

Welcome to the Show

Jasmine Winchcombe

(2020)

‘Do you know why you’re here?’

The question shattered the quiet of the room. From across the desk, Mr Beckett peered at me through absurdly large glasses. I stared back. I waited until it looked as though he was going to repeat the question before piping up,

‘Because I am criminally insane?’ I replied, rolling my tongue on the ‘r’. I flashed a toothy grin. My reply bothered him. Excellent. He attempted to speak again, but I tapped my foot. Tucked out of sight, in the folds of my skirt, a razor-sharp scalpel quivered in my hand. Soon, I would strike.

‘Well yes. But you are *here* because of a recent—accident.’ Mr Beckett hesitated, tasting the last word to see if it was the right one. It wasn’t.

‘It was only two guards,’ I said, the words like acid in my mouth. ‘And they deserved it.’

Mr Beckett failed to hide his disgust. He shuddered, then cleared his throat. ‘All the same, we should talk about it. I’m here to help you, and so is everyone else.’

I narrowed my eyes. *You should probably shut up now, Mister.*

‘If you’re not careful, I could do the same to you.’

His face was a mixture of shock, fear, and rage. He leaned forward. I clenched the scalpel.

‘I wouldn’t get any closer,’ I whispered.

He stopped, his face an inch from mine, and sneered.

Too close. Goodnight, Mister.

*

I skipped down the cobbled path and out the front gates of the Institute, feeling like a cat who had just devoured a large bird. I hitched up my skirt and set off on my way. I took many dark alleys and detours, but I was walking with purpose.

I was going somewhere.

I was going home.

*

Thirty-four Clarence Avenue was a nice house in a wealthy neighbourhood. Three storeys, four bedroom, a large front garden. One light was on in the window, and a voices were coming from upstairs.

As I stepped onto the porch, I realised what I was doing. There was a small voice in my head telling me to leave, to start a new life, that this was nonsense, but I blocked it out. This was what I had to do.

Mustering my courage, I rapped on the door. The noise from upstairs stopped, followed by a grumbling voice and heavy footsteps coming closer. A moment later, the door clicked open and a large man in a red robe came into view.

‘What do ya want?’ he slurred, stumbling into the doorframe.

‘May I speak to Celia Hayworth?’ I asked with as much courtesy as I could manage. ‘I assume she still lives here?’

‘What do ya want with ‘er?’

His thick Scottish accent, combined with his drunkenness, made his words almost incoherent.

‘Well, I’ve come from the Wentworth Institute, and—’

‘You one o’ them crazy ones?’

‘I suppose so. Celia’s an old friend, so if you don’t mind—’

I tried to slip around the man, but he blocked the doorway with a bulky shoulder and squinted at me.

‘We don’ like loonies ‘ere. You can’t come in.’

He stumbled again, cursing under his breath. I could no longer understand what he was saying. Sighing, I gripped my scalpel.

‘I’m sorry, but you’re really not giving me any other choice.’

The poor Scottish man tried to cry out, but the blade was already deep in his neck. Blood poured from his mouth and, despite my satisfaction, I tried not to gag. I stepped around the man. From behind, I heard him drop to the floor and gurgle out a groan.

A woman’s voice was calling from above. I slipped off my shoes and crept up the staircase. When I reached the top, I peered around the corner. There she was, facing away from the door, fixing her hair.

Hello there, Celia.

‘Honey,’ she called again in that sickly-sweet voice.

‘Hey, sweetie.’

‘Hi—’ she stopped short and whipped around. I punched her in the nose. She fell to the floor in the middle of the room.

Out cold. Pathetic.

I rubbed my knuckles and straightened my blouse.

‘Ready to put on a show?’ I asked her.

She didn’t answer.

*

I bound Celia’s hands and feet with some rope from the basement. As I scanned the bedroom, catching sight of some photos on the dresser. The first one was of a beautiful woman in a wedding dress, smiling brightly. Two little girls stood either side of her. Me and Celia. I sneered. It was clear who had inherited our mother’s good looks. The second photo was of the same gorgeous dress, only this time, it was Celia wearing it.

‘I don’t recall being invited that time,’ I said, chuckling to myself.

There were more photos, each one of that pretty little girl and her mother. My own absence from each one struck me. I had the urge to smash those photos, but I restrained myself.

Remember, there’s work to be done.

I called the local radio and the police station to discuss my little performance. They sounded excited. Satisfied. I went to the window to wait.

*

By the time Celia came to, a large crowd was forming. From the third floor, they looked like ants below me. I stared down at them, savouring the moment.

‘What’s going on?’ Celia murmured. She blinked and looked around. Then she saw me. ‘You—’

‘Get up. The show’s about to begin, Celia. And you’re the star!’

She tried to struggle free, flopping like a fish out of water. I giggled. It sounded twisted. Insane.

‘Where’s Gary?’

‘He’s dead.’

She let out a whimper and thrashed about as if the ropes would magically break and she could run off. ‘Leave me alone.’

I laughed again. This time it felt real, not forced, or crazy.

‘I’m not going to leave you in peace. Goodness, no! You need to be taught a lesson. Consider this punishment for the years of torture you put me through.’ I was seething. I stared

at Celia's perfect features: her deep brown eyes and petite nose. Her perfect, stupid face. 'After all, you always knew I would come back to haunt you, sis.'

'You can't do this. You're mad.' She broke down in tears. 'I don't deserve this. I don't deserve any of this.'

If there was the tiniest bit of pity left in me, I didn't feel it. All that mattered was the crowd, the act, and the revenge. 'You're the one who made me like this and you know it, Celia,' I said. 'Nevertheless, the show must go on.'

I hauled her to her feet, grabbing the back of her neck with one hand and holding my scalpel to her throat with the other. We walked to the windowsill, where hundreds of people gaped at us. When they saw us, many fell into hysterics. I smiled and bowed. Celia cursed under her breath.

'See, they're cheering for you.'

'You freak,' she muttered.

I pushed her toward the open window, then jerked her back in. She screamed and so did someone in the audience. I thought I heard a faint siren whirring, but it could have been my imagination.

'Perhaps you'd like to apologise now, sis? Or would you prefer to end up the same way as dear old Mummy?'

Her bottom lip trembled, but she looked me dead in the eye defiantly. A raw, fiery hate burned inside of me. She saw it and more tears streamed down her face.

'Please, please, please—'

I leaned in close to her, scalpel still at her throat. 'No apology?' I asked.

At that moment, something seemed to snap inside her. She met my stare with a cold, malicious look and whispered, 'Go to hell.'

I shoved her forward as hard as I could, and she tumbled over the windowsill into the air. The audience erupted in applause. Screams and cries filled the air as Celia plummeted down. I grinned at her though she didn't see me. She flailed about, frantic to save herself, but she found only air around her. No one made no move to catch her; all they could do was cry and gawk at the sight. As Celia neared the ground, I knew the show was almost over.

'Bye, sis,' I whispered, before bowing to the crowd and drawing the curtains closed.
