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The Boy with the Wild Boar's Head Face

1.

When the famous Muzium Theatre closed nightly Ketut swept the wooden stage and aisles, working his way to the vestibule collection. He unlocked each case and gently brushed the exhibits with a duster made from a cockerel's tail feathers, remembering when the Master, his old Tuan had procured each on world journeys. There were historical costumes, hats, swords and stage ornaments and props from Asia to Europe. Touching the mask collection Ketut recalled his village in Bali. Years ago the Tuan had spotted him in the street wearing one with pig tusks miming a wild boar with compelling realism.

2

Ten-year-old Ketut was an orphan from a lineage of royal Balinese mask makers who had been taken in by his maternal uncle, a barber. The boy proved a financial burden for the pragmatic family, always off chasing street puppets and dance troupes.

Tuan's two sons had shown no interest in theatre but Tuan saw a glimmer of himself in the boy.

"If you take him with you," Ketut's uncle bargained. "I will give you his father's mask collection," pulling out a heavy chest.

Tuan's eyebrows rose. This was getting more interesting. "Alright, show me and then I will decide."

3

Tuan gasped at gold foreheads and teeth, a red-lipped Barong with tusks, Garuda, Rangda, a moon goddess wearing snake hair, a beauty mask with a royal Batik headdress, the good Boma demon, another with a gecko crouching between the wooden eye sockets. There was a smiling Buddha with rotten teeth, a white-faced monkey mask made from hibiscus wood and more. These were some of the lost heirlooms of the last King of Badung who had long ago committed ritual suicide along with his thousand or more retainers in opposition to the annexation of Bali by Dutch troops at Denpasar in 1906. The royal seal was imprinted inside each.

"Yes," Tuan said, "I'll take the boy." And also gave money.

4

Thus, Ketut commenced traditional discipleship as Tuan's attendant while doing chores like sweeping the old theatre, while Tuan began the training.

"Look!" he would say going to the wet market to buy durians and mangosteens. "See the man hopping about on the hot road like a crow? Remember that, Tut." Or when the monsoon pounded the pandan leaves Tuan would say, "Listen to the roaring downpour followed by the last *ping-ping* of raindrops. You can use that at the end of a dance sequence." Then Tuan demonstrated a jerky hand movement coming to a standstill. Ketut was aroused and captivated.

5

Tuan also told Ketut to look after the collection which was the pride of the Muzium Theatre. "Be diligent. Many of these costumes and jewelled ornaments were endowed to me by famous people like the Sultan of Brunei and the Count of Barcelona after I performed in their courts. Then there were great makers and artisans from France and Italy with whom I exchanged our kris blades, kebayas and turbans in return for their costumes, hats and weapons you see here. Look especially after the masks from your father. They are the most precious. They will be your best life teachers."

6

Such favourite attention aroused jealousy among the actors and even the Master's watchful wife. She still hoped one of her sons would return from the north to manage the family theatre. Puan was from a plain business family. Overseeing management matters suited her, replacing the tedium of art making. Frankly, she didn't agree with, or understand her husband's lofty ideas, but she did enjoy the status of being the wife of a great artist. When he formally adopted the Balinese boy, (who still wandered around with a boar mask playfully scaring the children) she did not accept him in her heart.

7

Ketut maintained the Muzium Collection and happily did all the menial chores. Then after two years during the southwest monsoon season, the Master died suddenly from dengue fever. It was a blow for the whole company and Ketut. After the mourning period Puan carried on, yet without Tuan the company began to dwindle. Ketut's theatre education stopped, too, although he had formed the habit of mimicking everything and everyone around

him, and although pure minded proud actors like Azlim, a rather messy rice eater, felt offended seeing Tut sit down with younger children mimicking each person in the company including himself.

8

Obligated, Puan kept Tut on, but without Tuan to champion him, he was soon sidelined. Puan read the motives of her actors and rationalised she had to keep things on a tactful footing. The easiest course was to leave Tut on as a janitor boy without any stage prospects, despite the career path Tuan had in mind. Nevertheless, Ketut continued without complaint, doing all the menial chores: sweeping the stage and aisles and dusting the collection at night when the doors were locked and all went to their homes. He imagined Tuan still speaking his lessons through each garment and artefact.

9

Put on those pantaloons from France, Tut and the Ming dynasty dragon coat. Take the sword from Toledo and leap onto the stage. Yes, that's right dance now. The sky is falling. Let your blade flash and slice off your enemy's head.

Ketut role-played his signature boar character being chased by a hunter all the way back up the other aisle. Then he put on a Commedia dell'Arte mask, hat and Harlequin suit skipping and tumbling and clowning across the stage.

Like this he paid homage to Tuan, and afterwards locked up everything, going off to sleep under the stage.

10

One morning Muzium Trust headed by Puan was having a meeting. Sweeping outside the office, Ketut overheard a familiar angry voice.

“We should sell off the collection. Funds are low, I tell you.” It was Azlim, the lead actor. Secretly, he wanted the company to go bankrupt because a developer had promised him a generous commission if he secured the contract for real estate development of the land. Things were changing in the city. With the money Azlim was going to migrate to Australia.

What would Master say? wondered Ketut.

“No! We must maintain Tuan's legacy at all costs,” said Puan.

11

The next day Puan found the theatre unlocked and the Collection gone. She called the police.

“Who has access, Madam?” The officer asked.

Speaking in her high society voice she said, “Azlim and Tut, our janitor boy.”

Ketut was brought. Puan seeing enemies everywhere these days suspected Azlim.

“He has been scheming with the other actors and demanding more pay since Tuan passed.”

Later, they matched fingerprints on the door with Azlim’s, but lacking more direct evidence the case was shelved. Nevertheless, Azlim was forced to resign. In reprisal, he lured away several key actors and actresses to start their own collective.

12

The collection theft turned out to be the saving grace of the Muzium Trust. With the insurance money they were able to renovate and modernise. Media attention aroused public sympathy and new audiences and patrons flocked to the well-funded productions which gained generous newspaper review space because a stream of celebrity actors could be employed here between their film shoots. Thus, the Muzium Theatre regained its prestige as a premier leader of the arts in the city. Ketut was happy. He helped out with the front of house before each show and swept up afterwards, glad Tuan’s life work could continue.

13

Under the practical but tasteless Puan, the management tried to curate a new collection, restocking displays in the vestibule to justify the name and image of the Muzium Theatre. The exhibits were no substitute for those rare exhibits, each with an authentic and personal history. Nevertheless, they installed the inferior exhibits with fanfare under the glare of media cameras. While all went off to a party, Ketut remained indignant. How could they dishonour the name and memory of Tuan, a national treasure, with all this junk he didn’t collect while keeping his gilded portrait on the vestibule wall?

14

Installing the new collection was also timed with the opening of the new production, the last work written by Tuan based on the life of the King of Badung. It was part dance-drama and song cycle with background shadow puppetry telling the story of the ritual suicide of a Javanese King, Queen and 1000 family members and retainers before colonial Dutch guns. Instead of fighting and sacrificing thousands, the noble king staged a

dance drama full of tragic spectacle as his ultimate protest in the face of military invasion. After the first night sensation, the play was a sellout. Everyone was ecstatic.

15

But the following week of success and media attention Puan received another shock. Tuan's priceless collection mysteriously re-appeared overnight replacing the new one.

"Tut," she called. He came running. "Have you seen this?"

He shrugged.

She really didn't know what to make of all this. She was fearful that with last night's new media attention the theatre might be exposed for fraud. Clearly Azlim was not to blame after all. She called her staff.

"Look, we have to hide this all? But where?"

They thought hard for a moment.

"There's that hidden storeroom under the stage," said her office manager.

16

As they tugged and manhandled the garments, hats and masks from the cabinets Ketut became agitated. "You are hurting Tuan's things. You will damage them."

Worried about a scandal, Puan got angry. "Oh! We have to hide it all Tut. It will bring a bad name to my husband's memory.

Backstage, they found the hidden door, but it was locked.

"Who has the key? Tut? Please open up."

Reluctantly he turned the lock and switched on the light. There was the new collection boxed neatly against one wall, his worn grass sleeping mat against the other and Tuan's picture looking down.

17

It dawned on Puan what had happened through the innocent Ketut. What drama! She couldn't be angry with him. He had saved their precious institution, after all. For now, they would have to reinstall the inferior items. In time they could bribe the local police to uncover the "stolen" one, fabricating a story of a raid on some art thief ring's warehouse and even get media attention for it. So she deftly diverted Ketut muting him through admission into the actor's ranks. His talent shined. Public popularity led him to the top very fast, fulfilling his destiny as Tuan's artistic successor.

18

Ketut developed into a great mask mime and led the Muzium Troupe to overseas festivals. Even Puan was moved to glimpse her own husband occasionally embodied in the new Tuan.

Back home, Ketut carried on as before. Never marrying he lived in the theatre sweeping up after hours. He also fixed the old trapdoor in the stage floor and would trigger it each night, plunging gleefully down onto foam. Then, he would put on his old boar mask, dust the precious exhibits while conversing with Tuan's portrait on the wall.

“Ok, Tuan?” he asked. “Did you like the show tonight?”