

Him

by Felix Cross

I am an actor, on the first day of rehearsals for a new production of a reasonably well-known play. First days are always a mixture of nervous excitement and the imposter-syndrome fear that this is the show where I am found out – where it is realised by everyone that I don't actually have any talent and my little success so far has been down to pure luck. I have never worked with nor met the other four actors and they barely register my presence, which is strange as I am playing the lead role. So, I am about to introduce myself to them when the director, an established figure in the theatre, enters followed by a stage manager full of scripts. The director calls me to one side, eye to eye, and quietly says, "Sorry Felix by we have decided to let you go; we have found somebody else."

Wordlessly, automatically, like I was expecting it, I get up and leave; stunned, shocked, mustn't show it. The door shuts silently behind me; I'm hot with anger, embarrassment, frustration; so, this is what it is like.

The sting at its most painful; slowly and mechanically getting my things packed in the green room, I glimpse someone else entering from outside and walking through to the rehearsal room. I realise this person is my replacement. My eyes cannot pull away; he looks oddly familiar. Surprisingly, he is wearing exactly the same clothes as I am and, as he turns slightly in my direction, I freeze and realise. He is me.

The door closes the behind him/me; beyond, voices of welcome. I quietly climb some steps leading up to windows from where I can peer down into the rehearsal room and watch me, my replacement-self. We/They are now sitting around a table with their scripts and beginning to read the play. I have the opening monologue, which he now reads. It's strange and not strange but he reads it in exactly the way I would have read it; his mannerisms, that I now recognise – the way he rubs his nose, clears his throat, glances unnoticed at the attractive actress – these are the things I do and he does them exactly how I do them. He is me, but he cannot be; because if he was really me, I would be inside his head, knowing what he was thinking; in fact I would be doing the thinking. But I'm not, I can't; so, he must be some kind of an imposter. One of us is.

I cannot bear this; he has my role; he has stolen it. What is he doing that I can't? I decide to confront him and the director. Back down the steps, I enter the rehearsal room; for a split second I actually wonder whether I am invisible, that I have perhaps split from my body and he is the physical part; but no, the moment my footsteps sound on the floorboards they all look up, including him. The play reading has stopped, the company stares at me, my purpose evaporates.

"I just came to see...I thought I had forgotten my coat..."

He and I lock eyes. But he doesn't flinch; if he recognises himself in me, he doesn't show it.

"But aren't you wearing your coat?", one of the actors asks.

“Silly me”.

Outside, on the pavement. Breathless, I need to think. A nearby café; a seat in a corner where, surprisingly for my profession, I can be unseen, hidden from...I don't know who. The tea is strong and jolts me into a reality. Why haven't I called my agent? Of course! She can sort this out; finally do something for her twelve and a half percent plus vat. Sadie the flirty receptionist answers as always.

“Hallo darling. How's it going?”

I pretend some chat and she puts me through.

“Shouldn't you be in rehearsal?”

“I.. have they called you?”

“No. What's the matter?”

“They haven't rung at all?”

“Where are you? We sent you directions. Shall I call them to say you're on your way?”

“No it's okay, I'm there.”

“Oh good. It's a lovely script. Enjoy!”

Her banal cheeriness still echoes as I finish my tea.

I go for a walk; around the block a couple of times; sit in a nearby park and wait. In an hour they'll be on a break. Maybe, like me, he will come outside for a quick smoke. I'll confront him then.

I realise my script is in my bag and I pointlessly start going through my lines in scene one. The monologue is good, well written, tasty. I imagine delivering it to a packed house; opening speeches are tricky because the audience have yet to settle down, but my speech – for it is MY speech – knocks them into an instant, silent, communal focus that will last until the final words of the play are spoken, also by me, ninety minutes later.

I must have worked that speech for a long time because I look up and see, across the park, through the railings, figures leaning against the wall of the church hall. He stands prominently amongst them; they circle around him; he is their focus. With the reading over, they know why he is cast in that role.

I get up to walk towards them; one of them nearly looks my way; this is all a bit creepy – me – stalking them, him, I turn back. I need to get him on his own. I'll have to wait until the end of the day and follow him home, but to where? - a chill surges through me - His place? My place?

But of course, like me, he has to have that second cigarette and, as the others, return to work, he lights up one more, coolly and self-satisfyingly, head back, tight braids of black hair flat against the wall; exhaling into the cold air. Angered, I march towards him, ready again to confront.

About ten feet from him I shout.

“Hey! You!”

He barely turns. Fuck he is cool. Am I like that? Is that how people see me?

“Can I help?” Innocent and almost concerned.

“Who are you?”

“Me? I’m just...look I understand how you must feel...”

“But who...? What’s your name?”

“I’ve had the same thing happen to me. It’s not nice I know.”

“You...you’re me”

“What?”

“Look at us!”

He does, indeed he looks at us both. For a good, long while. Then he laughs; not maliciously but inclusively, kindly.

“Yeah, I know what you mean. Can’t be more than one of us in a five-hander. Sorry man.”

He stubs out his smoke, offers me his hand to shake. It feels exactly as my hand would. He walks inside.

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