The Monarch

Cruz's father used to tell him that ownership began at the front door. That was how Cruz knew The Monarch Theatre belonged to him. He was the only one who could open the entrance without it squealing in protest (much to the dismay of his employees). Of course, no amount of skill or dexterity could prevent the ancient cedar from slamming behind him, but over the last seven years Cruz had learned how to glide over the fading carpet without so much as a whisper. By the time his workers heard the door reconnect with the frame he would already be standing behind them. God help them if they were on their cellphones.

When he got there, Alex, Stefan, Anita, and Reuben were behind the concession stand readying the popcorn machine, wiping down the counters, and filling the shelves with five dollar chocolate bars, as they were supposed too. Before the door could announce his presence, Cruz entered the manager's office, which was nestled behind a large mural depicting 50 years of Hollywood history. Today was an important day, perhaps the most important day of his entire life, and he had no desire to begin it by interacting with the scum of the earth.

Dale was already inside, bent over a desk and repeatedly swiping right on an iPhone with his wide, pudgy fingers. A half-empty cup of lukewarm espresso wobbled over the lip of the desk.
Cruz slid the mug away from the precipice as he walked past and got started on Dale's paperwork. Dale grunted.

The Monarch shed money like a cat sheds hair in the summer so ten years ago the company that owned it tried to tear it down and build a shopping mall. Sadly, some insipid little busybodies had convinced the city to name The Monarch a historic landmark. The company sold the theater to city hall and the city promoted Dale to Chief Manager and cut the theater's losses out of their operating budget. As far as Cruz could tell they didn't actually read any of the paperwork, they just filed it in a drawer somewhere.

Thirty minutes later, Cruz finished the last form and checked his watch. He still had time. Under a banner displaying The Rules of The Monarch (No Leaning! No Gathering! No Cellphones! Uniform Perfect!) sat a small desk, its drawers filled with composition notebooks. Cruz picked up the topmost one, inhaled, flipped to the first blank page, exhaled, pulled his ballpoint pen out of his shirt pocket, inhaled, pressed the tip into the top center of the page until the black ink had formed a tiny pool around it, exhaled, slowly swept the pen around the edges of the page until it returned to where it began, inhaled, then the crescent, exhaled, then the dot, inhaled, then the second dot. Perfect. Exhaled. Cruz stared at the perfect smiley face he had drawn for a full thirty seconds,
just sitting there and counting, one Mississippi, two
Mississippi, until the stygian pool had dried. He returned the
notebook to the drawer. There were seven years of perfect smiles
in that drawer. Two thousand one hundred and eighty four perfect
days. This would be the last one. Dale grunted again as he
closed the door behind him.

He should have announced his presence to the staff when he
came in, let them know playtime was over; they were late setting
up the stand. Anita rushed past him, staggering under the weight
of a box nearly as big as she was.

"You were late today," he said to her back. At the sound of
his voice Anita flinched and tried to turn around while still
walking forward. She tripped and the box flew out of her hands.
It burst open on the floor, sending chocolate bars cascading in
every direction. She landed amongst the carnage and her head
made a thud as it connected with the floor. She was his worst
employee, and as she picked herself up, he found himself wishing
that he could fire her. Sadly, only Dale had that authority.
Wordless apologies flew from her lips but he cut her off before
she could summon the courage to put sound to her platitudes.

"We'll discuss this later," he said "right now, I want you
to find the ushers. Tell them it's time for the morning huddle."

She nodded frantically and then walked toward the theaters
as fast as she dared. He stepped over the candy as she vanished.
down the hall and walked to the kitchen in search of the rest of his workers. He found them individually every morning because he didn’t believe in shouting. This too took longer than it should have but finally they were arrayed before him, bleary eyed but attentive.

"As some of you may know, today is an important day," Cruz began softly. "At some point today the lovely Victoria Manet will be gracing our Theatre with her presence."

There were murmurings among the assembled degenerates, especially the male employees.

"Let me make something very clear. I expect nothing less than absolute perfection from all of you today. This—" he said pointing to the spilled chocolate at his feet "This is completely unacceptable. Anita. Would you care to explain yourself?"

"I’m sorry, I... I’m."

"I refuse to serve this to our customers. I want you to pick these up and then I want you to throw them in the trash. The loss will be deducted from your paycheck."

"The whole box?" she turned pale. Two bars were more than an hours pay.

"The whole box," he said, savoring the look on the rest of their faces. Customer service would be excellent today. "You can start now, while I finish."
She stared at him.

"Now means now."

She knelt down slowly and began picking up the bars and putting them back in the box.

"As for the rest of you, I want you to remember the four golden rules."

One of the ushers, Patin, was staring into the distance at some point right above his forehead.

"Patin!" said Cruz "Would you care to recite them for us?"

"Um, no leaning, no gathering... no cellphones and... um... uniform perfect!" Patin recited. And then he smiled at him. The little weasel was always smiling at him, trying to get on his good side. Cruz dismissed him and the rest with a wave of his hand.

Cruz hated all of his employees, but not equally. There were the stoners like Alex, Reuben, and Christiana, the recluses like Stefan and Conley and, of course, the losers like Anita. Cruz knew them all, knew their dreams, he listened across The Monarch's vacuous hall to the echoes of their lives in the dark corners where they thought their voices wouldn't carry, but did. He knew Alex had failed out of college and Christiana went to art museums alone on her days off and Stefan ran away as a child but always came back. He knew the others detested Conley and Conley knew it and tried sometimes when he thought no one was
watching. He knew that Anita’s parents had disowned her two months ago and she had been living out of her car ever since because she couldn’t afford an apartment in Los Angeles, not even in the worst parts of the city. They were all incompetent of course. But at least they needed this job so he could compel them to work when they knew he was watching. No, it was the ones like Patin he really hated. The film students and wannabe directors and self-described auteurs in training who thought they were too good to shovel popcorn. They only ever stayed for a few months at most, before they inevitably quit. Years later they always came back, swaddled in their expensive suits and smirking at him.

Oh they’d go back work if he caught them gathering or sneaking into the theaters. But they always did it slowly; slow enough to make sure he knew they were only humoring him. Also, they all wore scarves outside of work. Every one of them.

Inhale, but Victoria would change all of that. She would walk through the rotten cedar doors tonight in a perfect storm of perfume and glamour and sex appeal and she would stride across the carpet beneath the grand mural in the lobby. The staff and the customers would stop and stare in awe, but she would only have eyes for him. She would see him from across the room, his hands clasped behind his back, holding the walls and roof together with his presence. She would recognize his
greatness amidst this mediocrity that surrounded him. In his perfect uniform with his perfect smile, he would step out from behind the counter and escort her to her theater. He would make a joke (he hadn’t decided which joke yet) and she would giggle and cast her eyes down demurely. She would ask his name before she went into her theater; theater number one, and that’s when he would ask her out to dinner. She would say yes. Of course she would say yes and by the end of the night they would kiss. It would be perfect. Exhale.

For the next several hours Cruz made the rounds. His eyes were spotlights, they swept the corridors for the faintest hint of gathering or a belt buckle out of place but his morning demonstration had done its work and the rest of his workers performed their job to a T. Nobody wanted to become the next Anita. Two o’clock arrived without incident and Cruz decided to treat himself to a late lunch at the Indian buffet across the street. The dim lights and interlacing aromas of alien spices never failed to put him in a good mood. He returned to the Monarch in high spirits.

On his way back to the manager’s office to store his leftover samosas in the old fridge, he heard a snort of laughter coming from the upstairs hallway. Samosas still in hand, he glided silently up the stairs. Standing in the middle of the
hallway between theaters six and seven were a group of his ushers. Patin was at their center, gesticulating wildly.

"So the car's totally broken and we're stranded in the middle of nowhere and, of course, there's no reception. And I'm on my hands and knees just trying to figure out what the fuck is even wrong when I here this rustling noise. So I look up and this motherfucker is halfway up a tree!" Patin said expansively. His audience bellowed with laughter.

"So I yell to him 'Jakovi! What the fuck do you think you're doing?' And he says - you know what he says? He says 'Patin have you ever seen The Third Man?'"

"He says what?!" said one of Patin's film nerd zombies, eyes wide.

"So I say: 'Of course I've fuckin seen The Third Man!' And you know what he says to me? He says—"

"He says what did I tell you about gathering?" Cruz said softly. The laughter stopped. Patin whirled around and they made eye contact. Cruz waited for Patin's head to drop and the excuses to begin but they didn't. Patin didn't say anything. He just stood in place maintaining eye contact, waiting for Cruz to speak first. His stare wasn't menacing or hostile but it didn't waver either and for the first time Cruz noticed how much taller Patin was. But this wasn't Patin's theater.
“Go back to your theaters. Not you Patin,” Cruz said matching his eyes. Patin made no attempt to leave. And yet, as his little cadre of admirers fled back to their posts without so much as a second glance Cruz felt the room shift and Patin waver. A circus clown is nothing without an audience. Cruz had him, and very soon Patin would respect him, just like Anita did. The Indian food was warm in his stomach and he felt himself begin to smile just a little bit. Patin smiled too.

“So Cruz, you seen any good movies lately?” he asked. Cruz recognized the trap, he knew Patin’s type. This question wasn’t small talk. It was a trick to get him to reveal something he cared about so Patin could insult his taste. But Cruz was no fool.

“I don’t watch movies,” he said, his smile growing wider “I experience life!”

For a second Patin stood in shocked silence at this pronouncement. And then he began to laugh, softly at first, then louder and louder and louder.

“You’re fired Patin.”

“Jesus I didn’t realize you were this funny Cruz!”

“I said... YOU ARE FUCKING FIRED!” The samosas were acid in his gut. Patin stopped laughing.

“You can’t fire me—“

“Put the fork out of my sight—“
"You can't... You're not allowed!"

"GET OUT!"

Patin ran, his face shaking with equal parts terror and childish anger. Inhale exhale inhale exhale, inhale running toward the managers office no doubt exhale, inhale little piece of shit exhale. Inhale. Exhale. Inhale... Exhale... In his mind's eye, Cruz scrawled a thousand perfect smiles on the burgundy ceiling and by the time Dale had managed to heave himself up the entire flight of stairs, Cruz was himself again.

"You fired Patrick," he wheezed.

"I fired Patin."

"Then who's Patrick?"

"There is no Patrick."

"You aren't allowed to fire my employees."

"They aren't your employees."

"Excuse me?"

"You heard me." Cruz had never felt so calm, so sure of anything in his entire life. Half the lights in the hall were broken, but the room had never seemed brighter.

"You listen to me, you little shit—"

"Shut up." There was no anger in his voice as he said this. It wasn't even a command. It was a statement of fact. "I've done your job for seven years. I'll make sure Downtown knows how you run this theater before I quit."
"Ok ok now just lets slow down a minute."

Cruz didn’t slow down. He walked past Dale and skimmed down the stairs. Dale floundered behind him.

"Cruz, Cruz, CRUZ! Would you just wait half a second? Let’s talk about this."

Cruz ignored him.

"Anita?" Cruz called towards the cash registers.

"Yes?"

"You’re fired too," he said. Dale panted past him and threw himself in front of the exit as if too tackle Cruz if he tried to leave. Cruz stopped and snorted into the whites of Dale’s eyes. And then he smiled, turned right, and walked to the manager’s office to put away his bag of Indian food, leaving Anita and Dale staring at his back. As the door closed he turned around to get a better look at their faces. Dale looked at Anita. Anita looked at Dale, the corners of her eyes glistening. And then Dale shrugged.

"Sorry Agatha," he said. The door shut.

For every second Cruz had spent fantasizing about Victoria’s arrival, he had spent three agonizing over all the ways his worthless employees could ruin this for him. And now they wouldn’t. He had done it. He had done it. Everything after this was just a formality.
By the time Cruz emerged from the office Patín and Anita were gone. The next two hours passed like a giddy dream and as the clock ticked ever closer to Victoria’s arrival, Cruz made one last small adjustment to his plan. Instead of standing behind the cramped confines of the concession stand he stood out in front, off to the side. For the first time in seven years he was in front of the counter instead of behind it. It felt right. He passed the time by people watching. There wasn’t much to see. The average moviegoer at The Monarch was sixty-five, rich enough to overpay for movie tickets on a regular basis and spiteful enough to demand a refund if the air-conditioning was off by three degrees. They were has-beens that never were, hunched over their walkers with crooked arms and jaded eyes.

Six o’clock arrived. Cruz stared at the door, transfixed. It didn’t open. Six o’clock passed. A few customers trickled in. None of them were her. Cruz’s fingers began to shake. People continued to trickle in. Cruz checked his watch. The trailers had begun and she still hadn’t arrived. The door opened again. A girl dressed in purple, in her early 20’s perhaps, led the charge in a wheelchair. A man, slightly older, pushed her across the lobby, followed by a crowd of the usual sort of customers. They bought tickets for the next show. Victoria wasn’t among them either. She wasn’t coming. She wasn’t coming. Cruz found himself staring at the girl in purple and her companion. There
was something familiar about her. Conley was manning the ticket
booth; he stared off into the distance with his eyes glazed
over. Cruz walked over to him.

"The girl in the purple jacket?" he began.

"Yes! What about her?" Conley asked, straightening.

"What theater did she buy a ticket for?"

"Uh, let me see," Conley said, tapping at the screen,
visibly relieved not to be the focus of Cruz’ attention. "She
bought two tickets for theater two."

Cruz walked away from a confused Conley. It wasn’t the
right theater but still... maybe. Celebrities travel in disguise
all the time after all. Cruz sprinted to catch up to her.

"Let me get that for you" he said, brushing past her
companion and opening the door for her. She smiled at him and
rolled inside. Cruz followed.

The air was much cooler inside and the light was dimmer.
Smooth jazz echoed out of the speakers.

"Can I help you find your seat?" he asked rhetorically. She
handed him the tickets.

"Ok. M thirteen and fourteen, that’s going to be aisle
seats... at the top," he said looking down at her wheelchair. She
stared upwards at the summit with wide mournful eyes.

"That’s impossible!" the man said. "There’s been a mistake,
we bought seats for the first row!"
Cruz opened his mouth but the man cut him off.

"This is ridiculous! I can’t believe the service at this theater. Look, there are empty seats right over there, can’t we just—"

"You’re being rude," said the girl in purple, scowling over her shoulder. He stopped talking. The scent of dust and mold drifted off walls and washed over them. The girl clutched the arms of her wheelchair and inhaled deeply and then she stood up. The man’s jaw dropped. Cruz knew she had looked familiar!

Victoria Manet pitched forward toward him and Cruz closed his eyes and reached out to catch her in his arms. The music swelled. Nothing happened. Cruz opened his eyes. She was still there, inches in front of him; their noses were practically touching. She was stooped over and shaking. It took a second to realize that she was clinging to the dirty railing for dear life with both arms; she was shaking from the exertion of supporting the weight of her entire body. He had been wrong, the wheelchair wasn’t a prop, and she wasn’t Victoria. Sweat poured down her forehead and Cruz waited in amazement for her to fall back into her chair. Instead, she raised herself higher and locked her elbows. Slowly, painfully slowly, she pressed her limp right foot parallel to the first step and then dragged her leg up and planted it on the next level. Cruz backpedaled up the
steps to give her room. She repeated the painful process with her other leg. The music stopped.

The minutes dragged on and the lights went down. Cruz pulled his flashlight out of his pocket and shone it at her feet. As the strange procession continued to climb, Cruz found himself transfixed by her face, somehow so familiar. She had high cheekbones and angular, aristocratic eyes and there were deep laugh lines carved into her black skin around her lips. In the darkness, her pale amber eyes radiated a warm glow like fading embers. Her raven hair was slick with perspiration. Whoever designed this theater deserves to be shot, Cruz thought angrily to himself. The incline was so steep he was practically sitting, just by walking backwards upright. She might as well be climbing Mount Everest. God, where did he know her from?

Halfway up the stairs, her eyes narrow with concentration, she somehow continued to drag herself forward. Cruz felt a sudden, wild desire to push her and watch her fall. He could feel the gilded lattice of the rafters pressing down on him, shoving him beneath the earth. The whole room was spinning.

In that instant, he was ten years old again, sitting in a dirty kitchen waiting for his father to walk through the front door. He could hear the fungus breathing on the other of the uneven plaster walls. He could feel their spores filling his lungs with every breath. The great white rectangular glow of the
movie screen was a shroud around the girl's silhouette; it was
his mother's shroud, it was the termite-infested door his father
walked through every night. Most fathers beat their children
Cruz' father was fond of telling him. His father never hit him.
But, often, he would clench his hand into a fist and send it
hurting towards Cruz' cheek. Of course, Cruz would flinch every
time. His father would laugh and laugh and laugh and call him
coward and then go to bed. Cruz would lie awake at night,
staring up at the ceiling, listening to the flow of his
breathing. He would inhale and exhale and steady the shake of
his lungs until he drifted off to sleep. Week after week, month
after month, his father would stop his fist in front of Cruz'
quivering jaw. Every day Cruz's breath would get a little
steadier until the day he didn't flinch and he looked his father
in the eye. On that day his father didn't stop his fist.

The girl in purple was still climbing. They were three
quarters of the way to the top. The seconds ticked by and Cruz
waited for her to fall, but she just kept moving. His mother
always fell, what right did this woman have not to? All he ever
wanted was to be on the other side of the counter. He deserved
to be on the other side of the counter. He had made this place
his own, he had worked for where he had gotten. The world owed
him this, the world owed him Victoria. It wasn't fair. He looked
into her eyes again. She looked up from his flashlight and for
the briefest instant managed to twist her grimace into the ghost of a smile. And then she kept climbing. For as long as Cruz could remember there was a scream lodged in the back of his throat that he had kept trapped beneath his breath. In the brief moment she smiled at him it disappeared. But there was nothing there to replace it.

The movie had started five minutes ago. An old man in a bespoke suit had spent the past five minutes working himself into a righteous rage over the intrusion Cruz’s flashlight presented. He leaned over and began to sputter a complaint. The scream came rushing back and lodged itself in the place it had always been. Cruz turned and gave the man a look of contempt so withering he dropped back into his seat immediately and shut his mouth. It was as if Cruz had threatened to chop his legs off. They reached the very top step and the woman in purple stopped. Cruz looked down to see her foot hovering mere centimeters below the last step. Her arms bulged as she strained to lift her leg that last miniscule distance, but it didn’t budge. A long moment passed and then her companion reached down to nudge her calve up and forward and just like that, she was over the ledge. Her arms shaking, she lowered herself into her seat. The man sat down next to her and Cruz placed the flashlight back into his pocket. He stood there awkwardly knowing he should leave but not wanting to and unable to express why. She looked up at him.
“Thank you,” she said with sincerity. Cruz couldn’t remember the last time someone had thanked him and meant it. He looked at the man next to her. He turned and thanked Cruz too but his gaze slid over and past him so Cruz would know he was dismissed. Cruz walked away from them in a trance, his eyes fixed straight ahead. But halfway down, he turned back and looked up at them. Their arms were wrapped around each other; in the darkness her amber eyes seemed to widen until they swallowed up the screen. Cruz walked to the bottom and gently rolled her wheelchair out of the middle of the walkway. Then he opened the door to the Lobby. A group of employees were gathered in the hallway, so close their arms nearly touched. They didn’t see him.

“Did you see her?” one of them said.

“See who?”

“Victoria Manet!”

“She was here?”

“You didn’t see her?”

“Holy shit!”

“Oh my god dude, she is sooo hot!”

“Victoria Manet? Seriously?”

“She just went into theater one.”

“I can’t believe you missed it!”
Cruz closed the door and walked back inside the theater. The movie, a romance, had only just begun. He stared up at the ceiling, at the cobalt murals of the city in its golden years rendered in loving detail, at the fading burgundy curtains caressing the screen.

In his mind's eye Cruz could see Anita and Patin, arm in arm, walking out the front door into the sun. He sat down on the first step, next to the empty wheelchair. With his back pressed against the feet of the Monarch, Cruz clasped his legs tight against his chest. Waves of sound and music and laughter washed over him from every direction and for the first time in seven years Cruz stayed and watched a movie at the Monarch Theatre all the way to the end. His Theater. His father's theaters. This theater that he had always owned but had never belonged to him. The scream loosened in his throat. Inhale-