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Station Eleven

Written by Emily St. John Mandel

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STATION ELEVEN

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PICADOR



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In memory of Emilie Jacobson

1. THE THEATRE

1

THE KING STOOD in a pool of blue light, unmoored. This was act 4 of *King Lear,* a winter night at the Elgin Theatre in Toronto. Earlier in the evening, three little girls had played a clapping game onstage as the audience entered, childhood versions of Lear's daughters, and now they'd returned as hallucinations in the mad scene. The king stumbled and reached for them as they flitted here and there in the shadows. His name was Arthur Leander. He was fifty-one years old and there were flowers in his hair.

"Dost thou know me?" the actor playing Gloucester asked.

"I remember thine eyes well enough," Arthur said, distracted by the child version of Cordelia, and this was when it happened. There was a change in his face, he stumbled, he reached for a column but misjudged the distance and struck it hard with the side of his hand.

"Down from the waist they are Centaurs," he said, and not only was this the wrong line but the delivery was wheezy, his voice barely audible. He cradled his hand to his chest like a broken bird. The actor portraying Edgar was watching him closely. It was still possible at that moment that Arthur was acting, but in the first row of the orchestra section a man was rising from his seat. He'd been training to be a paramedic. The man's girlfriend tugged at his sleeve, hissed, "Jeevan! What are you *doing*?" And Jeevan himself wasn't sure at first, the rows behind him murmuring for him to sit. An usher was moving towards him. Snow began to fall over the stage.

"The wren goes to't," Arthur whispered, and Jeevan, who knew the play very well, realized that the actor had skipped back twelve lines. "The wren . . ."

"Sir," the usher said, "would you please . . ."

But Arthur Leander was running out of time. He swayed, his eyes unfocused, and it was obvious to Jeevan that he wasn't Lear

anymore. Jeevan pushed the usher aside and made a dash for the steps leading up to the stage, but a second usher was jogging down the aisle, which forced Jeevan to throw himself at the stage without the benefit of stairs. It was higher than he'd thought and he had to kick the first usher, who'd grasped hold of his sleeve. The snow was plastic, Jeevan noted peripherally, little bits of translucent plastic, clinging to his jacket and brushing against his skin. Edgar and Gloucester were distracted by the commotion, neither of them looking at Arthur, who was leaning on a plywood column, staring vacantly. There were shouts from backstage, two shadows approaching quickly, but Jeevan had reached Arthur by now and he caught the actor as he lost consciousness, eased him gently to the floor. The snow was falling fast around them, shimmering in blue-white light. Arthur wasn't breathing. The two shadows—security men—had stopped a few paces away, presumably catching on by now that Jeevan wasn't a deranged fan. The audience was a clamour of voices, flashes from cell-phone cameras, indistinct exclamations in the dark.

"Jesus Christ," Edgar said. "Oh Jesus." He'd dropped the British accent he'd been using earlier and now sounded as if he were from Alabama, which in fact he was. Gloucester had pulled away the gauze bandage that had covered half his face—by this point in the play his character's eyes had been put out—and seemed frozen in place, his mouth opening and closing like a fish.

Arthur's heart wasn't beating. Jeevan began CPR. Someone shouted an order and the curtain dropped, a *whoosh* of fabric and shadow that removed the audience from the equation and reduced the brilliance of the stage by half. The plastic snow was still falling. The security men had receded. The lights changed, the blues and whites of the snowstorm replaced by a fluorescent glare that seemed yellow by comparison. Jeevan worked silently in the margarine light, glancing sometimes at Arthur's face. Please, he thought, please. Arthur's eyes were closed. There was movement in the curtain, someone batting at the fabric and fumbling for an opening

from the other side, and then an older man in a grey suit was kneeling on the other side of Arthur's chest.

"I'm a cardiologist," he said. "Walter Jacobi." His eyes were magnified by his glasses, and his hair had gone wispy on the top of his head.

"Jeevan Chaudhary," Jeevan said. He wasn't sure how long he'd been here. People were moving around him, but everyone seemed distant and indistinct except Arthur, and now this other man who'd joined them. It was like being in the eye of a storm, Jeevan thought, he and Walter and Arthur here together in the calm. Walter touched the actor's forehead once, gently, like a parent soothing a fevered child.

"They've called an ambulance," Walter said.

The fallen curtain lent an unexpected intimacy to the stage. Jeevan was thinking of the time he'd interviewed Arthur in Los Angeles, years ago now, during his brief career as an entertainment journalist. He was thinking of his girlfriend, Laura, wondering if she was waiting in her front-row seat or if she might've gone out to the lobby. He was thinking, Please start breathing again, please. He was thinking about the way the dropped curtain closed off the fourth wall and turned the stage into a room, albeit a room with cavernous space instead of a ceiling, fathoms of catwalks and lights between which a soul might slip undetected. That's a ridiculous thought, Jeevan told himself. Don't be stupid. But now there was a prickling at the back of his neck, a sense of being watched from above.

"Do you want me to take a turn?" Walter asked. Jeevan understood that the cardiologist felt useless, so he nodded and raised his hands from Arthur's chest and Walter picked up the rhythm.

Not quite a room, Jeevan thought now, looking around the stage. It was too transitory, all those doorways and dark spaces between wings, the missing ceiling. It was more like a terminal, he thought, a train station or an airport, everyone passing quickly through. The ambulance had arrived, a pair of medics approaching through the

absurdly still-falling snow, and then they were upon the fallen actor like crows, a man and a woman in dark uniforms crowding Jeevan aside, the woman so young she could've passed as a teenager. Jeevan rose and stepped back. The column against which Arthur had collapsed was smooth and polished under his fingertips, wood painted to look like stone.

There were stagehands everywhere, actors, nameless functionaries with clipboards. "For god's sake," Jeevan heard one of them say, "can no one stop the goddamn snow?" Regan and Cordelia were holding hands and crying by the curtain, Edgar sitting cross-legged on the floor nearby with his hand over his mouth. Goneril spoke quietly into her cell phone. Fake eyelashes cast shadows over her eyes.

No one looked at Jeevan, and it occurred to him that his role in this performance was done. The medics didn't seem to be succeeding. He wanted to find Laura. She was probably waiting for him in the lobby, upset. She might—this was a distant consideration, but a consideration nonetheless—find his actions admirable.

Someone finally succeeded in turning off the snow, the last few translucencies drifting down. Jeevan was looking for the easiest way to exit the scene when he heard a whimper, and there was a child whom he'd noticed earlier, a small actress, kneeling on the stage beside the next plywood pillar to his left. Jeevan had seen the play four times but never before with children, and he'd thought it an innovative bit of staging. The girl was seven or eight. She kept wiping her eyes in a motion that left streaks of makeup on both her face and the back of her hand.

"Clear," one of the medics said, and the other moved back while he shocked the body.

"Hello," Jeevan said, to the girl. He knelt before her. Why had no one come to take her away from all this? She was watching the medics. He had no experience with children, although he'd always wanted one or two of his own, and wasn't exactly sure how to speak to them.

"Clear," the medic said, again.

"You don't want to look at that," Jeevan said.

"He's going to die, isn't he?" She was breathing in little sobs.

"I don't know." He wanted to say something reassuring, but he had to concede that it didn't look good. Arthur was motionless on the stage, shocked twice, Walter holding the man's wrist and staring grimly into the distance while he waited for a pulse. "What's your name?"

"Kirsten," the girl said. "I'm Kirsten Raymonde." The stage makeup was disconcerting.

"Kirsten," Jeevan said, "where's your mom?"

"She doesn't pick me up till eleven."

"Call it," a medic said.

"Who takes care of you when you're here, then?"

"Tanya's the wrangler." The girl was still staring at Arthur. Jeevan moved to block her view.

"Nine fourteen p.m.," Walter Jacobi said.

"The wrangler?" Jeevan asked.

"That's what they call her," she said. "She takes care of me while I'm here." A man in a suit had emerged from stage right and was speaking urgently with the medics, who were strapping Arthur to a gurney. One of them shrugged and pulled the blanket down to fit an oxygen mask over Arthur's face. Jeevan realized this charade must be for Arthur's family, so they wouldn't be notified of his death via the evening news. He was moved by the decency of it.

Jeevan stood and extended his hand to the sniffling child. "Come on," he said, "let's find Tanya. She's probably looking for you."

This seemed doubtful. If Tanya were looking for her charge, surely she would have found her by now. He led the little girl into the wings, but the man in the suit had disappeared. The backstage area was chaotic, all sound and movement, shouts to clear the way as Arthur's procession passed, Walter presiding over the gurney. The parade disappeared down the corridor towards the stage doors and the commotion swelled further in its wake, everyone crying

or talking on their phones or huddled in small groups telling and retelling the story to one another—"So then I look over and he's falling"—or barking orders or ignoring orders barked by other people.

"All these people," Jeevan said. He didn't like crowds very much. "Do you see Tanya?"

"No. I don't see her anywhere."

"Well," Jeevan said, "maybe we should stay in one place and let her find us." He remembered once having read advice to this effect in a brochure about what to do if you're lost in the woods. There were a few chairs along the back wall, and he sat down in one. From here he could see the unpainted plywood back of the set. A stagehand was sweeping up the snow.

"Is Arthur going to be okay?" Kirsten had climbed up on the chair beside him and was clutching the fabric of her dress in both fists.

"Just now," Jeevan said, "he was doing the thing he loved best in the world." He was basing this on an interview he'd read a month ago, Arthur talking to *The Globe and Mail*—"I've waited all my life to be old enough to play Lear, and there's nothing I love more than being on stage, the immediacy of it…"—but the words seemed hollow in retrospect. Arthur was primarily a film actor, and who in Hollywood longs to be older?

Kirsten was quiet.

"My point is, if acting was the last thing he ever did," Jeevan said, "then the last thing he ever did was something that made him happy."

"Was that the last thing he ever did?"

"I think it was. I'm so sorry."

The snow was a glimmering pile behind the set now, a little mountain.

"It's the thing I love most in the world too," Kirsten said, after some time had passed.

"What is?"

"Acting," she said, and that was when a young woman with a tear-streaked face emerged from the crowd, arms outstretched. The woman barely glanced at Jeevan as she took Kirsten's hand. Kirsten looked back once over her shoulder and was gone.

Jeevan rose and walked out onto the stage. No one stopped him. He half-expected to see Laura waiting where he'd left her in front-row centre—how much time had passed?—but when he found his way through the velvet curtains, the audience was gone, ushers sweeping and picking up dropped programs between rows, a forgotten scarf draped over the back of a seat. He made his way out into the red-carpet extravagance of the lobby, careful not to meet the ushers' eyes, and in the lobby a few remnants of the audience still lingered but Laura wasn't among them. He called her, but she'd turned off her phone for the performance and apparently hadn't turned it back on.

"Laura," he said, to her voice mail, "I'm in the lobby. I don't know where you are."

He stood in the doorway of the ladies' lounge and called out to the attendant, but she replied that the lounge was empty. He circled the lobby once and went to the coat check, where his overcoat was among the last few hanging in the racks. Laura's blue coat was gone.