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The Understudy

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Extract

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Act One

WAITING TO GO ON

– That's not real life, lad. That's just pretending.
– But 'real life' *is* how well you pretend, isn't it? You. Me. Everybody in the world . . .

Jack Rosenthal
Ready When You Are, Mr McGill

Summers and Snow ep.3 draft 4

CHIEF INSPECTOR GARRETT (CONT.)
. . . or I'll have you back directing traffic faster than you can say disciplinary action.

INSPECTOR SUMMERS
But he's just toying with us, sir, like a cat with a—

CHIEF INSPECTOR GARRETT
I repeat - Don't. Make It. Personal. I want a result, and I want it yesterday, or you're off this case, Summers.
(SNOW goes to speak)
I mean it. Now get out of here - the both of you.

INT. MORTUARY. DAY

BOB 'BONES' THOMPSON, the forensic pathologist, sickly complexion, ghoulish

sense of humour, stands over the semi-naked body of a YOUNG MAN, early thirties, his bloated body lying cold and dead on the mortuary slab, in the early stages of decomposition – WPC SNOW is clutching a handkerchief to her mouth.

INSPECTOR SUMMERS
So – fill me in, Thompson. How long d'you think he's been dead for?

THOMPSON
Hard to say. From the stink on him, I think it's fair to say he's not the freshest fish on the slab . . .

INSPECTOR SUMMERS (not smiling)
Clock's ticking, Bones . . .

THOMPSON
OK, well, judging from the decay, the bloating and the skin discoloration, I'd say . . . he's been in the water a week or so, give or take a day. Initial examination suggests strangulation. By the ligature marks round the neck, I'd say the killer used a thick, coarse rope, or a chain maybe . . .

INSPECTOR SUMMERS
A chain? Christ, the poor bastard . . .

WPC SNOW
Who found the body?

(SUMMERS shoots her a look – 'I ask the questions round here . . .')

THOMPSON
Some old dear out walking the dog. Nice lady, 82 years old. I think it's safe to assume you should be looking elsewhere for your serial ki—

'Hang on a second . . . Nope – nope, sorry, everyone, we're going to have to stop.'

'Why, what's up?' snapped Detective Inspector Summers.

'We've got flaring.'

'On the lens?'

'Dead guy's nostrils. You can see him breathing. We're going to have to go again.'

'Oh, for crying out loud . . .'

'Sorry! Sorry, sorry, everyone,' said the DEAD YOUNG MAN, sitting up and folding his arms self-consciously across his blue-painted chest.

Whilst the crew reset, the director, a long-faced,

troubled man with an unconvincing baseball cap pushed far back on a reflective forehead, dragged both hands down his face and sighed. Hauling himself from his canvas chair, he strode over to the DEAD YOUNG MAN and knelt matily next to the mortuary slab.

'Right, so, Lazarus, tell me – is there a problem?'

'No, Chris, it's all good for me . . .'

'Because – how can I say this – at present, you're doing a little too much.'

'Yeah, sorry about that.'

The director peered at his watch, and rubbed the red indentations left by his baseball cap. 'Because it's getting on for two thirty and . . . what's your name, again?'

'Stephen, Stephen McQueen. With a P-H.'

'No relation?'

'No relation.'

'Well, Stephen with a P-H, it's getting on for two thirty, and we haven't even started on the autopsy . . .'

'Yes, of course. It's just, you know, with the lights and nerves and everything . . .'

'It's not as if you have to *perform*, all you have to do is bloody lie there.'

'I realise that, Chris, it's just it's tricky, you know, not to visibly breathe, for that long.'

'No one's asking you not to breathe . . .'

'No, I realise that,' said Stephen, contriving a chummy laugh.

'. . . just don't lie there taking bloody great gulps like you've just run the two hundred metres, OK?'

'OK.'

'And don't grimace. Just give me something . . . neutral.'

'OK. Neutral. But apart from that . . . ?'

'Apart from that, you're doing *terrific* work, really.'

'And d'you think we'll be done by six? It's just I've got to be—'

'Well, that's up to you, isn't it, Steve?' said the director, resettling the cap, stalking back to his canvas chair. 'Oh, and, Steve?' he shouted across the set. 'Please don't hold your belly in – you're *meant* to be bloated.'

'Bloated. OK, bloated.'

'Right, places, everyone,' shouted the first AD and Stephen settled once again on his marble slab, adjusted the damp underwear, closed his eyes, and did his best to pretend to be dead.

The secret of truly great screen acting is to do as little as possible, and this is never more important than when playing an inanimate object.

In a professional career lasting eleven years, Stephen C. McQueen had played six corpses now, each of them carefully thought through and subtly delineated, each of them skilfully conveying the pathos of being other than alive. Keen not to get typecast, he had downplayed this on his CV, allocating the various corpses intriguing, charismatic leading-man names like MAX or OLIVER rather than the more accurate, less evocative BODY or VICTIM. But word had obviously got round the industry – no one did nothing at all quite like Stephen C. McQueen. If you wanted someone to be pulled from the

Grand Union Canal at dawn, or lie slack, broken and uncomplaining across the bonnet of a car, or slump prone at the bottom of a muddy First World War trench, then this was the man. His very first job after leaving drama school had been RENT BOY 2 in *Vice City*, a hard-hitting post-watershed crime show. One line –

RENT BOY 2
(Geordie accent)
Why-ay, ya lookin' fah a good time, mista?

– then a long, hot afternoon spent with his arm dangling out of a black bin liner. Of course at thirty-two, his Rent Boy days were some way behind him now, but Stephen C. McQueen could still usually pass muster as most other remains.

But for some reason, today his technique was letting him down. This was a shame, because *Summers and Snow* was a TV institution, and in a few months upwards of nine million people would settle down in front of the telly on a Sunday night, to see him swiftly strangled, then lying here, inert, in a stranger's underwear. You'd be hard-pushed to call it a *break* as such, but if the director liked what he did, or didn't do, if he got on with his co-stars, they might use him again, to play someone who walked about, moved his face, spoke aloud. First Rule of Showbiz – it's not what you know, it's who you know. Stay professional. Be positive. Be committed. Always have a motivation. The trick is to *impress*. Always ensure

that people *like* you, at least until you're famous enough for it not to matter any more.

Waiting for the next take, Stephen sat up straight on the cold slab, and stretched his arms behind his back till he felt his shoulders crack – important not to stiffen up, important to keep limber. He glanced round the set, in the hope of striking up a conversation with his fellow actors. Craggy, Stern, Ex-Alcoholic Loner Detective Inspector Tony Summers and Perky, Independent-Minded WPC Sally Snow were in a tight little huddle some way off, sipping tea from plastic cups and confidently eating all the best biscuits. Stephen had always nursed a bit of a crush on Abigail Edwards, the actress playing WPC Snow, and had even worked out a throw-away little joke he could use in conversation, about his role. 'It's a living, Abi!' he would quip self-deprecatingly out of the side of his mouth in between takes, then raise a mouldy eyebrow, and she'd laugh, eyes sparkling, and perhaps they'd swap numbers at the end of filming, go for a drink or something. But the opportunity had never arisen. In between takes she'd barely acknowledged him, and clearly in Abigail Edwards' eyes, he might as well be, well – dead.

A cheery make-up artist appeared by Stephen's side, spritzed him with water and dabbed his face and lips with Vaseline. Was her name Deborah? Another Rule of Showbiz – always, *always* call everyone by their name . . .

'So how do I look, Deborah?' he asked

'It's Janet. You look gorgeous! Funny old job this, isn't it?'

'Still – it's a living!' he quipped, but Janet was already back in her canvas chair.

'Quick as you can please, people,' barked the first AD, and Stephen lay back down on the mortuary slab, like a large, wet fish.

Keep still.

Don't let them see you breathe.

Remember – you are dead.

My motivation is not to be alive.

Acting is not *re-acting.*

The C in Stephen C. McQueen, incidentally, was there at the insistence of his agent, to prevent any confusion with the international movie star.

It was not a mistake that anyone had yet made.

The New Romantic

Lucky Lucy Chatterton makes eyes at the hot young actor who's setting London's glittering West End – and Hollywood – on fire.

There was only one response when I told female friends I was about to interview Josh Harper – Sheer, Unadulterated Envy. 'Lucky old you,' they sighed. 'Any chance of getting his phone number?' Sitting opposite him in an exclusive West End members' club, it's easy to see why.

Still only 28, Josh Harper is Britain's hottest, and prettiest, young actor. Recently voted the 12th Sexiest Man in the World by readers of a well-known women's magazine, he shot to fame four years ago when he became the youngest actor ever to win a BAFTA for his heart-breaking performance as Clarence, the mentally handicapped young man waging a battle with terminal disease, in acclaimed TV drama *Seize the Day*. Since then he's had huge success on stage as a sexually charged Romeo, and on the silver screen as a psychotic, cross-dressing gangster in ultra-violent Brit-Crime flick *Stiletto*, while still finding time to save the world in futuristic thriller *TomorrowCrime*. Christmas sees the release of his biggest movie yet, big-budget Hollywood sci-fi adventure *Mercury*

Rain, but at present he's resisting the siren call of Hollywood, to play another dashing rake, Lord Byron, in the critically acclaimed West End show *Mad, Bad and Dangerous To Know*.

'It's Byron's life, told through his own words – his letters, poems and journals,' he says, sipping his double espresso, and looking at me with those unnervingly clear blue eyes. 'It's an amazing story. In a way, Byron was the first rock star – international fame, women throwing themselves at him – but he was really radical too, and really into politics, just like me. All of that, plus he was bisexual, had an incestuous relationship with his sister, *and* a club foot. A wild and crazy guy!'

Does he identify with the character in any way? I ask.

'What, apart from the club foot?' he laughs. 'Well, we're both passionate, I suppose. And I'm really into politics, especially the environment. I'm a happily married man, of course. And my sister's great, but, you know – there are limits!' Josh Harper throws his head back and laughs again, a warm, big-hearted guffaw. At the next table, two women look across at us. Is that envy I see in their eyes?

He goes on to tell me about how he likes to mix theatre with bigger-budget, commercial work. Hollywood still holds a fascination for Josh, though he's not about to move there full time just yet. '*Mercury Rain* was great fun – running about in space suits, waving guns around – but with those big sci-fi things, most of the time you're acting to thin air, so they can stick the special effects in later. Still, I hope it's a bit more sophisticated and intelligent than most of those kinds of movies. It's basically the old Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf*, but set in deep space. Also, what's great about those big event films is that financially they allow me to do the stuff I really love – live theatre,

like *Mad, Bad* . . . or small, independent films. Fame and celebrity, they're great if you want a restaurant table, but they're not the reason I got into this. I love the sweat and smell of *real* acting.'

So will he be doing any more big Hollywood movies?

'Of course! What can I say – I just love blowing stuff up!!! And, yes, there have been offers, but nothing I can talk about. And I don't think I could ever live in LA full time – I love my beer, fags and footy too much!'

So was it true about the James Bond rumours? Josh looks bashful.

'Only a rumour, I'm afraid. My people have talked to their people, but it's still just a pipe dream. And, anyway, I'm way too young. But one day maybe. Of course I'd love to play Bond – there isn't an actor in the world who wouldn't want to play Bond.'

The publicist is tapping her watch now, and there's only time for a few quick-fire questions. Who or what is the greatest love of your life? I ask.

'My wife, of course,' he replies unhesitatingly, his eyes lighting up. Josh has been married to Nora Harper, an ex-singer, for two years now. Sorry, ladies!

'And how often do you have sex?' I ask, pushing my luck a little. Thankfully, Josh just laughs.

'If it's not a personal question?!? As often as we possibly can.'

'How do you relax?'

'See above!'

'When and where were you happiest?'

'See above!!'

'Favourite smell?'

He ponders for a moment. 'Either new-mown grass or the top of a new-born baby's head . . .'

'Favourite movie?'

'*The Empire Strikes Back*.'

'And what's your favourite word?'

He thinks for a moment. 'One my wife taught me – Uxorious.'

. . . and Stephen C. McQueen thought this might perhaps be a good time to stop reading. He tossed the newspaper back on to the train seat opposite. What was it with the smell of a new-born baby's head anyway? Josh wasn't even a father. Whose head had he been smelling? From the seat opposite, the photo of Josh grinned up at him, immaculately stubbled, hands running through his hair, shirt unbuttoned to the waist. Stephen turned the photo face down, and went back to looking out of the train window, at the tower blocks and terraces of Stockwell and Vauxhall sliding by.

Stephen caught sight of his reflection in the window, and thought about how he might interpret the role of James Bond. True, he had yet to be approached about the part, but by way of a private audition, he raised one eyebrow, gave himself a suave little James Bond smile, and tried, very hard, to picture himself in a white tuxedo, standing at a roulette wheel surrounded by beautiful, dangerous women.

He had a momentary vision of himself as CONTROL ROOM TECHNICIAN 4, stumbling backwards through a sugar-glass window into the submarine dock below, his lab coat on fire.

THE NEARLY CV

Stephen C. McQueen had two CVs.

Alongside the real-life résumé of all the things he had actually achieved, there was the Nearly CV. This was the good-luck version of his life, the one where the close shaves and the near misses and the second choices had all worked out; the version where he hadn't been knocked off his bike on the way to that audition, or come down with shingles during the first week of rehearsal; the one where they hadn't decided to give the role to that bastard off the telly.

This extraordinary phantom career began with Stephen almost-but-not-quite winning huge praise for his show-stealing Malcolm in *Macbeth* in Sheffield, then consequently very nearly giving his heart-breaking Biff in *Death of a Salesman* on a nationwide tour. Soon afterwards, the hypothetical reviews that he would probably have received for his might-have-been King Richard II had to be read to be believed. Diversifying into television, he had come oh-so-close to winning the nation's hearts as cheeky, unorthodox lawyer Todd Francis in hit TV series *Justice for All*, and a number of successful film roles, both here and abroad, had quite conceivably followed.

Unfortunately, all these great triumphs had taken place

in other, imaginary worlds, and there were strict professional rules about submitting your parallel-universe résumé. This unwillingness to take into account events in other space-time dimensions meant that Stephen was left with his real-life CV, a document that reflected both his agent's unwillingness to say no, and Stephen's extraordinary capacity, his gift almost, for bad luck. It was this real-life version of events that brought him here, to London's glittering West End.

At the age of eight, visiting London for the first time with his mum and dad, Stephen had thought Piccadilly Circus was the centre of the universe, an impossibly glamorous, alien landscape, the kind of place where, in an old British sixties musical, a dance routine might break out at any moment. That was twenty-four years ago. It had since become his place of work, and coming up from the hot, soupy air of the tube station into the damp late October evening, all Stephen saw was a particularly garish and treacherous roundabout. Nearby, an adenoidal busker was doggedly working his way through the Radiohead songbook, and the chances of a dance routine breaking out seemed very slight indeed. Stephen barely even noticed Eros these days, surely the most underwhelming landmark in the world. If he bothered to look up at all, it was only to check the digital clock under the Coca-Cola sign, to see if he was late.

19.01.

He was late. He quickened his pace.

The Hyperion Theatre stands on Shaftesbury Avenue, in between a kitchen equipment wholesalers and an All-

American Steakhouse of the type found precisely nowhere in America, the kind of restaurant that always contains at least one woman weeping. Pushing and jostling his way through the crowds, still looking a little blue-grey from his own autopsy, he fitted in surprisingly well with the disorientated coach parties, the dazed and pale shop assistants struggling home, the doleful, homesick Spanish students offering him flyers for English classes. He hurried past an excessive number of bureaux de change, past the disreputable fast-food outlets that sold sticky, iridescent orange mounds of sweet-and-sour pork and 'pizza' – thick wedges of grey dough, smeared with tomato purée and candle-wax cheese. Maybe he should eat something. Maybe a pepperoni slice. He glanced at the wedges, perspiring under high-wattage bulbs, the pepperoni glinting with oily red sweat. Maybe not. Maybe he should wait until after work. 19.03 now, which meant that he was technically late for the half-hour call. The theatre was in sight now and, looking east along Shaftesbury Avenue, he could see the immense billboard of Josh Harper looming above the crowds, three storeys high.

On the billboard, the 12th Sexiest Man in the World stood in a puffy white shirt open to the waist, and a pair of tight black leather breeches of questionable historical veracity. In his right hand he held a rapier with which he lunged towards the passers-by, whilst in his left hand he held a book high above his head, as if to say, 'I'll just finish this duel, then get back to writing *Don Juan*'. Across his pelvis were scrawled the words *Mad, Bad and Dangerous to Know* in an extravagantly loopy hand,

designed to denote literary class and historical authenticity. 'A tour de force! Josh Harper *is* Lord Byron,' proclaimed the billboard, the italicised 'is' settling the argument once and for all. '*Strictly Limited* Season!' Three months ago, back in August, when he'd first seen the billboard, Stephen had amused himself by imagining that 'Strictly Limited' referred to Josh Harper's abilities as an actor, but he wasn't sure if anyone else would find this observation funny, or accurate, and besides, there was no one to tell it to.

Stephen glanced once more at his watch: four minutes past now, nine minutes late, very unprofessional, unforgivable for the understudy. Still, he might get away with it, as long as Donna wasn't at stagedoor. He hurried unseen past the huddle of autograph hunters waiting for Josh – eight today, not a bad score—

'Ten minutes late, Mr McQueen,' said Donna, standing at stagedoor. Donna was the stage manager, a short, wide woman with a large, blunt face, like a painted shoe-box, brittle ex-Goth hair, and the surly demeanour of an embittered games teacher. Permanently dressed in regulation faded black denim, she carried the regulation big bunch of keys, which she now twirled round on her finger like a six-shooter.

'Phew!' said Stephen. 'It's like Piccadilly Circus out there!'

'Doesn't get any funnier, Stephen.'

'Sorry, Donna, it's the tube . . .'

'Not an acceptable excuse,' grumbled Donna, dialling her mobile.

'You're cheerful today, what's up with you?'

'He's not here,' said Kenny, the doorkeeper, from behind his desk.

'He's not here? Who's not here?'

'*He's* not here,' scowled Donna.

'Josh?'

'Yes, Josh.'

'Josh isn't here?'

'Josh isn't here.'

Stephen became aware of the sound of the blood in his head.

'But it's nearly curtain-up, Donna!'

'Yes, I'm aware of that.'

'Well – well, have you phoned him?'

'*Brilliant* idea,' said Donna, taking her phone away from her ear and waggling it at him. She licked her lips, pushed her shaggy fringe out of her eyes, readying herself to leave a message for the man himself, and for a brief moment she precisely resembled a fourteen-year-old girl about to ask a boy if he wanted to go ice-skating with her.

'Josh, sweetheart, it's your Aunty Donna here at the theatre. You're late, young man! I'll have to put you across my knee,' she mooned saucily into the air, tweaking the studs in her ear lobes. 'Anyway, we're *very* worried about you. Hopefully you'll walk through the door any second now, but if not, give us a call. Otherwise, we'll have to send young *Stephen* on . . .'

Stephen stood nearby, unhearing, rocking backwards and forwards slightly on the balls of his feet, making the

high, humming noise he made in times of stress. Here it is then, he thought. Finally – the Big Break. After all, this had never happened before. The 12th Sexiest Man in the World was *always* on time. Until this moment, Stephen had been quietly accepting of his fate, doomed to shadow not just the most successful, most popular, arguably the most talented young actor of his generation, but also the healthiest and luckiest. No matter what glamorous debauch he'd been to the night before, no matter what time he'd stumbled out of some Soho drinking den or premiere party, Josh would be there, 18.50 on the dot, signing autographs at stagedoor, flirting with the Wardrobe Department, dimpling his cheeks, tossing his hair. Josh Harper was invincible. If, God forbid, someone shot him, he'd almost certainly smile, and reveal the bullet gripped daintily between his large white teeth.

But not today. Whilst Donna cooed on to Josh's voice mail, Stephen was imagining a number of lurid scenarios –

Josh Harper tumbling down the treacherous cast-iron spiral staircase of his luxurious warehouse apartment . . .

Josh Harper struggling to pull his shattered leg from beneath the faulty home gymnasium, the phone lying just inches away . . .

Josh Harper clutching his belly and sliding beneath the blond-wood table of the exclusive sushi restaurant, his handsome face a virulent green . . .

Josh Harper smiling bravely as plucky paramedics race to extract him from the wheels of a runaway number 19 bus . . .

'I . . . I can't . . . can't feel my toes . . .'

'Not to worry, sir, Mr Harper, we'll have you out in just a mo.'

'But you don't understand, I've got to be at the theatre in five minutes.'

'Sorry, but the only theatre you'll be seeing tonight is the operating *theatre . . .'*

'Right, Stephen,' sighed Donna, looking at her watch, and thinking the unthinkable, 'we'd better get you in costume then. Just in case.'

Stephen was barely aware of the journey down the corridor to the number-one dressing room. He had a vague floating sensation, as if Donna were pushing him on a gurney. So, this is how it is, he thought, this is what good luck feels like. Though by no means a spiteful man, Stephen had been fantasising about just such a glorious catastrophe, six days a week, twice on Saturdays and Wednesdays, for the last three months now. When Stephen told Josh to break a leg, he meant it: break in two places, compound fractures, please. This was, after all, the harsh algebra of the understudy's job – for Stephen to succeed, Josh would have to suffer; an incapacitating disease, or a flesh wound of some sort, something in between flu and a mild impaling, something to take him down for between, say, forty-eight and seventy-two hours. Just long enough for Stephen to do the show tonight, refine his performance for tomorrow, get Terence the director back in, the casting people, the film producers, maybe even a critic or two, maybe discreetly call some other, better agents, the real high-fliers. The snap of an Achilles tendon, the wet

pop of an appendix, a spleen even, were all that separated Stephen from the chance to turn his life around.

They were in Josh's dressing room now, Stephen pulling off his coat and shoes, Debs from Wardrobe standing by, holding the costume, laundered and pristine, as Stephen started to undress. Donna was on the phone to Stagedoor. 'No sign of him yet? . . . Right, we'll give it five minutes, then we'll make an announcement . . . He's here, getting ready . . . Yes, I know . . . OK, well, keep me posted . . .'

Thank God, thought Stephen, he's not okay.

Debs from Wardrobe held out Byron's leather breeches, and Stephen took them solemnly, and started to pull them on. He had never boxed professionally, and was unlikely ever to take it up, but he imagined that this is what it felt like before a big fight: the reverence, the sense of ceremony. He tried to clear his head, to find some kind of calm, focused place, but in his mind's eye he was already picturing the curtain call . . .

Lights fade to black at the end of the show, and a hush falls over the audience. Moments pass. Then the applause breaks like thunder, great rolling waves of it. Donna and rest of the team stand in the wings, big, beefy, moist-eyed stagehands with tears in their eyes applauding, pushing a modest Stephen C. McQueen reluctantly back on to the stage. Then the roar of the audience in his ears as they rise as one, bunches of flowers skidding across the stage to his feet. Great waves of love and respect and validation hit him, nearly knocking him off his feet. Shielding his eyes against the spotlight, he squints out into the audience, and spots the faces of the people he loves – Alison,

his ex-wife; Sophie, his daughter; his parents; his friends – all grinning and laughing, screaming and shouting. He catches his ex-wife's eye, wide with new-found admiration and respect – 'You were right all along,' she seems to be saying. 'You were right to hold out, you were right not to give up. You are an actor of rare and exquisite depth and talent, and if you believe in something strongly enough, dreams really do come . . .

'Fuck me, bollocks, shit, hi people, sorrysorrysorry I'm late . . .'

. . . and panting, and tossing his hair, the 12th Sexiest Man in the World tumbled into the dressing room, entering, as always, as if someone had just thrown him a stick.

Stephen stopped putting on his leather trousers.

'Josh! You were about to give your Aunty Donna a heart attack!' beamed Donna, skipping to the door and tousling his tremendous hair. 'Mr McQueen here was just about to go and put your cozzy on.'

'Sorry, Steve mate,' Josh pouted apologetically, head cocked to one side. 'You must have thought it was your big break come at last, I expect.'

'Well, you know . . .'

Josh rubbed his arm in matey consolation. 'Well, not today, I'm afraid, Steve, my friend. Not today . . .'

Stephen forced something that approximated the shape of a smile, and started to climb out of the leather trousers. It was like landing on the moon, and being asked if you wouldn't mind staying behind and watching the capsule.

'So what is your excuse then, you bad boy?' Donna scolded Josh indulgently.

'No excuse, just had a bit of a personal situation on the home front, if you know what I mean.'

Stephen handed the leather trousers back to Debs, who smiled sympathetically and rehung the costume on the rail, ready for its rightful owner. Stephen saw that Donna was now sitting on his own pair of trousers.

'Excuse me, Donna . . .' said Stephen, standing a little behind her.

'Well, Josh, you're a very, *very* naughty boy,' mooned Donna, enthralled.

'I know, I know, I know!' said Josh, taking Donna's large hands and gallantly kissing the knuckles. 'Tell you what, you can come round and spank me after the show.'

'*Could I just get my trous . . . ?*' said Stephen.

'I might take you up on that.'

'And so you should.'

'*You're sitting on my . . .*'

'I will then.'

'Come to the dressing room.'

'*. . . if you could just . . .*'

'I'm looking forward to it.'

'*. . . just let me . . .*'

'. . . Not as much as I am. Bring a bottle! And a friend!'

'. . . Oooh, saucy boy . . .'

'Do you think I could get my trousers please, guys?' said Stephen, grabbing them, and tugging. Donna stood, glaring at him for breaking the spell. A moment passed.

'Well, I'd better get the old make-up on!' said Josh, tossing his locks. 'Can't keep the people waiting,' and he held Donna's head between two hands like a basketball,

kissed it with a loud 'mmmmmmoi', and settled in front of his mirror.

'*Shestooduponthebalconyinexplicablymimickinghimhiccupingandamicablywelcominghimin . . .*'

In the corridor, Donna scowled at Stephen. 'You look awful, by the way,' she said. 'Your face is completely grey.'

Stephen rubbed his hairline and examined his fingertips for traces of make-up; small smudges of mackerel blue and grey. He couldn't tell Donna he'd been moonlighting. 'Just a little bit . . . glandy, that's all,' he said, rubbing either side of his jawline with his fingertips to prove the point.

'Honestly, Stephen, you're *always* ill. If it's not your glands, it's pleurisy, or gastric *flu*, or your misplaced bloody *coc*cyx,' she said, then stomped off to get ready for curtain-up, her prison-warder's keys rattling against her hip as she went.

Stephen stood for a moment and watched her go. Once again, he was left with the sneaking suspicion that understudying someone like Josh Harper was a little like being a life jacket on a jumbo jet: everyone is pleased that you're there, but God forbid they should actually have to *use* you.