



THE COCKROACH, LIKE CLOCKWORK

4 o' clock

A tavern, on the outskirts, along the cold west coast. An unnoteworthy stretch of coastline, save for a modest lighthouse with a mechanised beacon. Dead afternoon, and gulls sit at the bleached wooden picnic table. The tavern is open- it always is- a dark and hard little breezeblock building.

Everything is made of shadows inside the tavern. Shadowy corner, shadowy bar, lone shadowy figure hunched over a table in the corner. Sepia light filters in through a fading window decal for a brewery. Behind the bar, a woman with a pronounced overbite and two greasy tendrils of hair trailing down her neck pulls brown pints for the leering patrons.

5 o' clock

Floodlight sweeps through the tavern. Cockroach scampers.

Quarter past 5

An Irishman, a burlesque dancer and the Tooth Fairy walk into the pub. They're regulars here. The Tooth Fairy heaves her purse onto the bar, rattling with enamel molars from the previous night out. The three of them take their places in a row on the bar stools. +

6 o' clock

Floodlight sweeps through the tavern. Cockroach scampers.

Half six

Glistening, a plate of corned beef swimming in white sauce, mustard and peas is consumed by the corner shadow. Though mostly a mystery, it is possible to see his brittle facial hair move rhythmically as he chews each bite. The serrated edge of his knife scrapes, piercingly.

Ten to seven

The tavern has filled up and more and more glasses too, the bar lacquered now with a sticky residue. The Tooth Fairy vacates her stool, pushing through the throng to take a new seat opposite a small man and a chessboard.

7 o' clock

Floodlight sweeps through the tavern. Cockroach scampers.

The Tooth Fairy, playing white, moves her first pawn.

"Hey!" the pawn says. "You can't just move me around like that."

"I'll do what I want," replies the Tooth Fairy obstinately. +

8 o' clock

Floodlight sweeps through the tavern. Cockroach scampers.

9 o' clock

Floodlight sweeps through the tavern. Cockroach scampers

Quarter past nine

The chess game is still going. The shadow in the corner is still there, though seemingly finished his meal. The burlesque dancer has been performing a tired routine on a makeshift stage for an ungrateful but rowdy audience and nearly an hour.

Two officers barge through the doorway. The burlesque dancer, stood atop the bar by now, bosom heaving over their corset, screams operatically and whisks a checkerboard tablecloth from a nearby table to cover herself. "Checkmate!" the Tooth Fairy hollers, and culls the queen of the small man she was playing against. The shadow in the corner keeps his hunched position, though his empty plate has now been launched onto the floor by the burlesque dancer's feigned attempt at modesty.

"We've got a situation here," the officers observe, mostly to each other.+

From there, chaos erupts. The Irishman, ready for a fight, lurches onto a loose floorboard in the tavern, seesawing it into the floundering policeman. The cockroaches pour back out from where they've been scuttling, and the barkeep, in a smooth motion, scoops them into a bubbling pot of chowder. A steak knife whizzes through air, thrown by the shadow in the corner and lodges itself into the belly of a trophy fish mounted on the wall.

"What's a man got to do for a hot meal around here?" the officers say in unison, incredulously, sitting at an empty booth. "Two bowls of soup, love," they nod to the barkeep, who snarls in response as well as someone with an overbite can. She brings them two murky platefuls of steaming broth, bubbling like thermal springs.

"We don't get many officers in this tavern," the barkeep retorts, keeping a beady watch on the pair.

"No wonder!" they exclaim, still synchronised. "If there's always cockroaches in the soup, we won't be coming back either!"

Around the pub, the Tooth Fairy, the Irishman and the burlesque dancer make eye contact with each other.

"Phew," the Tooth Fairy mutters, "I thought we were going to be the punchline again tonight."

+ Growing up in a household that accepted and encouraged stories of the supernatural and fantastical, I was told as a child that the clientele at the local pub my dad frequented included the Giant, the Tooth Fairy and an elusive man called Big Nose. Eager to know more about the identity of the Tooth Fairy, and insulted that she might be spending her money on beer, I would interrogate my father on his arrival home for dispatches from the fairy. My belief in the presence of the Tooth Fairy at the pub created a debauched version of who she was, and imaginedly transformed a hypermasculine space into a zone where a fluid cast of characters could exist and revel together.

In *The Person*, this cast is reprised, but from the vantage point of being inside the tavern, though not necessarily an insider. Our position is as spectator, and Howe, Tuke and Laurie act as conductor or host, offering conditions in which this uncanny composition can take place. The analogue characteristics of puppetry, coloured-pencil drawings and automaton technology summon an ambiguous anachronism, but also the potential for glitch or malfunction. Clockwork falling out of time might disturb the temporal logics in just the right way.

+ A keen advocate for puppet theatre on his radio broadcasts, Walter Benjamin observed that the triumph of puppets lies partly in their capacity to mock everything without malice. Able to achieve an animation both more expressive and more rigid than that allowed by human anatomy, the puppet can mimic kings and state leaders with enough comedy to distract the audience (and subsequently, the target of the skit) from the reality of the puppeteer pulling the marionette strings.

+ In the introduction to her book *Cruel Optimism*, Lauren Berlant describes "the situation" as a state of things from which something that might matter could emerge amid the usual activity of life. This definition is deployed to recognise new genres that become identifiable during the nineties, in response to pervasive social precarity. Berlant points to the situational tragedy as an aesthetic outcome, the imperilled counterpart of the sitcom, in which the subject's world teeters on the edge of total destabilisation. Like the sitcom, the situational tragedy is able to track the mundane nature of ordinary life, presenting a schema where a minor mishap might plunge the entire thing into disaster. *The Person* takes place in this context: the filmic and durational nature of the work by the three artists allows a strange narrative to unfold, underpinned by the sense that something could go eerily wrong at any moment.