

THE ACT OF SLOWLY DYING

BY ALEX CRAIG

"Did you know I was once the queen of the fairies?" Miss Strange slurred upon the nurse in A&E.

"Yes, you've told me that many times before," said the nurse.

'What jealous Oberon! Fairies, skip hence: I have forsworn his bed and company.'

"Try not to shout," said the nurse.

Miss Strange reeked of sherry, apples and shit. A bottle of Old Grosvenor Cream for breakfast, several cans of super strength cider for lunch and another bottle of Old Grosvenor for dinner. She forgot to wash, and couldn't remember the last time she had; the resulting stench exacerbated by her occasional incontinence.

"I'm ravenously starving darling!"

"We need to get you patched up, and then I'll see about getting you a sandwich."

"I'm a vegetarian."

"Cheese it is then!"

"No, I like prawns!"

"Prawns aren't vegetables."

"Don't be bloody ridiculous, of course prawns are vegetables, they grow in greenhouses. I know, I've grown them!"

"You're in a real mess this time, what happened?" questioned the nurse, who Miss Strange thought had the jowls and the scour of a bulldog.

'What is it she does now? Look how she rubs her hands!'

"I'm washing my hands before I clean and stitch the wound on your head!"

'It's an accustomed action with her, to seem thus washing her hands. I have known her continue in this quarter of an hour.'

Miss Strange had been to A&E on four separate occasions in as many weeks. On the first occasion she said that she had fallen down the stairs, though her squalid bedsit had no stairs. On the second occasion she had sworn that she had gone blind during the night though had managed to get on the bus to the hospital. On the third occasion she had insisted she was having a stroke and a heart attack simultaneously; a false alarm on both counts.

This time, however, real blood flowed from a gaping wound on her head and trickled down the side

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of her sunken graveyard cheeks onto her soiled, tattered nightdress.

“Banged head, broken like eggshells, faded promises on the sand,” Miss Strange whispered.

“Did anyone come to the hospital with you? You don't have a husband or partner, do you?”

‘Chaste and immaculate in very thought.’

“Sorry?”

“For god's sake, I'm a fucking virgin darling!”

“Oh!”

“Close your mouth you'll catch flies, and there's enough of them in this place, hospitals are so damn dirty, not like they used to be years ago, when women scrubbed the floors on their knees.”

“These days we have machines and a large number of cleaners now are men.”

“Huh! Machines and men! soon mankind will be taken over by the machines. Are you a machine?”

You look and sound like a machine darling!”

“I'm not a machine.”

“If you are not a machine what the hell are you going to do when the machines do your job and you become redundant, go on the game? Don't knock it! I had to go on the game a few times between jobs.”

“I thought you said you were a virgin?”

“Did I say I was a vegan?”

“You said you were a vegetarian.”

“What time is it?”

“A quarter to five in the morning”

“Shall we sing now?”

“No, please keep still I'm trying to clean your wound, I think there is glass in it.”

“Yes, it was a glass bottle darling, a bottle of the finest ale.”

“I thought you said you banged your head, did someone hit you with a bottle?”

“I promised Daddy I wouldn't hurt myself.”

“you hit yourself on the head with a bottle, you did, didn't you?”

“I'm going to name you Bulldog Machine, darling. May god bless you and all who sail in you.”

“Thanks very much!”

“I named a boat once, a very long time ago, on the beach near the lighthouse by the sea.”

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"I'm just going to get some tweezers for the glass, stay there and don't move."

"I named it The Little Estelle."

Miss Strange retrieved her dirty brown overcoat and her precious cardboard box that she carried everywhere. It was the usual early Sunday morning, after the Saturday night before, the place packed with drunks, junkies, weirdos and the abandoned; Miss Strange wasn't out of place, just another face on the human mural wall, only the repellent reek discerned her from the rest. Invisible against the backdrop, a ghost shuffling by unnoticed, then momentarily ossified as if flesh had been turned to stone by the sight of new overhead signage indicating the locations of various departments.

"It's wonderful!" said Miss Strange, "I'm going home."

As the lift doors slowly closed on the crowded scene, she bellowed at the top of her voice, "bloody amateurs!", but the wall wasn't listening. The doors closed with a muffled clunk and the lift was a sleek limousine transporting her to the theatre for a matinee performance. She smoked with a long gold cigarette holder and sipped on a gin martini. "Get a move on driver, we don't want to be late." The car accelerated through Soho, dissolving through the dense fog, towards the theatre and the stage door.

"Third floor: Departments of Cardiology, Haematology and Theatres," declared the posh lift voice. The chauffeur opened the door and she walked as quickly as she could with her head down hoping not to be recognised; there was no time for autographs or pleasantries. The stage door was firmly locked, "Wrong theatre, silly me."

She walked on, past The Apollo and The Globe till she reached The Queens where yellow plastic signs stated *deep cleaning in progress*. The door ajar, though no stage doorman in attendance, no backstage staff or other cast members in sight.

"Hello, could someone show me to my dressing room," Miss Strange called, but no one came.

She wandered into the scrub room, and decided that by the length of the mirror that this must be her dressing-room. "Dresser! Dresser!" Miss Strange called, but still no one came.

The volume of blood oozing through her matted white hair was obscured, for the mirror above the surgical trough emanated sculpted radiance from pearlescent skin, her eyes sparkling, her auburn hair coiffured into tight rippling waves, her light dazzling. She had screen tested once for the

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movies, "I could have been a film star," she whispered as if it was a state secret.

Perched on the edge of a trolley in the scrub room, she pulled back invisible satin bed covers, as if she was slowly pulling back a feathered fan in a burlesque show, her arm outstretched waiting for the back of her hand to be kissed. She wore a jade green silk lingerie set with a wrap round peignoir and teasingly exposed brassiere. Her handsome beau was salivating as his wet lips touched her knuckle.

"Now, doctor, come and sit close to me, I want you to listen to my chest," she patted the edge of the boudoir bed and pouted her lips.

"I'll just fetch my stethoscope," she could hear him say.

"Oh doctor, you won't need that," as the peignoir fell from her shoulders, her hand reached to the back of her brassiere and in an instant, she had pulled it from her bare breasts. "There! that's better," she said.

Down on her luck, drinking heavily and desperate for work, the screen test had been for *Angel of Death*, a low budget 1974 erotic horror thriller with unending scenes of soft-core sex. The falling didn't stop, "Save yourself!", plenty of people had called out, but she couldn't, she continued to plummet till she could fall no further.

Miss Strange stood up and looked up to where the audience in the balcony might have been, "He pulls her close and then his murderous hands find her slender neck, then slowly so slowly her light fades: the act of slowly dying."

She didn't get the part; they had said she was too old and that she had been drunk, all conveniently deleted from her memory. "My breasts weren't symmetrical enough for them!" was her justification to her long-suffering agent. The world walked on and passed her by.

Before her in the mirror was a naked little old lady staring back, coat and nightdress at her ankles where she had peeled them from her withered old boughs during her 'screen test'.

"How did you get there?" she asks. "Who the hell are you? Don't you dare think that you can frighten me with the reviews: lacks conviction, mediocre, each movement laboured, poor interpretation, rasping voice, died a death on stage. Stop it! enough!"

She turned her head to the left and to the right and lifted her sagging jaw to the ceiling. She touched her creased breasts and pinched her thin pale mouth for confirmation.

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"Huh!" she grumbled, "I want to speak to the director, no one told me that this performance was to be in the nude. I'm not against such a thing if it's integral to the part, but I don't want to be accused of sexual exhibitionism. I have been told before that my breasts are not symmetrical enough for this kind of work. Is anyone bloody listening?"

She paced backwards and forwards whilst some silent director on high explained the artistic necessity of being nude in the context of the play. Defeated by the argument she snatched her precious cardboard box from the boudoir bed and threw her bloodied head back. "Come Cobweb, our audience awaits."

The operating theatre had been cleared of all equipment for its deep clean, the room barren and bare. "Lights!" Miss Strange promulgated with a grand flourish finding the switch to the operating theatre lights.

"Look Cobweb the lights of the stage, like rays of sunshine, feel their summer warmth.

This performance is to be a nude performance Cobweb, you must prepare yourself."

She opened the box and tentatively lifted out the gold metal urn from within, kissing it before unscrewing the lid and then gently tipping the ashes over the floor.

"There Cobweb, we're both ready now. What, your nervous? Just pretend it's real life."

'The wheel is come full circle: I am here.'

The curtain had risen, she cleared her throat and entered stage right.

"The circle of twelve stones that little Estelle had created on the beach was already beginning to be absorbed by the incoming tide, teasingly, ebbing back and forth, covering then revealing. There were twelve stones, then four, then twelve again, then none, brushed by the bubbles of the surf, it was hypnotic."

Miss Strange skipped naked amongst the ashes as if she was a child on the beach. She threw the ashes around her as if they were sand blowing in the wind, and flitted amongst the stones, squealing and soaring.

She ran up to the lighthouse by the sea, which did not speak, it sang lullaby's and caressed the lonely with its light.

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Waltzing amongst sandcastles, leaping above the waves whilst her audience, who had migrated from the invisible balcony, now watched from deck chairs eating ice cream cones and wiping perspiration from their sanguine brow's. Naked and free she turned and spiralled to the rumbling of the smouldering sea and the rush of the wind; for she was three years old again and running towards a handsome blonde man building a small boat. "My daddy!", she was engulfed in happiness and childish glee.

Miss Strange closed her eyes, staggered forward a little off balance, she imagined her once auburn hair forced upwards by a sudden gust, arms outstretched, as her daddy lifted her high and swung her round and round until she felt giddy. They danced as the landscape reshaped itself, rain fluttering across the beach and intertwining with the late afternoon light. She became a figure in the painting, an abstract of nature.

"Look Estelle, whales by the lighthouse!"

Daddy's voice resonated as soft as a velvet blanket. She clung to him as the weeping whales and dipped, rising and calling, their haunting chants like those of sirens; mesmerising, gripping water and rock, ricocheting on the wind. Then suddenly this private landscape was disturbed, the lighthouse by the sea bereft of its light, no one had notice it turn away to face the oncoming rain.

Blackout!

"Bugger, bugger, bugger! Cobweb, you hadn't even made your entrance! Ladies and Gentlemen the performance shall continue when the utility services have been resumed, I humbly apologise for the disruption. There will be no refunds!"

She lay down naked amongst Cobwebs ashes, and looked back up at the sky from where she fell, knowing that she had given the best performance of her life. She heard rapturous applause and saw the audience rise from their deck chairs in a standing ovation, tears of happiness filled her eyes.

Her proud daddy paraded her around the sandcastles, presented her to her people who threw roses and called "brava, brava, brava." The long dark night was over.

"She simply walked out of A&E, we thought she had gone home," explained Bulldog Machine.

"It's happened several times before with her, when she's been bored. Initially we sent an ambulance

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To her bedsit to bring her back as she had that gaping wound on her head, then someone noticed The drips of blood leading to the lift.”

“Hadn't anyone noticed the blood before?” asked the young male police officer.

“There's a lot of blood in here on a Saturday night, believe me!”

Bulldog Machine crouched by the covered corpse. “Her name was Miss Estelle Strange, eighty-seven years old. She used to be a well-known Shakespearean actress in the 1950s and 60s. I remember her showing me a photograph once, she was so glamorous, you would never have known it was the same person. She was in here at least once a week, sometimes more: mental health issues, alcoholic, seemed to find some solace in her own confusion. Miss Strange had no known living relatives as far as we are aware.”

“Just one more thing, do you have any idea what the substance on the floor might be?” asked the police officer.

“Yes, they are the ashes of her long dead cat, she carried them everywhere she went.”

Gently Bulldog Machine placed a hand on the covered body, “the performance is over now, rest well Miss Strange.”

On the beach little Estelle and her Daddy played until the sun went down, then the lighthouse by the sea, with its new-found light, cradled the echo of where they had once danced together and had heard whales sing.

Shakespeare References:

A Midsummer Night's Dream (2.1.61-62)

Macbeth (5.1.26-30)

Henry VI part 1 (5.4. 50-51)

King Lear (5.3.171-175)