

ATTACK
OF THE
THEATER
PEOPLE

A Novel

MARC ACITO

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THEATER
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***For Floyd,
Because no one laughs louder***

One

If you think about it (which I try not to), the very term is absurd: *acting school*. Like Juilliard we some kind of substitute filling in for the real thing, as in “acting president” or “acting chairman.”

At least, that’s what I tell myself as I pace around the fountain at Lincoln Center, my head throbbing like Vesuvius about to blow. The May sky may be as blue as Frank Sinatra’s eyes, but I’m equipped with my own personal rain cloud. Dread has its own ecosystem.

I look at the genuine fake Swatch I bought on the street—3:21 EST (Edward Standard Time)—which means it’s 3:10, because I set it eleven minutes fast. I don’t know why I bother, because they automatically make the necessary eleven-minute adjustment, which means I’m still always late, plus I have to do math.

Adhering to the Italian-Catholic tradition of optional piety, I make a silent prayer to the patron saint of lost causes, whose name escapes me, take one last gulp of spring air, then stalk around the corner with the grim, determined footfall of a condemned man hoping for a reprieve. As I pass through the glass doors leading into the finest drama school in the country, I glance at my reflection, only to see a pallid, hollow-eyed stranger, a faded copy of the Technicolor person I used to be. His face has the haggard, undernourished look of someone who has subsisted solely on a diet of criticism and sheer panic.

That’s what two years in acting school can do to you.

As I turn away from the ghost in the glass, I console myself with the knowledge that, unlike my life, at least my hair is under control. Years from now, if anyone asks me which technological advance of the mid-1980s most impacted my life, I won’t say personal computers or videocassette recorders. No, I will extol the miraculous properties of Beautonics® Ready-Set-Go Spray Mousse.

Straight-haired people living in dry environments have no idea of the immense challenges facing curly-haired residents of the New York tristate area. Forget the cat-sized super rats that stalk the sewers and have been known to creep into tenements and carry off infants. Disregard the legions of shaggy mental patients the Reagan administration has unleashed onto the city streets. No, for curly-haired coarse-haired Mediterraneans like myself, nothing compares to the indignity of having steamy, urban humidity transform your head into a privet hedge.

But then, this past New Year’s Eve, while getting ready to ring in 1986, my roommate Paul sprayed a handful of foam into my palm and, with one swoop across my scalp, ended twenty Bad Hair years.

I take a disproportionate amount of solace in the fact that, no matter how muggy it is outside (

inside my personal ecosystem), no matter what occurs, even if the unthinkable, the unmentionable happens today, my hair will remain rigid, steadfast, and true.

But I still must wait to learn my fate. Even at 3:47 EST, the door to Marian Seldes's classroom closed, which means that the grande dame of the Juilliard drama department hasn't finished with Willow.

Willow.

From the moment I heard her name—Willow Branch—I knew I wanted to be her friend. What kind of parents name their kid Willow Branch? (Hippie parents, as it turned out.) She asked obtuse questions during orientation, always in sentence fragments you had to piece together like a puzzle: “Juilliard doing anything—because Manhattan was stolen from the Native American people—we didn't pay them, they paid, but not a fair price—and Lincoln Center is funded by the city—at least, I assume it is—don't you think we should be doing something to compensate the native people?” Everyone else rolled their eyes, the faculty included, but I found her fascinating. Willow has an ethereal, Ophelia's-mad-scene quality about her, like she's listening to music no one else hears.

We met in the cafeteria. She was seated alone at the next table, moving a saltshaker along a subway map. I didn't realize she was talking to me because she just sighed and said, “I feel sorry for Fiftieth Street.”

I looked up from my copy of *Much Ado About Nothing* to see her freckled face peering at me, her skin like a speckled egg, her frizzy ginger hair growing every which way, as if it couldn't be bothered to coordinate the effort.

“Excuse me?”

“The Fiftieth Street station,” she said. “It has no identity. It makes me—well, just look—Fifty-ninth Street is Columbus Circle and Sixty-sixth is Lincoln Center. Then, to the south, there's Forty-second Street, Times Square, and Thirty-fourth Street, Penn Station. But Fiftieth—nothing. Just a number. It's the neglected middle child of the Seventh Avenue line.” She looked at me, her eyes glassy and fragile, as if this mattered a great deal. “What would you name it?”

“I don't know. Gershwin Theater? Circle in the Square?”

She frowned. “I'd like to name it Nowhere. That way, when you got off, you could say you were going Nowhere: ‘Where ya' goin'?’ ‘Nowhere.’”

“The existential subway station.”

Willow clutched her hand to her chest. “Oh! That's so—it makes me—you have no idea.” She advanced on me, her hands flying a few inches away from my body, as if she were molding me in clay. “I just love that you used the word *existential* in a sentence,” she said, practically crying. “Let's be friends.”

We have been ever since. Hanging out with Willow makes me feel grown-up and responsible.

because she's apt to do things like lose her shoes at a party or try to hug a police horse.

The door to the studio swings open and out she wafts with the vague, contented expression Blanche DuBois after a couple of spiked lemon Cokes and a nooner with the delivery boy. Unlike me, Willow's not in any danger. She has no trouble being "publicly private" or "emotionally transparent" in acting class. All she has to worry about is not taking the wrong subway and ending up in the Bronx.

Behind her I see the whippet-thin silhouette of Marian Seldes, her regal profile like something you'd find on an Etruscan coin. She turns and extends an oh-so-graceful arm.

"Ah, my little bird, come in."

Seldes calls all of us her little birds, with great affection, but I can't help wondering whether it's her way of protecting herself emotionally. Much in the way farmers don't name the animals they're going to slaughter, or the Pilgrims didn't name their children until they survived infancy, perhaps Seldes doesn't address us individually until she's certain we're going to last.

After a semester on probation, today's the day I find out. Probation. As if bad acting were a crime. I pass Willow, who crosses her fingers, then her eyes, which makes me smile. I love it when beautiful women cross their eyes. It's subversive.

Marian Seldes gestures to a chair, a Park Avenue hostess inviting me to tea. "Do sit down, Edmund."

"Edward."

"Oh, I'm so sorry. We were just discussing *Long Day's Journey into Night*."

Undoubtedly imagining Willow's future triumph as the dazed morphine addict Mary Tyrone.

I smooth my dingy black jeans, which I washed in the tub with shampoo because I can't afford the Laundromat, then pull my navy blue T-shirt away from my belly. It's the same shirt I wore when I played Jesus in my high school production of *Godspell*, but I've turned it inside out to hide the Superman decal, which now sticks to my chest. I don't really like wearing black and blue together, but if I were a bruise, but there's an unspoken competition in the drama department to see who can look the most ragged. Mention that you only slept four hours last night and someone will nod and say they only slept three. Back in high school I treated every day as a costume drama; but anyone who spiffs themselves up here isn't taken seriously.

And I seriously need to be taken seriously.

Marian Seldes folds one attenuated leg over another like a cricket about to commence a solo. "Dirigible for a Drama Student."

"Tell me, my little bird," she murmurs, "how do you feel you're doing in your studies?"

Truthfully? For two years, I've been lost in a Freudian bog without a map. Improvising .

ourselves, without a character to hide behind, is supposed to free us from self-consciousness and fear but the exercises only make me more self-conscious and fearful: three minutes alone in your room waking up; three minutes alone in your room getting dressed; three minutes alone in your room reading a letter.

In the words of Sally Bowles, “What good is sitting alone in your room?”

Acting class doesn't feel anything like doing a show. No backstage buzz. No spotlight. No applause. What's more, we're never supposed to penetrate the invisible “fourth wall” between us and the audience, never “perform.” I feel like someone's cut off my arms and legs.

The actors who succeed here are the ones who are emotionally available, like Willow. Press button and out come tears. I don't know how she does it. She's a human spigot. I'm more like Moral in *A Chorus Line*. I dig right down to the bottom of my soul and I feel nothing.

How am I doing?

“Okay.”

Marian Seldes fixes her eagle eyes on me, radiating the same steely resolve that landed her in *The Guinness Book of World Records* for performing five years on Broadway in *Deathtrap* without missing a performance—all while teaching. Her cheekbones are like bookshelves, above which sit eyes that speak volumes. “Just...okay?”

I look around the windowless room, with its gray linoleum floor and acoustic tile ceiling, desperately hoping I might be inspired by the brilliant ghosts who once studied here: Kevin Kline, Robin Williams, William Hurt. In the hermetically sealed world of Juilliard you are literally breathing the same air as the stars.

I've got to say something, preferably true. But what? After having every move I make, every word I say vivisected, analyzed, and criticized in front of everyone, I don't know what to do anymore. Learning to act is like getting buried in the sand up to your neck, then having an Australian soccer team play footy with your head.

Marian Seldes sighs.

“Edward, when you first auditioned for us you laid yourself bare, exposing the fishy white underbelly of your soul.”

Actually, I forgot my lines, had a total meltdown, and ended up incorporating the words *goddamn fucking ass-wipe shit-for-brains pussy-whipped toad* into Sophocles' *Antigone*. This somehow got mistaken for talent.

Marian Seldes continues. “But ever since then, you've been concealing something. Instead of truth, you're always giving us a *performance*.” She splays her quill-like fingers in a Fosse-esque manner, but the effect's all wrong.

She purses her mouth. "I'm afraid you're simply too...what's the expression... 'jazz hands' for Juilliard."

No. This can't be happening. I worked too hard to get here to be rejected. I sued my own father to make this dream come true, and that was after I tried to raise the money myself through embezzlement, blackmail, money laundering, identity theft, fraud, forgery, and (just a little) prostitution. "I'm sure I've got it in me," I say. "If I just tried harder..."

She places her hands to her breastbone, as if to quell the emotion burbling inside her. "Oh, my little bird, you're so young," she says, which is true. At least half of my classmates came to Juilliard after completing a bachelor's elsewhere. The drama division doesn't offer a master's, so we're all together and the gulf between those in their mid-twenties and those of us who can't drink legally is vast. "What you need," she says, "is life experience. You need to get out into the world and discover Who. You Are." She rises, gesturing to some unseen horizon. "Hop a freight train. Work on a fishing boat. Have a love affair and get your heart broken." She's all elbows and flying hands as she speaks, her fingers manipulating invisible marionettes.

"And then what?"

"Who knows?" Her eyes light with excitement, as if she and I were going off together. "That's the point."

"But I want to finish school."

"And you should. Listen, Edmund—"

"Edward."

"Of course. I'm so sorry. I keep thinking of Eugene O'Neill. He was expelled from college, too, you know."

The word *expelled* slams me in the chest.

"But then he went off and had *adventures*," she says, shaking a fist to screw my courage to the sticking place. "And that led him to become the first great American playwright."

"But," I hear a small voice say, "I want to be an actor."

It's all I've ever wanted.

Marian Seldes folds herself onto the chair again. "Here's what we'll do," she says in a soothing bedtime voice. "In a year's time, if you like, you can reaudition. Of course, there's no guarantee you'll get readmitted, but we'd certainly consider you again. How's that?"

I nod, unable to speak. Unable to feel.

“Now, *fly*, little bird,” she says, tossing her arms like she’s releasing a carrier pigeon. “Fly, and be *free!*”

It’s an exit line. Except I’m the one who exits.

Two

Failure follows me wherever I go—a shadow, a stalker. It’s infected every inch of me—a virus, cancer. Each morning I wake up and it’s written on the insides of my eyelids: EDWARD ZANNI GO EXPELLED.

No wonder Eugene O’Neill’s plays are so depressing.

It wouldn’t be so bad if I’d been kicked out for doing something notorious. Years from now, when I’m famous, I could sit on the couch next to Johnny Carson and tell him about the time I took a bath at the Lincoln Center fountain or got drunk at a party and felt up Marian Seldes. And Johnny would laugh until he wiped a tear from his eye the way he does, and his sidekick Ed McMahon would laugh even harder because he’ll laugh at anything, and everything would be okay because I would be famous and not washed-up at twenty, which is what I am.

“You have nothing to be ashamed of—*nothing!*” Paula insists, emphasizing her point with the wave of a fleshy arm. “Your process is different, that’s all. You and the faculty have...creative differences.”

Yeah, I thought I could act and they didn’t. I stink, therefore I ham.

Paula does as she has since we were in high school, bullying me like an officious Victorian nanny, insisting I periodically bathe, take invigorating walks in the park, and limit my consumption of beer before breakfast. (“Baby steps,” she says. “You take enough of them and pretty soon you’ve gotten somewhere.”) She’s hard to avoid, considering we share a one-bedroom basement apartment, along with her boyfriend, Marcus, and Willow. In order to maximize our limited space, Willow and I sleep in the living room—in hammocks. We thought it would feel like *Robinson Crusoe*, but it’s more like awaiting burial at sea.

None of my roommates can possibly understand how I feel. They’re all successes at Juilliard—relatively, at least. The faculty continually hassles Paula about her weight and Marcus about his attitude, but, like Willow, they deliver the theatrical goods and, therefore, remind me daily of my failure.

So there’s nothing Paula can say to convince me to join her on Memorial Day weekend for Hands Across America. Yes, I know it’s the first and perhaps only time that five million people will hold hands to form a line across the continent. And if I lived in the Arizona desert with my mother, where there are so few people they have to line up sailboats and catamarans, I would go. (If only to find out why anyone in the Arizona desert owns a sailboat or a catamaran.) But New York is a mob scene, and I fail to see what difference I’d make. Besides, I don’t want to feel at one with humanity. I just want to stay home in my boxers and eat ice cream.

I find an unlikely ally in Marcus, who boycotts the event based on a host of grievances, which he gladly enumerates afterward as the four of us cram onto a train headed to Jersey (five if you count my dirty laundry, which is the size of a body bag).

“They charged you twenty-five dollars to hold hands?” Marcus says, theropy veins in his neck popping. He scowls at the car packed with people in red-white-and-blue Hands Across America T-shirts. “Age, thou art shamed!”

Paula lifts her dark thicket of curls to cool her lily-white neck, her off-the-shoulder peasant blouse descending as her enormous breasts smush against each other like bald men kissing. “It was a fundraiser for the homeless,” she says. “Don’t be vituperative.” She adjusts her thick studded belt, which she wears over a gauze skirt, the overall effect being of a very trendy grape stomper. Unlike me, Paula hasn’t let Juilliard stomp out her desire to express herself through fashion. I look down at my wrinkled oxford and khakis and feel shabby.

Marcus gestures to the crowd with the same haughty disdain he exhibited as Hotspur in Juilliard’s production of *Henry IV, Part One*. “Baby, look at those T-shirts,” he says. “Every one of them an ad for Citibank and Coca-Cola.” He throws back his head, unleashing four years’ worth of voice and speech training. “Pawns! Corporate tools!”

Marcus inherited these convictions. The grandnephew of Nikolai Sokoloff, the Russian director of the Federal Music Project, he is also the son of Martha Hopkins, the distinguished African-American soprano and civil rights activist. As a result, he possesses the kind of pure, socialist contempt for capitalism that only a trust fund can buy. He wears his usual uniform—a white undershirt and jeans—to demonstrate his solidarity with the workingman.

“I don’t understand you,” Paula says, snapping open a lace fan and flapping it over the canyon of her cleavage. “How can you be opposed to corporations donating money?” She looks to me for confirmation, but I don’t have the energy; it’s partly depression but mostly the heat, which makes me feel sticky and fat. Nominally, I suppose I’m slender, having burned excess calories this semester through sheer panic, but my body is still soft, like an unbaked pie.

“I’m opposed to corporations, period,” Marcus snaps. “We shouldn’t have to throw a continent-wide block party to help the homeless.” Aggression radiates from his taut, coiled frame like a furnace, and the passengers next to us inch away. Marcus tends to have that effect on people. Both his personality and appearance remind me of sandpaper, the latter due to an unfortunate set of pockmark acne scars.

“Well, I found it *exhilarating*,” Paula says. “Didn’t you, Willow? Will?”

Willow turns and looks at us as if she’s just realized there are other people on the train. She shrugs her freckled shoulders, which look like they’ve been dusted with cinnamon, and starts to sing:

We are the world...

“Oh, no. Don’t you start,” Marcus says, but he’s drowned out by Paula.

We are the children...

A pair of senior citizens in shiny tracksuits chimes in, and soon all the people advertising Citibank and Coca-Cola are swaying and singing. No one knows the rest of the words, so they just la-la-la all the way to Jersey. I look at Marcus, feeling as saggy as my bag of laundry.

“What fools these mortals be,” he mutters.

. . .

The bar is packed when we arrive, and not just with people. Lucky McPuddles is the kind of claustrophobic restaurant-pub where they nail as much crap to the walls and ceiling as they can and call it atmosphere: street signs, bowling trophies, rocking chairs, carousel horses. It looks like the set of *Cats*. Add in all the high-haired Jersey girls dancing around piles of purses like witches at a cove and you can barely see the band.

And the band is the reason we’re here. Otherwise I wouldn’t set foot in Jersey. Not that I’ve got anything particular against my home state; I oppose all smug, complacent suburbs. As a result, I am not in the habit of eating mozzarella sticks while listening to a Bruce Springsteen cover band called Almost Bruce. But tonight is different. Tonight is the first time any of us will witness a performance of Almost Bruce’s new lead singer, Doug Grabowski.

Doug.

Doug, Doug, Doug, Doug, Doug.

I take some credit for the direction his life has taken. For it was I who first sensed that Doug yearned for a creative outlet beyond the Paleolithic pleasures of football. And it was I who convinced him to audition for Danny Zuko in the Wallingford Summer Workshop production of *Grease*, opening up a whole new world to him. But it was Doug who went to see Springsteen’s *Born in the USA* concert, which inspired him to follow in the rocker’s footsteps by dropping out of community college, taking up the guitar, and wearing very tight Levi’s.

There are worse things he could do.

Willow and I lose Paula and Marcus in the crowd as we push our way in. I still can’t see the stage, but I can hear a growly baritone that sounds just like the man Jerseyites simply refer to as Bruce.

This gun's for hire,

Even if we're just dancing in the dark.

I'm not a Springsteen fan. For all the hype about Bruce's lyrics being poetry, it bugs me when he mixes a metaphor ("This gun's for hire, even if we're just dancing in the dark?"); that is, when I can't understand what he's saying at all. Bruce Springsteen's mush-mouthed diction makes Bob Dylan sound like Henry Higgins.

No, as far as Jersey boys go, Springsteen may be the Boss, but Sinatra is still the Chairman of the Board. When Frank dances in the dark, he waltzes in the wonder of why we're here, looking for the light of a new love.

Now, that's poetry.

But since my failure is imprinted so firmly on my psyche, even Sinatra's music is spoiled for me. Just thinking of those classic Capitol recordings (easy to do—I know them so well I don't actually need to listen anymore) reminds me of Juilliard. You see, in order to pay for school, I kind of stole Frank Sinatra's identity. Well, not stole. More like borrowed. On the dubious advice of my cheesehead friend Nathan Nudelman, I used Ol' Blue Eyes's name to create a scholarship as a vehicle for laundering money so I could embezzle funds from my father when he refused to pay for acting school, which resulted in my actually embezzling the money from my evil ex-stepmonster, because she was embezzling from my father in the first place. That scheme didn't work out so well, forcing us to move to plan B, which entailed drugging my stepmonster and taking blackmail pictures of her passed out beneath Doug's absurdly large penis.

Y'know, just good, clean teen fun.

Memories of Doug naked—and of the one time we were nearly together—loom large in my imagination, so much so that I often question my mental health. Surely it's not normal to obsess so much about a straight guy. Not to mention pointless. And self-defeating. And humiliating.

And there he is.

Three

Doug shouts “Hey, baby!” and several women rush the stage. Suddenly there’s a clearing in the bracken of Big Jersey Hair, and my heart stops beating, presumably because all the blood has traveled to my groin. Doug’s outfitted in Bruce’s trademark checked shirt with the sleeves cut off, a bandanna wrapped around his head, and a pair of 501s caressing his thighs so tightly I momentarily forget my troubles, as well as my name and Social Security number. With his cowlicky hair dyed darker, he bears a surprising resemblance to Springsteen, all flashing teeth and sparkling eyes.

As a saxophone wails, Doug grooves to the music, his whole body swaying to the beat. The smile on his face is unmistakable—he’s drunk with the pleasure of performing—and he beams at the audience, flinging pheromones with each sweaty strut.

It’s not just the heat he generates that infatuates me; it’s the light he shines. Most straight guys are too macho and mumbly ever to express this kind of six-hundred-watt joy, but Doug’s not embarrassed to share the Pan-like pleasure he takes in performing. He seems so at home in his skin, so effortlessly comfortable in the world, so assuredly, maddeningly heterosexual. That’s the thing about guys with big dicks: They can be stupid, homely, poor—it doesn’t matter. They still have that confidence about them, that cockiness that says, *Guess what I have in my pants?*

To the shrieks of the hair down front, he extends a veiny arm into the crowd and pulls a slender woman in a pink ruffled miniskirt onto the stage. She spins around once, twice, three—*whoa*—four times, her square-cut cotton shirt rising to reveal her flat belly, her blond ponytail flying, her pampou legs rippling. She looks like a cross between a gazelle and Giselle.

Willow leans in to me. “Isn’t that your old girlfriend?”

I nod.

“What’s her name?”

Kelly.

I’m not surprised to see her—we planned to meet here, after all—but watching her rock out onstage with Doug gives me a pang. Last summer, when Kelly and I both worked at Six Flags Great Escape Adventure, I didn’t mind that she got cast in the revue while I spent two months baking inside a character costume. After all, she’s the Bennington dance major, not me, and I’d like to think I brought something new to the interpretation of Chuckles the Woodchuck. This past winter, however, we both auditioned for summer stock and, well, I was under a lot of stress at school and was fighting a cold which means Kelly’s got her Actor’s Equity card and I’ve got plenty of nuthin’.

I'm happy for her. Really.

I mean it.

No, really.

Okay, here's the thing: Kelly and Doug were like my protégés. I'm the one who lit that flame inside them. Now they're both three-alarm fires and I'm burned out.

Kelly bobs like a piston, each limb throwing off sparks of enthusiasm. She shimmies at Doug, like she did when she played Sandy to his Danny in *Grease*, and he laughs in recognition. They look so comfortable together onstage, so free, so uninhibited.

It makes me want to shoot them both, then myself.

The song finishes and, as the crowd cheers, I hear a man's voice behind me say, "They look good together, no?" The accent is indeterminately Continental, which either means Lucky McPuddles has been discovered by Euro-trash or I've been discovered by Ziba.

I turn around and there she is, literally the height of fashion. Her new hairdo extends upward like a skyscraper, adding another five inches to what she refers to as her five-foot-twelve frame, making her look like a very startled Cleopatra. I try to hug her, but am impaled on a pair of earrings shaped like Calder mobiles.

"Come," she says, tickling me under the chin. "I can't bear watching Kelly flirt with men." To Ziba's endless frustration, Kelly continues to experiment with heterosexuality.

I leave Willow, who's dancing alone with her eyes closed, and follow Ziba through the crowd, which is easy to do because she's five-foot-seventeen and wears a pleather tube dress and patterned stockings.

Once we're in the bar I'm pleased to see I'm not carded. There's nothing like bitter disappointment to lend you an air of gravitas. I order a pair of tequila shooters, both for myself. Ziba observes me, her face as unreadable as the *Wall Street Journal*.

"You look awful," she says.

"Thanks," I mutter as I knock back my first glass of liquid amnesia. "I feel awful."

She retrieves a cigarette from a sleek silver case, tapping it on the lid with the assurance of someone who's watched lots of black-and-white movies. "Well, at least you're consistent." She dangles the cig between two fingers, the Internationally Recognized Signal for "Light me, darling." Or, to be more precise, "I'm too pretentious to light it myself." Or maybe, "I refuse to let you wallow in self-pity. It's not good for you, and you know how excessive displays of emotion make me uncomfortable."

I pick up her lighter and increase her chances of lung cancer. "You should quit, you know."

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she says, exhaling a long stream of exhaust. “No one likes a quitter.”

Ziba.

“Besides,” she continues, “if I’m going to quit anything, it’ll be the Fashion Institute. You don’t know how lucky you are to be out of school, Edward.” Her voice drops an octave as she adds, “I’m bored.”

I remind her that her rigorous schedule of partying with other expat Persians actually prevents her from attending classes.

“That’s why I’m so bored,” she says. “I need a project. I called Nathan to see if he has any idea but his roommate said he was at home and his parents said he was at school. Have you heard from him?”

Of all of our high school friendships, none is more unlikely than that of the five-foot-twelve Persian lesbian and her five-foot-four Jewish sidekick. It’s the Ayatollah Khomeini’s worst nightmare. “I haven’t seen Natie since New Year’s,” I say, nor do I want to think about what kind of trouble he’s gotten into. Nathan Nudelman is like a headline—all bad news. “Maybe he’s been recruited by the CIA.”

Ziba exhales a dragon’s breath of smoke. “No, he’d tell me if he were.”

Just then, Kelly appears, breaking through Ziba’s cloud like the sun.

“There you are!” she says, giving me an I-haven’t-seen-you-since-you-got-kicked-out-of-school-but-I-love-you-anyway-even-though-you’re-a-loser hug. Or, at least, that’s how I interpret it. She brushes my bangs out of my eyes, which is hard to do when they’ve been moussed into submission, and gives me a moist, soulful gaze. Her eyes are made up to camouflage her heterochromia, a condition that causes them to be two different colors, one favoring blue, the other brown. Kelly recalls somewhere that Vivien Leigh didn’t actually have green eyes and that the effect in *Gone With the Wind* was accomplished through skillful makeup and lighting, so now she’s got this complicated Bloomingdale’s-makeup-counter regimen. Even with Monet’s *Water Lilies* on her eyelids, there’s no mistaking her pity. And I won’t be pitied by anyone. Except, of course, myself.

From the other room the band starts up again. “C’mon,” I say, feigning enthusiasm. “I love the song!” I don’t, but I’ve got to get out from under the weight of her kindness. Grasping Kelly’s hand like a lifeline, I squeeze into the back of the room, where we watch Doug perform with acrobatic abandon—jumping up on the amp, sliding across the stage on his knees, leaping into the crowd—and my body begins to ache. Not just for Doug, although that’s easy to do when so many of the songs are addressed to love objects with androgynous names like Frankie, Ricky, and Terry and have titles like “I’m Goin’ Down” and “Ramrod,” but also for myself, for the person I used to be. Back in high school I was the madcap *bon vivant* who cavorted onstage and off, a puckish Pied Piper who led the parade of the Play People. But two years of being told I perform too much—that I push, show, and indicate—have made me timid. I went to school to learn how to act and I’ve become inert.

After the show we snag ourselves a table, but, having drunk four (five? okay, six) tequila shooters,

find that the print on the menu keeps rearranging itself into kaleidoscopic patterns, like showgirls in a Busby Berkeley musical.

“Whah goes wid tequila?” I ask Ziba.

“Blackouts.”

I look across the room, which tilts like the deck of the *Titanic*, and see Doug surrounded by Jersey girls seeking autographs. Autographs! Back in high school he didn't know a whole note from a friend's egg, and now he's signing autographs. I resist the urge to march across the room and pull his fans off of him, screaming, “Back off, bitches, he's *mine!*” Instead I order another shooter, wishing I could arrange for an intravenous drip.

I turn back to the table, where Kelly's telling everyone what it's like to join Actor's Equity.

“They've even got a newsletter,” she says, pulling it out of her bag.

Marcus sneers. “You carry it around with you?”

“I brought it for Edward,” Kelly snips, then, turning to me, adds, “I figured you could use it, not that you're...Well, it's got a lot of great inside information.”

I flip through pages of casting calls, obituaries, and apartment notices, all of them swirling information, then fold the newsletter in quarters so it'll fit in my back pocket.

“Fanks,” I gurgle.

There's an awkward silence, as silences are wont to be. A quick inventory of the participants doesn't bode well for conversation: Marcus is in a mood, Ziba's aloof, I'm drunk, and Willow is, well, Willow. That leaves Paula and Kelly to do the heavy lifting.

“So where are you working this summer?” Paula asks in a cheery, talk-show tone.

“Akron Under the Stars.”

We all nod like we're impressed. Kelly tries to downplay being cast as Dream Laurey in *Oklahoma!* by explaining that she looks like the woman playing the regular daytime Laurey. *Her success has nothing to do with me*, I say to myself.

Eventually Doug struts over to our table. As usual, Paula takes charge. “Can you sit with us? Come sit. Edward, let him sit. Pleeze, sit, sit, sit.”

Fine, I think, *just stop saying “sit.”* I start to get up, a little miffed that I'm the one being asked to give up my seat, but Doug just nudges me over, sharing it with me. On the sound track in my mind, a thousand violins begin to play.

Paula continues as hostess. “Doug, have you met My Boyfriend, Marcus?”

If this were acting class, Marian Seldes would tell Paula she's telegraphing the subtext: "My little bird, don't *show* us that you're uncomfortable introducing your current boyfriend to a well-endowed man you used to sleep with recreationally. *Be* uncomfortable."

Doug and Marcus each give that upward nod of the head that guy-guys do, two alpha dogs.

"Hey."

"Hey."

Paula gestures to Willow. "And this is our roommate Willow."

Willow just laughs, as if someone told a joke only flakes can hear. She hands Doug a bar napkin. "Can I have your autograph?"

Doug reaches into his back pocket, his hand brushing against my thigh, and a shiver crosses my face and down my neck, making the hair on my arms stand on end. But then he pulls a pen out of his pocket and I feel myself die a little. Having autograph seekers is one thing; being ready is another. As he signs, Willow says, "You're a sweater."

Doug looks confused, a near-universal response where Willow is concerned. "I'm a what?"

"A sweater."

"Ya' mean, like a cardigan?"

"No. Like a big, wet, sweaty mess."

Doug furrows his eyebrows at me, the Internationally Recognized Signal for "The redhead's a freak, but I'd still bone her." If he does, that'll leave Marcus as the only person at the table with whom Doug hasn't had a sexual encounter.

I look down at the napkin, which he's signed, *Doug Grab*.

"Where's the-owski?" I ask. "Ya' need anudder napkin?"

"Doug Grabowski sounds like a teamster," he says. "Doug Grab is a rock star." He looks around the table. "Whaddya guys think?"

"It's a bit aggressive," Ziba says, swirling the Courvoisier in her glass. "But so's rock 'n' roll."

"I like it," Kelly says.

"Why don't you just call yourself Almost Bruce?" Marcus says, biting into a chicken strip.

Doug narrows his eyes. "'Cuz that's not my name."

You can almost hear the Western showdown music.

“I’ve got it!” Willow says. “Why don’t you call yourself the Sweater?”

For a moment we’re all united in our shared opinion of Willow. “He can’t call himself the Sweater,” Paula says.

“Why not?”

Paula begins to explain and I tune out. Willow and I have conversations like this nightly while we lie in our hammocks: “How come, when you pick up a rock and there are all those bugs and worms and stuff underneath, how come they’re not smushed? And how come, in *Cinderella*, the coach and the footmen and the dress all turn back to what they were at midnight but the glass slippers stay the same? And how come...”

Doug turns to me. “So?”

“Sew buttons.”

“Whadja think, man?” he says. “How was I?”

He cares what I think. Of course, he doesn’t know yet that I’ve been kicked out of school. That my opinion is obviously worthless.

I look straight into his eyes—all six (seven?) of them.

“You. Were. Great.” I concentrate on each word to make sure they come out in the right order. “Raw. An’ electric. An’...”

“And what?”

“I forgot whut I wuz gonna say. Oh! An’ you were to-talilly in the moment. Totalilly. And I’m no jussayin’ that ’cuz I’m a lipple titsy...a tittle lipsy...’cuz I’m drunk.”

“Thanks, man,” he says. “That means a lot to me.” He puts his hand on my shoulder, and it takes every bit of self-control I have left not to lean over and lick him.

I am twenty years old and, thanks to a not unreasonable fear that sex with the wrong person will kill me, I have only gotten laid once in the last two years. Once! And even that wasn’t so great. After a summer sweating inside the woodchuck costume, I finally hooked up with one of the dancers in the Six Flags revue, which we called Six Fags because all of the guys were gay. But he wasn’t really my type. None of them were. Those swishy dancer guys just make me cringe. I mean, if I wanted to date a woman, I would. After all, women are still my second-favorite people to have sex with, but they’re a distant second. I guess you could say I was on the “bi now, gay later” plan.

I’m brought back into the conversation when I hear Kelly mention a wedding Ziba’s going to. I’m always eager to hear about Ziba’s Persian social life, her “Arabian nights” at trendy bars with private rooms and subtle lighting.

“Why do you have to be so mysterious?” Kelly says, then announces to the rest of the table, “She’s going to the shah’s wedding.”

“The shah of Iran?” Marcus says. “I thought he was dead.”

“It’s his son,” Kelly says, “the one who would’ve been shah if his father hadn’t been deposed.”

“What do you call the son of a shah?” Paula asks. “The prince?”

Ziba hesitates just long enough for the rest of us to volley the possibilities:

Shah Junior

Shah Lite

The Man Who Would Be Shah

I Can’t Believe It’s Not the Shah

Shah-Nah-Nah

Shahma-Lahma-Ding-Dong

George Bernard Shah

Almost Shah

When pressed for details, Ziba answers in vague generalities, leaving us all to wonder just how close she is to royalty. Marcus won’t let it go, though, and bores into her with his coal black eyes. “So you’re a monarchist?”

Ziba opens her mouth just enough to let the smoke out, like when there’s a fire behind a closed door. “Politics bore me.”

“But you’re going to his wedding. That’s a political act.”

Paula rests a tiny hand on Marcus’s arm. “Honey, calm down.”

“Why should I?” he says, rising. “That’s the problem with all of you. You’re too complacent in your bourgeois bubble.” He then embarks on a Marxist diatribe I won’t repeat, mostly because I can’t follow it. Something about the exploitation of the common people by the evil-white-male-military-industrial-corporate complex, which, somehow, is personified by a five-foot-seventeen Persian lesbian. He finishes by marching out without paying.

Paula apologizes for him. “The graduating class just did their presentations for agents and casting directors. Marcus didn’t go over as well as he would have liked.”

Willow nods as she sticks the paper umbrella from her piña colada in her hair. “Some agent said he had a face like a sea sponge.”

The party breaks up from there, and I immediately mourn the demise of the evening. I don’t want to leave my friends—not yet, not so soon. My petty neuroses aside, I never feel more like myself than

when I'm with them, and I feel desperate to hang on to that feeling. I wish we could go everywhere together, like wolves or Japanese tourists. Not only are my friends a safe harbor in which to dock, they're the lighthouse guiding me home across storm-tossed seas.

But I have to make a duty call—at a port I have no desire to visit.

Four

It's after two when I stagger down the hall to my old room, swaying back and forth with my bag of laundry as if I were dancing with it. I don't know how my dad can stand living in a four-bedroom split-level ranch all by himself. Actually, I don't know how anyone could stand living in a four-bedroom split-level ranch period, particularly if you could afford any of Wallingford's many charming Colonials or Tudors. As always, Al's got financial reasons for keeping it—something about capital gains and a onetime exertion. (Excursion? Excretion? Whatever.) But it's a sad place, the house my mother walked out of when I was twelve, and the house I walked out of shortly before my eighteenth birthday, slamming the door on the Teutonic nightmare that was my evil ex-stepmonster. Plus, it's a four-bedroom split-level ranch, which just sucks.

I slip in the door to my old room as quietly as is possible when your body is do-si-doing against its will, unzip my pants, shimmy across the room, and flop onto the bed face-first.

Onto a sleeping body.

I'm not sure who screams first, me or the woman. I scramble to get off of her, a task made easier when she knees me in the groin. While I cringe on the floor, she yells, "*AYUDA! AYÚDAME!*"

The door flies open, and I see the silhouette of a caveman with a club.

"*POP! IT'S ME! IT'S ME! IT'S ME!*" I yell, suddenly sober. Life-threatening terror can do that to you.

"Eddie?" He flips on the light to find me sprawled on the floor, my pants around my ankles, while a plump young woman sobs in Spanish.

"What the fuck's goin' on?" Al says, putting down the baseball bat. His furry frame is covered only by a towel, giving him the unfortunate appearance of a skirted dancing bear.

"I don't know," I gasp. "All I tried to—"

"Milagros, you okay?"

"Spanish Spanish Spanish Spanish," Milagros says.

"THIS. IS. MY. SON," he shouts, like she's retarded instead of foreign.

The woman pulls the neck of her oversize T-shirt up over her face, hiding her head behind the wool. RELAX. She looks to be in her late twenties.

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