

*Britta Town Hall*

*"Who knew this was here?"*

The sun, deflating like a balloon towards the horizon, drags the warmth and light of the day behind it as if on a string. The music, too, is drifting towards the floor of the auditorium, caught in the confetti of applause, while the musicians stand up to bow. The applause, tossed up again and again, sprinkled and hurled across the room, finally settles and the murmur of the audience floats up out of the debris.

The man beside me has arrived at the last moment of the first performance. He wears glasses with black, heavy frames; his forehead is sweaty. He sits on the very edge of his seat and claps with his hands stretched out towards the musicians, following them across the stage. He claps until everyone else has stopped and his is the last clap to fall, with a loud smack, to the floor. It echoes somewhere behind us.

*"I'm blown away by this place,"* he says to the woman to his left, without looking at her.

*"You never know what's behind these old sandstone buildings."*

People have been trickling into the building since the early evening, clogging the entrance now and then in a gurgle of questions and confusion, so that a small crowd pools on the steps outside. There are men in business suits and ties, their faces sagging and creased. There are children in their school uniforms, their hair ribbons falling undone, glue stains on their jumpers. Elderly women in matching white hairstyles move at their own tempo up the stairway towards the auditorium; small, quivering semitones scattered on the red, carpeted steps.

People get up and down, swap seats with each other. Whole rows move across to make room for a couple to sit together. Children tumble and scramble in their parents' arms and in their laps. A little girl stands on her chair in the front row and stares down her audience as it ignores her, collectively turning the single piece of paper that is the program over and over in their hands, folding it up and putting it away in their pockets, frowning and pulling it back out again, settling it on their laps.

Fragments of conversation scramble out of the din.

*"If you were visiting you could just wander in..."*

*"Last time I was here they had..."*

*"That organ is..."*

*"Beautiful."*

There are five empty chairs and music stands on stage as the musicians walk back in for their second performance, Beethoven's Quintet for Piano and Winds. Three are men in grey suits of

varying shades, one woman wears a white shirt, and the other a black dress. It's a performance in greyscale.

The memory that this evening will become is more captivating than its reality in the now, as time drags on and the music becomes background noise for the wandering thoughts of the audience members. In dregs people get up and leave, whispering, crinkling their programs, shifting and scratching and wiping their hair away, fidgeting and yawning and picking their noses. Every seat in the room is filled. One woman with white, perfectly straight hair sits very upright in the very front row. A man next to her closes his eyes.

As the night ends with the final applause, people swirling and draining out of the auditorium, dragging along with them their conversations and laughs, complaints and yawns. With a sigh they breathe out the last of the music they had been taking in and wonder where they parked their cars, what they will watch tonight, what's for dinner.

*"We're all dressed up now. We have to go do something,"* a teenager with a ponytail on top of her head and a silver t-shirt says to her two friends.

Council employees wait in the stairway to catch compliments and pass out thank-yous, the audience members oblivious to all that has gone on behind the scenes.

We head out into the street, where the sun's light, upon crashing into the horizon, has scattered in bursts of headlight and streetlight and starlight, darting and flashing in our vision.

The facade starts to slip from the moment the audience leaves. Like an actor holding their smile or a dancer holding their pose as the curtain falls, the auditorium is still in the moment on stage, sweating and puffed, dazed and flushed. Fragments of a memory from many years ago flicker at the edges of reality, in this headachy, adrenaline-soaked stupor.

Did 1100 people really once dance in this room?

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On Monday night the Town Hall straightens itself up for a council meeting. It puts on its most serious expression, takes a deep breath and opens the big brown door marked 'Council Chambers' to councillors and members of the public in equal numbers. White signs sticky-taped to the walls led the 15 people now observing from the public gallery to their seats. They look down as often as they look up, at phones and laptops, at voice recorders and notebooks, at the stapled pages of the meeting's agenda.

It's strange hearing the names of familiar places mixed up and jumbled around with procedural jargon. An alderman talks about Hobart's heritage and the need for an advisory committee but all I can see is the back of her curly-haired head; a calm and confident voice without a face.

Someone pours water from a fancy water jug and the ice cubes jingle and crash out of the wooden speakers seated on the chair next to me. A phone beeps with regularity, papers rustle

and, in a well-practiced dance, the meeting moves along in monotone ayes and nos, reaching a crescendo when the Lord Mayor stands up to talk about how much she loves Salamanca. In the public gallery we look up, briefly, and then back down as the meeting returns to its normal rhythm. All in favour, all opposed. Aye, no. Show of hands. Next.

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*“They used to look like someone’s dad had just tacked them together.”*

The stalls are now so modern I can’t even figure out how to lock the door. The bathroom, hidden under the dark, creaking staircase is bright and white and brand new. It doesn’t make sense, as though a page from one book has been torn out and sticky-taped in the middle of another.

Out in the stairway it feels like evening. There are no windows, just elegantly-draped red carpet under the dim light of an electric chandelier. But beyond this space are white walls and linoleum floors, fluorescent lights and grey lifts with peeling paint. It’s as though part of this building is a set, and the rest is backstage, where the real business of council goes on, where people’s offices look like anyone else’s. Swipe access cards beep, high heels clack, someone coughs and a motion sensor light flicks off.

A black mounted security camera captures it all on tape.

The auditorium itself wears its sparkly chandelier earrings like clip-on, costume jewellery. I imagine one crashing to the ground in the 1920s, fragments skittering across the wooden floor and out into the community, a crystal diaspora, to be reunited and reconstructed sixty years later.

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The music of the string quartet on this cold, drizzly Sunday morning makes a sudden, frantic attempt to escape from the auditorium, crying out in choked sobs, wailing and gasping, twirling up and around through the building. Some of it seems to be coming from the human figure painted in the old gaol cell downstairs, caught mid-struggle trying to free itself from its wall.

The four musicians draw their bows, furiously striking their instruments again and again, slicing through the uncertain silence of the room. There’s a second set of performers hanging in the auditorium mirror, distorted and inverted in their alternate reality, wobbling uncertainty above the heaters, opposite the very composer whose work they are performing. Beethoven, Bellini, Handel and Liszi are watching. They catch their breath and pluck their strings, the notes plopping gently to the wooden floor of the auditorium, like the rain pattering on the footpath outside.

At the end, the performers, one after another, walk in and out, in and back out, stuck on repeat and in rewind, sit back down for one last movement, stand up and walk out and back in again one final time.

The music trickles back in time to the first moments I discovered the Town Hall, following me as I ascended the carpeted stairs, luring me down into the belly of the building, calling out to me from around each corner. They whisper secrets of what might have happened in those gaol cells, behind the heavy, rusty gate, the bins and the dusty layers of cold, air, the mess of cables clinging to the ceiling. They hint at a dark past.

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Outside, in public, the Town Hall stands quietly among the other buildings, some of them gripping onto scaffolding, old and weary. It spends most of its time alone now, holding onto its memories and keeping its secrets.

As I explore the underground space, a man in white overalls looks at me.

*"I'm a writer-in-residence here," I say.*

*"I don't care, I just work here. I just thought you might be lost. You know, people just wander in here to look around."*

It's strange. I haven't seen a single one.

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