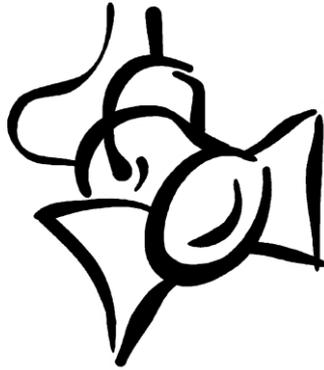


Natural Talent



Sheelagh White
(Sheelagh Aston)

ONE

“You’ve got it.” Dave’s brown eyes sparkled with pure delight. “The part’s yours. Congratulations.”

Aaron Summers’ heart somersaulted in his chest.

He let out a loud whoop of joy as he punched the air, then smacked Dave’s raised palm in celebration.

All the tension of the last few minutes left him. Fear had gripped Aaron the moment he had spotted Dave through the rain-spattered window of his south London home’s living room..

Despite the hearty smile that lit Dave’s face as he hurried up the path of Aaron’s home in South London that January morning, Aaron hadn’t been able to help bouncing on the balls of his feet in anticipation.

Jubilant flooded through him. With his mind racing with possibilities, Aaron found himself on the receiving end of a bone-crushing hug and a lingering kiss that made his lips hurt. Susan’s pert nose and impish grin filled his vision, her brown curls hanging down around her shoulders like a woolly scarf. Aaron felt his usual split second of embarrassment at his girlfriend’s hug but, in the short time that he had known Susan, he had learned she had few inhibitions.

But all he could think about was that they were going to make the film of their dreams. Aaron disentangled himself and glanced at his parents for their reaction. Neither of them returned his smile.

At first he thought it was because of the shock of him getting the part. Then as he looked round the room crammed with antique furniture and original paintings the silence continued.

“Dave, you promised to speak to us first,” Aaron heard his mother say. “Aaron’s got his GCSEs this summer.”

Aaron’s heart sank. Sixteen had its ups and its downs. Exams were one of the downs.

“I’ve thought of that. Shooting’s been scheduled around them,” Dave interrupted, with his disarming smile and his hands through his greying ponytail. “Come on, Lydia, you know I’ve always had Aaron in mind for the part of Gerry.”

Aaron held his breath. He still had vivid memories of visiting the museum, near Dave’s Newcastle home, to see the real ship *Turbinia*. Aaron had marvelled at the ship’s narrow grey hull and yellow funnel. Aged seven, Aaron had barely reached its waterline. Dave had promised that they would make the Charles Parsons’

revolutionary invention, the first turbine-powered ship in an age of steam, come to life.

His mother frowned and shook her head. In her casual weekend clothes she seemed quite different from the prim deputy head of weekdays.

“Not this time,” she said.

Aaron froze. Dave’s expression changed to one of alarm.

“Lyd, please,” he pleaded. “I need Aaron. None of the others have his experience.”

“What about the Muxworthy girl?” his father asked, pushing his glasses back up his nose as he stood by the fire.

“Jasmine? She’s mainly done TV. Shows promise, certainly – and she’s up for a National TV Award,” Dave replied. “And I’ve got a talented newcomer from Peckham, and then there’s Denton.”

“Fraser?” Susan gasped. Her cheeks reddened.

“He’ll be joining the shoot in Newcastle in July.” Dave lowered his voice. “Seems his latest, *Trojan Soldier*, is not pulling in the punters as expected. The word is that linking him and Aaron again might help.”

For a moment Aaron forgot about his Mum’s refusal and remembered how the American studio, Lambart International, had agreed to Dave’s request for him, then aged twelve, to be cast alongside the sixteen-year-old heart-throb in the espionage thriller *Ten Minutes To Zero*.

“No.” His mother folded her arms.

“Mum!” Aaron stared at her in disbelief.

“Your exams are important.”

“So is this,” he argued. “Please. We’ve waited ages to do *Turbinia* together. Even Lambart’s agreed I’m right for the part. Please. I’ve got it. I’ve got it!”

His Mum gave a firm shake of her head.

Aaron straightened up and met her sea-blue eyes, a deeper shade than his own, and without the tiny specks of green that made his so distinctive. He knew she could outstare him, but he wasn’t going to give in that easily. School might be important, but so was this. Face fixed, he held his gaze, making the most of all the height and strength he had gained over the last two years. Even his thin legs had muscles these days. Only the spiky tuft of his double crown remained from childhood. Her eyes seemed to freeze, while his crumbled.

Unable to hold out any longer, Aaron shot a desperate look at his Dad.

He ruffled his own receding tuft of hair and adjusted his glasses, not meeting Aaron’s gaze.

“Why did you let Dave put my name forward, then?” Aaron demanded.

Like his Dad, Aaron’s mother avoided his stare.

“You didn’t think Lambart would agree!” He answered his own question in amazement.

Anger welled up inside him. All those months, and not a word.

“Well, they have, and I’m going to do it.”

“Not this time, Aaron,” his Mum insisted. “Maybe next year.”

Aaron gritted his teeth. He wasn’t interested in next year. Next year the role would be gone. His role.

“Why?”

“I’ve just explained.”

“I’ve never let you down before. Not once. You’ve seen my school reports – I’m doing fine – you can’t do this to me. Not now.”

“It’s for your own good,” his mother said.

Aaron felt the anger inside him rising to a boil.

“You know how much this takes out of you. You’re a publicist’s nightmare – you shook like an electric drill at the DVD launch of *Zero*. You freeze during interviews. There’ll be a lot more this time round.”

“I’ll cope.”

“Radio, TV, press conferences,” she ticked them off one by one on her fingers, “and of course there’s the première. Remember your first one. *Ten Minutes to Zero*?”

Aaron dropped his gaze. Six months after shooting the film, just thirteen, he remembered the waxy smell of the black limo’s soft leather and how it had almost suffocated him. The way it squeaked when he shifted in his seat, and the rumbling in the lower regions of his stomach as the car cruised past New York department stores and busy restaurants, still decorated with fairy lights in the post-Christmas sales, to the waiting crowd and press at the cinema complex.

“I do,” she continued. “So does the dress that you threw up over in the limo en route. You were so chewed up with nerves.”

“You’re just using that as an excuse,” Aaron said, peering at his feet and noting that the top seam of his trainer was splitting.

“I don’t need to. I’ve got a perfectly good one. Your education.”

“Please, Mum?”

“No.”

Aaron clenched his jaw and managed to restrain himself from using the phrase that he knew would make her even more determined.

“Is there any chance of putting the film back until after June?”

His father’s question distracted Aaron from Susan’s pout.

Dave shook his head.

Trying to keep his temper under control, Aaron concentrated on a point over Dave’s shoulder. Above the battered leather sofa, behind Dave’s wiry figure, hung his parents’ most prized work of art, a watercolour of two flamingos, necks entwined, and standing ankle deep in swampy water under an amber dawn. A wedding present from Dave. One of his paintings. Art and boats were his passions, after making films.

“Lambart want the film released next spring,” Aaron heard Dave say, stroking his wispy beard. “I’ve arranged a break over the exam period, and the location shoot over the summer to fit in with the other cast members' schooling, despite Stamp’s grumblings. Lambart have insisted on him being Executive Producer, as they’re financing the film. He’s made it clear that the scheduled deadline won’t allow any delays beyond the beginning of March, after the mock exams.”

“Please Mum,” Aaron pleaded, echoed by Susan.

“How many times do I have to say it? No.”

Aaron fought back the rage inside him. The forbidden phrase rose to his tongue again, but he knew what would happen if he opened his mouth. With a thunderous look he stormed out of the room and slammed the door. Mouth still shut, he pounded up the stairs, catching his angry reflection in one of the row of small paintings hanging on the wall.

For a second, the temptation to smash his fist against one of them overwhelmed him. He wasn’t a possession. He had rights. It was his life, his career, not theirs. Unknown-from-Peckham’s parents wouldn’t stop him doing the film, Aaron thought, banging his bedroom door. A shudder shook the house.

If it had been anything else – anything – Aaron would gladly have backed down. Upsetting his parents was not something he enjoyed doing. The glitz and glam he could do without, but with *Zero* under his belt, *Dearheart* due for release in April and *Turbinia*, at last, ready to roll, Aaron Summers knew what he wanted to do with his life, and it wasn’t a nine-to-five job.

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