

The Eyes of Old Bet

A ONE-WOMAN PLAY

by
Tara Meddaugh

EXCERPT



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For the complete play [THE EYES OF OLD BET](http://tarameddaugh.com/the-eyes-of-old-bet), visit here:
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THE EYES OF OLD BET

Character Breakdown

MARTHA

Female. A woman in her 30s-70s.

Setting

Somers, NY, a small rural town around 50 miles north of New York City. 1800s kitchen, farm, path outside...

Time Period

Early 1800s.

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1808, Somers, New York, a small rural village around 50 miles north of New York City. MARTHA is a woman in her 30s-70s, who takes us with her as she tells us her story. Scenes change time period and location, which may be represented by background images, staging, lighting, etc.

MARTHA

When I hear she's been killed, my body goes cold. My knees shake and I fall to the ground and weep. An injustice. A cruelty undeserved. There was no life we had ever seen like hers, nor will we ever see again.

But I was not always so enthralled with her. My daughter saw her value long before I did...

I'm kneading dough in the kitchen one morning, when my little Sybil comes running to me.

"Mama!" she yells. "Mama! Come! There's an infant down at Farmer Bailey's!"

Mrs. Bailey has not been with child, so I think, a cousin must be in town.

"We can visit later, Sybil."

"No, Mama. Everyone's going *now*! Mrs. Ford says she saw Mr. Bailey walking it down the turnpike and it's a real infant! With ears the size of hay bales!" It makes no sense, but Sybil has always had an active imagination. She grabs at my skirts with such ferocity. "Please, Mama! Please!"

Sybil is...my whirlwind of life. Before her, Edward—my husband—and I had resigned ourselves to a childless life. Between Edward's work as a shoemaker, my teaching and our finding time to read and actually talk to one another... Dare I say? We were happy, the two of us.

But my ever-concerned neighbor, Mrs. Wilson, with seven children in tow, was not. I endured many a Ladies-Prayer-Group asking for my "stubborn womb to cease its cold resistance and open up so that a Seed of Life and Heaven may be planted."

When I informed Mrs. Wilson I'd no longer attend the Ladies Prayer Group if these bothersome prayers continued, she reluctantly agreed, but warned me, "You shall never stop me from praying behind your back, Martha."

And...her irritated prayers worked after all...because...we did conceive... and now we have the delight of our hearts, the bright light we didn't know we needed, until we met her. Our Sybil. And do you know what Mrs. Wilson prays for now?

She takes every opportunity to inform me, "You're spoiling the child."

"Maybe so," I agree.

"She'll be unruly if you spare the rod."

"But she's not."

"She speaks her mind already. You're in grave danger that Sybil shall never find a husband in her condition."

What Mrs. Wilson doesn't understand is that Sybil's "condition" is only that she is loved. She is valued. So it is no surprise that if she feels valued, she might also feel that what she says has value.

"I hope she shall always speak her mind," I tell Mrs. Wilson.

She starts to reply, but I know what to say that will always make her speechless: "You know...none of this would have happened, Alice, if you hadn't prayed quite so hard."

So when my spoiled, unruly, unmarriageable 4-year-old daughter tugs at my skirts while I'm kneading bread...I wipe off my hands to hold hers. The bread will wait. And I follow her.

She pulls me down the path—we run the entire time, because Sybil is always running when she's excited. When we finally reach Mr. Bailey's farm, we see a large crowd gathering around his field. And we lay eyes on the "infant" Sybil refers to.

I first notice its ears, yes, the size of hay bales. Then my eyes take in its gray skin, as though the fur has been stripped from its body...There are two horns coming from its mouth...And what is hardest to believe is what looks like a long gray snake coming from its head which it moves around like a boneless arm...I have never seen anything like this before. I was expecting an infant. But of course...what my four-year-old meant was... elephant.

Here. In 1808. Somers, New York.

I clutch my stomach as a wave of nausea rolls over me at the sight of this strange form. I'm repulsed. It's an other-worldly monster to me and I don't want to look at it. While I fight my own discomfort, I glance down at Sybil. Her eyes are wide, and a bright smile takes over her entire face.

“Don’t you love it, Mama?”

“Sybil,” I tell her. “It has a fifth leg coming from its head!”

She doesn’t blink. “But have you ever seen it before?”

(pause)

“No. No, Sybil, I have not seen such a creature before in all my life.”

“Well, then,” she tells me. “Aren’t we lucky, Mama?”

“Would we be lucky if we slipped off a cliff and died, Sybil?”

“No, Mama.”

“Just because something is rare doesn’t mean it is good.”

“Oh.” Sybil is disappointed I don’t share her joy. Yet as she turns her head back to the creature, she can’t help but smile anyway.

Mr. Bailey has named this elephant Old Bet. She is only the second of her kind to ever walk ground in this land. Mrs. Ford says he has spent over one thousand dollars to purchase her. My mind cannot even conceive of such an amount.

This giant beast is meant to work his farm.

“Let’s go home now, Sybil. That’s enough.” It’s my turn to drag her down the path now.

But.

It is not enough.

Because every morning thereafter, Sybil wakes me up, begging to see the elephant. And every morning, giving up our final hour of sleep, I go with her.

One morning, we watch as the elephant puts dirt upon her own back.

“Isn’t that smart, Mama?”

“She’s bathing in filth.”

“Farmer Bailey says it keeps her cool and keeps the bugs away.”

Another morning, she eats for the entire time we visit.

“Does she ever stop feeding herself?”

“It’s only because she’s so big, Mama! And Farmer Bailey says elephants don’t kill animals to eat meat. Isn’t Old Bet gentle?”

I keep my back to the elephant most days. But Sybil is happy to watch her every movement. One morning, as Sybil is playing with a doll on the fence, the soft toy slips from her grasp to the other side. It’s only a foot or two away but the barrier seems immense. A part of me wonders if a doll is worth the effort of retrieval, but Sybil is calling to me in a panic, “Mama! Mama! Dollie Jane fell over! Dollie Jane is hurt, Mama!” She’s stretching her arm toward the doll she cannot reach... and I know that it is.

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ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT



Tara's plays have been presented by theater companies such as Fusion Theatre, Mosaic Theater Company of DC, The Directors Company, Le Petit Theatre de Terrebonne, Theatre One, Tutti Bravi Productions, Westchester Collaborative Theater, Possibilities Theater, Tagragg Productions, One Armed Man, Oracle Theatre, Inc, The Acme Theatre Company, The Harlequin Players, Woman Seeking..., and numerous schools, universities and colleges including Gardner-Webb, Prince Williams, and Colgate. Her work has showcased at festivals such as the Artists of Tomorrow Festival in NYC, The Bangkok Community Theatre Fringe Festival, the Pittsburgh New Works Series and the Last Frontier

Theatre Conference in Alaska. Tens of thousands of teachers, actors and students world-wide have utilized her monologues for competitions, course material, auditions, performances, and showcases. Tara has taught Playwriting at Carnegie Mellon, the Pittsburgh Public Theatre, and for The Westport Country Playhouse, and she has led Creative Dramatics Workshops for children in underserved areas throughout New York and New Jersey. Additionally, she has script consulted on several animation and VR projects. Tara's work has been published by YouthPLAYS, Smith & Kraus, Oxford Press South Africa, the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Arts (LAMDA), Limelight Editions/Applause Acting Series, The Hunger Journal, Meriweather Publishing, Applause Theatre & Cinema, Performer Stuff and Ace-Your-Audition. She is a recipient of the Shubert Fellowship in Dramatic Writing, the Sloan Screenwriting Fellowship, the New Works for Young Women [Actors] Award, The Write Stuff Award, and is a member of the Dramatist's Guild. Tara holds her MFA in Dramatic Writing from Carnegie Mellon University.

For more information about Tara Meddaugh or her work,
visit her website at www.tameddaugh.com.

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