

## Drama Class

At least I am good at somethings. I'm confident of that. For instance I'm the type you want around in a crisis. I mean an active disaster, with things suddenly going wrong and panic feeding the catastrophe. I keep my head. I always have.

Not to be presumptive but I think I would have made a good soldier. I would have been good in combat. That's likely why Sgt. Bates from the recruiting office kept after me for so long after high school. I must have scored well on those Army aptitude test in high school measuring coolness under fire, a natural proclivity for calm in the heat of a crisis. It was every week for five years, even following me off to college. When I would come home my mother made a joke of it saying in a sing songy way "guess who called, your old friend Sgt Bates, you should at least call him Bobby and tell him you're not joining up, I feel bad for him."

For example there was the time my father nearly cut his hand in two when I was twelve. We were building a dog bed on the table saw and I don't know, he was in a hurry, he got that way sometimes, not paying attention, shoving a piece of plywood over the saw when it happened. He ran the meat of his hand right over the whirling blade, screaming, holding it up, his ring and little finger flopping strangely to the side spewing blood with the pulse of his heart marking everything with a bright red stream, the saw, my shirt, until he finally clutched it to his stomach making a peculiar guttural sound, something between a whelp and whisper that told me as if I didn't know already this was serious.

I knew what to do. I had learned the technique in Boy Scouts. Close the wound, direct pressure. It was simple. But the important thing was I knew to do it. I recognized the moment and acted. Of course I was excited, but I didn't panic. I grabbed an old work towel from his bench and cinched it around tight stanching the blood, telling him in a calm resolute voice to press until it stopped and everything would be fine.

And he did, taking my instruction because I gave it dispassionately like I knew what I was talking

about. Suddenly I was the adult.

I lowered him, pale from shock and the sight of his hand, by the shoulders into a chair until I was satisfied he was settled, talking to him all the while with a low soothing stream, "okay, we're just going to get you comfortable, that's the first thing, then we'll take it from there," steadying him and myself, "you're all right, everything is going to be fine," looking him flush in the eye until he gave me a solid look back as if answering a question, before explaining I was going to go for help and then I did, deliberately taking the stairs to the kitchen finding my mother, calmly describing what had happened then agreeing the next logical step was for me to haul ass across the back yard to fetch Dr. Campbell, our surgeon neighbor, while she went downstairs to tend to the patient.

In the end he was fine. He made it. After a marathon session of reconstructive surgery he had his hand back, although it took months before he could do anything with it. But that's not the point. The point is I knew what to do, and kept my wits about me to do it. In the end everything that depended on that turned out okay.

Not everyone can do that. I've seen it, certain examples involving family members and friends I won't go into. But let's just say not everyone can handle certain situations. And generally it's the one you least expect, that rule the moments when things are going great, people experts would identify as leaders because they're able to stand up and impress people with their presentation, relish the undivided attention.

Those are the ones that melt in a crisis. You can see it in their eyes, the total detachment if not active panic that has to be dealt with as much as the disaster itself before you can be on to corrective action. That's exasperating for people like me. It's too bad there's not a disaster all the time. Maybe I should have been a fireman or an ER doctor.

Maybe that's why I'm telling this, expressing an appreciation of myself as much as servicing the story, reminding myself I'm good at something to bolster myself, because when confronted with

disgrace it's good to remind yourself of what you can do.

It's also exposes an irony. Because maybe the one thing I always wanted to try was acting. I'm not sure why but I love the proper telling of a story, the depth of feeling, the amount of courage required to expose yourself in a convincing way. It's almost inconceivable to someone like me to do that. But to see it done properly that's the thing, and coming from my point of view why I admire it so much. I appreciate the raw stripped away exposure necessary to do it. As if you've been skinned alive with your muscle and sinew on display. I'm not sure everyone understands that as much as I do. They can't if it comes too easy.

In fact it seems to me the better actors would be people like me, introspective, overly attentive to emotion. Not the type that usually end up being actors, those that storm the spotlight for its own sake simply to own it, without a larger purpose in mind, the first objective being simply to capture and hold, defend from others.

Only afterward would it occur to such people to do something with it, caught out as they are in a sort of "oh yeah" moment. But given their personality that's not a problem. They fill the space. And if what they fill it with is stupid and manufactured for the moment so what. They can always generate bluster, coyness, hyper feigned emotion, all of that a mildly entertaining distraction from the lack of depth their personalities prevent them from expressing, so preoccupied are they with themselves, what they want, it's impossible for them to glean it in others.

That's my general theory anyway. So when I saw the listing in the catalog, and needed one hour to fill a gap in my electives, I knew it was time to act.

It said this: Actors Workshop, a concentrated weekend seminar for non-majors focusing on technique and presentation centered around Stanislavski's techniques of Method Acting.

I'll repeat the part that jumped out at me again, Non-majors. That's what I focused on, what I took to mean an environment suited for those like me. I envisioned like minded, sensitive yet yearning

introverts, assembled nervously but expectantly in an embracing cocoon like space, perhaps with light refreshments and a mild mannered therapist like instructor, encouraging us to lay down our inhibitions in a supportive manner, infusing us with the confidence to do it absent the mocking eyes of "majors," distrustfully elbowing each other out of the way for attention. I don't know why I pictured it being this way, probably because that's what I wanted.

The professor would be diminutive, nonthreatening, pale from the lack of sun, with a light goatee and soft calming voice, as if one of us. He would empathize with how difficult this was, having been there himself and taken the path he was helping us negotiate. We would bond, have individual and group breakthroughs, evolve over intense Saturday and Sunday sessions from 9:00 AM to 4:00 PM in Special Room C of the Theater Complex located at 1401 10th Avenue South. It would be as much therapeutic as instructional, a path for self actualization tailored to the pathologically shy, exclusive to us, cloistered together as we were against a world dominated by extroverts that went around shoving our type out of the way.

But that's not the way it turned out. The one and only true thing about the class that I had either read or imagined was that it was held in Special Room C of the Theater Complex located at 1401 10th Avenue South. That was it.

It was a building I had never been in but intrigued me as I passed it on the sidewalk, being slowed up by groups of theater majors, emotive, high spirited types at the change of classes. They would bind themselves in tight tribal packs, jostling each other, laughing. The girls were always sexy in the way they carried themselves so confidently forward, the boys enviable with their ability to hold forth gathering laughs, entertaining friends, hits of the party. That's how it seemed every time I saw them, a tribe of extroverts bubbling along on a froth of good times, each more entertaining than the other.

The instructor was a big haired, full chested woman named Marge Boman, a New Yorker she declared right away in a brassy tone as if that proved something. How tough she was, that she didn't

cotton to wall flowers, that Saturday morning standing hands on hips unimpressed before the class in Special Room C, a small amphitheater type room off the main chamber.

"You will be stretched," she declared, parading back and forth in a light goose step. "We don't have much time so we will make the most of it. We will find your emotional depth, how far you're willing to go. I'm not go to hold your hand. The best I can do for you is walk you to the cliff's edge then give you that little shove over," she crescendoed pirouetting on a heel planting her boot with a sharp report, glaring at us individually as if figuring out right away which of us was going to be trouble.

Most would not be. As it turned out that non-major item in the catalog was crap. Before me in the front rows of the small bleachers sat about ten or twelve people giggling and nudging each other, brought to a sudden snapping attention by Ms. Boman, equal counts of male and female. If I didn't recognize them as individuals I did as a group, the same type from the sidewalk, theater majors all, now bringing their act to this enclosed space, their natural environment. If it were possible for them to feel even more emboldened they did so here, in their natural space amongst friends.

Right away I felt had, as if the entire exercise had been a ruse designed to lure shy unsuspecting types in. Ms. Boman even acknowledged as much, pausing in the middle of her speech chastising a couple in the front row by name to settle down, doing so with a patient familiar grin that made my heart sink. Non-majors indeed.

There was one other in the room like me. I spotted her right away beside me on the back row, recognizing her by the same stricken look I must have been projecting. When our eyes met I knew I had a friend, someone else that had taken the room's measure, realized her folly, and was suddenly afraid. I slid closer.

"I think they're all theater majors," I whispered. She looked me desperately in the eye nodding with enthusiasm held as a confidence.

She was thin and fair, with large round tortoise shell glasses, bookish. Maybe she was a library

science major, someone else enamored by stories. She could have been my sister. Right away I thought of her as such, someone I shared experiences with by virtue of being alike.

"Okay people let's get to it," Ms. Boman boomed, smacking palms together striding across the front eyeing the group harshly. "We will start with a simple exercise, something to loosen our throats. I need two people. I'm not going to tell you for what, part of acting is trust, putting yourself forward without hesitation with the absolute knowledge your fellow actors will reciprocate, you'll just have to trust me."

Immediately hands in front shot up, each stabbing higher. Throats squeaked eagerly, "Me, me, come on Ms. Boman, please, please, me, me."

My new friend and I cowered, this being the moment our bad decision became obvious. We looked to each other again, panic in our eyes, finding solace, slumping low making ourselves small, the only ones without hands up.

Ms. Boman scanned the crop of hands with a cool nearly cruel expression, no doubt having seen this eagerness a million times. It was always the same, too much a part of her experience to muster enthusiasm. Her gaze settled into mine. We stared deeply at each other, my terror swelling with her assessing it, calibrating it against a thing she knew, a chart kept in every theater instructor's office of trauma, bad decisions coming to fruition, people in the wrong place at the wrong time. With a quick nod she looked away, and with a light gesture touched two hands in the front row as if plucking delicate flowers.

"You two, Anastasia and Beau, come up here, I want you."

Anastasia and Beau. Who in the hell is named Anastasia and Beau. Theater majors, that's who. And she knew their names. The brazenness of it was numbing. I rocked back gathering a new sense of conspiracy, terrified by how thoroughly this game was fixed. It was as if Ms. Boman had called her students at home urging them to sign up for this little workshop foisted on her by the administration, not wanting to tolerate thin skinned non-majors queering the deal, rigging the game so her job would be

easier. This theater world as it turned out was a closed system, the whole of it set up to protect itself. Once in and bona fide, demonstrating yourself to be cut from the right narcissistic cloth, the gates swung shut and you assumed a position on the wall.

Anastasia and Beau shot to their feet facing each other rolling their necks shaking out their arms, measuring each other as if preparing to throw punches. Ms. Boman stood between them, a hand on each shoulder, speaking to the group, chin up, projecting proper thespian technique even in normal speech.

"So here's what's going to happen. As you know so much of acting is reactive, that is feeding off what the other person gives you. It deals in emotional currency, not necessarily based on the subject or any specific topic, so content is not important for this exercise. To demonstrate the importance of simple but effectively conveyed emotion I've created an exercise, for fun we'll call it The Boman Exercise," and as she continued still in instructional mode, she turned gathering a stack of ledger sized placards from a table holding them towards us.

"On these I've written a series of emotional states." She thumbed through them holding them high, moving them back and forth displaying words in large flourishing script, the first being hate, followed by joy, anger, worry, relief, sorrow, anxiety, empathy, surprise, confusion, shock, betrayal and so on. "This is intended as a stretching exercise, as runners might do, and to demonstrate that emotions are language as much as actual words. Emotion is a vocabulary. The way this works is as I hold up each card in turn you will say something to your partner, anything, the sillier the better, it doesn't matter, just whatever comes to mind, but how you say it will convey the emotion written on the card. For example if someone says 'peach ice cream,' and the card reads disdain, they will not just say it but they will say it with disdain, filling those words with that emotion as if vessels into which it was poured until it sloshes over its brim, do I make myself clear," and her eyes raked the room slowly assuring everyone was paying attention.

And they were. The theater majors were all on the edge of their seats nodding crazily. Myself and my new friend also paid close attention, asking ourselves why we had come. I pictured how I might stand quivering in front of these people exclaiming tug boat, or Bismark, North Dakota, and have those things convey admiration or peevishness, two other words I had seen on her cards, without demonstrating to this room of exhibitionist how afraid I was.

"This is a partnering exercise, each of you will select a partner, if you don't I will." Now Ms. Boman's voice rose to reach us on the back row. Her neck arched eyeing me and my friend speaking directly to us. People in front wrenched around looking at us strangely, jealous of the attention lobbed over their heads, aware there were some in the room requiring special attention.

"You will each take your word and convey its assigned meaning, giving it to your partner to solicit their response. Your partner's response will be presented as a reaction, with whatever word or phrase chosen to carry the assigned emotion. It may seem foolish, become absurd at moments, but it's meant to test your focus so stick with it, don't fall out of character, react, invent as you go, feed off each other. Now does everyone understand," and there was a general delighted murmur from the front. Heads bobbed. I heard exclamations like "this will be great." or "I just think it's fantastic, it really makes you think," as if scripted beforehand to endorse Ms. Boman's methods.

Ms. Boman smiled. Her eyes plied the crowd, finally settling again on me. We stared at each other a long moment. I again pictured myself in front of these people. Panic rose in my chest. Her eyes squinted reading that. Her smile broadened.

Then she stepped back vigorously shuffling the cards, suggesting one should be prepared for anything.

"Anastasia, you go first." Anastasia nodded eyes fixed on Ms. Boman, face eager as Ms. Boman held up the first card

"Determination," it read in florid script. Anastasia paused staring at the floor, then looked up to

Beau.

"My aunt will be here for supper," she said determined it would be so, that Beau should accept that, that perhaps there had been disagreement over whether he would and she would not have it.

Ms. Boman revealed the next card.

The word was pleasure. It was incongruent, odd against what Anastasia had said and the way she said it. People giggled, leaned forward in their seats. Beau smiled seeming to know what he'd say. It could be anything. It didn't matter as long as it conveyed pleasure. But it mattered now.

"I'd like some cherry Jello with whipped cream," he said slowly and deeply, letting the words ooze away. People burst out laughing. Anastasia seemed perturbed then fought a giggle herself.

"I won't have that," Ms. Boman barked. "Do you hear me people, all of you, you are just as much a part of this as these two. Put yourself in their place, don't be the audience, as actors you can't afford it, do you hear me, suspended belief is a luxury only the audience enjoys, as actors you are always in the moment. " Then she chastened the room with her glare, Everyone went silent and sat up straighter.

The next word was betrayal. Anastasia looked at this wizening her eyes at Beau as if she'd chosen the word because of something between them.

"I think that I will never see, a thing as lovely as a tree," she enunciated slowly with quivering emotion, finishing tight to Beau who drew away guilty. The group in front murmured approval unable to contain it, eyes darting to Ms. Boman who granted an almost imperceptible nod then showed the next card.

It read surprise. Beau took to it instantly, immersed in the exercise, having achieved a state of mind every actor strives for, an obliviousness to who you are and feelings unrelated to the character you have become.

"Please check that all baggage is properly secured in the overhead bins before the train is in motion," he wrung from his throat like a disbelieving question, finishing with indignation, a different

emotion not on the card but inventive, expressing nuanced surprise, not the innocent type one might expect. Ms. Boman recognizing this smiled, as if only to herself looking at Beau long and satisfied the way only a teacher can at a student exceeding expectations.

"That's it you two," Ms. Boman announced, and Anastasia and Beau formerly faced the small crowd of fellow theater majors to a smattering of applause, bowing with a practiced dignity.

"Okay who's next," Ms. Boman exclaimed smacking her hands together again looking over the room. All hands in front went up fluttering high in the air, accompanied by little "me, me" chirps. It was a disgusting display of vanity. I was reviled, and at the same time grateful, because Ms. Bowman's eyes roamed the room fixing on those fluttering hands, drawn tighter by the exclamations. Her focus never made it past the first rows.

Although I did sense a brief instant when she looked at me again, for barely a second, giving an opportunity I would in no way seize upon. But that passed quickly. Soon enough she was plucking two fluttering hands from the crowd as one might select delicate pastries, having the new couple rise to their feet with ceremony, leaving others to groan arms falling away.

That's the way that first the day was filled, and how I avoided participation. Each round hands shot up, some who had already had their turn. But that didn't matter. For some no amount of time before others was enough. All the while I and my little friend crouched low wincing, dodging the call to the front, glancing at each other in terror as that moment held us until it was decided and we shared relief.

Each time I felt Ms. Boman looking at me, that becoming an accumulation, pressure building. After all it was a fair question. I had put myself there. What did I expect. At the end of the day I slipped from the room as I had spent it, with stealth, doing my best not to be seen, embedded in a babbling pack of theater majors so engrossed in reliving the day they didn't notice, until I made it into the late afternoon air and sprung free taking deep breaths stretching my strides up the sidewalk relishing escape.

For the rest of that day and night it was as if I were being crushed by a heavy weight, burdened by

the knowledge my escape was temporary. It was inevitable if I returned I would be called upon. Ms. Boman would make sure of it, tallying my avoidance with each look, it finally amounting to too much.

The thought terrified me but I had to go back. I needed the credit hour to graduate, and I had paid for it. Not going would be throwing away money, as well as cowardice. So I told myself maybe my luck could continue.

All of that begged questions associated with my failure to face fear, why had I signed up for the class in the first place, so what if it was filled with theater majors, I didn't know any of them. Who cared what they thought. All of that solid reasoning pushing against anxiety that could not be reasoned away.

I know I slept some, but not much. When I woke I was exhausted and fretful. Yet I found myself getting ready, going through the motions, my mind in one condition, preoccupied, while my body was in another, businesslike, moving toward its objective. I showered, got dressed and fed, and soon enough found myself in my car with a sudden waking realization of where I was going and that it was too late to stop. I should just follow my body. It knew what to do. So I let it lead my weighted mind into that little theater again, feeling as if the entire evening had not passed, it inconsequential to what stood at either end of it.

Ms. Boman was late. My friend was there and I sat by her, maybe too close finding comfort in that. I said hello and she replied sweetly pleased to see me, as if having spent the same sort of evening relieved I made it, understanding that was not guaranteed.

As a way to fill the time and as something overdue, I introduced myself. We shook hands. Her name was Paula. That seemed a particularly nice name given her smile and the way she squeezed my hand understanding everything the way I did, looking me in the eye, smiling with a twist of empathy and kinship.

Finally the door slung open and Ms. Boman waded in struggling against the weight of a giant bag

and carefully balanced coffee mug, slinging down car keys rattling like spilled change, breathlessly apologizing. She unwound a bright scarf and unshouldered a long black coat like a cowboy might wear, everything amounting to a grand entrance a leading character would make.

Squaring herself up with a pivot, deep breath, and planted heel she recovered the lost time and began.

"Well the greatest challenge for any actor is conveying raw emotion, I mean the most fundamental kind, fear, love, anger, ecstasy, etc. It's a short list. These are the emotional states that entail the greatest risk because the punishment or reward is highest. You come off like a fool or genius, there's no in between. So it is the exposure of these primal states that requires the greatest amount of courage. You must reveal yourself in a way most wouldn't dare, because make no mistake you use yourself to do it properly. You can't hide in a character dodging responsibility as if it were someone else. That's what some think but it's not true. It has to come from you, drawing on your own emotional experience, exposing your most vulnerable self. That's why it is so dangerous. You're revealing your greatest or worst moments. Not everyone can do that, or should for that matter."

She paced, head down in thought. She stopped, turning to us speaking softly.

"Now many of my colleagues disagree with what I'm going to make you do. They feel it's best to grind through the remedial stuff first, work up to such exposure in a gradual way, become acclimated. But that's nonsense. It is my feeling not everyone can do this, no matter how well you plow the ground to plant the seed, some soils never produce, certain people aren't capable. They don't have the stuff inside it takes, and it's best to figure this out as soon as possible. Just get right to it. So I have devised an exercise to do that."

She paused eyes scanning the room. I tightened as they stopped on mine, one of two people that had done nothing the day before.

She continued speaking as if only to me. "What you will do is get right to the basest emotion, doing

it the simplest way possible, by showing it to me, acting it out, without device or artifice, using whatever words you choose, or no words at all. I don't care, as long as you get it done, it's over when I'm satisfied you've done everything you're capable of. That's the only way it ends, when I decide."

There was an appreciative murmur through the group sprinkled with a giggle of excitement. Heads nodded enthusiastically endorsing this no holds barred approach. By the tone of some impatient grunts some thought it was about time, certain others had been coddled too long.

Now she looked at me not disguising it and I knew this exercise was for me. Her stare was not an effort to convince, but a declaration. I had subjected myself to her environment, even had the chance to leave and not come back and had not done so. So I was her's to do with as she would, and rightly so.

Fear rifled through me. I felt flush and started to sweat. Defensiveness took me over, anger almost. My pulse quickened.

"So let's get to it," she said her arm reaching over the crowd palm cupped as if she might scoop me up. "You, you know who I mean." Her voice sunk to a growl. "I need you down here now." She wheeled her arm reeling me in. "Come on let's go, you've been sitting back there dying this whole time, don't think I haven't noticed, so let's get this thing over with. I'm going to put you out of your misery one way or another." Faces bolted around fixing on me. I came to my feet not feeling myself do it as if lassoed.

"Come down front where we can see you, you can't act from the audience, that's not how it's done," her mocking angering me flushing me down standing defiantly by her blinking into the bleachers numbed by the moment.

I could see Paula there, her face in pain. I felt appreciation, then resentment for being so openly pitied. The faces on the front row gawked like watermelon slices, all flesh and teeth anticipating something they couldn't know, gauging wildly what it might be, good one way or another that was certain.

"Well the way I usually do this is randomly just naming an emotion and have the student take it from there, but in your case we know which emotion it is going to be," Ms. Boman spoke eyeing me with indifference. "Yours is obviously fear, the one nearest the surface, and what we need to work with right now." She turned toward the class regarding me as an exhibit from which to teach. "Because I think when we learn to access our emotions, it's the one most readily available that reveals the path to others, provides a template. There's no point in going for the hardest when something equally good is handy. No in this case today I think fear is what we're nearly dealing with so this should be fairly easy." She turned to me again, looking at me with such apathy about my fear that for an instant I thought it might be anger. I suppose that flashed in my eyes because she seemed to glean that, drawing back smiling, pleased it had registered. Not because she cared about my feelings but because it served the process of extracting emotion to forge toward a larger purpose, emotion of any kind simply raw material for the task at hand.

"Okay here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to step away. You take a moment, whatever time you need, what you need to do is access your fear, tap into it, feel it rise to the surface, let it build until it is out, raw, exposed, then find a way to express it, anyway will do. What you're going for is difficult. Nobody gets it the first time, but what you have to do is feel it and control it at the same time, guide it, use it, ride it like breaking a horse, you'll get thrown but don't let that stop you, get back up." As she continued her voice lowered. She began to back away fading into shadow at the edge of the stage. "You need to feel the emotion first, recognize, let it take you, and then as if controlling a dream recognize where you are in it and have it turn out the way you want," and with that she was gone, vanishing like an apparition, her voice trembling in the air then silent, and I was alone.

My head dropped. I stared at the floor for a long time. I could hear the theater majors in front breathing, that growing heavier tinged with impatience this opportunity was wasted on me.

I heard chirps of encouragement, half sentences, nearly spiritual in support, "come on now, you're

fine, just let it happen," and I tried to fix on one of those looking up to see a sympathetic face I didn't know, a guy looking at me nodding, wide eyed with pity as if fighting that, not wanting to reveal despair, that there was still hope. He spoke looking his words in. "You can do this, feel it then let it go, it's simple, once it happens you'll know, trust yourself." All of that made sense, rang true so for a relieved instant I believed him, but then just as quickly I remembered myself and it didn't matter.

I could not raise my head to look at the room of people waiting. It had all become about what they thought of me. I stared at their feet stealing glimpses higher into their faces reaping a mix of pity, amusement, encouragement, disdain, emotions as honest as the one I was expected to display, emotions now the currency of the room. I felt them all ripple through me.

Then with a sense of inevitability fear rose in my throat. My head inflated until I was dizzy and I might simply topple over. I grabbed the table where Ms. Boman had unraveled her scarf and set her bag, teetering clutching it tightly. I heard a gasp and I looked up to see people leaning in with intensity, holding still expectantly. My throat began to close. My breathing became quick. I wheezed squeezing the table's edge with both hands fighting that, taking deep deliberate breaths as best I could.

For a moment I felt stronger. The fresh oxygen gave me relief. I stood tall and faced the room squarely, looking purposefully at each person that fell within my sight, as one at sea might fix on the horizon staving off nausea. I looked at several people in turn, each with a different expression, bemusement, intensity, appreciation, until fixing on one girl's face. Her's was indifferent, disdainful, bored. In it I was pathetic. This recalled what I thought of myself, setting panic in motion again. All my gains evaporated in a instant. I nearly wretched from the fear surging in my throat. The room swayed. I began to babble, I don't know what, little blurbs, bits of words justifying myself, gasps venting from my throat like steam. My eyes snatched desperately at faces about the room as if one might provide a hold, not seeing any one fully, everything gathering speed until I'm don't know what happened next. I can't recall the precise sequence but I remember not being able to find my way out, bouncing off walls

and the grip of black drapes to the sound of laughter. Then I was running, breathing wildly. There was the bang of a heavy steel door and sunlight and fresh air, and concrete and the whoosh of cars down 10th Avenue brushing me back, my momentum teetering me on the curb so another step would have splattered me in traffic.

It took time to regain my breath, my bearings, some sense of place and that something had happened that needed understanding. Then she was there panting, grinning through her gasps, ripe with something to say.

"That was fantastic," she finally breathed out. "I especially liked the bit with not finding the door, how you were trapped, panicked like a wild animal, that was a beautiful touch," and she gave me the "okay" with her thumb and forefinger, letting that and her grin do the talking while struggling to recover.

By then I realized enough to know I didn't understand. Did she think it was intentional?

"That's what I'm talking about, you nailed it, the honesty of emotion, the intensity, even the little noises, those blurts and hisses, perfect manifestations of fear. It was beautiful, I couldn't have scripted it better." By now she had risen to her full height squaring up to me with her best posture, feet spread, hands stabbed into hips, big breasts forward, looking me firmly in the eye not allowing the chance for questions.

"You're coming with me now," and without any thought to resist, pliable and confused as she seized my elbow, I followed. All the way back in through the maze of sidewalks, heavy doors, dark hallways, finally bursting through curtains into the open space of the little theater, Ms. Boman giving me a hard shove into the spotlight as the theater majors rose to their feet bursting into applause.

I was dazed. The long haul in had compounded my confusion, so I stood wavering accepting the cheers too disabled to get out of their way, as if I appreciated them. At least until I recovered myself and what I would accept. Then I started to walk, leaving for the final time. But Ms. Boman grabbed me

digging her nails into my flesh, making me accept the praise as if I should get used to it, this was part of it too. Why you did it. Perhaps she believed it would give everything meaning, explain why I would want to do it.

She was wrong. In time the applause faded. I hung my head until it did, my shame snuffing it out like water dumped onto a campfire, hissing, steaming, dying with remorse. I climbed back into the bleachers skulking through the theater majors, some of whom respectfully gave way with little pats, touches, and chirps of appreciation.

I happened to look at the one girl whose disdain had triggered my panic. She returned my look forcefully, angrily waiting for it, leaving me more anxious to get away, all of it too much. But I took my seat broken and owned by the day, resistance spent, under no control of my own, for the first time not afraid, the worst having been done.

Paula squeezed my knee. I could read by the pain in her eyes she understood everything. That there was nothing redeeming in any of it, and also it would pass, not to worry.

The rest of the day went quickly. I don't remember details, students getting up over acting emotions. It was tough to watch such hard effort put toward such weak results, the lack of ability highlighted by the trying. I guess I had set the bar too high. By the time it was done I had become so glazed over, lost in reconstructing events, I barely knew it ended.

Somehow Paula avoided taking the front of the class. I don't know how. It was as if she were immune, having been planted there to observe. She and Ms. Boman had schemed it all out beforehand. She would gather observations about individuals, then report after everything was over, an all important subtext revealing meaning.

At the end of the day she gave me a hug on the sidewalk looking me long in the eye saying, "you did good, you should be very very proud of yourself," representing herself as a mothering authority until I broke free stumbling away more confused past the dispersing theater majors, one guy slapping me

boldly on the back barking out "good job," surprising me with his genuine feeling.

I was glad to be free. That's all I cared about, like being held hostage then suddenly turned loose and told to run, flying down the road in my car putting it further and further behind me, pretending it had never happened. I even resolved not to watch movies for a while, at least not the way I used to, studying performances asking myself if it was simply acting or if I believed it, the acting so good that even accounting for the actor I recognized I forgot that, swept up in the performance, suspending disbelief. I didn't want to think of any of that.

Three weeks later I had a message from Ms. Boman. I don't know how she got my number. I must have filled out a form or something, but there was a student production of Psycho coming up, a stage adaptation she had written herself. She thought I would be perfect for the role of Norman Bates. "I feel you've got the edge to really pull that character off," she said begging to please, please call her back. But I ignored it, and several more messages, and even the note she left jammed in my door somehow figuring out where I lived. Because I'd decided my drama career was over. I was wondering if it was too late to join the Army.