All The Men and Women Merely Actors by Matthieu Alain Ellaga

My right hand brushed lightly against the haircomb that was embedded in my hair, just before the ponytail at the back of my head. The lights flooded the seats as the audience drifted towards their places and I saw them, right there in the front row. **The Cheats.** Mother, father, my ex-boyfriend and my former boss, all sitting there without a care in the world as they waited for the play to start.

“Callista?”

I jumped and swiveled around to be faced with Solomon as he zipped the jacket he was supposed to be wearing for the first act.

“Solomon! Please, don’t do that; you’ll give someone a heart attack!”

I took a sharp breath before turning back around to see **The Cheats** still there and now half-heartedly looking over the program, giving a smirk when they saw my name. They started cackling together, presumably at my photo. I grinned and turned back to Solomon who had the look of a kicked puppy on his face as I strutted past him and tightened my ponytail. This is where it ends.

The dialogue flew effortlessly from my mouth as I walked about on stage, proclaiming several watered down lines that had caused absolute scandal with the script editors. Solomon was shouting after me, quite accurately portraying my supposed boyfriend after I had caught him cheating on me with my boss. I could feel the glares of **The Cheats** on my back as I acted, making several exaggerated movements and projecting my voice with such volume the moon would hear me in the silent night. The stage was alight and I gave a light brush of my haircomb, shining silver in the glaring brilliance. Solomon verbally stabbed me and I retorted back before Solomon pushed me off the main stage.

I thudded onto the ground sidestage as the curtains closed and all the previous set pieces were removed by the running crew and replaced with the furniture from my apartment. I could see my old couch and old photo frames on their side table. The tapestry that I had bought at some dodgy art sale was hung as part of the backdrop and the coffee table book that I always wanted to read but never got to, was sitting exactly where it always was. Right next to that picture.

I'd screamed. I'd screamed into the walls of my apartment, tears running down my face as I collapsed onto the couch after discovering my boyfriend had cheated on me. The pictures taunted me from their place on the coffee table, taken back when I could trust him. There was a really old and stupid one of me and him on holiday by the coast in Wales, smiling without a care in the world, his hand on the back of my head and the silver haircomb a shining star in the photo. There they were, taunting me with their perfect happiness and simple lives. A lie. I had thrown myself off the couch and grabbed the frame, slamming it hard into the white walls. Glass shattered and flew in all directions, cutting parts of my hand as I had dropped to the floor and wept.

I sat quietly on the floor of the stage as I came back to myself, shaking off the old memory while its reenactment was littered around me on the stage. Pieces of sugar glass had lain themselves around me in a pattern almost identical to when it originally happened and the fake picture sat in my lap, soaked wet beforehand in case I couldn't get the tears flowing but quiet streams of water poured from my eyes and soaked the lower half of my costume. At least I didn't have to think too much about reenacting that. It appears my body moved for me. I sighed and got up, wiping my eyes as I left the picture among the broken glass and headed to the other side of the stage. Solomon watched me from his perch behind the curtain and frowned with those deep blue eyes that tried to read my thoughts as I grabbed the coat from the hanger, walking off toward the fake door that led to my parent's house.

An old motley door with varying shades of paint from different productions over the years with a pristine white frame and ornate doorknob. The doorknob was golden and moldy with fine lines etched over the surface of the old prop, forming a T across its surface. Just like my parent's one.

They had laughed. They had sneered and cackled their little black hearts out, but my parents had laughed at me. I stepped backwards, placing my back against the front door as my father doubled over in laughter and looked like he might burst. My mother was letting out short, high-pitched shrieks of absurdity while glaring holes in my skull with her beady green eyes.

"If you think you're getting a single cent back," my father wheezed as he collapsed to the floor in guffaws, "then you are sorely mistaken. That money is ours to do with whatever we please and your success is all thanks to us. Your money is ours."

My mother and father laughed even harder with my mum joining her husband on the floor in their giggles. I glared at them in their flippant disregard and stormed over.

“You are going to give me my money back or I swear I’m going to call the bloody police and I will **happily** watch them throw you in a cell to rot,” I spat in disgust and I slammed my foot next to my father's face and he smiled, giving one last chuckle before getting up. He pushed me back into the door, frowning deeply as he grabbed an umbrella from the holder and held it tight against my throat. I scrambled for air and tried to push him off but he held firm.

“You wouldn’t dare. Call the bloody police and I will make your life a living hell, you twat,” my father grunted and I managed to push him off. He tumbled to the floor and I sprinted out the front door, my heart shattering in my chest. I risked a glance back and that ornate golden doorknob shined in the sunlight, showing off the finely engraved T.

I slammed into a wall sidestage, wiping away the tears beginning to blur my vision and I risked a glance into the audience. My father sat with the rest of **The Cheats** in the front row, squeezing my mother’s arm so hard it looked like it might burst off. My mother didn’t look better as she glared at the stage where Amanda was giving a monologue with a wig that looked remarkably like my mother’s actual hair. The other **Cheats** decided to begin throwing insults at Amanda, who was doing her best to keep in character despite my mother herself screaming about her “inaccurate” portrayal. Other members of the audience had begun glaring at **The Cheats** and I smiled as everything was going perfectly.

The final act had arrived and everybody was stressed out of their minds, running around frantically while the audience waited on the other side of the velvet curtains. Actors were running to and fro with makeup half-applied on their faces and costumes half-on as they swerved around the giant rock props and cliffside set dressing that was being pushed by the stage crew in preparation for the climax. I steeled my nerves as I took out my silver haircomb from the back of my head and turned it over in my hand. Still intact after all these years and looking a bit aged since the ex-boyfriend had first given it to me. I’m pretty sure my ex-boss had one too. I lightly chuckled to myself as the silver spine lit up the backstage. The glittering prongs blinked slowly like they had when it was given to me in Wales. I gave a light scoff as I placed it in my palm and carefully stuck it in the back of my head.The comb felt heavier than it had any right to be as I stood up and crossed to the curtains. There was a slight gap in between the pieces of fabric that I peered through and smirked at **The Cheats.**

They were going over the events of the play in hushed voices while other audience members glared down at them but said nothing. My father was still gripping my mother’s arm hard enough to cut off the old woman’s blood flow so her arm looked pale and sallow while my dad looked peaky and about to faint. My ex-boyfriend and boss were pushed up against each other as my ex-boss adjusted her version of my comb on the side of her head and it looked like my ex-boyfriend was saying some kind of prayer. He looked more pathetic than I remembered. His blue eyes were alert and darting around, half listening to the conversation my parents were having

with his girlfriend as he turned and noticed me staring at them. I withdrew myself behind the curtains as he alerted his fellow **Cheats.** I slowly exhaled before going and grabbing a prop I needed for the final act. A fake dagger. The cardboard blade was quite flimsy so I had to try and straighten the thing when I bumped into Solomon.

His costume was already on and his makeup had been reapplied rather hurriedly as he leant down to grab the dagger. “I believe this is yours,” he whispered, placing the prop back in my hands as I quickly adjusted the harness beneath my costume.

“Thanks,” I muttered and was going to strut off when he grabbed my arm and pulled me back.

“Are you alright? The final scene is quite graphic.” His eyes did their thing where they tried to read my expression but I held my heart close as I shook my limb out of his grip.

“I’ll be fine. It’s not real, remember.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“Why would I?”

“Because you think everyone does that. Are you feeling okay? You’ve been crying at random points in the night”

I gave a small shake of my head as I slowly walked away from him and headed for the stage.

“I’m fine. Besides, people do lie.”

He went to say something after me but all he spoke to was empty air as I walked on stage.

The cliffside had been particularly windy that day as I’d walked through the tall grass. Tears had run down my face, staining my blouse as I stood there, looking out over the empty ocean. How inviting it had been at the time. Quiet and peaceful. My heart ached for that. Peace. The silver comb in my hair felt heavier as I stumbled through the grass and ferns to reach the edge. They surrounded me, taunting me, belittling me,degrading me to nothing but their servant. Mother, father, my boss, and my boyfriend. All liars and **Cheats**. Their apparitions shouted profanities and insults in my head, wearing me down as I reached the edge of the endless drop. Jagged rocks jutted out below, stabbing the waves as they lapped against the stone. It was nice knowing the end of it. The end of this. It was somehow reassuring. I grabbed the dagger from my purse and dropped it into the ocean, waiting for the subtle splash that would indicate the distance. It wasn’t too long because eventually, the dagger splashed quietly into the depths. I still wondered why my ex-boyfriend kept that almost useless dagger around. Oh well, it’s not as if I would remember it. I dropped my purse behind me and stretched out my arms as I waited for the end.

“Callista!”

I didn’t glance behind me because I knew Solomon was there. Clever guy, He’d figured it out. Still, justice would come swiftly. The audience were specks from my perch on the rafters, wooden beams that overlooked the auditorium but didn’t quite reach the chandelier. **The Cheats** were shouting below me, having encircled around the fake dagger I’d dropped on my former boss’s head. They were yelling. Forbidding me the peace I’d tried to take two years ago at the cliffside. Here we were again. Solomon was begging behind me, pleading with me not to do it. Well, I couldn’t lie to everyone. Solomon was correct there. **The Cheats** continued to shout underneath me, saying I was wrong. It was all my fault. Never theirs. Not the money extortion from my own parents, the unfaithfulness of my ex-boyfriend, or the insidious infiltration from my former boss. No, according to them and their script, it was all me. I was the villain. The harness wasn’t attached to the cable so I took a step closer to the edge and everyone tensed. Solomon was now begging harder and crying for me to reconsider and not do it. But **The Cheats** had taken my life and I was taking it back. I used my right arm and ripped the silver haircomb out of my hair, throwing it downwards. Directly into my mother’s lap as she had finished her soliloquy about how I owed her money that she would never stop stealing. The police burst into the theatre, hearing the end of my mother’s speech and I smiled. Someone who had called triple nine directed the officers to where I was and they started towards me and **The Cheats**, handcuffs already in their hands. I breathed a sigh of utter elation and took a step back from the edge as it was finally the end.

The auditorium was crowded with witnesses to history. My history. My life. The lights continued to flood the seats, disregarded as the play ended and every actor took their final bow.