

## ODD MAN OUT

by

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She shows up at the theater, hoping that this time when the elevator doors open, it will be different, that tonight she will belong. Truly belong, instead of being merely tolerated.

The bell chimes. The doors slide open, revealing the small lobby densely packed with patrons. Instantly, a voice that is just this side of shrill calls her name. She starts to cringe but catches herself and prays that the reaction has read as simple flinching; the normal, expected response of a shy person who has just had the brightest of spotlights turned on them. In truth it is not the uttering, but the name itself that has made her cringe. Elsewhere she can forget, but here she is painfully aware that it is not just a name, but also an adjective and frequently an epithet.

The sea of stylishly attired men parts, and Richard appears only steps from her. He looks regal in a wine-colored shirt and charcoal slacks. She feels drab in her ensemble of black turtleneck, black jeans, black sneakers.

“Nancy!” he says again, still at an outsized volume. Not for the first time she wonders if he is thinking, too, about adjectives and epithets; if he is speaking tongue-in-cheek. She looks for a tell—the lift of an eyebrow or the corners of his mouth curling ever so slightly, but he gives nothing away. His gaze is steady, his lips pursed. She chalks it up to the years he spent as an actor before becoming the head of the theatrical production company whose latest show she’s there to see. It is unfathomable to her that he has simply failed to make the connection; Richard is always ten steps ahead of any crowd he’s in. It’s what she admires most about him.

He touches her arm and leans forward in an awkward hug. “It’s so good to see you, dear!” he says. “I’m so glad you’re here!”

She opens her mouth to respond but no words come out. Everything she has rehearsed to say in this moment seems suddenly trite or inane. After what feels like an eon, she finally manages, “I wouldn’t miss this. It sounds so interesting.” In reality the paragraph about this production in the season brochure was inscrutable. She’d taken away from it only that the piece was historical, dramatic, and serious. Those elements are Richard’s forte; her time is guaranteed to be well-spent.

“Well. You’re. Just. Going. To. Love. It!” he says, punctuating every word.

His smile is brilliant. “We’re so grateful to have gotten the rights. It’s a fantastic show.”

“I can’t wait,” she says, feeling robotic. “I’m really looking forward to it.” In the pause that follows, she feels the conversation deflate, but he is much too good of a host to acknowledge it.

“Listen,” he says, dropping his volume to a conspiratorial stage-whisper. “We’re offering our special again this season. Ten percent off if you buy a subscription tonight.” Now he does, expertly, arch one brow.

She is not interested in subscribing this season because they are doing several revues and those are not to her taste, but she smiles. “I might have to take you up on that.”

“You should.”

From across the room a deep voice shouts “Richard!” They both turn. A young man—post-college but not very, and blond, and whip-thin—has partly ascended a flight of marble stairs in order to be seen above the throng. He lifts his arm high in the air and waves to Richard, who returns the gesture, then turns to her.

“Excuse me, dear.”

“Of course.” She watches him dive into the crush and somehow emerge unscathed on its other side, where he and the new arrival exchange cheek kisses. She turns toward the usher who guards the entrance to the theater, hands over her ticket, and takes the program offered.

When she rounds the corner and sees the number of people who have already found seats, she is surprised. Combined with the patrons lingering in the lobby, it is easily the largest crowd she’s ever seen the company draw, and she’s thrilled. Still, it unnerves her when several men—as usual, she spies only a handful of women in the crowd—cease their conversations and look her way. Her gaze ricochets away from one and then another and another until it finally lands on the carpeting. She keeps it there as she climbs the stairs.

Once safely in a seat, she opens her program and reads Richard’s director’s note. Though she is unfamiliar with the particular story being presented that night, she is well-versed in the larger one, the backstory of this and every piece the company has ever done. She nods in response to what she reads, thinking, *Oh, I remember when that happened*, and *Yes, that’s true. People really did regularly say awful things like that back in the day, and they were rarely challenged*. It occurs to her that she’s been paying attention for long enough now that she could join Richard in bending the ear of the blond in

the lobby with stories of How It Once Was. In spite of it she feels sure that if she were ever to attempt such a thing, they would both look at her as if she were crazy. Her deepest fear is that they would roll their eyes at her and ask in unison, *What could you possibly know about it, dear?*

She goes back to reading. When she has finished with the director's note and the cast and crew bios, she closes the program. Snippets of disparate conversations swirl around her:

"Wait until I tell you what I found out yesterday."

"Oh, I didn't know he was in this!"

"...*very* surprised. I never thought he would. I mean, did you?"

"Anyway, I think I'm going to go back and tell him."

"That's what *I* said!"

The last outburst comes from the shorter, slimmer half of the couple seated directly in front of her. Toned, impeccably dressed, and exuding confidence, he appears to be her opposite in every way.

*And yet*, she thinks. Just then the fellow in question unexpectedly cuts his eyes sideways and meets her stare. Flustered, she quickly opens her program again.

There is nothing left to read but the ads, which for years she has merely skimmed, because the vast majority offer services she could never need and couldn't afford even if she did. There are ads for antiques restoration companies, expensive suits, a Realtor who specializes in properties in a tony part of town, and personal trainers.

The self-doubt—that knotted her stomach right before the elevator doors opened, and she was disgorged into the crowded lobby—grips her again now.

*I must be out of my mind to think I have any business being here.*

That fear is the reason why she has only once answered Richard's plea for volunteers to help with upcoming productions. Without the framework of "attending a show" to sanction and guide her interaction with him and with the current and former cast members who comprised the rest of the volunteers, her insecurities were magnified. Every smile seemed a smirk, every glance an accusation: *The ally has arrived to save gay Paris! Quelle surprise!* She wishes now that she had not ever volunteered, because choosing not to continue doing

so was—is—unexplainable. It's a relief when the lights dim. She settles back in her seat, a choir ready to be preached to.

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Afterward, she moves in a daze, shuffling back out to the lobby with the crowd. It's far too small a space for so many people, but no one else seems to mind. Happy to be out and about, in their element, the other patrons deftly negotiate the close quarters, paying compliments to one another and trying to one-up everyone else there by loudly uttering the wittiest comment on the show.

It was one of the serious pieces Richard does so well, and he has not disappointed. The true story of a transgender woman who lived as openly as possible for as long as was possible in pre-World War II Berlin, it contained one line in particular which reverberates in her mind:

*We became good friends because she was a lesbian and I was the same.*

Even more than the words themselves, it was the audience's reaction to them that forced all the breath from her body. They'd laughed, but the sound was far from a rebuke. On the contrary, it was full of empathy—an easy and immediate offer of acceptance by those who know how it feels to be rejected for who, innately, you are.

*This is my tribe*, she'd thought in that moment, and thinks again now, matching her step to that of the man in front of her.

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Hours later she wakes with words in her head and fumbles for her notebook and pen. She switches on the bedside lamp and strives to put the words down just as they are, as quickly as possible, the way she has done for as far back as she can remember. Still half asleep, she writes:

He shows up at the theater, hoping that this time when the elevator doors open, it will be different. He will belong. Really belong, instead of merely being tolerated. He wants so badly to fit in, to be accepted.

*Or if that isn't possible, he thinks, to be invisible. Invisible would be good. Anything would be better than being the odd man out.*