

Behind The Curtain

By Nick Hayden

Alicia opened the door as soon as I knocked. That's how I knew she'd been waiting for me.

"I'm so glad you've come," she said, hurrying me in out of the wind. "Don't take off your coat. I want you to talk to him."

That meant he was in the shed and hadn't come out. I expected as much when I received her call. I asked how long he'd been locked in there.

"Eight days. I tried not to worry. But it's been over a week. He won't answer his phone. I hear him in there. I didn't know what else to do, Alan. Maybe he'll listen to you?"

I calmed her with a few words, but I was anxious. We both knew how eccentric John was. We expected absences and odd hours, but this was beyond his usual aberrations.

I pressed back out into the winter world, snow flashing across my face like knives, the first gust chilling whatever warmth I had soaked up inside. My former footprints had nearly disappeared.

The shed, as Alicia and I called it, was John Theron's art studio. A windowless steel facility on the exterior, inside housed creative alcoves, private displays, endless blank canvases, abandoned sculptures and designs, and all sorts of nooks and crannies no one knew what for. There were two doors--a large shipping one, for transporting his latest works, and an nondescript entryway.

I pounded on this metal entrance forcibly for half a minute before

beginning my demand: “John Theron, open this door!” I pounded insistently, changing up the rhythm every minute or so, and shouting now and again. It was a practice I had found useful in getting John’s attention. Too much regularity and his mind would block out the distraction. The evolving pattern caused his brain to take interest.

I expected to knock for fifteen minutes, considering how long he’d been in exile, but it hadn’t been five when the door opened. John stood there, his face aglow like a child’s; on another, such a look of joy might make a man look imbecilic. My fingers had begun to burn and I could no longer feel my face, but I remember clearly, even after all these years, his expression. In fact, whenever a chill seeps into my bones, that memory comes to me unbidden.

A second look, however, revealed the true state of things. His clothes were stained and rumped, and he had begun quite a prodigious beard. I caught the stench of John’s unwashed body on the crisp air.

“John, your wife--”

“Never mind that. It’s finished.”

“Good. Now, if you’d come back home....”

Snow whipped into his face. He stepped back as it bit his nose, and he laughed. “Oh, yes, it’s winter, isn’t it? Come in, come in.”

There was no use protesting, and I gratefully stepped inside. I entered southern latitudes. “John, you’ve been here a week.”

“A week? Seven days?”

“Eight, actually.”

“Yes, well, now that you mention it, I guess so, but I really had no

idea. You'll understand. When you see it, you'll understand."

It took some effort for him to speak. He kept looking about, like a man who would rather be elsewhere."

"Have you slept?"

John walked off toward the kitchenette, and I followed, repeating my question. He rummaged around the room, peering in the fridge and scanning the cupboards. He finally decided to pull a loaf of bread out of the freezer and seize a jar of peanut butter from the counter. He spread and consumed at an alarming rate.

"Slept? I might have, here and there. Not much. Wasn't really any time or need. A brief snoozer now and then to reset the old brain." He looked directly at me. It was the first time since he opened the door I felt he really knew who I was. "I think I'll be very tired in an hour or two."

It was then it hit him. I saw it happen "Alicia's furious with me."

"You could have taken ten minutes and reassured her you were alive and sane."

He considered. "I'm not sure I could have."

"Don't give me that. You control your impulses. You could have."

John hesitated. "I didn't want to."

"What is it, John? Is there trouble between you two?"

"No! Not yet, anyway." I could see the distraction returning, some idea that would not leave him. "Come see it. You have to see it. It's...it just is." He stood and pulled me to my feet, but when he reached the door, he stopped. "You can't see it."

"I want to see it."

“You can’t. I won’t let you.”

I led him back to his seat. “What’s the matter with you, John? You’re not making sense. I’m going to have a doctor look you over.”

“No!” John pulled away violently. He breathed deep, shook himself, and sat again. “No. Nothing’s wrong. It’s just so hard to make you understand. I don’t quite understand myself. Let me show you.”

He led me into his main studio. It was a landscape of paint bottles, abandoned sketches, broken pottery, and twisted metal, the wreckage of half-formed ideas and untidy brainstorming. The air smelt of clean flame. John had some experience as a glassblower and blacksmith, among his many other talents, and not a little of his fame came from mixing traditional fine art with more workaday materials and methods.

His strides increased as we crossed the chamber and entered his private studio. The first he regularly led visitors through; the second, perhaps three or four had seen, myself included. Chisels and sawdust and debris of stone narrowed the floor into a walkway. Great purple curtains sectioned off the back corner.

John stopped and held out his arm to bar my path. “It’s there. Behind the curtain.”

“Let me see it.”

“I can’t. It’s not for you.”

“Is it for Alicia?” When he didn’t answer, I asked worriedly. “For someone else?”

“It’s not for anyone. No one can see it. I won’t ever look at it again.”

“Is it that bad?”

John's eyes burned, and he took hold of my hand. I noticed that. He rarely made physical contact with a person. "I wish you could--no--I saw it because it was given to me. But it's not for me. That's why I will never see it again." He squeezed my hand. "You understand, don't you? Who it's for?"

"Let's go home, John. You're exhausted."

He suddenly looked it. As if my words reminded him, his form slumped and fatigue disfigured his face. "When I was working on it, I lived forever. Time was nothing. But now--I'm so tired."

I maneuvered him out of the room, planning to return later to see the thing that had so entranced my friend.

"No one must ever see it," he said quietly. "You understand? No one."

He shivered against the cold and responded weakly to his wife's impassioned embrace. I tried to leave him in Alicia's care, but he clung to my sleeve. "I haven't told you yet. I'm burning to. It's all I can think of, but I'm scared. Perhaps I've finally gone mad like my critics threaten."

Together, Alicia and I settled him into bed. He could hardly keep his eyes open; he fought for every waking moment. "Alan, glory, hallelujah. Praise and glory and power and strength. From him is all Beauty and Goodness. What I saw! Such a private vision, a love letter to make your ears burn! Do you understand? I'm so tired..."

I watched him fall asleep. He breathed deeply and rested.

Alicia looked at me with fear. "What's happened to him? Did you see it? What did he make?"

“Something. He wouldn’t let me see.”

“I don’t want to see it, either,” she decided. “But you look. Tell me if it is great, or if it is madness.”

Winter bit and clawed once again. In his studio, it was warm and quiet. I walked through his personal gallery. Faces looked at me from portraits, some in the style of Rembrandt, others in a personalized Picasso. I walked around distorted forms of sculptured abstraction, seeing elegance in lines and curves, mystery in the arrangement. I passed quickly, making no effort to take stock of the trinkets and full-scale masterpieces that flowed from the imaginings and beliefs of John Theron.

In the innermost sanctum, the curtain waited. I walked close and touched the fabric with my hand, lightly, delicately. He would never know if I looked, if I peeked in the box he had wrapped for another. But I would know.

I waited, as if for some sign, or even some new decision. I could hear the scrape of my soles upon the floor as I fidgeted slightly.

I returned to Alicia.

“What did you find?”

“I didn’t look.”

“Is there anything there at all?”

“I don’t know,” I answered.

* * *

Rumors grew up around John’s mysterious work. I don’t believe I began them, but I cannot say for certain. In the first few days after ushering John out from the shed, my mind returned again and again to

those curtains. I woke up at night and reached out my hand, as if to draw them back. I told myself that if the piece was as celestial as John believed, men must look upon it. Besides being John's friend, I was a great admirer of his work. Shouldn't I have a glimpse of that vision he claimed to have seen?

And when I woke at night, half-convinced that I could reveal the glory of his hands to my sight, I felt a wild anticipation that bordered on fever. Such intense longing, I am ashamed to admit, resembled lust far more than love.

It did not take long for the work to be referred to as *The Curtain*, and more than a few, especially the critics, considered the curtains to be the entire point of the piece. What was behind did not matter, and indeed, it was almost certain, they said, that nothing was behind it. Like life itself, the mystery was an illusion, and if we were to draw back the curtain, we'd be lucky to find even a two-bit magician from Oz.

John refused to speak a word of it to art writers and visitors and admirers. When questioned, he stonewalled. When pressed, he would hang up the phone or leave the room. But sometimes in my presence he would allude to it in hushed tones, as if to speak of it was to deface it.

This all bothered me immensely. John seemed healthy and well-balanced--as much as he had ever been, in any case--but this was too secretive, too private. For a man who had made his fortune sharing his creations with the world, this silent treatment seemed rooted in some aspect of his nature I did not yet understand.

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It was at dinner at his house when I managed to confront him, in my way. We sat drinking coffee after the meal, a tradition Alicia forced upon all her guests, and she was harping upon a favorite subject.

“One date with her, Alan, and I’ll stop bothering you, I swear!” she said, laughing. “Come now, you’re a nice guy. A gentleman, even. Why waste it as a bachelor when you could make some lady quite happy?”

“And what do I get out of it, hmm?” I teased. “Nagging and worry. But perhaps you make a good point. You say I have admirable qualities (doubtful, but you insist), and because of that, I should share them with some eligible lady. Let’s take that artistically. If something is beautiful, it should be shared. If something is excellent, it should be shown to as many people as will see it. What do you think, John? If something is beautiful, should it be given to the world?”

He came slowly out of his moody self-reflection. “Should be?”

“For the betterment of mankind. For the enrichment of the world.”

John shook his head. “It *can* be. I wouldn’t make a rule of it.”

“What if an artist has a vision from God Himself? Isn’t he duty-bound to share it with others?”

John looked at me, but I could not read his expression. Alicia’s head was down; I could feel her anxiously waiting for his answer.

Finally, he took a drink. “When Alicia finally marries you off, I suppose you’ll televise your honeymoon. For beauty’s sake.”

* * *

When next I saw him, he apologized for his remark, which was quite unnecessary. Indeed, the fact of his offering it struck me as unusual, for it

was his custom to forget previous conversations and take little notice of any offense his straightforward remarks might inflict.

“Come with me,” he said, and I understood by his voice where he wanted to take me.

He took two chairs from the main studio and set them in front of The Curtain. We sat as if watching the sunset from the porch.

“You think me strange.”

“I’ve thought that a long time.”

“I need someone I can trust completely. I think I can trust you.”

“You can,” I answered.

“No one can ever look at it.”

I said nothing. I knew no argument to change his mind.

“You don’t agree.”

“I don’t. I think you’re scared.”

“Of what people will think?”

“That it’s not what you thought you made. That it’s less than perfect. That it’s just a poor copy of what you meant.”

He chewed the words slowly, considering. “There’s a story, apocryphal some say, that when Handel finished composing the Hallelujah chorus, he said, ‘I did think I saw heaven open, and saw the very face of God.’ There’s your poor copy, if you believe the claim, and quite a famous one.”

“You try to distract from the issue at hand.”

“Yes. Honestly, I don’t care what you think.” John said this simply; it was how he was. “What I care is that you understand that no one must

ever see it.”

“I understand.”

“I mean it. No one. Not even when I am gone.”

“Don’t talk like that.”

“When you have kids, that is when you first think of making a will. Since the completion of this, I have begun to think of my legacy. I have long to live, I hope, but if I don’t--I want to leave it in your hands. The estate will get the rest.”

“I’ll look at it before your body’s cold.”

He laughed, and I was glad for it. “I don’t think you will. But you must promise me something.”

“I won’t look.”

“Something else. No one must *ever* look. Do you understand? I don’t want it defiled. Its intimacy is integral to its beauty. Have you read the book of Revelation? God gives each man a stone with a name known to him alone. Can you imagine? Such mystery! Lover’s names, whispered, flirted.”

I considered, staring at the blank wall of curtain. What was behind it? The way John talked, it was an epiphany in material, a Polaroid of a beatific vision. Was such a thing possible? I doubted. Perhaps John misremembered. His own emotions colored his memory. Behind the curtain was just form and color, a thing of beauty, but an earthly thing.

“Should I destroy it?”

“No, no, not unless there is no other way. Find someone to keep it hidden. Someone should have it. It must be protected. Beautiful things

need protected.”

“You want me to be curator for an unseen work of art?”

“Put it however you like.”

“I could make a fortune charging people just to pass by The Curtain.”

John searched me to see if I was joking. I don’t know that I wasn’t.

“Respect it,” he said. “It’s not a circus sideshow.”

“Unlike you.”

“Unlike me,” he said.

* * *

Fifteen years later, John died. His great fortune couldn’t cure his cancer. Alicia lived alone, managing his estate, silent and sad, and so The Curtain came to dwell with me.

Alicia funded the construction of an addition to my house, where I planned to keep it. I protested her involvement for I believed John’s decision to leave his most precious work to me hurt her. But she insisted. “He knew I would look,” she confided. “To find some last piece of him when he was gone. Some deep, intensely personal piece.”

I watched her carefully whenever she visited. In those first days, when John’s ghost hovered about her, she would sit in the room with The Curtain for hours, and I sat with her, not trusting her to remain in her place if I left.

In subsequent years, not a few people offered money, sometimes enormous sums, to see The Curtain. I always managed to refuse. I even locked the door to its room and permitted myself to visit only once or

twice a year. The room was cool and dark and still, and as I sat there in the silence, I listened and I waited. Sometimes, it seemed a solemn, thoughtful presence waited behind the curtain, briefly noticing me, its attention directed elsewhere. But a man finds what he hopes to find, I think. I don't trust those experiences. Indeed, I don't trust anything to do with The Curtain.

Years passed, marked by the revolution of seasons, winter, spring, visit, summer, fall, visit, and time has brought me to this point. I have told you all this one last time, to be certain you understand. I know you are a religious man, and we have had numerous interviews. Too many, I am sure, and I beg your forgiveness. You have finally convinced me as far as I am able to be convinced, though my soul will remain a skeptic until the end, I'm afraid.

I remember you came to me shyly, if I may use that term for such a distinguished gentleman, and you requested to be considered, because you heard I was looking for a steward. You offered no money, no title, hardly your name. Later, when I inquired why you offered nothing for the privilege of watching over The Curtain, do you remember what you answered? You said, "I haven't enough to offer, so I have resigned myself to begging."

You truly believe The Curtain is a vision from God. You believe more earnestly than any I have known, not with the fanaticism I have witnessed often enough through the years, but with a quiet and serious reverence. It reminds me very much of John. I confess you believe more fully than I do. Mightn't this all be the product of some undigested bit of

beef, so to speak? If I had to put into words my truest belief, it is that whatever waits behind The Curtain is a rather ordinary work of art, certainly not John's best. But, I think, it is his purest.

You must hide this thing away. Move it elsewhere. It has become an attraction, a madness. Nothing convinces me so fully John meant it for God as the idol it has become. They sell postcards of it. They make half-billion dollar movies of it and reference it in cartoons. I did not understand before, but this world hates what it cannot consume. It must grasp and cling and dissect. It must broadcast and mock and critique. John understood that and I love him for it.

I was very nearly convinced I would have to destroy it with these two liver-spotted hands until you arrived and convinced me of your character and conviction.

I have nothing left but wonders and doubts and hopes. About you. About it.

Enough. Take it. It is yours.

No, not yours. Not really.

Glory and hallelujah! Amen.

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