

Regular Guy in Hollywood

I was saving a lot of money because I was getting paid from working at the Auto Parts Store, and I was living with Uncle Lou. I felt like I knew there was more out there for me to do. Not that I didn't like working at the Auto Parts Store, it was OK but I knew I might have to move on. I asked myself one day, OK, what is the thing you are most interested in? That was easy, TV and movies. I watched a lot of TV and saw almost every movie that came out. I didn't care if those movie critics gave them one star or four, it's more important that the people who put the movie together got people to see it. It's a big accomplishment.

I decided that I should move to California to be where they make the movies and TV shows. I got enough money together to buy a ticket on the Greyhound Bus to go to Hollywood. I told Uncle Lou and his eyes got all watery, but he told me I was all grown up now and I could make my own decisions. I think he was secretly relieved. I wasn't interested in making Auto Parts a career, so he was training the wrong guy. There are plenty of guys in Detroit who would love a job like mine. It would be better for everyone involved.

In California, I figured I could be an actor. They sometimes discovered people right off the street. Regular people, they liked regular people like me. Someone could just walk up to you and you'd think they're probably going to ask you for the time, but instead they asked you if you'd like to be in their movie or TV show. They looked for regular-looking people because we're so ordinary. We acted like ourselves, and they liked that. They had way enough people who were trained to act, they didn't need any more of those. I saw a special on Jimmy Stewart, the famous actor, and he said he

never took an acting class a day in his life. He just did it, and he's real good. So maybe I could too.

I got a job as the guard at the front gate at 20th Century Fox studios. In the beginning, I was being trained by a Security Supervisor, Bill. He had a gun and after my training period was over, I got a gun too. I learned how to check the list for drive-on passes that were arranged ahead of time. I learned how to call for verification if a guest arrived and we had no pass at the gate. People who worked at Fox full-time had parking stickers stuck to the lower left windshield of their cars. I tried to remember their names and say hi, or have a nice day. And if I couldn't remember their names, I smiled and remembered their faces. I also had to learn who were the wives or husbands, or boyfriends, or girlfriends of the stars, so as not to offend anyone.

I liked my job, and I took it very seriously. I got my first raise after six months. And I got to know many of the stars on a first name basis. I said hi to Mel (Mel Brooks), and one Christmas he gave me a videotape of his movie "Spaceballs" which was very nice of him. I have it at home, tucked inside a Ziplock baggie. I labeled the baggie "Given to me by M. Brooks, my friend and movie producer, 12/19/88." I have never played it, mainly because I don't own a VCR.

I said hi to Corbin (Corbin Bernson) from "L.A. Law." One day, for no reason at all, he gave me a bottle of red wine. I don't drink, so I was able to preserve it. I have it inside a large freezer baggie, and it's labeled "Given to me by C. Bernson, my friend and a fine actor on L.A. Law on 4/12/89 because (in C. Bernson's words) 'you're a great guy doing a great job.'"

I also am on a first name basis with Cybill (Cybill Sheperd) and Bruce (Bruce Willis). Bruce asked me once why I thought he should do a movie where he hangs off the Fox Towers (just built behind the lot) and I said, "Bruce, because it's there." Next thing you know he made "Die Hard." That's what friends are for.

I really liked Jamie (Jamie Lee Curtis) too. She always ate a lot of junk food. She'd buy Kit Kat bars, especially. She would eat half of one, then get to the guard gate and give me the other half and she'd

usually say something like “get this stuff away from me!” I’d take it off her hands, and waved “see you tomorrow.” I have 37 dated baggies filled with half-eaten candy bars from Jamie, mostly Kit-Kats but she’d really go for anything with chocolate. I liked her show and I prayed “Anything But Love” got better ratings.

Don and Melanie (Don Johnson and Melanie Griffith) were on the lot quite a bit before “Working Girl” premiered, so I got to know them. They’re both real nice. She’s kind of quiet, but I think it was because of opening night jitters. On their way out one day, Don handed me a half-filled styrofoam cup of coffee. “Mind dumping this out for me? Thanks.” “No problem,” I said, and waved goodbye. I poured the coffee into a nearby bush, and kept the styrofoam cup for myself. I put it in my knapsack and when I got home, I was so excited. Not only had Don been drinking from the cup, but there was lipstick on the edge of the cup too. Melanie’s. I have this in a dated Ziplock baggie, labeled “Given to me by my new friends D. Johnson and M. Griffith.”

I have been collecting gifts from my friends for quite a few years now. I know how busy they all are, and it comforts me to know that even though they are off working shooting a film, I have a part of them nearby. So when I begin to miss them, I pull out a baggie and smile remembering them, and once a year I have a big party and I pull out all the baggies for the evening. I arrange them in my living room on my couch and pillows. When I look around, I am filled with such joy I start to cry. I am so fortunate to have so many people I care about. I always stop crying and start laughing when I look around and see I have the most mementos from Jamie (Jamie Lee Curtis)—that girl can go through junk food. I don’t know how she keeps her figure.

It’s my own private hobby, I guess you could say. I’ve thought about telling the guard on the night shift, then he could collect stuff in the day when I’m not around. But, it’s really a private matter. I know I’m just a sentimentalist, but they might think I’m crazy or something and then I could lose my job.

I had been working at Fox for almost eight months when they hired this new guard named Bobby, and they put him on my shift.

I didn't like him too much. After I'd talk to Jamie Lee Curtis or any of the Fox stars, he'd make fun of me. Like one time I said to Jimmy Smits, "I really liked you in last week's show. I was so worried that you'd lose that case but you pulled it out as usual." Jimmy told me how they re-wrote the script up to the last minute, and how just before they filmed he got new lines. I told him he did such a good job acting I couldn't even tell his lines were changed. He thanked me and drove off. Then Bobby imitated me and made kissing noises. I never did like to argue so I just looked down and made myself busy alphabetizing the drive-on passes.

They were filming a big restaurant scene for "L.A. Law" and since Jimmy Smits knew how much I liked the show he asked me if I wanted to be in it. I was really surprised, but I tried to keep it in because I didn't want to appear too eager or anything. I said yeah, that sounds good. He said there was a small part in it, only a few lines, for a busboy. And I would make a good busboy, he said. So before I knew it, the casting lady called me and told me where to show up and what to wear, and that Jimmy spoke very highly of me. The whole rest of my shift I was so excited I thought I might throw up my lunch burrito.

I got home and pulled out my white shirt and plain black pants. It was a good thing I could work the night shift now and then because that way I could hold down a steady job and be an actor at the same time. The casting lady told me to come in make-up tomorrow too. So it sounded like they were just going to have me all ready to go for the cameras.

That evening, I went out to the dime store and looked a long time in the make-up section. I was trying to remember what my Auntie Edna used. I bought some pancake and foundation, some eyeshadows, black eyeliner and mascara. I spent almost \$25, but I looked at it as an investment.

When I got back to my apartment, I didn't know exactly how to apply the make-up. So I stared at it for like an hour and then knocked on Mrs. Dencheck's door. She's my landlady. Even though she was 63-years-old and had a hearing problem, she always wore her face all made up pretty. So I knew she could help me out. She was all

excited when I told her I was going to be on "L.A. Law," even though she didn't stay up that late anyway and never saw the show. She fed me milk and ginger cookies as she did my cheeks and eyes. She was a model once herself, which is where she learned to apply make-up correctly. I felt very lucky to have a former model for a landlady. Mrs. Dencheck powdered me off and sent me home with a paper plate of more ginger cookies and some cheese she couldn't digest too well.

The next day I went to Fox all made-up and ready to go. My Supervisor, Bill, saw me and smiled. "I got a part on L.A. Law today," I told him, "Don't worry, I'll be back at work tonight." He waved me on. I heard Bobby laughing at something and Bill telling him to shut up.

The sun was bright and everything looked so clear to me, like the day after a heavy rain when everything suddenly looks almost too real. Stage 19 was where the show was filmed. It was so crazy there. People were moving cameras and walking real fast and talking real loud. I spotted the casting lady and she took my arm and put a piece of paper in my hand that had my lines on it. Well there was only one line. It was "I don't know, I'll get your waitress." She told me it was in response to a line that Corbin Bernson would be saying, asking me how much longer his food would be. Corbin was acting very impatient because he had a big case coming up, that was what the casting lady said. She asked me to quick do the line. I tried to memorize it as fast as I could. Actors have to learn their lines at a moment's notice.

The casting lady looked at her watch and said, "Any time." So I did the line but I left out some words. She stared at me and asked why I was wearing makeup. I told her she asked me to. She laughed and said all I needed was some base so I wouldn't shine under the lights. She thought the rouge and eyeliner were a bit much, and then she laughed. I was thinking, how was I to know? I didn't know. Mrs. Dencheck should've known what was right. The casting lady said there was no time and to leave the makeup on. Jimmy Smits walked by and I waved to him, but he was talking to someone and didn't notice me.

So I did the scene and it went pretty OK. I didn't mean to, but the line kept coming out of my mouth wrong. I was nervous I guess. Then a guy with headphones came to get me and said I was released and told me to sign some papers. I asked when the show would be airing. He said probably in four weeks.

It took forever for those weeks to pass, and finally my "L.A. Law" came on. I called to tell everybody back home in Detroit. After all, it was my television debut, you could say. I was watching it and watching it and then the restaurant scene came on and before I knew it, it was over. I wasn't in it at all. They cut me out. Like I wasn't even there. Like I never did the job. Like they never hired me. No one called me from back home to ask me what happened or of it was the wrong week. I'm glad they didn't because I wouldn't have known what to say. I was so sad that night I broke into the plastic baggies marked "Jamie Lee Curtis" and ate the rest of the Kit Kat bars she didn't finish. Sorry, Jamie. They were stale but I didn't care.

When I went to work the next day, Bobby said he watched the show and didn't see me on it. He made fun of me again. He said he thought he saw the back of my head in the restaurant but he wasn't sure it was mine because it didn't look big and fat enough. I didn't want to cause any trouble or anything so I laughed a little bit like I thought it was funny even though it wasn't.

I didn't go to work the next day. I called in sick, which I never do. Bill said it was OK and he'd get another guy to cover for me. He was nice enough not to ask me why I was sick. He probably knew.

The next couple of months, I kept working as a guard at Fox. I did my best but my heart wasn't in it like before. I was eating more chips and candy and ice cream. My pants were getting tight around the waist and I didn't want to buy new ones. So I started wearing my shirts outside so the tails hid the fact that I couldn't zip my pants all the way up.

The pizza delivery guys started to know me by my first name. I was ordering pizzas not just for dinner, but in the middle of the night too. They never asked me why I was ordering so many pizzas

or how I could eat them all. I guess I'm not the only one who orders a lot. Mrs. Dencheck started worrying about me, though she never said as much but I could tell because instead of giving me like a dozen ginger cookies, she started giving me only one or two.

I wasn't feeling too well about that time, so I started calling in sick. I didn't do it too often at first, like I'd call in once every two weeks, but then I started calling in every week. Bill at the guard gate was worrying about me but I told him not to and that I didn't need to see a doctor.

When I stayed home sick, I wouldn't do much. I just kept looking over all my gifts from my friends. I had stopped collecting stuff from them and I wasn't sure why. I guess I lost interest. I began to wonder if I was cut out for all this Hollywood stuff. I wanted so bad to be discovered and all I was doing was working as a lousy guard.

One week I didn't go into work at all and I didn't bother to call in. The phone would ring but I wasn't in the mood to talk to anyone. Bill called Mrs. Dencheck because I wrote her down as my nearest living relative in case of an emergency because I didn't have nobody here in L.A. and Uncle Lou was too far away. She came over and found me lying asleep on the floor with the TV on. She poured a glass of water on my face and brushed food crumbs off my shirt, and then I heard Geraldo asking some guy why he killed his family of four.

Mrs. Dencheck made me tea and showed me the deep knee bends she still did to keep in shape and how I could do them too. I said I'd try it but I knew I wouldn't. Then she told me my boss had called and I should go back to work because I was still young and able for crying out loud.

The next day I did. I went back to work. But it was too late. I wasn't there more than five or ten minutes when Bill came up to me and said he had to fire me and that he felt bad but I wasn't reliable anymore. I agreed with him and left.

Back at my apartment, I sat alone in the dark for two or three, maybe it was more, days. I can't exactly remember. All I remember is the dark. I didn't turn on any lights or even the TV. No light came

in except for a crack, a slanted sliver from underneath my only window. It was an old shade Mrs. Dencheck kept saying she would fix because it didn't line up right and everything in life should line up right. It bothered her but she never got around to fixing it. It never bothered me though.

In that dark room I thought about a lot of things. I thought, what am I doing here? Why did I leave home? And was I stupid for wanting to be an actor? I was stupid. I was no actor. Nobody wanted me. Who was I kidding? Me, that's who. I was kidding me. You need talent to be an actor and I guess I didn't have it. I'd be better off back home at Uncle Lou's Auto Parts Store. That's where I belonged. I could do that. I could sell auto parts all my life and never be disappointed.

I decided to go back home, and I told Mrs. Dencheck. She said she'd miss me, but my rent was a month past due so she was glad I'd have a steady job again. It was true; I owed her rent. I only had a little savings left so I gave her twenty dollars and all my gifts from my famous friends as collateral.

I called Uncle Lou and he said he would take me back and that he couldn't find anyone as good as me to fill the job. He was just saying that to be nice. I planned to leave at the end of the week, on Saturday. I had four days to go. I kept some money for my Greyhound ticket back and then I took what was left, ten dollars, and went out to get some groceries for the rest of the time I was here and for the long ride home.

I walked outside. It was the first time I saw daylight in days. I had been in the dark so long my eyes hurt to look up. Everything was washed out like all of Southern California had been left out in the sun too long. And I didn't see a bird in the sky that day either, not one. I felt like I was in a strange land, like in some science fiction movie, and I didn't know how I got there.

I walked into Ralph's supermarket on La Brea. It was such a relief to finally be in there because everything outside felt so weird. I usually got the same food every time I went there, mostly I bought lots of food in cans like canned spaghetti because it kept longer and it was cheap and easy to make. I just heated it up or ate it cold out

of the can if I was in a hurry. Anyway, I was picking up some canned beef stew when this other can suddenly fell off the shelf. I figured I did it, so I picked it up and put it back on the shelf.

I was ready to move on to the next aisle when another can fell off the shelf. This one wasn't my fault, I knew it because I was not even standing near it. I was thinking, should I pick it up? I'm not going to pick up the can because I didn't drop the can, so why should I? They pay stock boys to pick up cans. But then I thought, why should I take it out on the stock boys? They have it just as tough as me. Who am I not to pick up the can? I'm going to pick up this can and I don't care what anybody thinks. So I picked the can up and put it back on the shelf and I felt good about it. Just as I did, two more cans fell. People were looking at me like I did it, like I was some guy who liked dropping cans, so I told them, "These cans are flying off the shelf all by themselves, I didn't do it." Then more cans fell off, so many I couldn't even catch them all. I said to a lady, "Did you see that? It just flew off the shelf all by itself." She walked by me like she didn't hear what I said.

Then the manager of the store came over. His name was Stan, that's what it said on his plastic tag. He started accusing me of throwing cans on the floor. I kept telling him, "I didn't do it, I didn't do it." He asked, then how did it happen? I told him they were falling off the shelves like they were alive or something. He laughed at me and said, it's OK because, "You're on Candid Camera!" Candid Camera. It took a minute to sink in. Wow, was I surprised. I was on TV and didn't even know it.

The Candid Camera people told me when my show would be on and I called all my relatives back home in Detroit. I told Uncle Lou I wouldn't be coming home and that I was going to stay here in Hollywood. After my show aired, some people even recognized me on the street.

Things are looking up.