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THE BRIGHT STARS

Mais, maintenant, nous sommes au
théâtre. Voici que le rideau se
lève....

(Alain Robbe-Grillet,
*Pour un nouveau
roman*)

IT IS A DREADFUL PLACE. I go in. It is a sooty place,
a black hall. I see it hung with bats, the foam comes
out of the seats, they'd be better made of wood, or
concrete arcs. It's a warehouse, that we call a theatre.
The musicians have a pit, a hole, yes, in one corner

there is standing water. What it needs is some hero, spurring up the lighting, summoning up ushers. Now, empty, banal. Not a metaphor, just nothing; rather, something dark, it smells of boots.

The director, Igor, says, ‘Gilded pills, yes they slip down – what do they heal?’ But healing’s not his game. On his stage there is no death, ‘It trivialises,’ he says. In-stead there’s suffering, laid on with relish. But it’s all a show. What troubles me is that brash laughter coming from below, sometimes it seems beneath our feet an eng-ine snarts and crackles, there is a pause, maybe some music like it’s squeezed from stones. Then days of silence.

Igor puts on shows, he’s a spectacularist. He’s also my friend. My girl, Katya, acts for him, maybe she’s his girl too. As actors are.

Igor instructs me, his ideas. And back there, where I’m not at home, they’re starting up the killing, small-scale, vendettas, old scores become new scores – only if you slaughter the kids will you have – well, not peace but resentment seething to the cemetery. Killing is right, it comes from our experience, and though it’s stupid, sure makes its point. And down we go, for justice, our good cause.

Igor says, ‘I need human voices, they give warmth, a carpet of illusions, and more, always you need more, I think about sixteen, talking and singing, you don’t need words, or to distinguish them, but those instruments, so limited, yet you can make them loud, so loud, they call and trill like birds. The poor

things, you can make them do anything, they'll make love or kill themselves, so willing.'

I say 'Obedient,' and he, 'No, not at all, but willing, finding a plot, grasping so quickly how the tragedy ends.'

I say, 'Always tragedy?' and he, 'What do you expect, immortality? When it's over for the evening, back in their box they go. And you must pull them out again, they dance upon your strings.'

And I think of those recordings, Austrians of 1944, clapping like mad at Richard Strauss, then out to meet their horrible ends, and after having killed so many. Nothing cancels out, and maybe Igor's right, these moral tales are only fables, stick in the mind but nothing more, just glue of plot. They're all there, prancing and yodelling on – inaudible until you open up the box.

And Igor says, 'It's just obsession. But no one really dies, and while you're planning it, you live!'

Drama is alien to me, an orphan by profession.

I remember – the neighbour sleeping on the cobbles when it was hot inside his house, kept drugs in his vacuum cleaner. Another – who imported cocaine in painted plastic life-size trees, tried to kill me with a log. The basalt columns, they say there was a temple of Cybele, triangulates with Macedonia and Izmir, anywhere triangulates with anywhere else, and those black stumps are everywhere. Like burnt-out trunks – we'd no nature left, just houses, safe houses, for penitents and not – all styles and none.

The white buffaloes, that disappeared from their wallow by the river – then came decorative swans, stolen to eat when there were feasts. Eaten, like the pigs they butchered in the gutter, blood like mine running down to somewhere, blond lashes and pink skin becom-ing white.

Neighbour who said, ‘Blow on the head gives a sharp-er edge to reality’ – concerned about my head, though those swans were killed horribly. Remembering things that don’t give you an identity – Igor says that gangs can kill below the level of the media, could be an epidemic.

And my girl acts, though she can’t sing – will she be acting, making love to Igor? Odd profession, throwing yourself into any passing imagination.

Igor’s friend has a limousine, and Igor goes with him to collect clients, and then walks home – keeping fit in luxury.

I have a Serbian name. I administer the money that may pay for him. His shows.

I belong to a leper country, the bosses make us resp-onsible for the history they wished to make. I have never lived there, never attached. The name’s enough. My dem-ons are alive, like children’s toys, fresh in their boxes twenty years on. Every detail bright, but never played with. Dressed up a little, can’t shoo them to the past – living with injustice that can never be appealed, yet weighs like guilt. And so I feel at home in Igor’s play – choices that aren’t, retribution from all sides, rescue that kills.

I've my doubts about Igor and the spectacle he's planning, he's obsessed by what they were watching – in Moscow, wasn't it? – when the commando, women, wid-ows, armed, what they hell did they want, blow it all up? 'North' something, wasn't it? I forget, everyone's for-gotten. And then the special forces came in and made it all real drama, my God, – the gas, the buses full of resc-ued people dying, stacked like dried cods, he wants to make the drama.

My God, those poor Chechens, and the killing there, and now the Russians too – and Capital comes in, you can't destroy it – but that other capital they did, Grozny, and now all neat, rebuilt without the people, no one rem-embers now nor maybe cared a lot just then, he wants to make a stage that has it all: a civil war, the music, and the musical. The audience that becomes the corpses, com-mando struck down with all their military junk. A putrid scheme, it makes you feel clean and free just to think it, then to extract maybe another big idea – but then you throw it off like something dirty, another of the little nightmares we hope burn off at dawn.

All blown away, shot, burnt, decapitated, buried in ruins, crushed under tanks, slit open, starved or bludg-eoned, then gassed, neglected, saved to be killed, rev-enged, forgotten. Or resurrected – those that remember, those that grieve, maybe they find that Igor's scheme, that Igor's person, is something ugly, ambiguous, is something putrid, made for himself alone, not at the level of their reality, some kind of

therapy to make him feel. Fable of suffering, as if it happened centuries ago.

To make it, on the stage, happen all over. To accomplish what? Resolve, depict, or just to shock and make some bucks?

And I can say, you'll get the cash, more likely you *might* get the cash – but you can't bring the people back, it's all gone by, another country, no one character to make you cling, sit firm. Just invented figures gripped by ideas or circumstance, action or innocence.

All over! – out you walk, no gas, no guns, no buses, a piece of history, and you think – maybe the killing's not the point, it's culture, religion, policies and plots, the practicalities, errors, soldiers think in their way, then try to think like those guerrillas, widows some, or warriors – how did they think, maybe spaced out or tricked. And who can read those clans, decide who planned it all? Not the killing, then, but the responsibility – but then, and after all, what does that do, we're sitting in our seats, thinking great thoughts at Igor's big idea (sheer vanity). What a pity.

Igor defends himself – for these are early days, and later he just runs ahead. It seems I've seen the horror and the trick, but missed the point.

'You miss the complexity, and so the reality of life – you counterpose concepts and deplore the results. I know, it's because you're Serbian – though a good liberal one. Neighbours killing neighbours – then you see they are like you, they are you, and so you say

“halt”. But every-one else, it’s not either-or, universal us and them, death, suffering. And ‘Bring us together, all.’ For the rest – it’s the rules. Rules of being. The rules count, you know. If you’ve no rule, just being cruel and seeking vengeance, so that every atrocity’s part of your suicide, you do and then are done to, so you miss the essence. The tragedy. The culture. Not “what” but how and when and why.’

I say, ‘Igor, I just hand out the money. I am not a Serbian. Anyway, you see emotion coming from those rules, you want that audience permanent, gassed but alive, sitting there under your spell. That’s not the rules,’ and Igor says, ‘It’s my rules, rules of my game.’



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