

## The Wrap

Clayton was a 5'9" blonde-haired, green-eyed movie actor; his companion, Mr. Pobble, was a 6'5" bright blue anthropomorphic kind of an octopus. Clayton wore a white T and blue jeans; Mr. Pobble was dressed in a dove-grey mac, a trilby perched on his bulbous head. He stood upright on two tentacles, as if they were legs, used his top two tentacles as arms, and kept the rest inside the mac, giving him a weird shifting bulge, like he was about to explode, or give birth, or multiply. When Clayton met him his first question was,

'What's with the trench coat?'

'Its not a trench coat.'

'Why are you wearing it?'

'Why are you wearing jeans?'

'Cause I don't walk around with my wanger out unless I'm getting paid for it. Do you even have genitals?'

'This is getting too personal.' said Mr. Pobble. 'We've only just met.'

'But I've known you for years.'

'You have?'

'You never wore a trench coat.'

'Mac.'

Clayton had flipped out at a private party and stabbed a well-known movie producer seven times in the belly and groin. The producer had been lucky to survive. This did not seem to disturb Mr. Pobble, who stood beside the young actor in front of a wall with three doors in it. One red, one white, and one blue.

'I just choose one?' said Clayton.

'Yup.'

Clayton looked from one to another.

'But they're all the same.'

'Are you colour blind?'

'Apart from the colours, they're all the same. How am I supposed to choose? This seems a little random to me?'

Clayton's intonation rose interrogatively at the tails of his statements, undermining them. Mr. Pobble, unexpectedly, had a slightly nasal, Harvard accent. This disconcerted Clayton, even more than his sardonic half-lidded milky eyes. He had expected somebody a little more reassuring; cute even... then again, if things got hairy- and they

might- what was really more reassuring? Maybe it was better to have somebody sort of languid and sarcastic than somebody liable to freak out and dump his ink every time something went 'bang'.

'I can see the colours, man, I just...'

'So choose your favourite colour.' When Mr. Pobble spoke, you could not see his mouth. It was concealed beneath a flap of... well what did you call that stuff? Not exactly skin... Like fish-flesh or something?

'None of these is my favourite colour.' Clayton gestured at the doors.

The octopus rolled its eyes.

'I can tell this is going to take a while.' He said. 'Out of red, white and blue -nice patriotic choices, by the way- which appeals to you the most either in life or simply at this time. Go with your instincts.'

'Well then... Blue, I guess.'

'Conventional.'

'Dude, you asked me to make a choice...'

'I wasn't criticising you, just making an observation.'

Beneath his mac, a little notebook held in one coiled tentacle and a pencil in another, Mr. Pobble wrote

'Uncomfortable with his sexuality?'

Clayton moved towards the door.

'Do I just push it?'

'How do you normally get through doors?'

'Wise guy.'

The door opened into what looked at first like the dining room of a 1970s house. Mr. Pobble, turning his awkward bulk, knocked into one of the walls; it wobbled.

'Whoa.'

A wall was missing; through the gap they could see a studio set, lights and cameras facing the dining table. Clayton ran his hand along the orange table cloth.

'Ladybird Summer.' He said.

'Huh?'

'I was Joe, a Vietnam vet with PTS.'

The octopus looked at him sharply.

'Pre-menstrual tension?'

'No. Jesus. Post traumatic stress.'

Mr. Pobble gazed at the shiny wallpaper.

‘This is hideous. Did people really think this looked good in the 70s?’

Clayton sat down in a chair.

‘I had this great showdown with my brother right here at this table. Its what got me noticed.’

‘Good for you, sport.’ said Mr. Pobble. ‘Any idea why we’re here, though?’

Something went plop. Clayton looked left, then right, then under the table.

‘That’s weird.’ He said. He straightened up holding a child’s crayon.

‘That is weird.’ said Mr. Pobble, making a note in his pad.

‘You see where it came from?’

‘Nu-uh.’

They exited through the fourth wall. Stepping over wires and moving carefully past tripod-mounted lights, they crossed the darkened studio. An exit sign glowed from the shadows. Clayton stopped beneath it.

‘Again with the three doors?’

Mr. Pobble regarded the tricolour exits.

‘You aren’t French, are you?’

‘No.’

Mr. Pobble crossed something out in his pad.

Glancing at the octopus for affirmation, Clayton pushed open the red door. It opened onto a bright, corn-studded hillside; simple open flower faces washed in the rays of a yellow sun. In a neighbouring field, piebald Friesian cows cropped cud, tails flicking. A big barn gleamed red-orange; zinging against the blue-green of the grass. Beside the barn, a tyre swing rope hung under a cluster of oaks. Clouds like the froth on the top of a milk churn plumped up a blue sky, still as a painting.

Clayton’s face went as sunny as the scene.

‘Its the farm.’ he said, white teeth shining in his all-American apple-pie smile. Mr. Pobble, wading into the corn, swung his big blob of a head.

‘Seriously?’ he said. ‘What, did you grow up in a commercial or something?’

‘Isn’t it great?’ Clayton was moving towards the barn. ‘The sun was always shining, and the chickens was always laying...’

‘This isn’t California.’

‘Of course it isn’t. I didn’t grow up in Cali; this is Kansas.’

‘Well, hold on a second, Dorothy.’

Clayton turned around, waist-deep in gilded corn, his surfer’s tan saturated like the Technicolor in a 1950s film.

‘This isn’t your real memory.’

‘What the hell? Sure it is. I remember this alright. Look, there’s the swing. My big brother Ted, he used to put me in that tyre.’ He laughed. ‘He used to turn it around, and around, and around, and then he’d let go? And I’d be like...’

Clayton stirred the air at frantic speed; the smile put dimples in his cheeks.

‘What I mean is,’ said Mr. Pobble, ‘we’re in what you movie actors might call *Vaseline lens* territory.’

Without expression, Clayton looked fetching, but dim. After a moment he said,

‘Can we go look at the barn?’

‘Just give me a minute.’ said Mr. Pobble. ‘I need to think this through...’

But Clayton was already running towards the barn. Mr. Pobble swore. He shuffled after the actor, his mac catching on the corn.

In the sun-bright yard, plump chickens picked at a dusting of gold corn. Clayton looked about him; a soft crease bisected his brow.

‘Be with you in two shakes.’ said Mr. Pobble, struggling to reach the actor.

Overhead, a dark cloud emerged slyly from among the cumulus candyfloss, like an assassin at a pageant.

‘You hear that?’ Clayton tilted his head to one side.

‘Hear what?’

‘That... Sort of creaking sound.’

The dark cloud crept across the sun; the yard went blue under shadow. The chickens began to put up their heads, snapping them from left to right uneasily. A ripple of wind went through the corn.

‘Clay,’ Mr. Pobble spoke carefully, ‘something’s not quite right here.’

‘I think its coming from the barn.’

Creak, creak, creak.

‘We should think about this...’

The barn had a big rectangular door. Clayton made for it with an expression of childlike curiosity.

‘Wait.’ Mr. Pobble, finally coming into the yard, stretched out to stop him. He had a good reach -more than eight feet- but it was not enough. Clayton stood at the door of the barn, looking in.

Beneath one of the big beams, a man swung gently from a rope around his neck. A chair lay tipped over upon the floor beneath the dangling feet; the rope creaked.

'Pop?' said Clayton.

Mr. Pobble stepped on something and felt it crunch; he looked down and saw the remnants of a child's crayon.

'Oh boy.' He said.

A wall of wind drove over the corn, flattening it. The cows bellowed. The sky had gone a very dangerous grey; almost black. Mr. Pobble changed colour from blue to a very pale pink.

'Twister!' he shouted.

Clayton had grabbed onto the legs of the hanging man, and was whining, 'Pop, pop.' Like a little boy. Mr. Pobble wrapped all four exposed tentacles around him.

'Clay! Clay! What do we do? I'm a cephalopod, I don't know the protocol for land storms.'

'Who gives a \_' Clayton swore. 'My \_' swore again 'pop is dead, and now they're gonna take me away from the farm.'

'But you're already away from the farm. You've been away from the farm for years, remember? You're 31 years old...'

The tornado hit the barn like a high-speed train. There was a hideous ripping sound, and then they were up, spinning, Clayton grotesquely anchored to his father's body, the octopus wrapped around him, an ineffectual life vest. 'My trilby!' Mr. Pobble shouted, as he saw the hat whisk off into the whirling madness of the storm. Clayton's tears flew up, little pebbles of water, and formed a silver ring around the interior of the barn.

They landed with a jolt more akin to a fall from a wall than a drop of several hundred feet. Mr. Pobble's cushiony arms took the brunt of the shock, unexpectedly soft, like a woman's breasts.

'Get your creepy hands off me.' said Clayton.

'They're not hands.' Mr. Pobble unwound himself with injured dignity. 'They're tentacles.'

Clayton rubbed his eyes with his fists. His shiny Hollywood face now looked pink and slapped.

'Where's my pop?'

'Is that him?'

A pair of feet protruded from beneath the smashed barn. Clayton walked over to them and looked down.

'I guess.' He said, sniffing.

'You think if you... if you put on the shoes, and... Clicked your heels..?'

Clayton turned red-rimmed eyes on the octopus.

'You think that's funny?'

'You see me laughing?'

Clayton regarded him for a long moment, then said,

‘You’ve gone pink.’

Mr. Pobble looked embarrassed.

‘Happens sometimes.’

‘It never happened in the books.’

‘What books?’

Clayton hunched down and tugged the battered moccasins off his father’s feet. The feet were long and skeletal; almost grey in colour.

‘Aw, -’ Clayton swore. ‘They stink.’

He threw the moccasins into a nearby bush, and brushed his hands on his jeans.

They had landed in a thicket. It was not a lot like the Oz described in L. Frank Baum’s story; it looked pretty much like a regular clump of trees. Clayton picked up a twig and walked forward a few paces; with a moue of distaste he prodded the stick into the undergrowth and retracted it, now with a pair of white men’s Y-fronted underpants on the end.

‘Ew.’

‘There’s a path here.’ said Mr. Pobble. Discretely, he scuffed his tentacle over it to see if it might be yellow beneath the dirt, but it was just plain asphalt concrete.

They followed the path out onto a barren stretch of stubby grassland. Before them, a 6’ wire fence loomed black, loops of razor wire like ripped shadows across the top. Beyond the fence, an intimidating fortress rose up against a storm-bruised sky.

‘Golly.’ said Mr. Pobble. ‘This is... Different.’

The fortress looked impossibly misshapen; black turrets jutted, and big black birds circled.

Clayton wandered towards the fence.

‘I... Think I spent a couple of years here.’

‘In ze castle of Count Dracula?’

The expression Clayton showed to Mr. Pobble belied his boyish features.

‘Its a home.’ He said. ‘For delinquents.’

He turned back to look at the building, then conceded,

‘It may not have looked exactly like that.’

They followed the fence until they came to an incongruous red door. Going through they entered the compound, and approached the building. As they walked up the wide stone steps to the doorway, a vein of lightning cleft the sky with a cartoon crash.

Although the exterior had resembled something out of a bad B-movie, the interior of the building did not seem to have been given an imaginative reinterpretation. It was cold and colourless; straight lines, squeaking vinyl floor and bleach stink. Through an open door they saw three rows of boys in identical grey uniforms sitting two-to-a-desk, glum-faced and silent. At the front of the room, a man paced up and down a dais, occasionally gesturing at a chart on the wall with a bamboo cane.

‘What a homely place.’ said Mr. Pobble.

‘That’s Mr. Werner. Jeez, I’d forgotten all about him. He was about as fun as he looks.’

The man had a face like the side of a cliff after a rock fall. The cane vibrated in his hand; a snake preparing to strike.

‘I don’t get it.’ said Mr. Pobble. ‘You lost your dad and they sent you *here*?’

‘No.’ As they passed a second door they heard the murmur of boys’ voices, dully reciting the 9 times table. ‘I didn’t come here right-off. You have to do something *bad* to get yourself in here.’

He stood in the middle of the hall, looking around at the corridor, staircase, notice-board, as though trying to bring something into focus but not quite getting there. The artificial light stained him yellow; Mr. Pobble looked almost green. Clayton grimaced.

‘Place always stank of cabbages.’ He said.

There came the sound of something small popping from step to step as it descended the central staircase. A child’s crayon rolled to a stop upon the hall floor. Clayton picked it up.

‘These darned things get everywhere.’ He said.

Mr. Pobble looked past him.

‘Those don’t look like they belong here.’

Clayton turned and saw three doors.

‘Well I’ll be a son-of-a-’

‘Time to make another choice.’

‘How do I know I’m even picking the right ones?’ said Clayton. ‘I mean, maybe we shouldn’t even be here. Maybe this place got nothing to do with anything? This aint choice, its chance.’

‘Its not as random as it looks.’ said Mr. Pobble. ‘Its set up this way to give you options. It might not seem to you in your current manifestation like you’re making conscious choices, but believe me, you are. What you’ve got here is a

door for approaching the problem circuitously, a door for hitting it directly, and a door for getting the hell out of dodge if things get too much. Now, you *know* which one is which, but right now you don't *know* that you know.'

'Okay, you lost me somewhere around "manifestation".' said Clayton. 'Do *you* know which door is which?'

'I'm sorry, I'm not at liberty to disclose that information.'

'Great. I sorta wish I hadn't asked. Now I'm scared.'

'You're doing real good.'

They walked through the blue door into what was clearly a child's bedroom: a small single bed with blue coverlet, a white wardrobe, a bedside lamp shaped like a crescent moon mounted on a cloud. The drapes were closed, but it was light outside. There were a small number of books stacked along a shelf; a poster of the solar-system was tacked to the wall. On the carpet, an assortment of toy cars and trucks in various unrelated sizes were arranged around a cardboard box decorated to look like a garage. A plastic basket tucked under a shelf held an assortment of alternative toys; plastic dinosaur claws poked out through the bars like prisoners' hands.

'This was my bedroom.' said Clayton, recognition beginning to flicker in his face.

He slid a book from the shelf and opened it.

'Look it's you.' Clayton pointed at an illustration of a smiling blue octopus. The octopus was engaged in painting a pedestrian crossing, overseen by a jolly traffic cop.

'See? You aren't wearing a trench coat.'

'Mac. It's a mac.' Mr. Pobble peered at the picture. 'What am I *doing*?'

There was a movement from beneath the coverlet.

'Oh my god.' Clayton turned in alarm.

'Don't panic.'

'It's me.' Clayton clutched at Mr. Pobble, gathering a tentacle to him like a pillow. 'That's me in the bed.'

'Stay cool, kid.'

The bedroom door opened; a man filled the doorway. He was perhaps forty; hair cropped like a soldier, white shirt tucked into blue work pants over a flat stomach. His face was in shadow. Clayton swayed; he squeezed Mr. Pobble's tentacle.

'Oh my god.' He said.

'Er Sport? You wanna lay off the tentacle some?' said Mr. Pobble.

'Oh my god.'

'What is it, Clay? Who's that man?'



‘My uncle.’ Clayton, managed to say through numb lips. ‘He took us in after... After pop...’

The man quietly closed the door and crossed to the bed. He began to unbuckle his belt.

‘Er...’ Mr. Pobble began to back away.

Suddenly, the bed cover was thrown back. A small fierce-faced boy with blonde hair and green eyes was briefly visible. He shoved at his uncle, who uttered a grunt as though winded by a much larger force, and clutched the bedside table. His skittering hand knocked a plastic pot onto its side; coloured crayons went everywhere. The boy leapt from the bed and fled the room, leaving the man leaning with one hand on the table.

‘What just..?’ Mr. Pobble started to say, then, ‘Oh my.’

The man turned around slowly, and slid down against the bed. A large kitchen knife now protruded from his groin. Red blood pumped from the wound, over his white shirt and blue pants. Beneath his coat, Mr. Pobble tried to scratch out his note about patriotism, but his tentacle was shaking and he dropped his pencil on the floor. He dry-swallowed; turned to Clayton. Behind him, there was only one door in the wall, and it was red.

‘Time to go.’ He said, voice cracking.

‘No.’ said Clayton. ‘I want to watch him bleed.’

‘Not a good idea.’ The octopus put out a tentative tentacle.

‘Don’t touch me.’

‘Okay, okay.’

Clayton was breathing heavily. His uncle leaned against the bed, blood pooling black on the patterned rug. His head lolled; he blinked around at the cars and trucks as though they had betrayed him, and he couldn’t understand why. Clayton took a step forward, bent over him and, very deliberately, spat.

He went past Mr. Pobble without looking at him, and shoved the red door open aggressively. Suddenly, they were in the midst of what was clearly a very high-end party. A disorientating swirl of music and chatter engulfed them, pulling them away from the quilted silence of the child’s bedroom, the slow bubble of blood. Low brassy lighting glinted off brown skin and white smiles. A long sheer drape billowed out in a gust; behind it the silhouette of a woman in a short dress.

They walked among groups of gassing guests. Bars had been set up in every room; waiters patrolled, trays aloft, laden with Champaign. Through glass doors a lighted turquoise pool projected shifting reflections across a peopled patio. Beyond, the Santa Monica mountains were cut out black against a brown sky; the big smears of roads and the scattered crumbs of city lights spread across the valley.

Faces shifted, indistinct. Dark figures clustered in shadowy corners, lips seeking, hands groping. The air was scented with grapefruit, and lemon, perfume and cigar smoke. Certain details emerged from the gloom like surfacing fins: amber light caught in a crystal tumbler, a woman's throaty laugh, expensive white dust on a glass table. Mr. Pobble snagged a Champaign glass and swallowed the contents in one gulp.

'Nice place.' He said.

'Belongs to a real Hollywood big-shot.' said Clayton. 'He saw me in Ladybird Summer, offered to give me my first big break; lead part in his next movie. Said I was perfect.' He stared into a mirror; in the dim light only his eyes were reflected back, and the crescent of one cheek. 'Thought he was talking about the part.'

They came to the foot of a staircase; a modern spiral arrangement in the centre of a polished wood hallway. It was dark at the top of the stairs.

'What's up there?' Mr. Pobble sounded wary.

Clayton stopped in the blue dark, hand on the stair rail; a fugitive oblong of yellow light passed across his tense face. Mr. Pobble suddenly wished he hadn't had that glass of Champaign.

'The truth.' said Clayton, gazing forward intensely. Mr. Pobble coughed, and Clayton's eyes shifted sideways.

'Did that sound corny?'

'A little.'

'Sorry.'

'Don't blame yourself.'

The stairs led up onto a gallery. The only light came from the slit of an open door; the marble floor glowed peach. Clayton glanced back at the octopus.

'You know, you kind of look like a spy right now, in that get-up. I mean, a weird-shaped spy, but...;

'I was going more for *detective*.'

'Really?'

Mr. Pobble plucked at the mac.

'You didn't get that?'

'Not so much.' said Clayton. He took a deep breath, and pushed the door all the way open. Mr. Pobble could be heard to mutter,

'I guess without the trilby...'

The well-known movie producer reclined on a *chez*, wrapped in a silk kimono. Even the soft lighting could not flatter the man; there were deep crescents of shadow beneath his eyes, hard lines scored into his cheeks. Loose

skin draped from throat to chin, mottled as refrigerated meat. He stroked a hand across the material tented over his crotch. Mr. Pobble made a choking sound.

‘Wait, isn’t this the man you..?’

‘Come here, baby.’ said the well-known producer, ‘Don’t be shy.’

Something dropped to the floor and rolled; a child’s crayon. Then another. Then another. Suddenly, crayons were raining down from the ceiling.

‘Let me make you a *star*.’ Stroke, stroke.

Clayton began to cry.

‘All my life.’ He said. ‘All my god-damned life. I managed to forget it and this son of a -’ he said something unrepeatable ‘gotta do what he done; bring it all back.’

‘Clayton, I’m so sorry.’ said Mr. Pobble.

The crayons began to cover floor and surfaces. Clayton put his hands to his head.

‘This doesn’t help me.’ He said. ‘What the hell do I do *now*?’

Mr. Pobble put a tentacle on his arm.

‘You gotta go back.’ He said.

‘Will you be there?’

Mr. Pobble shook his head.

‘I’m a talking octopus.’ He said, gently.

Clayton squeezed his eyes shut.

‘I can’t go to prison,’ he said, ‘I’ll be shower soap.’

‘I’m not sure you got a choice.’

The crayons were up to their shins; they spilled out onto the gallery, rolling down into the hallway below.

‘Oh yeah?’ Clayton looked past him, blinking tears. ‘What d’you call that?’

Along the opposite side of the gallery, three doors had appeared. Red, white and blue.

‘Three choices, you said.’ Clayton looked heartbreakingly hopeful.

‘Sure, but...’

‘One to go round, one to go direct to...’

‘Clay, I don’t know if...’

‘And one to get the hell out of dodge.’

‘Yeah.’

They looked at each other; wet parallel lines glistened on Clayton's cheeks.

'Well I want to get the hell out of dodge'

'Clayton...'

'You help me.'

Mr. Pobble kneaded his forehead with the tip of one tentacle.

'You realise I'm just a figment of your imagination?' he said.

'Just because I'm blonde doesn't mean I'm stupid.'

Mr. Pobble stared hard at the three doors, his shifting midriff suddenly still.

'Help me.' said Clayton.

Mr. Pobble sighed.

'Its the white one.' He said.

Clayton went to the white door; stood in front of it. He turned to look at the octopus.

'Can you hold my hand?'

'Ah, now...' Mr. Pobble shuffled awkwardly. Clayton looked stern.

'In the books you would have held a guy's hand if he asked you nice.'

'Oh, very well.' The octopus rolled his eyes and, shyly, extended a tentacle for the actor to grip. Clayton took a deep breath and pushed open the door. Together, they stepped through to the other side.