

“The Violence of Violins”

Tonight, he was Superman. He didn't feel the costume best described him, but everything else at the shop required a mask, which would have made his head sweat. He'd considered coming as Sartre, big pipe and glasses, but without the lazy eye it didn't work. He ascended the stairs to their floor and rang their doorbell. Catwoman answered.

'You made it!' she said, inviting him inside. 'Lovely, you can leave your coat in the office, just over there.'

He knew where the office was. He'd carried into it the desk on which he now placed his coat, next to a pile of other jackets. Back in the lounge, fictitious characters danced, drank and made conversation. He saw The Tin Man talking to a scarecrow. Catwoman began shifting her bodyweight from foot to foot as Superman stood in front of her, saying nothing. He noticed how good she looked, though she must have had some years on him. Last year, he'd noticed his own hairline receding, and it hadn't stopped since. Sweat tickled his forehead.

The Tin Man came over to them and shook Superman's hand.

'Hello, *good* to see you.' A brief dimming in the lights of The Tin Man's eyes admitted he had forgotten who Superman was. 'How *have* you been?' The Tin Man emphasised words for no reason, a linguistic flare used as if style could substitute for substance.

Superman mumbled some of the stock-phrases he used to make polite conversation, words that were clichéd and safe. The Tin Man made him nervous. When they'd first met, here in this flat, he'd heard a violin playing softly in the lounge. The Tin Man had asked him if he liked Bach's *Sonata for something or other*. Superman had been forced to say he hadn't heard it. The Tin Man had smiled, a grown-up with a silly child, and said, 'This is the fugue.'

As they now made their way into the lounge, The Tin Man looked back over his shoulder. 'Well, help yourself to *drinks* ...' Somebody else had arrived at the party and was at the door behind them. 'The wine and glasses are over on that table.'

The Tin Man followed his own glare to the unwelcome newcomer with Catwoman. Superman looked back and saw it was a woman dressed as a hippie. He went to the drinks table. The wine was red and intimidating, but that was fine. He just needed a little buzz, something to take his mind off the patches of sweat forming in the armpits of his costume. The room was alive with noise and movement, vibrant colour and the smell of sophistication (which, to him, was wine and oak and fresh paint – this was a combination he associated with success). Those in costume had taken the opportunity for self-invention through varying degrees of expression and disguise. Superman speculated about what the guy in the centre of the room was saying with his choice of Viking costume.

'Happy Halloween!'

Superman turned to see The Hippie smiling at him.

'Happy Halloween,' he returned. 'I like your costume.'

'Thanks.' She continued smiling and watched him. He thought he was expected to say something else.

'Sorry, my name's –'

'You can't tell me your name! You are Superman, after all.' Then she took his hand before it was offered and shook it as if she was parodying the action. She laughed, he didn't know why.

'I almost came as Sisyphus.' He was confident for a moment, thinking that the reference might impress her, but she smiled with less enthusiasm now. 'I mean with a boulder

to push ...’ The Hippie was frowning, lost. Superman was embarrassed. He retreated to the safety of small talk. ‘How do you know the hosts?’

‘I don’t really know Catwoman, but I know her husband.’ She looked across at The Tin Man, who had his back to her. ‘And you?’

‘Funny story, actually. I live on the floor below. They were moving stuff in a couple of weeks ago, and I passed the moving men on the stairs. I gave them a hand with a desk. She thought I was working for them. She didn’t realise her mistake until I introduced myself – after I’d moved half of their stuff in. She was mortified, I guess. And then she invited me to this party.’

The Hippie turned away to look at someone waving at her from across the room. It was a mermaid, shuffling in an impractical outfit that turned her legs into an unconvincing fishtail. The Hippie said, ‘I have to talk to my friend, but find me later, yeah?’

‘Sure.’ Superman backed off into the chattering, dancing masses and felt himself disappear. The clock ticked toward eleven. The Hippie was out on the small balcony off the front room with a friend, sharing a joint.

Eleven o’clock arrived, and Superman drank a little more (the wine was strong and he was not). The Hippie returned from outside, still with her friend and joined by the Viking, who was pretending to listen to her while flexing his arms. Superman wished his own workouts would pay off like that. He ran, he ate well, usually, and he had a set of weights at home which were in use, perhaps not regularly, but it was hard to keep motivated when he stayed scrawny and awkward. His posture was terrible, always hunched as if he was cold. He only wore the Superman outfit because it was padded, comically enough that he wouldn’t look like he was really trying to fool anyone, and yet thick enough to disguise just how shapeless his upper body was.

The Tin Man strolled over to Superman, a glass of wine in his hand. He seemed comfortable in his inebriation. He put his hand on Superman’s shoulder, as though they were old friends.

‘What do you *think*?’ He nodded at the Hippie to indicate the subject of his question. ‘I saw you talking to her earlier.’

‘She’s certainly different.’

The Tin Man watched him. He seemed suspicious of something in the response. He took a look dramatically around the room as if checking for spies.

‘*Look*, I don’t want to talk badly behind someone’s back. She’s trouble. She’s really messed up. I didn’t even want her here tonight. I’m not sure who invited her.’

‘What do you mean, “trouble”?’

‘She’s a liar. She gets really attached. Possessive. She’s kind of *wild*. It’s not always a good thing.’

‘Are you warning me away from her?’

‘No, I just want you to be aware, *that’s* all.’

‘Right. Well, consider me aware.’

The Tin Man smiled. He wobbled and said, ‘I’m going to see where my beautiful wife is.’

Another hour passed. It was midnight on All Hallow’s Eve, but there were no saints to be seen yet. From the orgy of people dancing in seizures near the stereo, The Hippie made her way to Superman. She was laughing and misplacing almost every step, daring gravity to topple her.

‘You need another drink,’ she told him.

‘I’m fine, thanks.’

‘You’re not! Have you spoken to anyone else tonight?’

‘Yes, a few people.’

She leaned in and whispered theatrically, ‘Who do you like the look of?’

He shrugged. She regarded him with impatience. The nuances of flirting were a mystery to him, but he was sure he had missed a cue to say something witty, or cute, or any of a set of adjectives that did not describe him.

‘What do you do for work?’

She sighed. ‘You can do better than that. It’s Halloween, we can be whoever we want. We can go a little crazy!’

‘Okay. Let’s do something crazy.’

She flashed a wicked smile. She scared him a little.

Catwoman interrupted their conversation with an offer to refill their glasses.

Superman shook his head. The Hippie extended her glass and watched Catwoman with a look of interest as the wine was poured.

‘Are you two lovelies hitting it off?’ asked Catwoman.

‘We might be,’ The Hippie responded.

The two women regarded each other with painful smiles full of intent. The Tin Man jumped into the now silent group.

‘What are we talking about?’

The Hippie smiled at him. ‘Nothing much.’

The Tin Man turned to Catwoman, but kept glancing back to The Hippie. ‘Babe, I *could* use your help in the kitchen. I can’t find the ... you know, the what-do-you-call-it.’

The Hippie watched them go, and The Tin Man didn’t look back. Superman watched her throat move as she swallowed barely concealed feelings. She strained for a smile and returned to the conversation with Superman.

‘We were just saying we should do something crazy,’ she reminded him.

‘Any ideas?’

‘Let’s find somewhere quieter.’ She looked to the closed door of the office.

‘Somewhere private.’ Then she bit her lip and tilted her head, an overtly sexualised gesture. He immediately followed her away from the lounge, to the office door, where they feigned a conversation. When they had a clear moment, they slipped into the room. The Hippie closed the door behind them.

The office was dark, though a lamp was glowing on the desk. The room was rich in its décor of oak furnishings and hardwood flooring the colour of dark tea. The walls were lined with ceiling-high shelves filled with books. The spines of the books filled every space, some books were turned on their sides to slide into odd gaps. The small window behind the desk was partially obstructed by a violin propped up on the sill. There was a stack of boxes which – The Hippie pulled back a flap to look inside the top box – were full of more books. Superman went to the chair behind the desk and sat down, moving aside the pile of coats. He lifted a pen, slid a page across the desk as if he intended to write. He felt he had become someone else, as if through some metamorphosis, someone educated and respectable.

The Hippie was still opening boxes. She’d moved onto the bottom box of the pile and looked disappointed to find more books. She moved aside the top few titles and came out with some loose sheets of paper. With renewed interest, she sat on the floor and began to read.

‘Are you looking for something?’

She didn’t look up. ‘Just curious.’

She tossed the papers back in the box, though she left the other boxes out of place.

She came round to Superman’s side of the desk and opened drawers. This looked like more than curiosity. He stood and moved away from the desk. Something felt wrong now, and he wanted to get out.

He said, ‘I might return to the party.’

‘Fine.’ Again, she didn’t look at him. She was reading the address on an envelope she’d found. She touched the torn edge of it as if she didn’t understand what it meant. Superman went to the door. The handle turned, and The Hippy dropped the envelope. In came The Tin Man.

‘You two? What are you ... ?’

Superman looked back at The Hippy, not knowing what to say. She looked guiltily away from both men. Superman understood that whatever had been between The Tin Man and The Hippy was between them again now, but in some new way. The Tin Man was glaring at The Hippy, but when he looked back to Superman, his face was friendlier. Superman wanted to stand protectively between them, to take the force of the glare and anger. He wanted to save her.

‘Sorry, I noticed your books earlier when I put my coat away. I wanted to have a look at the titles. I didn’t mean to be rude.’

The Tin Man stared for a moment. The Hippy still looked away.

‘Not at all, have a good look. Are you a *literature* buff then?’

Superman shrugged. ‘I like to think of myself as reading widely.’

‘I think it was Vizinczey who wrote that being well-read is great for dinner parties, but not for *understanding* literature.’ The Tin Man sloshed a little of his wine over the edge of his glass as he spoke.

‘I’m trying to understand the fundamentals. Read the classics. Eventually, I’ll focus on refining my knowledge.’

The Tin Man nodded approvingly. He went to a shelf and stroked the edges of spines until he tipped a book out into his hand. He passed it to Superman. It was *Being and Nothingness*.

‘Have you read Sartre?’ The Tin Man asked.

‘Yes, I’m a big fan. I enjoyed *Nausea* – ’

‘I prefer the existentialism of Camus, of course.’

Superman was silent. How was he supposed to respond? He would not return the ‘Of course’. He noticed The Hippy rolling her eyes at The Tin Man, so he took up the rhetorical sword.

‘Of course,’ he said, ‘Camus wasn’t an existentialist.’

The Tin Man looked shocked. ‘I’m *sorry*, he was. I’ve studied philosophy.’

‘Was that a while ago?’ Superman asked with faux innocence. ‘Camus rejected the label. He said that both he and Sartre were always surprised that they were seen as of the same school.’

‘And what’s *your* major in? Or your degree?’

The question hit Superman with the blunt pain of a miserable yet honest observation.

‘I didn’t go to university.’

‘Ah,’ said The Tin Man. ‘So you studied at A-level?’

‘Actually, I dropped out of college.’ His defiant tone was not convincing.

‘Right.’ The Tin Man looked back at The Hippy and, when she finally met his eyes, he said to Superman while looking at her, ‘If you’d like to borrow any of my books, be my guest. I’m *always* happy to encourage education.’

‘I’m going to get another drink.’ He didn’t offer to get drinks for the other two. He escaped and didn’t look back. A sailor staggered past him, going to the bathroom with a drink in hand. His eyes were sunk into a grey face, and he looked at Superman longingly, begging for something he couldn’t give him, something he didn’t have. The man sought his answer in his drink. He looked into the liquid at the bottom of the glass and said, ‘It’s a void.’

Superman looked back to the office, at the closed door. He felt taunted by it being closed, as if opening it would be to raise his middle digit above a defiant fist. He could have

what was behind the door if he just took it. He approached the office, the door, took the handle and turned.

The Tin Man was holding The Hippie's arm awkwardly in the air, as if announcing her the victor of something, but he was angry. She was absorbed in watching the performance of his rage. The Tin Man saw Superman standing uninvited in the doorway. He let go of her arm, which stayed where it was for a moment, then the fingers uncurled and reached for The Tin Man, but he'd already stepped away. He was looking past Superman's shoulder. Superman turned and saw Catwoman behind him. The anger passed from The Tin Man to his wife. She stared, and it became a glare.

'Just a friend?' Her voice broke. 'I knew it.'

The Tin Man began to speak, and she tore away. The Tin Man rushed off after her. Superman sensed a collective holding of breath – there was a moment in which the conversations from the front room lowered in volume, then ceased completely, and the stereo was left filling the void of absent voices. It played something modern with a frenetic synth chorus that sounded out of place in the moment. Silence would have been better. Superman looked at The Hippie, who looked away from him. The noise returned to the front room, and the party resumed. The Hippie spoke at last.

'They'll be fine. He'll convince her there was nothing going on. It's not as if she actually saw us doing anything ...'

'I don't know, she seemed pretty mad.'

'No, he'll get her back. Women believe him. He convinced me he was going to leave her.'

'Oh. So you two –' He left the sentence there to sit awkwardly unfinished and untouched. There was no need to complete his thought. The night was over at this point, at least for him. Whatever followed would involve leaving this room, and then – as there was nothing else here to interest him – leaving the party. He felt that he was almost at the peak of his discomfort. He might as well push to the top and see where it got him.

'Look, you and I have more in common with each other than we do with anyone else here. And I know you have feelings for him, but he's an ass.'

The Hippie laughed. Superman continued, encouraged.

'He's so pretentious! And I bought into it, that's why I'm here. Can I tell you something really embarrassing? I wanted their approval. But I don't need it. You don't need it. We can leave here and have an infinitely better time without playing up to anyone else's expectations.'

The Hippie's smile was weaker, and her eyes looked more at the floor than at him. He pushed harder.

'I live downstairs. I have a few beers in the fridge. We could just talk and be ourselves. Do you fancy it?'

The Hippie said nothing. Superman waited, but she'd already given him an answer. He counted to three, so he wouldn't seem impatient, and then told her he was going to go home.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I need to be on my own.'

Superman left the room. The party continued, though a tension in the air was subduing it. A few people were leaving. Superman looked around the front room and saw The Tin Man and Catwoman on the balcony. They were arguing in mime, mouths moving with no sound, arms waving and faces flexing to show anger and concern. Superman went to the front door and left the party.

He descended the stairwell, returning to his flat. He smelled his body odour before he lifted his arms, and when he did he saw the dark stains of sweat. He ceased to care about what would have ordinarily embarrassed him. The smell didn't matter – no one would be near

enough to him to smell it. He would throw the costume in the wash tonight. In the morning, he would iron the creases out of the cape, knowing it would be wrinkled and need ironing again soon, but then it would be somebody else's problem. Returning to the store tomorrow would be the only reason to go outside. There was nothing and no one else to leave his flat for. He would spend the rest of the day telling himself he should read (his stack of 'currently-reading' books was growing faster than he could read them) and would instead watch shit television and feel guilty about it. He reached his floor, his door was ahead of him. There was a shuffling sound from upstairs.

'Are you down there?' The Hippie's voice called down to Superman. 'Hey, are you there still?'

He went back to the bottom of the stairs and looked up between the alternating sets of steps. The Hippie was leaning over the railing and looking down at him.

'Will you come back up here? I left my bag inside, and I don't want to go into the flat again.'

He tried to hide the smile that grew on his face. He frowned seriously and nodded. He would go up there again. He had another chance at ... at what? He thought it was happiness, or maybe love, or maybe sex. He would settle for even a few more minutes of conversation delaying the inevitable return to his own flat. He took to the stairs again.

'The Violence of Violins' is taken from the collection "Burn the Pages"