hope did she ever have?*

Anyway, nobody bothers with *real* beginnings anymore. We stopped making up stories about the creation of the world ages ago. But the deadest of the dead—the ancient, toga-tugging, shee-

fucking, olive-gobbling, laurel-spangled dead—they rattled on about nothing else. Gardens and clouds and the Sky slinging back a nebula or two for courage then slicking back his hair to make nice with the Earth. They had it right. It's downright dishonest to begin with anything but the Creation of the Known Universe, and a tale that ends before the destruction of all and sundry is a damnable lie. Fire? Well, that's too obvious. And floods always look amateurish. Maybe it just winks out. Cue Aqua-Blue Print.

Point is, the Greeks had their heads on straight: If you're going to bother beginning at all, you have to throw up a believable theory of origin or it's got no anchor. No *root*. Why four seasons? Why seasons at all? Why just the one moon? Why green trees and red roses and not the other way round? Why death and time and is there such a thing as fate, and what, percentage-wise, is the efficacy of human sacrifice? You have to answer those questions before anyone comes on stage, you know. In even the littlest story about a ... let's say a housewife in an aqua-blue print dress and a matching apron making a roast, only she's planning to kill herself later, obviously, or maybe her husband—otherwise why should we care one soggy whit about the vagaries of beef at temperature? At any rate, someone's got to die. That's why she's wearing aqua. Blue invariably means death. Even in poor lost Millicent's kitchen—yes, Vince, her name is *clearly* Millicent, do try to keep up. Before she even pricks the meat to slide the garlic in, it's all been arranged for her. Does death do its thing, in this universe? Yes. Time, in Millicent World? Progressing one second per second, or twenty-four and seven and three hundred-odd. Seasons: four. The moon: intact, in orbit, in phase. Green elm, red peony. Seventeen per cent sacrificial success rate under ideal conditions, results not peer reviewed. And of course in stories there is always fate. It goes by the name of foreshadowing and it is the emperor of everybody. Given all these parameters, husband Humphrey should be dead by dessert. See? It's only that the answers in most stories are boring because they are supplied by the real world rather than—well, something better. Something more stimulating. Sit down with the Greeks and the Romans, and the boring answers get more interesting. Seasons because a girl and a crocus. Death because a girl and an apple. The moon because a girl keeps driving her daft chariot into the sea.

It's all down to girls, one way or another.

[indistinct]

All right, all right, I'm boring you. I'm babbling. I haven't made up my mind about this one yet. I don't even know how to go about making up my mind. I would rather *not* have death. I would rather that. Time is terribly tawdry, as well. And let's see what we can do about that percentage.

Let us begin properly. This is what I'm thinking: She came from nowhere. She came from the sea. She came from the dark. The Earth fucked the Sky and made a hundred children—or maybe just nine. Mercury, Venus, Mars, the whole ragtag family. And the nine had their own kids: Phobos, Triton, Io, Charon, all the brats. Maybe we can do this like we used to do, way back when. You know I can never quit Vaudeville. Toga up the main cast as the planets and the moons: rings around Saturn's head; Venus dripping wet; Mars in a cowboy getup; Neptune, I don't know, up on strings like the levitators, maybe? Stupid on af-yun, all heroin eyes and running makeup. Stand them tableaux against a spangly cloth backdrop. Then they can start killing each other. It'll be Shakespearean. Barking big knives. Buckets of blood. Blood and callowmilk.

So the little bastards stab the Sky to death and throw the spangles into the sea, and they turn in the title, and that's where she comes from. Out of the words and the water. She can rise up on clamshell naked and covered with blood and milk. That's what birth looks like, after all. Naked with a myrtle branch in one hand and a camera in the other.

I have no ideas for casting. Someone new. I don't want anyone whose face has been someone else. I'll have to call Richard. He'll find somebody fresh off the rocket who looks like her. He always knows what I want. So, whoever she is, she'll look through the camera in her hand at the camera in my hand. The waves hit her and wash her clean. Mostly clean. Leave a mark on her face. Like a wound. Presto: Birth of Venus.

[indistinct]

Yes. Severin's birth, too. No difference.

But that's the last time we use her name, Vince. What's our rule? You can't name the subject. You can't say the word *death* in a murder mystery after the body gets discovered; no more than you can say *love* in a romantic flick until the end, until it's a bullet firing, the bullet you've had on deck since the scene-one-take-one clapper smacked its lips. You *circle* it. You *stalk* it. But you don't call it out.

MAKO: But everyone will know who it's meant to be. What's the point of being coy?

UNCK: Coyness is what makes it art, darling. Otherwise ... otherwise it's nothing but a funeral.

[long pause] We'll call her something else. Hell, I named her once, I can do it again. Something bombastic, something mythic, something Venusian. All the names have to come back to Venus in the end. I remember what you said when we were writing *Rocketship Banshee*—we went up to the cabin on the Sea of Fertility and trotted out our old dance, writing movies instead of fucking. Two rooms, two typewriters, the blue cassia forests, moon-daisies by the door. We swam naked in the bitter silver sea and you floated on your back under the Earthlight with water running off your colloidal blue breasts and said: *Names aren't loners, they're connected, even in real life. You name your kids for someone dead or what you hope they will become or what you wish you were and your parents did the same to you and that big, glittering net of names tells the story of the whole world. Names are load-bearing struts. Names are destiny.* You wouldn't just let me name our hero John and his demon bride Molly.

MAKO: This is different.

UNCK: We'll call her Ares. I gave her a boy's name the first time around, so why not this time? It's perfect. Ares went and shagged Venus when he should have stuck to what he was good at, which was fighting with anyone who'd put up half a fist. Good, right? Yeah. Yeah.

MAKO: Let her have her name, Percy. Let everyone have her own name. She'd hate you for changing it. You know that.

UNCK: [Clears his throat several times. His voice quavers.] I don't want to. I don't want to write it at the top of every page. I don't want to have to say it. Every day. All day. I don't want to have to call some nobody actress by my daughter's name.

MAKO: Too bad. It's my script, too. I'm not your secretary. Her name is Severin. You don't get to turn her into one of our demon brides.

[Sounds of typewriter keys and cigarettes extinguishing, lighting, smoke exhaling.]

UNCK: Fine. Fine. You win. Severin bloody Unck forever and ever amen.

— Back to it. Once we've got the world created—Sky, Earth, clamshell—we move on to more important business. The Plot at Hand. We switch scenes entirely. I want to go full noir: neon fritzing signs reflected in rainy streets on Luna. Unless it shouldn't be Luna. Could do somewhere more interesting. They get vicious storms on Uranus. Wrath of God-type stuff. We shot something in Te Deum once, didn't we? What was it? *Thief of Light*? *The Oberon Assassin*? Christ, I can never remember. We've made too many movies, you and I. Or too few. Always too few. Too many to have any meaning, too few to say what we meant. But TD is a spectacular city, really. All those coloured towers—bioluminescent, you know—thick as a fat man's fingers, stubbing up pink and purple and hot green to the stars. Cheap as hell, too. Pubs everywhere like mushrooms in the morning. Good gravity, at least in the winter.

MAKO: If you insist on shooting on location, at a minimum we'll need permits for Neptune, Saturn, Jupiter. We're fine for principal photography on Luna, obviously. Venus?

UNCK: Oh, Vince, I don't know. I don't know if I can. Isn't there somewhere on the Moon we can dress for Venus? We have enough seas. I'll hose down half the globe if it means I don't have to go to Venus. Or we could try Earth. Glum old Earth. Moscow, maybe. Or Chicago. Could try Australia, but the red tape is absolutely frightful. Melbourne, perhaps. I can't stand Sydney. We almost did *Hope Has No Master* down there, remember? Looks quite a bit like the older parts of Mars. The same again, Mars actually gave us a better deal, when you figure in the tax incentives. Guan Yu is a fabulous town. You can see Mons Olympus from every balcony.

MAKO: But ultimately, we want a city. Deep in a city. Noir has to have a city. And a detective. I presume we're talking about Anchises.

UNCK: I know, I know. Who else could it be? If we don't produce him pretty quickly, everyone'll just be waiting for his entrance. We're telling a story everyone already knows. We gotta outrace the memory.

MAKO: I think he's living back on Venus, now. Shouldn't be too hard to find him, if we want the man himself.

UNCK: *Christ*, no, he's not gonna play himself! I'm not a masochist. Let him rot in those stinking swamps. I'll make him better than he ever was. Our great detective ... and he's an amnesiac. Looking for his memory. Piecing his life together—and he can't do that without finding *her*. *She* writes itself. He hunts down the story, and he *is* the story. Get him a trench coat and a hat with a brim so sharp it'll cut the night. A revolver strapped to his hip, something big and mean looking. Fucking *never* stop raining on him. If I see a dry patch on that lantern jaw, so help me. We can even afford a voice-over if we want it.

[indistinct]

UNCK: Well, I don't particularly give a shit, Vince. Where's your obsession with authenticity now? Severin made talkies. It practically *has* to have sound.

MAKO: [long sigh] I'll talk to Freddy. So ... our man needs a love interest. Someone more mysterious than he is. Long legs, long hair, long gazes. If you don't put someone on-screen who loves him, the audience won't know they're supposed to.

UNCK: Yes, now you're talking. A proper dame, in stockings and a dress tighter than a close-up shot.



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