

# TRIAL BY COBRA

by  
Ann Snead

Dramatized for radio from  
The Blind Owl  
by Sadegh Hedayat

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## CAST

NARRATOR	An Iranian opium addict.
REZA	An Iranian shopkeeper in his early twenties.
RUSTAM	REZA'S brother.
(REZA and RUSTAM'S voices should be close, but distinguishable.)	
ALI	Their servant (could be played by the NARRATOR)
RANI	A beautiful devdasi (temple dancer)
PRIEST	At the temple of Shiva (could be played by the NARRATOR)

## SETTING

Banares (Varanasi), India, at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## TRIAL BY COBRA

### SCENE 1

### INT: CLAUSTROPHOBIC BEDROOM IN MUD-BRICK HOUSE

MUSIC: EDGY MUSIC ON THE NEY (IRANIAN FLUTE) FADING UNDER

NARRATOR: There are sores which slowly erode the mind in solitude, like a kind of canker. Whoever saw me yesterday saw a wasted, sickly youth. Today he sees a bent old man, with white hair and burnt-out eyes, lying on this bed, in this room, in this tomb-like house.

FX: HE STRIKES A MATCH. A LAMP SPUTTERS TO LIFE.

NARRATOR: People are unable to understand the agony inflicted by this type of disease. The fact that it has no cure—that relief is found only in oblivion—seems to them unbelievable. Let it be so. What the rabble thinks is of no interest to me. My only fear—

FX: HE REMOVES THE LID FROM A LOZENGE TIN, WHOSE CONTENTS RATTLE LIKE LUMPS OF COAL. HE CLOSSES THE TIN UNDER:

NARRATOR: Is that I'll die. Die within these four walls without ever having come to know myself. That's why I've decided to look back at my life. Not for others—what business of it is theirs? For my Shadow. I want to press my entire life, as if it were a bunch of grapes, in my hands. I want to pour, drop by drop, the bitter wine of my life into my Shadow's dark throat. I shall trace to its source the disease which afflicts me. Show how what happened at the beginning of my life poisoned my whole existence. Forced me to withdraw from human company. To take refuge in wine and—

FX: TAKING QUICK SHORT PUFFS FROM A PIPE.

NARRATOR: Opium. Unfortunately, the effects of such medicines are only temporary. After a certain point, instead of alleviating the pain, they intensify it. Dreams become nightmares.

FX: THE SLOW BEAT OF LEATHERY WINGS COMES UP  
UNDER

NARRATOR: (HIS VOICE CHANGES, BECOMES LANGUID, AS THE DRUG TAKES EFFECT.) In a coma-like limbo between sleep and wakefulness, the soul's shadowy reflection manifests itself. Thoughts grow large, subtle, magical. They soar. Imagination, free from the attraction and the weight of earthly things, rises towards a sublime tranquility and stillness. How shall I describe this to you, Shadow? It's as though I sit on the wings of a golden bat and roam in a radiant, empty world unimpeded. A profound and indescribable delight comes over me.

FX: CROSS-FADE TO THE SOUND OF HIS HEART BEATING  
ARRHYTHMICALLY, HIS BLOOD CIRCULATING, UNDER

NARRATOR: I can hear my heart beating. Feel the blood throbbing in my arteries. I'm drowning in a sea of caressing waves. Dissolving into a circle of black. I am a drop of ink. A musical note. A stroke of calligraphy... If only I could surrender my life! Here. Now. Disintegrate into nothingness. Find peace at last. Let it be so! Let it be so! (A SHUDDERING SIGH.)

My mind's going dark. Going blank. I begin to fall through space, into an infinite abyss, an everlasting night. (A CRY OF RAGE.)

I'm caught by a tiny hook... No! Oblivion is what I seek! Let nothingness last forever! (LAUGHTER OR SOBS [CAN'T DISTINGUISH WHICH], WHICH ABRUPTLY STOP.)

I break free and begin to fall again. Now my body feels as if it's growing smaller. As if the course of time has reversed itself. One by one past experiences, past states of mind, forgotten childhood memories, re-occur. I not only observe, I participate.

FX: HE TAKES MORE DRAGS ON THE PIPE.

NARRATOR: You stretch across the wall in the light of the lamp, Shadow. Waiting for me to tell my story. Where shall I start? There are so many stories. Of love, of copulation, of marriage, of death... Which are fiction? Which fact? I feel sure of nothing in this world. I believe nothing. Even the events of my own life seem unreal to me. (HOARSE COUGHING)

When I was growing up, I heard several different accounts of my parents. Only one of them—the one nanny gave me—can, I imagine, be true. When my father and his brother were in their early twenties, she said, they decided to leave Iran and go to India. To Benares. There they set up a business selling Persian wares—textiles, shawls, needles, pen cases, pottery... While Reza tended the store in a dark, crowded alley near the Vishwanath temple, Rustam went about the dusty roads of the countryside, buying and selling. (FADE OUT) Opening up one day...