MEASURING THE MAYFAIR

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Hugo holds the dumb end of the tape measure while I hold the smart one and read the measurements off to myself, "twenty-two feet, four and three-fifth's inches." I grip my metal Maglite between my teeth in the darkened theater and write the measurement on a preliminary drawing that's attached to a large clipboard. Hugo carries a sketchbook with a fountain pen. He's our office's third-year architecture intern, visiting from the University of Cincinnati, and he and I are measuring the old abandoned Mayfair Theater on Howard Street. We are here for a job to renovate the Mayfair into a non-profit arts center. The idea is that the theater will serve as a revamped performance venue for student actors with teacher and visiting artist flats in the building next door.

Believing that I supply valuable context for this project, I inform Hugo that we are in the heart of Baltimore's once proud theater and shopping district, a popular place when the City's population hovered around a million. Now that population has dipped to five-hundred thousand. "My mother used to bring me down to Howard and Eutaw Streets to shop," I tell Hugo, "that is, until the '68 riots and the suburban Towson mall got built."

"That's nice!" my companion says, cutting me short.

It seems unfair that I have to bite down on a flashlight, read off the measurements, and mark the result on a badly folded drawing, but it's probably for the best. Hugo only has one eye. The left is a glass prosthetic that never seems to keep pace with the healthy right. He tells me this is the result of an infection that he contracted as a boy but supplies no further details. He's also

suffering from a dust allergy and here inside the musty and mold-infested theater, he's constantly sniffling. On occasion, I catch him wiping the mucus from his nose along the sleeve of his Seersucker suit.

So far, we have measured behind the stage where the dressing rooms used to be. We have measured the balcony where, under Jim Crow, the African-American Baltimoreans were once forced to sit. We have pointed our Maglites at the baseboards of walls and watched the rats scurry. We have stood up on the stage and measured the breadth of the proscenium arch, and from there we looked up at the grandeur of the wrecked vaulted ceiling, decorated with crumbling plaster fleurettes, at least where there wasn't a hole the size of a radar dish. When we looked up, the daylight shined through the expansive hole, past exposed beams and trusses, spilling its particulate-infused rays on the plush red velvet seating below. I like to imagine the once bejeweled audience watching the plays that must have been performed here.

At one point, making his way up the waterlogged aisle carpets, Hugo reaches down and picks up a discarded program. He examines it inside and out and tells me it's from a performance of *Hamlet* with Richard Burton. I remember Burton from the Mike Douglas, Merv Griffin, and Johnny Carson talk shows of my youth. Appearing with the violet-eyed Liz Taylor, the avuncular Burton liked to casually discuss the 40-carat diamonds that he'd purchase for Taylor whenever one came on the market. Instead of tossing Burton's mottled *Hamlet* program back on the ground once he's read it, Hugo sticks it under his arm and carries it with him. He says that being here makes him nostalgic for his days performing in high school theater productions, a time when he wanted to be an actor. When I hear him say he was once an aspiring performer, the puzzle pieces fall into place. I know from our days spent sitting across from one another at our drafting boards that Hugo craves attention, often elaborating upon his philosophy of archetypical buildings and overdressing in his revolving collection of Seersucker suits and sporting showy bowties. To me, he seems more to be acting the part of architect than digging in and working as one.

"An actor?" I mark down my most recent measurement. "Indeed," he says, speaking in a resonant voice, sounding older than his twenty-one years, the erudite thespian. "Like most motivations, it started out because I had a crush on this girl, Tammy Kameroski. She had chameleon-like features, at once ugly, at once lovely, an aquiline but bent nose, chalky skin, a quivering bottom lip but glistening eyes, long arms, and chubby legs, shapely in blue jeans. She was always in plays, and I wanted to hang out with her so I decided to try out for plays as well. I was good enough to get parts, but as it turned out, I always had to play the villain. Tammy often played the ingénue. In *Oklahoma*, while she starred as the love-conflicted Laurey Williams, I played the murderous farm hand Jud Fry; in *To Kill A Mockingbird*, while she portrayed the spirited Scout Finch, I acted the racist daughter beater, Bob Ewell; and in *Of Mice and Men*, while Tammy took the part of Curly's attention-starved wife, I flushed out the dumb brute, Lenny, who breaks her neck. I tried for the more heroic parts, but as you can see for yourself, with my rotund girth, pockmarked complexion, and one good eye, our school's theater director always typecast me as the baddie.

"During all that time, I'd try to ask Tammy out. She was always a flirt and frustratingly evasive. She dated around, sometimes geeks, sometimes athletes, one time a sousaphone player in the marching band. She never accepted any of my advances, but she was kind to me, and we often did hang out. I ate lunch with her along with the other theater narcissists. But I didn't realize until early in our senior year that Tammy wasn't as dedicated to the craft of acting as I was. She told me one afternoon over a lunch of chicken patties, Jell-O, and ice cream sandwiches that she was sure to get a lacrosse scholarship to the University of Cincinnati in the fall and planned to study economics. What was I going to do? I told her that I'd planned on matriculating to college for acting of course. After I said this, she stared with disbelief into my good eye but said nothing."

When my measuring companion gets to this part of his story, we are sizing up the theater's lobby. It's dark in here except for our aimless Maglites and a slice of natural light that comes

through two pieces of plywood being used to close up the theater's front entrance. The neo-classically detailed lobby is an awful place. On one side, there's a crack-glassed, incased ticket booth; on the opposite side, there's an identical booth with a sign behind the glass that reads, "Coloreds." Near the graffiti-covered plywood barrier stands a shopping cart, the edges of which are strewn with a pair of stiff workpants and a stained brown jacket. Along the marble baseboards are all variety of blanket and bedroll. One area even has a pile of burnt papers and wood coals from where someone has abandoned a fire. The most disheartening sight however has to be the sloped terrazzo floor dotted with feces, landmines that Hugo and I must dodge like soldiers on patrol.

"Twenty-eight feet, seven and five-eighth's inches," I say to Hugo as I take the measure of the lobby's width. Hugo slackens his end of the tape measure, and we are about to move on to the far end of the lobby to confirm that the measurement is consistent when I hear a loud yelp come from his direction. His end of the tape measure releases, and it drops onto the floor. All I can think is that it's sliding across the human waste and will soon be retracted into my hand. I push the lock on the measure and it stops retracting. When I hear continued wincing from across the lobby, I shine my flashlight toward the sound. There I see Hugo holding up one foot, attached to which is a three-foot length of two-by-four.

"What happened?" I yell toward him. There's no response so I make my way over, losing track of him as the bright yellow tape measure remains extended, and I step between bombs of foul-smelling feces. When I arrive, Hugo has taken a seat on a lion-pawed bench, eyes flecked with tears in my flashlight's beam. He has crossed his injured foot with the attached two-by-four over the steady knee of his other leg, the stud sticking out of his ruby red loafer like an unbound snow ski. When he wrenches the board away from his shoe, a nail appears and this makes us both grimace. Tossing the stick to the side, he begins taking off his shoe and sock, setting them on the bench where he has already located his flashlight, sketchbook, fountain pen, and Richard Burton program.

When his naked foot appears, I shine my flashlight on its sole. There's a pooling bubble of blood near a plantar wart. He sniffles, more from pain now than allergies I suppose, and picks his sock up from where he set it. He uses the sock to wipe away the blood and examines his wound. I take a moment to redirect my light at the two-by-four. The nail is rusty, and my sympathy for his condition grows. While he recovers, I contemplate having a rest and sitting beside him, offering comfort. This measuring job is a lousy assignment for a newbie architect, I think, not very inspiring, but necessary. I'm sure that like me, Hugo has imagined much more from his career as a creative.

When I attended architecture school, like Hugo, I was often caught up in professors' talks about building philosophy and rarely about how to build buildings. The professors regaled my class with tales of the greats: the brash naturalist Frank Lloyd Wright, the sleekly modern Le Corbusier, and the historically invigorating Louis Kahn. They discussed the opportunities to shape important institutions: schools, libraries, museums, and cathedrals. I had prepared for the life of a Palladio or Brunelleschi, a Renaissance man, a genius of the first magnitude ready to go out and add to or rebuild the great American cities. Instead, I became a company man, remaining single, spending my last fifteen years at Hammersmith, Goldman, and Murry, drawing handicapped ramps and bathroom stalls, picking ceiling and floor tiles out of building material catalogues, memorizing local and national building codes, and constantly getting sent out to make field measurements in cobwebbed hallways. With each passing day, I've grown increasingly envious of the designers who schedule appointments with wealthy clients, drink tea and coffee in those clients' sunrooms, and discuss design ideas for home theaters and pool houses. I am nothing now if not bitter, but I hide it well.

When Hugo appears to have somewhat recovered, and has put his sock and shoe back on, I can't help but want to know what happened with his acting career so I ask him. Still wincing, he stands up, gently places weight on his foot, and tells me that he changed career paths. He thought Tammy would like him more as

a thriving architect than a struggling actor, so he enrolled in design studio and followed her to the Cincinnati campus. He held out hope that she'd finally have him. "But no matter what I do—" here he stops and corrects himself, "did to impress her, she never seemed to care. In fact, before taking this internship, when I went to see her, I met her and her boyfriend in her dorm room. The brawny wrestler told me that I needed to back off, to start leaving Tammy alone. During the course of our conversation, things got heated, and her grappler left me with a nice shiner on my good eye."

I tell Hugo that if he hasn't done so, he should probably get a tetanus shot. He shakes his head at the ground, resigned that this is true, and says he could use some fresh air. Holding his sketchbook in one hand along with his fountain pen and flashlight, he tucks the program of Richard Burton's *Hamlet* under the opposite arm and heads toward the plywood partition. As he crosses the lobby, I can't help but witness a grotesque sight: Hugo squeezing one arm close to his side, swinging the other far out in front of him. At the same time, his good leg steps forward, and the other, with wounded foot, points outward at a ninety-degree angle, dragging behind, step scraping, step scraping through the minefield of shit.

I don't follow or help him, but I hear him sniffling, and once again, he lifts the long sleeve of his Seersucker suit and wipes his nose. As he comes to a stop at the crack of light shining between the two sheets of plywood, he leans a shoulder on the flimsy one-quarter inch thick ply and gazes out into the street. After a few labored breaths, his head turns to the side, revealing a flat-nosed profile, glass eye glinting in the silver light's sliver.

"Do you know what?" he says, barely loud enough for me to hear.
"What's that " I ask.
"I'm really tired.
"Tired?"
"Yes, tired of being the bad guy ."

I glance down at the poop skids on my extended tape measure and can't help but whisper an addendum. "And I'm tired of being the good one," I say.