



TYLER DEMPSEY

The Actor

DEMPSEY

Characters have visions of true life— they dream reality and then they are lost. – Felipe Alfau

This story, I've been writing, writing, and writing some more. Then writing some more. If I approach it too serious, it falls flat on its face. I think, *make it a comedy*. Then I remember being funny is hard.

When I write I never begin with a character specifically in mind. I become interested when my imagination retires— the job becomes getting it down just right, I can detach from the sentimentality of my characters, and I can do anything. Like kill them.

I'm not badass. I'm not the Yahweh of mental faculties. I'm more of a puzzle master. Believe me *nothing* dries up a woman's pants faster than that. But I have a good ear. And what am I to do? I'm dull. Mystery confounds

me. It's terrifying. I'll wear the same clothes, all week, so the lady at the post office isn't wondering.

My wife thinks I'm crazy. She'll say, "You're crazy." But let her say what she likes. There's no use trying to go changing.

The protagonist I'm wrestling with isn't like me at all, more in the surrealist strata — self-destructive, blurry direction, and worst of all, imaginative.

It takes tremendous urgency to motivate me to write. Or do anything really. Maybe a beautiful dilemma, or conundrum, will finally dawn my 'flirting-with-pudgy' (the wife) ass into slow grind-n-squeal first gear.

I tell her, "In some countries, cookie dough's sexy."

"So is a high heel to the dick."

She's sweet.

I'll move myself to avoid a hassle or something much harder.

I know the story will be called "The Actor," and that's all I have, just a title and a general feeling. It's horrible. Feelings kill. I try keeping the wife blind to being worked up but she's been noticing, and lighting a bunch of candles, and playing Mariah Carey *non-stop*. I've been hiding unused condoms in Bibles and under utility bills. Things she never uses. But I've developed this rash—

A friend once remarked of my writing, "your char-

acters are possessive, but that only feels like scraping at the surface. Their words, hit you, strangely, whatever it is driving them.”

My characters are caricatures. I didn’t tell my friend that. But this keeps things *nice* and boring.

In this instance in spite of how blatantly I work to be uninteresting this ‘actor’ keeps virgin-on-prom-nighting-it, leaving me wishing I had been a murderously weak-hearted landscape painter instead of just a murderously weak-scrotumed writer.

Just think of life as such a painter! No mountains. No rivers — tweak my neck — there’s the barn with colors so weak they’re peeling from the canvas, and my cholesterol spikes, glacially. I never get it right but jab at paint none-the-less and smile unrapturous.

This bastard has me dreaming.

I can’t frame a scene, can’t hear the story, all my techniques are thrown out of whack. Because he’s scandalous, re-reading scenes I find them wracked in double entendre.

Example:

“Thank you guys so much; dinner is utterly *delectable*.” Seems simple, right?

Then I’m forced afterward to have someone else at the table respond with,

“Well, we should all be grateful.”

You see what I mean?

Example 2, exposing double entendre *entendable*:

“Thank you guys so much, dinner is utterly *delectable*, albeit, a little awkward.”

“Yeah, it is. Oh, and by the way, that guy should fuck himself.”

Despite how it looks things aren’t *all* blowjobs and neck-‘til-dawns.

So I’ve begun cutting more and more of the story. I write whole scenes where we hang out in my living room, talk hours about the weather or run the whole-length bibliography of Anatole France. My psychotic laughter has the walls in disrepair. I hear Diana, my wife, making phone calls to Rolling Meadows, which is the local watering hole for husbands who’ve lost it.

How to exorcise this story?

Get to belly laughing, over lemonade with wife.

I’m desperate.

A year passes uncomfortably. Then another. I break out the story again and pine for that ‘fresh’ perspective. After throwing away most everything here are two sentences I don’t hate:

He steps out below the descending line of streetlight,

framed by the darkness sliding by. He lights a cigarette.

On second thought that cigarette's got to go.

I should put these drafts away. Call it quits. Giving up usually makes me feel better. But it'll be hard to sleep. And he'll be scheming.

Many pages are *just* out of reach, one handful in a sad heap in the corner amongst pubic hair and other dander.

I'll tidy up in the morning.

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...Now that naming is out of the way, so long as I'm quiet, I'm alone on Front Street; faint music floats a few streets away from a bar. I'm long done with this cigarette.

There's no cover. I grab a stool at the bar. *Give me one, Freddie! Shit, give me two!*

"Name's Joe, pal."

The band is between songs. Fidgeting with equipment, the guitarist mouths something to a sound guy, obviously getting the canned desperation response of the dive-bar technician. I'm guessing Bluegrass. The stage is absorbing quite a dearth of wool pants. The sweating is palpable. It's early.

"Eww *whheee*"! Pitches a blonde from down close, which initiates some half-assed whistles from a guy who looks like Willie Nelson. Willie Nelson if he just gave up

and started letting his clothes rot off.

A snug wreath of people choke around the dance floor folks. The dance floor folks lubricate, prolifically. The heat could singe eyebrows.

I finish my brandy; let the stool-back hold my coat. Order another brandy.

The band's at it again.

A girl moves at the back of all this mess. When I people watch I never watch men, unless they look funny, but usually it's women.

She's with two friends— both guys so they slide out of the picture. She laughs, which sends her features quivering. She wears it well. She is down under an overhead light. From my advantage I can see her tattoo (a butterfly, shoulder to shoulder) of which her outfit portrays nicely.

She dances. I think maybe she's had training. I think her friends have trained too. The guys' feet never touch bottom. The pulse grabs a few of the young ladies and shakes them up and down by the spine. Something catches in my throat. I drink it down.

I finish a third brandy and leave it and the jacket behind. I slip as un-disturbingly and emotionless as possible into the folds and shifting crowd-currents. I want to be able to watch her, in proximity, hear something she

might say to one of her friends, while praying they aren't that close of friends.

They've slipped into their own circles and seem not to be focusing on one another that much. Their bodies rub occasionally.

I let the music start from way down low. It moves up, slowly. It shifts and circles my feet. The length of the rhythm determines my personal "space."

The song has a natural swell to it with the progression giving it away. I've worked to within maybe five feet of her. I dance.

A contortion of dancers separates us and I'm closer to the stage than she is. I know she sees me so I look everywhere but at her.

When I really dance, I lose myself. The poets and ecstasies write constantly about it. From them it's about, in the moment. I feel more of an *un*-moment— but I understand what they're getting at. Every touch of my toes, curve of my back, twirl of my fingers, is a beat real or imaginable. The music and room submit to it. Every eye on me is power. Real, *fist-fighting* power. Your energy expresses over others. They're entirely under your control. And they can't help it.

I turn and we lock in each other's eyes. I smile knowingly. She grins back.

"You got moves!"

The word "m-o-v-e-s" shoots out of her mouth.

I play it off. I didn't expect her to talk to me. I like the way she seems not to care what her words really mean.

"But what about *you*?"

It's her turn to smile. She dances harder. So far, scripted.

It's time to be funny.

"Is this an all ages show?"

She seems to me pretty young plus I'm making fun of the crowd. It works. She laughs.

"We're all equals here." She says.

I don't agree but I laugh anyways. I try to be 'on her level.'

Her eyes are back. She smiles, and for the briefest *flash* looks down before burning into me. I grab the back of her neck, and I dissolve those lips, press against her body; I try sucking in everything that's left.

I pull back and colors swirl around our heads. I've given myself to her moment, momentarily.

"Look," I say, "I've gotta' go."

"But—"

Damn these scripts.

So I tell her let's get together soon. She agrees. I seem not to care what the words really mean.

“...anytime.” She appears a little hurt.
I nearly rip the stool down getting at my jacket.

As soon as I’m outside I begin thinking. What made me do that? There I was, acting natural. She must have instigated it somehow. Those looks? And conversation. Carefree. One of her friends was, obviously, interested in her. He said something and she was laughing. Make me believe. I’m going down again.

Drifting into un-reality, the mind loves creating. Just loosen hold of your imagination.

When I was five my family took a vacation. We camped for a few days by a lake or river. I want to say a river. It’s my earliest memory.

It was common. I got separated from my family. I just walked off.

After a minute of ‘kidding’ around I heard a voice in my ears. It was as if I had said something to myself without realizing. The voice called my name just above a whisper. I checked around and didn’t see my parents.

I went on playing. The voice came again. And this time I wasn’t alone. Perched on a log where the sand-bank met the tree line was a man. Upon seeing him, the thought, *the circus* drifted through my head. He wore all ancient clothes and a little hardened cap. He let his legs

swing from a branch. A crooked smile stabbed the side of his face.

I walked closer, but hesitantly. A smell like forest animal hit me. He must have been about two feet tall. Too damned short. I was five. I didn’t trust him.

“How do you know I’m me?” This was actually what I asked.

“Because, I have something for you,” he winked, “but let’s make it quick!”

“I’m not suppose to take things from strangers.”

“Jesus, kid! My name’s Daemon, so there, we’re not strangers. And besides it belongs to you. So give me your hand.”

I did as I was told.

He got to his feet and hopped just a little, raising his arms to make a ‘V’. Then he started shrinking. He shrank to the size of a toothpick. It only took a couple of seconds.

He jumped into my hand.

He was acting differently. He could barely keep still. He spun around and kicked out his legs one after the other, and grabbed his gut to laugh painfully. His voice had changed the most, now tuned high like a television set. It spilled out something terrible. A deeper register crept in now and again at undetermined moments, seemingly

possessed.

“*Eat me!*”

I nearly dropped him. Where were my parents?

Daemon danced a dirge. He was drunk on something. I was scared. Most likely at this point I wet myself.

“*Eat me! Eat me! Eat me!*”

“Tell me what happens first!” I was shaking.

“If you let me in I’ll climb, I’ll be in your ear in no time. Then I’ll live. I’ll live for all the days. My voice gives you something to hope for. It directs you. It tells you stories that’ll make you rich. And the ladies! *Whoa!*”

“The ladies?”

“Don’t worry about it, damnit. You’ll have superpowers. The whole world will answer to you. *Wha’do’ya’say?*”

“Will it hurt?” This had me scared the most. (But it might have been embarrassment.)

“No, I promise.” He rubbed his little hands together. “All you have to do is once it’s over, listen. I’ll be there. Here let’s make it easy.”

He curled up and wrapped his arms around the outside of his knees, ducking his head. I stood there looking. A *voice* living in my head? At this point my mother called my name somewhere on the wind, then my father. They were looking for me.

I thought about my parents, that was what made me do it.

There was a foul taste like medicine. He ricocheted around in my mouth. My mother called again so quickly I swallowed.

He was lodged in my throat, thrashing about. The voice came out through my teeth. There was laughing peppered with chokes and gags. I panicked, fell to my knees, and clutched for air.

My parents saw me and I heard their feet hitting the sand. I tried to retch. A ring of black swallowed my vision. My sight blurred with tears.

I thought about dying. I submitted that I was going to die. I felt like lying down, lying down seemed like the sweetest thing. Then from inside me rose up this strength. I saw it, felt it— stronger than me, separate of me, a love twirling up.

I put my hands above where I felt the lump and swallowed. I pushed down with all my might, arching my back. Coughing seized me. I could feel him running around in my stomach.

My mother’s arms were around me. I was folded in my mother’s arms.

“Honey, what’s the matter?”

I take a deep breath.

I'm walking, still on the sidewalk but further from downtown. Further from the lights and dancing. The Los Angeles wind smashes all the sadness of the city against curbs and buildings. Nothing to hear now but my feet slapping the sidewalk and the buzzing of the lights overhead, occasionally, an open window sends out a dinner conversation or a television plays.

Neurologists say that our brain sees both past and future in the exact same way, fictionalized by fragile memory, but you know, recapturable.

One neuron, acting like a dam keeps our futures hidden. These experts speculate that this mechanism falls into torpor irregularly— during REM sleep, a shamanic trance, or just randomly. Déjà vu is assumed to be a fluttering of this neuron-dam. Our mind must rationalize. And everyone knows the theory. But that isn't it—

When I was near the dance-floor queen, before we kissed, *especially* while looking into each other's eyes, I felt our pasts bouncing together like buoys crashing in the sea along a single line of indeterminate length. For a moment I could see, like a crystal, what was meant and going to happen...

I close the front door of my house, quietly. I kick off

my shoes and walk hot footprints across the tile floor, then shock myself with a quick shower before heading to the bedroom.

My lover lays there on her side with her back to me. I stand staring at her from beside the bed with my nerves tight.

There is a slight chill in the room. Still sleeping she turns onto her back with the blankets at her navel. Her bare nipples cut the moonlight. Taking a deep breath, she sort of 'coo's, aware then, even in her sleep, that I'm in the room watching her.

She's manipulating what is around her, perceiving quickly what is most picturesque— knowing her nipples are there and the moonlight.

She moans softly.

We've been together a long time, at least for me personally. We live together meaning we're bored a lot. Fights erupt suddenly. She's really really great but she's extremely emotional; so things come to a head quickly snapping up from a calm fog with flaming eyes and elbows. After the oxygen is stolen from the room we're left with no direction to sort out the pieces. When I've battled with new sanity I realize satanic expectations from both sides had not been met, and I was the one at fault.

She's an actress, and I know because we pick lovers

to hold up as mirrors. Try calling her on it though and she starts breaking shit, becomes *furious*, believing— forgetting we're different people who experience the world independently— that she's this sort of director. We all do this. Movies have taught us to separate from ourselves in sickening ways.

Comedy does the same thing, but this isn't funny.

As life allows the movie reel to run we the blank faces, the crowds, are running too, running and running, in little lost circles. Lost little circles.

Her dog suddenly raises his head, wags his tail twice, and looks at me. I smile. He stretches his chin back out, on the smooth tops of his legs, snorts, and relaxes into sleep. She turns over onto her side again in bed. Her hip forms this fresh curve with the blanket. Those hips the shape of her mother's.

I slide beneath the blankets. They feel like ice. I hold so tightly still I'm hardly breathing. My body adjusts so that I inch in tight. I rest my hand and fingers on the skin of her hip. She flinches from the cold. My chin and the crook of her neck fit together perfectly.

Sleep overtakes everything.

My lover and I have friends over a few days or a week after that. A couple that keeps talking and talking

of plans for that fall, and then, more plans for the following spring. The woman harangues on and on of a Dream Goal. Five years, she says, five years, and they'll be there. Then the two of them exchange soft buttery eyes at each other and I struggle to keep down Dim Sum.

Now mine is warped by their excitement and she starts in with a lot of "we," and "us," talk. Since my night at the club I've done something to leak my secret. Cold sterile facts are in her but she doesn't know why yet. As she talks to our friends, her words start to become queer to her. I pick up on these kinds of things a little before she does. I have an attentive eye for the subtle emotion. A man has to keep on top of his emotions.

It's a week post-dinner, and today we speak not a word. Her eyes are bloodshot. She stares off into nothing. I refuse to give her the satisfaction and ammunition she'll use against me. Nothing spoken yet of the *incident*, thank God, so I try to remain calm and shake the tension. Which is high. I can't read or even concentrate to do anything. If I leave it would necessitate saying something, so I just stay put.

It was after the two friends left that she sensed something that started this whole silence game. She blamed everything on me.

"Why were you acting so *strange* while April and Li-

onel were here?"

"What are you talking about?" (I'm good.) "Nothing about them or me seemed strange at all."

She started crying. She looked terrible which for some reason, made me yell at her.

"Every day, every *day* I'll question it!"

She ran out of the room.

Slamming of doors throughout the house.

How long does this last? Becalmed. No movement.

I sit beside silence.

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What will I do? I ask because for us, him and I, this is so difficult.

I have a moral decision; we all have moral decisions. I tell myself this over and over. I'm forced into decisions. Now *my* relationship's falling apart, Diana's left for her sister's. Just the other day I touched a flame to the manuscript's edge, until it began to curl, but of course I pulled away at the last second. I feel foolish. I can't kill him. From where do we take our cues? Maybe I should go to Rolling Meadows.

I love him somehow.

But this can't go on! How can you trust someone? The whole thing isn't real! Nothing we do constitutes, *reality*. It's imaginary. Fake. A puppet act. What we really

need is Time. Time to think things out.

The whole mess is under the bed now. I don't know what's going to happen. Everything is beyond me.