Cassandra's Words

The first thing I lost was time.

One moment, I remember standing in the wings at the theatre, waiting for my entrance as Cassandra. Next, the world had gone black.

When it returned, I was on the floor.

My ribs hurt. Not the clean ache of a bruise, but something deeper, as though bone had fractured beneath skin. Someone was speaking to me, though the words would not arrange themselves into sense. My mouth would not answer. Later, I learnt I had fallen. Led from the stage, I had collapsed. The play continued without me.

At nineteen, I didn't fathom the word *seizure*.

I knew only pain, and that I had been Cassandra.

Weeks earlier, the cast list had appeared on the Drama Centre office noticeboard.

Agamemnon. The Aeschylus tragedy. Directed by a famous artist from overseas we had aimed to impress in recent auditions. The corridor smelled of cheap coffee and old paint. Students now pressed around the page, eyes scanning, searching for their names.

I stretched my neck. *Please, not the Chorus.* And there it was.

Cassandra.

I read it twice. The script came back to me. Daughter of Priam. Priestess of Apollo. She saw Troy burning before the ships had sailed, predicted her own murder, and people did not believe her. They called her possessed. A liar.

A smile spread across my face. Here was a woman whose truth was called madness. A woman given sight, then punished for using it. I wanted to give her my voice, one that would make the audience listen.

Rehearsals took me over.

I learned to move as Cassandra moved. Not walking so much as being pulled forward by her visions. Spun until the fabric of my stand-in costume lifted around me. I spoke prophecies to actors who turned away, who frowned, who did not understand. The director encouraged it.

More, more. Go further. Let them see what she sees.

On opening night, I stood in the wings, my heart beating. My actual costume was a swirl of bright silk. Beneath it, I wore nothing but nerve and ambition. I had pushed past my shyness weeks ago. This was part of becoming Cassandra. I stepped into the light.

Spin. Speak. Spin. Speak.

The audience was dark, full of eyes. But I followed the shape of the scene. Where Cassandra's crisis would come: the monologue, the whirling, the terrible knowledge pouring out of her. I had rehearsed it until my body knew the way.

Until a strange wrongness swelled inside me.

I had felt nothing like it. Not fear. Not nerves. Something rising from somewhere deeper, gathering at the base of my skull.

Onstage, my fellow students glanced towards me. I did not notice. I was trying to find my next line. My mouth opened. What came out was not Cassandra's language. It was a babble, broken and unfamiliar, though I kept turning, kept dancing, because some part of me still believed I was performing.

Spin. Speak. Spin.

The lights smeared. A chorus member gripped my arm. I did not understand why. Next thing, I was sitting in the wings in a fog while the play went on without Cassandra.

Afterwards, the cast gathered in the green room to celebrate. Nobody mentioned what had happened. They laughed, avoided my eyes. Someone handed me a drink I did not want.

You stuffed up. Forgot your lines. Ruined your big moment.

But I knew it was deeper than that. Much deeper.

The GP sent me to a specialist. The specialist ordered a CAT scan.

At first, they said *cyst*.

Then newer machines arrived, larger and colder, and the word changed.

MRI. I discovered claustrophobia, locked in a metal tube that thumped and shuddered.

Brain tumour.

The lesion sat close to neurological centres governing speech and memory. The places in me that made language possible.

Finally, wrapping it up: *epilepsy.*

A balance of pills might stop the fits. They never have. *No more Driver's Licence.* Freedom taken. And no more stage. For a while, I believed my life had ended before it had begun.

I had trained to be an actor. I had wanted the lights, the audience, the transformation. Instead, I learned the geography of hospital corridors. I learned to recognise the strange warnings my body gave me: flashes of returning to known but forgotten places, speech slurring, the gap in time, the sense that the room had tilted, the blur of returning.

Seizures did not always look like falling. Yet often, people frowned, decided it was drunkenness and looked away. Sometimes, it looked like silence. It was like words becoming foreign in my mouth.

It looked like Cassandra.

Fear did not leave me all at once. It thinned. There were people who stayed. Friends who learned what to do when I went down. How to turn me on my side and wait. Family who did not flinch at the sheets I wet some nights, or my bruises and fractured ribs, or the time I spent surfacing from confusion. And there was a partner throughout who never flinched, and

later a child who grew inside me when I learned with joy that my body could carry life and overcome danger.

I did not return to acting as a profession. But I never left the theatre. I taught Performing Arts at university and directed plays. Then joined other women breaking into the industry. As Trainee and then Resident, I learned my craft. Plays, then operas. I ran theatre companies, working in Australia and overseas. Took pride, watching young actors find their way toward their own moments of transformation.

And I wrote.

At first, the stories were small: fragments, scenes, voices that would not leave me. They became longer. A page could hold me steady when my body would not. Here, I could make the world behave. Succeed, creating characters and giving them words that someone else would read and believe.

Now, decades after my first fit, I sit at my desk. The flat glow of a screen has replaced stage lights. Writing is hard work. It is a slow process of rearranging sentences, cutting out excesses, and staring at a blank page until the right words land. I type the final full-stop of this text. No applause, and no sudden revelation. There is only the quiet reality and satisfaction of a finished draft.

I am not the nineteen-year-old girl who fell. Not the actor whose words turned to noise on a stage that wasn't built for her. I have learned that a life can change direction without becoming less. One who has built her own workplace.

The seizure took the stage. It has never stopped the story.