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TEMPUUS or 'Arts Cuts' b

A fog hung in the air obscuring the moon and lending an indefinite, silky cloak to the street-lamps. The occasional drops of rain skittered across the surface of the car-park puddles and I danced through them with all the grace of the drunk I was intending to become. I had slipped into the car-park round the side of the budget supermarket with the intention of taking an illicit, back-street route to the Wetherspoon's free house. I had no illicit, back-street concerns to tend to, but I found that taking such a route gave me a little thrill.

As I skipped towards the alleyways I was so looking forward to, I noticed a strange glow surrounding a crumbling doorway, which, as far as I was aware, led into a disused cinema. I walked a little closer and focussed my ears and began to hear voices from within. I felt a strange sensation which I had not felt for a long time: the feeling that something, in this very grey town, was actually happening. I'd yearned for some kind of Haight-Ashbury happening for so long, that now that one seemed to be doing just that, I was unsure how to go about involving myself. The first step was the one which took me just beyond the threshold; with this taken I continued inside.

The passage was lit solely by the mysterious light that had drawn me to it, which was emanating from somewhere further in. I turned a corner and found myself in what must have been the main theatre. The room itself was grand enough, with tattered curtains lining the walls and great pillars beside what previously had been the screen. The screen itself had been removed and revealed a stage flanked by more fraying curtaining and displaying at the back a wilting banner declaring this to be 'Backstreet People's Theatre'. It struck me how few of the 'people' were here. The stage, as with the rest of the room, was lit by a curious mixture of portable lamps and candles and had, in its centre, two figures. The shorter of the two was a boy, no older than ten, who had a grubby face and wore the curious combination of a plain grey, ripped t-shirt and shorts, and a vibrant mock-native American headdress. The taller of the two was a strikingly beautiful woman, she had impossibly long black hair, which I followed with my eyes down to her long black dress and further still down to her feet, dirty from the dust on the stage. She stood a little ahead of the boy with her back to him, a look of icy contempt on her face. Then the boy spoke:

SCENE ONE

'O, Helena, witch-queen,
My father, the lion, has caught a sickness,
he's rotting from the inside.
His mane has fallen from his neck,
and his teeth are made of marshmallows,
and his claws are blades of marram grass,
and his voice is as the chirp of a bird.
Please, Helena, make him some medicine,
some hot potion and bring him back to pride!'

Whilst I was aware that this was theatre I was still struck by the boy's boldness – I could surely never show such strength addressing such an imposing woman. Having heard his speech she wheeled around, her impossibly long hair scything through the air, reminding me of a whip. She turned back to face the audience, whom I had now counted and numbered around six.

'Tell me boy,
did your lion chase away the monsters,
wrestle the hyenas
and banish the bad dreams with a roar?'

'Yes ma'am,
he would make us feel safe as if we were at the bosom of God.'

'Ah, child,' Helena sneered,
'So did my father,
but they must all die,
and every little cub must be cast, alone, into the world.'

The boy began to weep and ran off-stage. The curtain fell with a smattering of applause from the tiny audience. I had only one thought at this moment: this could not be the end, surely. The piece reminded me of my own father who was, at this very moment, shuffling off his own mortal coil and going gentle into that dark night.

Having lost myself in these thoughts I had failed to notice that the cast were emerging from the wings and chatting with the audience, and the witch was making her way towards me. The first thing which struck me about her off-stage was that she was without her immense black locks which had been replaced by significantly shorter auburn hair barely reaching her shoulders.

'Hello there, I see you've managed to stumble upon our little gathering.' Her voice was lacking the harsh edge that had marked her performance but retained the sophistication of the stage.

'Yes, well, I noticed the light you see. I was going to the pub but...' I was stammering and didn't really know why. 'What do you do here and what's the piece?' I finally managed to finish although my speech was lacking any vestige of charisma I had ever possessed.

'Well, presumably you've already worked out we're a little independent theatre company, so the first question is a little silly don't you think?' Her voice wasn't charged with indignation and I was about to affirm that 'yes, it was a little silly', but she continued quickly with a smile. 'The piece, however, is a little odd so your ignorance is forgiven there. It's a modern reworking of an old African myth. It's a study of maturity and loss.'

Normally I would have considered this a little pretentious but having witnessed the performance I had to admit that I was struck by the feelings it had managed to excite in me; but I still had one question...

'That surely wasn't the end though, was it? I mean it...didn't seem like a resolution.'

'No, of course not!' She smiled for the second time in the evening and I felt a little flutter. 'Even in our less than desirable venue the room hire is too high, we can just about get two hours a week. There's not a lot we can afford when we're selling about three paintings a month between the lot of us!'

I sighed, I knew this sentiment all too well, I was still living at home with my father having failed to interest anyone in my poetry – which I had been convinced was my vocation as a boy and had now given up writing. She turned to speak to some other patrons.

'Sorry, I didn't catch your name. ' I blurted instinctively.

She turned, her new, less imposing hair bobbed and caught the light pleasantly as she did so.

'I'm Edie, and what little there is here is mine!' With that she left me alone.

As I would discover from mingling with the other audience members and players, the company was mostly made up of, and patronised by artists from the nearby creative quarter who, having found themselves washed up in our town by the coast, now hungered for the visceral and the avant-garde interests more prevalent in the cities.

After a short while we were required to vacate the premises and I watched as the artists dispersed across the car park, returning to little studio flats, presumably to smoke and listen to compilations of The Cramps in the soft, angle-poise lamp-light until the early morning.

When I returned to my house the lights were off and there was no ethereal glow guiding me inside. Still, I jangled my keys in the lock and stepped in. The house smelt of illness. I considered how, in one short step, one split second moment, someone can change tense from an 'is' to a 'was'.

Upstairs my father groaned and turned in his bed. I cursed silently. He'd been groaning for months now. I could see his pain but this didn't make tolerating it any easier. Then I cursed myself for thinking this. How can you blame a dying man for not wanting to die?

As I returned to my room the groaning and creaking continued. I began to write a poem:

Lion

'Could you tie my laces?'
Says Dad.
'I'm choking – reach down my throat,
and fish out the lump.'

They've taken so much,
of his blood.
They must be drowning in samples.

'Watch – boy.
Watch, as your lion,
toothless, clawless,
struggles after the pride.'

Now, stumbling slow,
on an afternoon. He points,
to the houses of the dead.

'Do you remember,
when he would banish the monsters?'
When did they switch our guard dog,
for a sack of bones?

And now I wish this hateful wish,
upon a falling satellite -
Please let Daddy be

quiet.

Interval

A few days later, I was wasting the afternoon strolling through the creative quarter wondering which coffee bar to spend my money, in when I saw Edie across the cobbles chatting to a man selling fruit. She was dressed much more plainly than on our last meeting but retained her unusual beauty. I stalled for a moment, waiting for her to finish talking to him. She soon did and I scuttled over.

'Hi.' I began, but I was drowned out by the market trader who had begun barking the price of his wares once again.

'Sorry?' She said, cupping a hand to her ear.

'Hi.' I repeated, blushing.

'Oh, sorry, I thought your opening gambit may have had a little more pizzazz than that!'

'I live to disappoint.' I mumbled.

'I'm sure you have some worth, I just haven't worked out what it is yet.' Her remarkable frankness left me a little stunned and I was unable to respond before she continued, 'you look a little at a loss. Let's have coffee.'

I nodded dumbly and we strode into the nearest overpriced coffee outlet.

At the counter I ordered 'one of that', pointing to the item with the most lengthy and hyperbolic description on the menu. Edie ordered something else with a similarly continental name.

We sat on a sofa, misshapen in a fashionably modern way and the conversation began in a stilted manner, however once we had drinks to fill the pauses things became easier. We talked of her theatre and the arts in general. She enjoyed Klimt's use of colour and thought that Patti Smith was the most powerful woman who had ever lived. She was currently reading *The Bell Jar* and had a loathing for Oscar Wilde who, she said, had plagiarised the majority of his most famous witticisms from other, more discrete dandies.

The pace of the afternoon changed as we continued to exchange passions. I extolled the virtues of Jimi Hendrix's 'Electric Ladyland' and I failed spectacularly to pinpoint the source of my infatuation with the pathos of Vonnegut. I described a misty J M W Turner scene which had caught my eye and then became misty eyed over a short film I had seen featuring two underground comedians as washed up folk musicians. Before I knew it it was dark outside. Edie looked at the litter of coffee cups we had accrued.

'How about something a little stronger?' She had a mischievous look on her face and I decided it would be rude to let such an expression go to waste. Moments later I found myself, at last, several days late, in Wetherspoon's free house.

As the beers flowed we felt our tongues loosening further.

'The last man I loved was also the worst playwright I have ever met.' Edie volunteered.

'Oh yes?' I asked, eager to hear about this pathetic dolt who could ever imagine himself worthy to be loved by such a wonderful woman.

'Yes, we ended up putting on one of his works in the theatre. It was a half an hour long piece about time. First of all he called it 'Tempus', then he decided that wasn't high-brow enough so he added an extra 'u'. I'd say the promotional flyers for 'Tempuus' were probably the most vandalised posters in town that year. What's worse is that he made us perform the same piece three times in a row to 'represent the cyclical nature of time and how everything would repeat itself and we'd all make the same mistakes', she mimed inverted commas and rolled her eyes for the last bit and I laughed, 'still, I loved the idiot. He loved to be troubled though, he'd always sabotage his own happiness.' She sighed, I sighed. A couple of lads wandering past our table noticed and made exaggerated sighs themselves then laughed.

'The last woman I ever loved,' I slurred, 'was the most beautiful girl on Earth, damn talented too. She had this...hair,' I mimed someone having hair, much to Edie's amusement, 'it was great.' I concluded. It was true, she had been great, but whenever it came to explaining why I was always completely lost for words, it seemed as if nothing would do justice to such a pure adoration.

At that moment my revelry was interrupted by a small bit of dribble creeping down my chin. Edie wiped it up with a napkin and collapsed into fits of giggles.

Soon closing time came around and we stumbled outside occasionally seeing fit to lock arms. I agreed to walk her home. As we arrived at her door I recited one of my poems for her. She listened attentively with her twinkling eyes fixed on my face. When I finished she told me it was rubbish and kissed me. Then she told me it was good and invited me inside.

For an hour we kissed and listened to bootlegs of '70s Nigerian funk bands then we went to bed.

I awoke to the sun shining through the window of her bedroom, my head was spinning and it took me some time to see Edie perched on the side of the bed clutching a cup of tea. I looked at her and smiled a weak, slightly awkward smile.

'Did we-?' I began.

'No,' she smiled, 'you said something about not wanting to be drunk, I concurred, said you were sweet and then we went to sleep.'

'That sounds uncharacteristically responsible of me.' I laughed.

'If it makes you feel any better you did smash a plate.'

'Good.'

After a cup of tea and an alka-seltzer I dressed, kissed Edie goodbye and headed home. When I arrived the curtains were still drawn and I entered to find my father sitting in his rocking chair. He fixed me with a solemn stare which packed both pain and disapproval.

'You were supposed to be home to cook my soup and make my bath and change my dressing.' His bottom lip quivered. I felt a pang of guilt stabbing at my stomach.

'Shut up you old buffoon, I'm allowed to have a good time. You should learn to do something for yourself.' I snapped and immediately hated myself for doing so. He turned away from me and I stormed from the room.

SCENE TWO

A few days later I found myself seated in the theatre once again. This time I sat with the other 6 audience members. Three men, three women, four beards, two waistcoats, all covered in paint. Normally I wouldn't find myself in the vicinity of such people but having shared the experience of the last performance I felt as if I belonged and I waited with a little tingle of anticipation.

After a short wait the curtains parted and Edie emerged, this time she was without her great black wig – I later found out she had sold it to a group of fantasy role players in order to buy lunch.

'As I'm sure you're all aware,' she began solemnly, a look of disquiet on her face, 'since our government grant was axed we at the theatre have been extremely low on funds. It's only thanks to Janet selling her 'Deal or No Deal' themed triptych 'Three Studies of Figures at the Feet of the Banker' that we are able to put this night on at all.' A woman to my right nodded sagely.

'However the session will have to be curtailed, in fact we only have time for one more scene. So without further ado please welcome the Backstreet People's Theatre.'

With that she walked dejectedly behind the curtain. After she had gone the boy from the last performance entered, without his headdress, and an elderly man followed awkwardly. The two bowed slightly and the old man laid himself down on the grubby stage. Straining my eyes I saw that he had scraps of yellow felt on him and some vague charcoal whiskers scrawled on his face.

I sat and watched for the meagre half hour that we had through a film of tears as the boy and his father, the lion, wrestled with mortality. The boy explained to the lion that the witch would give them no medicine and that he had been to the man in the village who had given him something to make him better. The old man drank it and it was only water - the boy had traded his beloved headdress for water. They cried and shouted and the scene ended with the boy and the old man locked in a weak embrace. It was as if the child was hugging a hessian sack.

At that moment I knew right where I should be. I knew whose bedside I should be at, I knew whom I should be comforting and I knew whom I should be caring for. I left the theatre speaking to no-one – some things were more important than pleasantries.

As I ran home I resolved to make up for every time over the past few months my patience had lapsed and I'd snapped at the man staring right back into the waning light of life. I would make these last few days or weeks a paradise – after all I had so much for which to thank him.

Upon arriving home the door to the living room was closed and I would have been certain that the old man was in bed had there not been the conspicuous lack of the groaning and creaking that had characterised his sleep for some time now. I ran upstairs to his bedroom and found it empty. My body grew cold and I walked with growing anxiety back down the stairs and to the front room. I paused at the door, drawing a great breath. When I did finally open the door I was greeted by that which I had feared. Slumped in his rocking chair was the old man, his head slumped back and his mouth gaping in a grotesque manner.

I edged towards him, my body alight with tension and terror. I touched his forehead and found it cold. At that very second all feeling left me. I stood, frozen and alone beside a shape that was no longer my father. I walked away, shut the door behind me and went to bed.

I called the relevant authorities in the morning.

Interval

The next few weeks were like dust on the wind – if you had looked closely you'd have seen that a lot was going on, but you're not looking closely and you don't really notice. Many people passed as particles and whispered a litany of condolences, cards piled on the doormat and messages flooded the phone.

At first I tried going to the shops and going to the bank and engaging in the cult of routine that keeps small town life ticking along, but it soon became clear that all the mundanities of life which my father had navigated easily were littered with rocks to stumble upon. I understood little of finance and could scarcely plan a meal for myself. It was troubling to realise how much the old sea-dog could've taught me had I listened.

One day, not long after, I was standing outside the supermarket, laden with shopping I had assumed I might require. I saw Edie across the road. I didn't want her to see me as the incompetent ghost I had become and I hurried to turn away. Unfortunately in my addled state I failed to see the kerb and tripped, spraying shopping and limbs across the forecourt. This was the sort of pathetic display that was guaranteed to attract the attention of a kind soul such as Edie. Sure enough, as I lay, sprawled on the pavement in a sea of broken biscuits, crisps and ready meals I felt her crouching down next to me and placing a soft graceful hand upon my aching back.

I turned myself over to face her. She smiled kindly and I winced as I became aware of the grazes adorning my face.

'You look like you could use some help.'

I nodded dumbly, and then winced again – my neck had seen better days.

We packed my things in silence and then, without needing to discuss it, retreated back inside the supermarket and bought tea from the in-store cafe. As I sat, slightly smashed, on the plastic seating I looked around at the bizarre cross-section of society displayed around me. I was struck by how people I would once have deemed healthy now all appeared to be sick. I pretended to wonder when this ailing pall had been dragged across my eyes but, of course, I knew.

Several moments later I noticed I had been staring right through Edie's head and she was gazing at me intently, her eyes glazed with a thin sheen of tears. I mumbled an apology and looked into my tea.

'I can't even begin to imagine how you feel.' She said, eventually.

'Neither can I.' I replied petulantly.

We sat in silence again for a long while. I stirred my tea and watched galaxies of bubbles swirling, existing and then winking back out of existence leaving only a yawning brown nothing. I heard some sniffing from across the table but couldn't bring myself to raise my neck let alone my voice.

'The theatre ran out of money before we could finish the piece. No-one wants to buy Janet's 'Guernica in Colour'. Everyone has drifted away.' Edie croaked.

'What does it bloody matter? What does any of this matter?' I snapped, looking up and surprising and horrifying myself.

She stared back into my eyes, stunned, and I watched as all the shimmer of life drained from hers. She left without a further word.

SCENE THREE

A week later I met with my father's solicitor to discuss the small matter of inheritance. As it turned out I was to come into a not insignificant amount of money. I was well aware of how undeserving I was of such posthumous kindness and as I walked back home I considered giving it all to a cat sanctuary or something like that. Cats were given far fewer natural advantages to waste than I had been and were, I thought, deserving of a leg-up in life.

Back at home I sat, listless in front of a documentary about a singer-songwriter who had found his purpose and self-worth in music.

'I used to be an abuser,' he said, 'I would abuse the gift of life – women, drugs, alcohol - just for the sake of it. Then one night I found that I was not happy. I looked out of my window and saw that the moths caught in the gaze of the streetlamps played a bigger role in society than I did.' He was dreadfully aware of how poetic he was being, yet there seemed to be some sincerity in what he was saying.

'That's when I decided to turn to music. I tried to write about that which I knew and ultimately the only thing that I knew was that we were all here together whether we liked it or not. So why not try and make someone else's life a little better. A few days ago I received a letter from a girl who said she'd been saved from suicide by my song 'Venus (Step Off Your Half-Shell and Live a Little), and for me that justified everything I had been doing.' He smiled meaningfully at the interviewer, then his expression changed:

'And I think it's terrible that fewer people are going to be able to make this difference if the government continue with these absurd cuts to the ar-' At this point I switched off. I was in no mood for politics. Nevertheless there had been something profound in what the man had been saying. It was on this thought that I dwelt as I went to sleep.

And I dreamt. It was a dream of a cliff on a stormy night, it looked over into a raging sea and, wrecked on the rocks beneath, was a ship. There were many people splashing helplessly. Then Edie was there and she lowered into the sea a rope and called to the survivors. As I studied the rope closely it was clear it was made of books – plays to be exact – 'All My Sons' was linked to 'Rhinoceros', 'Rhinoceros' to 'Waiting for Godot' which linked to 'Twelfth Night' and so on all the way down to the water. I watched stunned as everyone was saved. Edie turned to me and made an expression that simply said:

'See.'

I awoke, basted in sweat. I was shocked that my imagination could be so blunt. I would've preferred subtle guidance, delivered through elaborate metaphors, instead I got the spiritual equivalent of a note, attached to a brick, hurled through my window.

I rang Edie the next morning and stated my intentions. I would put my inheritance into the play. We would stage a great performance of her piece on the sea front. We would make a grand day of it. All the artists would come and all the real people would come and we would revel in the struggle of one lowly cub to beat a callous society and in doing so, beat death. There would be music and there would be cheering and dancing. After all – we're all in this together so why not try to make things a little better for each other. I opted not to credit the songwriter with this sentiment, deciding that

whilst it was profound, it was also, now I thought about it, incredibly obvious. Last of all I begged her not to tell me how the piece was intended to end. I would find out on the day.

And after weeks of banner making work shops and planning meetings the day finally arrived. My personal gift to the people. A carnival to celebrate life. I peeked from behind the curtain and saw a great many people laid out in front of me. I smiled, I think, at this point it had been such a long time since I had smiled I was unsure what one felt like. I went out onto the stage and briefly praised Edie and the 'Backstreet People's Theatre' and finally dedicated the performance to my father. I felt myself begin to weep. At first it was a trickle, then a river and then a flood. I bowed and ran back behind the curtain and as I did so I felt a great relief. Weeks, months – maybe years of tension – relaxed. How long had I been an over-wound clock with the pressure straining my cogs and weakening my springs?

I took my place in the wings and waited. I was desperate to see how the show would end. This venture which had once seemed trivial to me was now central to my existence. I sat, with my hands clasped together, praying for a satisfying resolution.