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Sooner or later it comes back to most of us. In sleep or memory we return to a time in our lives we were afraid would last forever. Once again we wander among the pea-green walls of a high school from which we will never graduate, or sweat over the exam we never seem to complete. Once more we are trapped in the tyranny of childhood, wrestling with a crucible of family emotions. A dead-end job extends its stretch of bleak and wasted days as far as the mind can imagine. A manuscript that will never be finished on time overflows the desk. Our hopes seem frozen in the dead of a winter that will never end. Once again, we have returned to the "self-same spot," a dark cul-de-sac from which we fear we will never find an exit.

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It was the winter of 1979 in Minneapolis, and my plan for becoming a great playwright was running like clockwork. Unfortunately the clockwork had a creaky, gothic quality, closely resembling the machinery behind Poe's slowly encroaching walls of *The Pit* and *the Pendulum*. January had trapped me in a pest-ridden studio apartment not far from Hennepin Avenue. The ice on the inside of the window sill was an inch thick, and the average temperature outside was 40 below. Almost no one would read my plays, and no one at all would produce them. Nobody in this icy Nordic urbanscape cared about the brilliant stuff I had written. The bed hidden in the old couch hurt my back, so I slept on a mattress on the floor. At night, large insects ran over my stomach and over the dusty typewritten manuscripts stacked at my feet.

To satisfy the rent demon I worked for dreadful wages at a nursing home some miles distant. To get there I had to take several buses in the terrible cold. I worked in the disturbed ward. In the first hour and a half of my shift, it was my job to awaken, dress, roll, walk or carry fourteen men, some larger than myself, to the room where they were served breakfast. Oblivious to the fact that the number had swelled from nine to fourteen during my period of employment, the staff sometimes complained that I was slow.

On each of the last ten or eleven journeys, I would have to run a gauntlet of a queries from an agitated older gentleman who sat strapped in his wheel chair by the dining room door, the meal-serving arm of his rolling prison fastened across his lap. "Doctor, doctor!" he would cry after my white-jacketed form, which was often lightly spattered with excrement. "When do we land in Rochester?"

Hard to say, I thought. When would we ever land in Rochester? I had never experienced Rochester, but from the tone of his eternal question I envisioned comfortable homes with roaring fires, pokers of polished brass, humidors bulging with fragrant cigars, refrigerators full of rare roast beef, cheese and three kinds of expensive beer. Pool tables with swards of green felt, and outside the insulated windows, a fine car in the driveway and long sweeps of yard covered with white virgin snow.

After work and a shower I'd head for my night job, as stage manager for a strange play by a local theater entitled, **Make Room for Dada**. I'd gotten the job by going to see the producer, himself, at the old warehouse where the productions took place. I'd seen a good production of *Curse of the Starving Class* in the same theater, and was anxious to work there. Jack showed little enthusiasm for my quest for theatrical employment until I mentioned that I had once lived in Guatemala. "Guatemala!" he cried gleefully. "I once studied the three-toed sloth in Guatemala!" Not far, it turned out, from a mountainous region where I had once run a small errand for the Canadian Consulate following the quake of '76. "I like your vibes," he declared, and although it paid only a couple of hundred dollars, I accepted the job. In fact I was elated. Finally, I had found a theater that would actually pay me! Jack promised to read my plays, and he meant well, but I later learned the theater had a dusty closet full of them that had been collecting for years.

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The concept of **Make Room for Dada** sprang from Jack's passion for the Chaplin movie, **The Great Dictator**, made in 1940. The film, Chaplin's first full "talkie", evolves around a humble Jewish barber (played by Chaplin) who bears a striking resemblance to the Hitler-like dictator of Tomania, an apple strudel republic being nibbled by the worm of tyranny. **The Great Dictator** is an interesting political satire of the times. As drama, however, it wanders between romantic sentimentality, forced comedy, and preachy didacticism.

The theater Jack ran was nobly dedicated to the idea of productions in which a great variety of people of different racial, religious and ethnic backgrounds could work together. Since many of the potential cast and crew were African Americans, Jack decided to transfer **The Great Dictator** tale to an African setting, using Idi Amin as the evil dictator, and, of course, having the same actor play the tyrant and the poor barber who had the misfortune to be a look-alike.

Some months earlier, Jack had found a writer he believed was perfect for the job. The story, as I recall it, was that the enthusiastic young man had been a wunderkind on a TV writing team. As a teenager, he had written several scripts for a TV show that featured a bionic hero who was always racing away, hand in hand with a beautiful woman, from buildings that exploded into flame behind him.

Unfortunately, the script (containing characters such as Yessir Arabfat), was even worse than the original screenplay of 1940, and Chaplin's brilliance was not there to rescue it. In addition, the playwright had imitated the entire structure of the film, almost scene for scene. The problems this created were enormous. Since the film frequently cut swiftly back and forth between the dictator's palace and the humble barbershop, the play, using almost perfectly parallel structure, had to follow suit. Early on, I had suggested that we use abstract sets that had something of the flavor of both environments, so that by shifting the lights, and having the actors "change hats" we could transform the space without changing sets. The producers, however, were determined that this should be a "realistic" play. We had to have a barbershop set, and a palace set that could be interchanged quickly. How could they achieve it? The solution had a kind of heavy mechanical brilliance. They decided to mount the stage on a revolve -- a giant wheel, the surface of which would be divided in half, with the barbershop on one half, and the palace on the other. When you wanted to go from shaving to chicanery, you simply turned the wheel and presto-barbershop became palace!

Unfortunately, the budget did not allow for a powered revolve. The massively heavy set, carrying a full-sized barber chair on one side and a bulky refrigerator (containing the red paint-splashed rubber heads of the victims of the evil "Dada" Amin) on the other, had to be moved by two people. The second "mover" had to be one of the actors, a group which, deeply offended by this inartistic addition to their duties, rotated the task among themselves. As the critical moments in rehearsal approached, the stage-whispered arguments, audible throughout the auditorium commenced: "It's your turn, damn it -- No it's not! -- Is too! -- Is not! -- We go right! -- No, left! Left!" The maneuvers were accomplished in complete darkness using often-scuffed-over marks of luminous paint on the floor and the revolve to mark positions, since if a light were used, the director complained, light would leak out onto the stage. To jazz up the complexity, a screen was added to one end of the dividing wall to show slides and create dazzling multimedia effects. Without a light to read notes, the long combination of right and left turns to various positions had to be memorized. To move the thing, two of us had to use all our strength and lean our bodies into it. When actually in motion the thing made a loud thundery noise that reminded me of earthquakes in Guatemala. It took about thirty seconds to move 180 degrees while the entire theater shook and vibrated. On one occasion the heavy casters hit a bump, causing the door of the refrigerator to spring open and rubber heads

to bounce out onto the stage with unintentionally comic effect. Given the setup, it was little surprise that such screwups occurred frequently during the short rehearsal period. When that happened, the director would chip in by calling out, "Try to get it right next time, will you, Rod?"

The mills of providence grind slowly but surely. The revolve survived opening night, but **Make Room For Dada** died after one dreadful performance. In the spring I returned to Wisconsin, and to experimental theater there, in the hopes that maybe a little love and art would come up with the grass. Escape is possible, isn't it? In the years since, better days have arrived, but deep within me the dark cog still turns. Sometimes, often in the middle of January, I will awake in this familiar old house beside my sleeping wife, and it all rushes back to me: the cockroaches skittering across my belly, the smell of stale fried potatoes in the cold studio, the endless ache in my shoulders, the arrival in Rochester that never happens. Then lights dim in the old warehouse, and I hear whispers in the darkness: "It's your turn -- No, it's not!" And finally there are two shoulders at the wheel pushing, pushing. And then the earth shakes and there is a noise like thunder everywhere. Then "bang!" A caster strikes a stray tool beneath the undercarriage! The refrigerator door jolts open -- and rubber heads bounce across the stage.

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