

Make Haste to Live

Plink
Clink-click
Tik-tik-tik-tik-tik-tik . . .
Shink!

“How much is that?”

The old lady manning the counter peers up from her book as if I’ve interrupted her. *Lady, if you want a job with no distractions, don’t work in retail.* But then she dredges up a smile from somewhere, gets up and comes around the counter, her Coke bottle glasses catching the light. “How much is what now, honey?”

“This. The old carnival thing.”

“Oh, you mean Madame Tarot?”

The front of the wood and glass box simply says ‘Fortune Teller’ in swooping red letters on a darker red background, the typeset swirling around someone’s idea of a mystic mandala framed in cherubs and the sort of curlicue decoration the Victorians liked so much. Lower down, ‘One Cent’ reads the smaller type above a little coin slot. But it’s what’s inside the box that’s really catching my eye.

Inside the glass box is the figure of a seated woman, her head slightly bowed; a candle sits on her right hand, a teacup on her left. A sheaf of tarot cards fans out under her quiet hands. And she’s gorgeous. I’ve seen these things before, running up and down Antique Row; usually the fortune telling dummy is made to look grotesque, or comical, or just a little bit sinister.

These wax windup dolls in their glass boxes survive from the days when little carnivals still traveled the country every summer. People across America really did get a wicked thrill out of putting a penny in a slot and feeling like they’d done something exotic when a wax ‘gypsy fortune teller’ dropped a card in the slot. Pretty tasteless to most people today. But hey, they had culturally insensitive carnival toys, we get into fights with strangers on Facebook. Every generation does one dumbass thing, at least.

Besides, this dummy is different. She looks like a Moroccan Madonna dressed for a dance. On her head is a sheer veil bordered with silver coins. Beneath it, her hair is a lustrous black, catching dusty light in soft blue shimmerings. Damn, I wish I’d brought my sketchbook. I want to capture that hair in the light.

Her wax face is beautifully defined and lustrous, tinted so perfectly that you expect her to take a breath, raise her head and look at you any second now. If somebody had told Michelangelo, “Hey man, ever done a carnival attraction before? Give you fifty bucks if you can do it by next week,” this is what they’d get.

Commented [LAJ1]: I suggest 'behind' instead of 'manning'. Having 'lady' and 'manning' side by side gave me a gender/surname moment of confusion. It's too early in the story to risk that.

Commented [LAJ2]: Internal thought. Italics helps define this, and is a familiar format to readers.

Commented [LAJ3]: Coke is a trademark of the Coca-Cola Company, and should be capitalized.

Commented [LAJ4]: I added 'swirling' as it felt like a word was missing. You could use a different word if you wish.

Commented [LAJ5]: The 'above and below' overly-complicated description wasn't flowing well. I tried a new arrangement.

“How much is she?”

The shop lady consults a tag behind one of the long, fluted legs that support the fortune teller’s box.

Commented [LAJ6]: Or is she the shop owner? See two comments down for more.

“Hundred and fifty, honey.”

I bite my lip. A hundred and fifty is the proceeds of the last painting I sold. It’s supposed to go on the credit card . . . but I could make it up by doing some extra hours at the tea house, right? It’d even out.

Commented [LAJ7]: Biting of lips is a common cliché used often by many writers. Think about having your character do something else instead. What would her character be likely to do? Imagine her in this scene and see what comes to mind.

And I really, really want to draw this lady. Hell, I’d love to do a full painting based on her, and if that sells, then she’s a business expense, right?

Oh screw it, I’ll be honest. I want her because she’s that toy you never got as a kid. She’s old and new and shiny and fascinating, and I know right where she’d go in my studio.

“Does she work?” I ask tentatively, pointing at the jotted note tacked below the penny slot that reads ‘Do Not Touch!’

The shop owner’s iron curls bob as she tips her head. “Oh that was just to keep kids from messing with her. I can’t really tell you to be honest; I never tried her.”

Commented [LAJ8]: Previously she was referred to as the ‘shop lady’. Choose one title for consistency.

I nod, still chewing my lip. Hundred and fifty . . . hundred and fifty . . . A glint catches my eye, and I stoop to pick up a penny off the floor while my brain does the math. The shop owner looks up at me from her nest of canary cardigan like a friendly tortoise peering out of its shell, studying my face. “I’d sell her for a hundred,” she announces after a long moment. “She hasn’t gotten any attention, and she’s taking up space. Can you do a hundred?”

Commented [LAJ9]: Again here with the lip chewing. I suggest something similar to, “I nod, still mentally juggling my budget” Try some ideas and see what you like.

I try not to wince. Man, I must look broke. Clothes were never my thing; if it’s comfortable, I wear it, end of story. Today it’s brown cargo pants and a ‘Science Is Not A Liberal Conspiracy’ T-shirt under a big blue duffle coat. And—yep, shit, forgot again—the caked paint around my cuticles probably doesn’t help, either. My only vanity is the line of silver earrings along the ridges of my ears and the streak of blue in my cropped black hair. Having that dyed and getting a haircut regularly is a bitch to remember, but it makes a great contrast with the black of my hair and the brown of my skin. I look more artsy, less street that way. At least, that’s what my landlady says. She’s all tact, that one.

Commented [LAJ10]: Changed plural to singular. It’s a lot of earrings, but it’s her only vanity.

A hundred. I can do a hundred easy. Yeah. My fingers reach for my wallet, but what they really itch to do is take this penny in my hand and see if the fortune teller will move.

It’s a pain in the ass lugging the fortune teller out of the shop and down to where I parked, as the sky spits snow. I guess I should have realized that a box full of glass, wood, cogs and whatever runs the fortune teller would be heavy, but hey, spatial reasoning was never my thing, either.