

LIBBY

Written by

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FADE IN:

EXT. FOUNTAIN SQUARE - CINCINNATI, OHIO - AFTERNOON

From above, a dapper Jewish man, ALFRED HOLZMAN, 37, walks past the fountain in Cincinnati's Fountain Square, amidst a small crowd of people in early 20th century garb. He strides hurriedly into the posh SINTON HOTEL, looking shaken.

SUPER: MAY 23, 1904

INT. SINTON HOTEL - BAR - SIMULTANEOUS

Alfred -- tall, slender, spectacled -- steps into the hotel's lavish bar, passes the small cluster of men drinking. He SLAMS A TEN DOLLAR BILL DOWN ON THE BAR.

ALFRED HOLZMAN
Drinks on me, gentlemen. My wife
has just given birth.

His friends breaks into a cheer. But Alfred slides down onto his bar stool, flustered.

BAR PATRON #1
Why the glum face, Alfred?

Alfred is deep in thought. He recovers--

ALFRED HOLZMAN
Oh. I just feel... ill-fated. For
the second time, it's a girl.

BAR PATRON #2
Of course it is. Anyone can have a
daughter. It takes a proper
gentleman to beget a son.

The men break into uproarious laughter. Alfred remains solemn. Noticing, the patrons reduce their calamity to silence. Still somber, Alfred gives a weak smile.

BAR PATRON #1
We're just teasing, Alfred. But we
understand your disappointment.
Your legacy is at stake. What
could a woman achieve in today's
world?

We stay on Alfred's crestfallen face, and then SMASH CUT TO:

INT. SELWYN THEATER - EVENING - 1930

It's now 1930. The CURTAINS RISE on a dark stage on a production of *Three's a Crowd*. Our hero, the torch singer, LIBBY HOLMAN, wearing a long black dress in a plunging neckline, begins to sing -- HIDDEN IN DARKNESS.

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
 LIFE'S DREARY FOR ME.
 DAYS SEEM TO BE LONG AS YEARS.
 I LOOK FOR THE SUN.
 BUT I SEE NONE THROUGH MY TEARS.

A PIN SPOT glows on her. Her features are still shrouded in darkness as she continues, her left hand clasped across her heart.

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY (CONT'D)
 YOUR HEART MUST BE LIKE A STONE.
 TO LEAVE ME HERE ALL ALONE.
 WHEN YOU COULD MAKE MY LIFE WORTH
 LIVING.
 BY SIMPLY TAKING WHAT I'M SET ON
 GIVING.

She continues across the stage, against the BLACK VELVET CURTAIN, her slow, slinky steps followed by the PIN SPOT.

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY (CONT'D)
 MY HEART IS SAD AND LONELY.
 FOR YOU, I CRY. FOR YOU, DEAR,
 ONLY.
 WHY HAVEN'T YOU SEEN IT?

She steps into the light, finally allowing us to see her face -- a mature 27-year-old with a dark complexion, arched brows, thick shoulder-length black hair.

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY (CONT'D)
 I'M ALL FOR YOU, BODY AND SOUL.

We DOLLY across the stage as Libby sings.

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY (CONT'D)
 I CAN'T BELIEVE IT.
 IT'S HARD TO CONCEIVE IT
 THAT YOU'D TURN AWAY ROMANCE.
 NO USE PRETENDING.

As she continues, we see various reactions of the audience. Young men enamored, much to the chagrin of their girlfriends.

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY (CONT'D)
 IT LOOKS LIKE THE ENDING
 UNLESS I COULD HAVE ONE MORE CHANCE
 TO PROVE, DEAR.

We are now back on-stage. Libby continues her passionate performance.

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY (CONT'D)
 MY LIFE'S A HELL YOU'RE MAKING.
 YOU KNOW I'M YOURS FOR JUST THE
 TAKING.
 I'D GLADLY SURRENDER
 MYSELF TO YOU, BODY AND SOUL.

Libby pauses briefly before delivering her final line, enraged with passion and confidence--

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY (CONT'D)
 I'D GLADLY SURRENDER
 MYSELF TO YOU, BODY AND SOUL.

Before she can conclude the last note, the audience goes nuts, STOMPING and SHOUTING and calling for an encore. The ENTHUSIASM PRELAPSES as we CUT TO:

INT. ENGLISH TEA ROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

A distinguished journalist, WALTER WINCHELL, is seated, waiting for Libby at the exclusive restaurant on West 48th Street. She enters, dazed and hurried, wearing a tattered French beret and shabby raccoon coat.

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
 I'm so sorry for keeping you
 waiting, Mr. Winchell. You must be
 thinking, 'What a bitch.' Well,
 tough. I have a good excuse.

She plants a friendly, aggressive kiss on his cheek. He blushes, embarrassed. They both sit.

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY (CONT'D)
 As I was leaving the theater, I was
 mobbed by a handful of men who had
 been bussed in from Harvard. They
 said they had all decided to flunk
 an exam in order to see me perform.
 I didn't want to rush off. But I
 finally said, 'Gentlemen, I must
 leave. A reporter from the Daily
 Mirror is waiting for me.'

WALTER WINCHELL
 Well, the gin generation has
 certainly embraced you. You've
 made a sucker out of the
 Depression. I was blown away
 tonight. You were sensational.

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
 Oh, thank you. It's nice to be
 part of something so original.
 There have been such tired old
 tropes on Broadway lately. If you
 ask me, any lyricist who rhymes
 "love" with "skies above" should be
 publicly flogged.

WALTER WINCHELL
 You're funny, too. Maybe a career
 in vaudeville if you ever lose your
 velvet-contralto. When did you
 begin to train as a singer?

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
 Train?

WALTER WINCHELL
How did you develop your technique?

Libby begins to stir. Then recovers--

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
Walter, I have no technique. I
just sing from the gut, vocal cords
be damned.

Walter is not impressed. He begins to write down notes,
shorthand. Libby eyes this. Hurries to add--

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY (CONT'D)
My singing is like Flamenco.
Sometimes it's perfectly hideous.
I try to convey anguish, anger,
tragedy, passion. When you're
expressing emotions like these you
cannot have a pure tone. All the
songs I sing are about people who
have had difficult times in love,
but they never surrender. They
just say, 'That's my plight and I'm
going to take it in stride.'

WALTER WINCHELL
Do you find it hard to relate?
Given your upbringing?

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
What do you know of my upbringing?

WALTER WINCHELL
Weren't you a woman of wealth?

Libby raises her eyebrows.

WALTER WINCHELL (CONT'D)
I discovered that your mother one
of the Workums of Cincinnati.

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
A distant relative. She has no
ties to Levi and his distillery.
She's a schoolteacher.

WALTER WINCHELL
But your father, Alfred Holzman?
Wasn't he a millionaire?

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
My father is a lawyer. And he most
certainly is not a millionaire.

The journalist looks over his notes.

WALTER WINCHELL
Didn't he start Holzman & Company
with his brother? A firm of
investment bankers trading in bonds
and securities?

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
 Why, yes, but it ended in
 bankruptcy. The investors lost
 hundreds of thousands of dollars.
 And my uncle owed \$150,000 in bonds
 that he'd borrowed. He disappeared
 and we never saw him again. But my
 father paid off all his debts in
 his absence. We were left with
 nothing.

Libby finds that she's become impassioned.

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY (CONT'D)
 Well, it looks like you've
 successfully riled me up, Walter,
 you old cad. I suspect you knew
 all along of my childhood and
 wanted to trigger a response.

WALTER WINCHELL
 None whatsoever. I have very
 limited notes on the subject.

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
 I can set the record straight, if
 you'd prefer.

WALTER WINCHELL
 By all means, please.

Libby thinks, then begins.

26-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
 All right, I'll make it short. But
 there was nothing glamorous about
 my childhood. I lived my entire
 adolescence at the Cumberland
 Apartments. Fifteen years. I
 imagine you've never been there but
 I can assure you, it was nothing to
 write home about.

Libby turns her head, which TRANSITIONS US TO:

INT. CUMBERLAND APARTMENT - LIBBY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT - 1910

It is 1910. In a tiny bedroom, lit only by a bedside lamp, RACHEL HOLZMAN, 36, is at the bedside of the olive-skinned, dark-haired 6-YEAR-OLD LIBBY. Rachel twists a shower cap in her hands as she speaks.

6-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
 How long do we have to stay here,
 Mother?

RACHEL HOLZMAN
 I don't want to hear any complaints
 from your tongue. We're in heaps
 of trouble and it's all your Uncle
 Ross's fault.

6-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
What did Uncle Ross do?

RACHEL HOLZMAN
What has he not done? With his gambling problem and his affinity for borrowing other people's money. We have been ruined, Lizzy. Your uncle has abandoned his responsibilities. He's probably fled to Honduras, given how much he talked of that retched place.

Pouting, Rachel exits, slamming the shower cap on the bed.

REVEAL: Just feet away, Libby's 9-year-old sister, MARION, has been listening in, a book laid open on her chest. Libby addresses her--

6-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
Honduras! How spectacular. I think one day, he shall return to Cincinnati and surprise us all by being terribly wealthy. When all of you are asleep, he will find me and tell me about all his adventures before returning to Honduras. But first he will give me a million dollars. Oh, won't that be lovely -- I could buy so many gowns and baubles and prizes.

9-YEAR-OLD MARION
Don't be foolish, Lizzy. You always anticipate the best for things but it's strictly your imagination. What Uncle Ross has done to us is unforgivable. Now put on your cap and go to sleep.

Libby isn't shaken but still smiling, dreamily. She slides the shower cap onto her head and then turns to sleep. Marion puts the book aside and flicks off the lamp.

INT. CUMBERLAND APARTMENT - LATER THAT NIGHT

Alfred comes home. We follow him as he walks down the long, narrow hallway into the living room. There, sitting in darkness, is RACHEL. The railroad flat is TINY, CRAMPED, with a large, ugly highboy the only barricade between the living room and the dining room table, where Rachel works, knitting a frock. He waits for her to speak. She doesn't.

ALFRED HOLZMAN
Rachel? What's the matter?

RACHEL HOLZMAN
A cockroach crawled across your child's head tonight.

ALFRED HOLZMAN

Marion?

RACHEL HOLZMAN

No, Lizzy. Your six-year-old daughter. This home is filthy and infested with bugs. All I could do was gave her a shower cap to wear to sleep. Why are you home so late?

ALFRED HOLZMAN

The insurance company decided to hire me as an attorney.

RACHEL HOLZMAN

Oh, thank goodness. You'll make money again and we'll be back on our feet.

ALFRED HOLZMAN

It's not that easy, Rachel. My brother left behind hundreds of thousands of dollars of debt.

RACHEL HOLZMAN

Yes? So what of it? That's not your responsibility.

ALFRED HOLZMAN

But it is. Russell and I both feel we need to make right the crimes that our brother committed.

RACHEL HOLZMAN

Holzman & Company was the largest failure in Cincinnati's financial history. We can't try to repair his problems. It's not your fault.

ALFRED HOLZMAN

It's not about me, Rachel. Ross took advantage of a lot of people who need their loans back. I have to set this right.

RACHEL HOLZMAN

Set it right? This is mortifying! We've gone from broiled steak with potatoes to scraps and stocks. Do you know how I made the stew we ate for tonight's dinner? I took home the leftovers from today's church social. We can't live like this for another year.

ALFRED HOLZMAN

We will have to. Until Wallace and I can repay all our brother's debts.

RACHEL HOLZMAN
Do you know what I have spent my evening doing, Alfred?

She holds up the clothes.

RACHEL HOLZMAN (CONT'D)
I'm refashioning Mar's old clothes for Lizzy to wear. Because we no longer have the funds to buy new clothes.

A CRY is heard. She looks down and we now see that HER ONE-YEAR-OLD SON has been sleeping on a cot, just behind the dining-room table. She does not move to comfort him. Instead she turns to her husband and states--

RACHEL HOLZMAN (CONT'D)
And I imagine when Allie grows up, I'll turn them into gentlemanly attire. You've turned our family into peasants.

EXT. RESIDENTIAL NEIGHBORHOOD - 1915

Almost five years have gone by. A 13-year-old Marion walks Libby to school. A 10-year-old Libby tugs at her long, frumpy frock.

10-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
Why do I have to wear your old clothes? I look absolutely pathetic.

13-YEAR-OLD MARION
You look fine. Don't worry yourself.

10-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
That's easy for you to say. You'll never have hand-me-downs.

Libby tugs at the dress before giving up. They have made it to AVONDALE PUBLIC SCHOOL. Libby crosses up the lawn to the entrance as Marion continues on.

INT. AVONDALE PUBLIC SCHOOL - CHOIR ROOM - DAY

The kids are being evaluated in the choir room. One by one, the choir teacher approaches a student and they sing a line. A young boy sings out--

12-YEAR-OLD BOY
LIFT EV'RY VOICE AND SING.

CHOIR TEACHER
Very good. Elizabeth?

Libby sings out, a low and husky voice.

10-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
LIFT EV'RY VOICE AND SING.

CHOIR TEACHER
Why are you singing so throaty? Is that your natural singing voice?

10-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
Yes.

CHOIR TEACHER
Try again.

10-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
LIFT EV'RY VOICE AND SING.

The kids are now silent. They look, nervously, at the teacher. He collects himself and then explains--

CHOIR TEACHER
Elizabeth, you possess the plangent voice of a bullfrog.

The kids erupt in giggles. But Libby isn't insulted. She, too, smiles.

INT. AVONDALE PUBLIC SCHOOL - THEATER - AFTERNOON

The children, including the boy who sang earlier, are now running through an after-school rehearsal of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Libby is on stage, hamming it up as she performs one of Puck's monologues.

10-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
"My mistress with a monster is in love! Near to her close and consecrated bower, while she was in her dull and sleeping hour, a crew of patches, rude mechanicals, that work for bread upon Athenian stalls, were met together to rehearse a play, intended for great Theseus' nuptial day."

The drama teacher steps in, interrupting.

DRAMA TEACHER
Incredible, Lizzy. She's only 10 years old, everyone. Let this be a shining example to all of you. Everyone can learn Shakespeare with enough effort.

The other students politely applaud. None more vigorously than the boy from the choir practice.

EXT. TOWN SQUARE - CINCINNATI - EVENING

Libby and her friend walk home, past shops and restaurants.

12-YEAR-OLD BOY
How did you learn to read so well?

10-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
I don't know. My father's always
taken me to the theater. We study
Emerson and Wilde and Jung at home.

She stops cold, looking up at one of the storefronts.

10-YEAR-OLD LIBBY (CONT'D)
I have to run an errand for my
mother.

12-YEAR-OLD BOY
Do you want me to come in?

10-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
No. You stay here.

She enters the local BAKERY.

INT. BAKERY - CONTINUOUS

The door chimes as Libby enters the bakery. The baker
notices her, greets her with a smile.

BAKER
Hello, again.

10-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
Hello. Do you have any bread from
last night for sale?

BAKER
Yes, we do. Half off, as always.

10-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
I'd like a loaf, please.

Libby sets down her bag, grabs two coins from her pocket and
sets them on the counter. The baker crosses to the back
counter, returns with a loaf of bread.

BAKER
Why do you always prefer this
bread? It's quite stale and I
can't assume you're trying to save
two cents a loaf.

10-YEAR-OLD LIBBY
Oh, no, sir. Of course not. My
mother uses it for stuffing.

She slides the bread into her bag and walks out, embarrassed.