

The Artistic Life

I'd been out of work a long time, writing novels I had no luck publishing, plays no producer would stage, a screenplay no agent would take on. In the past, I'd gotten work occasionally as an actor (all actors work only occasionally) in grade-C films and dinner theater, but it all dried up. I was too young for this, a bit too old for that. Even the bottom-feeders who had my number for extra work no longer called. It was just another one of those bad spells, I guess. I seemed to have them all the time.

Worse, the accumulated failure had crystallized into a formidable writer's block. It was all I could do to drag myself out of bed in the morning.

For years my wife had been working a real job at the telephone company. Whatever jack I once had in reserve had long since dwindled away, and she was having trouble making the rent on her own. We were living out in the suburbs, and though the rundown duplex wasn't nearly as expensive as an apartment in the city, it still took a small fortune to cut it out there among the strip malls, cineplexes, and condo developments.

"You're going to have to do something, Max. I can't handle it by myself anymore," she said one morning over breakfast. "Some of the bills are going unpaid. I didn't want to tell you last month, but...."

I knew what it meant -- I was going to have to come up with a job. A real job. To hell with writing, to hell with acting, to hell with my rich fantasy life of fat, regular royalty checks and

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reliable agents and all the other pleasant hallucinations of the artist *manqué* in America.

A simmering rage ate at me. Years of unrelenting work and I was back at square one. It was always the same old story. I was doomed. And I wasn't getting any younger.

Nevertheless, I went and filled out applications for anything I might even vaguely fit: editor...claims adjustor... substitute mail carrier. Nothing happened. But I was determined to put off pumping gas or sweeping floors until I had no other choice.

One afternoon, as I stared at a talk show featuring obese lesbians, I got a call from Allen Hormel, an actor pal I hadn't heard from in a while. He just happened to be working in the business office of a medium-budget film that was shooting in and around Asbury Park, New Jersey. If I was hard up against it -- and he knew I probably was -- he could offer me a few days' work. With a little luck, I might just get myself cast as a day player. As they say, you never know.

"At this point I'll do anything, man. And thanks -- thanks a lot."

Things happen fast in the movie business. One minute you're doing nothing whatsoever, the next you're in the eye of the cyclone. After months of unemployment, I was up and out the next morning well before the crack of dawn, rolling east on the highway toward Manhattan. I made a pit stop at Dunkin' Donuts, where I picked up a super-sized coffee, a pair of vanilla cream donuts, and a newspaper from the machine in the parking lot. Polishing off the junk food as I drove, I made it across the river before the rush hour. My orders were to first pick up a member of the production team in the Village and drop him off at another location, then re-cross the river to Jersey and commandeer the

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truck I was assigned to drive to the set.

I couldn't find the producer's address. Either his building wasn't marked properly, or 451 Bank Street didn't exist. I circled the blocks between Hudson and Washington Streets a few times, before finally deciding to park and check whether "Jonathan" wasn't actually waiting for me at 541 or 514 or 415.

The sign at the curb read "No Standing Tuesdays 6 A.M. until 9 A.M. -- Street Cleaning." It *was* six-thirty, and it *was* Tuesday, but I didn't see any street sweepers or police units, so I figured I'd take my chances. I hopped out and dashed across the street, scanning the numbers on the buildings.

My man was waiting with folded arms inside the vestibule at 514. When he saw me, he frowned. "I was just beginning to think you'd never get here."

"Yeah, well, looks like someone gave me a bum address."

Jonathan was much younger than me. For some reason this was a surprise. He was soft and doughy and sported one of those ridiculous Banana Republic safari hats at a rakish angle. I didn't give in to the temptation to ask why he couldn't have stepped outside and kept his eyes peeled for me. *That paycheck*, I reminded myself. *Do nothing to jeopardize that paycheck.*

When we went outside to my heap, there was a figure in uniform filling out a citation, using the rust-pocked hood as his desk.

"Hey! Hey! I'm not really parked here! I'm just making a pickup! Can't you tear that thing up?"

The meter cop shook his head. "Already started. Can't tear it up once I'm started -- regulations."

Shit. I decided to throw myself on his mercy.

"Listen, *sir*. I really can't afford this ticket," I begged, with

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all the humility I could muster.

He didn't flinch. Since he was black, I decided he had to be sympathetic to the plight of the underdog.

"Look, bro...I been out of work going on two years now. I don't have a pot to piss in or a window to throw it out, know what I mean? You can dig that, can't you? You gotta cut me a break, here. *Please.*"

"Just doin' my job," he sniffed.

That's what they all say. He tore off the citation and handed it over.

"Gee, thanks, pal. You have yourself a real nice day."

He shrugged. "They all the same to me."

The problem with the world today is that no one has a beating heart.

"Tough break out of the gate, huh?" Jonathan chuckled as I chauffeured him downtown.

"I'd call getting nailed for seventy-five smackers a bad start to the day, yeah."

Soon enough Jonathan forgot about me. He was on his mobile, dropping names like Goldwyn and Hanks and Roberts. He was friends with them all, he wanted the party on the other end to know; in fact he regularly did business with them.

Everything about the twerp -- from his baby fat to that stupid hat -- irked me. As I rumbled over the cobblestones of lower Greenwich Street I heard him sigh in the back seat. "Well, it's too bad this dreamboat of yours isn't a company car."

"Why's that?"

"Because then we would have paid for the summons."

"Yeah. Too bad for me."

"You can say that again. It's just your lousy luck that Dad

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needs to cut costs to the bone on *Rock And Roll Heaven*. No fucking around this time! No freebies. We gotta watch every penny. That's why you're giving me this ride."

"Who's Dad?"

"Dad is Sol Blomberg."

"Should I know him?"

"Couldn't hurt. Dad's paying your salary on this shoot -- whatever it is you're doing."

"No kidding."

"No kidding. His title is executive producer. *Pray For Death Parts One, Two and Three?* That's Dad. He's giving me a unit producer credit on this one."

Now I knew for sure why I hated Jonathan. What I couldn't figure out was why, if Daddy was so goddamned fixed, he had to make *me* part of the cost-cutting process. Couldn't junior just have grabbed a cab this morning?

"Be careful where you park from now on," was his parting shot when I let him off in front of a warehouse near the Seaport. He didn't even thank me for the ride.

I watched Jonathan waddle away. The bastard looked so *sure* of himself. Maybe that was my problem: I lacked an air of self-confidence.

"Go fuck yourself," I said to Jonathan's back. Then I gave it the gas.

I was a nervous wreck. I'd never driven a real truck before, certainly not one the size of a school bus. Weren't you supposed to have special training to operate this type of vehicle? Yet here I was, rumbling down the insane New Jersey Turnpike at

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the height of the morning rush.

All of my anxieties and phobias had been roused to life. My palms were wet. My knuckles were white. Sweat trickled down my spine. I hoped to Christ my wife was happy that I was finally working.

Outside the window, horns blared. Brakes screeched. I got the finger for driving too slow. Some asshole shook his fist at me.

Two hours later, I managed to maneuver the monster -- in one piece -- to production headquarters, which was a tall beachfront hotel.

A teenage boy I'd never seen before ran shouting up to my window. "Unload on the double! People are waiting on this stuff! What the hell took you so long?"

He walked off, leaving a hand truck on the curb. Fine, I thought to myself, I'm getting paid -- minus the cost of the parking summons -- so don't make a stink, just do what the young fellow says.

It took me more than an hour to haul every last case of Coca-Cola Classic, Diet Coke, Caffeine-Free Coke, and cartons of chips and candy seven flights up to Control Central. Up there, another young man informed me that he was my boss. All kinds of people scurried to and fro. My friend Allen was nowhere to be seen.

"What's your name?"

I told him. Call him Jason, he said. He was the line producer for *Rock And Roll Heaven*.

Another producer. Everybody was a producer but me. I wondered who *he* was related to.

It took another half-hour to stack the cases and cartons in a corner of the big suite, which was swarming with frenetic activity.

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When I tripped over an electrical cable I caught hell. Everyone was jabbering about what a handsome, talented hunk the star of *Rock And Roll Heaven* was. When this film hit the silver screen, Michael Sandstone would be AN EVEN BIGGER STAR than he already was.

When I finally finished, I stood in the corner, popped a can and took a swig of Coke. Before I could swallow, Jason was at my side.

“Your buddy Allen tells me you’re an actor.”

“Let’s put it this way: I’ll do anything for money. But I’m a writer, actually, though I’ve done my share of acting.”

“So, what have I read that you’ve written?”

“Nothing, probably, unless you subscribe to obscure literary journals.” I reeled off a few titles. He shook his head. Then he nodded at my drink. “By the way, that stuff isn’t for the gofers. It’s only for the cast and crew and production team. When it’s time for your break, there’s a Seven-Eleven up the street. And you’ll have to use your own money.”

“Sorry I stepped out of line.”

“Forget it. Look, there’s something else I need you to do.”

“All right...”

“I’d like you to drive down to Philly and pick up a property for one of our actresses.”

“You’re the boss.” Suddenly I was afraid that I’d have to get behind the wheel of that infernal truck again. “What is it?”

“A wig.”

“A wig?”

“That’s right. Tiffany Silva -- you know her from *As The World Turns* -- wears a customized wig in the scene scheduled for late tonight. You can take one of the cars in the pool.”

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Now this was more like it. I began to daydream about sitting in an air-conditioned vehicle for a couple of hours and listening to the radio. Maybe I'd take my sweet old time coming back, tell Jason I got stuck in a traffic jam or something.

"All I need is directions."

"And I want you step on it, hear? Things are really going to be crazy around here later."

"You got it."

"Oh -- and one more thing. I got a call from Jonathan Blomberg. He mentioned something about you getting a parking summons when you picked him up this morning?"

"I won't deny it."

"He said to remind you to be more careful when operating *our* vehicle today." Jason nodded to himself sagely. "I say that's good advice."

Who was I to argue? I headed for the elevator.

I drew the runt of the Goldmine Pictures rentals -- a sad-looking, dented, stripped-down K model Plymouth, with not even an AM radio to keep me company. No air conditioner either, and the late June heat was already vicious.

Okay. My bad luck was holding.

A millinery shop in North Philly was my destination. After meandering around the maze of unfamiliar, litter-strewn streets, I finally managed to locate the address, a hole in the wall fronted by a battered sign that read "FAZAKAS' HATS AND WIGS."

No wonder they'd given me this job, I thought. Nobody else wanted it.

I flopped on a seat and waited while the hag who ran the

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place applied the finishing touches to the hairpiece. There was nothing to read except for Hungarian newspapers. Not being fluent in Hungarian, I just sat there staring into space. The shop wasn't air-conditioned either. The heaviness of the air made me drowsy, and soon I was lost in a dream....

I was about to seduce a dancer I'd met in a strip joint not long ago. She was topless, and wanted me to do the honor of removing her bottoms. I was just about to reach out and pull them off when I felt a tap on my shoulder.

It was the old costumer. She was pushing a circular box at me.

“Your lady veel be veddy hoppy vid dees veeg.”

I signed for it and hopped into the Plymouth. Another hour and a half back to the set. The heat kept coaxing me to sleep at the wheel. I hadn't had a thing to eat since those donuts, but I didn't have an appetite.

The second I walked through the door Jason charged me, waving a piece of paper.

“I thought you'd never get back!”

I tried to explain that his directions were a little off, and that the costumer hadn't been through with the fake hair when I arrived at the shop. But he was too distracted to listen.

“Well, never mind that now. Just take care of this stuff ASAP.”

He handed over the paper.

I was to run out for three cartons of cigarettes. Move some cartons around. Remove all empty soda cases. Haul the trash to the dumpsters at the back of the hotel. Go down to the second floor and gather up the loose electrical equipment. When I was through with all that, I was to head over to the hardware store and pick up

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some gaffer tape and two-inch nails....

Word came up from the set: Sandstone had pronounced himself satisfied with the day's takes so far. The message sent the production staff into ecstasy, complete with applause. By now it was clear to me that I wasn't getting anywhere *near* that set. So much for being hired as a day player. As with extra work, it's a carrot dangled in front of your nose to keep you doing the dirty work.

Around midnight, while running the vacuum over the carpet, I was informed by one of Jason's flunkys -- who happened to also be a hot little brunette with a killer body -- that I could go home as soon as I *cleaned the bathrooms*.

I looked up. "What?" I thought maybe I hadn't heard right.

"Jason said for you to do it. Then he'll sign your time sheet."

"I wasn't hired to clean shithouses."

She pretended not to hear me. "Everything you'll need is in there, Jason said. Brush, cleanser, you name it. This place has to be kept spic and span! It's like our home for the next couple of weeks, right? We can't have a filthy bathroom at home, can we?"

I stared at her. Someone of my formidable talents should not, under any circumstance, be swabbing a john for the likes of her and Sandstone and Blomberg and Jason. But I was too bushed to argue.

Well, what the hell. I'd done worse in my day. I rolled up my sleeves and attacked the piss stains and the pubic hairs and the shit-spattered toilet seat. Rather than hold on to my resentment, I tried to let it go. Besides, I wanted to work for the next couple

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days. My friend had promised me that.

Jason popped his head in just as I was wiping down the base of the commode.

“Hey author, I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but it looks like you won’t be needed anymore on this shoot. Jonathan just informed me that we’re already in danger of going over budget. Soon as you’re done, I’ll sign you out. Your check will arrive from California within ninety days.”

There it was. Over before it started. To boot, I was going to have to wait three whole months before I saw a goddamned penny. My luck hadn’t changed since morning.

“Ninety days? Can’t anything be done to speed up the process?”

Jason swallowed a mouthful of his broccoli pizza.

“Not a chance. Goldmine’s parent company issues those checks, and there’s always lag time. You’ll just have to make do until then.”

I was assigned an empty van to drive back to the depot where I’d picked up the truck that morning. The night was as hot as a furnace. In my mind, I went over the same ground I’d covered that morning. As usual, I failed to come up with any solutions to my various dilemmas, except for planning a new attack on the “Help Wanted” section first thing in the morning. To hell with my latest novel. It wasn’t going anywhere anyhow.

The artistic life. It was just one more game for the privileged few, the ones who had rich daddies and attended the right schools. But I’d known that all along, hadn’t I? So why was I disappointed in it now? Nobody had asked me to write in the first

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place, had they?

After docking the van and depositing the keys in the drop, I circled the building to the visitors' parking area. It was dark back there. I blinked. Then I blinked again. My wreck was nowhere to be seen.

I walked back and forth. I was confused. Maybe I was in the wrong place? "Son of a bitch," I cursed. I retraced my steps and searched again, to no avail. It was gone, all right. My old station wagon was history, stolen right off the lot.

Why would anyone want that piece of junk? Now I was going to have to shell out seventy-five bucks on a citation for a car I no longer had. It was so funny I had to laugh.

It was well after midnight. I'd have to call the cops. Then I'd have to wake up Lauren to come and get me, unless I wanted to spend the night on the hard asphalt.

I dropped my ass on the curb, lit my last cigarette, and watched the lights of the planes coming and going into one of the metropolitan airports. I thought about how Sandstone was probably screwing that lovely brunette production assistant right now.

Some days you win. Most days you lose. Sometimes it's all you can do to come away with nothing but one more story.

I took one last, long drag and blew out a slow stream of smoke. Then I got up, flicked the cigarette, and went looking for a pay phone. I felt in my pockets for change, and realized that I didn't have any.