

FORMAL

Midnight. The chosen are redeemed from the rabble in the downstairs ballrooms and invited into the host's private quarters, to view his treasures.

EXCLUSIVE

I follow the frocked host into his holy of holiest, past antiques, draperies, art. Blue room, windowless, square, semi-darkness. Glass pyramid in the middle. The lucky guests draw closer to the bizarre centrepiece. My heart contorts in a spasm.

Inside, round a circular table, ten pairs of mechanical hands; cold, austere.

"Watch this."

The hands click; across the frictionless surface, they throw playing cards, face down.

SPECTACLE

The pair opposite receives the card, then swiftly throws it again, towards another automaton.

It starts slow but picks up pace. Dozens of cards now in play, with such timing and precision they never collide, but zip and swarm with minimal clearance.

The grotesque marvel reaches an impossible speed, each hand catching, re-throwing multiple times a second. Then, pipes under each set of hands start pouring sewage. The pyramid starts filling amid continued juggling; rises near the tabletop.

THERE

I wonder what trick awaits, but then the fluid overflows through some vents, out of the pyramid, onto the floor of the room.

I turn in panic, realise all have left.

The doors are locked.

The sewage rises; I scream, rummage for help. I stack furniture, fearing a horrible end. Then I notice a trapdoor above the fast-submerging pyramid. Despairingly I climb, stand on the tip, flip the trapdoor open. I swing a leg over the ledge just as the glass apex disappears.