

Third Callback

Marcus sighed deeply.

His shoulders slumped over the varnished wood of the bar, he wished he could just disappear into the dim light of the boozier and never be heard from again. His chin rested on the heel of his left palm, elbow planted firmly on the worn, padded bar railing. With his free hand, he absently swizzled at his jack and coke, using the small, plastic stick resting in his glass.

What a day.

“Marc, how the fuck did you get fired! Didn’t you just say you were on the fast track to being shift manager?”

Marc couldn’t see Debbie’s face through the phone, but he didn’t have to. He cringed, knowing the expression all too well. It was the one that mixed equal parts anger and disappointment. The one that made her normally delicate features contort into furrowed frustration.

“Sweets, I tried to get there on time, I really did, but the audition ran late!”

Silence.

“Well, what was I supposed to do?” Marcus paced the length of their studio apartment, pleading into his phone.

“You were supposed,” Debbie said coolly, “To keep. Your. Fucking. Job!”

“God damn it, Deb! The audition ran long, how was I supposed to know that was going to happen? I couldn’t miss it, this could be it for us!”

Marcus’ phone crackled with soft static as Debbie slowly exhaled. “You always think that this is going to be it, Marcus. You always say that this is going to be the one you get.”

“This is my second callback!” Marcus tilted his head skyward, “Deb, I’ve been getting better and better auditions. These casting directors like me, they just haven’t had the right role for me until now. I just got a third and final callback; they really want me for the part!”

“According to who?” Deb said flatly.

“Richard, who else?”

“You’re talking about your deadbeat agent that never returns your calls?”

Marcus quickly wiped his hand over his face. “He doesn’t always have time, because he’s so busy! Deb, this is a supporting cast role, not some extra, or some walk on bullshit. This is the real deal.”

Marcus listened to a quiet phone for a moment before speaking again. “Are you there?”

“I’m here, Marc.” Debbie’s voice softened by three-sixteenths of a degree, “Marc, I just don’t think that this is working out. This whole... L.A. thing.”

“You don’t believe in me.”

“Oh, nice.” Deb laughed quickly, “So you immediately go there. No, Marc, I believe in you with my whole heart and soul. You’ve got buckets of talent, I’ve told you that so many times before. You were awesome on stage and you’re phenomenal on film.”

“But?” Marcus waited for Debbie to respond to his prompt.

“But... It’s this city, Marc. No one here cares about talent. It’s all about connections and blow jobs, I feel like it’s just going to end up making you worn out and bitter, and you don’t need that. We don’t need that.”

“I’m just asking for another year.”

“You said that three years ago, Marc. I’m supposed to be finishing law school right now, not slaving away in a dead-end secretary job. Not working for some sweaty, bald asshole who spends half the day staring at my tits and the other half talking about them!

“I’m tired of this. I want to go home. I want to go back to school. I want to start a family. We’ve been trying to do this your way, Marc, and it’s not working.”

The conversation played through his mind, looped *ad nauseam* like a child’s favorite song. He couldn’t get Deb’s words out of his head, nor could he stop thinking about her implied ultimatum. Marcus flicked a glance around the room and surveyed the crowd, which grew thicker by the minute. In his contemplation he hadn’t even noticed most of them enter.

Marc’s bladder tingled. He rose from his stool and headed toward the men’s room. Bustling and pushing all the way there and all the way back, Marc made his way through the bar, occasionally muttering apologies, but mostly not. His nerves set on edge every time some dullard in the crowd refused to move and let him pass by, or had to make a rude comment at Marc’s need to get around.

At last, his spot at the bar came back into view.

“What the fuck?” Marc said loudly.

A group of four men had taken over his area. Marc’s drink, only half-finished, appeared to have been collected by the bartender and his stool now supported an athletically built, blond man about his age.

“Hey!” Marc called to the bartender. “Where’s my drink, man?”

The bartender shrugged quickly as he breezed past from behind the bar. Thirsty customers yelled out orders to the man, whose hands turned into a whirlwind of glass, ice and colored liquids.

All four of the group who had commandeered Marc’s locale stared at him with narrowed eyes.

Marc stood defiantly, arms crossed in front of his chest. He zeroed in on the blond man sitting on his former stool. “You’re in my seat, man.”

“I don’t see your name on it.” The blond smirked. He brought a glass to his lips and sipped from a dark beverage.

Marc’s eyes darted around their group; it looked as though the blond was the only one of the four who had received a drink.

“Man...” Marc blinked slowly and shook his head. “You’re fucking gross, man. You just take people’s half-empty drinks? Give me back my jack and coke, dude.”

“I don’t see your name on it.” He smirked again, just for a quick moment before draining the rest of Marcus’ beverage.

“Ahh.” The blond smacked his lips together in satisfaction.

“Yeah? Well you’re about to see my name...” Marcus sputtered while he assembled a real zinger. “When it’s on my foot, that’s... That’s going so far up your ass, you, you’ll wish you had a drink!”

“What!” The blond stood quickly from his stool, knocking it down behind him. The closest of his three friends put a hand to his chest.

“Take it is easy, Roscoe!”

“No way!” The blond, Roscoe, cut a hand through the air and pointed straight at Marcus. “No one, I mean no one, tells me that they’re gonna stick their name on their foot and put up my ass!”

Roscoe’s friend tried to get in front of the man. “He ain’t worth it, Roscoe!”

Marcus jabbed a finger to Roscoe's cohort. "Your mom ain't worth it!"

"You take that back, bro!" Roscoe shook his fist toward Marcus, "His mom is so worth it!"

"Oh yeah," Marcus egged the man on, "How much did you have to pay?"

Roscoe pushed past his companions, within three paces he stood close enough that Marcus could smell the drink he had paid for on Roscoe's breath. Roscoe stood eyeball to eyeball with Marcus, their foreheads touching.

"You're going down, bro!" Roscoe yelled.

"Hey, assholes!" The bartender shouted at them.

Both Marcus and Roscoe turned their heads.

The bartender grabbed a glass from an overhead rack. "Take it outside or I'm calling the cops."

"Fine!" Marcus yelled in Roscoe's face.

"Let's do it!" Roscoe screamed back.

Marcus, Roscoe, his three companions, and a few scattered spectators filed out of the bar to either engage in or watch the ensuing fight.

Blood burned its way through Marcus' ears and face. He cracked his knuckles and stretched his neck as he walked out into the parking lot.

"Yeah!" Roscoe screamed in a rough, hoarse voice as he hopped up and down on the asphalt, putting his fists up in a boxer's stance. Marcus watched Roscoe's fists pump in front of him in rapid succession, delivering a series of deadly, well-practiced punches.

Marcus swallowed, remembering that he hadn't actually been in a fight since the second grade. He steeled his nerves. Remembering a stage combat class he had taken earlier in the summer, he leapt in the air and delivered a crisp flying roundhouse, meant to intimidate his opponent. *Maybe, Marcus hoped desperately, I can scare him away before he realizes I can't fight.*

The stage combat trick hadn't worked. Roscoe started to sweat. He was really good at acting like he could box, but in truth he had never had to take a punch in his life. This guy though – the dude all pissed off about his drink – was some kind of god damned karate champ or something.

It was now or never. Roscoe screamed, he put his shoulder down and charged forward on the off chance he could take out the kung-fu asshole with brute strength alone.

Shit. Marcus panicked. Roscoe ran for him at full speed, it must be some kind of crazy boxer's trick, and Marcus was falling for it hook, line and sinker. He had to act fast. Marcus copied his opponent, screaming wildly and running straight for him.

They impacted in a tangle of limbs, stars flying in front of their eyes. Marcus gasped to regain his breath while they grappled. Roscoe's fist tried several times, unsuccessfully, to find Marcus' face. They strained muscles as they tried to force each other into vulnerable positions, panting with the effort.

Marcus brought a knee up into Roscoe's gut. The move didn't create any noticeable force on the man, but it did knock them both off balance.

Falling to the greasy asphalt their hold on each other broke for a split second. Marcus rolled away from Roscoe and stumbled to his feet.

Roscoe hopped back upright as well, his clothes rumped and marred with black streaks.

"Okay, time out!" Marcus formed a 'T' with both of his hands.

The spectators looked to one another in confusion. Roscoe bent forward, putting his hands on his knees as he breathed deeply, nodding in agreement.

"What's a matter," Roscoe said between gasping breaths, "You had enough?"

"Shit," Marcus swallowed, "I'm still gonna take you out, man."

Roscoe shrugged his shoulders and opened his arms over a quickly rising and falling chest. "Then why you stopping?"

"Ground rules," Marcus said.

"Ground rules?" Roscoe raised a single eyebrow.

Marcus nodded. "I've got an audition tomorrow, so, no punching in the face, okay?"

"What?" One of Roscoe's crew yelled in frustration. "What kind of shit is that?"

"No, wait..." Roscoe put a hand out to silence his friend and stood fully upright. "That's not a bad idea. I've got an audition on Friday and I can't go in there all bruised up, either."

Roscoe's friends looked to him in disbelief.

"It's all right, I can kick his ass without hitting him in the face!"

The crowd cheered in agreement.

“But, look,” Roscoe put his hands on his hips, “Just don’t try and hit me in my stomach anymore, ‘cause I’ve got to be in a swimsuit for this commercial. My six pack is like my trademark, so, I’ve got to be looking my best.”

“Okay, sure.” Marcus pursed his lips for a moment. “Who’s the audition for?”

Roscoe guffawed. “Uh, only Abercrombie and Fitch. Ever heard of them?”

“Shit, that is a big deal, man.” Marcus nodded appreciatively.

“You’re telling me.”

“Are you nervous?”

“Sure, I guess. I’d be more nervous if it was a callback though.” Roscoe looked behind him to his friends.

They all looked at him expectantly. The tallest of the group gestured toward Marcus with a closed fist.

“Prepare to get stomped, son!” Roscoe yelled.

His friends cheered and pumped their fists in the air. Marcus raised his hands in the best approximation of a boxer’s stance he could muster. Roscoe put his fists up in response; they began to circle each other slowly.

“What’s it for?” Roscoe said from behind his fists.

“What’s what for?” Marcus lowered his guard slightly.

“Your audition.”

“Oh.” Marcus raised his eyebrows. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Try me.” Roscoe’s feet slowed.

“A feature. Directed by Guy Ritchie.”

Roscoe stopped dead in his tracks. His cronies gasped.

“Shut the fuck up.”

Marcus gave a half-smile. “Dead serious.”

“Callback?”

“Third one.”

Dropping his fists completely, Roscoe stood fully upright. “Well, what kind of a part are we talking about here?”

“I haven’t seen much of the script, but it’s a supporting cast role.”

“Dude.” Roscoe put his fists on his hips. “That’s huge.”

“Yeah,” Marcus laughed bitterly, “Tell my girlfriend that.”

Roscoe barked out a singular laugh. “Oh, well, come on, man. Unless she acts, you can’t expect her to understand.”

Scattered members of the crowd returned inside, showing their disappointment in the lack of violence.

One drunken patron stood on wobbly legs, pointing squarely at Roscoe. “Hey, you gonna beat his ass, or beat him off?”

“Fuck you, man, you wanna piece of this?” Roscoe puffed his chest out toward the inebriate.

“Ah, fuck off.” The drunk waved away the pair of non-combatants and returned inside with the majority of the crowd. A few remained and listened to the exchange.

“Anyway,” Roscoe rolled his eyes, “How long have you been at it out here?”

“Little over four years.”

“And how many real parts have you gotten?”

Marcus considered the question. “Few commercials, a lot of extra work. Some good stage parts.”

“And she’s tired of keeping her life on hold, waiting for you to get famous, right?”

“Looks like it,” Marcus said.

“Can you blame her?”

“I guess not.” Marcus looked down at the filthy ground of the parking lot. “Hey, can we finish this some other time? It’s getting kind of late and I should be getting back home.”

“Um, sure.” Roscoe looked back to his friends. “How about Friday night?”

Marcus nodded. “Sounds good to me.”

“So, yeah, come by and let us know how the audition went.”

“Yeah, I will.”

“Then I can kick your ass proper,” Roscoe said.

Marcus gave Roscoe a sidelong glance. “You wish.”

Roscoe and his friends made their way back into the bar. Before he crossed through the doorway, Roscoe turned around and pointed at Marcus. “What’s your name, man?”

“Marcus.”

“Hey, break a leg, okay, Marcus?”

“Thanks.” Marcus gave him a wan smile.

“Cause if you don’t, I’m going to break it for you!” Roscoe flexed his pectorals and his biceps in tandem. He whooped loudly once before stepping back through the doorway.

Marc shook his head and turned to walk toward his bus stop. Chuckling softly, he brushed small particles of gravel from his t-shirt, thinking that he couldn’t wait to tell Deb about how he had been in the most ridiculous fight of his life.

In hindsight, the whole fight was laughable from start to finish. Marcus couldn’t believe how he could have been so stubborn and short-sighted with the one person he loved more than life itself.

What a day.