

*Making It Up*

A balled pair of tube socks center stage. The rest darkness. Our Hero bounds from the wings. He catches sight of the socks. He looks left. He looks right. He looks over his shoulder. He scans the stage and then the audience. He steps back and looks up as if shadowed by a tall building. Have the socks somehow fallen from above?

He reaches toward the socks and then draws back. He squats, snatches up the socks, and cringes in that morning-dump squatted posture. He waits for the IED to explode. Nothing explodes. He opens one eye and then the other. He looks right. He looks left. Unconsciously, he brings the socks to his nose and sniffs. They smell like fresh laundry.

Then his eyes pop wide, and he drops the socks suddenly, convulsively. He backs away from them, but then rushes forward and punts them across the stage. He retrieves them and replaces them carefully where they were as if he had never touched them.

This time when he looks out, he sees the audience. He winks and swears them to silence, zip the lip and throw away the key. When the imaginary key falls backstage there is an enormous clatter, and everyone laughs.

This is the opening scene of the first act of Bailey's not-yet-titled Masterpiece, which is so smashingly brilliant he has left off writing it and is instead composing snippets from the glowing Broadway reviews.

So far, the Masterpiece is approximately one-third complete. What Bailey knows for sure is that his not-yet-named Hero will be wearing the tube socks by the third act. There will be abysses from which characters pull back. Biblical crying jags. Lost weight, so the tube socks hardly fit when our Hero draws them on. Also, a character who continually points out that they are only tube socks and what's the big deal? But the audience and our Hero will know the tube socks are so much more than tube socks.

Which actor will play our Hero? That's another open and troubling question. Bailey types up some Hollywood names. He

wonders whether they are dead. Bailey has been a decade out of the theater business, and people are turning up more and more frequently dead. He often Googles key contacts to make sure funerals have not been missed.

Bailey's boss interrupts the Googling to inquire whether Bailey has yet finished the quarter's invoices, which must absolutely positively go out today. Revenue must be recognized and paychecks paid and wives able to put dinner on the table.

Bailey—who has no wife and whose dinners consist mainly of Cheetos and Hot Pockets—closes the documents containing the Masterpiece and the snippets and the Hollywood names, but keeps thinking about what happens next. Perhaps, he thinks, our Hero was at work, and that's why he ran out into the darkened stage in the first place: he was being chased by his angry boss.

Or perhaps chased by—Bailey glanced out the window for inspiration—a bus!

Or by a miniature schnauzer!

Or by a runaway bus driven by a miniature schnauzer!

(Absurdity is a key element of the Masterpiece-to-be. It's the only thing that really makes sense any more.)

No matter the motivation for our Hero's appearance on stage, what's certain is that at some point after the first scene's laughter dies out, a lover emerges. Or, perhaps not an entire lover. Perhaps just a hand. From stage right. A left hand from stage right. The Hero will hold the hand, and the hand will urge him not to be afraid, Helen Keller style.

Bailey would like such a lover again (the whole kit and kaboodle, ideally, not just the left hand). Bailey—or perhaps it's our Hero; Bailey cannot decide whether to lend our Hero certain plainly autobiographical details—has great expectations. A pair of tube socks is the least of it. He expects a whole suitcase to fall from the sky. Maybe a steamer trunk. He expects a call from beyond. In the third act, he expects running, strobe machines, something to really bring out the white of the tube socks, like a blinding smile. He expects to put the Hero in drag. Amateur, hairy-chested mustache drag. Neither the Hero nor Bailey must be seen to be trying too hard.

Because Bailey makes a note to himself on the new invoices concerning drag, he feels a bit superior to the rest of Accounts

Receivable: he isn't just creating new invoices, he's creating art. At home this evening, he will grudgingly confess to these feelings of superiority and his lover will enthusiastically agree with Bailey's assessment but nevertheless gently poke fun at Bailey for sport. Afterward, they will make sweet love.

And then Bailey remembers again that his lover is twelve-years dead. So, if Bailey truly wants to share feelings and sweet love with a lover, he'll instead have to make do with the imaginary lefthand-lover from stage right. Which makes Bailey feel sad. Which makes Bailey question whether a hand is sufficient to the Masterpiece's purposes. Which makes him start from scratch and re-imagine the whole Masterpiece from the get-go.

For example, that enormous offstage clatter from that can be heard from time to time? That's now other Accounts Receivable employees thinking and working and perhaps also writing plays in their spare time just like him, which makes Bailey feel less alone.

Other changes? Our Hero will be out at work. He will be able to admit to his boss that he lost someone in the attacks. He will have taken time off to grieve the man with whom he had planned to (1) spend old age together, (2) wear running shoes for comfort and (3) together never mind the lack of style because they had each other.

Necessary backstory: That man, a flight attendant, had frequently begged our Hero to leave Hardscrabble, Oklahoma and come live in Bergenfield, New Jersey. Which our Hero had always intended to do, though the time never seemed precisely right.

Impatient with Hardscrabble, impatient with our Hero's not owning who he was, impatient that our Hero's literary ship has not come in and none of his plays yet produced, except at the community theater in Hardscrabble where the mere fact of writing plays makes a would-be playwright suspect as a homosexual, the flight attendant had flung accusations at our Hero just before he boarded the plane:

- Too old to be playing playwright!
- Too old not to show a little self-respect!
- Too old *not* to start over!
- You're absurd! (Which made him kind of hip, Bailey supposed, post-attack, when absurdity was all that made sense.)

These accusations were the last words they shared, other than a spooky message on voice mail that, like a pair of tube socks from a stage floor, our Hero did not pick up until too late.

Bailey suddenly decides to spell socks as “sox” throughout the Masterpiece. Taking a break from invoicing to search and replace, he simultaneously ponders all the metaphysical questions the Masterpiece poses:

- Does a pair of tube sox exist if no one there to see them fall from the sky?
- If you’ve never dared place a photograph on your desk, never tied the knot, never complained about the way a lover folded laundry to your fellow Accounts Receivable workers and closet playwrights so you can all commiserate about the spouses God saddled you with, does that lover even exist?
- Who the hell was going to play our Hero again off-Broadway?

Bailey jotted down some actors’ names, none of whom, so far as he knew, was already dead. He banged out some invoices. He wished he had a Schnauzer to pet.

If only someone were to ask Bailey—a *New York Times* theater columnist, for example, or Oprah Winfrey—there were answers to the Masterpiece’s more obvious questions:

- Yes, Bailey could confirm that they are the lover’s tube sox, fallen from the sky.
- True, there were far more weighty objects Bailey might have used, but tube sox seemed just right, freighted with absurdity, which makes the freight light. Ephemeral. And yet exact.
- No, Bailey’s not troubled by the minimalist set, because the first off-off-Broadway productions of the Masterpiece romantically wouldn’t be able to afford a big budget.

Obviously, in later well-financed productions after the Masterpiece is a certified hit, the minimalism will just be grand-standing and, even though he wrote it that way, Bailey will feel superior to the directors who haven’t dared tinker with the Masterpiece’s slightest detail out of fear they will get it wrong.

The costumes will be street clothes and flight attendant

uniforms and head scarves.

There'll be good quality sound to indicate the off-stage/backstage Accounts Receivable workplace.

There will be a miniature Schnauzer, which our Hero pets for luck and not just for company or because he's the only friend our Hero has in Hardscrabble.

There will be a plane that whizzes low overhead and a thunderous roar that deafens the audience. (No low planes ever fly over Hardscrabble; all cruise at thirty-thousand feet, heading east or west, doesn't really matter which, because our Hero's on none of them.)

A shadow will pass over the stage, but the center spot will never leave the bright white tube sox as if the hero's legs had been sundered at the knee.

This is Masterpiece's brilliance. This is the Masterpiece's conceit. It's all Bailey has left: a whole drawerful of tube sox he is afraid to surrender to the dryer for fear one gets lost. He giggles to himself. His boss yells. You can't make this shit up. No one can deny it's all true. It's all up there on the stage for anyone to see.

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