

The Llama in the Main Theater

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“Oh crap—” said the man as his enormous hand reached underneath the bed in search of a pair of glasses, oversized compared to their owner. After a series of “ow”s and “oof”s, five frail fingers finally grasped the eyewear and a pale, bony face emerged from behind the bed frame. After a bit of inspection, the glasses were hastily placed atop the man’s narrow nose as he stumbled out of bed to get ready for his tenth day at work.

Earl’s work was all about running around fetching things in the dark while the more important people onstage called for props, moppings, or even tissues during rehearsals and the actual performances. They called him the “runner”, a cool job, no doubt, which had at first reminded him of the ‘roadrunner’ from Looney Tunes.

This particular day was especially busy for the Main Theater, a giant positioned as elegantly as possible, though in vain, right in the middle of Main City. Main City was the part of The Great Continent with the most lights, screens, flashy show windows, and smiling people, but to Earl, it looked rather more like a decorated chicken coop than a beautiful city. The Main Theater was also like a chicken coop, or at least the elevator was when there were too many people in it. Earl would always be the one on the way back to be squished behind everyone else, squirming to find room.

Since Main Theatre had Main City’s biggest stage and the brightest lights, the city had decided to use the place for The Big Event. From the start of the morning, crew members were hurriedly moving documents, checking stage lights, barking orders to each other, and generally making a big fuss about a full house that was supposed to come that evening.

People were talking about how it wasn’t just *any* full house. There were going to be a number of prominent figures in the hall that evening including the mayor, the head of a certain entertainment agency, and some other famous men and women each in tailcoats and flowing dresses that they had to hold using both of their hands to walk. It couldn’t get any more practical.

Earl wasn’t making a fuss, but his mind kept jumping back and forth from his work and the huge crowd he imagined would be looking at whoever was on the stage. Celebrities on stage were like a mystery to him. Earl thought ‘How could they stand in front of all those eyes and still be in their right minds?’ as he mopped last night’s dust off the stage before the rehearsal.

Earl had never chosen to be onstage before. It seemed suffocating to feel the searing gaze of a gazillion eyes looking him up and down without having a clue what they were thinking of him. Earl thought the wisest decision he had made in life was to grow his fringe. It was like having his very own shell, with him being the hermit crab. It pricked his eyes sometimes, but he thought it was nice to have a curtain of your own that you could hide into from time to time.

“Gooooood mornin’!” a voice called out, breaking Earl’s stream of thought. A man in a dark blue suit opened the door to the theater with a loud ‘bang’ and clomped his way up to Earl, who was on the stage.

“Oh – good morning, Mr. Madison,” answered Earl, facing the man who was already climbing up the stairs to the stage and was reaching his hand out for Earl to shake.

“Jus’ call me Garfield – been seeing me for weeks now, haven’t ya? Don’t have to sound so stiff. C’mon, relax. Let’s just be cas,” said the man, giving Earl a little bump on the shoulder.

Garfield was a slim, young man with a tidy suit and shoes; he looked fit for the title of “the master of master of ceremonies”, a title his fans had given him. He was a well-known figure in the field of entertainment for his ‘gift’ of making good speeches, which was a miracle considering that few would call him the brightest bulb in the box.

“If you aren’t already too busy,” Garfield said to Earl, who was already busy, “could you help me go through my lines one last time before the final rehearsal? Y’know, we’ve been doing this before the past couple rehearsals, and I must say—this sure helps, man. You’re the only one who has so much time, and—no offense, I’m not saying that you’ve got nothin’ to do. You’re—what did you say you were?”

“A runner.”

“Yeah jus’ that—a runner. You’re a runner, you have to go and get props and all that but people don’t need *you* all the time. So I guess you’re the best listener.”

Earl frowned slightly behind his fringes and let out a quiet sigh. Garfield Madison seemed not to be able to notice, since he was distracted by the large theater he would be making his opening speech in.

“You know when this was built? A sure beauty this is, jeez.”

“I thought you were going to practice your opening speech in fr—”

“Oh yeah right, hehe, I’m sorry man. Shall we start?”

As evening came, the theater started to bustle with people and the backstage crew was hurriedly checking the gear for the last time. Earl was also in a hurry since he had to check if all the props and materials were prepared according to the right order, and there were constant orders to get this and fetch that.

It was one minute before the start of the show, but Earl felt that something wasn’t right; something was missing. It could even be a ‘somebody’. Earl looked around but couldn’t see a trace of Garfield Madison.

“Sir—,” said Earl.

“What?” said the director.

“I’m afraid we have someone missing—,” said Earl.

“Speak up, and don’t beat around the bush—we don’t have all the time in the world,” said the director, who wasn’t being so concise himself.

“Garfield Madison,” Earl replied.

The director’s eyes widened, and sent off the assistant director to go look for the tardy celebrity. The lights on the stage had already dimmed, signalling the start of the show.

“Do you know the lines?” the director asked all of a sudden, looking at Earl straight in the eyes.

“H-huh?” Earl stuttered, eyes widening to the size of dimes. You could see them widen even behind his fringes.

“I asked, *do you know the lines?* I saw you practice with the man before,” said the director.

Before Earl could even answer, with a big push, which didn’t have to be so strong since Earl didn’t weigh half as much as the director himself, the director had him onstage in front of a terrifying number of eyes looking back at him with curiosity and confusion. A huge tremor seemed to go through his body starting from the head down to the toes and then back up again as

his eyes frantically ran all around the theatre, catching nothing in particular due to the blinding limelight and the crushing weight of the silence. Earl scooped as he saw, through the corner of his eye, the director hurriedly shoo him to the middle of the stage. His pin-like legs started shaking, making even those simple movements way harder. Earl gulped, though there was nothing in his mouth, as he kept on listening to the loud thumping sounds his heart made in his throat with each passing second.

“Ssssay sssomethhging!” the director said behind the curtain, who, at that point, sounded more snake than human. Heart still pounding, Earl got hold of the mic positioned with grace on its stand, clearly waiting for a man with the equal amount of poise to grab and speak into it with words of prodigality, but behold; they had Earl instead.

Earl was on the stage for a total of two minutes, including all the trembling. Earl, hidden, or maybe not so much as he wished, behind his own wad of curtains that hung from his scalp, gave in all the energy and effort that he could to remember and utter all of Garfield Madison’s lines. It didn’t take so long to finish, but to Earl, at that moment, it felt as though the clock was intentionally moving slower, laughing and content with his struggle.

When Earl finished the speech with the last words, “and I—I hope all—all o’you enjoy!”, loud applause hit his ears, which were now red as cherries. Earl barely managed to keep himself up straight, safe from collapsing right there in the middle of the stage. The crowd seemed content about what had happened a moment before, because in small glimpses Earl could see smiles and even laughing faces, not with mockery, but with sheer delight. He had not even the faintest idea of what they were happy about, but this wasn’t the right time to think about such details. He stumbled off the stage, as he had stumbled out of bed that morning, and all that was in his mind was the wish for a good cup of tea.

He returned backstage to the sound of people chuckling, and also to the faint sound of someone coughing and complaining. Some members of the crew gave him a pat on the back as they passed, and Earl flinched to their touch; it was the first time anyone patted Earl’s back at work. Earl noticed someone clomping around in the dark, muttering something underneath his breath to a crew member.

“It was aching so bad I couldn’t walk, for heaven’s sake—I was trapped in that goddamn bathroom! I couldn’t have come even if I had wanted to—really it was that bad,” the silhouette whispered in a hurry.

The crew member rolled her eyes, and said to the man that he'd better calm down and be quiet, because "thanks to your negligence, we almost ruined everything," and they had to send "another crew member on stage like a lamb to the slaughter." The crew member, realizing Earl was there, quickly gave him a thumbs-up.

'Heaven knows what's up with these people,' thought Earl, and he staggered to a small chair in the dark where he could ease his breath.

By around 10 o'clock, the last of the crew members were taking their leave out of the theatre to go back home. Earl was also preparing to leave, but had lagged a little behind the others to check on whether he had all the props in the right places; it was something he often forgot to do. Just as he got out of the main entrance, a voice called him from up front. "Oh, I see— here's the man that gave us a good laugh this evening." The voice came from a fleshy man wearing a tuxedo, standing next to an open van with another man. The fleshy man was only about five feet tall, so he had to look up to see Earl's face, which was a little more than a foot above his. The man would have been very good-looking if his features hadn't been smudged up in his own flesh, so now he looked something like a well-dressed bloodhound, all prim and in full attire. The latter was the mayor, taller than the five-foot fellow but equally well-dressed.

"What's your name, lad? I'm afraid I haven't seen you anywhere before," said the fleshy man, reaching to take Earl's hand for a shake.

"This could make a great opportunity for a debut. A comedian maybe?" the mayor chimed in, facing Earl, whose face had turned a dark red. Earl, since he had one hand in the fleshy man's, thought he must shake hands with the mayor considering the fact that he was indeed a man of authority, and inadvertently took out his free hand to reach the neatly dressed figure. Coming to the realization that people usually don't do handshakes with both hands, he immediately tried to hide the fact that he had attempted to do so by sticking his hand into his pocket. Realizing the silly mistake, both men in the suites laughed, shaking their heads and looking contently at each other.

"You know what?" started the fleshy man, rummaging his pocket, "Contact me with this number, you see? I want to invest in you. Contact me if something interesting happens to you, and you'll know what that means, fella, in a while." With that, the fleshy man gave Earl a small business card and two pats on the shoulder. The man shook hands once more with the mayor and walked a short distance down the road to his own vehicle. The mayor chuckled, shook hands with Earl and disappeared down the road in the van, leaving Earl alone with the business card.

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That night, Earl put the business card inside a drawer in his night stand. He simply didn't know what to do with it. Anyways, he was no celebrity after all.

It was a little more than a week after The Big Event when Earl saw a video of himself, not on his phone or his colleague's, but on a giant screen in the middle of Main Square. He had staggered out of bed like any other day, flung on his uniform, and was heading for the Main Theater by bus when he saw an unusually familiar face through the bus window. It was none other than himself, standing on that stage of damnation, trying his best to keep himself from fainting. His mouth gaped as he saw the words 'The Weekly Virals' run along the side of the screen as it went on to show how many 'likes' the masterpiece had received; a clear sign of honorable external validation. Earl wished for his fringes to magically grow longer, just long enough to cover his entire face.

Unfortunately, and pretty obviously, his fringes stayed the same and everyone at the Main Theater already knew about 'it', as people referred to the video. Everyone paid respect to the frazzled roadrunner, and Earl enjoyed that very much. Crew members who met him in the hallways waved first, and people who had never talked to him before complimented his hair as they passed. During lunch break, the director who had pushed Earl onto the stage came up to him to give him a slap on the shoulder, saying "You should thank me later, man!" and went off, chuckling and shaking his head. Earl even got more room in the elevator, which gave him at least one thing to be thankful of the misery of getting so much attention.

When Earl arrived at home that night, he sat in front of his computer, his face in his hands. He pondered for a while; should he check those videos again? Of course Earl didn't want to see him make a fool out of himself onstage, but at the same time he was curious about why they were so interested in him. After all, he was the backstage roadrunner who never used to get enough room in the elevator and grew a long fringe. He couldn't get what about those two minutes made the audience laugh, and what about him could possibly have gained so much attention.

Minutes later, Earl's fingers had finally typed 'weekly viral' on the search bar and his right index finger was pressing the 'enter' button. There they were, full videos, short clips, and

memes of his performance that evening. The video that was on the screen in Main Square was an excerpt from a video called “who dis llama onstage?” with “llama” being a reference to his long fringes. Wide-eyed, Earl checked the number of views; you could have easily said the whole city must have watched it. The comments were mostly about him being “the biggest klutz but also a bit wholesome”, of which Earl could only relate to partially. For some reason his mistakes and crude recitals seemed to arouse the most laughter.

Earl cocked his head to one side.

“I have no idea,” he muttered as he clicked on another video and flinched at the scene of him almost slipping and then laughing to himself on stage. He could hear the crowd guffaw in the recording.

That night Earl couldn’t sleep, and just kept staring at his phone thinking of how many people would still be watching him stumble, slip and stutter.

Earl had only one strategy; to pretend that nothing ever happened. He didn’t know what else he could do to make it the least unbearable. After many cups of coffee and a couple cigarettes, he decided the best thing to do in this situation was to do nothing at all.

Earl dressed up and went to work as usual, except for adding a cap and a mask to go with his black jeans and black T-shirt after giving his fringes a little brush. They had grown a little longer than back then, but Earl didn’t really mind; he was more thankful than ever to have them on him.

At first, everything seemed okay for Earl, and he was hopeful that things would just blow over as time passed. They would eventually find something else that was more interesting than him, and he would be gone from everyone’s minds by then. Sure enough, everything was okay for Earl until he saw a video, and another, and then another on one screen, and then on several other screens about the llama in the main theater. As each day of ignorance passed, the videos and memes seemed to duplicate in number, spreading from person to person, screen to screen. On one particular day Earl even saw someone on the same display in the Main Square discussing the “current trend”, saying he “wondered who the hell it was”.

It was nearing the twelfth night of hiding as Earl sat on his bed staring straight ahead, listening to a song play on the radio to keep his mind off of things. He kept the radio volume down, so as not to disturb the neighbors, which had him keep his mind focused to hear the lyrics of the song. A popular song was playing, and Earl listened intently until he heard:

“I’m only one call away—”

At that moment something struck him. He opened the drawer in his nightstand and stared for a second at the small piece of paper sitting on the dusty wood.

“Good afternoon, ladies, lads, and gentlemen. We have a very special guest with us today—everybody, please, a loud round of applause for our guest, Earl McGee, aka the llama in the Main Theater!” The host of ‘Take My Words with a Grain of Salt’ shouted into the microphone as a star-sequined curtain opened to reveal Earl in his theater crew uniform, slightly smiling and giving a small wave to the audience. He had his back straighter than usual as he walked down the pathway to a velvet covered seat.

He was on TV, live, in front of another curious audience looking intently at him, like how it was at the Main Theater, anticipating what would happen between the host and the so-called llama. There were about thirty people in the seats, clearly imagining Earl to be the stumbling, slipping, stuttering mess they saw on the Main Square monitor.

“How are you doing, Earl?” the host asked, looking inquiringly at him, eyes going from head to toe as if trying to catch something uniquely hilarious about the man. His eyes probably succeeded in getting hold of a couple features like his hairdo, but unfortunately not a lot about him seemed to be particularly eye-catching. Heaven knows why.

“It surely is a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Clark.” Earl said as he calmly took Charlie’s hand for a shake, his smile a little wider than usual.

“No need for ‘Mr’. Just call me Charlie.”

Charlie shook hands with Earl, and went on with the questions and jokes prepared on his script. The thirty minutes on live, Earl kept a stable voice, answering all the host’s questions with taste and ease. He made sure his voice wasn’t too low or too high-pitched, his posture not too stiff or relaxed as he went with unusual grace throughout the show, from beginning to end. This time, the audience barely made a sound; it wasn’t quite out of respect, nor was it out of concentration. Something else strange hung in the air that day, and Earl knew it was exactly what he had aimed for.

As Earl walked back home that day, he got a phone call from a number he had dialed two weeks ago.

“Oh, Rick. Yeah. I’m just on my way home,” Earl spoke into the phone as he headed back to his studio apartment.

“How was the show? Did you do well?” Rick asked.

“I guess, it turned out as I had wished,” Earl answered, feeling the corners of his lips rise a little.

“Earl, I bet it was fantastic, and I just want to tell you that if there are any other shows that want you on as their guest, I’ll be letting you know right away, ‘kay? I guarantee you it was a great choice for you to choose our agency, and you have a good night okay? I’ll be hoping to see you soon,” and with that, the phone call ended.

As days turned into weeks and weeks into months, Earl was able to take off his cap and mask when he was outdoors. There was no sign of the llama, and the content on the Main Square screens had changed to faces of other people doing the most unusual things, honored and applauded by the audience.

Time passed, and it was another workday for Earl; a performance had just ended in the Main Theater, and all the staff members were wrapping up and getting ready to go home. Earl went to the bathroom to wash his hands and took a look in the mirror just as he was about to leave. He looked at his fringes, his personal curtains that he had always felt the need for, but this time he questioned it. After a couple seconds he came out of the bathroom, knowing exactly where he would be heading before going home that night.

He would be going to the hairdresser’s.