

"ONE OF THE FUNNIEST,
MOST DELICIOUSLY TWISTED
TALES I HAVE EVER READ."

—Ben Fountain, author of
*Billy Lynn's Long
Halftime Walk*



THE
DISASTER
ARTIST

MY LIFE INSIDE THE ROOM,
THE GREATEST BAD MOVIE EVER MADE
GREG SESTERO & TOM BISSELL

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THE
DISASTER
ARTIST

MY LIFE INSIDE *THE ROOM*,
THE GREATEST BAD MOVIE EVER MADE

GREG SESTERO
&
TOM BISSELL

SIMON & SCHUSTER
New York London Toronto Sydney New Delhi

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Acknowledgments

About Greg Sestero and Tom Bissell

To my family, with my love and gratitude

Joe Gillis: Maybe it's a little long, and maybe there's some repetitions . . . but
you're not a professional writer.

Norma Desmond: I wrote that with my heart.

Joe Gillis: Sure you did. That's what makes it great.
—*Sunset Boulevard* (1950)

I always thought it would be better to be a fake somebody than a real nobody.
—Tom Ripley, *The Talented Mr. Ripley* (1999)

This play can be played without any age restriction. It will work if the chemistry between all the characters makes sense. Human behavior and betrayal applies to all of us. It exists within ourselves. You love somebody.

Do you? What is love? You think you have everything, but you don't have anything. You have to have hope and spirit. Be an optimist. But can you handle all your human behavior or other's behavior? You don't want

be good, but great.

—Director's Note, *The Room* (2001), by Tommy P. Wiseau

The Players

Tommy Wiseau	<i>Johnny / writer, director, producer</i>
Don [sic]	<i>the other Mark</i>
Brianna Tate	<i>the other Michelle</i>
Philip Haldiman	<i>Denise</i>
Dan Janjigian	<i>Chris-</i>
Scott Holmes	<i>Michelle</i>
Juliette Danielle	<i>Lisa</i>
Carolyn Minnott	<i>Claudette</i>
Robyn Paris	<i>Michelle</i>
Kyle Vogt	<i>Peter</i>
Greg Ellery	<i>Steve</i>
Bill Meurer	<i>Birns & Sawyer owner</i>
Peter Anway	<i>Birns & Sawyer rep</i>
Raphael Smadja	<i>director of photography no.</i>
Sandy Schklair	<i>script supervisor</i>
Safowa Bright	<i>costume designer</i>
Amy Von Brock	<i>makeup artist</i>
Zsolt Magyar	<i>sound mixer</i>
“Merce”	<i>art department</i>
Graham Futerfas	<i>director of photography no.</i>
Todd Barron	<i>director of photography no.</i>
Byron	<i>stagehand / director of yelling</i>

Author's Note

Imagine a movie so incomprehensible that you find yourself compelled to watch it over and over again. You become desperate to learn how (if) on earth it was conceived: Who made it, and for what purpose?

This book is about what might be the world's most improbable Hollywood success story. At its center is an enigmatic filmmaker who claims, among many other things, to be a vampire. This man speaks with a thick European accent, the derivation of which he won't identify. He also refuses to reveal his age or the origins of his seemingly vast fortune. His name is Tommy Wiseau; and the film he wrote, directed, produced, starred in, and poured \$6 million into is a disastrous specimen of cinematic hubris called *The Room*.

The Room is—despite its ostensibly simple plot—perhaps the most casually surreal film ever made. To put it simply, *The Room* doesn't work in any way films have evolved to work over the last century of filmmaking. It's filled with red herrings, shots of locations that are never visited, and entire conversations comprised of non sequiturs. It is, essentially, one gigantic plot hole. For many, experiencing *The Room* is both wildly exhilarating and supremely dislocating. The film engenders an obsessive fascination, instantly luring you into its odd, convoluted world. Tommy Wiseau intended *The Room* to be a serious American drama, a cautionary tale about love and friendship, but it became something else entirely—a perfectly literal comedy of errors.



A typical reaction to the film, at its Copenhagen premiere.

Yet since its 2003 release, *The Room* has spread across the United States, and now the world, with virulent unstoppableness. Many believe that *The Room*'s unfathomable incompetence elevates it to something like Bizarro-world brilliance. It's revered for its inadequacy and its peerless ability to induce uncontrollable laughter from beginning to end. It may be the most wonderfully terrible one hour and thirty-nine minutes ever committed to celluloid.

And I was in it.

In 1998, as a nineteen-year-old aspiring actor, I enrolled in an acting class in San Francisco. It was there that I met Tommy Wiscau, an encounter that had an unforeseeable impact on the direction of my life. Tommy and I were opposites in every conceivable way, though we shared a common dream: a career in entertainment. This chance meeting inspired a journey neither I nor anyone else could have imagined.

This book is a personal account of that journey—the one that led to the phenomenon that is *The Room*. It is, I hope, a tale of heart, sadness, and blind artistic courage. The story it tells is as much about the power of believing in oneself as it is about the perils that can arise in conquering self-imposed limitations.

The conversations and events depicted herein are true and have been rendered as I recall them. The material in this book not derived from my observations and experience is the documented result of on-the-record interviews with Tommy and other persons concerned. I have also used as reference *The Room*'s original script, photographs, and hours of behind-the-scenes production footage. The footage in particular was used to accurately describe scenes related to the filming process. Minimal liberties have been taken to streamline the narrative. In combining and condensing some conversations or events, I have done so with the hope of maintaining their integrity while also accurately capturing their mood and spirit.

• • •

Upon its debut, *The Room* was a spectacular bomb, pulling in all of \$1,800 during its initial two-week Los Angeles run. It wasn't until the last weekend of the film's short release that the seeds of its eventual cultural salvation were planted. While passing a movie theater, two young film students named Michael Rousselet and Scott Gairdner noticed a sign on the ticket booth that read: NO REFUNDS. Below the sign was this blurb from a review: "Watching this film is like getting stabbed in the head." They were sold.



The crazy cult of *The Room*. From left: Michael Rousselet, comedian David Cross, and Scott Gairdner.

The Room mesmerized Rousselet and Gairdner. They rallied others to experience the film and so

enough a cult was born. These young men and women created many of *The Room's* now famous audience participation rituals, and for several years served as the vanguard of an unofficial underground fan club. They simply wouldn't let the film die, going so far as to camp outside one theater to demand its continuance. The combination of their enthusiasm and Tommy's hapless guerrilla marketing made the film an L.A. in-joke and an entertainment industry curiosity. Before long, the cream of Hollywood's comedy community developed a particular affinity for Tommy's film, hosting private *Room* parties and parodying it in their work. Slowly, the film's cult status gained momentum, and by 2009, *The Room* had entered the mainstream. It was featured in *Entertainment Weekly*, *Time*, and *Harper's* and covered on CNN, FOX News, and ABC's *World News*; it also began airing annually on national television. Following the media blitz, *The Room* emerged as a top-selling independent film, and to this day it screens to sold-out crowds worldwide.



Tommy plays football with *Room* fans outside Prince Charles Cinema in London.



The Room heats up the South Pole!

The magic of *The Room* derives from one thing: No one interprets the world the way Tommy Wiseau

does. He is the key to *The Room*'s mystery as well as the engine of its success. Tommy had always predicted his film would become a classic, embraced worldwide—a notion that could not have seemed less likely. Yet he was right. *The Room* became every bit the blockbuster that Tommy had envisioned, though not, of course, in the way he envisioned. Despite *The Room*'s reputation as “the *Citizen Kane* of bad movies,” Tommy continues to believe that his is the greatest film of all time.

In the end, the phenomenon of *The Room* has allowed me to realize that, in life, anything is possible. *The Room* is a drama that is also a comedy that is also an existential cry for help that is finally a testament to human endurance. It has made me reconsider what defines artistic success or failure. If art is expression, can it fail? Is success simply a matter of what one *does* with failure?

Many of us want to embark on a creative life and never take the chance—too stifled by our self-awareness or fear to try. All the odds were against Tommy Wiseau becoming a filmmaker, yet something pushed him to go for it—something powerful enough to inspire a global phenomenon. Ten years after wrapping *The Room* and living my life in its strange wake, I realize how much the experience has changed me, and how grateful I am for that. By now millions of people have stood before the great, mysterious closed door that is *The Room*, peering through its keyhole with a mixture of joy and bewilderment. My hope is that I have unlocked that door and welcomed everyone, at long last, inside.

Greg Sestero
South Pasadena, CA
October 2010



Meeting fans in Dublin, Ireland.

“Oh, Hi, Mark”

Betty Schaefer: I'd always heard you had some talent.

Joe Gillis: That was last year. This year I'm trying to earn a living.

—*Sunset Boulevard*

Tommy Wiseau has always been an eccentric dresser, but on a late-summer night in 2002 he was turning the heads of every model, weirdo, transvestite, and face-lift artist in and around Hollywood's Palm Restaurant. People couldn't stop looking at him; I couldn't stop looking at him. Even today, a decade later, I still can't unsee Tommy's outfit: nighttime sunglasses, a dark blazer as loose and baggy as rain gear, sand-colored cargo pants with pockets filled to capacity (was he smuggling potatoes?), a white tank top, clunky Frankenstein combat boots, and two belts. Yes, two belts. The first belt was at home in its loops; the second draped down in back to cup Tommy's backside, which was, he always claimed, the point: "It keeps my ass up. Plus it feels good." And then there was Tommy himself: short and muscular; his face as lumpy and white as an abandoned draft of a sculpture; his enormous snow-shovel jaw; his long, thick, impossibly black hair seemingly dyed in Magic Marker ink—and currently sopping wet. Moments before we walked in, Tommy had dumped a bottle of Arrowhead water over his head to keep "this poofy stuff" from afflicting his hair with considerable curls. He had also refused to let the Palm's valet park his silver SL500 Mercedes-Benz, worried that the guy would fart in his seat.

At this point I'd known Tommy for almost half a decade. Tommy and I looked more like Marvel Comics nemeses than people who could be friends. I was a tall, sandy-blond Northern California kid. Tommy, meanwhile, appeared to have been grown somewhere dark and moist. I knew exactly where Tommy and I fit in among the Palm's mixture of Hollywood sharks, minnows, and tourists. I was twenty-four years old—minnow, like Tommy. That meant we had at least thirty minutes to wait for a table. Upon entering the restaurant, I could see various diners consulting their mental Rolodexes, trying to place Tommy. General Simmons after three months in the Gobi Desert? The Hunchback of Notre Dame following corrective surgery? An escaped Muppet? The drummer from Ratt?

"I don't wait in the line," Tommy said, speaking to me over his shoulder. He marched up to the Palm's hostess. I kept my distance, as I always did at times like this, and waited for the inevitable moment in which Tommy spoke and the person to whom he was speaking tried to make geographical sense of his pronunciation, which sounded like an Eastern European accent that had been hit by a Parisian bus. The hostess asked Tommy if he had a reservation.

"Oh, yes," he said. "We have table reservation."

"And what's the name?" she said, slightly sarcastically, but only slightly, because who knew whether Ratt was on the verge of releasing a Greatest Hits album? Her job required carefully hedging one's fame-related bets.

"Ron," Tommy said.

She checked her list. "Sorry," she said, tapping her pencil on the page. "There's no Ron here."

"Oh, sorry," Tommy said. "It's Robert."

She looked down. "There's no Robert here, either."

Tommy laughed. "Wait, I remember now. Try John."

The hostess found the name John near the bottom of her list.

“John,” she said. “Party of four?”

“Yes, yes,” Tommy said, summoning me over to bring him one party member closer to accuracy.

I don’t know who “John, party of four” actually was, but the hostess snagged a wine menu and began walking us to our table.

I followed Tommy and the hostess through the Palm’s dim interior and looked at the dozens of movie-star caricatures that lined its walls. There was Jack Nicholson, Bette Davis, O. J. Simpson—which made me wonder: What, exactly, did you have to do to get banished from the wall of the Palm? I noticed some star faces sitting at the tables, too. Well, maybe not starry, but midsize astral phenomena: sports broadcaster Al Michaels, colleague to my beloved John Madden; *Sports Illustrated* swimsuit model Josie Maran; the cohost of our local ABC News. There were also lots of faces unknown to me but obviously connected. These mostly middle-aged men and women talked show business at conversational levels, and *real* show business sotto voce. The waiters were all older, beefy guys who smelled of expensive aftershave and had big, white manicured nails; they were such smooth operators, they almost managed to convince you it didn’t matter that you weren’t famous. The air in the Palm was very expensive. Everything, other than the food, tasted like money.

“Excuse me,” Tommy said indignantly, after the hostess showed us to our table. “Excuse me but no, don’t sit here. I want booth.” Tommy always insisted on a booth.

“Sir, our booths are reserved.”

But Tommy was nothing if not unrelenting. I think the hostess figured she had two options: Give Tommy a booth or call animal control to tranquilize him. Through a combination of lying, grandstanding, and bullying, Tommy and I were now seated in a booth in the nicest section of the Palm. As soon as Tommy sat down he flagged someone down and said he was “starving” and ready to order.

“I don’t work here,” the person said.

Whenever Tommy is in a restaurant, he always orders a glass of hot water. I’ve never seen a waiter or waitress do anything but balk at the request.

Here’s how the Palm’s waiter handled it: “I’m sorry. Did you say a glass of—?”

Tommy: “Hot water. Yes. This is what I am saying.”

“A lemon maybe or—?”

“Look, why you give me hard time? Do I speak Chinese? This is simple request, my God. Are you tipsy or something? And more bread with raisin stuff.”

We were at the Palm to celebrate. The following morning, official production would begin on *The Room*, a film Tommy had conceived, written, produced, cast, and was now directing and set to star in. If you’d know Tommy as long as I had, the beginning of *The Room*’s production was a miracle of biblical significance. I worked on the film with him, on and off, since its inception. My most recent and intense job on the film was working as Tommy’s line producer. When we began, I had no idea what a line producer was. Neither did Tommy. Basically, I was doing anything that needed to be done. I scheduled all auditions, meetings, and rehearsals; ran the casting sessions; helped find equipment; and, most challenging, made sure Tommy didn’t sabotage his own film. In a sense I was his outside-world translator, since no one knew him better than I did. I was also in charge of writing the checks that were flying out the door of Wiseau-Films like doves in search of dry land. For all this, Tommy was paying me a decent wage, plus “perks,” which was what Tommy called food. With Tommy’s vanity project about to begin, my plan was to walk into my eight-dollars-an-hour retail job at French Connection the next day and quit. I hoped never again to fold something I wasn’t going to wear myself.

“So,” Tommy said, taking off his sunglasses. His eyes were red with veiny lightning. “We are :

production. How do you feel?" He started to wrangle his hair into a scrunchie-secured ponytail.

"It's great," I said.

Tommy was looking at me directly, which didn't happen that often. He was sensitive about his left eyelid, which drooped noticeably, and he rarely held anyone's gaze. When he did talk to someone he'd try to hold his face to the left, which he thought was his best angle.

"Are you nervous little bit?" Tommy asked.

"For what?"

"For big day tomorrow."

"Should I be nervous?"

He shrugged. As we ate, we talked a little more, and things in the Palm started to wind down. Nine p.m. is, however, Tommy's noon, so as the Palm became emptier and more sedate, Tommy grew more and more energetic. I had to get home for a number of reasons, not the least of which was my girlfriend, Amber. She wasn't a fan of Tommy's and hated it when I wasn't with her on her nights off.

Tommy leaned forward. He'd never touched his hot water. "What you think now about *The Room*?"

I'd told Tommy what I thought about *The Room* several times, which was that the script didn't make any sense. Characters' motivations changed from scene to scene, important plot points were raised and then dropped, and all of the dialogue sounded exactly the same, which is to say, it sounded exactly like Tommy's unique understanding of the English language. But nothing I said would ever change his view of *The Room*, so what did it matter? I thought the film offered a fascinating glimpse into Tommy's life. But I couldn't imagine anyone anywhere would be able to decipher it, let alone pay money to see it.

"You know what I think about *The Room*," I said. "Why are you asking me this now?"

"Because tomorrow is very important day. It will go to the history. Touchdown. No one can take away our top-of-mountain day! We begin to shoot." He smiled and leaned back. "I can't *believe* this, if you really think about it."

"Yeah. Congratulations. You deserve it."

Tommy looked at me, his face slack. "This 'yeah' is not convincing. You are not happy?"

I *was* happy. I was also, at that moment, distracted. I'd accidentally caught eyes with a young brunette across the restaurant, which I think she mistakenly took as an invitation. She and her blond friend were checking out our table. And now, suddenly, they were coming over. Dressed up, both of them. Heels, both of them. Young, both of them. The blond woman looked like an agent's assistant maybe meeting her slighter, racier, less securely employed friend for a night of whatever they felt like they could get away with. They had sparkly eyes and hello-there smiles and were holding half-drunk glasses of wine, which were clearly not the first drinks of the evening.

They motioned for Tommy and me to scoot in so they could join us. "Just wanted to come over and say hey," the brunette said. "Thought you were cute."

We awkwardly shook hands, introduced ourselves. Greg. Tommy. Miranda. Sam. Our booth smelled like it had been hit with a precision strike of apples-and-vanilla perfume.

Conversation, haltingly, began. Yeah, the food was great. Oh, that's so funny! My bare arm was touched once, twice. Tommy was glowering, backing away into some small, irritated corner of his mind. He stayed there for a bit, before, out of nowhere, he asked the girls, "So what do you do besides drink?"

They exchanged a quick, decisive look. I could almost see the mischief in their eyes flicker out at the same time. "Excuse me?" Miranda said.

Tommy sighed. "I ask what do you do? Any job or anything? What do you offer besides the vodka?"

Miranda looked into her wineglass questioningly, and then over at me. There was nothing I could say. Miranda and Sam stood up. Yes. Well. It was nice meeting you, Greg. Yeah, thanks. You, too. We'll see you

around. Sure. Take care, then. Absolutely.

After they left, I looked at Tommy and shook my head. “Girls are crazy,” he said.

The waiter arrived and asked to see Tommy’s identification. This wasn’t unusual. Our bill was huge, and Tommy was paying with his credit card, which wasn’t reading. Tommy, however, refused to show the waiter his identification, eventually announcing, “I have a right under law of California!” Then the waiter made it clear to Tommy that the Los Angeles Police Department was only a phone call away. Tommy got angry and allowed the waiter to glimpse his driver’s license beneath a murky plastic lining in his wallet. The waiter said he was sorry, but Tommy had to remove the identification. “Very disrespectful!” Tommy said. “I’m sorry but you are completely off the wall.” The waiter, finally, acceded.

Tommy stormed out. I lingered behind, apologizing to every member of the staff I saw. I’d become accustomed to this; it was how *I* paid for our dinners.

Outside the Palm, we waited for the valet to drive Tommy’s Benz around. (He had apparently forgotten about the dangers of valet farting.) I dreaded the look on the valet’s face when Tommy tipped him. On a hundred-dollar dinner tab, Tommy would often tip five dollars. Sometimes the recipients of Tommy’s tip would come back to him, with an air of wounded dignity, and ask, “Have I done something wrong?” And Tommy would say, “Be happy with what you have.” Tommy must have been feeling a little guilty about what went down inside the Palm, because the valet didn’t seem scandalized by the tip Tommy gave him.

We headed east on Santa Monica. Traffic was light, but Tommy was nevertheless driving at his standard speed of twenty miles below the legal limit. I wondered, sometimes, what drivers on the freeways of Greater Los Angeles thought when they passed Tommy. Expecting to see some centenarian crypt keeper behind the wheel, they instead saw a Cro-Magnon profile, wild black hair, and *Blade Runner* sunglasses.

Coincidentally, at the first stoplight, Miranda and Sam from the Palm pulled up beside us. I looked over and smile-waved. They, of course, burst out laughing. Tommy powered down the passenger window and said, as loud as he could, “Ha! Ha ha ha ha ha ha. Ha! Ha! Ha!” Horrified, they pulled away from the stoplight as though from a terrible accident. I sank into my seat. This was another way in which I passed time in Tommy’s company: trying to disappear.

Tommy looked over at me and said, “You look great, by the way. Like Spartacus.”

Tommy loved movies, though I wasn’t sure he’d seen anything made after 1965. I think he thought I looked like Spartacus because for the first time in my life I was wearing a beard. While working on the casting of *The Room*, which took months longer than it should have, I had let the beard—along with my relationship—just sort of go. Though Amber hated it, I’d grown to like the beard. There was something invigoratingly Viking about it.

“Spartacus?” I said. At that point, I had never seen *Spartacus*, but I gathered Tommy’s observation was accurate. A few years later I finally watched it. Spartacus does not have a beard.

The car began to roll forward again. “So listen now,” Tommy said. “This is *very* important. You have to do *The Room*.”

“I am doing *The Room*.”

“This is not what I mean. I mean you must act in *The Room*. Perform. You *have* to play Mark.”

We’d been over this. Many, many times. Tommy claimed that he’d written the part of Mark—who in the script betrays his best friend, Johnny (Tommy’s character), by sleeping with Johnny’s future wife, Lisa—for me. I was never sure how to take this.

In the four years that I’d known Tommy, he’d come to my aid on numerous occasions. If it weren’t for Tommy, I never would have moved to Los Angeles. Now he was making a film—a film that meant the world to him. So I was happy to help him. But act in it? That was an entirely different level of obligation. I knew what good films looked like. *The Room* was not going to be a good film. It was probably going

require divine intervention just for Tommy to *finish* the thing.

~~This was to say nothing of the fact that the role of Mark had already been cast.~~

“What do you think about this?” Tommy asked.

“I think,” I said, “that Don is already playing Mark.” The actor’s name was Dan, but Tommy always called him Don, so I had to call him that, too.

Tommy was quiet for a block. Gobs of oncoming headlight filled the car and withdrew. We were now traveling ten miles below Tommy’s standard twenty miles below the speed limit, all while he veered into other lanes. Men on bicycles were passing us. The cars not honking at us should have been.

“What if we do something?” Tommy said. “What if *we* give you very good money?”

We? The leadership structure of Wiseau-Films was simple: Tommy was the founder, president, chief executive officer, treasurer, legal department, brand manager, administrative assistant (under the pseudonym of “John”), phone answerer, and mail opener. He claimed to have four other producers backing him on *The Room*, but no one, including me, had met them. A few months before, Tommy had offered me the salary-less title of “Vice President of Wiseau-Films,” and even gone so far as to print business cards with my name on them. I had politely declined.

Tommy was now stopped at a green light with his brights on. I motioned for him to drive, but he was busy being incredibly determined to convince me to play Mark. “Just listen what I say; forget these honking people. What if we give you good money to play Mark? What do you say about that?”

What, I wondered, was up his sleeve here?

I had called Don in when he responded to an ad Tommy placed in *Backstage West*. During the audition process, Tommy had made Don expose his bare backside, which was humiliating for him and deeply uncomfortable for the cameraman (me). For reasons that were never completely clear, Tommy didn’t like Don, possibly due to his vaguely entitled rich-kid vibe. (Tommy was rich now, but he hadn’t always been, and no one dislikes each other more than the circumstantially different rich.) Regardless, two months ago Tommy had Don sign a contract; Don had been rehearsing ever since. He’d even finagled a part in the film for his roommate. As far as Don or Don’s roommate or anyone else involved in *The Room*’s production knew, I was “summer intern” at Wiseau-Films.

Tommy’s car was still stranded at the La Cienega stoplight. I couldn’t believe he would spring this on me hours before filming began. Things were finally simple: *The Room* was being made. But Tommy *had* to make things unsimple. He couldn’t proceed unless he was under heavy fire.

To make matters worse, Don had also made friends with other cast members—especially Brianna, who was playing a character named Michelle. If Tommy got rid of him, for no reason, on the day filming began, I felt certain everyone would revolt. These were the kinds of details that tended to escape Tommy’s notice.

Tommy, finally, pulled away from the light. Within moments he was serenely piloting his Benz down Santa Monica, waiting for me to say something. “I can’t do it,” I said.

He didn’t look over at me. “I always intended you to play the Mark. Okay. So you have to do it, you see. This is your chance. Don’t blow it. You will miss the boat.” Now he looked over at me. “What is your problem?”

“Don is Mark. End of conversation.”

Tommy turned away. “Forget this guy. He can’t perform shit. The love scenes? He’s plastic. There’s nothing there. Everything is flat.”

“Love scenes? Tommy. Are you kidding me?”

“I say there’s nothing there. I would fire this guy. No matter what I fire this guy. So this is your chance.”

“There’s no way I’d ever do a love scene the way you’ve rehearsed them. I won’t do it.”

“Fine, then. I make special arrangement for you. During love scene, you don’t have to show your ass. You

keep your pants on. We do the way you feel comfortable. But this is your last chance. We pay you some very good money.”

Tommy kept hitting the “very good money” point because he knew I didn’t have any. Out of curiosity—but also, I suppose, out of greed—I asked Tommy what he would pay.

And Tommy told me.

“Huh” is what I said. *Holy shit* is what I thought. This could put me back in the game. I could stay in L.A. once the movie was done and not have to go back home to San Francisco a failure. This could be the thing I had to do so I could do what I wanted to do. “That’s a lot of money. Are you sure?”

“Yes, we pay very well.”

“What would you do about Don?” As much as I needed the money, I was trying to push away this *number* Tommy had dropped in my lap. “Everyone likes Don. If you fire him, you’ll piss everyone off. People might quit.” I wanted to avoid another casting ordeal. The fact is dams have been built in the time it took to cast *The Room*—a film with only eight parts to be cast.

Tommy finally turned onto my street, Flores, where I could see my car—a 1991 Chevy Lumina my grandfather would have felt square driving—parked beneath the smeary light of a streetlamp. Amber’s car was parked behind mine. I was thinking of the car I could finally buy with the money Tommy had just offered me, when he said, “What about we also get you new car?”

The week before I’d tried to drive a few blocks to buy some groceries and my car broke down halfway there. My Lumina was keeping half of Hollywood’s mechanics employed. “Tommy,” I said, “I just don’t know. Let me think about it.” My voice was weak, small, and therefore revealing. Tommy had me now, and he knew it.

He pulled up to my place. “Don’t worry about this Don guy. We take care of him, okay?”

“You’re talking like a mobster.”

“No, not mobster. So this is my idea. You show tomorrow, and we tell everyone producers want to see you on the camera for future project. And we shoot you on the 35mm film. For him we say we roll the film but we don’t shoot the video. No worry. We delete everything. It’s over. Very simple.”

It was just crazy enough not to work at all.

“Don,” I told Tommy, “will figure out in ten minutes what’s really going on.”

“Don’t worry about that. We take care of it.”

At that point I told myself a few things. I told myself (a) Tommy wanted Don out, and I couldn’t do anything to stop that; (b) a new car meant new confidence, and new confidence meant better auditions, and better auditions meant booking work; (c) this movie was, probably, never going to be finished, and it *certainly* wasn’t going to be released; and (d) pushing Don out of the film would be doing him a favor. Really. “Greg,” Tommy said, “I don’t have time for games. I need response.”

“Give me an hour,” I said, and got out of the car. Immediately I noticed Amber standing by the front door of my building. I could tell from her expression that she was about to leave because she was sick of waiting for me, sick of Tommy, sick of *The Room*, and sick of my beard. It occurred to me, as I walked toward her, that I’d let my beard come in not only because *The Room*’s casting process had overwhelmed me, but maybe also because I liked having another barrier between her and me. Which was surely why Amber hated it so much.

Amber was a makeup artist from San Diego who prided herself on being a cool chick, and she *was* a cool chick. She had dark, wavy hair, and was feisty in the way short girls with confidence can be feisty. Spicily feisty. Stare-you-down feisty. She stared me down all the time, even though I had almost a foot on her.

We’d been dating for a year and a half; it was time to either move in together or move on. Unhappily, neither didn’t want to do either. A month previous I’d sort of preempted the move-in-or-move-on conversation by using the money Tommy was paying me to lease an apartment in an Old Hollywood building with a den

palm-tree perimeter and a great view of the Hills. Amber loved the place so much that she started spending all of her time there.

“Well, hello,” she said coolly. “What took you so long?”

“Guess.”

Tommy was pulling away now, after awkwardly staring for too long. He beeped. Not a fun little bye-bye beep, but a long, sustained *beeeeeeeep*.

“So,” she said, arms folded, “how’s Tommy?”

Whatever Amber and I had, she was obviously as close to being over it as I was. Which hurt, oddly.

Tommy was now at the end of the street, beginning an agonized turn, still beeping. At least, now, there were little beeps. *Beep beep. Beep beep.* ‘Bye, Tommy. Amber watched with an expression of disgust as her Benz disappeared around the corner.

“Greg,” she said, “what is this Tommy thing getting you? He’s taking over our lives. Try something else. Get that job at EA Sports you’re always talking about. Being around Tommy is just too hard on you.”

“Tommy,” I said, “just offered me the role of Mark.”

Her head was shaking; she was still on guard. “So? He’s offered you that part, like, a hundred times.”

“Yeah, but this time he offered to pay me for it.”

Her head was no longer shaking. “How much?”

I told her, after which she became very quiet. Above us, wind flapped in the palms.

“And a car,” I said. “He also offered to buy me a new car.”

Amber looked puzzled. “Isn’t somebody already playing Mark?”

I described Tommy’s absurd scheme. We stood there, looking at each other. I assumed she thought I was a terrible person for even considering it. I decided to tell Tommy no thanks. “Okay,” I said, turning to go inside. “I’ll go tell him.”

Amber was still looking at me. “Tell him what?”

I froze in midstep. “What do you think I should tell him?”

“I think you should tell him yes. You’re going to be on set all day anyway, right? Fuck it. Do it.”

I was shocked. “You want me to do it?”

“Yeah. Do you think the other guy would give a shit about you if the situation was reversed?”

I didn’t know, honestly. Maybe he would have.

“I don’t know. Nothing about it feels right.”

“It’s a lot of money.”

Amber was right about that; we’d been struggling. *And remember*, I thought to myself, *Don is a rich kid*. Actually, I had no idea if Don was a rich kid. It just seemed like he was, and right now I was very fond of that impression. “You’re right,” I said. “I’ll do it.”

“Good,” Amber said—there was, I noticed, no joy or victory in her voice—and we walked inside. The phone was heavy in my hand as I dialed Tommy’s number. While Tommy’s cell rang, I imagined him making one of his semi-truck-slow turns onto another street. No. He was probably still driving down Fountain, the next street over. When Tommy picked up I asked him where he was. “I am on the Fountain,” he said. “So what’s the story? I have no time to beat the bush.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Greg,” Tommy said, “I think you make great decision.”

La France a Gagné

Everybody should have one talent.
—Dickie Greenleaf, *The Talented Mr. Ripley*

I saw *Home Alone* in Walnut Creek, California, on Christmas Day 1990, when I was twelve. After the movie immediately got to work on writing the sequel, *Home Alone 2: Lost in Disney World*. The plot hinged on Kevin McCallister (Macaulay Culkin) boarding the wrong plane and winding up in Disney World, where he runs into his slightly older neighbor Drake (Greg Sestero). There, Drake and Kevin get into various monkeyshines while avoiding a crack team of bandits recently escaped from a Florida state penitentiary. I created a soundtrack, drew up a poster, and threw together a marketing campaign. When I finished the script, I remember thinking that soon I'd be on set in Orlando and skipping eighth grade.

Next, I did what all twelve-year-old screenwriters do, which was call information and ask for the phone number of 20th Century Fox. I got through to someone at Fox, though for some reason I was given the runaround. Incensed, I called information again and asked for the address of John Hughes's production company in Chicago. Then I sent Hughes my screenplay directly.

My mother teased me about my dream of getting my movie made, but that only fueled my aspirations. I checked the mail every day after school, hoping to prove her wrong.

A month later my mom walked into my bedroom holding a brown envelope. She looked stunned. "I got a letter from Hughes Productions," she said.

I tore open the package like I was about to find Wonka's Golden Ticket. Sad news—my screenplay was being returned—but attached to the pages was a handwritten note from John Hughes himself. "Believe in yourself," he told me in closing, "have patience, and always follow your heart." Writing a random little boy a note of encouragement was merely a small, dashed-off kindness on Hughes's part, but at the time it meant a lot to me. It still does. In the intervening years, I've learned that many people can afford to be that kind, but not those who can, most don't.

After reading Hughes's letter, I knew I'd found my calling.



I love my mother. She is a wonderful human being: strong, tough, loving, practical, and beautiful. We get along and have always gotten along, save for one key area: my choice of career.

The first thing to know about my mother is that she's French-Sicilian. I'd like you to think for a moment about the temperamental implications of that genetic combination. My mother wanted me to become a Rhodes scholar, a lawyer, a doctor. For my mother, "I want to be an actor" was roughly analogous to "I want to be homeless." Oddly—or not oddly at all—my mom had once wanted to be an opera singer. "If it were that easy," she said when I asked about this, "I would have done it."

In retrospect, the way my mother went about discouraging me from acting was, tactically speaking, a little wrong. She could have sat me down and said, "Greg, look. This is an incredibly hard thing to do, and even many of the most talented actors barely survive. You might be great and still not make it. Is that the kind of chance you want to take?" But she didn't say that. What she said was, "You are going to learn the hard way, and the worst part of it is you had your parents to warn you, unlike all those loser Hollywood runaways you

see in the streets.” It was hard to hear this from her. My mother was the one person I wanted to be proud of me.

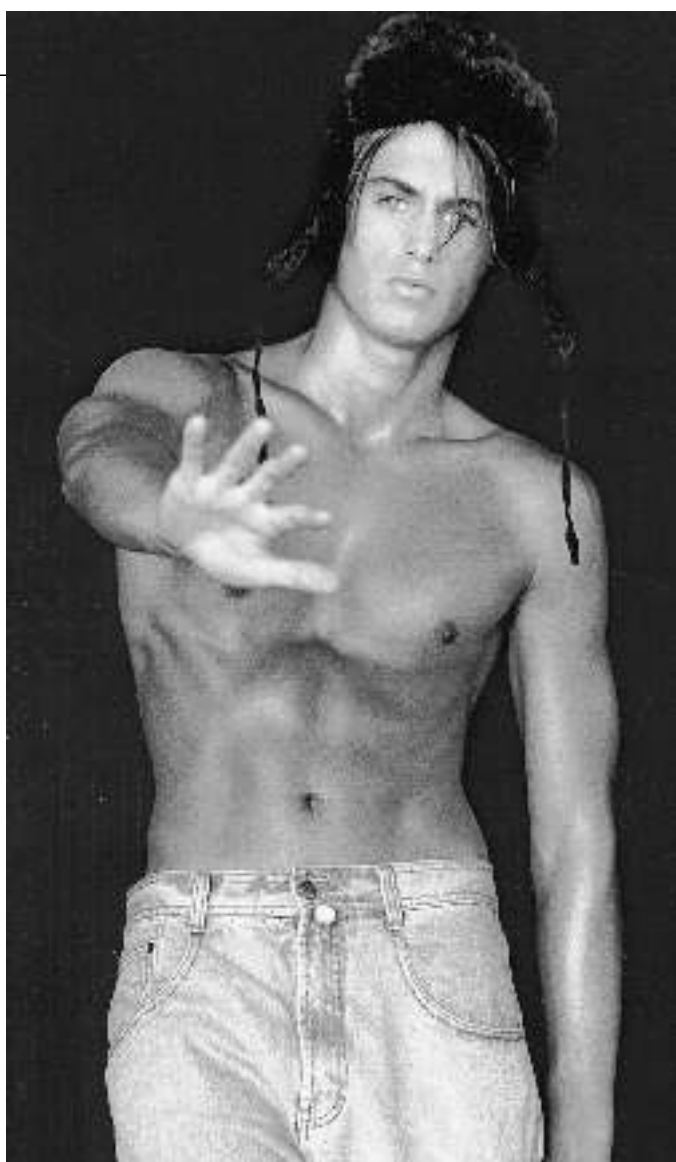
With my dad it was different. His idea of solid parenting has always been to say, “Just do what you can enjoy life, because it sure goes by fast.” But with my father so low-key, my mother’s voice dominated. “Most people have nothing to lose,” she would tell me. “Gregory, you have a lot to lose.” It wound up feeling like that, which meant I lost a lot. I didn’t go out for high school drama, for instance, because I was afraid of not being good. I persisted in reading about acting, though, and remember my stomach dropping when I learned that Jack Nicholson stumbled through 350 auditions before getting his first small part. By the end of my junior year, I was fear-stifled and I had no idea what I wanted to do. I didn’t apply to colleges; I didn’t have a plan. Nothing felt right.

It was around this time that I watched another movie that had a huge influence on me: *Legends of the Fall*. I believed that Tristan Ludlow (Brad Pitt) was on a quest for self-understanding similar to mine, though mine, I hoped, would have fewer bear attacks. The morning after I saw the film, I noticed an ad in the *Costa Times* for Stars, a San Francisco talent agency, that was seeking new clients. I decided to send them photos, and after a couple of weeks, someone from Stars called me in for a meeting.

A month and a half later, Stars had gotten me a gig to model in Milan. This overlapped with what would have been the beginning of my senior year of high school. I worked out an ad hoc “independent study” with my school, and suddenly I was landing at Malpensa Airport and blinking in the glorious Italian sunshine.

I got off to a frantic start, attending castings all over the city, many of which had four hundred models waiting for hours in line to be seen. This was about as intimidating as anything I could imagine. For the first time, though, I didn’t let my fear control me. Just because I was sheltered didn’t mean I wasn’t good; it didn’t mean I should quit. That said, I was greatly rattled by the beauty of the Italian women and by the alien qualities of the fashion world as seen through the eyes of a seventeen-year-old California boy who wanted to act. I made the mistake of voicing this aspiration to fashion people: “I’m doing this to act,” I’d say. “You should be doing this to model,” I was told (rightly, too, I now know).

Every moment of every day felt newly, freshly incredible. I did shoots in Florence and Venice and Lake Como. On my off days I hung out with other young models near the Duomo. In Paris I got the chance to work for Jean-Paul Gaultier. I met the fashion editor of *Vanity Fair*, who playfully asked me, “Your mom kicked you out of the house?” (*Not exactly*, I didn’t say.)



Blue Steel-ing in Milan, 1995.

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