

The Double

Dale, the big-brained neighbor kid plinked some pebbles at the plastic bubble over the window well of my basement lair.

“Lonnie, you in?”

Lonnie?”

I heard him but it felt like a dream.

I woke up to the distinctive zither music of Anton Karas and the image of a smirking Harry Lime peeking out of the shadows in a doorjamb in Vienna on a screen that took up just about half the wall underneath the bubbled plastic window. Sunlight streamed in one fat ray over the top of the TV, illuminating the mix of skin flakes and dirt and mold spores that we swim through blindly every day, and injected a little warmth into the cool room.

On a long, short table in front of the TV I had a DVD player, a VHS, and, for the occasional score at the local thrifter, I even had a vintage laserdisc player. I was prepared for any movie, any time, any format.

“I’ve got your weed, man,” he said. “The best shit I’ve grown. And you’re the first one I’m going to smoke out. To the top of your skull.”

He’d taken to heart his high school’s entrepreneur elective for ambitious juniors and seniors and grew only a few, but exceptionally well-tended, potent and delicious marijuana plants in the basement he lived in at his parent’s house. If it weren’t for the pesky issue of it being illegal, he’d be a good poster boy for industriousness.

I relished his friendship, as over the previous six weeks I’d been trying to adjust to the cash coming to an abrupt, unceremonious stop. I suppose I’d come to take it for granted – anyone would, really – and Dale’s combination of intelligence and film addiction made for good daytime movie watching companionship.

He’d only just graduated from high school two years early and was, at 16, a cannabis king with a fetish for obscure mid-century noir films. Coincidentally, this was the area of film I was

most interested in, so though I had the knowledge in this genre, he's the one who'd turned me on to *The Third Man*. I could count our friendship's meetings to that point at about a dozen, but it felt like one of those gifts that life hands you with which you're not certain how to treat.

More pebbles.

"Alonzo. ALONZO. Wake the fuck up. Wee. Da. Licious. And a surprise. I just acquired a box of old movies."

I grozzled out of my afternoon dream state and instinctively clapped twice to turn the TV off. I still wasn't used to the missing finger and when I smacked my hands together it felt unsatisfying and sounded like I just punched a raw chicken. The Clapper had proven an irresistible 2 A.M. purchase many months before — urged on, undoubtedly, by one too many ginger and gins — and it had been a very long time since I had to worry about spending money frivolously. I bought twelve Clappers that night and installed them at every outlet in the house except in my bedroom.

My girlfriend, Viv, didn't want me clapping in the bedroom and refused to use any of the others out of principle.

"What's next? Some Ginsu cutlery? A pair of BluBlockers? You ever wear those," she told me, "and we're finito."

But she wasn't around the house most days.

She was a hygienist at a family dentistry, Trellon Teeth, an office of five related Mormon dentists — the father, his two sons and their two wives. As it said on their window, "Your teeth are in our family's hands." She chose to continue working though I told her she didn't have to.

"Be right up," I said to Dale and downed the last of my drink, the glass warmed on the ottoman that was directly at the end of that ray of sunlight. I saw him through the window of the door going to the backyard, his head at the center of a cloud of smoke so thick I expected Spicoli to greet me.

"Mister Alonzo. Welcome to the backyard." He gestured to the greying sky above. "I smell

a ripper of a storm, Lonnie. Sniff that sweet moisture in the air.”

“Come in,” I said. “We’re not in Amsterdam.” As soon as I said it, I looked around at the depressingly suburban terrain and wished for one quick second I was Dutch, living on a houseboat and maybe owned a large bird that sat on a perch on the main deck all day, occasionally dipping into the river for a fish.

“Where’ve you been?” I asked. “Haven’t seen you for a while.”

In fact, I hadn’t seen Dale for about a month and half, since he’d finished school.

“My mom and me drove to Iowa after I graduated early. She took me as a reward to go fuck around with my cousins in Ottumwa. We kind of grew up together. And I picked these up for you while I was there.”

He set the box on the kitchen counter.

“My uncle’s stash of old movies. Some have labels, some don’t, but there’s at least a couple of noirs in there.”

He pronounced noir like snore, so snores.

“No-WAHR,” I said.

“Old fuckin’ films,” he said.

I pulled a knife off the magnetic strip on the wall. “I was going to have some pizza,” I said. “Hungry?”

“I’m sixteen, I’m a stoner and I’m human. Which of these three says no to pizza?”

I’d just had a finger lopped off the winter before and was still getting used to navigating the days with nine digits. While it was for a good reason – and an elective surgery – just half a year after my finger vanished into some biodegradable scrapheap, my reasoning for the digit removal seemed like a waste.

More on that later.

I’d finally perfected a knife grip that didn’t require, as it once did, the missing end inch of my right index finger. I opened the fridge and pulled out the fixings for my very regular lunch –

homemade pizza dough, homemade tomato sauce, homemade buffalo mozzarella and a couple of onions. Having a little money had allowed me to explore cooking in a most minor way and this was one of the things I'd become good at creating – simple but perfect pizzas. For grins, on a whim, and to test Dale's memory, I pulled the top off the glass dish of tomato sauce, dunked short-fingered hand into it and picked up the knife.

I turned to Dale.

“Oh, pig-ass-mother-fucker,” I wailed and held my hand up. “My fucking finger.”

Dale's knees jellied and the color, what little he had, drained out of his head.

He grabbed a kitchen towel next to him and handed it to me. “Dude, dude, dude, dude, dude! Dude.”

He smiled. “Dude. Got me.”

“I told ya, Dale. Short term memory.”

We laughed and he pulled a joint the size of a Bic Pen from behind his ear.

“Spark it up,” he said. “You're the winning prankster for the day. Prize is first toke of my new strain. I'm calling it Alonzo Noir.”

For the first time in since I lost my finger, I could feel myself starting to cry. I took the joint, lit it with an extendo lighter, turned around and started slicing the onions in my famously thin manner. They were the thickness of rolling papers, both delicate and substantial, so you could roll them up into little translucent onion joints that I laid on the pizza in dozens of crisscrosses.

Dale grabbed the box of movies and headed down to the basement.

“Let's start with some of these unlabeled ones,” he yelled. “Maybe we'll land on a porno.”

Between the onions and the smoke from the joint curling up into my eyes, I stood there crying, wondering how exactly I was going to start earning money as I hadn't had a real job, any job, for just over ten years.

Once the weekly mailings stopped --- I had gotten the envelopes like clockwork for 519

weeks - \$3,000 each, thirty sweet hundreds, tax-free, an employment arrangement I'm pretty sure no one else ever has had or ever will have --- I was at a loss of how my life would pan out.

My last gig for him had been touring Asia for two weeks and waving to enthusiastic crowds and polite paparazzi.

The day we met was probably as weird for him as it was for me. He'd not yet been signed to a major film so his face was not recognizable beyond a handful of filmgoers who'd seen his half dozen indie efforts and one commercial where he'd fed a sexy girl a perfectly golden french fry, him in a tuxedo, her in a prom dress.

I'd never seen him before, so he had to tell me all this.

But the night we met in Denver at the hotel that was locally famous for hosting impossibly large groups of conventioners would be one of the last days of his anonymity. He'd been signed for the starring role in film that his business entourage guaranteed him would change his life forever in almost every imaginable way.

They were right.

He was passed out in a large leather chair that was so big it looked like a like an enormous leather snake mouth, swallowing him slowly.

In my drunken stupor of wanting to be a kind and helpful friend to a stranger, I stumbled over and shook him awake.

"The chair's eating you, man."

He didn't move.

"Hey. Man. The chair. You're vanishing."

When he looked up at me, I fell backward, partially due to the alcohol, mostly because of the unexpected face I saw looking back: my own.

He sobered up in a microsecond.

"Who the fuck are you?" he said.

"Who the fuck are YOU?" I said.

The waitress wandered over and said, "It's last call, can I get the twins a nightcap to deliver a certain hangover?"

He said, "A bottle of tequila. The check to Suite 1010."

We talked while she fetched the bottle and in our drunken stupors decided we must have some common distant relation, something only alcohol-laden brains could come up with. The only difference we noticed was that I was about an inch taller than him (the waitress confirmed this)

We squeezed a month's worth of drinking into the rest of that night, tequila going down like water. The next day I woke up in his room, he was gone, a short note on a cocktail napkin that said, "Nice to meet you, brother." I guzzled some water right from the bathroom sink tap and figured that would be the extent of the story.

I had no reason to believe we'd ever speak again.

The meeting was one of those curious points in your life that, if you were religious, which I'm not, could be chalked up to fate. If into other ethereals, destiny.

Me, however, the atheist / pragmatist / buzzkill that I am, just figured that this was my lottery win for life. My chance at winning a high-odds event had transpired that day in Denver when I ran into him. Little did I know that I'd hit another jackpot, this one with distinctly more value than an event meant only to be a party topic.

I picked up the phone about a year later and heard, from an eerily disembodied voice, "Hold for a personal call, please."

A few seconds later, he came on the phone.

"I hope this call is finding you well," he said.

"I still remember our meeting in Denver like it was yesterday.

After all, how often are you nursed off a world-class hangover by your doppelganger?"

“I guess that’s right,” I responded, mumbling.

A ten-minute phone call later, my future employment was essentially set. He’d just gotten hugely famous in the previous month for a blockbuster that even people on isolated island nations were talking about. He’d recalled our meeting and our uncanny resemblance and concocted what I thought was the goofiest and fail-prone scheme a human had ever invented: I’d provide him a cover, be his double. When he wanted privacy and when the studios demanded his presence in a locale on a promotional trip, I’d be there. He’d already arranged, through his brilliant agent, to secure into his contract a no-speak clause. He’d make appearances, shine his face to the camera, but no words. This would allow the increased likelihood that our scheme would go undetected. And, against probability, it did. Without a single hitch.

All of these, as all of the gigs I engaged in for him over the 519 weeks, were fairly safe for him. He became renowned for going on vacations where he either didn’t speak a word if confronted by the odd intrepid journalist who managed to get close to him, but was primarily just photographed from distances, ranging from a small boat away (Indian Ocean) to a full mountain away (Alps).

Thus, pictures of him (me) existed in both exotic and mundane locales all over the earth.

My favorites were, in no particular order:

- a) A Hawaiian getaway where I was gifted the use of a yacht so big it had its own internal fish tank – yes, in the ocean, this boat had an aquarium – just for the use of the Japanese chef who came with the boat so he could stock it with exotic delicacies and yank them out of the tank moments before they slid down my gullet.
- b) A trans-Europe private train ride where I had a private car with so much privacy that my valet had his own valet lest when he stepped out of the car on train stops in rainy villages to fetch a local delicacy he mucked up his own clothing and risked dirtying the car’s invaluable oriental carpets.

c) A stay in Dick Proenneke's built-from-scratch cabin at Twin Lakes in Alaska where I was, for one glorious month, at least an airplane away from nosy photographers and where, after two delicious days in the summer, I stripped down to nothing but boots and stayed a devoted nudist for nearly four weeks while I learned why my boss craved the kind of isolation that his career and success could never offer.

So, the finger.

He called me from the set of a film he was shooting in New Zealand.

He didn't go into detail, but summarized that a combination of crew error/ laziness and a trailer that was filled to the brim with the wine from the local vineyard on which they were shooting, contributed to the quick, clean, and not painless severing of the tip of his left index finger, but only above the first joint – so, essentially, his finger was lopped off right at the cuticle.

The first thing he thought of, or one of the first after the local hospital took very good care of him and sent him back to set for a short recuperation, (the studio insisted on it being as short as possible, so rearranged filming for a week so that his hands didn't need to be in the shots) was to call me and discuss what had been up to then a perfectly unremarkable relationship with no one but our own closest relations the wiser.

In a call lasting less than five minutes, I'd come to accept that if I were to continue being the double, my own finger would have to identically be shortened. He'd already arranged for the hospital in New Zealand to email photos to his doctor in L.A. so there would be no confusion.

After he said, "I'll arrange for my surgeon in Hollywood to take care of this. All you have to do is show up after Janet phones you with the appointment time," I started to say "Are you sure..." and he anticipated the dozens of questions I had in my head.

"I'm rich. It's Hollywood. Marilyn didn't commit suicide. It's another planet, another galaxy. Everything is possible."

The next day, I flew in to L.A., was picked up by a private car and whisked off to the very private surgery and exchanged possibly fifty words with everyone in the office, mostly Yes and No questions about my medication and recuperation. The whole scene was so choreographed it struck me as oddly routine.

“It’s just a little digit removal,” the surgeon said. “Trust fund kids wrapped up like vagabonds up and down Venice are having this done frequently. It’s all the rage. Tattoos? Passé. Just make up a good war story for it. It’ll work like magic on the ladies, believe you me.”

I was out of the recovery and back home in Phoenix within 12 hours, a bottle of painkillers to help me get through what I’d just done.

Janet, his assistant, the voice I’d heard from just a handful of times in the last ten years, called me just about at the same moment I heard the cover story on a tabloid TV show.

“He’s dying,” she said.

“But I’ve seen the news. They say he’s just going off the grid for some kind of role research after a quick publicity tour.”

“Nope, he’s terminal with cancer,” she said. “His doctor says six months, maybe a year.”

“Okay, I understand,” I said, not quite understanding.

“I just wanted to give you a heads up,” she said.

“He’s got some upcoming foreign junkets that the studio is keen on him attending. Could be the difference between bomb and bust in the Asian markets.”