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Not That Man
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I used to be a cab driver. It wasn't easy work; it was exhausting and made my days vanish like scratches in a desert. But I went to work everyday knowing that my life was going to get better, that the sacks of sweaty flesh that piled into my cab with their big cigars and pinstripe suits would notice me. They would see what a rugged face I had, what a man's voice that came from my young mouth, and bring me to the top. That's why I came to Los Angeles. I came here knowing that everybody was looking for a star, or not even a star, but just a character. The entertainment world needed the little roles too, and I so desperately believed that I was going to be one of them.

I would have been one of the darker guys, the ones who aren't too pretty, I would have had to just look at the camera and my audience would squirm with anxiety and fascination. My plan was to always die in my movies, or live on as a tortured soul so that the audience might feel a little pity for me. Always meaning what I said, the directors couldn't force me to do anything. I would get the girl, and toss her aside for the hero to pick up. No big deal. My character would only need the clothes on his back and a Dodge Challenger locked up in a garage somewhere just in case he needed to escape. I would have been bad, and the young girls would obsess over me.

When I wasn't shooting my next film, I would be racing around the hills in my car, the most expensive thing I owned, with women who looked like Ursula Andress or Ingrid Bergman. I would always be caught in drug scandals and bar brawls with critics and show offs. Whenever someone would come up and say to me, "ain't you that guy from that movie?" I would say, "Ain't you that nobody that I've never heard of, who

shouldn't be looking at me let alone living in the same town as me." Yeah, I would be a real tough jackass.

Until I got too old for the action, not fast enough to escape the cops or the lawyers. I would break down with white streaks in my hair at forty and give up the hard life. I would do a few films that showed my reflection, I wouldn't say much in them, I wouldn't need to. The women would stop calling, maybe just a few hard chicks who had been dreaming of me ever since they saw my first movie. I would marry one of them, and they would take care of me until I died in our house in the desert in my fifties. I would have burned brighter than any fire in Hell, and gone out in an instance without a word.

That's who I was going to be, so I kept driving. I worked extra shifts and never left the city. I lived in the same apartment for thirty years, watching my friends give up the dream and leave for San Francisco.

I only ever made it in front of a rolling camera once. It was a World War II film about Jews escaping from Germany into Palestine, I was just an extra, but I had about twelve seconds where the camera was zooming in towards my face. I was dripping with fake blood from my hair, eyes, and nose. Some little guy dressed up as a Nazi officer had shot me in the side of my head, to make an example for the rest of the Jews not to attempt escape. I thought maybe the screen time might land me another role, but it never happened. I couldn't afford an agent and could barely make any time off from my cab driving.

I did get to meet Zero Mostel once. He crawled into the cab near Redondo Beach. I didn't really know who he was; at first I thought he was Mel Brooks. I asked and he just laughed and said that he knew the man, but he was, "unfortunately, tragically, not the

man.” Zero was in his early sixties, he was in my cab on the way to guest star on a show called The Muppets. He was very sad, his eyes were swollen and his graying hair was combed over from the side to cover the bald circle on the top of his head. He looked as if he had been starving himself. I asked him what it was like to be an actor, I was in my thirties and I was still clinging on to my dream of being on top one day. He said that it was just as hard as it ever was, except now he was out of style and exhausted, which made things even worse.

He mentioned the House Committee of Un-American Activities, who put him on trial in the Fifties. They had accused him of being a Communist, and it had almost destroyed his career even before the trial. He said that during the trial he had never let the Committee get the best of him. The first question that the counsel had asked him was, “Mr. Mostel are you or are you not a Communist?” And Zero jumped up through the microphones and grabbed at the HUAC attorney’s throat and shouted, “That man called me a Communist! Get him out of here! He asked me if I’m a Communist! Get him out of here!” He had the entire committee laughing. He said after he listed off each of the amendments of the Bill of Rights to the committee, he pleaded the Fifth because he refused to give them names of other actors who might be communists. He said that that moment had crippled his career for a decade.

“I never could tell if it was worth it.” He wondered aloud if he hadn’t made such a mockery of the committee, maybe things would have been easier. I asked him for advice and all he could muster was, “Don’t even try. You’ll be brittle and ancient one day and no matter how successful you have become, you will wonder if your life is yours or someone else’s. You will feel wasted.”

I dropped him off at the studio, and he disappeared into a side door. He didn't give me much of a tip; he said he could barely afford a taxi anyway. He died a few days after that ride at sixty-two.

I continued working as a cab driver, with little to no work anywhere else. At fifty I was declared legally blind and my drivers license was revoked. I lost my apartment and the girl I had been seeing on and off for a while left for Seattle. I tried to become a voice actor and failed at that too. After my motel ousted me I had nowhere to go. All of my friends had left the city years ago, and as a cab driver I had kept mostly to myself.

I started to wander, and I grew thin. The hair on my head vanished and the hair on my face grew into a chaotic bush. I started to pick clothes up from the Salvation Army, and then food from the homeless shelter. I wanted to be close to the sea, in almost forty years in L.A. I had only ever been to the ocean once, when I was still a kid. I wanted that smell that captured so many young hearts, the freedom of the flowing water.

I drifted down sidewalks, walking towards the sunset, anxious to hear the waves and smell the salt. I landed in Venice Beach, a place where no one looks out of place. Not a single person is dressed to match anyone else. Where Mexicans work in Italian bistro's and Asians work in Taco stands. I was too blind to really see anything, I couldn't watch the street performers or the surfers floating in the ocean, it was just a haze, but I could hear everything.

The sounds of Venice rushed through my head, Spanish guitarists, hip-hop artists, preachers, drunken laughter, and opera singers. The languages and accents of thousands of different worlds rocked inside my eardrums like brutal poetry. The waves were silent until nighttime, and then there would just be a gentle hum of water on sand. During the

day I sat on the sidewalk next to a burger shack with my hat open on the ground in front of me. All day long I would wait for the sound of nickels and quarters bouncing into my fabric bowl. Sometimes I would get a bill, and I would have to ask someone what the number was printed on it because I couldn't see it, usually it was just a dollar. One winter someone gave me a twenty. I was so excited that I didn't know what to spend it on. I tried to use it to get a job as an advertiser for a taco stand. That didn't work so I decided to save it, spending just enough to feed myself every day.

I was not very good at begging. Most of the time I sat on my knees with my head on the ground, holding my hands together in prayer for someone to give me a chance, just one chance to prove to them that I am worth something. I still waited for that big man with a cigar.

I ate Cajun fries and fish tacos most days, drank water from the fountains, I didn't move around much. I was getting too old and I figured that if somebody saw me begging in the same spot every day, then they would have to see me as a tortured soul and be generous in their offerings. I imagined myself surrounded by critics, smelling their snobbery and feeling their stares. When it became too much for me, I would hobble to the sand.

Laying down under the perfectly warm California sun, it feels like someone is still in love with me. I breathe the salt air and listen to the young girls play volleyball. They laugh and it makes me smile. All I have is the sand, it is soft and easy, and the ocean and the sun remind me that I am still alive, even though I never became that man.