

The Hall

Text all rights reserved © Saint-Lazare, 2025.

Being born in the 80s spared you from being threatened with death by spindle by a wicked fairy. Mine had scratched her perm, and combined the chance encounter of questionable sushi with my bowel movements. And so there I was, death in my guts, and the only thing trying to kiss me was a clogged toilet. Panting, sweat dripping onto the tiled floor, I wobbled as best I could out of the stall to reach the sinks, to continue emptying myself from another end. An acid volcano had opened a portal inside me, and it flowed endlessly, eating away at my insides.

I had lost track of time, but even weakened, I felt something was wrong. Where were the assistants, the crew, the other musicians, the hubbub of fans waiting for the show to begin in the sold-out arena? Every backstage area looked like something out of a documentary about the Backrooms, but a certain electricity made them come alive. There, the silence weighed heavily, a breeding ground for my anxiety. I splashed icy water on my face and temples. I never cancelled a show. A true professional. I had to carry everything on my shoulders; it had always been the case.

With cautious steps, I left the restrooms and followed a corridor. Finally, in the gloom, I could make out silhouettes. "Hurry up, we have better things to do than wait for you." A voice without visible lips, disrespectful. Despite my discomfort, my ego ignited. But before I could protest, I was pushed forward, and I did not land on an arena stage. Instead, I was in a performance hall.

And then I remembered; the arena, the band, the fans, they belonged to the realm of my dreams. *I never left the hall.*

I do not remember when I first got stuck into the hall. It must have been in my early twenties, when ambition started to devour me, and I met people who looked down on me with their commiserate smile. Four black walls. Rows of deep red synthetic seats with a barely visible audience. In front of me, on a leather sofa, an asshole host and hostile experts. My enemies. People who wronged me, hurt me. Guests on both sides of the scene. On my left, clueless idiots who did better than me. On my right, the elite. My favourite musicians, directors, writers, actors.

And me, standing in front of them all. Proving my worth in the harsh spotlight. Talking back with confidence, dancing in a spectacular way, singing with brio, masterfully playing instruments, being smart, witty, fun, cool, sexy; assuming the "fuck off" position. Taking revenge on my foes. Flabbergasting my peers. Impressing or even seducing my models, and the audience. At least, it was the illusion I entertained for years.

With time, however, things deteriorated. I began to suffer from déjà vu, with certain scenes repeating themselves like a broken record. I parroted piquant sentences until they became void of sense. The host grew increasingly sharp, the glee of his insolent questions giving way to deeper cuts. Unblinking, his smile froze in the eerie backlight. A sinister Muppet. Every second became a humiliation. *Get more entertaining. More. MORE!* Evidence of my worth? Ridiculous and ridiculed. Vanishing into thin air as soon as I conjured it. And I had to start again. And again. New faces appeared. Old faces vanished. No more friendly staff or guests. Lifetime insecurities never went away. Serving anguish, not cunt. The audience slow-clapped

like a sluggish heartbeat, mechanically calling for a kill in the Colosseum. The demands got darker, more vicious, and more extreme. How far would they go? Deep-throating the Devil?

Yet, I was still inside these four black walls, thinking hard about a way to show them all. I knew that I did not need this. That I was actually free to leave. But the exit doors were hidden. In my blind spots. A prisoner without a crime. Because I was my own kidnapper. My own torturer. This hall was my mind. I locked myself up, and lost the keys. Cannot evacuate. Like a clogged toilet full of my own diarrhoea. I had to dive my arm in to dislodge the shit that blocked it.

For now, back to square one. Starting anew. The tape had rewound again. "Our new guest has a little something on his face, a bit of stage fright seems to be running from his nose," sneered the host. To the slow, disquieting chuckles of the shadow audience, I nervously ran my hand over my philtrum, discovering a remnant of vomit. The hollow between my nose and my upper lip had always been wide and deep. Legend attributes it to the imprint of an angel's finger, forcing the newborn to keep silent the secrets of the universe. What was he trying to silence from me? What kind of screams could I have made? I could not imagine anything worse than what I was experiencing at that moment.

The walls seemed to tighten with every breath I took. I felt the sticky caress of cobwebs, floating in the blinding spotlight. A pungent smell of piss rose from the stage. And then, that tension. Like an invisible, demonic presence lurking in the darkness, behind the cameras and empty teleprompters. Ready to strike at any moment.

The audience's sniggering and the guests' jibes suddenly stopped. A soft beep, seemingly coming from far away. I had heard it all these years. Each time, it froze time, giving me a brief respite. Like the sonar of a submarine lost in the shallows. The sound of hope? Once its breath had evaporated, the circus would resume, bringing me back to my pathetic clown act.

My chest tightened, and I briefly closed my eyes to take a shaky breath. When I opened them again, a new guest had materialized. She had not been there when I entered, but she had been an old acquaintance for some time. A neutral face, unmarked by time, framed by straight, dark hair like a hood. Always that sad softness in her eyes, an encouraging twitch at the corner of her lips. Each time I would walk on this stage, she would play a different role. A sister. A best friend. An employer. A lover. My only ally.

Deep down, I knew her truth. She embodied my regrets, my missed opportunities, my childish weaknesses, my guilt, my lack of audacity, my lack of everything. The fruit of temptation, two slender hands placed prudishly on her crossed knees. *Untouchable. Unkissable. Unfuckable.* And she relished it. The demon in the room was none other than her smoky shadow, whistling a requiem on repeat. Mine.

This time, however, the lava in my intestines had heated my blood. With a leap, I threw myself toward her, hands out in front of me, to grab her frail neck. The walls creaked as they tightened. The beeping sounded again. Its pace faster than usual. Another pause. When the farce resumed, the seat was empty, my hands grasping nothing.

Before her neighbors could protest my action, screams echoed through the stalls. "May chaos consume you! Power to the Void!" Assault rifle fire erupted in the room, the shadows let out shrill screams in slow motion. The smoke dragon slammed against the walls, which lurched. Lightbulbs exploded, and the bullet-pierced ceiling rained down dust and sharp debris. Corpses piled up, phones ringing in the void like so many voices of worried loved ones. I desperately searched for my own phone and could not find it. Who was worried about me?

Terrified, I tried to flee backstage, but fire doors slammed into me. A siren wailed. The beeps, once peaceful intermissions, grew frantic, becoming **shrill** and powerful, as if they now resided in my eardrums. Electric arcs, a human torch running across the front of the stage, the rumble of the building collapsing. The beep, virulent. For a moment, the performance hall vanished, and I briefly saw a small room with outdated wallpaper. A nostalgic oppression lodged in my chest, and then, the vision **went out**. Everything **went out**. The hall collapsed on top of me.

The nerve-racking silence of the restroom returned. And this time, I understood its message. The hall was my vault. Now I was physically buried alive, the rubble weighing on my torso, my joints, cutting off my circulation and stealing my breath. Should I save it, or try to call for help? But what if the terrorists were still there, with their guns? The emergency services did not have access to this place. Who else but me could come into my own head?

Rage filled me. It roared in my lungs, in my larynx, in my tear ducts. My **life** has been a struggle, **every** moment of it. The social codes and comedies? Unknown languages and charades I could not decipher or play. A perfectionist to a T, the brave soldier who never gave in, and who rebuilt his own colossus with clay ankles **every** time the storm had passed. What for? All along, I was facing opponents several steps ahead, with days longer **than mine**, bodies more potent **than mine**. Dancing smoothly down the wide avenues of **life** while I trudged painfully up the endless stairs.

I was suffocating. No happy slideshows struck my pupils, no sweet smell of childhood, all my memories vanished behind screens of waked dreams tasting of ashes. I did not care about their expectations. Success, career, travels, parties. But pricks twisted my flesh, pieces of metal pressed in by the weight of the rubble. A brief child's laughter. Passionate but inaudible conversations. The possibility of a kiss **that** lingered long enough to break my heart. Rage gave **way** to the despair of unfairness. **The darkness** was moistened by my tears. My nerves, giving **way**, **made** my sarcophagus **made** of broken walls vibrate.

Then I felt a hand on mine. The soft touch of skin. Cold, but present. My eyelids fluttered, searching **the darkness** for a little light. In the space between a beam and a piece of ceiling, I saw an **eye** shine. Her **eye**. My only ally. The demon **that** fed on my inability to live.

"Ungrateful," she whispered. "It's thanks to me **that** you survived all these years. I was your backbone, your perfusion of joy, your cheerleader when you had to start over. I kept **you alive**. I am keeping **you alive** now."

I calmed down. At least I had **that**. Squeezing her hand, I was ready to give myself to her, body and soul, when the beeping came again, this time continuous. "**CLEAR!**" a voice yelled from above. A violent electric **shock** shook the rubble. "The pulse is weak," **another** remarked, "we're losing him." "**CLEAR!**" **Another shock**. I looked at the girl's eye, confused.

"**Don't** pay attention to this, it's just **another** pain. You've had enough, **don't** you think?" The shocks moved the debris, freeing my vision a little. I could now see her full **face**. **That** ageless, emotionless **face**. And a **smile** **that** was neither comforting nor tender. A predatory **smile**. From her orientation, I realized **that** the rest of her body was above mine. Pinning me down. I had forgotten for a moment what I had guessed about her all these years. She **still** embodied false hope.

I began to scream, to call for help, to let the voices fighting above me know **that** I was there, **still** alive, **still** ready to **get up**, and go **again**. "Come on, hang on, buddy!" the voice shouted. Another shock. "**Get me out of here!**" I yelled at the top of my lungs. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the girl's face transforming. A cold shiver crept up my neck, and I faced her **again**.

Now she looked like me. *No. It was me, above the ruins, looking down at myself, with a victorious smile.* "Get me out of here!" she said, a convincing imitation of my own plea.

The steady beep returned. A soft light bathed my double, who disintegrated, with the jubilant smile lingering just a bit more. "He's back! Well done, my boy!" the voices said. And then, it was pitch-black again. The weight again. The loneliness again. The incomprehension, forever.