

David Morris Parson

Foley

A chopped log dropped into mud and stone is Tom Hanks dropping dead on a gravel drive. Stabbing raw chicken is stabbing Don Cheadle. Breaking frozen Romaine lettuce is breaking Robert DeNiro's fingers.

I'm a sound effects guy. A foley. A scientist, really.

"A scientist!" Lolita emitted from the narrow bathroom. "Phil, you are no Einstein."

Nine months of living together and it was the first time she'd mocked me. I would've let it go, but pulling an all-nighter at the studio still had me going, and you know as well as I do, when no-sleep collides with all-sleep you end up with drama.

"They teach it at universities," I said. I dropped to the king bed and landed too hard against the coffee headboard. I grabbed the TV remote from the side table and watched a black weatherman jubilantly prognosticate a soggy morning.

"Science is Pasteur or Salk or curing AIDS," she continued. "Not Lee Press-On Nails."

Lolita was referencing the work I'd done on *Benji: The Next Generation*. Dogs running on kitchen linoleum in the movies is me in a dim recording booth wearing gloves glued with Lee Press-On Nails. Sound deceives. The real sound—real in real life—doesn't fly on screen.

"Make-up artist"—I aimed my voice towards the bathroom—"oxymoron, wouldn't you say?" A dose of her own medicine. Lolita, she's a make up artist. But none of that alien-car-wreck-star-in-a-fat-suit stuff; she's the lips-perfect-hair-star-on-the-red-carpet kind. We met on the set of a Vin Diesel straight-to-video. She approached me and said I looked like—ironic, now as I look back on it—Einstein. My hair, obviously. My all-nighter look. Her lips migrated to the right, turning her

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1

mouth greedy, and later that night I took her left breast in my mouth before we cleared the kitchen table and pushed the wooden legs to their limits.

Wooden legs are a rusted gate. Two lit cigarettes are two thumb prints in sand.

"The guys who did *Hellraiser*," I said, scrolling through channels, "that's talent!"

Her loud exhale traveled along hair-sprayed air and settled at the base of my earlobe. "If you only saw," I heard her say, "what I had to do to Harrison Ford so he doesn't look like a shriveled goat."

Morning rays knifed through wooden blinds. Burning slashes clawed across the mahogany dresser, the black weatherman, and my pale skin atop a crimson duvet, making me feel as if my entire existence had lost an epic battle. A make-up bag zipper screamed.

She exited the bathroom and entered the closet. Neck down she was white robe, neck up she was wheat hair: a piled haystack with hidden pins hugging strands—it looked haphazard, but no doubt it was erected with purpose, as if it was designed to deflect the fact that she was the one who started this argument.

I'd come home needing a consoling Lolita, a sexed-up Lolita, a Lolita who could erase my night and ease me into sleep. Maybe she was having a bad day, taking it out on me, which is what couples do, and isn't sleep more important than what's going on here?

She emerged in ripped jeans, flat shoes, and gripping a purse strap that cut through the shoulder of a tight white T. Her skin radiated.

"Look"—I reached for her hand—"it's work. It's Nick. He doesn't know dick between tennis-shoes-on-tile and high-heels-on-shag."

Lolita buried her hands in her purse. "He's hot right now," she said, rummaging.

I clicked off the remote and watched my reflection ghost in the black

screen.

Nick. Director Nick. Nineteen-year-old Director Nick. A kid who at fourteen shot a home-made civil war comedy that erupted on Youtube, exciting Spielberg, who flew him to Hollywood to let him sit on his lap while he directed Indiana Jones 4.

Now Nick was directing—get this—*Friday the 13th: the Musical*. His brainchild.

“You know,” Lolita spoke to me with car keys in her hand, “It’s all about who you know in this town. You might learn something.”

Of course I know it’s all about who you know in this town. I’ve sweated the business longer than she has. Yet, her patronizing air made me more fearful than furious. I was in a tired fog, but the parts of her that came through the clouded edges didn’t seem like parts of her at all.

She walked away with the back pockets of her jeans going up down. Saw saw saw of left jean-leg against right. Slap slap slap flat heels on wood.

“I’ve got meetings,” she echoed from the living room. “A studio’s interested in my screenplay.”

Metal clacked in a rusted knob, an exhausted hinge brittlely, ecstatic birds bowed to a dump truck’s bellow, a screen door shot a bullet against a pane. I succumbed to the pull of the pillow when my synapses sputtered and made me aware of the fact that Lolita had never mentioned she was writing a screenplay.

You’d think being in the industry we’d go to the movies a lot. But when we first began we lived in bed. She’d gently comb her fingers through my shocked hair while breathing out a post-coital wheeze.

She went alone to the Venice Film Festival as the hair and make up gal for the stars of several featured films, that’s when we lost our rhythm. I think she left there the part of her I liked best, because upon her return she retained no desire to pass the days with me in bed. If I went to Venice

now, could I find that part of her and fly it home?

This is what I'm thinking when I pulled into Paramount, the preamble to a ridiculous session on *Friday the 13th: the Musical*. Today, a horny high school track star (a bare-chested baritone) gets surprised mid-song by Jason who straps the lad to the end of a dock before backing a boat into him, thereby cutting the song, literally, in half.

I'm amped when I arrive. I've predicted Nick's presence.

Sam greeted me with a wide, close-mouthed smile. "He-who-just-learned-to-shave isn't coming." It was Sam's name for Nick. Sam had a knack for terms of endearment; he called me "White Noise."

He handed me a cup of coffee and I took a sip. "Nick?" I said.

"No babysitting today." Sam's large, lined face gave him the countenance of a comedic pumpkin. "No explanation."

Sam and I dialogued with nods and grunts and snaps and claps, he the master of the mixing board, and me the fixer of effects. Jason and the baritone battled on the dock but it was me who stabbed chicken for a moist insertion; it was me who thrashed and gagged in the waves; it was me who stirred noodles and grapes and fricasseed the boy's torso to eternity. A bloody symphony. A symphony that couldn't steal my mind away from Lolita's screenplay. Not knowing about her screenplay was like not knowing a part of her, as if that part could be revealed only through the lock and key in a girl's diary.

The mics were muted, the soundboard had cooled, when we got the call: Nick wanted rain. Hail even. Rain and hail in a scene that was shot in searing sun on a mild mirrored lake. "I'll handle it in post," Nick said. "CG the clouds and rain, make it more epic," he said. "This isn't friggin' *Gladiator*," Sam said beneath his breath. Nick needed the sound track to sell it to the studio chiefs. On Monday. Today was Friday.

I thought about what Lolita said. Collaborate. Nick's a rising star.

I phoned and reached her voice mail. I told her I'd be late. I told her I

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1

hoped her meeting went well. It seemed like the way to end the call.

I rolled home and my nose was immediately tangled in a thorny vine of rose perfume. It grew on pockets of air moist from a recently run bath. Painted on Lolita was a black cocktail dress.

"You said you were going to be late," she said, pinning an earring.

"It's eleven." I stared at her coordinated ritual. "Did I forget about a party?"

She turned towards the dresser and applied lipstick in the mirror. "No," she said, and smacked lips the color of terracotta.

I stood slump-shouldered behind her and in the mirror I saw a rumpled brown T-shirt, dingy knee-worn jeans, and my shocked hair gone limp. "I should grab a shower. I mean, if you want me to go."

She snapped the cap on the lipstick. "Don't you have work tomorrow?"

I forgot I left her the message.

Tinkling metal hangers and a shoebox lid: She was in the closet now.

"I guess you could go alone," I said.

She stepped out in black pumps. Her folded arms secured a black shawl, her auburn eyes projected a tedious stare. "Look, Phil, if you want to go, sure. I mean, if you feel up to it."

"Do you not want me to go?"

She looked at her watch and exited the room, heels hitting hardwoods in descending decibels.

I got the story in the car: We were dining with Nick.

"Ironic, right?" she said. "Dreamworks is interested in my script and

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1

there's a director who's hot for it and it's Nick, *that* Nick, Director Nick, your Nick, and he wants it for his next picture." She drove herky-jerky as if the tenor of her vocal cords affected her hands gripping the wheel.

"I didn't know you knew Nick."

"We met on a gondola in Venice."

"Who meets on a gondola in Venice?"

"Dreamworks threw a bash on a boat in the middle of the bay. How else were we supposed to get there?"

A burnt cloud of smoke plumed in my chest and spread to my extremities. Something shameful. I felt like I was coming into the middle of another person's movie. The actors looked like us, sounded like us, but the words they spoke were a foreign language I couldn't comprehend. The dubbing was tragic.

I was nowhere near happy for her.

In the restaurant courtyard Nick sat at a square table under a thick tree where the pin lights in the branches haloed him. Adorned in a crisp white linen shirt he looked like a star in his own movie. He smiled and stood when he saw Lolita, who smiled, scrunched her shoulders, and went from a twenty-nine year old makeup artist to a jar of honey.

Nick focused on me and didn't falter. "We can't get away from each other, can we, buddy?" he said. The table was set for two. "Lola wasn't sure you'd make it."

Lola? I imagined him strapped to a dock while Jason backed a boat into him.

"How's the rain comin', buddy?"

"Killer," I said.

Over-stimulated birds chirped in upper branches. Water poured soothingly into glistening glasses. Just-off-the-grill steaks sizzled from atop waiter's trays. Lolita's wooden chair squeaked under a nervous

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1

knee. Nick shot fireworks from crackling knuckles. My heart beat with the irregular rhythm of drubbing fingers.

A cork popped. "Champagne?" exclaimed Lolita.

A tall waitress poured golden bubbles into reedy flutes.

"Compliments of the studio," Nick said. "They greenlit your script. We shoot in the fall."

Lolita squealed, erupted from her chair, and landed on Nick with her arms outstretched. He looked over her shoulder at me with that conspiracy between men: what's a guy to do?! Lolita held on, then, abruptly, withdrew. Her smile seemed unsure of itself when she turned to me, as if she'd just expended most of her energy and was mustering what was left.

I stood to hug her, kiss her, I didn't know what. She hugged me vaguely, no commitment to feeling.

Raucous laughter and jingling jewelry from the table in the corner shot like fireworks above the trees. The champagne at our table bubbled skyward, but the effect felt like a forgery. Lolita returned to her wooden seat and tilted back her fluted vile.

"Lola's going places, buddy." Nick thrust out a hand that made a home of my shoulder. He squeezed, which I felt in my chest. "Like Jon Peters. You know the Jon Peters story? One day he's Streisand's hair and makeup guy, the next he's riding shotgun at the Academy Awards. *Caddyshack*, *Flashdance*, *Batman*—the one with Michael Keaton—he produced them all. The rest is history." He removed his hand and raised his glass. "To Lola."

"To Lola," she beamed.

I drank too much, laughed too little, and fulfilled my on-the-fly plan of passing out in bed. With Lolita curled up in a fetal, and my soused equilibrium sloshing me to sleep, bobbing around in my head was the Jon Peters story. I thought of what Nick said, but I couldn't tell if he was

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1

talking about Lolita or *me*: was Lolita riding on his coattails, or was I riding on hers?

My cell phone woke me and assaulted me with facts: 11:42 AM, Sam.

"Phil?" His grizzled exuberance startled me. "Forget about the rain scene?" Sam blew heavily into the phone, probably his umpteenth cigarette of the morning.

The bedroom blinds were open and sun poured in thick and molten with an audible bubbling current, smoldering the duvet in a white-hot heat. The spinning fan fluttered a note on the side table.

"Nick's come and gone," Sam said. "He thought you'd be here early."

I hung up, stretched for the note and blinked to focus.

Script meeting all day. Let's talk tonight. L.

Ka-thud and pop, knees snapped in place. Slap slap slap bare feet on cold tile to the tub. Squuuuuk squuuuuk stubborn shower knobs released an echoed downpour. Squeak squeak knobs off, tardy drips like ricocheted gun shots in a metal shed. Swoosh jingle slam rattle puck thuck growl tires churned asphalt into dust.

In spite of my hangover Sam and I were a well-oiled machine, interpreting an audio language, giving meaning and reality to reality. And when we left with daylight still alive in the Hollywood Hills, Sam smirked, which I knew from experience was soon to be followed by a comment about Lolita.

"You're lucky, Phil." He stooped to get into his vintage Mustang. The engine rumbled and he rolled down the window. "You're going home to Little-Miss-Can't-Be-Wrong, and I'm going home to this." He held up his right hand, laughed, and drove away.

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1

Sam had no idea what he was talking about.

I drove home with the windows down. Traffic honked in a harmonious hymn, and, miraculously, there wasn't a helicopter hovering in the sky. Nothingness in twilight. Which is why when I parked in front of the house I was able to discern a soft squeak.

At the front door I turned my ear to my tennis shoes—my feet had paused but the squeak intensified its presence. The door swung on hushed hinges.

Eek eek eek eek eekie eekie eekie eekie kola kola kola kola lola lola lola lola.

The living room was empty, but the house was packed with atmospheric pressure. A rolling thunder tumbled from the bedroom.

"Lola!"

"Nick!"

I wanted to catch Lolita and Nick in bed—in my and Lolita's bed—and break things up, bust Nick up, but when I reached the bedroom door, a door closed to me, instead of ripping it from its frame, I paused and heard the sound effect equivalent of tires screeching to a halt. My throbbing heart was a blown tire thwopping against asphalt.

Eekie eekie kola kola eek eek eek eek. A dirty dialogue.

And in between grunts and sighs and push and shove, there in the space known as 'and', as in "in *and* out" and "up *and* down" and "no *and* yes", there was something more. A singular silence. In that silent space, I knew, was where I lived in this trio.

It all was oddly alluring.

I had to match the sound to the reality. I had to see, like rubber-necking a bloody wreck, mulling over the mangled mess.

I applied feathery force and guided the door open to the width of an eyelash.

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1

She was on top, her back to him, facing me, with eyes closed. His head made puffy blows against the pillow. I closed the bedroom door, tottered backwards, and found myself back at my car in front of the house.

Birds bickered from black wires bisecting a blue, heavenly ceiling. Lolita's white Volkswagen kissed the curb on the other side of the street. Nick's red Porsche—the gift from Spielberg—where was it? Maybe it was parked beyond the corner, or camouflaged as a Camry, or God knows what, but here I was, propped against the back end of my black BMW.

A subconscious tick forced its way into my conscience.

I popped the trunk. The trunk was empty except for my portable recording equipment. Two metallic briefcases sheltering a microphone, tape recorder, mixer and cords. A foley never leaves home without it. I grabbed the two briefcases, carried them into the house, and set them next to me as I sat in the chair in the corner and waited for them to finish.

On the other side of the wall: a banging headboard; a sudden silence.

In the past I'd been the one on the other side of the wall.

The bedroom door opened, Nick shuffled out in a black T-shirt and jeans and blond ruffled hair topping a flushed face. He didn't see me. He left through the front door but didn't close it.

Lolita briskly exited the bedroom in a khaki blur and smile.

"Lolita," I wanted to say. "Please," I wanted to say. She might have said something had she seen me. Something like, you don't listen, Phil, you're not in tune with me, Phil, you're not—

A door slamming is a door slamming. A car driving away is a long, deep broken sigh.

The bedroom drew me in with a tepid step. The chocolate duvet and creamy pillows were freshly fluffed just as I'd left them this morning, but it all had the perfection of a sitcom set, robbed of authenticity, void of soul, free of my pheromones. Talcum and rose rubbed their magic beneath my nose. In the bathroom at the bottom of a mesh trash basket I

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1

discovered chunky, clear, broken glass. Based on the hints of its original shape it was the remnants of the vase that decorated the dresser. I jerked my eyes back to the bedroom and verified the dresser. Bare. The ghost of a sound I had missed.

I taped a miniscule microphone to the back panel of the dresser. The wires trailed veinlike to the recording box zipped inside my old red gym bag hidden underneath.

At night, in bed, exhausted, drunk, I pretended to sleep when she made it home.

She kissed my cheek—the moist separation of her lips sounded like the adhesive parting of two sweaty bodies.

I couldn't fathom her motivation for the kiss. An act of contrition, the ablu-tion of guilt for screwing Nick? Or an act of pity for my seemingly soft-headedness, a patronizing salve? And why my surreptitious surveillance? To expose their betrayal? To prosecute them in the court of public opinion? Enough questions to make one deaf.

I remembered that her morning note said she wanted to talk tonight.

I got a new vase. The old one was basic enough—small and round at the bottom, wide at the top. You can get them anywhere. I got this one in the prop department at Paramount.

When she got home I was in bed watching Letterman. Her wheat hair was tied in a ponytail, she clutched her script school-girlishly to her breast.

"How was the meeting?" I asked.

She suddenly seemed tense.

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1

"Fine." She set her script on the dresser next to the vase. "Great."

"Nick screwing with your script?"

"Yes." She blinked. "No. I mean, no script changes. Meeting went well."

"I got a new vase," I said, nodding at the dresser.

"Oh, yes. Thanks. The other one..."

"Broken. Found it in the trashcan."

She looked down at her script on the dresser. "Yes."

I clicked off Letterman, rolled over and closed my eyes. "Good night."

An hour later she slid into bed. She did not kiss my cheek.

The next day I got up and out before Lolita got awake. At the studio Sam greeted me vaguely, which wasn't like Sam, but when I entered the sound stage I immediately understood: Nick stood next to a microphone drinking Starbucks.

"Buddy, we gotta talk," he said.

A steel ball dislodged in my chest with a loud chink and rolled heavily into my stomach, stretching the lining.

He took a swig and kept his eyes on me. "We got ourselves a situation."

The steel ball teetered as if it were ready to rip the lining and drop into my groin.

He continued: "What're you gonna do about it, buddy?"

I blinked absentmindedly at the wooden blocks, water buckets, and sand box, hoping that their presence would inspire sounds that would form words.

"Well, I sure as hell don't know how to make it storm," he said, raising his voice. "I mean, look, I've gotta be blunt. The sounds you gave me yesterday suck. I need hell fire and damnation at Camp Crystal Lake, know what I mean? I've got a meeting with the chief at Paramount tomorrow. The fucking chief of Paramount fucking Pictures! I can't go in

there with this shit." He swept his arm across the studio and through the window at Sam. Sam stared blankly at us, smoking a cigarette. "You've got twenty-four hours or I'm fucked. And if I'm fucked, you're fucked."

He tossed his coffee in the wastebasket by the door and left.

I hoped he had glass remnants from a vase in his ass. I prayed he had Chlamydia. I wished he had a needle dick. I feared he smelled like Lolita.

I was the God of thunder and lightning and Camp Crystal Lake was my domain. Tall pines swayed and knotted limbs scissored, stripping bark in a frenzied whittle and scraping branches smooth and bare as bone. Petrified planks cracked with conviction. Tornadic winds frothed white-caps, and the wall of water devoured the dock, dropping the taut teen into whipped waves, and, climactically, into the scythe of the boat's blades. The boy's cries were lost to the lacerating wind. Lightning flashed, illuminating shocked dead eyes looking lastly upon a tormented sky.

Lolita and I played tag. I left for work in the morning while she feigned sleep, and I pretended to snore when she finally came in at night. The new vase stood still, a symbolic tower looming over us, and neither one of us moved closer to discussing it. The voice-activated recorder picked up nothing. Which is to say it picked up the screaming nothingness that had slipped under the bedcovers and snuggled in between us.

Three days later I was assaulted with four-letter words. Lolita had left the house for a "script readjustment," and once her Volkswagen had rounded the block I pulled out the old red gym bag and played the tape. Expletives, grunts, murmurs, ripped clothing, a belt buckle dragging the floor, the four-poster stabbing hardwoods into my heart.

Proof pressed itself down on me, leaving me violated. And yet listening

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1

to her with him, it was the first I'd heard anything from her in a week. I could control her—turn her voice off, turn her voice on, choke it, dream it.

The days ran together, the tapes did not lie.

Monday: a tape bore slaps on the face or butt (I couldn't tell).

Tuesday: a headboard heaved.

Thursday: whipped and gagged and chained.

Saturday: Lolita and I went to the movies. I asked; she accepted. Something mindless was needed between us. A stupid Adam Sandler flick. The audience roared, but we stared at the screen, the flickering scenes bathing our faces in jaundiced light.

That night in bed, my eyes closed, my mind awake, I recalled the day Lolita moved in. I thought of the metal colander she unpacked from a much-packed cardboard box. I don't know why I said it but I'd commented on how unworn it looked, with barely a scratch across its shiny finish. She'd looked at me oddly and said that it was one of those things that everyone needed, a dependable appliance. She said that you'd always know it *wasn't* there just when you *needed* it there. Better safe than sorry—always carry a colander. Now, remembering that colander, my emotions seemed to collect there, leaking through hallowed holes, never brimming over to the point of a mess.

It's possible to create your own reality when reality is too real to begin with.

With each tape I placed myself in the room. Me and Nick, sharing Lolita. I allowed my mind to picture anything in bed. Her in the middle, me in the middle, even going further than simply fondling Nick; I pleased him on every lick of his long, hairy body—stopping short of the ultimate pluck of the rose. I was a martyr for her.

Wednesday: voices close to the microphone like they were on top of me. They were on the dresser, where it all began with a broken vase.

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1

"Yeah, baby."

"Nick."

"Oh, yeah—"

"No...oh—"

"That's it."

"What's this?"

"Me and you, baby."

"This."

"Almost there, baby."

"A...microphone."

"Baby."

"We're being recorded!"

"Don't—"

If Nick hadn't cut the wires, mashed the microphone, or sent the recorder ricocheting across the room, I'd have caught one nasty fight on tape—a fight between me and Lolita. She was waiting, alone, when I got home. She threw the left side of the house at me. Picture frames, plates, luggage, bananas, the TV remote, the colander, and a cable ACE award I'd won years ago. Words were hurled: "Pervert. Sicko. Freak!" Her arm movements were broad enough for the blind. Her mouth mouthed loud messages for the deaf. She gave so much, too much. Armageddon noise.

Is there anything more definite as start and finish? The moment in time when opening credits appear and closing credits roll? It's important to define such moments, to be able to look back and say this is when it happened and, yes, *I was there*.

Wilderness House Literary Review 4/1

You can't make this up: Nick hired me for his next picture.

Lola's script.

I took the job. A rational decision, I thought. If I had declined Nick could've damaged my reputation in town. And if I said yes—which I did—he could still torture me: his and Lola's mere presence on the set would insure that.

But Nick went further. He added a scene that wasn't in Lola's script. A sex scene. Grossly gratuitous. And I had to foley it. I figured it was his way of reminding me of what I'd done to them.

In the end it wasn't Kevin Bacon and Marisa Tomei steaming up the screen.

Well, it was them, and it wasn't.

It was Nick and Lola. Made possible by a memento. Tape doesn't lie.

You know, I was wrong about something. In the beginning of this story I said something about how sounds aren't what you think they are in the movies.

Tap dancing.

Tap dancing in the movies is tap dancing in real life.

You can't fake Sammy Davis, Jr.

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