

The Vaudeville

The crowd is in frenzy now.

Polkinghorne has, for the first time in the town's memory, shown charity, sharing, free of charge, his rucksack full of last week's rotten pears, cabbage, and tomatoes that pulse in fists like sacrificial hearts. Boglewicz' spit steams on the stage. Spittle sticks unnoticed to the necks of the first two rows. The Puddicombes, sweating turbulently, one-up each other in decibel and defamation. Gelb gropes the young girls in front of him in the pandemonium. Baumgatner's sodden-chewed cigar lies invitingly close to the curtain as one of his decadal ideas sparks behind black heavy lids and he twitchingly lights another.

The absent artists, scattered by the earlier ridicule, are called out by uncreative cognomens not worth sharing. The paradox of the audience's requests is lost on all but Nex, whose name remains unuttered.

They catcalled little Lee Mosley when she sang the Siren's Song. She was still hiding in one of the wicker costume baskets backstage, her tears scratched away by the pink-white tarlatan of a Titus Andronicus production.

They laughed and jeered at the Amazing Dean's magic show. They never even saw the rabbit, Yutu, whom Dean had traded his father's pistol for and kept secret from all the town, training him under the floorboards where he had fantasized of one day integrating the hidden trapdoor in the stage into a trick of his own. Before he could even reveal the pledge, he had run from the hall and could not be found. The stagehands spoke in stentorian voices of his much-anticipated disappearing illusion in

the hopes that wherever he was he would not give up his dreams of an apprenticeship with Nex.

Yutu now nestled comfortably amongst exposed wiring and chewed Polkinghorne's sickening winged cabbage.

A jack of spades lay prophetic as the hangman under the beating lights.

After exhausting themselves dodging flying fruit and miscellaneous missiles in their acrobatic extravaganza, the Carson twins held each other and intermittently held each other back from taking the stage again and leaping into the pit.

The Cussing Quartet, in their simple sordidness, said they god damn well weren't going out there to face those uppity bitches and be taken in the ass by some moronic bastards.

And the headlining act, The Dead Pans, whom only Nex knew, were still yet to show. This did not go unnoticed by the partially sober, and surprisingly conscious, part of the crowd who incited a subtle change of name to insinuate a timidity-induced, rather than geriatric, bladder problem.

The boos and shouts of outrage grow steadily louder and more violent. All out to outdo each other. Even the bats in the rafters are too frightened to show themselves. The vaudeville posters, torn from the walls, crumble to the floor.

Beer and at-one-time-inconspicuous hard liquor spill over Sunday bests and slosh to the floor where children crawl, pinching each other's behinds like their parents do, splashing in the puddles, in and out of knee high boots and ever higher waste, slurping at the dregs of discarded cartons, becoming as belligerent as their guardians above,

running and screaming down the aisles like Christmas has come and given them what they have always wanted—to only have their parents attention when they want it.

The stage remains empty above two inches high. The sound of a schoolboy's smacked ass rings out as chairs begin to lift and crack against the floor, building to a crescendo of a battering ram at the gate. The curtain quivers with every jolt.

Grozganic drops his chair. He barely heard the boy's scream amongst the riot.

Leaning down, what was once kept bubbling below the surface sloshes over and pours out, gastric steaming, upon the poor child's head.

Nex sighs and moves behind the cerise velvet arras. The click of his boots on the swelling wood can be heard even above the uproar. He slips through the dancing folds on a deafening beat, and a welcome silence settles.

The faces in the crowd freeze as if a change of wind had just passed through the curtains and touched each of them with a parent's cautionary tale. The light gleams off the skin of yellow country teeth. Mouths dry, eyes bulge and water, sweat takes a languid stroll down pulsing temples. Curses are swallowed half cast and null, hands ride gravity to rest, stances shift inadvertently. The footsteps echo off the roof and walls. The effect, a patient ambush, with Nex on high ground, downstage and surveying his pitiless game.

Bravo, he claps.

Two easy strokes that sound six with the last snapping the town out of their trance, lips coming to rest, mouths shutting off miasma currents, eyes blinking, red and incredulous, and never a sound dared.

You've been quite the audience thus far.

His footsteps echo to stage left and down the few stairs there. Each beat visible in the eyes and throbbing veins of his audience. The effect more powerful than the whole auditorium of chairs being lifted and crashed into a riotous fire.

He makes his way down the aisle, surveying the dumbstruck attendance. Their curious eyes, unable to hold a gaze, shift and lower as Nex's attention brushes over them.

Bringing tears to the eyes of the innocent...the uncorrupted you have just now befouled with your own untenable insolence.

He stops at the row seating the Ercole's—husband, wife, and young daughter—and looks down upon the family. Quiet tears stream down the child's face below a homemade pointed birthday hat painted red and pink and white. In all of their wet regretting eyes, a look of sympathy is reflected, or only refracted, by the depths of their desire. He reaches down and takes the child up gently. Holding her in one arm, he whispers something into her ear and she falls immediately to peaceful slumber upon his shoulder. The parents watch, hope visibly draining, leaving their bodies void of all *élan vital*.

Shattering dreams. Just as yours have been shattered. And so, I suppose, all dreams deserve to be if only one goes unrealized...

He walks with the same long easy strides back down the aisle, taking the pointed cap off the sleeping girl and placing it on Baumgatner's dunce-worthy head of a similar patterned hue.

What's been happening with you boys? Couldn't make it as a musician, couldn't cut it at basic training, didn't land that job in the city, that promotion you thought you deserved? Girls never had that dream wedding, that movie star daughter, that sports star son?

Nex takes center stage.

So you thought you'd catcall a young virgin. Rather let food rot when you have children as thin as a refugee camp barbed-wire fence... No respect...

He begins to stalk—a tiger with no cage.

I heard your secret susurrations. Rendezvous behind the butcher's for a midnight snack. Trysts set for this decrepit hall here after a convenient set of gloves is left behind. Well there will be no lovemaking under this roof tonight. You deserve neither this ramshackle art house, nor the good conscience required for fun-loving procreation. And let it be heard, you who do not listen even when you have paid for the privilege, that any copulation to take place

before the night of the new moon will sire a child out of this disgrace, who will, on their fourth birthday, be coming with me.

Gasps cause menopause and, for the first time in the night, parents turn to search for their children.

And I hope I'm going to get the chance to come back around.

He stops. Everyone freezes.

You wanted to see a show. Something with a little spark.

And the room flashes with the brilliance of a lightning stroke that concatenated across the sky the length of the high narrow windows that wing the hall.

Something to get that cold heart racing.

And the whole building shakes as the accompanying thunder delivers a message of mortality. The tiny bats now leave their nest in the rafters and circle about the ceiling, carrion birds waiting for the predator to finish playing with its prey.

You have been a truly wonderful cast of players tonight. For, while you were watching the stage, we were watching you.

Another flash and crack of lightning, now all at once.

Hearing familiar flatterings for mistresses and handmaidens alike. Trailing the blind grope of a hand into the shadow of a groin. And while a husband sits clasping the other. I honestly admire the audacity.

Palms sweat, knees itch, bladders swell.

Bottles kept secret from significant others. Alcoholic and otherwise. A few drops never hurt anyone, you soliloquize. A few salubrious drops administered into a heady beer. Must help the demon sleep at night. Better than wreaking havoc on the children. Just give it a try.

The thunder and lightning were almost constant now and the winds were howling outside like a werewolf come upon a feeding frenzy. Trees, horizontal, scratch at the walls. Seeds, sticks and whole branches, steel sheeting from the roofs of neighbors' houses, bounce and roll across the roof in a clamor giving fright to women, children, and men alike. But no jump in the night was more terrifying than the presence of the man stalking the stage.

You dare to mock the ambition of young artists when you fear to take the stage yourself. Why not come up here and bare your soul to the community you call your own?

A tree crashes to the earth outside.

See if your neighbors find your feline pastime so funny.

Eyes wouldn't rise from the floor. The walls were trembling and wouldn't stop. Flakes of dried paint fall with restless spiders to sprinkle the heads below. Scattered bodies rise and dance a tarantella to shake loose the shiver that ran their spines.

Regale us all with a song about the stranger you boys hung up.

More than one soul creeps further within its shell and waits, agitated, watching the shadows at the cave entrance, and exaggerating fantastic, threatening beasts.

Perhaps a one man show about the innocent girl no one raped.

Nothing.

Well I'm not quite so innocent.

The lights shatter in screams that fall like hail piercing the skin of the night. The scene is swallowed in darkness, the sound in thunder. Shards of broken glass scatter up the legs of the crowd, and once more the madness comes to light.

Now I ask that you all remain seated while the hall comes crumbling down.

At that, the main double doors break their latch and burst open. Everyone turns to stare, mortal tears in their petrified eyes, as a monstrous raven surges into the room.

Lightning cracks across the doorway and licks at the absence of color that drips off the creature's wings. It caws the sound of collecting every man's due and circles the crowd three times.

Eyes closed, bladders burst, prayers spent.

The rain breathes the length of the hall in the same pattern as the bird, an emanation to match the gasp of Charybdis, the bats less macabre, but unsettling in reverse. In three turns the raven remembers every face for a lifetime and flies back into the ether, the camp of bats close behind.

The man and child on stage are gone. The wind drops a knot. The thunder rumbles.

The lightning casts twisted shadows on suspicious faces. The theatre is dark.