

Hardships Emporium

Conrad signaled a right turn from Broadway and noted a slight, uncomfortable shift in the passenger seat. The brakes on his crappy Contour shuddered when he pressed the pedal and the engine bucked as he accelerated onto 1st Street.

“Where are we going?” Ted asked, hand reaching up to grip the overhead grab handle.

“What? You in some kind of hurry?”

“No. I thought you were dropping me at home, though.”

“Still am.”

“So where are we going?”

“Up the road a bit.”

“So I gathered. But where?”

“You working on anything these days? Hot screenplay or something?”

Ted bit his lip and brushed a lock of hair from his forehead, tucking it ineffectively behind his ear. “I’m always working on something, but this isn’t a deadline thing. I asked where we’re headed because I’m in this car with you and you turned unexpectedly.”

“Any prospects? Anyone buying? That’s what I’m asking.”

Ted rolled his eyes and sighed. Not the most mature response in his arsenal, but he felt justified in its deployment here. “You know as well as I do that—”

“Not trying to be an ass here, Teddy. Come on. Talk to me.”

Ted considered dusting off the old reliable silent treatment, but decided to hold that one in reserve. “I’m pitching Unified a couple of things next week. I rewrote one that they gave me notes on, and I’m almost done with draft... shit, seven or eight of a new one they might like.”

“You pitching them because they’re interested or because they’re the only ones that ever bought anything you wrote?”

“God, Conrad. You’re in a mood today.”

“I’m *concerned* is all,” Conrad said. There was a defensiveness in his tone that made Ted’s shoulders tense. This conversation was not going to improve and Ted was a captive audience. Unless he bailed at the next stoplight.

“Concerned how? That I’m wasting my time or that I—”

“What’s this new script about?”

“What does that matter?”

“Come on, out with it.”

“Conrad...”

“Betchu it’s weird right? Kind of funny like?” Conrad said. He turned again, this time into a parking lot.

“I usually lean that way.”

“What’s that called? When you make things all stupid and fake.”

“Screw you, Conrad.”

“You know what I mean.”

“Why you being such a dick?”

“I’m not. Just asking what that’s called is all.”

Ted rubbed his temples and groaned. “Some people say it’s absurdist, but I don’t think of it— Hey. Where are we?”

“We’re here is where we are,” Conrad said, parking the Contour and shutting off the engine. The car shuddered, as if relieved, and something in the vent system hissed. “The absurdist thing. That’s what I’m concerned about. You always go there. That’s why no one buys your stuff. They don’t—”

“Hardships Emporium?” Ted said. “You can’t be serious.”

“Yes I can. Apparently you can’t, though, and that’s why we’re here.”

“I’m not going in there.”

“Sure you are.”

“I don’t need or want anything from that place,” Ted said, jabbing a finger at the big ugly building floating on the edge of the asphalt lake. A heat haze from the blacktop warbled the bottom of the huge letters of its hideous sign.

“Yes you do, you’re just too stubborn or ignorant to know it.”

“Why do you I even hang out with you, Conrad? You’re an asshole.”

“Nope. Just honest. Besides you writer types are always torturing yourselves ‘for your craft’ so there’s no mystery in why we spend time together.”

Ted said nothing. Now was a good time for that silent treatment tactic he supposed.

“Car’s off,” Conrad said. “Don’t see a lot of clouds in the sky. Sun’s baking the parking lot. Temperatures in here are apt to reach—”

“What’s your point?”

“Air conditioned in there. Sweat it out in this pile of crap,” he said, slapping the grimy steering wheel, “Walk home. Or quit acting like a child and go inside with me and have a look around.”

“God I hate you.”

“It’s good for you.”

“Do you know how offensive this is?”

“Oh, you’re offended? Did I crush your little feelings? Insult your artistic sensibilities?”

“It’s like telling a chef that she should pop into a Burger King before working on the menu for her five-star restaurant.”

“Yeah. Cause you’re a five-star writer.”

“I don’t need this.”

“I think you do.”

“So what you’re saying is that you don’t like my work.”

“Not true.”

Ted’s underarms were getting swampy. Pretty soon there’d be a trickle of sweat sliding down his back. He hated that. “Do you even read what I give you?”

“Every word. But if I don’t give you an honest opinion I wouldn’t be doing you any favors.”

Ted wiped a hand across his forehead. “Have you been lying to me this whole time then?”

“Not at all.”

“But now you’re telling me that you don’t like my stuff.”

“I like it just fine. I like it because I get it. Because I know you. Now get out of the car, you’re getting all sweaty.”

Conrad yanked on the handle of his door and shouldered it open. A piercing squawk screamed from the hinges. Ted shook his head and pulled the door handle on his side. Nothing happened.

“Oh. You have to roll down your window and open it from the outside,” Conrad said.

“Are you serious?”

“It broke last week. I can come around and pop it open for you if you want. Like we’re on a date.”

Ted considered the latter option, there was something amusing about it, but opening the window would allow air in and get him out of the car quicker so he went with that.

“Maybe you should get it fixed,” Ted said, rolling the window back up and shutting the car door. It didn’t latch so tried to pull it back open and slam it, but the door lock had engaged. Conrad walked around the front of the car and slammed his hip into the door a few times until it fastened shut.

“Your average, everyday Joe doesn’t understand you,” Conrad said and started walking toward the big ugly building at the end of the parking lot.

“What’s not to understand? I work hard to make my scripts read clearly”

“True. And it’s not that the stories aren’t understandable. I just don’t think people like them.”

“Thanks.”

“Mostly because they don’t understand why you write them that way. They’re used to a certain type of story and yours are definitely not those.”

“What? You want me to write the same crap that everyone else writes?”

“Not exactly. But I think you could benefit from producing something that audiences can relate to a little more. And that’s what this place specializes in.”

They stopped on the blacktop, the store hunched on the other side of the fire lane. The sign, huge block letters, black on garish yellow, read:

HARDSHIPS EMPORIUM

Below, on a smaller sign, red letters on black, was:

Discount Tragedies, Disasters,
& other easily relatable Misfortunes

“I changed my mind,” Ted said. “I think I’ll walk home.”

“Come on. I’ll buy you a Popsicle or something if you’re good.”

The door whispered open and a puff of musty air assaulted their noses. Both men instinctively held their breath. There was a tang of autumn leaves in that air; a touch of funeral bouquet and antiseptic bandage wrap.

“It’s already terrible,” Ted said.

Conrad took a deep breath through his nose, breathed out in the same exaggerated manner, and cocked his head slightly as he took another noseful.

“Not so bad. You get used to it real quick. Now, where should we start?”

“Your car. Though I think I’ve lost my appetite for Popsicles so you can take me straight home.”

“How about Misereries?” Conrad asked. He gestured toward a display sign. “It’s buy one get one free on Misereries this week.”

“No thanks.”

“You don’t even know what they carry.”

“It sounds…” Ted paused dramatically. “Miserable.”

“Let’s go.”

Conrad grabbed Ted’s arm and led them past the cash registers into the main concourse. Ted made a deliberate decision not to tug free and run, but he didn’t amble ahead willingly, forcing Conrad to jerk him forward a time or two.

“Hmm… None of these aisles are marked Misereries,” Conrad said. “I see Accidents. Natural Disasters. Illness.”

He looked around, spotted a woman in a Hardships Emporium apron, and said, “Miss. Could you help me? I can’t find the Aisle of Misereries.”

She looked up, smiled, and said, “Our products aren’t separated into tragedies, hardships, and misereries. Each aisle is stocked with a certain type of event, Love Lost, Injury, Victim of Crime. The sections will then have a variety of tragic degrees within them. Misereries, Misfortunes, and the like.”

“Maybe you could point us in the right direction then.”

“Well...” She looked vaguely irritated, as if that same stupid question came up every day. “How about you tell me what you’re looking for and I’ll tell you what aisle it can be found on.”

“Oh. I know,” Ted said, “I was thinking something in a misery about a guy whose friend drags him to this store called Hardships Emporium.”

“Nevermind. We’ll browse,” Conrad said, yanking Ted down the nearest aisle.

Most of the packages on the shelves were black or grey with a sprinkling of somber blue. A waft of air, like chemically sanitized deli meat, fingered their nostrils. Conrad pulled a blister pack from a metal hanger, skim-read the description, then glanced up, and scanned around until he spotted the aisle sign.

“Death in the Family,” Conrad said. “We should be able to find something here. People love it when someone dies at the end.”

Ted groaned and said, “It’s amateurish. The ending to every student film ever made. And besides, that script I’m pitching Unified was based upon the events of my grandma’s funeral so I’m covered.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. She died last spring.”

“A grandma.”

“What?”

“Dude, everyone’s grandma die. It’s not a real shocker when they go.”

“Hey. Asshole. I was very close to my grandma. And besides, the script isn’t about an old woman’s death it’s more about drug dependency and addiction.”

“Your grandma was junkie?”

“God no. What’s wrong with you?”

“Well how was I to know?”

“Can we go now?”

“How’d you screw it up?”

Ted’s face pinched, bewildered. “What are you talking about?”

“The script. What did you do that makes it weird?”

“And stupid?”

“Right.”

Ted snatched the plastic encased tragedy pack from Conrad’s hands, slid it back onto the metal hook, and strode toward the end of the aisle.

“Seriously,” Conrad said, chasing after him. “I know you didn’t just write about her funeral. Or a pall bearer shooting up. You added something strange. Like a casket that goes back in time or funeral potatoes that cause nostalgic episodes or maybe there’s—”

“Aliens.”

Conrad stopped. “Seriously?”

Ted’s shoulders slumped and he stopped walking. “Well, yeah.”

“What? Like your grandma’s body was abducted by—”

“No,” Ted said. “One of them... crap. It’s like this. The day of her funeral my Mom popped a couple of my grandma’s Xanax. I guess she inherited them. Anyway, she gave one of those life-sketch speeches, like an extended obituary. She was overly cheerful, almost vacant. Happily detached with this weird grin on her face. I kept thinking that it was a shame that my mother didn’t show up to Grandma’s funeral.”

“Where do the aliens come in?”

“I had a visiting alien named Zann Ehhx replace someone at the funeral. Zann Ehhx was eager to experience human events and was very cheerful throughout the proceedings. He gave a poetic speech with a saccharine grin in a pleasant tambour.”

“Was he in her body? Wearing a clone body?”

“No. He was all green and jiggly with slimy antennae and bulging eyes. No one seemed to notice, or else they were too polite to say any—”

“See! That’s what I’m talking about. That’s your problem. You took a valid event with conflicting emotions and made it silly.”

“But it works.”

“Does it?”

“Yeah. It says a lot. And what do you know, you haven’t read it yet.”

Conrad pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m sure I’ll like it, but Unified won’t buy it.”

“You can’t know that.”

“Care to wager?”

Ted walked out of the aisle and stood against the back wall next to a series of round bins. A sign above them proclaimed, “Sorrows in Bulk!” Conrad scanned the bins for a moment and then gestured at one filled with multicolored, individually wrapped pieces, and said, “There’s always mental disorders. Job loss. Unrequited teenaged love.”

Ted said nothing.

“Why don’t you rewrite than Zann Ehhx one without the aliens?”

“I’ve done too many drafts already. I’m not up to a complete rewrite. And besides, I like it. Can we go?”

“No. I’m gonna find you something.”

“Why is this so important to you?”

“You’re my friend. I want you to succeed.”

“That’s not it. What are you hoping to get out of this?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

“Come on,” Conrad said, walking off. “Let’s go down Crippling Injuries.”

“Don’t change the subject.”

“I’m not. You sure are trying to though.”

“How do you figure that?”

“We’re here to find you a story, something that people can easily relate to, one without any of your weird absurdism.”

“Right. And the question of why you are so determined we do so, logically follows.”

Conrad turned down an intriguing-urine-scent laced aisle, with undertones of cauterized skin. Or was that singed hair? He grabbed a plummy purple box from the shelf and scanned the withered white text. “Hmm. Promising athlete loses leg in a car crash.”

Ted slapped the box from his hand. The muscles in Conrad’s jaw flexed and his teeth ground audibly. When he finally spoke the tones were low and measured. “You’re talented. Gifted in a way that I am not. I want you to do great things. If I, by extension, benefit from having a successful writer friend, well that’s gravy for me. One of life’s

little bonuses. You smack something from my hand again, you'll be writing a script about an ass whoopin."

Conrad smiled. "What about a terminal disease? Or an STD?" he said.

Ted sighed. "I've already done a couple of STD stories."

"You have not."

"I have."

"Which ones?"

"The factory with the cream filled pastries. And the one about the gas pumps."

"You're shitting me."

"No."

"So the sour milk used to make the pastry filling..."

"Was the STD."

"And the machine injecting the pastry was..."

"The sex."

"Sorry, but I totally missed all of that. I thought you wrote that one because you got a bad éclair or something. And the gas pumps... Was that the story where the one nozzle is servicing all those cars and some kind of corrosive element—"

"Yeah, that's it."

Conrad rolled his eyes, grabbed Ted's arm, and led them into another row. The aisle was musky and sour. A mix of damp human crevices with a hint of blueberry steeped onions.

“Pick something. Love lost. You can’t mess that one up. And don’t tell me about having already written it. You writers can’t go on enough about spurned affections.”

Ted scanned the shelves. Reluctantly, he picked up a few packages, barely reading the labels before scoffing and tossing them aside. Conrad passed him some others but Ted discounted those as well. Eventually Ted made it through a label’s entire description before rejecting it.

“Well,” Conrad said, shuffling through a stack of small silver and mauvey-pink boxes, “at least you’re looking.”

“Hey. How about this?” Ted said, holding out a dented, slightly torn, blue and green package.

Conrad eyed it suspiciously, took it from Ted, and read aloud, “Ronald is a lonely science nerd who takes the idea of love too literally. He designs an apparatus which allows him to medically remove his heart without dying. He then gives it to the girl of his dreams. She snubs the strange case, with its tubes of pumping blood and beating heart, throwing it into the trash— Seriously? You found this here?”

“Yeah.”

“Where?”

“Bottom shelf. It was in the back. Jammed under the bracing strap.”

Conrad shook his head. “Of course it was. Some outdated, reject idea that should’ve been returned to the factory years ago, and you managed to find it.”

“Right. So... let’s get it and go.”

“Look at the date on this thing. It’s expired,”

“Who cares?”

“Ted. One of the selling points of this particular store is the guarantee of sale on all its products. You buy the story and the sale, whether that’s to a film studio, an agent, a magazine publisher, whatever, is guaranteed.”

“Look. I came in here with you. Under protest. Despite my misgivings and a feeling of dirty, professional shame, I’ve selected something off the shelf. Now you’re saying it’s no good? To hell with that. It’s this or nothing.”

The blue-green package crinkled as Conrad’s knuckles whitened.

“Fine. You know what? You’re helpless. I don’t know why I even try.”

He marched toward the front of the store, head shaking. When he reached the check stand he tossed the expired Love-Lost misery on the conveyer belt and flashed a joyless smile at the woman behind the register.

“This was on the shelf. It’s expired. You should tell your freight crew to look for things like this.”

“So... do you want it or not?” the woman asked.

“Can I get a discount?”

She scanned the box a few times and said, “It doesn’t even come up in my system. Just take it.”

Conrad tossed the package at Ted. Ted’s attempt to catch it was more of a flinchy dodge and the box clattered to the floor.

“Enjoy your obscurity,” Conrad said. “In fact, I don’t need to read any more of your scripts. I don’t—”

Conrad's eyes fixed on a small countertop display. For a long moment his face was stony. Transfixed. Then his hand shot out, snatching a red-orange card from the display, and tossing it on the conveyer.

"I'll take this," he said, eyes lighting up.

The checker smiled. "This is a real popular one. Are you sure?"

"Absolutely."

"And who would be the beneficiary of the gift card?"

"That's him, right there," Conrad said, jabbing his thumb in Ted's direction.

She moved the card across the scanner like a magician disguising some slight of hand and rang up the purchase. Conrad paid. Then he handed the card to Ted.

A man in a black ski mask rushed into the store, fired a few rounds into the ceiling and yelled, "Nobody move! This is a robbery!"

He thrust his gun at the checker and demanded all the cash in the register. She quickly filled a bag with surprisingly thick wads in large denominations.

"Just don't hurt me," she whimpered.

"Shut up, bitch!" the man screamed.

"Hey, come on," Conrad said. "She's doing what you want."

The man swiveled, fired twice into Conrad's chest, snatched the bag of money from the screaming checker's hand, and ran from the store.

Conrad slumped to the floor. Ted was at his side, catching his lolling head before it hit the linoleum.

"Conrad, what did you do?"

Conrad coughed and spat blood.

Ted shook the red-orange gift card in Conrad's face and yelled, "Random Fatal Robbery? Friend is shot by masked bandit and dies in friend's arms? You stupid son of a bitch. How could you do this to me?"

Another gurgle of blood erupted from Conrad's mouth. His voice, when it came, was raspy and weak.

"Did it... for you."

"Bullshit," Ted said, tears streaming down his face. "This is just some martyr bullshit."

"Promise me," Conrad whispered. "Promise me you won't screw this up with... any of your absurdist nonsense."

Conrad's eyes fluttered and his head pitched to the side. A gurgle rattled in his throat as he died.