

Herbert Smith Squared

Herbert fingered the gilt-edged card in his breast pocket nervously: it was still there.

This was the first premiere after-party he'd been invited to in his entire career: ten years, not one premiere. Up to this point, his life as an actor must have delighted his family, since they'd always been against him going on the stage. Not like tonight would change anything: the invitation had come at short notice. Presumably that meant some PR called his agent asking her to come up with a couple of meat socks to fill the room, make it look like a happening party.

Herbert was thirty-two. Since leaving Weber Douglas Academy, he'd tasted each glorious trial of youth to the point of excess: Bit parts. Extra parts. Stand-ins. Understudies that never led to an appearance. The odd voice-over. Even four speaking parts in feature films, two of which ended up on the cutting room floor. To earn a living, he'd grown familiar with supermarket shelf stacking. Those greasy, dusty lines of beige metal in the half light of 3AM, just begging for him to set another flat-pack of stewed tomatoes on them, or (if he was less fortunate) bags of sugar or flour that felt like cement and always seemed to leak through some unseen wormhole or other in the space-time fabric of their outer packaging.

He'd also earned a wage in bars. Restaurants. Temping agencies, media clippings agencies. He had yet to suffer the indignity of dressing as a giant strawberry or hot dog at a children's amusement park, nor had he sunk to the admission of failure that is setting up an acting school. He'd never done porn or driven a taxi – and yes, he'd do the former before the latter. Still and all, he'd scraped together enough acting to keep his dreams alive: never enough for him to earn his living from it, though.

But his nemesis, his doppelgaenger, the thorn and sword of his life, was a man near his age but far from him in fortune. A man who was Herbert, only seen through a brighter glass. The person he might have been.

I refer, of course, to celebrated thespian Bert Smith. The thirty-year-old whose angular cheekbones have graced our screens, first as CIA agent Craig Frank in *Undercover*, then as the male lead in some of the most successful "Hollywood-meets-art" films in recent years. You know the kind of thing: those movies where it's arty, but enjoyable. Late Spielberg kind of stuff.

Bert Smith - the man who stole poor Herbert's name and ran away with it to live his dreams. From the style mag features to the trophy girlfriends and sweet apartment in Los Angeles (with a more substantial home just outside London, of course.)

The first time Herbert encountered his homonym was seven years ago, shortly after being promoted from shelf stacker to frozen vegetables manager on his supermarket night shift. Taking his regulation ten-minute coffee break from the peas and carrots, Herbert had flopped exhausted into the filthy confines of the staff canteen, a cup of "espresso" before him that came from the monster coffee machine in the corner – a metal behemoth which looked like a robot from a fifties sci-fi flick, only with less personality.

Herbert ran his hands over his tired face and rubbed his neck – another four hours of throwing plastic sacks of vegetables into a freezer before he could go home, sleep, and dream his sad dreams of stardom

and fame. Across the room, a figure sat chewing at the remnants of whatever snack it had just ingested. Clothed as it was in the regulation hair-net and plastic coveralls of the butchery department, Herbert couldn't tell if the shape was male or female, young, old, or something else entirely.

Herbert averted his eyes, not wanting to engage in conversation, staring at the ceiling's faded, grotty paint, waiting for his coffee to cool. After some time, a voice emerged from the figure in the corner to break the silence.

"What you doing still working here, then?"

Now that its jaw had stopped chewing and started talking, Herbert could tell it was a man. Indeed, he discerned the voice to be that of Jon Postlethwaite, Relief Night Manager in the butchery department and a thirty-year veteran not just of this supermarket chain, but of this actual location. Herbert wondered if the man ever left the building – perhaps he slept here. To judge from the profoundly unpleasant reek wafting across the room, he certainly didn't wash very much.

Herbert lowered his head to look at Jon Postlethwaite.

"What on earth do you mean? I need the money, just like everyone else."

"Not any more you don't, does ya?" Postlethwaite grinned, revealing a gap-toothed smile under his greasy moustache. He held up an open copy of *The Sun* so Herbert could see the headline stretched across the page:

BERT'S A DEAD CERT!

Best known to audiences on the box as CIA hunk Craig Frank in Undercover, actor Bert Smith (23) has just been signed up to play the lead in an adaptation of Kate Callat's Neck Romance – a story of vampires, love and intrigue set in a downtown LA morgue. Beefcake Bert, who hails originally from Tiverton but is now based in the city of Angels, has recently been spotted with glamorous Model-Turned-Actress Querida Chingar. Rumour has it they've been house-hunting in Bel Air...

Peppered liberally with file pictures of Bert Smith at some Hollywood party, the article's main image was a paparazzi snap of Querida Chingar diving off a boat into the Gulf of Mexico, her perfect form glistening in the sun. Herbert slumped backwards on the stained fabric of the tearoom chair and raised his eyes to the striplights, then looked across the room at Postlethwaite, who had resumed masticating whatever congealed bread product he'd just stolen from the pre-prepped sandwiches fridge.

This had to be the final indignity. Failure itself was cosy enough, most of the time: if no-one knew your name, you had nothing to lose but your pride. And Herbert's pride had long since gone the way of all flesh. But to watch a contemporary live your dreams, thinking that it might be you up there, one who shared your name... *Yet he that steals from me my good name steals something more precious than riches – my reputation.* How right the Swan of Avon had been. But Billy Shakesdick wasn't going to help him now. Oh no.

And thus it continued as the years went by. Walking down Tottenham Court Road on his way to an audition, looking up to see Bert Smith's ripped physiognomy staring back at him from a 48-sheet billboard, advertising underwear. Going to the dentist and picking up a curled and tainted copy of GQ, twelve months out of date, with a Rolex advert and Bert Smith's wry smile decorating his slightly cruel face: "ROLEX. BERT SMITH'S CHOICE."

Meanwhile the supermarket, shelf stacking. Throwing frozen peas into long metal body-bags for vegetables, lined and lit up like ice sarcophagi. A monotony interrupted only by calls from his agent to do the odd corporate video. To fill in at parties. To appear for one act in second-string fringe venues, or go to auditions he already knew were going to go to whoever was banging the producer or the already-signed-up lead actor. But if you wanted to keep your agent, even such a bloated miserablist as Herbert's agent was widely noised to be in theatreland, you had to keep showing up for the parties, videos and auditions.

Life went on. But then one day, finally, life changed.

Herbert's luck turned: a proper speaking part on TV. It was yet another of those slice-of-life dramas set in a hospital. Herbert's role was that of a male nurse of dubious sexual orientation – fitting, given his total lack of action since a confused fumble at a wedding three years ago – and the pay was equity minimum.

Herbert was guaranteed at least ten episodes because the script had already been written that far. Almost a full season. Herbert smiled bitterly as he remembered his agents' jowls wiggling with excitement when she called him in to tell him he'd got the role. Now he was going to go up her pecking order, he could tell. She bought him lunch in the same place she'd taken him when she signed him up straight out of drama school all those years ago. An Italian place with acceptable food and a decent wine list – must be her second-string place. Presumably if you landed a film, you got the Ritz or somewhere.

As the wine flowed, his agent started making all sorts of promises to him. Hollywood. Films. Endorsement deals. Product sponsorship in Asia. Nothing was too grand a fantasy for her after a couple of glasses of Frascati on a Tuesday and fifteen per cent of a thousand pounds a week for ten weeks' filming.

All of which explains how Herbert found himself in a loaned dinner jacket and polished shoes clutching an invitation to a more-stylish-than-most afterparty at the Mandarin Oriental in Knightsbridge. As he approached the paneled oak entrance to the party, a PR person was surreptitiously ticking names off a list, glad-handing, air-kissing and smiling welcomes to all and sundry as they passed through her spiritual meat grinder.

"Herbert Smith?"

Herbert nodded.

"But you go by Bert, right?"

"Well, actually, I" –

“Not another word. I’ll try to be discreet. Let me know if the paps are bugging you and we’ll get you out through the kitchen entrance, OK? Where’s Querida? Or are you flying solo tonight? I’m sooo pleased you could make it, darling!”, she gushed, enveloping him in an awkward, bony hug.

She glanced quickly at her clipboard, then snapped her fingers. A slightly chubby young man in a suit with a floppy fringe leapt forward from beside the door.

“Take charge of the line, William”, she said. “And can you please do me a favour? Make sure Bert Smith’s name is added to the VIP list, and put him down as “attended”, OK? Thanks William.”

William smiled and nodded his assent. “Love your films” he wibbled briefly before the PR lady guided Herbert into the centre of the room.

Herbert was flying and shitting himself all at once. He spotted Mick Jagger on the other side of the huge ballroom, his skinny frame leaning against the wall as a model young enough to be his grand-daughter fiddled with her tresses in front of him. Naomi Campbell, the image of statuesque perfection in a tan-and-black gown. Jackie Stewart, the seventies Formula One Champion. All of life was here – or at least, what passed for life in the parallel universe of celebritydom. A world hermetically sealed against the likes of Herbert Smith – until today, that is.

“There are sooo many people I want you to introduce you to. I thought you were in LA these days.”, the PR woman blubbered as she steered Herbert into the centre of the room.

A waiter appeared before them with a tray of champagne. The PR lady – Herbert couldn’t quite read her name-tag, she kept moving so fast – handed him a huge champagne flute and took one herself.

Herbert necked a long swallow of what tasted to his semi-educated palate like a decent vintage. It had been a long time since he’d been able to afford champagne on the supermarket wages, and his first installment from this hospital series was only going to pay down his whopping credit card bills once his agent had taken her cut.

He leaned in to the PR woman, trying again to make out her name. Linda or Liana or something; the name had been scribbled on her plastic tag in washable ink.

“Listen, Linda” – he began.

“It’s Liana, Bert. But you can call me anything you want to.”

“You know, I must tell you. I’m not” –

“HAAAARVEY! Oh my God! Haaarvey! I thought you were in New York! Please – let me introduce you to Bert Smith! Yes, I know – he’s in London! What a lovely surprise!”

Herbert looked in the direction of the public relations dervish, who had now released his arm and dashed with as much grace as dashing will allow in the direction of an overweight man in his fifties with a greying, unkempt beard and immaculate dinner jacket, probably by Brioni or one of the better Milanese fashion houses.

“Hello Bert. It’s a pleasure to meet you. I’m Harvey Linitz – I produced tonight’s premiere film, *The Prophet’s Tears*, for Sony Pictures.”

Herbert took another gulp of champagne. He felt an overwhelming urge to dive in to his glass and swim away, all the while feeling his pulse race with possibility.

“Hello.”, he finally croaked, taking Harvey’s outstretched hand and feeling the man’s car-crusher ham-ball smother his own.

“So what are you working on?” Harvey asked, looking him up and down. “Hey, you’ve lost a little weight, right? And I like the new hair colour – wow, quite the departure, sir!”

Herbert grimaced. Truth time. “Well, I” —he froze.

Someone stuffed something in his pocket.

A woman brushed past him dressed up to look like Marilyn Monroe in *Some Like It Hot*. She carried a tray of cigarettes and chewing gum which she’d been dispensing to the partygoers. Herbert felt his jacket pocket briefly, assuming she’d pushed a packet of chewing gum in there. But it was a note of some kind – he’d read it later.

Harvey Linitz looked at him expectantly. “Yes? Come on, Bert. I know your agent. You can tell me.”

Herbert smiled and was about to utter the greatest lie any man had told outside the bedroom when someone ching-ching-chinged on their glass for silence with a fork.

“Ladies and Gentlemen. Thank you for attending tonight’s premiere of *The Prophet’s Tears*. I know we all have a lot of people to talk to and a lot of hands to shake and cheeks to kiss” – a ripple of laughter, though no-one found the joke at all funny – “but before things really get going, I wanted to ask our Producer, Harvey Linitz, to say a few words.”

There was a loud round of applause and all eyes turned to Linitz. Now Herbert really wanted to disappear. Bad enough that he wasn’t who they thought he was: now all eyes were on him.

“Thank you, Liana. And thank you, everyone, for coming here tonight. You know, I could talk to you about this movie. But those of you who come to these things often will have heard it all before. Just let me say this: it’s a good film. I’m extremely proud of the adaptation we’ve achieved with this work. But I want to remind all of us here tonight that what we’re doing in the cinema is exactly that – work. It’s art. That moment when a Director realizes he’s more than just a story-teller in the pay of the money-men. That moment when he can turn around and say, like the great Europeans of yore: *je suis cineaste*.”

Harvey’s Brooklyn accent chewed up the French phrase he had no doubt spent some time perfecting. He smiled around the room, sensing he was beginning to lose his audience. Herbert fumbled out the note the Monroe lookalike had stuffed in his pocket and glanced at it. A scribbled mobile phone number perched on top of a single sentence that promised a spectacularly vulgar sexual favour if he gave her a call.

Herbert looked up as Harvey Linitz began speaking again:

“ART!” Harvey bellowed. “ART! That’s why we’re here, ladies and gentlemen. It’s true – everyone knows I’ve made money for the investors in my films. But I’ve never lost sight of why we’re doing this, in truth: we are here to create art.”

Harvey put an arm around Herbert's shoulder. "Ladies and Gentlemen, as proof of the importance of art in the movie business, I have with me here one of England's most talented young actors. You will know him, maybe, from his role in *Neck Romance*. Or the magic he created in *Undercover*. Or any one of his other roles. Or maybe you've just seen him in those underwear commercials" – more laughter from the crowd, this time with the added frisson of sexual excitement.

"But Ladies and Gentlemen, I know that my friend Bert Smith here is an artist. He's not just a studio lackey, in it to make a pile of dough and end up in the hot-tub at the Chateau Marmont hotel with six strippers and a slag-heap of cocaine. No: I know he's laboured to shape his craft. And to prove it, I'm going to ask this fine young man to recite a little Shakespeare for us from memory."

The bastard. He knew. He must think I'm here on the make, Herbert thought. Right, here goes. Herbert smiled, clutching his glass in both hands, the note from that Marilyn Monroe impersonator twined between his fingers.

"Thank you, Harvey." Herbert smiled at his new non-friend, gazing at him with a false simulacrum of the affection veterans who'd fought in the same fox-hole must have for each other, his new pretend cinematic blood-brother from another mother: "It would be my pleasure."

Herbert drew a deep breath, pulling up his spine to every micron of his six feet and half an inch, then began to declaim the soliloquy from Act V of *Othello*. "But soft you, a word or two: I have done the state some service, and they know it..."

The audience listened in silence. Herbert's eyes floated around the room as he ran through the verses: Mick Jagger moodily sipping champagne and checking his phone: *One whose eyes dropp'd still their medicinal gum...* Naomi Campbell rummaging in her clutch, then poking her assistant to get her attention, gesturing inside her bag. *Set you down this: say you too, that in Aleppo once...* as he reached Shakespeare's thundering, final lines, then the climax, there was first silence, then the room erupted in applause.

Harvey Linitz enveloped Herbert in a bear-hug. "I don't know who you are, kid", Linitz yelled roughly in his ear over all the applause, "But that was wonderful."

Herbert released himself from Harvey's crushing hug. He may never be famous. He may not even be talented. He might stack frozen peas for the rest of his days. But tonight, this night, he felt like he was swinging the world by its tail – for one night only. And maybe that was enough.

(3091 words)