

Puck

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PUCK

Michael stepped back from the mirror. He was satisfied: not an ounce gained since he had come to New York to live, fight and conquer. Anyone as short as he (5 ft. 6" "), could not afford one inch too many around the waist. A «rubber tire» near the navel, and he was finished. The only acting parts he had been able to obtain, had been those of teenage boys. For a Chicago kid of twenty-seven, this was quite an achievement.

Michael combed his dark hair over his forehead. With his button-nose, his small features, clear skin and tousled hair, he really could pass for a teenager. When he had played Miles in that splendid dramatization of «The Turn of The Screw» by Henry James, even the electrician had been fooled. That kind-hearted, white-haired giant had brought him an ice cream during intermission and had been shocked when he saw Michael sipping a Scotch and soda. Well, those had been his happiest days in New York: that short run of the James play, when he had really managed a difficult part, played at being alternately young and carefree, and evil and obsessed. Michael had even learned to turn up his voice so that it sounded like that of a teenager, just before the fatal break. It hadn't been a falsetto, just a very high tenor. Well, that's one thing I have to thank my Dad for, Michael thought, as he bent down to straighten out the sofa bed, my Dad wherever he may be now . . . His glance fell on the small writing desk. There was that letter to his mother in Chicago in which he started to tell her the truth—that he would stay in New York although he had no job . . .

Mike sighed, turned from the bed and went to the desk. He hated writing letters, just as he hated any display of emotions except on the stage. His eye glanced over the other notes on the desk. Here was the one from that man, Alfred, the tall, enormous lawyer who had been waiting for him patiently after «The Turn». When Michael had finally accepted the invitation and taken supper with him in that enormous penthouse on 72d and Riverside Drive, the man asked him to put on special clothes . . . They had been an exact copy of the things he wore on the stage as Miles. It was then that Michael realised he wasn't ready for guerilla warfare, not yet. He didn't want to make love to someone while in disguise. He didn't want to act off stage. He didn't want to be fourteen for this greedy, embarrassed man of the law, who was hankering for the young flesh but was afraid of it. Michael left, in a hurry, but the burning, dark eyes in the round, fleshy face had haunted him. He put the letter on the bottom of the pile and looked at the tiny blue note before him.

Come to think of it, Robert, the Swiss writer, the melancholy, erratic, reliable and anxious Robert, was the best thing that had happened to him in the jungle of New York. Michael fingered the blue paper which was different from any paper he had ever seen. He must call Robert. Why did he feel inhibited about it? Robert never counted who called. He called Michael when he felt like calling. He did not phone book-keeping like so many in the overwrought, insecure set . . .

The phone . . . loud . . . insistent . . . the life-line of every young, struggling actor and dancer and writer in the tenements of the Lower East Side . . . He recognized Mrs. Glickstein's breathless voice before she identified herself, good, tough, fat Mrs. Glickstein, his agent, who pretended to be without pity, and

strictly in it for the money, but who would melt if you took her out for one cocktail . . .

«Now listen carefully, you Irish idiot,» she went on quickly. «The Shakespeare Festival has come through. Yeah. In Central Park. Some wealthy food magnate has donated \$ 200 000. You must meet Morton Da Silva, the producer. You heard of him? Hm. He is casting. He has all his people from last time, except a few. He needs a Puck for «Midsummer Night's Dream». And you have done this in Chicago?»

«Your files are up to date.» Michael's voice was a bit hoarse with excitement. «It got me the Northwestern U. fellowship . . . it . . .»

«Stop selling yourself. I am your agent. Remember? You will meet Mr. Da Silva, the producer of New York's Summer Shakespeare Festival, tomorrow evening at my house, for drinks. How's that for speed?»

«Mrs. Glickstein, you should run the State Department.»

«If you get the part, you can call me by my first name. It's Rachel. No comments, please.»

«What is he like, Rachel? Da Silva, I mean? Shall I put on my teenage act?»

«Nothing fake. Be yourself. But, Mike, I must warn you. There is competition.»

«There always is. Who is it?»

«Brian O'Brian, I am sorry to say. Mrs. Strauss' protégé. And she has an entire organization behind her. Remember, I am not essentially a front for a record company.»

Michael's hand was wet. Here had been blinding hope. And now the rub again. Brian O'Brian had played a sexy teen-ager in a Grade B movie. He had been discovered through a notorious scene where he took off all his clothes—well, nearly all—in front of a triple mirror so that one gained the impression he was playing with . . . well, to compete with tall, muscle-bound Brian was about as easy as it was for a light-weight boxer to take on Joe Louis.

Rachel Glickstein went on. To her, Michael realized, this was more than the usual struggle. She hated Henrietta Strauss, the powerful representative of MAGNA, the most powerful talent syndicate in New York, which, financed by record and TV interests, had snatched away many promising youngsters. MAGNA paid them nicely for doing nothing. So that other clients, in whom MAGNA had invested more money, would be in the spotlight . . . No, Rachel would go all out fighting for Michael, this time . . .

«Find out as much about Da Silva as you can, brush up on your Shakespeare and read Wilson's 'The Hidden Shakespeare'. Da Silva just discovered this big tome and thinks it is the Bard's Bible.»

«I know the book, Mrs. Glickstein. I graduated at the top of my class from Northwestern Drama school . . . But what do you mean, find out about Da Silva?»

«Here is CBS. I must hang up. I am still working on this deal to get you the role as a teen-age gangster for the educational series. So perhaps if Puck doesn't materialize . . . bye, Mike. Tomorrow, my house, at 7 p.m.»

Click, the voice gone. The excitement gone. Michael looked around his disorderly small apartment, the floor full of holes, the windows dirty, the kitchen corner needing paint and attention. He threw himself feverishly into activity. He cleaned, scrubbed, washed, re-hung the pictures, laundered the curtains (a gift from Robert) and mended his socks. Who had given him those? He couldn't

remember. During the first weeks in New York, when he had to live on \$ 10 a week, but had to look like a successful star at the big agencies, he had learned one of the rules of the guerilla warfare: be nice to middle-aged men, and they are not only nice in return, they are usually happy to have someone on whom they can lavish gifts. They are not only starved for affection, they are starved for giving affection. And since they couldn't put it into words, it took the traditional form of gifts. Mike owned beautiful scarves, three expensive broadcloth shirts, an Italian de-luxe sweater, but he owned only one pair of shoes. For some reason, no one had ever asked him whether he needed decent shoes. And Michael discovered one rule of the New York theater jungle: that the less you asked directly, the more you received. The lonely, middle-aged men wanted to prove their ingenuity, their cleverness in figuring out the right gifts... Well, with Robert it was different. Not only was he fond of Robert—so much so that he took strong pains to conceal it—but Robert's kindness was shot through with a cool intelligence and matter-of-factness. The second time Michael had visited Robert in that European-looking place in Greenwich Village (everything Robert touched, lost its American look and turned Continental, by some weird alchemy), Robert had turned his blue and melancholy eyes on him and declared: «Listen, Mike. Tomorrow, I'll take you to Bargain Street. Yes, and shut up! Canal and Delancey. You need a summer suit and a raincoat. I haven't much money. My Swiss francs don't go far in New York. But down on Delancey, I can manage to make you look decently bourgeois...»

True enough, down there in a crowded shop they had found a wash-and-wear number for one third of the usual price, and a \$ 5.00 raincoat, manufactured in Japan after an Italian design imitating an American Western model.

Michael wiped the sweat from his forehead and glanced at the alarm clock, a gift from Mother. 7:50 p.m. He dialed Robert's OR...number.

Robert was delighted. «Puck is ideal for you, Michel.» He pronounced Mike as though it were French. «I know Da Silva slightly. Let me think. Oh, yes. Very complex; he is in analysis with Kurt Kripp, I think. Always worried that he will exploit people. You must trust your good Irish intuition. Brian will play it for sex, with a complex surrender that will show Da Silva what charm he has. I also have a hunch, you won't meet Da Silva alone. Henrietta Strauss will maneuver him into some restaurant, and there will be Henrietta, too. I'll see you tomorrow late. Need something?»

«No. I'm all right.» All of a sudden, Michael was moved. Robert was so matter-of-fact, he so carefully avoided showing affection because he knew Michael hated all display. «Can I call you after the meeting, Robert? Will you be home?»

Yes, Robert would stay home to work. As he put the receiver down, Michael had the usual and detested anticipation-vision. He saw himself, exhausted, depressed, leaving the meeting place, after having muffed his chances with the producer... fighting not to come to Robert like a bedraggled dog begging for affection. And fighting the temptation to bolster his morale with one or two or three whiskies... Michael shook off the vision and went to his bookshelf, department: Shakespeare. For a long time he studied Puck, the play, the whole miraculously funny and ethereal spider web of Shakespeare's fancy... He began to repeat the lines...

The phone again. «Thank heaven,» Rachel Glickstein sighed. «You are a good boy. You are studying Shakespeare? I respect you, child. Bad news. Hen-

rietta, that bitch, won. You'll meet Silva at Luigi's around 7, and O'Brian plus some other people will be there. I can't make it, damn it. CBS meeting about that educational series. Which by the way looks good. I told them you are the ideal juvenile gangster. You must acquire a darker skin, though.»

«No trouble. I played an Italian kid in 'Giovinezza'. See my files . . .»

«Anyhow, I think we'll be lucky. And that TV series means steady employment. More money than that one-shot Puck . . .» Mrs. Glickstein stopped. She knew she didn't deceive Michael—she wanted to cushion the blow if Brian's more apparent charms would win. For once, Michael reversed the roles. He consoled her: «I'm happy about the TV chance. I'll be at Luigi's, all scrubbed and calm, and I expect nothing, nada.»

But this was, of course, an outrageous lie. He couldn't sleep that night. What had Robert said about the battle of the young men in New York? A young girl with talent is pretty safe now. If she is genuinely gifted and a little tough, she'll make her way without having to bed down with anybody. But for the young men, those hordes of gifted, ambitious, handsome boys from all parts of the USA who descend on New York year after year, for them there is no path of virtue. They must fight, and much of this is done in darkened rooms, where lies must sound convincing. They had both laughed at this new 'socio-cultural' discovery but now Michael wished it weren't true.

When morning fell, Sabina saved Michael, as so often, Sabina, the neighbor, the sweet-faced ballet girl, firmly entrenched at the City Center Corps de Ballet, a steely body lodging a motherly mind. Sabina prepared a heartening breakfast and sent him to the Public Library. Theater Division, card index: Morton Da Silva. Michael memorized the biography printed in a program—the slow start as assistant TV director, the off-Broadway play of 'The Absurd', the first musical where he dared to use abstract, movable sets and which made him famous over night. Yale Drama School with Father manufacturing a popular soft drink called MIRAFLOR . . . Michael made up his mind never to mention soft drinks when meeting the producer.

Luigi's was plush, dim, slightly gangsterish, and popular because the food was prepared with love and no regard for expenses. At a corner table he recognized Brian O'Brian, tall, slim, in a tight-fitting suit that betrayed the oncoming star. Mike's wash-and-wear looked clumsy and cheap next to it. The conversation was labored. Fortunately, Henrietta Strauss, thin, bitter and with the drive of a super rocket, had to leave soon. At least the battle was even. For the other three young contenders who showed up a little later, had no experience, no background and were out, right away by silent accord among Da Silva, Brian and Michael. Da Silva ordered food and they discussed the play, the difficulties of a staging in the park, the special ideals Da Silva wanted to put into reality. Tomorrow, he would start auditioning at Seaton Hall, 10 a.m., and both should come prepared to read something else besides Shakespeare . . .

Michael studied the producer. Not a bad head, not a disagreeable fellow. Hectic, over-energetic, fanatically driven, fanatically driving, and haunted. Michael suddenly knew that tonight, after the euphoria of creative imagining, there would follow the let-down, the emptiness. Though Da Silva was not Irish, like the two young rivals, he was more guilt—ridden than any of them. Of course, Brian was just a brave go-getter helped by a marvelous physique, but even Brian, as a Catholic, had been to confession, had the feeling of sin, guilt and redemption in his blood. But Morton Da Silva paid for that dangerous gift:

to be able to create out of nothing. At this moment, sipping his coffee, watching Brian flex his muscles, watching Da Silva go off into outer space-phantasies, Michael knew what to do. He let Brian ride up with the producer in a cab. He insisted he had to get downtown. Brian couldn't hide his triumph. Michael waved after the taxi, unconcerned, friendly . . .

Robert did precisely the right thing: he played classical music, Schnabel, Rubinstein, and did not ask anything. Michael began to untense. Furtively, he glanced at Robert. A still handsome face, finely cut, the graying hair framing a thin, well-shaped head, aristocratic and melancholy. Did it really matter? That Robert was 'middle-aged'? Michael felt strangely uneasy. He found Robert not only pleasant tonight but exciting. Perhaps this obsession with young people was an American myth? Michael began to be sure it was, for him. If he would get the part, he would take out Robert, turn the tables on him, buy him a gift . . . he also knew one thing: he would never be bored with Robert.

The audition was memorable for many things but Michael would always remember two: the triumphant attitude of Brian, and the defeated look of Da Silva. He could hardly speak, he croaked. Brian, like an animal after a good meal, radiated strength and self-assurance. He trumpeted the lines as though Seaton Hall were a Hippodrome for 300 000. He looked like a Greek-Irish statue, and he was entirely wrong because Puck had to be sly, mischivious, enigmatic. And Brian was simply parading and selling virility . . .

But as Michael stepped onstage and started with Miles' speech from 'The Turn', as he conjured up the invisible Mr. Quinn, the seducer of children and purveyor of evil, the indifferent crowd of listeners, agents, actors, friends, backers became tense. A power was streaming into Michael, something from far away. He went through all his speeches as if in a trance. He could spot Da Silva, haggard, tortured but captivated, and Michael knew as he spoke, that Brian had made love all night and that that pale man out there in the dark was suffering the tortures of those who can never accept their pleasures.

Mike stumbled out of Seaton Hall into the bright, ugly light of the West Side. There stood Rachel Glickstein and Robert. His two good spirits. Rachel beamed, and her beautiful false teeth gleamed. «Michael, you divine Schnorrer, you made it. Silva didn't say. He is too far gone this morning. But he mumbled to his assistant he should write Henrietta that Brian is too tall . . .»

Robert shook his hand. «How lucky you are, Michael, to be so small,» he said wickedly.

«I am buying lunch,» Rachel declared. «Tell me, baby, how did you do it? After all, you didn't take . . .» She stopped, Brian O'Brian approached, towering over them, an ugly frown on his freckled face, over which one could see small pearls of sweat running down slowly.

«Those bastards,» he said to Michael, ignoring Rachel and Robert completely. «Those double-faced bastards. You give'em the best time they ever had, and they double-cross you. Do I sound like a whore? Well, I don't mind.» Suddenly his anger left him. He had just discovered something. «Hey, little one. Have you read Freud? I guess that's where I failed. Insufficient training for New York jungle warfare. That's it! In order to be a real whore one must sometimes give up whoring. Because the other one gets so loused up he must take it out on you. Is that it?» Brian grinned, and slapped Michael on the back. «Lots of luck, little one. Am I right, by the way?»

«Yes, you are,» declared Robert. «It is known as the wages of sin, modern version.»

And Rachel Glickstein, linking the arms of both men through her enormous ones, added: «Tell Henrietta to start a compulsory course on Applied Freud for all the young stallions in her stable.»

By Orlando Gibbons

Waiting for Joe

By DAVID H. JOHNSTONE

«Is Joe coming this evening Mother?» asked Michael staring into the fire.

«Of course» replied his parent softly. «He always comes on Wednesdays».

«Yes of course» echoed Michael. Two people waiting quietly for their friend, in the darkened room lit only by the flickering flames from the fire. The two figures sat silently, hating each other's eagerness to see Joe again.

Mary thought of Joseph with affection, tall and dignified Joe, Ex Naval Officer and leader of the Boys Social Club in the town.

She smiled to herself thinking how like her late husband he was. 'If only her husband had lived' . . . Oh how different things would be . . .

Mary glanced at her son curled in the armchair opposite. 'What good companions they would have been, still Joe had helped a great deal lately'.

But there was something wrong between Joe and Michael now, she sensed it more every week. But when had it begun?

Michael had always been a worry to her since his father passed away; it had only been two months after his death that Michael had been expelled from college at Cambridge.

She remembered the letter which stated briefly «due to an unfortunate affair whilst he should have been studying». What significance those words held Mary could never imagine. Had it been a girl outside the college? or was it another student?

She sighed in the gloom.

Michael noticed his mother watching him and wondered just what her thoughts were at that moment. Had she guessed that his eagerness to see Joe was more than just friendship? No! she couldn't have guessed that.

Suddenly tears brimmed his eyes as his thoughts went back to college and Francesco. What a beautiful friendship it had been. But so sadly and quickly ended. Thank God his mother never heard the truth.

Indeed it was good to know his secret was safe, also the secret he now had hidden in his heart, that he loved Joe.

He had known that he loved Joe ever since that evening last summer.

He had been standing under the elms watching the cricket with Joe and his mother when a sudden storm drove them closer under the sheltering branches.

Joe had held him close so that Michael could feel his heart beating faster every second. Joe had seemed reluctant to release him after the rain had finished and Michael had wanted to stay in his arms forever, but his mother was soon herding them towards the pavillion for drinks.

To Michael it had been a few minutes of heaven but what to Joe? Had he sensed the waves of affection that flowed from his young body?

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