The Last Playwright

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Introduction

The world ended, but the voice did not. Our first inheritance, after the sirens and the hunger and the hard learning of new maps, was a single sentence, half-remembered and passed from mouth to mouth like a canteen: Once upon a time. We learned to carry it with care. We learned that a line could be rationed, shared, struck, rehearsed, and that to speak together was to put a fragile roof over our fear. In the aftermath, with roofs scarce, we built rooms of attention instead—little houses of breath where we could meet without drawing a weapon, where our hands could become birds or torches or a mother’s lap, and a square of broken ground could become a stage.

This novel follows the people who made that choice and kept making it when the choice cut back. They call themselves a troupe because troupe is an old word that remembers the road, and the road is what remained when borders fell into dust and the maps grew teeth. They cross the red-lined zones the way a story crosses a silence—carefully, urgently, and sometimes with a joke because jokes are a form of rope. They carry costumes sewn from curtains and flags, a trunk of props that once were tools for mending, and an ever-thickening packet of scripts whose pages smell of mildew, smoke, and the stubborn oils of many hands. They collect plays as others collect seeds. They water them with breath.

The danger is not only the shambling threat that patrols the dead cities, nor the fever that blooms at the wrong touch, nor the men who prefer a law that begins and ends with their own names. The deeper peril is amnesia: the soft erasure that turns a people into a crowd, a crowd into a rumor, a rumor into nothing at all. Against that, theater is a simple, scandalous contraption. It says, Come close. Look. Listen. Believe this for a while, and then believe each other again. It teaches a body where to stand, when to enter, how to wait, how to give the next person their light. In catastrophe, these are not niceties; they are civic skills.

They recruit as gently as they can in a brutal age. A scavenger becomes a stage manager because she already knows how to find what others overlook. An ex-teacher finds his voice again inside a mask. A medic learns that a well-timed laugh can lower a fever. Children learn to count beats instead of bullets. In camp after camp, the troupe posts a callboard: Roles available. No experience necessary. Payment in food and memory. The first rehearsal is often a lesson in trust: how to pass a prop without flinching, how to die convincingly and still rise for the bow, how to stand inside a stranger’s gaze and not mistake it for a threat.

Somewhere out there, they’ve been told, lives the last playwright: a rumor of a person, or perhaps a mantle that slips from shoulder to shoulder when the night is

coldest. The troupe does not know if the last playwright is a genius with a hoard of unworn words, an old woman who cannot stop revising, or a boy who only just learned his letters and refuses to forget them. It hardly matters. The title is a promise the living keep making to the dead—that someone will witness, shape, and hand forward what happened to us, what we did to each other, what we forgave. To seek the last playwright is to wager that meaning has not finally bled out of the world.

This is an ode to the practical mysteries of the stage: the ghost light left burning so that no one falls, the ritual of the house lights dimming so that we can gather in the dark, the quiet power of a cue obeyed by people who owe each other nothing but choose to listen anyway. It is also a ledger of debts and gifts: the old scripts ransomed from flooded basements, the new plays born in whispers beside cookfires, the scenes that buy an hour’s peace at a checkpoint, the curtain calls that knit strangers into a provisional public. If you have loved a story enough to carry it, you already know why they risk the road.

Here, among ash-choked avenues and wind-torn fields that smell like salt and copper, a cast assembles. They will argue and bury and fall in love, miss their marks and find them again, and in doing so they will attempt the most difficult blocking of all: to move a broken world into a shape that can be lived in. Their stage is wherever they can clear a space. Their script is the record of what we were and what we could be. The play is beginning. The house is open. Take your seat.

CHAPTER ONE: The Curtain Among the Ruins

The curtain was not really a curtain. It was a door taken from a fourth-floor apartment in a building that no longer had a fourth floor, hung from a rope strung between two parking meters with strips of rubber cut from a tire. Maren had found the door in a supply haul three settlements back, and she could not bear to leave it. Something about the brass handle, the way the frosted glass still let through a smear of light—it felt like a threshold, and thresholds mattered now.

She tied it off and stepped behind it. On the other side, the audience waited.

There were twenty-three of them. She had counted as they filtered in, picking their way through the rubble and sitting on overturned crates, cracked concrete blocks, and one very dignified folding chair that someone had carried six kilometers for reasons no one questioned. A few children crouched near the front, their knees already streaked with dust. An older man with a bandaged forearm sat with his hands on his knees, watching the door. He had been watching the door for ten minutes. He would keep watching it until someone walked through it, because that was how theater worked now.

Maren took a breath. Behind her, the alley smelled like rain and wet ash and something faintly chemical that she refused to identify. The set—a row of shelving units borrowed from what had been a pharmacy, draped in fabric that might once have been curtains and might once have been tablecloths—stood waiting. A single LED lantern cast the whole space in amber. Beside it, Tomás was crouched over the cue sheet, running his tongue over a chipped tooth as he muttered the order of scenes to himself.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Not even close," he said, but he stood up and brushed off his knees and moved to his mark.

Maren reached for the door handle, pulled it open, and stepped through.

The troupe called it a house, though no architect alive would have recognized it as one. It was the gap between two buildings in what had once been a commercial district—office towers with their faces half-shattered, their innards spilling out like the contents of a dropped bag. Glass crunched underfoot wherever you walked, and the wind moved through the hollow frames with a sound that was almost, but not quite, musical. Someone had once taped a sign to a pillar that read RESIDENCES, though no

one had lived there in years. The troupe had simply occupied the gap, strung their laundry between rebar, and made it theirs.

Their stage was a slab of concrete roughly four meters by six, propped at the back against the remains of a loading dock. Two zinc buckets served as footlights, filled with kerosene-soaked rags that Tomás lit with a cigarette lighter he had been keeping in a sealed plastic bag. The flame was small, orange, and alive. Maren liked to watch the moment it caught, the way the light expanded the space from something narrow and cautious into something that could hold a hundred ideas at once.

They had performed in worse places. A flooded basement in the seventh ward, the audience standing ankle-deep in brown water. The courtyard of a hospital where the walls still bore bloodstains they had tried to bleach out and only managed to pink. A rooftop with no railings, where a gust of wind nearly carried Lotte off-script and into the sky. But this gap between buildings felt right—enclosed enough to gather sound, open enough that the air could move, and far enough from the nearest red-zoned block that they had three days of early warning if anything shambled their direction.

Three days. That was the calculation. Always the calculation.

The play they were performing tonight was old. Not ancient—just old enough that no one in the troupe remembered seeing it on a stage. Maren had found the script in a box hauled from the basement of a public library that had mostly survived, if you didn't count the roof, the flooding, and the fact that three out of four walls were leaning. The title page read *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, and Maren had stared at it for a long time before deciding it would work.

It was, at its heart, a play about a person who walked out of a room and refused to come back. In the world they now inhabited, that was not a metaphor. It was a Tuesday.

She had cut the third act and added a short epilogue she wrote herself, standing over a campfire with a stub of pencil and the back of a scavenging manifest. The epilogue was simple: the character who had left returned, not because she had been persuaded, but because she wanted to explain, and explaining, it turned out, was its own kind of leaving. The troupe had debated it—one of their few real arguments, settled eventually by silence and a slow nod from Sable, who rarely spoke and was therefore assumed to be wise.

Rehearsals had taken four days. They always took longer than expected because everyone in the troupe had other duties—scouting, water runs, guard shifts—and because the act of remembering lines after the collapse of civilization required a kind of concentration that bordered on meditation. Maren had watched Julio forget a monologue and sit perfectly still for forty-five seconds before starting over, his eyes

moving as though he were reading invisible text. She had never corrected him. She thought he might be composing something.

The performance began with the audience coughing. There was always coughing at first—nerves, dust, the kerosene smoke from the footlights. Maren had learned not to wait for it to stop. You started speaking, and the coughing became part of the sound, and the sound became part of the world, and the world became, for a little while, a stage.

Lotte opened. She played the role Nora had originally been, though the troupe had stopped using the character names and started using the actors' names, which was how it worked now—no programs, no printed cast lists, just a person stepping into a space and becoming the story. Lotte had a low voice and a habit of pausing at odd moments, as though she were listening for something in the next line. Maren had told her to keep doing it. It made the audience lean in.

"And then the children came in," Lotte said, speaking to the room, speaking to no one, speaking to the dark spaces between the lantern light. "And I realized I did not know what to say to them."

A silence. Not the empty silence of absence—this was the full silence of attention, the kind that only happens when a group of strangers has collectively decided to hold still. Maren felt it in her chest, a pressure like a second heartbeat.

Tomás shifted behind the shelving units, readying a sound cue—a wooden spoon struck against the back of a pot, their approximation of a door knock. It was a delicate art, this foley work. They had a tambourine for horses, a sheet of corrugated tin for thunder, and a bag of dried lentils shaken in a tin cup for, depending on context, rain, gunfire, or a reasonable approximation of applause.

After the first scene, Maren watched the audience. This was her favorite part—not the performing, which was exhilarating and exhausting in equal measure, but the watching-while-performing, the peripheral vision that caught a child leaning forward, an older man's eyes closing not in sleep but in concentration, two women gripping each other's hands over a shared crate. She had read somewhere, in a book she had since traded for antibiotics, that theater was the original democracy. She didn't know if that was true. She knew that when you stood on a slab of concrete with a lantern and a stolen door and said words that someone had written a century ago, something happened in the air. It was not magic. It was worse than magic. It was temporary, and it worked.

The second scene went smoothly. Then Sable's monologue.

Sable was the troupe's oldest member—a claim she made with no evidence and

everyone accepted, partly because she looked ancient and partly because no one wanted to test her. She wore a coat that had belonged to a paramedic, the reflective strips still faintly visible, and she carried a walking stick carved from a broom handle. When she spoke, she did not project. She simply spoke, and the silence around her deepened to receive the sound.

"The law is not the law," Sable said, holding her lantern light. "The law is the agreement. And the agreement is only as strong as the next morning."

Maren had heard her say it in rehearsal four times, and each time it had landed differently—once angry, once sad, once almost funny. Tonight it was plain, the way you state the color of the sky. A fact. An open fact.

A woman in the third row mouthed the words along with her. Maren noticed but said nothing. By now, mouthed lines were common. People had memorized scripts from previous performances and carried them like charms. Someone in the northern camps reportedly knew the whole of *Waiting for Godot* by heart and recited it while repairing fences. Maren had never verified this, but she liked the image of it—a woman alone in a field, gesturing at an empty chair, delivering the lines to no one and therefore to everyone.

There was an intermission, though calling it that implied a theater with a lobby and a refreshment counter. In practice, it was a ten-minute pause while Tomás reset the shelving units and Maren walked among the audience, accepting small offerings—a strip of dried meat, a handful of berries, a folded piece of paper with a phone number written on it. The phone numbers were always fake. Nobody had working phones. But people wrote them down as though they might wake up to a ringing line, a voice saying, *I'm here, I made it, come find me.* Maren kept every one, in a notebook she carried in her back pocket alongside a knife and a stub of pencil.

A boy approached her. Twelve, maybe thirteen—hard to tell when everyone looked like they had aged a decade in a year. He held out a piece of paper, and she took it, expecting another number. Instead, it was a question, written in a careful hand: *Can I be in the play?*

She looked at him. He was thin, with sharp elbows and eyes that moved in quick, nervous increments, cataloging everything. She had seen that look before—not fear exactly, but alertness dialed to a frequency that could not be turned off.

"Do you know the story?" she asked.

"No," he said. "But I can learn it."

Maren nodded. She wrote on the back of his paper: *Be here at dawn. Do not bring a*

weapon. Bring something that makes a sound when you shake it. She did not tell him she had no role for him. The script was full, the blocking was set. But she had learned something in the months since the collapse that she had not known before it: you never knew which person in the audience would become necessary, and the safest assumption was that any of them might.

The final scene was the hardest. It required Lotte to walk through the door—the real door, the prop, the one with the brass handle—and close it behind her. The sound of it, a wooden click in the silence, was the emotional hinge of the entire piece. Maren had spent an entire rehearsal session on that sound, having Lotte open and close it dozens of times until the click was not a click but a statement, a period at the end of a long sentence.

Tonight, Lotte did it perfectly. The door closed. The kerosene lantern flickered, as it always did in drafts from the gap's open ends, and for a moment the stage went dim. The audience held its breath. The lantern steadied. Tomás set down his cue sheet. The play was over.

No one clapped, at first. Applause was a tradition they had tried to maintain early on, but it felt too loud, too aggressive, a sound that traveled and could bring the wrong kind of attention. Instead, the audience did something they had settled on unconsciously: they exhaled. All at once, a long, collective breath that rose and fell like a tide. Maren had heard a marine biologist, years ago, describe the way whales surfaced to breathe in unison. She thought of that now.

Then Julio stood at the edge of the stage and bowed. He had played a minor role—a neighbor, a voice on the other side of a wall—and his part had exactly four lines. But he bowed as though he had carried the entire narrative on his back. Lotte bowed. Sable bowed, slow and deliberate, her walking stick laid across her knees. One by one, the cast stepped forward and lowered their heads, and the audience watched, and for a few seconds the gap between the buildings felt less like a ruin and more like a room.

Afterward, the crowd dispersed quietly, carrying their crates and folding chairs back into the dark. The children ran ahead, already shouting about something unrelated. The older man with the bandaged arm stopped beside Maren on his way out.

"That line," he said. "The one about the agreement."

"Yes," she said.

"It's true," he said, and walked off, and she watched him go and thought: *That is the review. That is the only review that matters.*

Maren and the troupe broke down the set in silence, a practiced choreography born of

dozens of such nights. The shelving units collapsed back into flat panels. The fabric was folded, the lanterns doused, the door lifted from its rope cables and carried by two people who walked carefully, as though they were transporting something holy. They moved everything into the supply cart—a repurposed shopping trolley with a wobbly wheel that Tomás had fixed three times and swore he would fix a fourth.

By the time they were packed, the sky above the gap had gone from black to a deep, bruised blue. Dawn was still an hour off, but already the air had changed, lost its nighttime edge and taken on something softer. Maren sat on the edge of the cart and pulled out her notebook. She added the boy's request to a growing list—*new recruit, maybe, needs a role*—and beneath it wrote a reminder for herself: *Check northern route. Rumor of a library in Sector 9. Maybe more scripts. Maybe not.*

Tomás sat beside her, eating a strip of dried meat and watching the sky.

"We should have more costumes," he said, chewing.

"We should have a real theater."

"Start small."

She looked at him. He had flourite-green eyes that caught the early light and held it. He was not beautiful in any conventional sense—his nose was crooked from a break that had never been set, his hands were calloused, and he had a scar running from his left ear to his jaw that he claimed was from a wolf and that Maren suspected was from a knife fight—but when he sat beside her in the half-light and said *start small*, she believed him. She believed him the way audiences believed the stories they watched: not because the words were true, but because the telling made them true.

"We start at dawn," she said.

He nodded. They sat together while the sky changed color again, and somewhere in the ruins a dog barked, and somewhere further off something groaned against the wind, and neither of them moved.

By the time the sun cleared the eastern skyline, the troupe was already in motion—two carts, eight people, and everything they owned distributed among them in bags, bundles, and a violin case that contained no violin but instead held three surgical kits, a map of the red zones, and a single preserved copy of *Hamlet* with water damage on pages forty through sixty. Maren walked at the front, her boots crunching on broken glass, her notebook in her hand. Behind her, the boy she had not yet named a part for followed at a careful distance, clutching the piece of paper she had given him as though it were a contract.

They were heading north, toward Sector 9 and the rumor of a library. They did not know if the library existed. They did not know if its books had survived fire, water, or the hands of people who burned words they did not understand. They knew only that stories were running out—that the living were forgetting faster than the dead could take them—and that someone had to go looking for what remained.

Maren turned around once, just to check. The troupe walked together in a loose, practiced formation, each person aware of the others' footsteps, adjusting their pace without being asked. They looked, from above, like a small and unlikely parade—ragged, sunlit, and moving with purpose through the wreckage of a world that had forgotten its own stories but not yet lost the need for them.

She turned back to the road ahead and kept walking.

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