The Entertainer

*“You could study study Shakespeare and be quite elite,*

*And you could charm the critics and have nothing to eat*

*Just slip on a banana peel, the world’s at your feet*

*Make ‘em laugh Make ‘em laugh Make ‘em laugh…* - Donald O’connor, *Make ‘Em Laugh*

 We were on the Gatwick Express to Brighton. London collapsed into itself as the carriages hurtled as one, first out of the city’s peripheries, then on a fine iron thread toward Gatwick. After Gatwick, all you could see was the country. Innumerable farmsteads bordering one another, antiquated bridges, broads, and dales. We passed a reservoir in which two swans drifted like rubbish, and besides, unharvested hazel, beech and birch trees. Pigeons flitted always, and as the sun dipped the carriage was flooded in yellow. The clouds dispersed completely.

 His eyes were on me from the beginning. I felt them when he entered the carriage, despite my book, the sunglasses, the shopping on the chair warning aliens away. The seat I had picked was one of a pair. Nobody could face me. And yet he did.

 Sat diagonally across, facing away, his knees sought me first, turning in their jeans like dowsing rods toward water. Poking out from his leather sandals were toes, covered with spores and dirty. On his head were two patches of hair, as long as open hands and pronounced, reaching away from his scalp.

 Eventually he turned completely. In his head, his eyes had been rolling about, seeking others, and his mouth hung open reciting a low babble.

 “How far’s the sea from Brighton Station?” He asked.

 I pulled my glasses down. Looking at him, I answered. “About ten minutes, walking.”

 “And the D?” He replied.

 Hesitant, I said, “sorry?”

 “The D. From the C. I’ll tell you, it’s right next door. The Z’s twenty-three letters away…”

 My non-reaction had not fazed him, though he felt the need to announce,

 “it’s a joke. I’m an entertainer.”

 There are times when young people must confront the disparity between themselves and their elders. Humour is one of these disparities, and I never cringe more than when the comedy of yesteryear comes out in this intergenerational chat, for it doesn’t age well. I laughed, of course I did, because withholding the acknowledgment of a joke’s attempt is something only sadists do. It was something more of a tick than any real understanding of the gag, though I think it would be recognised as a laugh. Yes, I think it would.

 Quickly he removed himself to his muttering. Then returned,

 “did you get the joke though? You know the alphabet?”

 I lay my book down. A thin sense of guilt pinched me.

 “Yeah. It was really funny,” I said. Nodding, he admitted,

 “that’s good. For that joke to work you have to know the alphabet. Not knowing it can cause all sorts of problems. I, myself, only know twenty-five letters. I don’t know why.”

 Perhaps I’d misheard. Shaking my head and answering with nothing, I must have said an aside, like ‘yeah’, or ‘cool’, or something akin to the former chuckle. Then he clapped me from my stupor, leaning in near again and saying, “it’s a joke. I’m an entertainer. It’s a joke.”

 Leaning back, eyes still fixed upon me, a hand massaged his cheeks. Realising the punchline of the last joke, I looked to him. My attention enlivened him, and his tight five continued.

 “I’ve done all sorts,” he continued, “once I worked as a lumberjack. I couldn’t hack it, so they gave me the axe…”

 Minimal though it was, I laughed at this one, an exhale from the nostrils and a slight bouncing chest.

 “And I was an electrician,” he cleared his throat, “though not a very good one, mind you. My clients were always shocked when they found out.”

 The previous joke in new clothes, no reaction.

 Assuredly, he repeated once more, “I’m an entertainer,” then again, “I’m an entertainer. What do you do?”

 Answering honestly, I told him I wanted to be an actor.

 “You know what actors do?” A rhetorical question. Then, “they pretend.” After this he stood up. I suppose I should have been hearing a slow piano scale, should have seen the dimming lights and spotlight fall. Then he leant near me. Perhaps he would have had a cane, in bygone days. His eyes fixed upon me and he asked, “but are you a *great* pretender?”

 I said I was alright.
 “No!” He said. “Be more sure of yourself, girl. Say, YES, I’m the great pretender. Pretending that I'm doing well…” A verse of this continued in a Mercury-esque warble, before his knees buckled into an Elvis hump and he shuffled near me. Too close. Embarrassed, I raised my eyes up and above the headrest before me. Spying a few shifting bodies, a pair of boys beyond with heads fixed forward, I realised, I was somewhat alone. Sliding a hand into my purse, I started fingering the coins, should the performance have come with a price. Once he had finished the verse, I said quietly,

 “very good.” And, as if we’d not even talked, The Entertainer returned to his chair, the aisle across, a couple rows forward. He sat still muttering. Hoping the ordeal over, I hugged my bag close and checked inside it, in case he’d pulled a fast one. From within, a tomato looked out with greying flesh and the first mossy signs of mould. Hadn’t noticed it while buying. It was useless now, repulsive. Reading the first lines of my book, I let out a sigh.

 But he went on, in that same tone. Something too loud about it for a lonely man on a commuter train, void of a social conscious and with something of a monotony to it. Talking to the carriage before him, though the question was asked of me, he said,

 “do you get frightened?” The tone was slightly personal, inquiring. Adopting the line of most drama students, I admitted, yes, of course I do. Just as I was about to shut him down, however, with some explanation of my coping mechanisms, he went on. This time, the words tumbled out in a melancholic pitch of whimsy,

 “so do I,” his eyes fixed front, “but not anymore. Not on stage. I overcame that by performing in front of a thousand people. I’ve entertained a thousand people.”

 Dropping my book slightly, I set my eyes upon his slightly shaking hands. Feeling somewhat sorry, I thought I’d enquire where. To which he answered,

 “Oh, everywhere. Weston-super-Mare and Scarborough, I was famous there. And Yugoslavia.”

 I laughed. Some sort of giddiness from when I was younger caused me to actually laugh, to forget myself. But he turned to me.

 He asked, “why’s that funny?” Brow furrowed, I noticed the mauve bags beneath his eyes, and certain jade veins. Closing the book around my finger, I stuttered,

 “sorry. Thought that was a joke.”

 He explained it was not. Turning, now, away, I wondered if my reaction had finally dashed him. Then I felt guilty. My own grandfather had the same nature as The Entertainer, in fact, so did my grandmother. It’s something about the boomer generation. They don’t fear each other. Whichever social horrors paralyse us, for them, do not exist. I’ve watched it a thousand times, been mortified a hundred. In a cafe, or in a canal-side pub with Grandma and Grandad. One of them leans toward a reserved couple, and proceeds to say something completely random. Mostly, the subject replies with something cursory. Never do they enter into a real dialogue. Nevertheless, the moment of awkwardness is there. Though they cannot perceive it. The only times I have ever felt real disdain toward a stranger is when they cannot identify the harmlessness of an elderly person trying to converse with them, when they shrug, or turn a defensive frown. That infuriates me. Must make them feel diseased. So, now, I pressed The Entertainer.

 “Anywhere else?” Was the first thing I asked. Immediately, he sat up straight, and swung quickly toward me, like a storyteller opening a book:

 “Yes… yes. Where did I perform. You know the West End. Yes I’ve performed in the West End. I was there for Les Miserablès debut.”

 Asking whether he’d performed with Les Mis - there was something of Thénadier in him - he clarified he had performed *at the same time*. So, I suppose, on the streets outside. Or something akin. Then he went on. Sam Beckett once tossed a coin into his guitar case, outside the Theatre de Babylon, in Paris. George Formby saw him leaning on a lamppost, once. He used to drink with Scott Joplin. I didn’t know the names then but, still, nodded the same, let the fantasy live out.

 “I used to perform on cruise liners,” he said. “But now they won’t have me. Do you know why I’m going to Brighton?”

 I answered negatory.

 “I’m building a yacht. They won’t have me like they used to, these cruises. So I’m going to build a yacht with a little stage, and it’ll be four berth, and I’ll sail it from Spain to Monaco and pick people up for a short stay, and while they’re with me, I’ll perform. I’ll perform for them the whole time and show them the old ways. And it will be exclusive,” he added, “are you Christian?”

 “I’m not,” I admitted.

 “You know Noah though?” A small laugh echoed up from down the carriage. Affirming that I knew the story, I nodded. He continued,

 “well, I saw God. God came to me and he said, ‘audiences are dying out, you must preserve them’, so I’m going to build an ark, and I’m going to sail from Wales to France, and I’ll take two of every audience member, and two of every gag…”

 Senseless. Acknowledging his plans, I went silent, and gazed outside. We had passed Haywards Heath and were creeping besides Preston Park. Outside, the city moved silently. Momentarily, the thought occurred, that these last bits were part of some abstract routine, maybe. Brechtian?

 Then I noticed a camera. A sort of prescience tapped me, the uncanny sensation of being watched. Checking The Entertainer, I saw nothing in his hands. He had merely looked ahead once more, and his jaw was at work, telling its stories to no one. Reviewing the carriage, I noticed a boy, maybe twenty, filming the muttering man. Eventually, The Entertainer noticed too. Raising a finger toward him, he said,

 “what’s your name?”

 The guy’s mate turned around. His face was beaming, and he slapped his friend encouragingly on the shoulder. Answering, the boy said, “doesn’t matter.”

 “Do you want a card?”

 Riffling through his pockets, he pulled out a thin piece of paper. Ripped from a brochure, it had been covered in green biro illustrations, and his name.

 “I’m on Youtube,” he told the boy, stretching the card in his direction.

 “I’m alright mate,” the boy said, still filming. Poking my head out, I saw his eyes dart down toward the screen, checking his footage.

 The Entertainer asked, “are you on Youtube?” Shaking his head, the guy said,

 “maybe, after this.” Laughing, his friend piped up,

 “you a singer?”

 The Entertainer stood up. Leaning on his heels, he said, “what d’you fancy?”

 They didn’t respond fast enough. Quickly, The Entertainer jutted a finger to me. “D’you fancy her?”

 Laughing at him, one said, “she’s alright.” I squirmed.

 “Will you two get married?” Was his next question.

 They cackled. The Entertainer continued, “because when you do. You can book *me,*” he started singing, “love and marriage, love and marriage, they go together like a horse and carriage.”

 Together, the laughter from the two ahead subsided. One of them asked again,

 “you a famous singer?” I noticed the iPhone tilt up, trying to capture him entirely. The Entertainer answered,

 “I’m a famous Entertainer.” Raising his voice, the one with the camera spoke for the microphone, asking,

 “who you perform for then?”

 Here, I noticed The Entertainer search his brain. Of course, many myths lay behind, multiple to pick from. His mouth hung slightly ajar before he spoke, announcing,

 “Princess Diana.”

 As one of the couple ahead laughed, the other said, “fuck off you did.”

 “I did,” The Entertainer affirmed.

 “You didn’t,”

 “Oh yes I did,”

 “You didn’t,”

 “I did,”

 “You didn’t.”

 Hesitating, The Entertainer looked as if he might relent, but continued, “I did, guess what I sung?”

 Turning completely to face him, the boy admitted, “dunno.” And The Entertainer started,

 “Goodbye Norma Jean. Though I never knew you at all…”

 Uncertain as to whether the guys recognised the song, I looked toward the Entertainer, willing him to take his seat and forget the routine. Forget it, I prayed. But the song faded, and his audience’s gaze still fixed upon him, and his outstretched hand, plying them for the next gag. While he had them, he would extrude whatever satisfaction performing could reap.

 “Oi,” he said, “what do Princess Di and Pink Floyd have in common?”

 I tried to chip in. Pitifully, I raised my voice, pantomimic, “I don’t know, what do Princess Di and Pink Floyd have in common?”

 Turning his head over his shoulder, he took my answer, throwing the punchline toward the boys.

 “Their last big hits were the wall,” then he clapped. My head fell into my hands.

 No cymbals, no drum fill. For a moment I thought the joke had passed them by, before one laughed, and the other said “that’s offensive.”

 “No it’s not,” The Entertainer continued, “the most offensive thing you can say to someone is, attack.”

 “That’s not offensive,” the boy without the camera shifted, then sat up and spoke,

 “say something offensive,” the boy said, tensing his hand around the phone, angling it.

 Drawing in a breath, I raised my head again above the carriage. Eyes that had once been fixed forward, unconcerned, were turning toward The Entertainer. In the foremost seats of the carriage, an elderly man and woman, perhaps only slightly younger than him, mumbled and furrowed their brows. As The Entertainer fell back into his thoughts, muttering, “something offensive, a bad joke, something offensive,” I saw the woman of the couple stand up, and move into first-class. Together, the two young boys with the camera were laughing and smiling, saying,

 “go on then, you’re a comedian.” To which he replied,

 “I’m an Entertainer.” The boys nodded, and he continued, “something offensive, the worst joke in the world… the worst joke in the world.”

 One of the few pieces of poetry I’ve inherited, I first learnt at Christmas dinner. One year, my Mother decided, we all had to perform after our meal - everyone had to learn something by heart, and share it with the family. I recited *On The Ning Nang Nong.* My Grandfather performed this:

 *“Turning and turning in the widening gyre*

 *The falcon cannot hear the falconer;*

 *Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;*

 *Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,”*

It’s Yeats, and I remember it now, remembering The Entertainer. At his joke, anarchy fell upon the carriage. The gag was uttered, and one of the boys considered it a personal attack. Knocking the phone from his mate’s hand, he charged like a bull at The Entertainer’s fabric frame. The old man fell like a science-class skeleton. I screamed. First a silent scream and then a conscious, demanding call. Standing up, rushing to shield the old man from the onslaught, my bag fell onto the floor, the fruit inside rolling down the carriage, a carton of grape juice spilling under the seats. From the front of the coach a city worker, not quite senior and certainly old, the point of authority between the youth and the elder, leapt at the boy as the toe of a trainer skimmed the Entertainer’s breast. At this, the city worker was knocked on the head by the first boy, the cameraman, forcing him to recoil. I threw my purse at the boys, then my book. This caused a retaliation. As one, the two boys scooped my shopping off of the floor. With the ruthlessness of hecklers, they pummelled us - mostly, The Entertainer - with fruit. Apples, pears and wet plum tomatoes rained upon us. The train slowed to a crawl and a guard entered. With the city worker, they restrained the boys as The Entertainer lay bruised and embarrassed. Curling up on the ground, he cried, “I’m an entertainer, an entertainer. They’re jokes, that’s all they are. Just jokes.”