

AN ACTOR PREPARES

Written by

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2nd Draft
2nd Jan 2002

FADE IN: WHITE TEXT on black

A life in art is the most difficult pathway, full of nettles and pit-falls and frightening ghosts. It may lead to destruction, it may lead to paradise, it may lead nowhere. That does not matter. - Konstantin Stanislavsky

EXT. CHURCH - DAY

Caption: The Present

A sign in the foreground reads: BACK CREEK FRIENDS CHURCH, FAIRMOUNT, INDIANA

A small, unassuming small town church in America. Wooden boards, whitewash, next to a straight two lane blacktop.

A sunny day, with a small throng of people gathered outside.

Many of the men and some of the women wear red Harrington jackets, their hair gelled back in a pompadour style. Many of them have a cigarette dangling self consciously out of the corner of their mouth.

Everyone carries bouquets, photographs, mementos of their long dead idol. A number of stalls are set up around the church grounds with signs.

The James Dean Look-alike contest.

The James Dean Pendant stall.

The rest sell videos, posters, books, postcards, autographs of Dean.

James Dean adorns people's ties, scarves, necklaces, pin badges, hats. Some attendees proudly show off their James Dean tattoos.

The church clock strikes one. The congregation begins to file inside the church.

INT. BACK CREEK FRIENDS CHURCH, FAIRMOUNT, INDIANA - DAY

TOM, a middle aged man, wearing a tie with a Warhol print of James Dean, stands at the pulpit as people enter, sitting down in rows on the church pews, the stragglers standing at the back.

The doors are left open so people outside can hear the proceedings. Sunlight streams in through the windows.

TOM

Of all the places on the planet you could choose to be on this very special day - you sure picked the right spot!

He looks over the crowd, reading the slogans emblazoned on some of their t-shirts, accompanied by red windbreakers.

"James Dean Lives"; "James Dean Forever"; "Disciple of James Dean". Tom nods.

TOM (CONT'D)

You're about to hear from people whose lives were profoundly changed by the great man himself, some fifty years after he was taken from us.

There is polite applause as IKE PULLEY walks to the podium.

IKE

I've just driven all the way from Vancouver, Canada. I've been playing tapes of Jimmy's movies all the way. Not the music! The dialogue. Know it by heart.

(beat)

Glenda thought I was crazy. Guess that's why she didn't come along.

There is polite clapping as he walks off. The next one up is a woman, PATRICIA DAVIS.

PATRICIA

My son was such a great fan of James. He copied his walk and his gestures. I still have the album which he made of all the old pictures and clippings - anything to do with him. It has the greatest sentimental value to me.

(beat)

It's all I have to remember him by.

The clapping is more hesitant this time, as she leaves the podium to be replaced by ROSA.

ROSA

I've lived in Fairmount all my life. The 50s were a very conservative time in a very conservative place. Like most young people I had a lot of conflict with my parents.

(beat)

Then I went to see a movie, Rebel Without A Cause.

(MORE)

ROSA (CONT'D)

I was ten, and for the very first time in my life, I fell in love.

(sighing)

I remember when he died. I remember lying in bed. Praying, crying, asking God to take my life and to bring Jimmy back. Soon after, I started the James Dean Fan Club. I know I could have been Mrs James Dean.

As she leaves the stage, the applause is at its loudest. A few women are wiping their faces with handkerchiefs, weeping copiously. The next man up is KAZUO. He is the Japanese James Dean, with red windbreaker, white tee, blue jeans, a cigarette behind the ear. The resemblance is striking. He may even have had plastic surgery to achieve this effect.

KAZUO

I had parents and younger brother and our family love each other, but James Dean made me awake to love of family IN MY MIND!

A ripple of polite applause.

KAZUO (CONT'D)

Like General MacArthur, I shall return - I shall return - I shall return - to Fairmount! East is East and West is West, but East of Eden is East of Eden!

The congregation stands and cheers wildly.

EXT. BACK CREEK FRIENDS CHURCH, FAIRMOUNT, INDIANA - DAY

The applause fades away, the sun setting. The road running beside the church is a straight line of tarmac stretching off into the distance.

The scene changes to night. As the sun sets, the church becomes newer, cleaner, less worn. The wooden slats in the fence straighten. The road becomes narrower and bumpier, the houses in the distance fewer. Silence.

Caption: September 30, 1948

Twin headlights on the horizon. A solitary car races towards the church. It passes at around fifty miles an hour, the small block Chevy rumbling.

The small cockerel weather vane at the side of the road spins madly.

INT. LEM'S CHEVY - NIGHT

JAMES DEAN and his childhood friend, LEM CRAIG, are sitting side by side in the front of the Chevy.

JAMES is a young teenager, his hair styled in a duck tail quiff, accessorised by a pair of tortoiseshell glasses.

LEM is a tall, gangly older man with crooked teeth and awkward hair, slicked down across his forehead. They make an odd couple.

Lem drives, with a bottle of Four Feathers in his lap. He passes it to James, who swigs a burning mouthful.

The car is a trash heap, full of tools and electrical wires, empty bottles, magazines, flashlights. Lem points to a crumpled pack of Luckies on the dashboard.

LEM
Cigarettes.

James takes the pack off the dashboard, lights one and tosses the pack back. They both look ahead in silence. The flickering headlights of the Chevy illuminate a tiny patch of the road ahead of them.

JAMES
So what was the feeling you had -
going ashore?

LEM
Mostly, plain scared shitless.
That's the truth of it, JD. But
there's a small part - a real quiet
voice in the back of your head -
that keeps telling you not to
worry, that even dying's not so
bad.

(swigging from the bottle)
Let me tell you, man. I wanted to
follow that voice. I wanted to
follow that peaceful voice of
dying. But you need your wits about
you. So I didn't.

(lighting a cigarette)
Funny thing, I hear that voice all
the time now and I'm starting to
believe it.

JAMES
Still, you had to wade in, what,
200 yards? Couldn't do that without
pissing in my pants.

LEM

Who said I didn't? Had this buddy. His plan was to get over the landing ramp and onto Omaha beach as fast as possible. Told me they'd have less chance of getting you the faster you went. Damn fool. The trick was...

Lem swigs from his bottle of Four Feathers.

James waits politely to hear what the trick is.

JAMES

What was the trick?

LEM

What trick?

JAMES

About getting to the beach alive.

LEM

What makes you think I did?

JAMES

Don't jive me, Lem.

LEM

Big thing was finding the right rhythm. Not getting in too fast. Not staying in too long. The first wave took it bad. We all knew it would. Believe me, kid. It was so damned cold. Made you want to move your nuts through that water tootsweet. But you sure as hell couldn't dawdle. I was carrying all this fucking equipment. I damn near came in walking behind my own pack.

(beat)

They told us to come in staggered in waves, like setting up checkers, you know? No one did it though. I tried to line myself up right behind the guy in front. Most everybody did.

A car passes them, going in the opposite direction. Its headlights pass across Lem's face, making his crooked front tooth glitter as he grins at James.

James looks back. Then they both turn to look ahead again. The car is turning onto dirt roads, passing wooden shacks and trashy looking jalopies. This is a part of town that James has always avoided. He shifts in his seat uneasily, trying to speak offhand.

JAMES
Where we goin', Lem?

LEM
(beat)
Need someone to take a few pictures
of me. You're elected, sport.

They drive on, back into the nice part of town, passing the high school, the police station, the new library. Fairmount looks so clean and wholesome.

JAMES
In the dark? Why not wait until the
light's better?

LEM
Has to be at night. You'll see.

The car stops at an intersection. Waiting for the light to change, Lem looks over at James, studying him intently.

JAMES
What? What is it?

LEM
JD, JD, JD. One initial lower and
you'd be JC. That's who you remind
me of. Knew it was a real
mysterious name.

JAMES
That mean I'm gonna end up
crucified?

LEM
Just could be.

James says nothing. In the windshield he can see Lem's grin. It is distorted grotesquely in the curve of the glass.

EXT. MOSSBACHER FUNERAL HOME, FAIRMOUNT, INDIANA - NIGHT

The Chevy pulls up outside, the lights dimming. Lem turns to James, touching his arm.

LEM
Hey JD. That stuff I told you about
the landing? That stays right
between us in the car, okay?

Lem's eyes widen in warning. James returns an easy smile. Lem takes his hand off James' arm.

LEM (CONT'D)

So these plays you're in, I sure hope its just so's you can be close to Jenna.

JAMES

No. Well, yes, I guess. But I sort of like it too. You get to be other people. Maybe not be them. Feel like them, anyway.

LEM

(flapping his wrist
limply)

I hope you're not going fruity on me.

JAMES

I'm still playing basketball.

LEM

So, what you seeing with Jenna tomorrow?

JAMES

Something with zombies. Jen sort of likes being scared.

LEM

Get the back seat. Least it's better than that lovey dovey garbage they show in town.

Lem flaps his wrist again. James laughs, but feels deceitful doing it.

LEM (CONT'D)

Open the glovebox, JD.

James does so. Sitting on top of a pile of maps is a boxy looking camera.

LEM (CONT'D)

Know anything about photography?

James grunts, shaking his head.

LEM (CONT'D)

That there's one of the finest cameras in the world. Got it in Dusseldorf after the war. Hasselblad.

Lem takes the camera and starts the car up again. Looking left and right, he drives down the alley at the side of the funeral home, over a dirt road to a patch of macadam at the rear of the home.

LEM (CONT'D)

Wait here.

Lem pulls the camera from the glove box and slides out of the car. James watches as Lem puts the camera strap between his teeth, and shimmies like a monkey up the drainpipe. From the drain pipe he's on the porch roof. From there he climbs to the second floor and through an open window. James is not surprised. This is typical of Lem Craig.

He sees the back door of the funeral home open. Lem's hand emerges, beckoning James in with a single finger. James obeys, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand, leaving the car and sliding inside the door of the funeral home.

INT. MOSSBACHER FUNERAL HOME, FAIRMOUNT, INDIANA - NIGHT

James follows Lem into the display room.

Several caskets are in the room, arranged randomly at odd angles.

Moonlight makes the shadows longer and more eerie.

James folds his arms in an instinctive gesture of self-preservation.

Lem slaps his hand on James's shoulder, making him start. He hands the camera to James.

LEM

The flash is on. Just be sure I'm
in focus. You press right here.

Lem leaps into an open casket on a table, lined with red velvet, his head resting on the satin pillow, arms crossed on his chest.

LEM (CONT'D)

Go ahead. Shoot.

VIEWFINDER: Lem's idiot face, tongue lolling, eyes closed, tooth protruding.

JAMES

Where's the focus?

LEM

The lens, you turn the whole ring.

JAMES

Hold on, I need my glasses.

James takes them from his jacket pocket while holding the camera in the crook of his arm. After putting them on, he looks through the viewfinder again.

VIEWFINDER: The image is much sharper and Lem's idiocy much more apparent.

LEM
How's it look, JD?

JAMES
Crazy, man.

LEM
Shoot it, then.

The flash goes off.

LEM (CONT'D)
Another.

The flash goes off two more times. Lem leaps out of the coffin like a professional gymnast, taking the camera from James.

LEM (CONT'D)
Now you.

JAMES
No, I don't think -

LEM
I'm going to print these up myself.
No-one'll ever see 'em. C'mon.
It'll be wild.

Lem pushes James toward the casket. Smiling over his shoulder, James climbs into the coffin, reticent and embarrassed.

LEM (CONT'D)
You look scared in there. No one's ever scared in a coffin. It's the end of being scared. Forever. Shut your eyes.

James shuts his eyes. The flash goes off.

LEM (CONT'D)
Stick your tongue out. Go on!

James refuses. The camera flashes again.

FLASH CUT TO STILL PHOTO: James Dean lying in a coffin, eyes closed, goofy smile on his face, glasses slightly askew.

James opens his eyes and sits up.

JAMES
Someone's sure to see them flashes,
Lem.

James looks towards the windows. They are covered by net curtains, and it is late at night. No one is outside, but James is sure they've been seen.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Hey man. Let's get outta here.

Lem's not interested. He wanders towards the embalming room.

LEM (O.S)

Hey JD, catch this.

James clambers out of the coffin and follows Lem. What JD catches is a fifty year old female corpse, in a very large, expensive, brass trimmed coffin.

She is dressed in pink and has had make-up put on. She looks familiar and James feels that he should know her, because this is Fairmount, a small town, after all.

But death has made her anonymous. James looks at Lem, who is fiddling with the camera. He takes a couple of steps backwards.

LEM (CONT'D)

Just one.

JAMES

That's sick.

LEM

Listen. I'm almost as dead as she is. We belong in a picture together. It's Mrs Trasker. The bank president's wife. Used to date her daughter.

JAMES

You're not getting in there.

LEM

Course not.

Lem gently raises MRS TRASKER out of the coffin to a sitting position.

Lem puts his arm around her shoulders, placing his cheek against hers.

VIEWFINDER: A pair of faces, frozen in time, like lovesick teenagers having their strip photos taken in a booth at a fair. The girl always has her eyes closed.

The camera flashes, the WHITE of the flash growing, filling the screen.