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Observatory Mansions: A Novel
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I gloved and greaved,
My hands, my legs, my thoughts,
Leaving no part of my person
exposed to touch
or other poisons.

Martin Sorescu

I. The Arrival



I wore white gloves. I lived with my mother and father. I was not a child. I was thirty-seven years old. My bottom lip was swollen. I wore white gloves though I was not a servant. I did not play in a brass band. I was not a waiter. I was not a magician. I was the attendant of a museum. A museum of significant objects. I wore white gloves so that I would not damage any of the nine hundred and eighty-six objects in the museum. I wore white gloves so that I

would not have to touch anything with my bare hands. I wore white gloves so that I would not have to look at my own hands.

I lived in a city, as many people do, a small city, an unspectacular city, a not very famous city. I lived in a large building but had access only to a small part of it. Other people lived around me. I hardly knew them.

The building we lived in was a huge, four-storey cube in the neo-classical design called Observatory Mansions. Observatory Mansions was dirty. Black stains like large unhealing scabs fouled the exterior, and sprayed on its grey walls in red and yellow car paint were various messages delivered at night by some anonymous vandal. The most immediately noticeable being: *And even you can find love*. The building's only notable features, save for its plainness and size, were the four simple columns that supported the entrance portico. The columns were badly scratched and dented, one in particular was inclined to slouch. The building's only other irregularity was the dome on the slate roof, directly above the entrance hall. In this dome, once upon a time, was an observatory. An observatory now lacking telescopes, now an unproclaimed sanctuary for pigeons, their shit, their young, their dying and dead.

Observatory Mansions once sat in the countryside, surrounded by outhouses and stable buildings, parkland and fields. In time the city crept up to it, covering with each new year more fields, until it reached the parkland, which it smothered in asphalt, and the outhouses, which it knocked down. Only the house itself, that large grey cube, remained. They built a circular wall, ten foot high, around the house, a barricade, a statement that this was as far as the city would get. But the city carried on, way beyond our home, building yet more roads and houses. And as the city continued, the roads that neighboured Observatory Mansions became ever wider and more frequented, a river growing in confidence, until an ox-bow lake was formed and Observatory Mansions became an island. A roundabout, a traffic island, forgotten by the city but surrounded by its quickly flowing business.

I often thought of our home as a solid, hairless and ancient man. This man,

sitting with his flabby arms hugging his round knees, stares hopelessly down at the traffic, at the smaller, modern, neighbouring buildings, at the countless people rushing by. He sighs heavily; he's not sure why he's still here. The old man is not well, the old man is dying. He suffers from countless ailments, his skin is discoloured, his internal organs are haemorrhaging.

This was our home and we were even tolerably happy living there, until a new resident came.

Our first rumour of the new resident came to us in the form of a little note pinned on to the noticeboard in the entrance hall. It said:

Flat 18 –

To be occupied.

One week.

A simple note that filled us with fear. The Porter placed the note there. He knew what we wanted to know: we wanted to know who it was that wanted to occupy flat eighteen. He placed the note there because he knew it would upset us. He could merely have kept quiet and a week later we would be stunned to hear someone busy about the living business in flat eighteen, unannounced. But he warned us, knowing how it would upset us. His only motive was to upset us. He knew that we would all separately be spending the week worrying over the mysterious person who was to occupy flat eighteen, and that he alone would keep the secret because no one ever spoke to him.

The Porter would not open his mouth, except to hiss. The Porter hissed at us if we came too near to him. That hiss meant – *Go away*. And we did. It was not pleasant to come too close to the Porter's hiss. It was not pleasant to come too close to the Porter. So even if we were to have enquired about the new resident the reply would have been a hiss. *Go away*. We had to wait. And more than anything else we hated waiting. Suspense was bad for our unfit

hearts. We were left to imagine the future occupant of flat eighteen – for a whole week.

And for a whole week we were terrified. We slept short nights. We would find each other examining flat eighteen, as if by simply being in that specific section of the building which filled us with disquiet we would immediately understand what sort of person it was that was soon to occupy it. When we saw each other there we backed away, ashamed. If we entered the flat while the Porter was cleaning it, he would hiss us out of the place. We would run back to our own homes, shaking.

Flat eighteen, which had been a large dressing room and bedroom when Observatory Mansions was a country residence, was now similar to the other flats on the third floor; we found no clues inside it. We wanted to take floorboards out, damage the plumbing, cut the electricity lines. Anything to make the new resident know that he was unwelcome. We wanted to, but we did nothing. We sat thinking, paralysed by panic, with sweat on our foreheads, on the privacy of our lavatory seats, behind locked doors. We ate less. If the week had been any longer than a week we should all have been noticeably thinner.

Before the new resident arrived there was perfect stagnation. Years had sat on years and we had not been able to distinguish any difference between them. We were growing older, true, but since we saw each other every day, we had all (as if in conspiracy) not noticed, or pretended not to notice, the particulars of ageing. Our home was a different matter. It is probable that many of us were keenly aware of our home's slow but gradual disintegration – on every floor large strips of the ubiquitous blue and white wallpaper had peeled itself from the walls, the carpets were faded and full of holes, the banisters on the top floor, where the cheaper, smaller flats were, had already collapsed. The plumbing was somewhat erratic. The electricity frequently failed.

We who lived in Observatory Mansions were a small and peculiar group of people. Group is perhaps the wrong word since it was only because we lived

in the same building that we could in any way be thought of as belonging to one another. Or perhaps we had become alike after spending so much time in solitude, the more time people spend alone the more difficult they become. How strange the people are who, past a certain age, find themselves blocked in every direction, these people who are convinced they will no longer be employed, these people who live alone. And of course they spend their time working out how to get by or thinking about their pasts, but they have only themselves to reminisce with. And how dull that is, how painful it is when it is only, day after day, their own reflection that appears in the mirror. How they long to get away from themselves, not just to get out of their own skins but to get out of their pasts and presents and futures; to leave, in short, everything that has anything to do with them behind for ever.

But I liked to think of these people as pure people, as concentrated people, or, to put it another way, as how everyday people would be if they were subtracted from work, friends, family and all the motions of life which we are told we should take part in. These people are obsessive; sometimes it is easy to spot them, sometimes not. Sometimes when you see them about the city their eccentricities make you laugh, but more often they make you feel miserable. They are a rare group of individuals, bizarre creatures, who seem to have walked out of strange, dark fairy tales, but they are real enough, they are about, they are to be found amongst cities' Coca-Cola signs, evening paper stands, waiting for the traffic lights to change with the rest of us. We seven from Observatory Mansions were a little like that.

We seven.

For years we had been used to residents leaving. Residents either packed up and left, or died in their flats and were taken away. After their departure the flats remained empty and with each vacation our home seemed larger and larger. It was well known to us that the value of our individual flats, though

once good, had been steadily decreasing and that if we decided to sell we would be unlikely to find a buyer.

Observatory Mansions was designed to house twenty-four different families but, just before the new resident came, only seven individuals lived there. It was supposed that that number would be likely to gradually decrease but most unlikely ever to increase. All we were worried about was being the last person remaining. Living in our vast home, walking around all those empty flats, perpetually alone, was not something to look forward to. Though we were not happy together, and though we were only intermittently friendly towards each other, though many of us lived in virtual solitude, there was some solace to be drawn from the fact that our misery was not borne alone. It was shared, between seven. There was a certain pleasure, or fraternity, to be gathered from living with people whose lives had ended as unspectacularly as each other's. We had little to look forward to. Little changed. The only change was the occasional arrival of demolition experts who appeared, uninvited, and never stayed very long. On their first visit, some twelve years ago, we were naturally worried. The demolition experts arrived with representatives of the property company that owned Observatory Mansions, the company that paid the Porter. We waited for something to happen. Nothing happened. The fear, though, we had been able to share, between seven. For a while we communicated with each other, dividing our anxiety. When a suitable amount of time had expired, and it appeared to us that nothing, in fact, was going to happen, we each returned to our solitude. We shut up our doors, ended communication until the next visit by the demolition experts. Each time the visits caused us less worry. We had convinced each other that nothing was actually going to happen, so much so that on the last visit, before the new resident came, we paid no attention to our uninvited demolition experts and did not even consider opening our doors to each other.

We continued, waiting patiently for the moment when one of us would be the last person left in our home, for the time when there would be no one left

to ignore. Solitude is only good when surrounded by other people. I, being the youngest resident, had the most to fear. I was thirty-seven at the time the new resident arrived. It may be presumed then that I would be glad to have another resident in our home, but that was not the case. It was not the case with any of us, and this is the great contradiction with the lonely. Though we longed not to be lonely, we also feared the pain it would take us to be brought out of our lonely states. And after that fear, could we be guaranteed that we would never be returned to a state of loneliness again? We could not.

Though we did not necessarily enjoy our condition of loneliness, we were at least used to it. It was dependable, almost a friend. We wanted nothing to change. Though we longed not to be the last resident, we also longed for our anodyne days to remain the same. We wanted no noises. We wanted no sudden movements.

On the day before the new resident came we were all united in an all-consuming anxiety. We had not yet opened our doors to each other, but the option was there. We could feel the door handles twitching. We were restless. We entertained the possibility that the new resident might be a person, like us, who deplored sociability. We entertained the possibility that the new resident would be old or dying, and could perhaps even die during his first night here. We entertained the possibility that the new resident might take one look at our home and decide to leave. If that were the case we would be offended for a few minutes and afterwards relieved for eternity.

There was nothing we could do but wait and make his stay with us, which we were sure would be short, unpleasant. But no one was more worried than I, being the youngest resident in our home and subsequently the one, if the new resident proved neither to be old nor to be dying, most likely to suffer his company for the longest time.

The day came.

It was a bright morning. It should not have been, it should have been overcast. It was a pleasant late spring day. It should not have been, it should have been shrouded in miserable Winter pessimism.

I was up early, I had fed my mother, my father and myself. I suppose that many people would, if they woke up at the age of thirty-seven to find themselves living with their parents, be filled with dread. To them, spending every day with their parents would be suffocating; those people would feel cramped, they would say that the air they breathed was somehow contaminated. Perhaps they would even kneel by their beds at night, as good children do, and pray that their parents be dead by morning, as bad children do. That was not the case with me, I was not unhappy living with my parents.

On the morning of the day that the new resident came to us, I crouched by the door waiting for noises. Silence. At half past eight I had to leave home to go to work. I climbed the stairs to flat eighteen, the door was open, the flat bare. He had still not come. The only life from the third floor was the friendliness pouring out of Miss Higg's pet television set in flat sixteen.

I had to go to work.

The journey to work.

I usually travelled to work by using the public bus service. Any person who could produce the correct amount of money on request was entitled to sit in its confines and endure the rather dubious comfort of its dirty and ripped seats. The dirt was, of course, perilous to my white gloves, and whilst on board I had to be careful not to touch anything. The bus was old, but it moved. It moved but slowly. Its driver was a young man who had surely failed all his school examinations and was thus forced to endure for the term of his working life the daily ignominy of driving this dinosaur of locomotion. This man had also to suffer the screams, giggles, dirt, loves and hates of the schoolchildren: the bus was the school bus too. It trundled all the local children to their hours of

misery every day during school time. When school was on holiday it was possible to see who the bus's other users were. There were various diagnosed imbeciles. Among the imbeciles was Michael, a giant of a man, more sensitive, I believed, than the others. Michael was always observing, he examined each of his fellow passengers, considering them through his delicate blue eyes. The imbeciles went to school too, a different type of school. This school did not teach them history or languages, mathematics or science. This school taught them to be happy, to smile, to read their digital watches and, most of all, not to worry. The other passengers were mainly old men and old women, sometimes couples, mostly not. The old were off for a trip in the city centre where they would sit in cafés, underneath flashing electric signs, listening bemused to the vapid music, sipping tea and coffee, sighing and drooping. Two other passengers I found worthy of attention. The first was a small boy with bright fair hair, who was always accompanied by his dark-haired mother (though she barely deserves a mention and is easily forgotten). The boy wore glasses and one of the lenses was gummed over so that it could not be looked out of. This was because the boy had a squint. By using only his squinty eye, that eye was supposed to slowly repair itself. I do not think it ever did. The other passenger was a man in his forties, stunted by timidity. This man was a poet, he wrote beautiful odes to trees, flowers and country animals which he had not seen since he was a child. He was reminded of them by photographs he found in the city library. And it was the city library where the bus would drop him. And myself too.

The day of the arrival of the new resident was during school time and the sad bus was full of children. Some of the children were inevitably female. And some of those female children were inevitably pubescent. These girls would usually sit by the bus driver and stare at his hairy arms and talk to him, lift their skirts, make him laugh, encourage him to pinch them.

We passed the shops, the burger restaurants, still quite new to our city, with their clean plastic signs. We passed the large supermarket, one of three we

have here, each of which employs an army of pathetically thin, pale girls with peroxidized blonde hair. What exotic delights there are to be found there: ostrich steaks, pulped papaya, a drink called Sex on the Beach. En route to my work that day I saw a curious sight, something new. A vehicle moving slower than our bus was blocking the traffic in the opposite direction. This vehicle was cleaning the streets. It is a fact that our city is dirty and repugnant. It is a fact that dust covers every object moving and stationary. This vehicle was in its slow but methodical way attempting to remedy the dirt of our city. I had never seen a vehicle designed to shampoo streets before and neither, judging by their reactions, had the other inhabitants of our city. The vehicle was new, it glistened. People stared in wonder at the machine and carefully stepped over the clean path it left behind.

After the school exodus and peace came the library. The poet and I descended. There is no darkness but ignorance, said a stone above the library's portal. And by this threat bent people's backs and kept the opticians in business. I walked to the door in the library labelled GENTLEMEN, for such a type am I, and behind the locked door of a cubicle, readied myself for work.

The work.

There is, in our city, in the centre of our city, that part of our city most populated by people with a little excess money, that part of our city where people who are not from the city are most likely to visit, a plinth. A statue plinth. A statue plinth lacking a statue. A statue plinth which once had letters on it naming the statue that once stood upon it. The statue had gone, the letters on the plinth had been erased.

It was on that statue plinth, in the centre of the city, that I worked. The words erased on the plinth could perhaps have said my name, for no one else used it but me. Had it said my name, it would have said: FRANCIS ORME. What was the work that I was employed in whilst standing on that statue

plinth? I was a statue, I pretended to be a statue. For this occupation I earned enough money to feed myself, to feed Mother, to feed Father and even occasionally, when I felt the need, to feed a man named Peter Bugg.

I wore white. White cotton gloves, as has already been admitted, these I always wore, but, when busy at my employment, I wore whiteness everywhere, not just on my hands. White linen shrouding my body, a white curled wig to conceal my not-white hair, white trousers, white shirt, white waistcoat, white tie, white face. I painted my face white every day before work commenced. I blotted out all those little moles, freckles and the swollen bottom lip that signified Francis Orme. I stood without identity, a statue of whiteness.

I stood two feet from the ground, elevated by my plinth. Beneath me was a tin box in which coins were placed as the day's work progressed. One other thing is necessary to mention: in my right hand I held a white enamel pot. In that pot was a small stick of white plastic with a wire hoop at its end. In that pot was a soap mixture. I stood still, holding the pot, with my eyes closed. When I heard a coin drop I would open my eyes, take the plastic stick with the wire hoop at its end from the enamel pot and blow out soap bubbles to the person who had dropped me the coin. The soap bubbles were an annoyance that I had to put up with. If people part with money they demand some compensation. Soap bubbles were the cheapest compensation I could think of. After I had blown out a soap bubble I would close my eyes, resume my pose and remain absolutely still until I heard another coin drop. Then I would open my eyes, move and blow out another soap bubble.

When I opened my eyes I saw in front of me many people. People who had never before seen a person keep so still. People who were confused, wondering whether I was made of flesh or of plaster. Until I opened my eyes. The white of my body was so precise in its whiteness that the whites of my eyes looked dirty by comparison. Dirty, but alive. When I closed my eyes I resumed my perfect stillness, and the people around me, who only a moment

ago had seen my living eyes, began to wonder all over again whether I was of flesh or of plaster. That was how perfect my stillness was. How had I learnt to achieve such inanimacy?

The art of stillness.

As a child I often played a game with my toys. I would place them all in a circle, leaving a space for myself. We would sit together. I would look at them all, each in turn, for exactly the same amount of time. I would consider what it could be like to be an object. These objects — a teddy bear, a tin soldier, a clockwork robot, a stuffed fox and a plastic frog — had all at times been given voices by me, I had temporarily made them live in the games of my childhood. I considered it only fair that since I had made them feel what it might possibly be like to be living that I should in turn try to discover for myself —but with help from them — what it was like to be an object. I kept still. I felt my heart slow down. I closed my eyes.

When I grew up I was given employment by the waxwork museum in the city. This was a popular job, the waxworks was a popular place. For my interview I was informed that I had to stand still amongst wax dummies. Five of us interviewed for one job. The job was stillness. The art of keeping still. We were informed that if none of us were still enough no one would be employed and the job would remain vacant for another year. It was a popular part of the museum that housed wax models that pretended to be people to also employ people who pretended to be wax models. When the public perused the objects they liked to guess which ones were wax, which ones were flesh. Often they made mistakes; this was because the army of flesh dummies were such experts, masters of stillness. When a dummy that was presumed to be made of wax moved, the public was astonished. They gasped and then they laughed. This was considered entertainment. In the interview we had to prove that we were capable of holding a pose for a very long time. Five

of us were interviewed with five wax dummies. We all wore different costumes from different ages. I was given a white shirt with frilly cuffs, breeches, a gabardine, white stockings, black buckled shoes and a curled white wig with a purple ribbon at its back. I remember this costume extremely well, not only would I wear it for my interview at the waxworks but I would also wear it for my subsequent employment there. In fact, after my employment was terminated, I kept the costume and used the shirt and the wig (with the ribbon removed) whilst standing still on my plinth. Once costumed, we five interviewees were shown our places between the five wax dummies. We selected our poses. The interview began. A fat man walked in wearing a cream three-piece suit, who I later discovered had come all the way from the largest of all the wax museums, in the capital city of our country, to take the interview. He walked up and down the line of wax and flesh dummies, pausing for a long time in front of each. He sat down and watched us from a distance. He took out his fob watch and waited. In half an hour three flesh dummies had made themselves known. They had moved. They were dismissed. We were now seven. Three quarters of an hour later a fourth flesh dummy fainted. We were now six. After an hour the fat man in the cream three-piece suit took a plastic box from one of his pockets. It was full of flies. He opened the box, the flies flew around us, landed on our faces, walked around our noses. But we did not move.

After an hour and a half someone else made himself known. But it was not me. One of the waxworks had really been made of flesh.

The fat man said (to the wax dummy who had revealed himself as a flesh dummy), I'm afraid we must dismiss you, thank you for all your work. The flesh dummy said, But I have been working here for three years, how will I feed my family? The fat man said, *Get a movement job.*

We were now five.

After nearly two hours the man in the cream suit clapped his hands, he said, Very good, that will do, please step forward. But I did not move. Another trick.

After two hours and a half an employee of the waxworks entered the room carrying a food tray. Roast pheasant, roast potatoes, broccoli, claret, lemon tart, stilton, port. The employee left. The man in the cream suit gradually consumed his lunch. Pausing between courses, eating everything, watching us as he ate and drank. After three hours and a quarter, the fat man fell asleep, or pretended to be asleep, to this day I am not sure whether it was another trick or not.

It was not until I had been standing there for nearly four hours that the fat man shook himself from his sleep, or pretended to shake himself from his sleep, and left the room, closing the door behind him. Shortly after, another man came in, he said the interview was now officially over and that Francis Orme would be employed by the waxwork museum. But I did not move. Then the man said, Thank you everyone, and all of the waxworks moved forward and walked out of the room. Unassisted. There had been no wax figures. The man came up to me. He said, Thank you Francis, that will do, don't boast.

I was by far the youngest flesh dummy ever to be employed by the waxworks.

The job was more complicated than it may sound to the uninitiated, and we who were employed in our jobs of stillness were a very proud group of soldiers. We believed ourselves half flesh and half object. To achieve that standard of professionalism it was important to gain not only outer stillness but also inner stillness. Inner stillness was an art I learnt from my father.

My father and his (inner) stillness.

Father is not a famous figure of today, will not be one of tomorrow, and his yesterdays were as eventless as an unfilled diary. Father will never be a famous figure.

Father considered himself a parenthesis in his own existence. Convinced that he was the essence of insignificance, he determined to live his days out of the light, in shades of darkness that might discourage people from confusing him for a piece of life. He felt comforted making friends with all that never answered back, with all that never moved, with all that others disregarded or simply never noticed.

Father kept his young body still to observe all about him. Keeping his body still helped him to see what was around him with patience and with consideration. Father was the friend of gradually changing levels of light, of a snail's odyssey, of dust's snowfall. One day, though, Father was caught in the light. One day mother drew open the curtains and marched Father to church. One day Father looked terrified and fragile. He was forced into the outdoors. Father caught a suntan (caught in the way that other people catch a disease). In time his wife stopped playing with her new toy and he was discarded. His short term of significance was over and he calmly sought the shadows again. The suntan ran away.

Then Father was alive and not alive, Father was dead and not dead, he lived and died still. Still. He kept his old body still. He kept time still. Time is movement, and Father and movement treated each other with caution. When Father, in his more active days, decided to move, the decision would only be acted out after great tangles of exhaustive internal considerations. Later when Father moved he was either being moved by someone else, or his body was involuntarily moving him. Don't be fooled, that was not Father moving, that was Father's body. The pair, though they had known each other all each other's lives, were not one. Father's body twitched without warning Father. It was an old creased rebel. Father, inside Father's body, watched his body moving with surprise, admiration and a quiet terror.

For larger sorties into the world of activity, we operated his limbs. Father was our own, grown-up, ugly dolly. We pulled his strings. Our mannequin made of flesh. Years ago, Father made a decision. Father's decision was to

keep his old body more motionless than his youthful body. Thereafter he lived in a chair, a large red armchair made of leather. If I had not introduced him as my father, then he might have been called a man in a chair – or a chair with a man on it, since the chair was at first sight more significant than its occupant. In this way, seated in his chair, death forgot Father. Death paused for a moment in front of stationary Father and then moved on thinking his business had already been accomplished. Father's decision was not made out of a fear of death. Father's decision was made out of convenience. It was convenient for a man who loved stillness, who sat in a permanent state of torpidity in a comfortable chair, to remain motionless. Father's decision was made out of a love of stillness. Father was a genius of the stationary. Father was an enigma.

However.

However, on the day that the new resident arrived I was unable to perform my perfect stillness. I was able to achieve outer stillness, but not inner stillness. I was unable to concentrate because I knew by then that surely the new resident had taken possession of flat eighteen. My stillness was not perfect and it being imperfect made me feel wretched. Without perfect outer and inner stillness I was no better than any of the other city buskers. What made it worse was that once, when coins fell into my tin, I opened my eyes to blow out the bubbles and saw Ivan, one of my former colleagues from the waxworks, one of the proud group of half-wax-half-human dummies, and I could see how ashamed he was of my performance. When I opened my eyes the next time a coin was dropped, he was gone.

We half-wax-half-human dummies that were still left were by that time no longer employed by the waxworks. Our roles had been taken over by electronic dummies, deemed in the long run cheaper than us and also, the shame of it, more impressive to the public. The art of stillness had become a

forgotten art. It was then still possible to see some of us half-wax-half-human dummies about the streets, walking dolefully through the city, pausing to look with envy at some statue or pillar. And it must have seemed to Ivan, my former colleague, as if I had forgotten my art, as if I was betraying it, as if I was a has-been still pathetically trying to earn money from a half-remembered trade.

I left work early that day.