



# L.A. Actors

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— by Robin Wyatt Dunn

## **The Queen of Spades**

I moved to Hollywood. Best thing I ever did. Hollywoodland, as it used to be called, a land owned now by the Queen of Spades, or so she says and so she thinks and so we have come to believe, marching our student marches in the hallways of our academy.

We train by night and day. And we march, laughing, crying, old and young, the bodies of the world come to nest for a year or two in our den mother's radiant theater roost.

“Latchka, Latchka, you're up, you're up next!” cries my classmate.

I have decided to recite some Pinter, Old Times, he's a sick one, Pinter, and I love him, I sing out Deeley's syllables like a lover mid-affair and I get it, I've got it, I know it.

When you a read a good play or when you see one, you drift back into that weird world that's been dreamt for you, you slip back, like on the Dead Sea, buoyed by the water beneath.

To be an actor is to be a servant. You serve the director, and the producer. You serve the stage manager and the assistant stage manager, and the whole crew. You serve the audience, and your fellow actors. Perhaps you serve an agent, and/ or a manager, if you are fortunate. You serve and are told you must be happy to do so, because you are not on the street, and they are right. Right enough.

And so we plug in, we plug our nervus in. Nervus, the string of a marionette. It hurts, but it's a good pain – the pain of the near promise of success.

And so we serve the Queen of Spades, our manipulator, our goddess with her electric strings, and she's a kind woman, and a cruel one.

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And I leap. I've eaten a huge free meal, and the nervus can make me do things that otherwise I could not do. I run across the stage and flip, and then am swept into the air as other strings leap down to support me, to unwind the nervus.

To my left I can feel Alex leaping, joining me in flight, and our larynxes vibrate in superhuman communion, Pinter in operetta.

"Dark!" (I'm a tenor)

And Alex answers, in beautiful contralto, "Fat or thin?"

"Fuller than me, I think!"

Fuller than me. I feel the urge to vomit but I do not, and Eliza Penche, our Queen of Spades, eases back a bit, knowing we need to make it at least to the second entrance this morning.

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At break I splash water on my face and try to avoid Alex. She is beautiful and young (only 19) and I am 33 and though I know she likes me she's always be in love more with Hollywood than she is with men. She's a Valley Girl and these four miles to the south, here in the heart of the Basin, is a huge journey for her psychologically. Too young, too young. I wish we had a pool at the academy; it's so hot.

We have had four burnouts already this year. We are reduced to fourteen. I am too intelligent to be an actor, you might say, but that is only a lie I tell myself. The truth is that I am too stubborn. I must relearn, every day, how to serve.

I am yours, Queen. I move for you, I dance for you. I am an artist and I am your art. Move me, shape me, make me mean. Make me mean, Queen! Make for me a meaning that I am.

Back to the nervus.

I hiccup in the next scene, a modern art interpretation of the Pinterian pause (he loved pauses, Harold Pinter), and so I hiccup and hiccup again, faster than the human body is supposed to, a kind of punk rock rhythm,

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Hicc hicc hicchicchicchiccup upuopup hiccuphiccup

And I do it and it is good and I feel like I'm dying but I know it's good, it looks good. Alex looks horrified but her body sways on the nervus like a willow in a breeze, a strong scene. It's going to be well-reviewed.

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Opening night is a technical nightmare. One of us is killed by a sudden power surge. We're not allowed to cry then; the show must go on. The understudy grieves behind her eyes, and takes Alyssa's place as Deeley's old love. It blows the mind of the city. And lo god, I get a break.

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### **The King of Hearts**

Fama, in the Latin, is a rich word, meaning both fame and reputation. Reputation is so important, it's never enough to hire competent reputation managers, both online and off, no, it's personal behavior. Your acts happen on stage and they are judged and this is life. I have almost no privacy; it is what I signed up for. When I want privacy, I pay well for it.

I am doing Deeley again. I have rewired the theater I bought. Now, I am impresario. I am both puppet and puppeteer. In my dressing room I put on my face.

White, along the lines of the bones of the face, as Richard Corson taught in the long ago, to bring out the skull. Darker paint on the flesh, to make it sag. Chiaroscuro: I'm no Carravaggio but theatrical lighting and well-paid designers make up for that, I just have to fool your eye while I'm in hyper-motion.

"Latchka?"

"Yes?" It's Munuel, my agent.

"Break a leg."

"Thank you. Are you watching tonight, Munuel?"

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“Your wife is here, in the audience. She wanted me to tell you.”

“She’s here?”

“Yes.” His hands come together at his waste and flutter at one another like nervous spiders.

“All right. Thank you Munuel.”

I have decided to be almost nude. The nervus plug in my spine is emphasized, not hidden, by my make-up and nudity. Huge red lines painted on my back point at the small fleshy orifice attached when I was 29.

I remember what our Queen of Spades would tell us when we were in training:

“The duty of you as actors is to captivate! I can only manipulate your bodies; your souls must soar as well. No amount of technology or artistic vision will make up for lackluster performances in your eyes, in your voices. You must be present, you must be hyperpresent. You must astonish.”

And so I astonish her, my little muse, my mistress, and manage to escape my wife. She is only twenty-two. Some women see only a philanderer, a man drunk on power. Neither observation is wrong, but then I know I see so much more, in myself and in others. Besides, it is what I am supposed to do: be the man who seems to have everything.

I hold her hand in my villa, which is small, but well protected. The night is huge, and dry, and we can hear the ocean.

“You were beautiful,” she says. “The stars, the yellow stars twirling around behind your head as you spoke of the little old women in black, it was like a dream.”

“I’m glad you liked it.”

“Where did you come up with it all?”

“We’ve been working together for five years now. Even the financiers are happy, which is rare.”

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“You love me?”

“You’re more beautiful than any play. Even if it’s one of mine.”

Her laugh fills me with pain. It makes me feel my age, my weakness. I need more of the lithium now to soothe my aches on the weekends, sometimes it’s too much.

I lie next to her most of the night, holding her, reassuring her with my body.

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### The Ace of Clubs

Five years later, revolution is come and it is good for business. My troupe and I have taken to street performing. The villa is unsafe and so I sleep now in Hollywood, having made a press release stating that I have given my fortune to the revolutionary committee (not much of it but enough).

At Vermont and Santa Monica, close to my old academy, I squat by the subway station holding my manipulator’s box, which signals to my two actors of the morning, in full white body paint and pink/blue hair, twisting through the crowd and soaring above it with jumps they could not perform unaided. A couple of local news agents have come to record but I shoo them away: it’s more memorable if it is not posted on any net.

One of the actors is my second wife, Marissa.

As a city-state, Los Angeles suffers few privations as long we control the Southland farms, though as a celebrity of course I still have access to some luxuries.

I plug in the nervus more rarely now, having gotten used to directing. Across the street I see a small group of canine lovers doing their favorite performance art piece: “Being walked by dogs.” There is nothing stranger than letting a dog control your body. Often such performers end up hit by cars but traffic is, fortunate for them, light today. I copied their style in one of my plays, using a much ratcheted-down algorithm that reduced “being walked by the dog” to a mere physical aping, quite good with the right software. To do more, to actually yield to the conscious whims of the dog, strikes me as disgusting.

Marissa pivots on her heel and shouts: “Hosanna” and I contort the second syllable

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and the flat ‘a’ becomes long, becomes a kind of sexual need, and she wiggles, wiggles like a rat, twitching her nose, and I can feel the need of the crowd, their desire, their hate. Johan kneels beneath her, a supplicant, and improvises a kind of death rattle, shaking his shoulders and hissing, his eyes wide and laughing. Some onlookers laugh, some walk away. For a second John looks back at me and I know he wants to hold the reins, that the wait for seniority is just as hard on him as it was on me.

A month after the revolution, I learn an interesting thing. They took every dime I had. And I find I do not mind. They have left me my equipment. My wife does not even notice at first, she likes our sleazy building; my notoriety keeps us both safe. The hours of busking, busking, busking are a strange kind of beauty, even without the lithium I find I have the stamina to fuck Marissa for over an hour every work night.

“What has happened?” she asks, sweat covered beside me.

“We’re changing.”

“Who will we become?”

“Parents.”

“You really want to have a baby with me?”

“Yes, woman. I do.”

“Will we raise it as an actor?”

“If you want. I hear at my old academy they are teaching the new Japanese style, the AI mediated one. It’s difficult to learn, I’m probably too old for it.”

“I want to busk again tomorrow, just you and me.”

“Yes.”

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The light in Los Angeles is a strange fire, it is like the music you sometimes hear played on the street (usually recorded, and much rarer than in New York): it detonates like

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a bomb over the sidewalks, burning. It burns away yesterday's lies to make room for new ones.

I hold Marissa's legs close, my right hand on the leg manipulator joystick. She sashays like a flapper who has learned to breakdance, doing what I call a zero-g Charleston, which involves spinning so fast she seems to leave the ground. The number of pivots is intense and I can feel her quivering. Then I make her scream, scream out, scream out, and I indicate that the phrase should be improvised.

We get a good crowd coming up from the subway, most staying at least a couple minutes, tossing in their coins. Over their rapt faces Marissa howls:

"I am yours!"