

Chapter 5

Woe betide any dreamer who came to Gilson's Casting without raw talent. From his office on high, Gil could be a punishing God and unworthy dreamers were cast out without any opportunity for redemption. Whether Gilson's banishments were altruistic or misanthropic none of us really knew but he would strike down hard upon any mere mortal he felt did not belong in Hollywood.

One by one by two by four the dreamers came knocking on Gilson's door. Suite 916 was Hollywood's adaptation of Noah's Ark in which Gil would save the best of us from drowning on The Boulevard if - but only if - we were in possession of '*it*.'

In 1995 Gilson released his grip on the Cobra and sobered up enough to make a film he originally called 'Dreamers.' The dreamers got to Hollywood by bus and thus the documentary later became 'The Hollywood Bus Stop.' None of us were convinced. Who the hell wanted to watch a documentary about ordinary people trying to make the big time in Hollywood?

"Real life TV," Gilson insisted, "is da way of da future."

Almost three decades later it is truly stunning to contemplate just how right he was.

Perhaps that documentary was an attempt to save himself by proxy. He knew he would never get out now, he was too far gone to ever escape. Perhaps his broken dream had so broken him that he was avenging his pain by inflicting the same on all those unfit for Hollywood.

He preached that "a dream is a terrible thing to break," while simultaneously bludgeoning to death the dreams of anyone he deemed unworthy. The paradox was not lost on my analytical mind, but this story is not about me.

In the 1990s Hollywood Boulevard was drowning in flyers screaming 'ACTORS WANTED / MODELS WANTED.' Pinned to every lamp post, taped to every stop sign, plastered on windows, pin-tacked to doors, these flyers seemed - to all naïve wannabes like me - a fabulous free-for-all who dared to call up one of those numbers. Anyone dumb enough to make such a call - according to Gilson Simoes - "wanted to be ripped off." Gil never advertised, he couldn't afford the paper. It didn't matter, we found him anyway.

Jodie got on a greyhound bus in Florida at the age of twenty. She had been dreaming of life as a model for the past eight years. Weighing in at around three hundred pounds, Jodie arrived in Gilson's Casting wearing luminous pink lycra cycling shorts and a tie-dye teeshirt as big as a small tent. A friend in Fort Lauderdale had told Jodie that modelling was a fun job to have and thus had she come to claim her Hollywood mantle.

Gil looked Jodie up and down then said, "do you have any idea what your competition is?"

Jodie's smile revealed a mouth jam-packed with yellow, crooked teeth.

"Yeah!" she said, "real skinny, real pretty girls."

"So do you have a plan to improve your look?" asked Gil.

"Yeah, I work out every day," said Jodie.

Gilson squinted at the camera crew.

He said, "honey, working out ain't *that good*."

Jodie didn't even flinch.

Gil went on, "you're not a turn off, I wouldn't mind going out on a date with you but you are not - honestly - what is needed in Hollywood."

"That's your opinion," Jodie said.

"You know what I think you should do," said Gil, "I think you should go back to Florida, get yourself a nice husband, have a

coupla kids and enjoy life."

Jodie turned up her nose as if the suggestion smelled revolting.

"I already have a kid, thank you," she said.

"Well get another one!" Gil said.

The camera crew were sniggering. Gil began to laugh.

"You can laugh all you want," said Jodie, "I really couldn't care less what you think. It's your opinion. And I will become a model."

"It is not gonna happen!" Gil said.

"How do you know?" she yelled, "who are you?"

"I happen to be a casting director," said Gil.

Jodie glared across the desk.

"Honey," she said to him, "people like you are a dime a dozen. And you know what, when I do become a model, I'm gonna come back here and rub it in your face. Then I'm gonna tell you to kiss my ass."

Cleo was only fourteen when she got to Tinsel Town. Her parents did not know and she refused to tell Gilson where she was from. Cleo's naturally blonde-haired, baby-blue-eyed beauty was eclipsed only by her rapacious ambition to be a star and Cleo intended to keep trying until someone put her in the movies.

"So what does it mean, to try?" Gilson asked in an unusually tender tone.

"To try..." Cleo looked up at the ceiling for an answer, "to try... to get a touch of someone," she said and then, "and if you keep trying really hard hopefully someone will notice how hard you're trying."

Cleo was flawless and Gilson wanted to save her.

"Honey," he said, "you are fourteen years owd... you are not even 'owd'"

He went on, offering Cleo one of his favourite speeches.

"A war zone is safer than Hollywood for someone of your age. In a war zone you get an army and a tank a gun, you'd be more protected than here. You are a child. You need help, protection, guidance. Dis is a very cowl town."

Something on Gilson's palate was patently amiss. He said "cowl" for "cold," he said "owl" for "old" and "da" for "the" and "dis" for "this." His tongue could not tap on the back of his teeth, certain consonants eluded his speech and soon he would reveal to me - in private - the reasons why.

They were futile admonitions, however. Cleo's fourteen years of mind was made up. She knew she had 'it' but there was no trace of hubris in Cleo. In a voice sweeter than honey she told Gilson she was staying in Hollywood. Gilson's final plea was that she please - at the very least - go back home and come of age first. I often expect to see Cleo in the movies.

Alabama didn't get the gentle tone. Alabama got the God of wrath. She was way too feisty to get off lightly. As beautiful as she was, and very beautiful she was, Alabama had sold herself to porn, and gone against the admonitions of our general. She sat upon the black sofa at the back of his office, chain-smoking while Gilson yelled about the route she had chosen.

"It sells doesn't it?" she said defiantly.

"I don't give a fuck if it sells!" screamed Gil.

Next he unleashed his most favourite speech.

"Do you know how many girls come in a bus every morning to Hollywood and got as beautiful pussy as yours? Hundreds! Do you know how many come in an aeroplane? Thousands! D'you know how many come in a car? I don't even know the number and they got a pussy just as good as yours."

Alabama finished her cigarette and walked out. Whether Gilson Simoes saved her soul or sealed her fate remains an unanswered question in this literary attempt at Hollywood debate.

Thus ran the scenes in *The Hollywood Bus Stop*. No one has ever seen it. And I've got the footage; but this story...

On 4th June 1994 I was on fire with the notion that I was almost over the rainbow. I returned to my room at the La Brea Motel feeling invincible after all I had learned that day. The magnificent black giant, Chuck's philosophy had raised me higher than Nietzsche's Zarathustra. In my mind I was already a superhuman superstar. Only one element of this new glow was spoiling the scene and that element was money.

As menacing as William Shakespeare's Iago was the money in my purse or lack thereof. I was too afraid to look into my purse because basically I was fucked. I did not want to see the harsh mathematical reality of how little cash was left. Better to stay ensconced in denial. The Americans call it a 'wallet.' I was blacking out a vision of my future begging bowl upon Marilyn's star outside McDonald's, which was where I would go if forced to do so because Marilyn's star might bring me luck and put money in my purse and as I began desperately looking for a distraction to prevent this vision from gaining any traction there suddenly came a knock upon the door...

Standing outside was a scraggly-haired, super skinny blonde boy on crutches. His bright green eyes glinted with a hint of insanity. On his left leg, up to the knee, he wore a length of plaster.

In an accent fresh out of the film *Deliverance*, he said, "hey, I'm Billy. I saw you checking in yesterday so I just wanted to introduce myself."

People in Los Angeles are so friendly, I thought.

"It's nice to meet you, Billy," I said, "I'm Tracy," and put out my hand.

"Hi Tracy, I *LOVE* your accent," said Billy.

I had not noticed him yesterday while checking in but now I remembered... there had indeed been someone standing behind me at reception.

Checking in to the La Brea Motel was the perfectly traumatic ending to that perfectly traumatic yesterday. I was at dropping point when I asked, "how much is a single room for the night, please?"

A tall Chinese man had to tell me the price three or four times before I understood and then had to ask three times for my passport because his accent was thicker than the bullet-proof glass from behind which he began yelling, "you pay now."

But that was yesterday - a lifetime ago - and now, as I listened to Billy explaining why he was here I dumped my first impression of him. The glint in Billy's green eyes was not insanity; it was a sensitive humanity combined with nervousness.

"I just wanna let you know that I'm up there in room 212 if you need anything," he said, "me and my boyfriend stay here all the time, we're from out of state, but we come here cos being gay back home gets us too much, erm, attention and we can be ourselves in Hollywood, so yeah, if you need anything just come on by... I mean when he lets me back in..."

I could see that he lived in one of those places where the prurient populace cannot mind its own business. Billy was not the first homosexual I had ever met but he was the youngest. He came to Hollywood to set his spirit free. In that respect he was the same as me. But now his boyfriend had locked him out of the motel room.

"We had a fight," said Billy, "and he's locked me out. Yeah, he has anger issues. He'll be okay in a little while, but anyways I just wanted to say hi. If you need anything just come on by."

In his eyes I could see that the fight was hurting more than his broken leg.

"Would you like to come in and sit down for a while?" I said.

Billy and his boyfriend were musicians. They were planning to break into the music industry, Billy told me. A&M Records was real close-by, just down La Brea, near Sunset.

"I play guitar and my guy plays drums," he said, offering me a cigarette.

"Excellent," I said. "I'm an actress. But I can sing too. I was in a band in London."

"Awesome!" said Billy.

Billy reckoned I would be famous in no time, what with my accent and being so cute an' all.

"How did you break your leg?" I asked.

"Another fight," he glanced in the direction of his boyfriend and a part of my heart felt his pain.

In an attempt to distract his sadness I tried to make him smile.

I said, "well, I'm having trouble walking too, thanks to the power of California sun on British skin. Look at this, Billy."

I showed him my shins. He did not smile. Billy was horrified.

"Oh my God, Tracy!" he said, "you need calamine lotion! Want me to go get you some?"

People in Los Angeles are so kind, I thought.

I suggested we walk to Limelite Liquor together. I could not think of another way to reclaim my solitude. Billy was too sweet and upset to dismiss outright but he was one of those who would talk until dawn if I let him.

The shop had a neon green sign which flashed the word 'Limelite' from dusk until dawn. The Americans say "store." I had already been in there once that day to buy a bottle of California

spring water. Behind the counter stood two stone-faced Russians. It smelled of cinnamon chewing gum, chocolate, beer and cigarettes and other elixirs for life. The atmosphere was somewhat cold-war-
esque and made me slightly nervous.

"Do you have any calamine lotion, please?" I asked with my confident, California smile.

The curly-headed, tallest brother pointed to a shelf upon which stood an array of dusty bottles and tubes.

Handing over that cash hurt as much as my shins burned. The Russian man did not smile or say thank you. Oh how much - so much later - would Limelite Liquor come to mean to me!

By 1997 I would be the favourite customer of those brothers Karamazov at Limelite Liquor on La Brea. By then Limelite Liquor was delivering Stolichnaya to my door at two or three in the morning by which hour - every night bar none - I was too drunk to walk one block. Up there on Franklin my Russian neighbours had a sign upon their door which read 'In Vodka We Trust.'

The Limelite brothers taught to me to say "cack dila" and "spasiba" and "harasho" which means "how are you?" and "thank you" and "very good" in Russian.

And in the exhilarating lingo of A Clockwork Orange I shall boldly borrow from Anthony Burgess to declare that Limelite Liquor was 'real horrorshow' for two of my six years on the Dark Side of Tinsel Town. The brothers liked me because no matter how drunk I got I could always quote Dostoevsky and while most of their customers were smoking crack or turning tricks I was on my balcony reading War & Peace.

When I got sober they were as dejected as Anna Karenina. I know so because when I went to buy a pack of Marlboros after a year of absence, they both - literally - jumped over the counter and hugged me in delight.

Billy, I decided, was now my baby brother and from him I needed a favour.

I said, "I'm going out tonight with a casting director."

"Awesome!" said Billy.

"Yes," I agreed, "but I don't know this man. I only met him this afternoon so will you come to my room to check on me at eleven o'clock tonight?"

The grunge era marks the spot just before the entire western world went on 24-hour call. When we were out we were out and even though I was not afraid of Gilson Simoes, it seemed sensible to tell Billy my plans, just in case...

"Sure thing Tracy," he agreed.

"I will definitely be back here by eleven," I said. "If I'm not here by then you may want to call the police in case he's killed me."

Billy's jaw visibly dropped. I made a mental note to the British self: "sarcasm: not well-received in Los Angeles."

"I'm just joking," I reassured little Billy. "I know I'll be fine, but here's his name and address. The casting office is just across the road."

I wrote down the details of Gilson's Casting while Billy congratulated me on having secured such an important meeting so quickly.

His enthusiasm brought to mind a stark contrast. Sometime circa 1981, I had told a school friend that I would one day go to Hollywood to be an actress. She and I were both ten years old.

Here's what that little Welsh valley girl said, "yeah, Trace, that's never gonna happen."

We breed our pessimists young in Britain and even younger in Wales. Too many 'can't's' and 'won't's' in my country and that's why I will never call it 'home.' And that's why I will never there belong.

And now here was Billy the Kid, affirming every one of my aspirations as I, in turn, affirmed his. The shift in consciousness was wonderful. Less than three days prior I had not thought of myself as anything but lost but now, having spent the afternoon at Gilson's Casting, having had my future predicted by the magnificent Chuck and having Billy receive my plans with unchallenging positivity, my intentions seemed reasonable, plausible and perfectly possible.

It was almost eight of the clock and already dark. While waiting at the stop sign I silently repeated my most important mantra; *Cardinal Rule Number 1: I must not drink alcohol.*

As I crossed La Brea I could see the light of Gilson's cigarette. He was perched on the edge of the silver sirens, a tiny, hunched over shadow. Without his black desk he looked even smaller. I saw him before he saw me. Every molecule within and around him, was heavy with the force of entropy and this kind of aura could drag me down with it. The night looked set to require a D.W. Griffith type of tolerance.

When Gilson saw me I clocked the shock in his eyes which quickly morphed into delight. He had expected me to not show up. Like a thousand other new girls in town, he had expected me to also let him down. I swallowed back the glob of pity in my throat and smiled like a new friend should. He was only about an inch taller than me. Reluctantly I yielded when he linked his arm through mine and off we went, to take a star-by-pink-star tour of 'Old Hollywood,' of 'Real Hollywood,' all the way along The Hollywood Walk of Fame.
