

the auditorium

Mrs. Amelia Donato, bless her ancestral Umbrian wildflowers, her genius inventor parents (who concocted a vacuum cleaner of suction so extraordinary that it brought in millions and afforded her a first-rate education in five countries), her compassion for the lonely and ailing (she really does volunteer at hospitals), her nervous tick ([sic]—she stands on one foot and taps the other behind her, in time with her loud Venetian watch), her bejeweled history, with faint clinks of family crime (her uncle, banned from the dinner table forever, got mentioned as "suspect" a few times on the Italian news), her two horses, one dappled, one grey, like the song, her telescopes (through which Mars really looks almost red), her hilly acres in Marin County (Inverness, I think), her dotting, but deceased husband, her gifted son thriving at Julliard but never coming out West to visit, her multiple newspapers, all in different languages (Spanish, Italian, English, German, Arabic), with slightly different takes on the world, confusing her mornings slightly, so that, without thinking, she reaches for an extra spoonful of sugar for her coffee and spaces out, gazing at the dapple and the grey, this very same Mrs. Amelia Donato donated an acoustically opulent, spatially corpulent auditorium to our erstwhile charmed and loose organization known as the Auditorium. You haven't been able to hear a thing in there since. Thanks to the requirement that each member bring a knickknack "to make the space more personal," the sound has gone dry, and we require clip-on cordless mics in order to be heard (not only that, but we had to start getting them in bulk from Radio Shack after our membership topped 1000. The expenditures got out of control – we could have ordered wholesale, but the debate over that issue took two solid weeks, and we ended up opting for what we knew). Were today not my last day, I'd be finding some reason to bear with it. Well, the reason it's my last day is precisely that I've run out of reasons and breath.

Leaving the Auditorium is a little complicated, though there are some twenty-odd exits in keeping with the regulations (they're called "expansions," but they'll get you outside if that's what you want). The preamble states that "the Auditorium is everywhere; everywhere we go, the Auditorium goes with us." Like a painted wooden caterpillar on wheels, with a string attached, it ties itself to your pinky and wobbles through existence with you. The only way to leave the Auditorium is to cut the string, and what the hell would that mean? It means leaving secretly, brutally, in the mid-swing of night, and

never looking back (or some approximation of this). It's not that anyone would force you to stay. It's that, if they see you leaving, they'll start chanting, "the Auditorium is everywhere!" They mean it as consolation, I think, but if you're really looking to get out of there, it kind of rubs you the wrong way.

The physical space itself consists of a dome with two long wings on either end, like a pot-bellied patient, supine on a hospital bed, or a caterpillar that had just a bit too much to eat. Within the dome, several tiers. A clerestory at the upper level, where hanging plants, wan in the squeeze of light through stained glass, let their limpid, tawny leaves drop onto us. They are like hand-flapping men and women sitting at tea on a hot day atop a balcony, shaking their sweat nonchalantly onto the passers-by below. Rude plants, but we let them stay.

Down below: the center, where a skylight sucks in the yell of day. Just outside the center, an intermediary zone (my favorite), draped in a middle shade of shadow. Finally, the outer edges, alternating between dark and light as doors close and open. Between these, gradations and variations. Your eyes, playing with the light, could zigzag like lightning or crayon. They could discover the ideal octagon, then lose it (the octagon and the mind).

The walls have become cluttered with masks, weavings, paintings, marionettes, finger puppets on toothpicks, herbs, maps, family photos, banners, meaningful personal statements fingerpainted on brownish kindergarten art paper or scrawled on florid greeting cards. By now, everyone should feel at home here, and if you don't, then by all means bring something meaningful to add to our wall! Make it stuffier here! We are "the Auditorium, a place for all voices to be heard," and there is no bloody reason on earth why we can't be home for everyone. We even have showers, a laundry room, a kitchen, an entertainment room – bring your sleeping bag and save on rent! It may ruin the acoustics, but it glorifies our name.

I chose today as my appointed day of departure because of the Big Assembly. On an ordinary day I wouldn't be able to leave without hugs, questionings, remonstrations. On Big Assembly day, it's so packed that I could probably slip out, provided I got the choreography right. Ideally I would make my way through the doors just as the speaker was clearing his throat.

There was one glitch to my plan: Alice had announced to a small group of us yesterday that she was going to make flan. Would I leave before the flan? I used to dance ballet once upon a time, before injuring my back. It wasn't a career – don't say career, I don't like that word! – but it kept me going, along with books, crickets, the oboe,

and occasional gambling. During my dancing years, I denied myself all desserts, and let me tell you, it wasn't the ice cream sundaes that made the tears well up, nor the coconut cream pies, though they sure were poignant and musical, nor the mousses, nor the lemon chiffon, nor the waffles with maple syrup. It was the flan: that quaking, chilly round pale featureless face in a cold sweat of caramel, that's what got me. Once I had a backstage fit because I saw flan in the reception area. It was like seeing an ex-lover that I still hadn't gotten over. The word itself gave me tremors. The very day that I decided not to dance any more, I celebrated with three servings of flan at a Cuban restaurant.

I think the desire for flan aggravated my back injury so that I could retire and eat it. Flan and departures have had something in common for me, a hint of lunacy, rejection, and unknown shores. Maybe that quivering circle, the island of sweetness, soothed my isolation of the moment. Today I retire from the Auditorium, and so it's fitting that I should partake of the flan.

Poor Mrs. Donato! She came to visit not too long ago. She took in the gaudy surroundings with the passive optimism of old age, the "I don't understand, but it's probably for the best" benevolence. She wrote us an obese check and beamed her way out. I saw her pause outside. She was wearing a wide-brimmed straw hat with silk flowers. Underneath: shades, overalls, and galoshes. She held a cane and a sequined purse. From her purse she retrieved headphones, which she donned. I think it was John Donne on tape, but it may have been Howard Stern. Then she took out a compact mirror and applied bright red lipstick. She walked away in a most dignified albeit lopsided manner.

She had left us a present. We hacked it open as soon as she left. A gleam of font and leather. "Aw, the fucking broad gave us another book," said Duke, in one of his rare moments of inpropriety. He collected himself. "How generous of her. If no one objects, I'll write her a thank-you."

Duke, a former Hell's Angel, had two distinct English languages: one from his former life, one from his new life in the Auditorium. He rarely mixed them up, or even used anything from the former. "Shall we say a prayer of gratitude?" he compensated, lifting his eyes to the tchotchke-blocked heavens so you could see the skull-faced mermaid tattoo on his neck. All sorts of dolls and chandeliers hung from the ceiling, swaying yes and no.

"We haven't even opened it up yet," I offered. "And yet, Duke, your words arouse the question: must gratitude be conditional? Would our gratitude not be more pure if we didn't know the contents of the gift? I believe it would, and so, on a count of one, two, three, let us pray.

God, or whatever name we do or don't choose to hurl at you, we thank you for this gift in its partially disrobed state, and for the kind woman who gave it to us, created by You in Your goodness and wisdom for the purpose of giving gifts to newly enlightened and grateful souls, humbly we offer You intense thanks and praise with the stipulation that, should we not like the gift or want to benefit from its contents, we may sell it on the street for the benefit of our brothers and sisters both inside and outside the Auditorium, and then spend the cash on a hamburger, or, in the case of vegetarians, an extra large order of fries. Amen."

Duke glared. I proceeded to unravel the gift. It was a dictionary. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, complete with an appendix of Indo-European roots. Duke scratched his arm.

"I see what you mean," he intoned humbly. "It might really help someone."

Bob, the old, old, old-timer, rumored to have been the first to step inside the Auditorium on Donation Day twenty years ago, concurred. "Yes indeed. We should donate it, not sell it, Clara, and let Mrs. Donato know. She would be proud."

"I'll mention it in the thank-you note," said Duke.

That was weeks and weeks ago. Now we were about to have flan: Duke, Bob, Tammy, Chloe, Dave, Harold, Alice and I. We were a mini-community of the type that was encouraged in the Auditorium for "greater intimacy and sharing," i.e., when we sat around in a little circle, we could probably hear each other speak, at least until the place started filling up. Harold, Alice, Tammy and I had liked each other from the start, upon joining the Auditorium. How did it all start? I think once we came to our senses and got our bearings, we struck up a poker game, and were laughing so hard by the end of it all that we could barely hold ourselves through Assembly. I think we chose to spend the night in the Auditorium that night, and treated it like a slumber party, throwing cushions, telling stories, laughing till we were shushed. We hit it off. Those were rollicking beginnings, but we were also desperately in need of something. We liked each other partly because we wanted so badly to like someone, and didn't find each other revolting.

Harold might have been revolted by us, though. He liked to be around people, but not because he liked them. He was the youngest of the bunch, and had suffered some ruptures of the mind that had been termed "paranoid schizophrenia," for lack of better definition. He had wild, wavy brown hair and big blue eyes. His teeth flashed

with gold and silver; he claimed the CIA accessed his brain regularly through the metal. He loved Shakespeare, or whatever fragment of Shakespeare he happened to seize upon and repeat, but held other Shakespeare lovers suspect (they were generally cops or spies of some sort). He suspected the three of us, but seemed to enjoy our company regardless. With other people he picked arguments. That he seemed to enjoy even more: he'd jump out of his slump and lunge into dangerous play, with the dexterity of a knight and the joviality of a jester.

Alice was born of adoring parents who had told her to pursue whatever endeavor she wanted, without thoughts of money, so long as it was honorable. She took up campanology, the study of bells. "Obscure and lovely, but in a way like a scary secret society," she said of it. She designed a carillon for an emerging arts college in the Midwest. She went to Germany to study with the world's leading campanologist, a Gustav Brendt, who adopted her as understudy. A year later she left without explanation, withdrew from the world for about three years under the guise of marriage (an old flame from high school who still pined after her). The marriage didn't work out. One night she left with nothing but a small suitcase, and lived in hotels until an old friend took her in. There's lots we don't know about Alice.

Tammy didn't seem to care about broken hopes and the like. Tall, voluptuous, pumpkin-toothed, she made her way through life the way a pumpkin might laugh if it had lungs and toes (we crinkle our toes when we laugh; toes detect humor and pass it on up). She loved to go to malls and watch TV. She loved to patter around in her bare feet. She loved to play with our hair and slap us gently when we said things that weren't in the spirit of the Auditorium. She'd initiate all the games, from duck-duck-goose to whist. She'd play the jolliest of group therapists when things got out of hand "now Clara, why don't you tell Harold how you feeeeeeel about that!" She came from Nebraska, and had three children, all of whom were living with her mother while she worked on getting her life together. Her mother wanted her to have a stable relationship and job. She seemed cut out for neither, but kept on trying, cheerfully, joking her way through every mishap. The last time she was arrested, for taking an exit onto an entrance ramp, she made the cops laugh so hard they let her go, and one asked her to marry him (she told him he'd have to call her — and he didn't). That was Tammy. But it was also Tammy who would go off into public bathrooms and snort up coke after months of abstinence, who would walk along railroad tracks late at night, who landed in mental hospitals about once a year.

This was our group. Then came Duke and Bob, whom you've

already met, neither of whom I particularly like (though women get crushes on Duke left and right, and Bob is regarded as an apostle) and Dave and Chloe, a young, skinny musician-couple from Seattle. The two were in constant embraces, having promised each other to stick it out together and bring their band to the world. They had all the trappings of young people their age: guitars, lithe bodies, sad sunken eyes, piercings, a few tattoos. Dave had orange hair, Chloe purple. They didn't say much to us, but came to all our mini-gatherings.

The speaker was making his way down the aisles to the center. He was wearing a dark blue suit and dark green tie with black stripes. He seemed of Latino background, with greying hair. Members of the crowd stopped him along the way to engage him in conversation. After speaking with the speaker, the strangers cavorted, rejuvenated. It brought them that much closer to the center, to the powerful mic, to the one remaining place where, with luck, you could be heard.

Alice passed around the dessert on little plates: they looked like wobbly citadels after a brown rain. Harold immediately stuck his finger into his. "Oops, I forgot the spoons," Alice choked. She darted a glance at us ("can you wait just a sec?") and ran off. Harold chuckled. The speaker stood across the Auditorium from us, nodding to the imbalanced rhythm of someone's life story. Doors opened more and more. The outer edges started to cake up with jackets, skateboards, briefcases, purses, sleeping bags. Alice returned with the spoons.

Harold had already finished his portion, and was licking the caramel off his plate. "Good custard you cooked us, Alice," he slurped, caramel dripping onto his nascent goatee. He caught me staring at him. "What's up, Prospero?" He called me Prospero because, in his view, Prospero was the "choreographer supreme," and he suspected I wanted to be the same. "Catching the moves, Prospero? Dictating the patterns?"

Alice sat down, empty-handed. She rubbed her eyes.

"If you're talking Shakespeare again, drop it," snarled Bob, who had never read any.

"Wait Bob. What do you think of this? 'Hell's empty, and all the devils are here.' What do you think of that, Bob?" Harold started chirping like a cuckoo clock whose time had come.

"It's a perfectly fine quote. Now drop it." Bob resumed his eating.

"Bob, you don't know what you're missing." At this point the ally came in handy. "Clara's an intelligent person, and she likes Shakespeare. You like Shakespeare, don't you Clara?"

"Yes I do," I said. I loved Harold's penchant for raising hell, but found the outcome a bit predictable. I watched Alice. She had buried

her head in her arms. The wan lights from the clerestory came down on us; a few leaves pirouetted down. Some landed in Harold's hair, then drifted down from there as he got up and pranced around us.

Dave and Chloe had been feeding each other bites of dessert, apparently deaf to the conversation. "That custard rocked, sweetie," fluted Chloe. Dave grunted with pleasure.

Tammy raised her arms. "Let's hear it for the custard chef!" she shrieked, clapping her hands above her head. We all clapped. Harold fell on the ground laughing.

Alice raised her face. She looked pretty close to death. "It's flan," she said. "Not custard. Flan."

"Are you going to focus on differences after bringing us together?" Duke chided. "Differences are the source of isolation, you know." He drummed the floor. His fingers were hairy. He wore a few big huge rings. They clattered with his tapping. One had a cross on it. He used to wear skulls. Now he wore crosses. "It's still murder you're interested in, Duke," Harold said once, before Duke punched him in the face and then apologized both to Harold and to God on his knees: "Dear God, I have taken physical action against one of my brothers who spoke out of ignorance, please forgive his ignorance and my violence, amen." Harold was in stitches during the prayer. Since then, Duke very rarely punched anyone. He just quoted from the Guide. "When we speak, we must take care to use words our brothers and sisters can understand." Then, in his own words: "I don't think flan is one of those words."

Alice didn't respond to Duke. She started collecting the plates. The speaker, now in the center, busied himself with adjusting the cordless mic on his lapel. He couldn't quite figure it out, so a big, bursting blonde came down to help him, sweating. Her breasts were inches away from his Adam's apple, since she was about six feet tall. Now you could hear him. "Ahem, check, check, check, this is Jose."

"Sweetie, I think we're all just trying to tell you that we loved the dessert...." Tammy's voice fizzled out. It was getting too crowded to hear anything. We started taking out our microphones and putting them on, like Jose. Dave and Chloe helped each other with theirs, rubbing up close to each other ("no, look, sweetie, it goes on like this. Ahem, check, check").

Alice collected the plates. Harold was on the floor, rocking back and forth, laughing as more leaves drifted down into his hair. "My experiment worked!" he giggled. "It was a grand one hundred percent success, worthy of the CIA!"

"Here we go," said Bob. "First Shakespeare, then the CIA."

"I said custard on purpose, to see everybody's reaction! It worked! Everybody went along with it, which is exactly what they want us to do here! And then Duke even quoted from the Guide! It's all one big experiment, and you're the guinea pigs, doing exactly what they want. At least I'm informing you. They won't. They're the Prospero in the wings. We know they're there, but they won't come out and say so. What, Clara, is this upsetting you? Maybe you're one of the spies?"

Maybe it was time for me to leave.

Alice came back. "I'm sorry," she said. Oh no. Not that. I could barely hear her, even with the microphone. It was getting so damn loud all around.

"Sorry – why, Alice?" I asked stiffly, pushing myself up onto my feet.

"I made a big deal about a word. I isolated myself instead of letting myself feel your appreciation. It was a custard. I don't have to call it flan."

"Now, see, maybe the whole reason you made the flan in the first place was that God wanted to teach you a lesson," gloated Duke.

"Yes, I'm sure it was that." She shuffled over to Duke and turtled herself in the shell of his grandiloquent, entirely quoted arms.

I started walking. To the right, to the left. The aisles were clearing, as people crammed into the seats. I saw people from the factories, people from paintings, people with bathing caps, people with impudence, people with cat hair, people with distinguished noses, people with bug bites, people with half-eaten apples and jewelry that looked like auto parts. I zigzagged around them all. My dexterity surprised me. Three seconds, and I was halfway up the aisle. "Hi, Clara!" someone shouted from the side. I waved and continued. "Coming back?" I made the "I can't hear you" gesture and kept on going. Off to the right I saw a group chant (I couldn't hear it, but I knew the chant well): "The auditorium is everywhere!"

Keep on walking, I told myself. I made it to the exit, and saw something gleaming on the ground. It was the dictionary. Isn't it funny that Mrs. Donato gave me the means of departure. I'll have to go thank her sometime. I carried it out with me. I stood outside by the trails of oil and the heavy hedges, listening to my breath and the squeal of an electric bus pulling to a stop.

"Clara." It was Alice.

"What is it, Alice?" I tried to sound a little annoyed, to get her off my case. "Look, you come up here and talk to me, cause I'm not turning around."

She walked ahead of me and turned to face me. "Don't go."

"I'm just going around the corner," I fudged, still walking, as she walked backwards to continue facing me. "I'll be back."

"No you won't."

"How do you know?" I had wanted to tell her, so it came as a relief that she had guessed, even though I wished she hadn't found me out here.

"Because as far as most of them are concerned, you're dead. Cause life is only in the Auditorium."

"Oh for Christ's sake." Now I heard a siren. "Did they have to call an ambulance if I'm dead? Did they have to make a big stink about it?"

"It was me. I called 911. Just in case. Just for the record. Mrs. Donato would be furious if someone died and we didn't do anything."

"You traitor!" I screamed. "You've ruined it for me!"

Soon I was swaddled in a coil of lights and sounds. I was tapped, poked, measured, timed. I was still facing ahead. A small crowd had come outside to see me lifted into the ambulance. Alice was trying to hold herself together, and looking very beautiful and brave. She had the chin of an empress. The paramedic gave her a sad nod, and put his hand briefly on her shoulder. Then he turned and climbed up into the driver's seat. The vehicle drifted quietly away, the way they do when there's no life to save.

To amuse myself as we rode, I read aloud from the dictionary. Dysphonia, foretopsail, heddle, pundit, Charon (yay Charon!), maudlin, squamation, gloriote, cornute (like Harold), palaver, replevin, urushiol, wirra, prosopopeia, saturnalia, and not only those, but morning, helium, rollick, soccer, onion, farrier, deep-fry (Tammy's soft spot), skate, raspberry, luminary, feline, tram, oubliette, nervure, mole (six distinct definitions!), cheating (yes, picking out random words and filling space with them is cheating, unless you consider the hunger, relief, thrill, like a beginning rider's first surprise gallop), and I sat up, craving flan. Hey paramedic! Hey paramedic!

The ambulance halted. I could hear the paramedic get out and walk to the back. He opened the back door and helped me out. He waved at me, climbed back into the front seat, and drove off.

I was in the parking lot of Cala Foods near Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. It was around 9 PM. Someone smashed a bottle across the street, by the park. I heard: "Want me to kick your ass, mother-fucker?" I turned around and started walking. The rain came down loud and cold.

I had no home and no cash. Fun was nowhere to be seen. I caught myself grinning nonetheless. I walked half-asleep and blurry down

this and that street, dictionary in hand, racking my brains for places I could maybe rest, or people who might remember me after all these years.