

My Own Worst Enemy

I push open the door to the toilets. I don't understand why other actors never use loos like I do. It's like my own private green room.

I breathe out slowly scrutinising myself in the mirror. My audition uniform matches my headshot, the soft black denim allowing freedom of movement and an archetypal 'butch' look. I carefully dampen my fingers from the dripping tap, and tame one loose hair back into its rightful place in my quiff.

I go into a cubicle and shake out my muscles. I swivel my tongue around my mouth clockwise and then anti-clockwise. I pull a section of my hair like a puppet string to correct my upright posture.

I place my hands on my abdomen and breathe deeply into my diaphragm. On the exhale, I violently push my abdomen out, with a 'ha' sound.

'Ha, ha, ha.' Deep breath in. 'Ha, ha, -'

There's a creak. I freeze. But after a few long seconds holding my breath, all I hear is the tap dripping, so I move on to my articulation exercises.

'Unique New York,' I say, enunciating every syllable.

'Unique New York.'

There's another creak, louder this time, recognisably the bathroom door. I break off mid-unique, my mouth frozen in its tight 'oo'.

Has one of the other actors found my spot? Or does someone just need a wee?

There's a slow tap of boots on linoleum. The door next to mine – there's only two cubicles in here – creaks plastically open, then shut, then locked.

I have to decide whether to make my presence known, pretend I'm doing a wee, and therefore rustle some loo roll (commit!). But the moment passes and I've stayed quiet too long. I glance at my watch: ten minutes until I'm scheduled to go in. I'll just have to creepily wait for this person to do their business and then carry on.

But there's no rustle of clothes from next door. Only the lid of a loo seat being flicked closed. The slight scuff of trainers on sticky linoleum. Then, like a renegade saying the password at the door of a speakeasy, a voice says,

'Unique New York.'

The articulation is effortless and flawless. The voice is slightly higher and brighter than mine, and the accent is unusual – New Zealand, I think, mixed with an inflection of something else. Irish?

I hold my breath. Am I being mocked, teased, or challenged? Could this be a bizarre coincidence?

Very seriously, I ask, 'A proper copper coffee pot?'

There's a pleased chuckle from the other side of the wall. A tingle dances along my spine. I'd have to practice a *lot* to make a laugh as charming as that.

'Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers,' they say.

I say it back, faster. But halfway through, they join in with me, so that we're saying it in unison.

I start again, trying to accelerate to the end of the line to beat them. But they keep up, laughing, with perfect diction in that unusual accent. Yes, definitely New Zealand and Irish, but there's still something else. I swear it's familiar in some way, but I can't place why.

'If Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers...'

I urge my mouth forwards, fumbling slightly but faster, racing through the last line to the punch and *just* beating them. We're both shouting now.

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‘Where’s the peck of pickled peppers Peter Piper picked?’

We break off triumphantly, and their laughter is infectious. I bark and then feel self-conscious at how ugly my laugh is compared with theirs.

‘Well,’ says the voice. ‘I have never felt so warmed-up.’

Damn it. What am I playing at, fraternising with the enemy before an audition? But wait, it might be alright. This could be the person who plays Kitty opposite my Nat... I could be signing up to perform opposite that voice.

‘Are you here for the part of Nat?’ I ask.

‘No, actually,’ they say, and my heart soars. ‘I’m here to do a massive shit.’

I laugh in surprise, then stop. The echo in here is not flattering. I wish I sounded sexier.

But then they add, ‘Yeah, I am actually here for the part of Nat. You?’

‘Oh...’ I say. ‘Me too.’

There’s a pause.

‘So, we can practice together,’ they say, at the same time that I say, ‘So, we’re rivals.’

There’s another pause. Then we both, at the same time, say, ‘Jinx.’

They laugh, that delightful laugh. ‘We probably just cancelled each other out.’

The wall next to me wobbles, like they’re leaning against it on the other side of the cubicle. I have an image of leaning against it too, like in a music video where the lovers are in different bedrooms thinking about each other.

I’m going mad. I stay sat.

‘I’m Em, by the way. Emmy Clooney. No relation.’

They laugh again.

‘God, I’m sorry. Do you have to say that every time?’

‘Yeah, it’s difficult not having a famous actor for a parent.’

The voice pauses for a moment, and I fear my joke hasn't landed. Then the angelic sound comes again and I smile to myself.

'I'm Mae. Mae Jones.'

'Mae Jones,' I echo, then blush. God, why am I being so embarrassing?

'My pronouns are she/her,' she adds.

'Oh! Yes! Sorry, I should have – me too.' I say, glad she can't see me flustering. 'It's a pleasure to, er... Does this count as meeting you?'

'Well, I don't know about you, but I'm planning to leave this bathroom stall at some point.'

She leaps up, clicks open her lock. There's the squeak of her shoes, and then I can see them under the gap at the bottom of my door. Well-worn, outrageously chunky, multicoloured trainers, their soles so large they're practically platform, turn towards me.

The tap drips. I hesitate.

'What's wrong?' Mae asks with a laugh. '*You* need to do a pre-audition shit?'

'No, I'

I don't want to break the spell. But that's stupid.

'Well then,' I say, to force myself. 'I'm coming out now.'

'I'm proud of you!'

I breathe in and open my cubicle door. Looking out, I lock eyes with myself in the mirror. But something is wrong.

Yes, my dark brown hair is short, my face is pale and slightly flushed, my eyes are blue, and one of my ears is pierced. But it's all... Off. It's like a game of spot the difference. I'm wearing the wrong clothes. In the mirror, my professional black audition outfit has become an clashing pink oversized shirt, over baggy blue jeans. My ear is pierced in the wrong ear, and instead of a hoop it's a glittering stud. Where

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my face is usually long and chiselled, in the mirror I have adorable dimples. I'm holding out my hand to shake, but in the mirror, I'm going in for a hug. And the smile in the reflection – a smile that's broader, straighter, more mischievous and charismatic than my own – is quickly dropping.

For a second, I have a sense of an alternate universe, a universe where I'm like myself, but better in every way.

Then I realise it's not me at all.

Mae is *exactly* my type.

