

## **Out**

*by Joannell Serra*

### **Grand Prize**

The theater department at Xavier High never cast the fat kids, so I knew, even as I huffed up four flights of stairs to the audition, that I wouldn't get a part. The leads of the spring musical would not be unsightly in any way: not fat, no bad acne, blue hair or anything of the other things that marred typical teenagers. The director liked preppy, clean cut guys. The type who looked great with a lacrosse stick in their hands. Guys who sported khaki shorts and scuffed up loafers and favored only the prettiest girls with their winning smiles. And he cast the pretty girls too.

*You will not get a part, Noah.*

I reminded myself to be realistic. Act nonchalant. And cool. But my polo shirt was wet with sweat by the time I reached the rehearsal room, and the monologue I'd prepared had completely escaped my working memory.

If leaving was an option, I'd be gone. I wished I could sign up for Lighting Director, the role I'd been born for, and head home to play *Minecraft* before dinner. But Mr. Draper, our ancient drama teacher, demanded that everybody auditioned. Whether you were hoping to be the front usher, the costume designer, or the leading star, you were part of the company and the company auditioned. And if we appeared to be taking the audition lightly – no monologue prepared, or trying to get a laugh from backstage by acting stupid – we were out of the production. No run crew, lights, nothing. And I needed to be in the company for two reasons.

One, when I started high school two years ago, my parents, who were long divorced and didn't agree on anything, agreed on this. I had to do either sports, music or drama. After watching me wheeze up the basketball court, and hearing my attempt to play the snare drum, we all chose drama. Secondly, Paris Winsome, the coolest, most interesting and smartest girl I knew, designed the costumes for every show. I liked being near Paris, even if she was a year older and a planet away in the social design of Xavier High. Even if she didn't appear to recognize our deep connection yet.

There was a third possible reason, one that I wasn't quite willing to admit to myself. I harbored a miniscule, barely alive, shred of hope that maybe, one of these times, I'd get a role. Not the lead or anything. Perhaps the butler, or a soldier on the edge of the kingdom. A chance to say a line, to be part of the cast, to take a bow at the end. A chance to have my costume created by Paris Winsome.

I reached the third floor ten minutes before call time and collapsed in a chair outside the rehearsal room. Nate, my best friend and only competition for Lighting Director, anxiously flipped through a book of monologues.

“You don't have one picked yet? We audition in like five minutes. I thought I was bad because I can't remember the words. But at least I have one.”

He gave me a quick glare, his icy one that he usually saves for his mother. Nate was Chinese American, and his mother had an idea he'd be the next Jackie Chan. She made him take Judo and acting classes, both of which he was terrible at. With long messy hair and a chin full of acne, he wasn't getting a role in the play either.

“I had one ready, but I tried it on my sister this morning and she said it sucked. So I’m trying to find another option.”

“You trust your sister on this? She’s six.”

“That’s why I trust her. She’s too young to worry about being nice. She’s honest. It did suck. I think.”

I took a long drink from the pink plastic water bottle my mother made me take this morning. She said I was man enough to carry a breast cancer water bottle.

“Why don’t you just do the Mac Beth one from eight grade?” I asked Nate.

“Draper’s heard it before. He always says no repeats.”

I yanked out the wrinkled paper with the monologue I had chosen. I hoped I could pull off Seth Rogen doing the sappy part of *Knocked Up*. I figured it was worth reminding Mr. Draper that fat guys do get cast in Hollywood, even if they didn’t in high school.

“What do you think about a *Raging Bull* monologue?” Nate asked. He stood up and tucked his shirt into his jeans, which were practically falling off him. Nate is as thin as I am fat, which is to say, noticeably.

“I don’t think you can pull off De Niro, Nate. I don’t think any of us can pull off De Niro.”

“What’s up with Jack Ass’s hair?” Nate’s voice had dropped an octave.

Jack Asqew, who most of us simply referred to as Jack Ass, strode by with a couple of his buddies. Jack’s hair was slicked back so he looked like Elvis, circa 1955. Jack and his crew were jocks who did theater to add depth to their Princeton application. They settled into chairs

down the hall with a cluster of girls who matched their status. This was the ruling class at Xavier High, strong well rounded and wealthy students who compulsively took and posted selfies. The guys began comparing AP calculus grades, while one of the girls did a series of pirouettes up and down the hall. I called them the A team. In my head, or to Nate. They didn't particularly bother me; they just bored me.

Paris Winsome sat alone, sipping something steaming in a paper cup, an aura of aloofness surrounding her. Her hair, died the color of yellow cake batter with the roots left dark brown, was up in a sumo wrestler style bun. Her nose ring of the day was a tiny frog, and she wore a long purple garment over ripped tights with high tops. Was it a strange dress or an enormous sweater? Paris never wore the same thing twice. I noted her outfits as I scanned the hallways and courtyards for her on a daily basis.

“Hello everyone!” A black guy wearing a grey beanie, jeans and white t-shirt stepped into the hall. All of us turned to look at him at once, the conversations abruptly halted. The students knew everyone on this campus, and he was a stranger. Also, there are three black students and one black teacher at Xavier, so black was noticed. And this man wasn't just black, he was dark, ebony, his skin so black he was almost purple. He lifted his hands up like he was going to give us a sermon, or a speech. His arms were sculpted, like a man who spent his days in the gym. Or a dancer? He looked like he could lift someone over his head, although he wasn't that big himself.

“I'm sure you've all heard about Mr. Draper. Really a bummer, I know. Anyway, I wanted to introduce myself. I'm Trip. You guys want to come inside?”

With that he turned and walked back into the rehearsal room, propping the door open with his foot. He wore shiny black shoes with his jeans.

I managed to position myself behind Paris as we funneled through the doorway. The cup she'd been sipping smelled like coffee. She held it close to her as we went in, like my fat might reach out and knock it out of her hand.

“Do you think Draper died?” I whispered to her.

Paris's green eyes widened. “Wow, Austen. Way to go there. No, I think we'd know if he *died*.” She wore blue mascara and it glowed under the bright lights in the classroom.

We stood in a loose circle in the rehearsal room, which was really just a large classroom with the windows blacked out. We whispered to one another, theorizing about what could have happened to Draper, while Trip got a pad of paper and pen from a brief case. Finally Amy Zieff, the girl who almost always played the female lead, raised her hand. She stood directly in front of Trip, about three feet away.

One of his eyebrows lifted high, his forehead wrinkling. It was impressive, how he could lift up one brow and not the other. “You don't have to raise your hand, miss. You can just ask me a question.”

Amy was looking more like a Barbie than usual. Her blonde hair was up in a high pony tail, and she wore a short skirt and extra white sneakers. Her friends wore something similar. Was it fifties day and I had missed it? Amy forced a smile. “Um, where's Mr. Draper?”

“You guys don't know?”

There was a general shaking of heads.

“Shit, alright.” Tripp rubbed his chin, which had a light stubble.

I looked over at Nate and tried not to laugh. Did that teacher just say *shit*? Trip wrapped his arms across his chest. “Well. You know, I thought you guys got an email or something. He’s alright. I mean not really, actually. He had a stroke, over the break, the day after Christmas. So he’s *alive* and everything. But he won’t be back this semester. I don’t know if he’ll be back at all. Anyway, I’m the new theater teacher. Temporarily, at least. And I’ll be directing the spring show.” He let us murmur, some girls seeming upset, while the rest of us just absorbed this news for a few minutes. No Draper was weird. He was an institution here at Xavier. Trip he went on. “Sorry again about your teacher. Any other questions before we get started?”

Amy started to raise her hand, then pulled it back down. “Are we still doing *Grease*?”

“*Grease*?” Trip looked skeptical. “Is that what you guys had planned?”

Amy nodded her head, a look of desperation growing in her pale blue eyes. Draper’s choice for the spring play wasn’t general knowledge. He had an inner circle of students though, who seemed to know. I wasn’t in the inner circle. Now I understood everyone’s retro clothes.

“Not *Grease*! So I slicked my hair back like this for nothing?” Jack Ass whined.

Trip turned and looked at him, examined his elaborate pompadour. “Yes, I guess you did.”

“What will we do instead?” Paris asked.

Trip’s midnight eyes scanned her, from her cake batter hair to her leopard-skin high tops. “It’s called *Hair*.” He started to walk around the group, looking at each us briefly. “*Hair* is a play written about the sixties.” Then he smiled broadly, a deep dimple in his cheek, “I think you’ll like it.” He handed me a clipboard and pen. “Go ahead and sign in, so I know who’s here. Then we’ll play a game to get to know each other.”

A game? We'd never played games in Mr. Draper's theater club before. And the phrase *get to know each other* made me queasy. In fifth grade, we had to interview another student and report back to the class, to get to know each other on the first day. My partner, Gemma Lee, was also my mother's neighbor. Gemma reported to the class that my mother was a lesbian and an actress. These things are both true, but not things I'd told Gemma during our interview. She also went on to explain that my name was Noah Hernandez because I was both Jewish and Mexican, and that my father drove a Prius. Clearly, Gemma had a future in journalism. Maybe as a paparazzi. These are the kind of things that come out in these games. There's nothing I'm trying to hide exactly, but there's nothing I want to share, either.

"Alright everyone, form a circle."

The A team looked anxious and irritated. Mr. Draper's stroke was really throwing a kink into their greased up plans. Trip placed a cardboard box, covered in black paper, in the middle of the circle. It looked like a cheap toy box. "Alright, when I call your name, step up to the box, and pull something out of it. Whatever prop you pull out, you have about one minute to use it in some way."

"Wait, what do you mean use it in some way?" Krista, an A team girl and Amy's constant side kick, spoke up. "How?"

"Anyway you like. It's an improvisational technique. You can do anything. Try something silly, or funny. Or try to use the prop in a way no one would expect."

There was a general rumbling and sighing. Who was this guy and why was he torturing us? But Trip moved fast. He grabbed his clipboard and called out the first name.

"Nate Chow?"

Nate's face froze. "You want me to go first?"

Trip looked at Nate's fearful expression and for a minute I thought Trip might say, "Nah, just kidding. Let's hear your monologue." But instead he nodded his head towards the box. "Go on. I know it's hard to be first but someone has to do it."

Nate walked stiffly to the box, like he might have pooped in his underwear. I hoped he hadn't actually. He reached slowly into the box and brought out a hand mirror. Some of the girls giggled nervously. There was about fifteen of us there, which meant thirty eyes were on Nate. He took a deep breath and held the mirror in front of his face, looking at himself. He smiled shyly, like he saw an old friend. After a minute, he lifted the mirror up so he could see the top of his head, then to the side so he could see himself from different angles playing with his hair. People started to laugh, but not in a mean way. Finally he put the mirror slightly behind him, and turned so he could see his back in the mirror, then he wiggled his butt, just a little. The group cracked up as Trip called, "Time."

"Good job," Trip added as Nate put the mirror down. I blew out a huge breath I hadn't even realized I was holding. Nate came back to our spot in the circle with a smile of relief.

"You nailed that," I told him. Which was an exaggeration, but he didn't totally blow it, which I was sure I would.

"I have to do these stupid games in my acting class," Nate said with a shrug. "I've even played this one before."

Lucky duck. A girl named Lucy was next, and she got a boa which seemed unfairly easy. She put it around her neck and did a half assed Charleston. Jack Ass got a book, which he sat down and pretended to read. He's not known for originality. A couple more A-team kids went,

the group getting sillier and more relaxed, laughing as Amy pretended to make out with a stuffed monkey.

I was really beginning to enjoy myself when Trip called out my name. Then the joy dropped to my feet and my heart started thumping like a base player on crack.

I forced my feet to move as I entered the center, conscious as I bent over that I probably looked stupid, my polo barely covering my stomach. The cardboard scraped as I pulled open the flap and put my hand in. We were supposed to grab the first thing we felt, but I was pretty sure the first thing I found was banana, and there was no way I was pulling that out. We'd all seen condom demonstrations on bananas in health class earlier this year, which had since ruined that fruit for me. I reached in farther and found something scratchy. It came slowly, getting caught on things, but eventually I pulled it free. It was a rough, black, rope, about six feet long.

Maybe I could hang myself and this game would be over? The thirty pairs of eyes on me was making my feet sweat. When you are overweight, you notice the space you have, or don't have, around you. I could swear the circle was shrinking.

"Noah?" Trip said. I nodded. Yup, I'll do something with this rope now. Yippee Eye O.

My grandfather on the Rodriguez side was a cowboy, more or less, in Texas. He took care of cattle, a long time ago. To look at me, you wouldn't think I come from cowboy stock, but I do. Fortunately, he taught me a thing or two when I was small, and we would go visit him.

I looped one end of the rope around the other, formed a slip knot and pulled. I glanced up and saw Trip watching me closely, his skin shining under the fluorescent lights, his eyes sharp like a raven's. I began to swing the rope in a gentle circle around me. As I swayed back and forth, the rope circled me, like it was making a line in the air. Around and around, circles

growing. My grandfather's voice whispered in my mind, coaching me. Move it slowly, Noah. Patiently, now bring it up. Get your eye on the prize and throw hard, high above the target, then let it drop. My brother and I had practiced lassoing posts, each other and even the dog.

I lifted the rope up and threw it lightly, towards Nate, hoping I could lasso my friend and get a round of applause, or at least a laugh. Even if I pissed him off, it would be worth it. But I missed, the rope went awry, and before I knew it, the rope was settling on Paris. She yelped as it slipped over her shoulders. Her cup dropped, splashing coffee all over Amy's white sneakers, who jumped away too late. Out of instinct, I pulled the rope tighter, just a little, around the target. My yellow haired, hazel eyed fantasy girl.

Paris yelled, "Noah, drop it!"

Amy cursed at me, her shoes speckled.

Coffee moved across the classroom floor, a brown tide.

And Trip let out a "Whoop!" and started to laugh.