READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Later, when she couldn't, he remembered fondly the day they both--mother and son--forgot their lines.

He opened his mouth to sing the first line of his big solo and realized he had no idea what it was. Occasionally during his career, he'd seen fellow actors freeze, not knowing how to cover for themselves, and he'd helped them out, asking a question that included the answer: "Were you insane?" The actor would unfreeze: "I was insane, I tell you." The audience had been none the wiser, the show would go one. But now *he* was the lead, he was *alone* on stage, and, to make matters worse, his mother was in the audience.

His mother hadn't seen him act in three years. When he first moved to New York, she'd made an annual pilgrimage to see whatever show he was doing, but when she turned seventy, she'd said Manhattan was too much for her. Then, shortly after his thirty-sixth birthday, he, too, tired of the City. Homesick for the Midwest, a few months ago, he'd moved to the Chicago suburbs, not far from the small town where he'd grown up. Because of his job search and rehearsals, he hadn't seen her as much as he'd intended.

"La da de dah-or," he sang authoritatively, as if it meant something. His mother used to say, "When in doubt, remember the feeling. It doesn't matter what you say, as long as you say it with feeling."

His mother was also an actress, and had won awards in college, but hadn't acted since Roger was born. Instead, she'd trained him. From the time he was twelve until he graduated from high school, every year, for the Memorial Day ceremonies at the Lillian Lake Cemetery, she turned him into a little Lincoln. Costumed in a top hat, morning coat and an adhesive-backed fake beard that took his young skin with it was ripped off, he recited the Gettysburg Address from memory for the ladies of the Historical Society.

Afterwards, she always accepted the praise for his recitation. "We know where he gets his talent," the Society ladies would say. "You should've been a star." The way they looked at Roger, he understood it was somehow his fault that his mother had never made it to Broadway. Since he'd been born when she was thirty-eight, her failure couldn't realistically be blamed on him, but at the time, he didn't know that.

Despite the hours of rehearsal, as a youngster, he'd liked the crackle of his voice through the microphone, liked the respectful silence of the crowd's rapt attention, liked the whiff of tension: Would he stumble? Would his voice hold? Would he remember all the lines? Especially, he liked the sigh of relief at the end, and the applause.

The applause. The overheard praise was only slightly soured for him by his mother's reserved and mildly disappointed, "Good job," followed by a series of notes or "pick-ups" on how his performance could be improved next time by a change in emphasis, a longer pause, a more subtle gesture.

"Have to be honest," she'd say. "Artistic integrity is everything."

Uncertain of the limits of honesty, he'd asked her, right before he left for drama school, how he could be both honest and polite if a friend was in a show and either the show or the friend stunk. “What do you say then?” he’d asked.

With theatrical aplomb and a grand wave of her hand, she’d answered, “You say, ‘Congratulations.’”

After the last curtain call, Roger removed his false mustache, splashed some water on his face and changed into a long-sleeved white shirt and a pair of khakis. His mother'd come to the theater with her girlfriends, but he was going to take her out for Sunday supper.

He’d been looking forward to having dinner with her, but now his flub cast a pall on the entire evening. The newspaper critics had loved him on opening night, and, other than the missed line, he’d been happy with the afternoon’s performance. But he hadn’t been perfect, and he knew he’d disappointed his mother. What he wanted more than anything was for her to say something more than “Good job.” He wanted her to say, “Great!” and “You should've been a star!" Once, he’d overheard her say, “My son, the actor,” with the same pride as her friend Mrs. Youngquist, who was fond of boasting, “My son, the doctor,” but she'd never given him such praise to his face.

Reluctantly, he made his way to the theater lobby, where his mother and her friends were waiting to greet him.

“Thanks so much for coming,” he said to each of them, giving the friends each a peck on the cheek.

“You were marvelous,” Mrs. Youngquist said.

“Terrific.”

“So enjoyable.”

“Yes, congratulations,” his mother said, and the friends smiled. She was studying the show poster, mumbling the cast names. "Marilyn Steele. William Rutherford. Roger Hayes."

“We had a great cast,” he said, and the ladies agreed. They kissed him good-bye, and patted his mother on the shoulder.

“Well?” he asked. She’d said, “Congratulations.” He wanted to hear her critique and get it over with.

Her green eyes were as bright as ever, but she stared at him as if she didn’t understand his question.

“Did you like my love scene in the second act?” he asked.

“Yes, I did,” she said.

It was odd that she didn’t add her specific notes, suggest more action or more vocal variety, something.

“Did you notice I flubbed that line?”

He thought she took a double take. “With a new musical, it’s harder to know for sure,” she said.

"'La da de' wasn't my most creative cover," he laughed, amazed that his mother apparently had mellowed so much. "If the author were here, she'd kill me."

"It was loud," his mother said.

"I thought the sound guy did a pretty good job," he said.

"Too loud," she repeated, herself too loud. Even though he didn't agree with her, he was relieved, in a way, both that she had a criticism, and that it wasn't directed at him.

He helped his mother into his car and she snapped the seatbelt, settling herself in the way people nestle themselves in a favorite chair in front of the TV. She didn't say anything more about the show, and he decided to let the subject drop. Maybe later, after her usual Manhattan straight up, she'd tell him what she really thought.

He turned out of the parking lot and his mother broke her silence. "Main Street. Stop 4-Way. 14 North/ South. 36 East/West. You can go whichever way you want."

"Thanks!" he said. His mother had a terrible sense of direction and even in her youth had been known to get lost when she drove him to a friend's house to play. "I remember."

"35 M-P-H."

"I know."

"Detour Ahead. Men Working. Bump." She read each line evenly, without particular feeling, like an exercise in word recognition, a computer sounding out the word but not comprehending the meaning. "Regular 2-4-9-9. Super 2-5-9-9. Free Car Wash. Brakes.

Mufflers." Past the gas station, there was the local middle school, "Go Badgers, Beat the Knights," and a few old houses, "The Week. The Week. The Week." He saw a few houses with mailboxes and special boxes for the newspaper, which, it dawned on him, was called "The Week."

He began to scan both sides of the street, looking for the source of his mother's words. Road signs, billboards, signs in store windows--she was reading everything in sight. Why was she playing this silly game with herself rather than talking to him? Even criticizing the show would be preferable to her babbling like some woman who was out of her mind. He sped up, just over the limit; perhaps he could drive faster than she could read.

"Caring. Quick. Convenient. Healthcare for Young and Old." Without missing a beat, she added her own words, "I'm Old."

Like an actor who'd forgotten his lines, he froze, then turned full face to his mother's stoic profile.

She was leaning slightly forward. "Lillian Lakes Nursery. Two for One Close-out. Come In. Lillian Lakes Cemetery."

"You okay, Mother?" he asked.

She ignored him, intent on her signs.

"I asked if you're okay?" he said, louder.

"What?" she looked at him.

"Are you okay? You're reading all the signs."

“So?” Her eyes sparkled blankly.

“Nothing,” he murmured. When had this happened? He searched his memory, not completely sure that it could be trusted, but certain that three years ago she hadn’t been acting like this, not even a few months ago. She was only seventy-four, too young to forget her lines.

“I just thought that if you were going to read the signs, you’d do it with a little more feeling,” he said lightly.

A wonderful smile crossed her face, as if she were taking her curtain call. "Ah," she said. “My son, the actor.”