

Community Theater

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The dressing room was empty except for Elaine. Who did the director think he was? This was not Broadway, Elaine thought as she applied a little more blush to each cheek—Terri, the make-up lady, always made Elaine tone down the color for the stage. She was sitting at the vanity, staring into the mirror. Her face seemed more finite and defined under the extremely bright lights. She could see the faintest semblance of crow’s feet around her eyes and the shadow of hair on her upper lip. She switched off the bright lights of the vanity and continued applying eyeliner using just the fluorescents from the ceiling. The room smelled faintly like a bathroom that had just been cleaned. The walls were bare and all the women’s costumes were thrown over the backs chairs or piled on the floor. Elaine stood up to hang her costume—an ugly orange and brown dress a size too small—as she thought of the director-dictator’s cruel voice.

The unseemly incident had occurred as she was winding her way through her big monologue in the living room set on the stage. She had entered with an over-sized watering can, humming a generic tune. As she watered the fake plants—the plastic hibiscus on the end table, the silk roses on the coffee table, and the odd vine-like thing by the window—she pretended to see something distasteful. Her neighbor, Mrs. Ferris, was blatantly talking to an unmarried man in her front yard. Now she was inviting him in for tea!

“Oh, my my!” Elaine exclaimed while staring through the fake window at someone painting a different set.

That was when the “directator” invaded the stage with his bullhorn.

“No! No! No!” he shouted. The noise was so jarring that Elaine jumped, sloshing some water from the can onto the floor and very nearly popping every button off the

little dress she had been pinched into. The Director moved through the set erratically as if exploring the space between the sofa and the coffee table. “Can you tell me what you’re doing wrong, young lady?”

Young lady? Pfft. She had at least ten years on him.

“Well,” she started, “I was trying to portr—“

“Yes! That is the problem!” he interrupted and promptly left the stage. Did they teach him to be vague and frustrating in that MFA program he was so proud of? Some program. Landed him back in Anton, Texas, population 1,400, directing an amateur production written by a student from the Adult Learning Annex. Elaine stood there by the fake window, waiting for someone to come through and make sense of all this. She spotted the dumpy woman who was playing Mrs. Ferris, who shrugged.

“Umm. . .” she ventured, “What exactly is the problem?”

The Director waltzed back onto the stage, this time with a sympathetic look on his face. Elaine knew that look. She had looked at students like that when they couldn’t do simple multiplication in their head.

“You were *trying* to be someone,” he said as he turned and faced the almost empty auditorium. “You have to just—“ he paused here to draw his arms out slowly from his side and tilt his head back towards the sky “—be.” He looked like he was about to flap his little wings and escape this tiny town. With advice like that, he’d be stuck in Anton for a while.

“I’m not sure I under—“

“Just be!” he squawked and left the stage.

Elaine stood there for a moment, wondering why she was being chastised by a twenty-something who couldn’t find an internship after college and had to move back in with his parents. She went back to her starting position and began the monologue again.

“Well, I de-clare. Who is that man out there?” she said loftily as she clutched her non-watering can-holding hand to her breast.

Bullhorn.

“No! No! NO!”

She was flustered and she could feel the blood come to the front of her cheeks. She thought of how little make-up Terri had applied and maybe blushing might not be too bad of an idea. She started again.

“Well. I declare. Who is—“

“NO!” The Director was back on the stage again, taking off his glasses and rubbing the corners of his eyes. “Why don’t you just go home for the night? I need to get some other actors on the stage.”

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Dismissed. She’d been dismissed. She finished by touching up her hair in the vanity mirror and thinking of all the pupils she had dismissed from her math classes over the years. She’d never thought of what they did in the hallway until now. Where did this man get off doing such a thing? She was here as a volunteer. They had needed more actresses for this doomed production and her evenings were mostly free. She was doing them a favor, after all.

She snapped on her plastic pearl necklace and pinned in her matching earrings. Her hat was missing. She dug around the piles of clothes before finding it placed in a box with some costume hats. It was a large and pastel pink sun hat with a little flower on the front. She placed it neatly on the top of her hair and checked the mirror again. Her female students often told her she had a sort of timeless beauty. They never believed she was forty-three. One day a girl named Katelyn had told her she looked just like Audrey Hepburn in those old movies, and Elaine had been so pleased that she took special note of her outfit and only wore it on days when she needed a little confidence boost. Of course, Katelyn was far too young to actually know much about Audrey Hepburn (Audrey Hepburn wouldn’t have had to be pinched into that little dress), but that was irrelevant. Elaine grabbed her matching pink shawl and draped it around her shoulders. After stealing one last glimpse at herself in the mirror, she left.

There was no other way to get out of the building than to go through the auditorium. She was grateful that it was semi-dark so she could sneak out without

having to say goodbye to anyone. As she walked up the aisle, she listened to the dialogue coming from the stage.

“How many sugars?” asked Mrs. Ferris.

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The weather outside was chilly, prompting Elaine to pull her shawl more closely around her. Summer and autumn had been battling it out over the past few weeks to see who was going to stick around. Every few days autumn would land a punch and the temperature would drop into the low fifties. But by the next afternoon, summer would be back on its feet, driving the thermometer into the eighties again. Tonight’s chill felt more permanent to Elaine, like summer was down for the count.

The sun was long gone. Elaine looked at her watch. Good lord. Was it really 10:45? She hadn’t even eaten dinner. She slid into her car, careful not to hit her hat on the door. She had two options: go home and look for something to prepare (was she out of eggs?) or go to that little late-night coffee shop down the street. She didn’t feel like burning toast, so the choice was pretty clear.

The coffee shop was full—even at this hour. A flyer on the glass front door said “TYLER UTELEDGE! PLAYING TONIGHT ONLY!” Uteledge was a familiar name, but Elaine couldn’t place it. The front room only had a counter. The dim light made it hard for Elaine to see the pale yellow, blue, and pink writing on the giant chalkboard menu. The sound of a single acoustic guitar and a half-attentive crowd was drifting in from the back room mingling with the smell of coffee beans and a tinge of sweat.

“What can I get for you, ma’am?” asked the pretty little thing behind the counter. She was wearing too much eyeliner and a t-shirt declaring allegiance to a band Elaine did not recognize.

“I’ll have the dinner special with a turkey cranberry pecan sandwich, tomato basil soup, and pita chips.”

Elaine went into the back room and found that it was full except for one booth in the corner, out of the spotlight. She sat down and surveyed the scene while she waited for her order. The room was subtle and tan with a few decorations thrown in to remind everyone of some small Italian villa. A few vines of fake ivy were crawling up the wall by the window. At the opposite end of the room was a little stage area where a young man with a crew cut was plucking his guitar and singing. He was wearing black pinstripe pants, a plain white t-shirt, and a matching pinstripe vest. Apparently someone had once lied to him and told him he could sing. Why was it that everyone who played an instrument thought they could sing?

She noted that most of the people in here were in the college range. A few had outrageous haircuts or piercings, but they were the minority. There were about four or five distinct groups clustered throughout the room.

One table had an intense game of Scrabble going. It was a group of four girls and they all seemed to think the music was an inconvenience. As Elaine unashamedly eavesdropped, they carried on a polite conversation with one another and sipped their tea as someone in the group tried to think of a word to play. They perched with straight backs and their hands on their laps. Each girl was trying to prove she knew the most Jane Austen-y words, no doubt. Elaine could see one of the girls thumbing the edges of a copy of *Persuasion* in her lap. She looked as if Anne were her hero.

After playing some word, one girl with thick rimmed glasses let her voice carry just a little too much as she said, "Triple word score, suckas!" She promptly threw her hand over her mouth as almost everyone in the shop looked at her. Only Guitar Boy went on as if nothing had happened, wailing about some lost love. The other three girls descended into giggles as if Thick Rimmed Glasses had just dropped character in the middle of an important scene.

Elaine's food arrived shortly after that little outburst. She dipped her pita chips into her soup to soften them up. By themselves, the chips were pretty flavorless. But with the tomato basil dressing they became almost irresistible. She hoped that other

people would see her technique and copy it. She looked around, but no one else was eating at this hour, so she dipped another chip in the soup.

Looking up, Elaine saw a couple sitting by the window. They were leaning in towards each other. They were not attractive by most standards, she thought. It was such a blessing when ugly people were content with one another. Elaine had long ago decided that no one should date outside of their own attractiveness range. Every once and a while, the woman, a crone-ish thing with a beak of a nose and dirty dishwater blonde hair, would throw her head back towards the sky and laugh. She looked just enough like the Wicked Witch of the West to make Elaine grimace.

The next table was close enough for Elaine to hear the intimate details of the conversation. It was a table full of housewives in their thirties. They had just been to see some movie starring Meg Ryan and were now talking about their lives as if they had been the ones on the screen.

“Don used to do things like that for me,” said one, apparently named Betty (and surprisingly pretty for a woman named Betty). “He would take me out on Friday nights, say cheesy things like ‘Your eyes shine in the moonlight,’ and give me little plastic rings he’d gotten from one of those little quarter machines.”

“How sweet!”

“But now I can’t even get him to do the dishes. I swore last week I was not going to touch them. If he wants to eat off paper towels, that’s his prerogative.”

“Don’t you have a dishwasher, Betty?” asked another woman who wore very little make-up.

“Yes. And Don refuses to even load the thing.”

Try living alone, thought Elaine. Problem solved.

A waiter showed up to the table and set down a little tea set with tiny pink, purple, and yellow petunias painted on every china piece. Betty took the teapot and poured a cup for one of her friends.

“It’s not that hard—How many sugars, dear?—he just refuses to lift a finger in the kitchen.”

The group sitting closest to Guitar Boy was listening intently. (They were just about the only ones.) A few of them had actually purchased CDs with the guy's picture on them. An older gentleman was with them, obviously a relative. When she looked closer, Elaine saw that it was Glen Uteledge, president of the Anton school board. She was definitely happy he had his back to her.

Just last week she had met with the board. They'd called her in to talk about "concerns." She wore her Audrey Hepburn outfit that day as she strolled in confidently to give her perspective on an incident with a certain student. Luke was a straight-A kind of kid, destined for great things outside of Anton, where Elaine tried to teach him geometry. One day he had made some sarcastic remark about "those who can't do, teach." She had dismissed him from class.

The board was nothing like what Elaine was expecting. There she was, all dressed up for the occasion, and most of the men sitting around the large conference table were wearing T-shirts. One of the men had a motorcycle helmet sitting in front of him and his shirt had the sleeves cut off. He was the one that spoke about "multiple complaints from parents." The man with the bad comb over had talked about low test scores and questioned her about her life outside the school and her mental health. She'd told them she was thinking about getting involved in the community theater. They had encouraged her in a way that suggested her job was somehow involved with that silly play.

Elaine sunk lower in her booth and hoped Mr. Uteledge wouldn't turn around. She sipped her tea. The Director's voice was still nagging at the back of her mind.

Just *be*.

But how? There was a reason why it was called acting instead of being. If anyone wanted to watch people, there were plenty around. People went to the theater to see acting, right?

But things like this didn't adhere to normal logic. In a theater, two plus two equaled whatever the director decided. Elaine didn't much care for that thought.

Vest-clad Guitar Boy wouldn't stop playing. The Jane Austen Society wouldn't run out of letters and the thirty-somethings were now talking about their messy kids. Elaine finished her sandwich and dismissed herself from the coffee shop before Mr. Uteledge had the chance to turn and spot her sitting alone in the dimly lit booth. She walked quietly out through the half-lit front room and pulled her shawl tight against the chill.

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Elaine lived in a three-room apartment a few blocks from the local community college. Most of her neighbors were college students who referred to her as "the old lady from 313." She could hear them call her that through the thin walls. The building was not old by any standard—just poorly constructed. Some of the other teachers at school wondered why she didn't move into a small house, which she could easily afford. But Elaine didn't need a house. She just needed a place to sleep and to get dressed in the mornings.

Tonight she entered and felt like she had to get out of her clothes. The hat, the shawl, the pink dress. They all felt very lived-in. She placed her hat on the hat rack standing in the corner of her bedroom with at least a dozen others. She threw the dress in the pink wicker hamper and slipped into a flannel nightgown her mother had given her the Christmas before she died. She stepped into the bathroom and took off her jewelry. She tucked the necklace and earrings into her little box full of fake jewels. She started wiping away her make-up and watched it drain slowly down the sink. Once it was all gone, she looked at herself in the mirror for a moment. She looked drained. The walls behind her were plain white and they sucked all the color from her face.

Her closet was basically a metal bar recessed into an enclave in the wall of her bedroom. She wrapped her shawl around a thin wire hanger and hung it in the back so she would wait a while before she wore it again. She took a step back and stared at all her clothes. They were crammed into the enclave so tightly that it was amazing they

didn't wrinkle past wearability. Every ensemble was brightly colored and attention-grabbing.

The air conditioner hummed to life. She hadn't turned it off because of the indecisive weather.

Elaine was suddenly very aware of her movement. She turned and walked into her tiny living room. She stood between the sofa and the coffee table, where some papers she hadn't graded were staring at her. (What was the point of grading them? She'd probably get fired anyway.) She swept them off the table and they went flying all over the floor. Lifting her arms out to the side and throwing her head back, she whispered.

"Just be."

Something satisfying in saying it. Like it had been poking at her like the under wire of her bra and she'd finally discarded it.

"Just be," she said at a normal volume.

Her head was still tilted back and it only felt natural to yell.

"JUST BE."

The satisfaction fled and was replaced by complete and utter frustration. She still had no idea what the director was talking about and she didn't know why she cared so much. It was just a volunteer thing. Just a stupid community theater program. Just be. She was an expert at just being! She looked like Audrey Hepburn and she wore flowery hats!

She slumped down on the sofa and looked at all the Pre-Algebra papers on the floor. Just be. Just a teacher. Just be a teacher.

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She was a math major at TCU. She'd sit in the student union and laugh while drinking coffee with her fiancé. He'd talk about his plans—an internship with NASA that summer. She didn't know what she was going to do after they graduated and got

married. Maybe she'd take some job in a local high school in Clearlake City or Huntsville or wherever they moved. Until their first child was born, of course. Then she would stay at home—just her and little Elizabeth. Baking cookies. Serving up healthy meals for her growing family. But that was a year away. As for the upcoming summer: more school.

A flood of tears after finals week and he would be back in a few months.

He never came back. He transferred to the engineering program at Rice to be closer to NASA headquarters. They'd offered him a job once he finished his degree. He'd called and broken off the engagement, saying he was sure she was bound for great things. Elaine finished her degree and moved back to Anton to teach basic math to tenth graders.

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As that memory came over her for the thousandth time, Elaine refused to let her eyes sting with tears. It would take a lot more than The Director to break her after everything else she'd gone through. She stood up and looked out her real window.

"I de-clare. Who is that man out there?"

Who would say something like that? In real life, people tried to avoid blatant rhyming. And who was her character talking to? She was supposedly home alone! All she needed was some know-it-all director telling her to just be. Stupid artsy people and their ridiculous concepts. Formulas were concrete. Get what you asked for. Plug in the numbers and get an answer.

She crossed into her kitchen and headed for the lower cabinet—the one by the stove. Inside was a brown paper bag with a few bottles inside. She reached in and pulled out a bottle of Jack Daniels. The amber liquid sloshed around. Taking a small glass from a pile of recently washed dishes on the draining board, she walked back into the living room.

She poured her glass full and took a sip as she sat on the couch.

She always coughed after the first sip as the cool liquid burned her throat.

She stared at the blank television in front of her for a moment before deciding to sleep on the couch—the bed felt too permanent. She put her glass on the coffee table and retrieved her pillows and a large, purple blanket with the seal of her alma mater printed on it.

On top of the VCR was a copy of *Charade*. She'd thought about upgrading to DVD, but that might ruin the nostalgia. She slid the cassette into the slot and waited to see Cary Grant and Audrey Hepburn playing across the screen. The room was dim and a twinkling light came off the TV. Bars of orange light invaded through the open blinds on the window. Elaine lay down beneath her blanket and sipped her whiskey as she watched Cary Grant pretend to be different people.

The lighter her glass got, the heavier her eyelids became. She wasn't seeing the screen anymore, but she could hear the voices coming from the television speakers as she was fading in and out.

All right. Get set for the story of my life.

Fiction, or non-fiction?

Fiction, thought Elaine. Mrs. Ferris was far too unattractive to be having an affair. If Elaine couldn't get one man to stay, Mrs. Ferris should not be getting two. The monologue just didn't make sense.

She batted them pretty little eyes at you, and you fell for it like an egg from a tall chicken!

The pretty little thing behind the counter with all the eyeliner—was she just being?

Wonderful! Do you realize you've had three names in the past two days? I don't even know who I'm talking to anymore!

Mr. Uteledge, the school board, the housewives, her ex-fiance. They all swam together in her head.

Marriage license, did you say marriage license? Oh I love you Adam, Alex, Peter, Brian, whatever your name is.

The annoying orange light from the streetlamp outside the window was bothering Elaine even though she had her eyes closed. She sighed as she turned over to bury her face in the crevice between the back of the couch and the cushion beneath her. Because of the sudden turn, she felt like water was flowing through her brain, slowly filtering from one ear to the other. Her breath warmed the cushions and her face as she breathed deeply. She was just breathing and not trying to do anything else. She could hear the sound of the ocean from the pounding of blood through her ears. She tucked her chin to her chest, flattening the top of her head against the back of the sofa and ensuring that her hair would be unruly in the morning. She licked her lips, which felt dry and cracked.

Somewhere in the distance, Elaine heard the VCR give a loud click before it started to rewind the tape. She didn't jump at the noise. Somewhere a little further away was a bullhorn-toting director with his lack of direction. Still further was a board room full of amateurs, questioning her whole life. And almost too far away to distinguish was a phone call from Houston.