

Ghost of a Chance

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Eric Rice

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Walt was anxious. He was always anxious on audition nights. Would enough actors come out, or, more importantly, would the right actors come? For every play was a world, and every character must come to life to make that world sensible and concrete. Nothing took the wind out of an otherwise excellent amateur production like an actor who failed to fill the role.

Walt, of course, was an excellent actor, and had studied every play to come through the theatre. He had played Othello, and Iago, at the same time, thundering to one line and mincing to another. And Hamlet, of course, and Ophelia too, although he didn't like playing a woman. But he empathized with Ophelia, locked in that great castle, with intrigue, murder, and insanity all around her, while outside the tremors and thrusts of world events rumbled at the borders of comprehension. Sometimes that's what he felt like, spending all his time in this theatre. Some days his very existence hung on a thread. Especially on nights when there were no rehearsals or performances. He would feel as if he was merging back into the walls, and find himself, come morning, curled up to the massive electrical circuits that ran the lighting grid.

So he did tonight what he always did when anxious. He inspected the theatre room by room. Nothing could have happened without him knowing it anyway, but what's a being without a job? A shade, drifting through life without purpose, and Walt refused to be without a purpose. Walterdale volunteers had saved the old firehall from its fate as a furniture warehouse in 1974 and Walt's job was to protect it. Heavy brick walls, four courses thick, rose up two stories and forty feet above the sidewalk. Massive wooden doors looked in disdain at foot traffic, covering arches that had once let horse-drawn fire wagons charge into the city. Occasionally the shade of a chomping panicked horse still rushed blindly across the stage, driven mad by bells and smoke and fire. A castle. Walt's castle. Thousands passed the building during festivals and Farmers'

Market days. Thousands. Tens of thousands or hundreds of thousands, over the years, but very few knew about Walt. That didn't matter to him. The only things that mattered were the amateur players and the plays that breathed life into the brick.

Walt patrolled, the epitome of silence. On the theatre deck, a few stacks of lumber waited for their chance to form the next set. Walt tipped his thin gray frame toward them in a bow. Everything is an actor, every bit of life a play. None of it made sense otherwise. Table saws huddled in the shop, shrouded in dust, and battered tool chests sported the scars of builders past. The bathrooms, dingy and dark, and the lobby, stretching around the theatre space like a hug, echoed only to the sounds of past audiences. He paused again to salute the plaque of Presidents and Artistic Directors. He heard voices. In the theatre?

Walt flashed there, and relaxed to find Griffin, the director of the upcoming production, leading his new assistant director through the building. Griffin's mop of brown hair balanced over his narrow face, large ears, and a head stuffed with self-importance. He had acted in other productions, but the only parts he played well were fools. His long slender fingers flicked for emphasis when he spoke.

"Of course, this is the space itself," he said, his voice rising at the end like a question. "Intimate, but it poses challenges for blocking with large cast plays."

The assistant, a young redhead that Walt pegged as a university student, settled into the sweet spot on centre stage and looked around. "It's beautiful," she said. "I love the feeling."

Griffin rolled his eyes. "There's the feeling, then there's the noise the furnace makes, and then there's the sounds of water running if anyone flushes during a performance, and then there's the dust. I'd swear this place is falling apart around our ears. As an example," he continued, "our

rickety back stairs to the green room.” Griffin waved the young woman to follow and headed up the twisted staircase beneath the bell tower.

Walt followed, close on Griffin’s back. “Griffin is a prick,” Walt breathed on his neck. “A peck of pickled peppers picked with Griffin’s little prick.” He grinned, stretched his neck muscles. He could still enunciate better than most.

Griffin shivered. “And these drafts,” he said. “This old place has got cold drafts in the strangest places.”

“I heard there’s a ghost?” the young woman said.

“That’s a tall tale,” said Griffin.

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Later, actors both female and male perched on chairs and couches against the wall of the audition hall. Lips moved silently over lines remembered or lines read from a script. Griffin preferred cattle calls to scheduled auditions, all the putative actors herded into one room, plucked one or two at a time from their spots to read alone or against one another. All of them, even the youngest or least experienced, forced to go through their paces with their competitors looking on.

Walt circled, careful to avoid touching, but coming close enough to taste their auras. Everyone has an aura, a fluttering jagged shadow extending beyond their bodies. Some, the auras of gifted actors, stretched and shaped themselves at the actor’s command, projecting like their voice into the reaches of the theatre, or retreating suddenly to wrap close around them when they withdrew. It could be one reason, he supposed, that great movie actors sometimes lost their lives—their auras were trapped, replicated thousands of times on the movie screen, shared with millions on television, and finally unable to return. The auras were themselves, and, once lost, could not be recovered.

These auras though, like the actors themselves, were of a lesser breed. Sign painter's auras. Bank teller's auras. Aura of teacher, of technical geek, of graphic artist. All of them tasting of their jobs. They were all who they were, and nobody else.

Walt circled the room, and settled, floating a few feet above the ground behind the director's table. As the room filled, he began to swell and vibrate with the energy. Griffin leaned over and whispered in the ear of a woman seated beside him at the table, a woman older than the others. Cathy Baker. Walt knew her of course, as he knew everyone who worked in the theatre, but he'd never had much to do with her. The classic stage manager, accommodating where possible, firm where necessary, and always, always, organized. As she turned her face to speak Walt saw the lines, felt the energy pulling down at the corner of her eyes. He tingled. She had been sick. He sensed easily when people encountered death. Their auras changed, their manner changed. They appreciated everything, even the shadows. He studied her.

Griffin rose, breathed twice deeply, and clapped his hands for attention, long fingers wrapping around each other in self-love.

"Good evening!" he yelled, his voice cutting the air. He moved around the table to take the centre of the room. As he spoke, his gestures became more animated, his voice livelier. Walt sneered. In his opinion, most directors were failed actors who had found another way to command attention. He let his attention drift across the assembled group, tasting fear, confidence, panic, excitement. Griffin chose two of the actors to start and seated himself primly back in his chair.

Walt tensed. The couple circled each other, bodies stiff and uncomfortable as their mouths and minds felt the words, strove to communicate the sense of it to nervous limbs, struggled to break out of themselves and into the part. Their auras, far more than their bodies,

experimented, leaped, twisted, shook with anger or shrunk in fear, throbbed or shivered. The man reached out to clutch and she spun, and her aura spun with her, twisting and darting. Walt almost moaned in joy.

After two hours it became difficult to remember who had read before, who had paired with whom. They all seemed so similar. Oh, some were better than others, some more experienced, some who fit the roles, some who didn't, some truly awful, but no one yet had shone. Walt knew who Griffin would choose. He had his pet actors, as did every director.

Griffin called a break, and the actors and actresses relaxed into groups and started chatting. Walt found it hard to relax and swayed rapidly back and forth. The curtains on the windows swayed with him, and Cathy turned, gazing straight at him.

"Better move it along," she said to Griffin, "Walt's getting edgy."

Walt slid sideways, quickly, out of her gaze. Her eyes didn't follow, and Walt relaxed. A guess then, a staged ploy for Griffin's sake.

"I don't believe in that stupid ghost," Griffin said. "He's not pushing me to change my auditions."

Cathy shrugged. "Up to you."

"I think I've seen everyone haven't I?" Griffin asked, shuffling through piles of audition sheets. "I know who I want."

Cathy pointed out one quiet young woman in the corner. "She hasn't read yet." She slid a sheet across. "Ember Pips. No experience."

Walt bounced up to the ceiling. Why hadn't he seen her? The girl who'd screamed at him during the Annual General Meeting. She'd been there all along.

“Christ. I suppose we have to give her a chance.” Griffin rose, and called out in a voice that barely masked his impatience. “Quiet please. We’re almost done. You, Ms. Pips is it? Please come forward.”

Ember stood up, the papers in her hands making a crackling sound in her grip, and moved quickly forward. She perched in front of the director’s table. Griffin looked up from his papers and swept across her with one glance. “What role is it you’d like to read for?” he asked.

“Beatrice,” Ember said.

Griffin dug around on the table and came up with the list of character descriptions that had been distributed with the audition notice. “Beatrice, the verbally combative niece of Leonardo, who is able to hold her own and often better any opponent in battles of wit,” he said. “That’s who you want to read for?”

“I know all the lines,” Ember said.

“Do you?” Griffin said. “Then please, take it from your favourite scene, and commence.”

“Do I get someone else to read with?” Ember asked.

“No need,” Griffin said, waving her concerns away. “Let’s see how you do.”

Walt could have slugged Griffin’s head from his shoulders. How unfair! For a moment Ember seemed to melt, and she dropped her head and the pages in her hands to the floor. The other actors quieted, attuned to the potential for tears. With one foot, Ember pushed the papers away, and her shoulders heaved. But then she reached down and picked one up, and deftly folded it into a fan. She opened it, held it up to her face, and straightened with a snap. From behind the fan her eyes flared. She spun her shoulders, first one way, then the other, and her aura leapt around her and spread like wings across the room.

“Benedick?” she said, searching, it seemed, for a suitable target. Her eyes passed over every man in the room, and landed on empty space, or at least it seemed empty. But for a long moment she looked right through Walt. Then she held up one hand, as if held by another, and began to move, lightly dancing with an invisible partner. Walt couldn’t help himself. He leapt to the floor, and danced with her, not daring to touch her hand, but bobbing, and bowing, and weaving to match her moves. He fancied that her eyes widened in recognition.

“Why, he is the Prince’s jester, a very dull fool; only his gift is in devising impossible slanders: none but libertines delight in him; and villainy; for he both pleases men and angers them and then they laugh at him and beat him. I am sure he was in the fleet. I would that he had boarded me.”

The air crackled in the silent rehearsal hall for a long moment, waiting for the response. Walt’s clamped his jaws shut with so much force it hurt. He couldn’t believe it. Would no one give her the line and let her carry on?

Cathy glared pointedly at Griffin as Ember stopped, froze, and slowly melted into herself again. Griffin’s open jaw snapped shut.

“Thank you,” he blurted. “Thank you...”

“Ember,” Cathy said.

“Thank you, Ember,” Griffin said and rose, as the room breathed out and Ember scooped up her scattered papers from the floor.

“Thank you everyone,” Griffin said loudly. “You all did very well. Those of you coming for a second reading will be called by Tuesday.”

Walt ached again as he watched Ember slink back into her corner. He bent his gaze on the back of Griffin’s head and willed him to call her back. She hadn’t even had the chance to

read against another actor! Griffin seemed oblivious and again made a show of shuffling pages as the actors filed out, Ember, almost invisible, among them.

Cathy waited until they were all gone, then turned. “You’ve got to give that girl a second read,” she said.

“She’s got no experience,” Griffin said. “You know how these rookies are, they sparkle at first but don’t keep it up.”

“She didn’t *sparkle* Griffin, she consumed that role.”

Walt found the audition sheet for Ember and tried to pull it out of the pile, but just succeeded in knocking them all to the floor.

“Walt likes her,” Cathy said.

“No more about the ghost!” Griffin said. “I’m not calling her back.”

Cathy closed her binder with a snap. “Griffin, I usually shut my mouth about these things, but you’re new. The older members are already talking, saying that you’ll pick your friends. If you want to be respected cast the best. Not your buddies.”

The assistant director, who had sat watching quietly, stood up.

“I know you haven’t asked my opinion, about anything really, but I’d say call her back. Nobody reads the Bard that well unless they get him, and understand the language. Not many professionals do, much less amateurs.”

Griffin bowed, deflated.

“Pam, if you think it’s worthwhile,” he sniffed, “I’ll include her in the call back list. I’ll send it out later tonight.” Papers in hand, he stalked out.

Cathy turned toward the assistant director, and again Walt felt the draw, the greyness settling around the eyes, the darkened edges of her smile.

“Thanks for the support,” she said.

“Griffin can be an ass,” Pam said, “but he’s still reachable at times.”

Cathy nodded. She picked up a chair and winced. “Do you mind helping with these heavier chairs?”

As the two women worked, Walt drifted off, the performance of Ember still vivid in his mind. The scope of that girl, the reach! For whatever reason, with whatever luck, her aura had responded to the lines and filled the room. There were a few spots that needed strength and a few spots too harsh that needed softening, but overall, fantastic. If Griffin didn’t cast her Walt would make his life hell.

“You’ll get used to the idea of Walt,” Cathy said. “I’m not sure if he’s a real thing or just the spirit of this place, but after a while you get to appreciate having him around.”

Pam looked around the empty room, chairs now pushed back against the walls.

“I wonder what kind of ghost he is,” she said.

Cathy threw her bag over a shoulder as they started to walk out. “What do you mean?”

Pam smiled. “I took a spiritualism course as an option. Ghosts are serious business for a lot of people. There are whole religions built around it. Some can be evil.”

“I don’t think Walt is evil,” Cathy said, pausing at the landing and looking back up the stairs right through Walt. “Although he scares some people.”

Only the ones who deserve it! Walt thought.

“Other ghosts are just a kind of energy,” Pam continued, “somehow coalesced into a form of a person.”

“That sounds like Walt,” Cathy said. “The energy of this marvelous old building wrapped up in a person.”

As Cathy fumbled with the key, Pam leaned against the doorframe.

“There’s been some really interesting work lately in England,” she said. “They’ve measured peoples’ electromagnetic auras, and found that they can be thrown, almost like somebody’s voice, and end up in places completely different than where you might expect them, or, become disassociated from the source altogether. And the coolest thing, if you can believe it, is that they think once they identify the physical source of a thrown magnetic field, they can bring the two together, bring the physical source back to life.”

Cathy laughed as she held the door for Pam. “Ghosts back to life, eh? I wonder what Walt would be?”

“Don’t you know?” Pam asked. “He’d be an actor.”

Walt followed. But he’d forgotten the draining wasting tug as he moved to go outside the theatre, and the sudden horrible vacuum that sucked and whirled in the outdoors and threatened to destroy him. He stopped, and the closing door gently bumped him back into the vestibule.

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