

Pretending To Be Somebody Else

If he hadn't been reminded of *Friction* on the walk home Billy might have forgotten about it. Although he'd signed for auditions within a few days of the acting conversation with mom, he didn't see any point in them now. The thought of pretending to be somebody else and then trying to convince an audience of it seemed ludicrous. And where does it get you financially? Forget about those movie stars—99.5% of the acting community's poorer than poor.

Billy could see himself waiting tables in a New York restaurant ten years later, trying to convince a high-powered exec at table nine that he's really an actor. "Sure kid," the guy would say. "So is half of Manhattan."

Still, Billy had made the final cut for the lead and he didn't want to bail at the last second like that without finding someone to fill in. It wouldn't be cool to leave Mr. Whitmore on the hook. He should have a choice over who gets the lead. (It was down to him and Preston Ames, the kid who played oboe and sat behind him in algebra.)

There were still several sessions before the final casting though—lots of time for someone else to step up and take his place. Billy took the script off his bed and leafed through the pages, noting the highlighted passages where his character Bucky Retson spoke. Terry knocked on the door before he could get to the big scene.

"Hey," Terry said from the other side of the door, "how about a game of ping pong-a-ruski?"

"Did grandpa fix the table?"

"He sure did."

For the longest time the table had bent hinges where it folded so there was a huge dip on one side and an uneven playing surface. The net braces were also broken so any time someone hit a shot into the nylon it collapsed and had to be reset.

"The bend's gone?" Billy asked.

"Yea—grandpa got some hardware and took care of it. He bought a new net and braces too. It's ready to go."

John Parisi

Billy figured grandpa would be eager to fix the table once the two of them moved in. He just didn't expect it so soon. "All right, get it set up and I'll whip your butt."

"We just played five games and I only beat him once. I had to pretend I liked getting humiliated for rematches."

"Pretend?" Billy asked, raising the *Friction* script in his hands.

"Yea, pretend," Terry said.

Billy came out of his room holding a stack of stapled paper. It was well leafed, like it had been studied thoroughly. If his brother was preparing for some kind of mega-test, Terry didn't know of it.

"How would you feel about taking over the lead for me in *Friction*?" Billy asked.

Terry raised an eyebrow. Only a few months earlier his brother had been going on and on about how he was going to be the next Harrison Ford or Marlon Brando or Al Pacino—now he was ready to hand over his debut role like a dead skunk.

"What gives?" Terry asked. "I thought you were psyched about that. Your first shot at the big time."

"Were is exactly right—I'm not into it now."

Terry took the script out of his brother's hands and flipped through the pages, noting the highlighted areas where Bucky Retson opened his big fat white-trash mouth.

"*Friction*, huh?" Terry said.

"That's the name of it."

Terry tucked the script under arm. "Can I think about it?"

"No sweat. Just let me know by the end of the week if it's a yay or a nay. I can't let it go longer than that—the final audition is in two weeks and I don't want to leave Mr. Whitmore without a choice for the lead."

"Who else is going for it?"

"Preston Ames."

"Oh." Terry knew Preston from Spanish class. He was definitely different, but very articulate. Terry wasn't sure that talent was necessary to play Bucky Retson. Of course, there was a bigger issue—Cassie was playing Audrey Winnow, the female lead. Terry knew Audrey from

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reading the play earlier. She was obsessed with her own vanity. Cassie playing Audrey? Naah.

“Grandpa still got his mean backhand?” Billy asked.

“As devastating as ever. Let me dump this in my room and I’ll meet you in the basement.”

“We’ll spin the paddle to see who serves.”

Terry plunked the script down on his bed and it opened to a passage where Bucky Retson was demonstrating his role-model behavior. The passage was underscored with notes written in the margin. They were scrawled in tiny print, on a diagonal so they could fit next to the typed words. Mom would be proud, Terry thought.

He could barely read his brother’s hand. Mindless—physical is only thing he understands—barbaric, primitive the notes said. Terry’s eyes shifted to the all-important text:

Audrey reads quietly in the living room, stroking her cat. The front door slams as Bucky returns from work. He storms in carrying a handful of bills.

Audrey:

Oh hello honey—didn’t hear you come in. You’re as quiet as a mouse.

Bucky:

What the hell you doin’? What the hell you doin’?

Audrey:

What does it look like I’m doing?

Bucky slaps his considerable stack of envelopes with the back of his hand.

Bucky:

This—this! This is what it’s all about! The phone bills. The gas bills. The rent. The bill from the mechanic for the transmission. The food. The dry cleaning. Insurance. This is what it’s about!

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Bucky snatches Audrey's book from her hands and throws it to the floor. He lunges to the bookshelf and yanks the books out by the bindings.

Bucky:

This stuff doesn't do anything—it doesn't put food on the table—it doesn't pay the taxman!

Bucky sticks his face in Audrey's.

Bucky:

What does it give us Aud? Huh? What? What!

Audrey:

Peace of mind perhaps—ever consider that caveman! Ever think of that?

That's me a T—Terry said to himself. Funny thing was he knew plenty of people who acted that way day in and day out, every minute—that meathead Dave Rudolph, for example. Terry remembered how old *Friction* was. We're 50 years further down the evolutionary cycle, but have we evolved? Mr. Charles Darwin might have an interesting case here—survival of the unfittest.

Billy's voice carried from downstairs.

"You gonna get down here or what? I only have time for one game before I hit the books."

"Coming," Terry said, with the Neanderthal antics of Bucky Retson bouncing around in his brain.

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By the time Terry got back to his room he'd actually broken a sweat. Over table tennis? Maybe it will become the next big exercise craze—no spinning classes, no aerobics, but ping pong-a-ruski—guaranteed to remove those pesky love handles in two weeks or your money back!

Someone had been in his room during the game. It was probably grandpa, because several of mom's paintings and a few of her boxes

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were leaning against the far wall under the window. Terry slumped in his chair. He didn't feel doing any homework.

There was a note on his desk from grandpa. A few of the things your mother wanted you to have, it read. You can go through them when you have a chance—no hurry.

No hurry? Yea right, no hurry. He's trying to jam her stuff down my throat and I'm supposed to eat it up like nothing's happened.

Terry sulked over to the boxes and paintings as if beginning a hated chore, like weeding or cleaning the garage. There were four paintings, smaller than the ones he'd rifled through in the attic. A few more books and scattered papers were stacked next to them, as well as a box full of who knows what else. He definitely wasn't in the mood. Without thinking he picked up the paintings and books and headed for grandpa/Nana's room.

Terry dropped the paintings and books in the corner next to the night table. One of the paintings fell on its side, but he didn't bother to stand it up. A couple of the books popped open. He slammed the covers shut, stacked them on top of each other and headed back to his room. There was another box.

The last one had mom's handwriting on the side. My assorted knick-knacks it read in her distinctive print. Terry ripped open the side flaps and found several of her favorite brushes—the horsehide bristle ones. He poked through the contents. There were some of her most expensive oil paints, a few small, blank canvases, various pens, pencils and a notebook with doodles on the cover. Perhaps this was her diary or sketchbook. Whatever, Terry wasn't concerned. Just the same, he flipped the cover. The first page had three big quotations written in felt-tip marker.

The spirit is the true self
—Cicero

*The happiness of your life depends
on the quality of your thoughts*
—Marcus Aurelius

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The full-grown modern human being...is
conscious of touching the highest pinnacle
of fulfillment...when he is consumed in the
service of an idea

—R. Briffault

Terry flung the book against the wall. He picked it up and threw it again as hard as he could against the baseboard. The spine cracked.

"Billy!" He screamed, running out of the room and down the stairs. "Billy," he called, turning the corner around the hall.

His brother was studying on the kitchen table. Billy liked to do that in the evenings because it gave him a chance to spread everything out so he could go back and forth between his books, notes and printouts without having to leaf through the material separately. He called his method seamless studying. Perhaps he could market that idea in the future. It would be worth millions.

"Billy!" Terry yelled.

"What are you screaming like a banshee for?"

"I'd be happy to take the lead in *Friction*."

"You would? Awesome. That gets me off the hook big time. What changed your mind?"

Terry thought of his mother's things scattered everywhere upstairs.

"Nothing. When do I have to touch base with Mr. Whitmore?"

"Sooner the better. He has office hours tomorrow afternoon—I'll go in with you if you want."

"Sounds good."