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Ms. *The One Exception*, by Tennessee Williams.

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The One Exception

(Women's voices, off.)

You are Miss—?

Viola Shield, yesss. I'm sorry to have had to put you off till today but when a painter is preparing for an exhibition, in process of hanging—

Oh?

Yesss. There's very limited time for other matters.

Your coat?

No, thanks, the place is too chilly.

(VIOLA SHIELD enters, an energetic woman of forty, followed by a distraught-looking woman in her fifties, MAY SVENSON.)

Viola: Why, it's so barely furnished, you must be just moving in.

May (Lowering her voice): Not staying but a few days. She has to be removed to an institution upstate and my leave of absence from Southern Baptist is up.

Viola: Evangelist, are you?

May: No, no, it's a Houston hospital. I work in the psychiatric ward.

Viola: Hmm. (Wind whines.) You'd better have your heating system adjusted. Hmm. So she has to be put away?

May: Please. Quietly. The Lodge wants me to get as much of her past history, when old friends in the city knew her, I mean friends like you, as I can get for them.

Viola: Lodge?

May: Shhh. The private institution upstate. I see it as the only solution, at least till she's made some recovery. If she can, if she does.

Viola: You're whispering so that I can barely hear you. Is everything top secret from the lady?

May: When speaking of the upstate institution. She's deathly afraid of institutions.

Viola: Private or public a mental institution is still a mental institution and scarcely preferable to a prison. I mean confinement is—oh, too loud? Forgive me, but I'm not accustomed to conversing in whispers.

May: She moves about so quietly I hardly know where she is even in this little place. Excuse me one moment, I'll see if her door is—(She stealthily opens an upstage door.)
—still closed, yes. Everything's going to have to be managed without her knowing.

Viola: Who'll sign the papers?

May: Her nearest relative is just outside the city.

Viola: Could that be old Agatha?

May: Agatha Criswell, yes. She's said she'll commit her.

Viola: Agatha occasionally dropped by the little commune, as we called it, always trying to extort something from Kyra and Kyra would let her have it to get rid of her. None of us could stand that witch. Finally insisted that they meet outside the commune if the meetings continued.

May: I see. I haven't met Miss Criswell except by phone, a public pay phone. But that part's arranged. My part is most unpleasant. I have to see that she's under sedation and have her removed by ambulance.

Viola: Who'll pay the—

May: Someone's had power-of-attorney for a good while.

Viola: My God, not old Agatha!

May: No, a lawyer, no, no, her—accountant who pays my salary.

Viola: You certainly ought to be getting well paid for a job like this appears to be.

May: Yes, it's a frightfully painful situation for all concerned.

Viola: In such situations persons not paid to be concerned are naturally reluctant to become involved. (Looks at her watch.) My time here is running out.

May: Mine, too. You see, I'm on leave of absence. I had it extended once, but again—not possible.

Viola: People who have these collapses usually pull themselves together when they realize they must or surrender to the alternatives which are one or two at best. – I thought I heard something. Has she emerged from her room? (MAY peeks out again.)

May: Not yet.

Viola: But she is expecting me, you did tell her I was coming?

May: I told her it was pointless being here if she didn't get in touch with old friends here. That it was necessary to, not *why* it was. She agreed. At first she agreed. Then said she wasn't ready to. "But if you're not ready now," I said, "When will you be ready?" She said "Let me think. Oh God! I just can't do it right now!"

Viola: Wanted to cancel the meeting with me? Make it later, when she was ready? Well, in that case, I might as well not be here. It wasn't convenient for me. Had to rearrange my schedule for the day. Gave up my morning's work, put off several appointments, including a very important one with a dealer who was quite annoyed. Actually, this is like her. I wonder how many of us would have bothered with her problems, her eccentricities, if in those times she hadn't been the one with—the one that was financially solvent. I know this sounds harsh but—just say I came by and regret she wasn't ready to see me.

May: Oh, no, don't go. There's no time to arrange another meeting.

Viola: No, there isn't, not with me. You've no idea, of course, about the disorder this cancelled meeting has caused in my plans today. Even in the art world, contrary to opinions outside it, there is a disciplined order of things. Oh, she never observed that, never had to, but I did, all of us did, the group you call her old friends in the city, we had to practice discipline, observe schedules. We still know the necessity of it, all of us survivors. One or two didn't. But the determined ones did, the dedicated ones did. I'm sorry about your disappointment, but—(Starts off.)

May: Please, please wait.

Viola: I tell you I have no time.

May: Fifteen minutes? Ten? It's so important. Please understand. When people aren't able to make decisions for themselves, you do have to make them for them. (VIOLA consults her watch.)

Viola: Hmmm. What a curious, what a very strange situation.

May: Strangest I've experienced, and most disturbing.

Viola: You're really concerned, aren't you?

May: Concerned as a friend would be.

Viola: Fortunately she has inherited money. I wonder just how much. Considerable, I imagine.

May: Enough to afford the expensive—(Drops her voice)—institution.

Viola: Hmmm. I wonder if it wouldn't be better to put her in right away or there could be a repetition of the attempt to—

May: Hush. I heard a door open.

Viola: My God, but this is—spooky . . . she used to have periods of depression but pulled out of them. She had her work and us, her friends, to offer our moral support, in those days. (Sounds, off.)

May: She's up, out of her bedroom. I do hope she'll come in now. It will be a terrible effort for her. If you see she's tiring out, don't stay. I'll be in touch again. About the Lodge, not a word. She'd go into a panic. Probably run out of the room. Oh, I—

Viola: It seems so very unnatural to me. I honestly don't know how to deal with a thing like this. However, I'd do better to follow my instincts than instructions, I think.

May: Do be careful what your instincts are.

Viola: Oh, I shall. I shall. I've always trusted my instincts.

May (In a whisper): She's hesitating to enter.

Viola: *Will* she?

May: Not so loud. She mustn't hear us talking. Oh, dear, she's retreated to her bedroom.

Viola: I think I'll go in and confront here there. Otherwise—

May: No, no, no. If she heard you approaching she'd bolt the door before you got to it.

Viola: Preposterous! Incredible! (Sound: hesitant footsteps.)

Kyra (Off, in a shaky voice): May? (MAY places a finger to her lips: then returns call.)

May: Yes, dear?

Kyra (Same voice): Who is out there?

May: I told you, dear. Your old friend Viola Shield.

Kyra: Oh, I forgot, I'll—(Quick footsteps—pause.)

Viola: She'll *what*?

May: She'll either come out or she won't and I don't know which.

Viola: A sort of—paralyzed state?

May: Not physical. I mean she moves about, paces the room.

Viola: Which room?

May: Her bedroom mostly. I hear her at night, getting up, lying back down, then getting up again. I can hardly sleep, especially when I hear her moan “What shall I? Why?”—questions moaned to herself.

Viola: Mmm. Paralysis of—decision.—Miss Svenson, it’s imperative that she be removed at once to the institution; no other action possible. Surely you see that. Don’t you see that?

May: I keep hoping for some change, some improvement, but—

Viola: I hear the moaning. Sounds agonized.

May: What or why again?

Viola: Just a long “Ahhh.” A long agonized “Ahhhh.” Maybe this Lodge could give her some kind of medication. Something to relieve her. All that I can suggest.

May: The Lodge sent someone to try to interview her but got nowhere. She’d hardly speak so they do need this background, this earlier history that old friends can supply.

Viola: I’m willing to help all I can but I would like a chance to compare her condition now with when I last observed her, here in the city. (Glances at watch.) I can’t wait forever for her to emerge or not. At *most* ten or fifteen minutes. I have an active life. Frankly, I never quite understood her and what you tell me about her present state is definitely unnerving.

May: But you can imagine how it is for her?

Viola: I’m a reasonably imaginative person, being an artist myself, but this sort of willful retreat from, this sort of—whatever!—No, I’m not able to understand it at all. If one has life and a creative impulse—no, I’ve never, never, and I hope I will never *ever*—comprehend *giving up!*—that’s just not what an artist’s life is about as I can possibly conceive it. Creative work is the opposite as life is opposite to—

May: Please, not quite so loud.

Kyra: (Off): What is—?

Viola: I heard her voice back there.

May: Did you?

Viola: Yes.

May: What did she say?

Viola: I heard “what,” just “what.”—Does she know you can’t stay on?—She knows you’re about to go? To leave her to the—

May: I can only refer to the matter indirectly. You see her dependence is total.

Kyra (Off, in a tremulous voice): May?

May: Yes, dear.

Kyra (Same voice): Someone’s out there. Who is it, May?

Viola: An old friend of yours. Recognize my voice, dear?

Kyra: Oh, I, I don’t think I—excuse me, I’ll—

Viola: She’ll what?

May: She dreads any encounter. Don’t be offended. It’s the same with everyone except me, now, and even sometimes me.

Viola: I can’t pretend to understand at all.

May: She’ll be out when she’s worked up the courage. I think I’d better go back there and bring her in here with me. She’ll need me with her.

Viola: Oh, but you must leave us alone together.

May: I’ll sit just outside the door because, after all, if the meeting takes a wrong turn, I’ll have to interrupt it. You see, you still don’t quite understand her condition.

Viola: I want some chance to reestablish our old relationship and I can hardly do that with you in here or waiting just outside, eavesdropping, it would be impossibly difficult. Trust my instinct about this.

May: —Well—I think she’s coming back out. I’ll—open the door, now. (She opens the door upon an almost apparitional woman, KYRA, a woman in her middle thirties with the look of a frightened child.) Kyra, this is—well, you know each other. (VIOLA rushes to embrace KYRA.)

Kyra: Please, please, I—forgot something

Viola: Kyra, you sit down. We have a lot to talk over.

Kyra: I—can't talk much. The past is—passed.

May: Do sit down, Kyra. Your old friend here has been waiting a long time to see you. I'll go to my room. Just call if you need anything. (MAY exits, closing the door partly.)

Viola: You feel perfectly comfortable with me, don't you, Kyra?

Kyra: (Sighs, looks away.)

Viola: So much water has gone under the mill—or over—since the old days, dear, when you and Lola and Joan and I shared that charming apartment on Ludlow Street.

Kyra: (Stares as if bewildered.) (Pause.)

Viola: Your, your—companion? Miss Svenson?—she says I must ask no questions but we've known each other so long.—I'm going to move my chair close and talk very quietly. There are things that I do have to know. (Moves chair close to KYRA's. KYRA looks more frightened.) Lola and I are still in the Ludlow place but Lola has taken a loft to work in. She's really making it, Kyra. It all began with outdoor murals.

Kyra (Mechanically): Outdoor? Murals?—Are what?

Viola: Murals painted on the walls of buildings. They drew attention to her talent. And now she has a gallery exhibiting her work. All of our little group—remember we called it The Commune?—all are prospering now; they had to and so they did. Joan, too. You might have thought Joan the least likely, stubbornly persisted in abstract realism long after it had gone out, abandoned it only when her idol, Geeko, looked at her work and simply shook his head at it. Now? George Shelton of Shelton and Shelton, one of the best on 57th Street, has taken her under his wing and is pushing her like mad. You see? You have to recognize inevitabilities and adjust positively. Change! No movement lasts in the city. Oh, and Carruthers, your young Wall Street admirer whom you gave such patronizing attention. Hear this! He's now vice-president of his own firm, draws down a smashing salary. Still unattached. Don't you want to see him? And Patricia, dear old Pat, she's discarded her southern proprieties, my dear, is living openly with

the Dutchman in Webley, openly and quite happily in the nicest part of Webley, the uptown fringe. Huge loft. We gather there once a week, they entertain wonderfully, oh, and finally, finally Bert has shuffled off Steve. To our universal astonishment and relief. Career-wise he shot up soon as he faced the realities of that attachment and cut it off at last. Constructive in every way, while Steve, he's even lost his looks, all he ever had, could never see them myself. Lives in bars, I understand, cadging drinks, I suppose.

Now have you heard about Sally? We had a little scare about Sally. You know, a little mole appeared on her cheek, became more prominent and some doom's day dermatologist diagnosed it as a melanoma. You know melanoma? Heard of it? Invariably fatal. Well, it obviously was not. She's thriving! Lord, what a mercy! She's suing the dermatologist for those months of anxiety, desperation, his false diagnosis cost her. Sooo! All our little groups coming through with flying colors. Now about you, Kyra? You're the one exception. (Consults watch.) Snap out of it, dear, it's just a little period of depression brought on by isolation after that irresponsible Canadian took you to Texas and—just walked out on you, did he? Canadian, Texas, impossible on the face of it as we all had warned you. Look. You're back in the city. If you don't care for this place, and I wouldn't blame you, have a real-estate person find you a nice loft, you can surely afford it, and what's past will fade into oblivion. Things do here in the city, rapidly. The rapidity of life in the city doesn't indulge one in time for morbid introspection. Oh, dear, I meant to—you know how my absorption in my work has always made me indifferent to externals such as clothes. Forgive my raffish appearance. My wardrobe is limited as ever. I *must* purchase and remember to wear some smart new outfits now that this important exhibition is about to open at The Baton Blanche. Kyra, I'm at the brink of a break-through but right now—I do need a loan. Kyra, I need a temporary loan right now.

Kyra: Yes. Alone except for—

Viola: L-O-A-N, a financial loan. You've always been so generous. Could you get your accountant, the one with your power-of-attorney, to arrange that for me?

Kyra: Alone.

Viola: Temporarily, only a month or two.

Kyra: Yes. Alone except for—

Viola: Externals concern me and this temporary loan will take care of it. The smart externals. Fur coat, a really smart outfit or two. Are you listening to me? You look so remote. Inattentive. Hmm. I've monopolized the talk and you show no sign of having listened at all. Why, you look a bit like Joan when she showed her work to Geeko and he just shook his head.—Kyra, tell me what happened, you know you can, anything, we all want to help, so.—What *has* happened, to plunge you into this practically bare ice—plant? (Gestures about room.)

Kyra: Noth—nothing. Just—

Viola: Oh, but I know, we all know, just don't know why and there's always a reason. Things like this have reasons. (KYRA trembles and gasps.)

Kyra: Excuse me! Not ready yet! Sorry, sorry . . . (She rises. VIOLA seizes her arm. KYRA calls out. MAY rushes into the room.)

Kyra: Help me out, help me out! (She stumbles. MAY catches her.)

May (To VIOLA): Instinct, what instincts, God knows what you've done!

Viola: Kyra, this woman is going to leave you. She's about to. You'll be alone, unless you let us help you. Or you enter a—

Kyra: No, No, Please Go! (MAY supports KYRA out of the room.)

Viola: I made every effort but it's plainly impossible. And this complete day—wasted! (She exits. Sound of KYRA's door slamming.)

May: Kyra! (Sound of pounding at door. Pause. MAY's voice at phone, off.) Doctor, doctor, May Svenson, could you come over? She's locked herself in her room. Come quick as possible, please!

Kyra: No, don't!

May: Kyra, come out here at once, unlock the door, come in here. (KYRA returns, panting.)

Kyra: Phone the doctor, tell him not to come.

May: He will—

Kyra: No, no, can't help. Has that woman left? Is it time you're going away?

May: When you're—better. I do have to return to Southern Baptist but you won't be alone. The time has come for a—for a hospital, an—institution, till you've recovered.

Kyra: —When? How soon? Will you leave me? Alone here? (Pause.)

May: Kyra, you haven't eaten for two days. There's eggs in the fridge and fruit and cheese. I'll prepare you a little lunch.—will you stay right here?

Kyra: (Nods with a senseless look.)

(MAY exits by upstage door. KYRA takes a few hesitant steps in one direction, then another. Frightened by the sound of her slippers on the floor, she removes them: then crosses to each door and bolts them stealthily. That done, she is again undecided of what to do next: at last, she seats herself rigidly in a chair stage center and closes her eyes.)

The scene dims out.

Tennessee Williams
January, 1983