

QUIET ALL AROUND

Life on a Movie Set

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PREP

28 days out

I am staring at the outline of a man.

HANDS UP! someone barks at me.

I look back at the outline of the man. I am a man standing inside the shape of another man. I'm smaller than the outline of the man. How did they determine the size and the shape of the man? I think of myself as a tall, fit person. Am I not? Are there people larger than the man?

There is a whirr and a burst of light. STEP OUT!

I step out of the TSA body scanner and start to put my shoes back on. I'm in JFK airport. I look towards the terminal, squinting, trying to figure out which way to go. My phone buzzes. I look down to see I've gotten a text. My phone tells me it's from "ATILLA – 1st AD"

Just past security, make a left, the text reads, I'm at the bar, I just ordered breakfast.

I start to walk to meet him and I'm stopped by a TSA security agent. He's a large, burly, older Black man. I am thin, young, and white. But I feel like I can relate to him. He looks tired. I am tired too.

Hold on, he says to me. I gotta pat you down. Sure, I say. Whatever you need.

Atilla is an old friend of mine, and we are flying down together to Austin, TX where we will spend the next three months making a feature film. We have made several together over the last decade or so and have an old camaraderie. He's the lead 'Assistant Director' on the movie, or the '1st AD.' As the 1st AD, he is responsible for creating and executing all of the scheduling for the film. He is in charge of managing the film's time.

The TSA agent starts to pat me down and my mind wanders to the movie I'm about to go off and make. The Director is David Gordon Green, who is known for having made a string of critically regarded arthouse films before making a strange and sudden departure into stoner action comedies, like *THE PINEAPPLE EXPRESS*.

Atila has worked with him before. I've not. I've never met him.

David has optioned the rights to a book called *JOE* by Larry Brown, which we're now helping him adapt into a feature film. *JOE* is relatively important when considered against the entire canon of literature, but is not so important as to be taught in high schools or freshman comp classes, like *THE INVISIBLE MAN* or *THE SOUND AND THE FURY*. As the TSA agent pats me down, I wonder about that for a second. If there was a time when even those books were considerable marginable or 'not important enough.' And how those decisions come to be made. I think about the invisible hand that guides works of art to their places of relative importance or obscurity. I'm proud of myself for having such a profound dialogue with myself so early in the morning. Sometimes I get worried I'm losing my wits.

The TSA agent pats the inside of my inner thigh and I jump a little bit. He stands up.

You think I'm gonna touch your pecker? he asks.

No, I say. You just got pretty close though.

He gives me a dead-eyed stare. I don't think I've ever heard anyone use the word 'pecker' conversationally. I want to ask him about it. I want to ask him where he's from. I want to make him feel like I'm on his side, so I say—

You could if you needed to though. Like for safety, I say.

My role on the film is being responsible to the film's budget; I am in charge of the film's money. I am also in charge of the day to day operations of the film. Securing equipment. Finding housing for out of town crew. Getting the food. And generally working to maintain an atmosphere of harmony, transparency, and competence. I am a travel agent, a negotiator, a therapist. I am a diplomat.

I am "the Unit Production Manager," more commonly referred to as the UPM. I am the UPM.

NEXT! the TSA agent yells very loudly.

I make a left just beyond airport security to find Atilla sitting at the airport bar, an oversized cowboy hat resting precariously on top of an impressive pile of luggage. Atilla is Turkish and has overgrown eyebrows and large hands. I take a seat next to him. I'm trying to be better about eye contact and physical affection in my life, so I reach over and I give him a hug.

Our waitress comes up to us with a plate of bacon and eggs. She has long, curly hair put lazily up into a ponytail. I've always wondered about people who work at the airport, which is sort of a place but not a place.

I accidentally ordered this from the kitchen, she says to us, in a Long Island accent. There's a new computer system, I can't figure it out. Do you want this? Please say yes. I'll get in trouble if I take it back. It'll come out of my pocket. She glances behind her towards the kitchen. There's a man in the kitchen staring her down.

I want to be helpful so I say we'll take the eggs. Atilla and I dig into our food and begin to fill each other in on what little we know about the film we are about to help make. The yolk bubbles out in hot spurts, staining my plate.

The big draw for everyone involved with JOE is that Nicolas Cage is attached to the project. He's playing the titular character, Joe. Other than that I know nothing else about the movie, who's in it, how we're going to pursue making it.

I ask Atilla what he knows. If he knows how the rest of the casting is going. He tells me he has spoken to David, the Director, only once and that he has mostly been auditioning homeless people for all the supporting roles.

Homeless people—homeless people? I ask. Like for real homeless people?

Yes, Atilla says. He's taken a particular interest in some man he found breakdancing under a bridge.

I ask, Isn't that an... asymmetrical casting strategy? To have Cage playing opposite a bunch of non-professional actors? Homeless men?

Atilla says Yes but assures me that David thinks it will be Awesome, dude. He tells me this sort of response is typical of David, that he is a high-energy kind of guy. He tells me David is singularly obsessed with doing justice to the novel.

JOE is about a tortured white man in the Deep South who runs a tree removal detail comprised almost entirely of vagrant black workers. The book is populated with similar characters – misfits, drunkards, neer-do-wells.

The primary plot of the book concerns the relationship that develops between this tortured man, Joe, and a young boy, Gary, who is new to town. Gary has an abusive, alcoholic father. I've had a paperback copy of the book on my bookshelf for years, the cover of which is two crudely drawn male shapes with black, hollow eyes. I've attempted several times to read it but have not been able to complete it. Things always seem to be getting in the way. But I've ascertained that it's a book of big themes, the old standbys: persistence in the face of adversity. The battle between good vs. evil. Man vs. nature. Man vs. himself.

I look down at Atilla's bag and see a copy of JOE peeking out of the top of his bag, those same black, hollow eyes peering back at me.

Have you read it yet? I ask him.

No, he says. Not yet. I haven't had the time. Things keep getting in the way.

I look back to the waitress who is talking in hushed tones with her manager behind the bar. There is a hot panic to their dialogue and I wonder how they're able to summon the energy so early in the morning. My job as the UPM is not unlike the restaurant manager's. We're not so dissimilar, me and him. We are both middle managers, with the full weight of our respective businesses' bottom lines on our back. But very little of the decision making originates with us.

He catches me looking at him and I give him a conspiratorial nod. One manager to another. I very conspicuously take a bite of my eggs. They taste rubbery, old. I force a smile as I chew them and I give him a little salute.

I've heard there's good food in Austin. Tacos and barbeque. It'll be fun to indulge a little.

I ask Atilla what other news he has gathered from the people already on the ground. How's the crewing up process going? I ask him, surreptitiously spitting the eggs out into my napkin once

the manager has broken eye contact with me.

Atilla's face goes grey. Apparently, we have hired a POC named Shanti. The POC, or Production Office Coordinator, runs the production office and manages the daily schedules of everyone on the crew.

I've never met her.

Shanti is overly qualified for the work, but apparently has a best friend who is gravely ill. There is some concern for her ability to do her job under such stress.

Additionally, everyone is worried for the sick friend, who is a known and beloved member of the filmmaking community. She has just been diagnosed with stage 4 pancreatic cancer which is basically a death sentence.

I have never met the friend, but I know that she is, like me, a UPM.

We ask for the check. The waitress in the ponytail looks over her shoulder as she rings us up. Her boss nods slowly to her communicating both threat and approval.

I hope they figure it out.

Atilla and I board the plane, sitting next to each other. We buckle up and immediately begin discussing movies. After years of working on them we're still able to summon passion for them, which is a fortunate thing. We meditate on the coming performance of Nicolas Cage in our movie, which is a peculiar, arthouse endeavor, a 'return to form' for David Gordon Green.

We discuss Cage's past body of work—the film where he played the weatherman might be a good indicator of how he'll handle our material. The film in which he played twin brothers also bodes well. We carefully dance around discussing the films in which he played a treasure seeker and a motorcycle-riding demon. Those do not bode well for us. They represent a hammy side of him I think we're all looking for him to avoid indulging.

The flight attendants begin telling us that we'll be departing soon, and instructing us what to do in the unlikely event of emergency, how to depart the plane. How to access air. The television screens built into the back of the seats in front of us demonstrate these safety techniques.

On the television screen in front of me, I watch as a bunch of actors wearing inflatable vests go careening down a large yellow slide spilling out from the side of the aircraft. Our conversation peters out as exhaustion begins to set in. It is early in the morning, predawn, and when we land in Texas, we have a full day of work ahead of us.

Atilla's phone bleeps as he receives a text message. He reads it silently and then turns to me.

Shanti, our POC, he says to me. With the sick friend.

The UPM, I say. Atilla knows both Shanti and her sick friend, the UPM, from other projects and he's getting updates from both of them.

Yes. She just texted me. Her friend, the UPM, is dying, he says to me, gravely. She has gotten worse in the last several hours. They are reading her her last rites. The flight attendant comes over and reminds us that we must turn our cell phones off. Communication must cease.

I try to look concerned in response to the news. I know this is the right response but I have not met either Shanti, the POC, or her sick friend, the UPM. A vague sense of anxiety curls about in my stomach. I try to manipulate it into something bigger, to feel something more elaborate for the dying UPM, whose job I share. But I fail. I begin to fall asleep feeling strange, unsettled.

As I'm drifting off, I think the word UPM over and over again in my brain. I say it several times to myself.

UPM. UPM.

It feels like a code. Like it shrouds, rather than imparts, meaning.

I sleep deeply as we fly across the country. As I sleep, I dream I am Nicolas Cage. I dream I am soaring through the sky like a super hero. The wind lashes at my face. But it does not feel liberating. It is deeply painful. It cuts me. Blood beads up all over my face. I try to shout out in his distinctive voice that is both deep and nasal, something like CARPE DIEM or WOO HOO! But the words get caught in my throat.

My message comes out a garbled yawp.

Suddenly I'm unable to fly and I begin to plummet.

The plane lands with a thump. We disembark the plane, retrieve our bags and step out into the hot Texas air. We turn our phones on. Atilla, a chronic smoker, lights a cigarette. I think of reminding him that smoking is bad for you, but I'm sure he's heard that enough in his life at this point. So I don't.

I'd love to get some tacos, I say instead to him. I hear they have great tacos down here.

Atilla checks his phone. He looks at me. She died, he says.

The UPM is dead.