

## The Unseen

As the first act draws to a close, Hal steps out onto the loading dock behind the theatre to run his lines. It's his habit. He does it in the shower twice, just before any performance—once in his head and once aloud. As a character actor with plenty of backstage time, he'll also step outside to run the second and third act lines after his first exit.

He knows immediately that Moya Parker, the actress playing Mrs. Bradman to his Dr. Bradman, in the San José Community Theatre production of *Blithe Spirit*, and Mary Alvarez, the stage manager, are out in the darkness having a smoke.

“Another act in the books,” he says, stepping off the dock toward the sidewalk and the little park across the street.

“Two and a half shows to go, Harold,” Mary responds with a final drag, before scooting back inside to set some props. This is the final weekend of the run. After tonight, only Saturday evening's show and the Sunday matinee remain.

“Don't get lost, Doctor,” Moya says, turning to follow Mary. “We are back on in 15 minutes.”

“Have no fear, my love,” he responds. He's glad he doesn't have to kiss Moya in this production. He finds the taste of cigarettes nauseating. In fact, he finds the prospect of close, human contact about as repugnant as cigarette breath. He has not kissed and has barely touched another human since the death of his wife, Margaret, from breast cancer four years ago.

The little park with its intoxicating moonlit fragrance of frangipani, moonflowers, heliconia and bird of paradise is much more to his liking than the smoky loading dock. He begins

to run his lines with his mind on auto-pilot, while his senses inhale the tropical night and his thoughts wander.

It was Margaret's death, prompting his buy-out as a partner in the brokerage firm and the sale of the couple's London flat, that have supported a well-funded early retirement to Central America, where, at 49, amateur acting and ample birding opportunities notwithstanding, he finds himself mostly at loose ends.

The little sojourn in theatre hearkens back to his school days, when he'd participated in pantomimes and comedy reviews. He's won a recurring spot in this little repertory company of sorts, due to his quick thinking in his first performance as Mr. Laver in the Ray Cooney farce, *Chase Me Comrade*. A key element of a 15-minute scene required him to remove a newspaper from his briefcase that another character would eat page-by-page to destroy an incriminating story. Some backstage wit had changed the combination lock on the briefcase. After several uncomfortable seconds of fiddling with the lock, he had seized a magazine from the coffee table and substituted that for the newspaper.

He had been greeted offstage by hugs and high-fives of "Great save!" from the rest of the cast and crew, the only ones to know how uncomfortably close the production had come to 15 minutes of improv or dead stage time. He'd gotten his revenge on the suspected prankster the next night by fainting into a dead weight when he was supposed to be caught in the man's arms and dragged across the stage.

It was that little prank as much as the great save that had ingratiated him with his fellow actors and won him a role in nearly every subsequent production from *The Real Inspector Hound* to *The Importance of Being Earnest*. In between roles, he spent substantial amounts of time each

day on his balcony watching black squirrels devour mangoes from the tree in the garden and thinking about how his life would be different here with Margaret.

He finishes with the mental half of his exercise and begins to mutter aloud: “Nothing to worry about, Mrs. Condomine—it's only a slight strain... He made a good deal of fuss when I examined it. Men are much worse patients than women....”

“I beg your pardon,” comes a voice from out of the darkness.

Startled back to his surroundings, Hal can only dimly make out a woman seated on a small bench not five meters away. How he failed to notice her is not only mystifying but also slightly comical.

“Disculpe, señora. No tenia el menor idea...” he begins in his earnest Spanish.

“Oh, I am sorry,” the woman says. “I’ve only recently moved here and don’t speak much Spanish.”

“Oh, are you English?” he says. “I’m surprised we haven’t met. I’m Harold Richardson. My friends call me Hal.”

“I’m Emily,” the woman responds. “Emily Reeves.”

“A pleasure,” Hal says, stepping closer, ready to shake hands, although Emily makes no move to raise her hands from her lap. He studies her for a moment and feels a shudder run through his body. Chestnut hair that she wears shoulder length, fair translucent skin, a black evening dress that exposes her slim shoulders. She is breathtaking. And she bears a striking resemblance to his Margaret—a few years younger, perhaps, hair slightly darker, but the same high cheekbones, full lips and fragile beauty. He is momentarily struck dumb.

“Are you here to see the play?” she finally asks.

“Uh, yes, I mean no,” he responds. “I’m actually in the play. Just stepped out for a little fresh air. Are you?”

“In the play? Shouldn’t you know that?” she asks teasingly.

“I mean, are you here to see the play?”

“Oh, no,” she says. “I...don’t like crowds. I also just stepped out for some air.”

“Oh, so you live around here then?”

She makes no move to respond. Instead, she shifts her gaze uncomfortably.

“I’m sorry,” he says. “That’s really none of my business, but you should be careful. This is generally a safe neighborhood, but a woman alone at night...you never know.”

She gives him an incredulous stare, which gives way to a sudden, unexpected howl of laughter.

“Oh sorry,” she says. “But don’t worry. I’ll be fine. You should go back in. I think Act II, scene 3 is about to start.”

Realizing that he has lost track of time, Hal is too startled to wonder how she might have known that fact. He bids her a hasty good evening and makes his way back just in time to hit his mark.

“Nothing to worry about, Mrs. Condomine—it’s only a slight strain,” he says, slightly out of breath and blinking in the stage lights.

His five minutes of stage time in Act II pass agonizingly, as if in slow-motion. All he can think of is finishing this tedious scene and rushing back out to talk again with Emily. He steps on his fellow actors' lines and gets a few unrehearsed looks of annoyance from Ruth, Elvira, Charles and Mrs. Bradman.

“The roads are very slippery anyhow,” he says finally, nearly running to exit stage left and shouting “Come along, Violet” from backstage. His puzzled stage wife is left to fashion her own exit.

When he hits the door to the loading dock, he is running, but to no avail. The park is empty. No sign of Emily Reeves.

“I’m so sorry everyone,” he explains later, bringing down the house at the after-party. “But I had the most dreadful urge to piss.”

He asks casually after Emily at the party and is disheartened to find that nobody knows her, which is surprising, as every well-heeled gossip in the English-speaking community is in attendance. Surely someone in industry, government or international education must know her. She couldn’t have dropped from the sky. He has half a mind to ask the British consul, who is cozying up to Moya Parker, but realizes how that might look, and decides instead to get drunk.

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He sleeps away most of Saturday and rises in a fog. Then he thinks of Emily and the fog dissipates enough for him to feel a throb of longing to go along with his blistering headache. He takes two showers before catching a taxi to the theatre—a long one to clear his head and another to run his lines.

His headache fades into something between a phantom pain and a memory as he waits in the front row for the rest of the cast and crew to arrive. He often arrives early, just to sit and appreciate the dark, silent and empty theatre. There is something restorative and invigorating about watching the house turn from a place of silent expectation to one of charged anticipation.

Sam and Barbara, the actors playing the leads, George and Elvira, are next to arrive, nodding and finding seats apart from Hal in the back row. They are shagging each other and mostly keep to themselves. Madame Arcati, played by a New Age coffee heiress named Maria de los Angeles Sanchez-Hoffmeister, arrives next to sit cross-legged on the stage and find her chi. The rest of the cast and crew straggle in and flop into seats or sprawl onstage just ahead of the bustling appearance of the director, Antoinette (Toni) Winkle, an elfin, white-haired sprite who ran a professional theatre in Canada before retiring to the tropics.

“My goodness, we are going to have to ramp up the energy in here,” Toni says. “This is quite unacceptable. We may have to put a limit on the cast parties.”

“Is there some other reason we put up with this temperamental bitch for eight weeks at a stretch?” Moya’s smoke-filled whisper crawls into his ear as they make their way holding hands in a circle around the stage.

Toni leads the cast in a series of stretches and vocal exercises beginning with a long “HMMMMMMMMM...” that rises in pitch and volume and culminates in

“A box of biscuits,

A box of mixed biscuits,

And a biscuit mixer,”

“Imagine an imaginary menagerie manager  
imagining managing an imaginary menagerie.”

The act of bonding continues with a “circle of trust” that collapses into itself, and a final, resounding shout of “Break a leg!”

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The first act is spot-on and full of energy—one of the best performances of the three-week run. When it finishes, Hal emerges into the night and finds Moya and Mary smoking again in their accustomed positions.

“I certainly hope you remember to use the loo,” Moya says unhappily. “You left me stranded last night.”

“Yes, yes, of course,” he responds, barely acknowledging her presence. “So sorry about last night.”

Moya and Mary share a glance fit for the front of the house.

He slowly makes his way to the park. He knows he has no realistic hope of seeing her again and wants to postpone the disappointment. But there she is! Right on the same bench. She seems to be wearing the same evening dress—this time with pearls.

“I’m so delighted to see you again,” he says, approaching her. “I worried I might not.”

“Well, you knew right where to find me,” she responds.

“Why yes, I did,” he finds himself saying, so delighted that he barely represses a giggle.

“I haven’t got much time to talk now with the play going on, but I would love to get to know you better,” he says. “Would you like to come to the after-party with me? It’s at the French ambassador’s house just up the road.”

She hesitates before answering.

“I know you said you don’t like crowds,” he says hopefully, hopelessly.

“I’m afraid I wouldn’t be able to do that,” she says, his heart devouring itself like a black hole. “But, if you like, you can see me tomorrow.”

“Yes, I would very much like that,” he says, his heart regurgitating itself back to life.

“Wait for me after the matinee just to the right of the bar in the lobby and you will see me tomorrow,” she says. “That is—stage left of the bar.”

“Promise?” he asks.

“I guarantee it,” she responds.

The rest of that evening’s performance passes in a blur. He knows it must have gone well, however—the cast receives a standing ovation and two curtain calls, and Toni is called to the stage and presented with a bouquet by the president of the theatre’s board.

Hal begs off the party at the French Ambassador’s house, wanting to be as sharp as he can the next day, and uses the 2:00 pm matinee as an excuse.

Moya and Mary once again trade a look that might bring down the house.



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The final show is a bit of a letdown. Much of the cast is hungover again, supporting Toni's professional analysis. Hal's mind is mostly on his impending date with Emily. He scans the crowd for her but doesn't see her anywhere in the audience.

Most of the Thursday, Friday and Saturday night shows have been sell-outs or near sell-outs. The first two Sunday matinees filled about half of the house. Today's show doesn't even match that.

Afterward, the audience, cast and crew clear out quickly. Most of the good-byes and final trysts have been taken care of the night before

Everyone with responsibilities is getting ready for another Monday to dawn bright and early. Most of the cast have jobs and families to return to. There is hardly anyone left as Hal waits expectantly in the lobby, just to the right of the bar.

"Goodbye, Hal," Maria de los Angeles says, swinging by to give him two air kisses, while barely slowing her gait.

"Yes, it has been..."

"Ciao," she says, her ankle-length dress flaring to the knee as she blows out the front door.

Moya and Mary have been drinking and are the last to go.

"Are you waiting for someone, Hal?" Moya asks conspiratorially, winking at Mary.

“Why yes, my dear,” he responds, making as if to embrace her. “I’ve been waiting the entire production to declare my undying love for you.”

She hits him playfully with her hat. “You are just too weird,” she says. “Let’s go, Mary.”

Watching them go, he begins to give up hope. There are only a few volunteers left, emptying the trash, sweeping the floors, and locking away the bottles behind the bar.

Normally, at night, the lobby is too dark to make out the décor, unless one really takes an interest. The light is so much better in the afternoon he can discern his surroundings. The walls on the far side of the lobby are covered by a variety of promotional posters and Playbills from throughout the decades. The non-profit theatre company is self-supporting through ticket sales, events, philanthropy and several generous endowments throughout the years from well-off retirees with no heirs. Mailers to supporters and members like to remind everyone that it is the longest-running English language community theatre in Latin America—dating back to the 1940’s.

He studies some of the posters he’s just glanced over before. There’s one from a 1983 production of *The Fantasticks* and another from a 1990 production of *A Chorus Line*, which appears to feature a cast of thousands. The posters to the right of the bar are even older. A young couple share a meaningful glance in a poster from a 1972 version of *Barefoot in the Park* and twelve angry, or at least slightly-annoyed, men peer out from a 1966 poster promoting *Twelve Angry Men*.

Then his eye catches a poster he has never seen, from 1954, five years prior to his birth year of 1959 he notes, and lo and behold, it is promoting none other than Noel Coward’s *Blithe Spirit*.

He reads the copy aloud as if running his lines again. “Noel Coward’s award-winning *Blithe Spirit*, coming to the San José Community Theatre April 8-25, 1954.”

His gaze wanders below to black-and-white photos of the leads. “Starring Edward Dinkcastle as Charles Condomine, Faye Stewart as Madame Arcati, Nancy Hollingsworth as Ruth, and...” he stops breathing.

He looks away and rubs his eyes, and then scans the poster starting from the top until his eyes again fall on the caption he can barely read: “...and Emily Reeves as Elvira.”

And there is her picture, complete with black evening dress, pearls, slim shoulders and fragile beauty, as vivid as she had been last night among the flowers.

He does the math. Although it was difficult to precisely distinguish her age in the moonlight, he had guessed that Emily Reeves might be in her mid to late thirties, possibly 40. But the woman in the photo looks no more than 35, making her birth year about 1919, meaning that Emily is about... 89??!!

That was no 89-year-old woman he had met in the park, of that he is sure.

Unsure how long he stands staring at the poster, he is finally approached by one of the volunteers.

“We are locking up now, Hal,” she said. “Are you ready to leave?”

He gives the question prolonged consideration.

“I’m fine,” he says. “Sorry if I’ve kept you. I have a key, so if you want to leave I can let myself out.”

“I understand,” says the volunteer. She is an American. He seems to remember her name is Jodi. “It’s difficult sometimes at the end of a run, isn’t it? You just don’t want to let go of the magic.”

“Yes,” he says. “That must be it. That’s it exactly—not wanting to let go of the magic. I’m going to stay for just a while longer and will let myself out. I’ll see you at the next show.”

“Oh yes,” Jodi says, “Meanwhile ‘The air feels thick and dense, as if the buildings breathe and steal away the oxygen...living in the city is like living inside the mouth of a crocodile, buildings all around you like teeth. The teeth of culture, the mouth and tongue of civilization.’”

“What’s that?”

“You know, from *Anna in the Tropics*, the October show,” she says. “I’m planning to audition for the role of Conchita, the older sister.”

“Well, I’d say you have a good chance with the way you delivered that line,” he says. “I didn’t realize you were acting.”

Pleased with herself, Jodi smiles as she locks up the supply closet. “Thank you, Hal,” she says. “You stay as long as you want. We’ll see you soon.”

After she leaves, the lobby is once again dark. He can barely make out the poster now. Night has fallen early in the tropics, as it does year-round.

Through the open door to the theatre, he can see the glow of the exit signs, now the only light in the building to help him find his way. He moves toward the light, finds a seat in the back row, and begins to wait for something to happen.