

A TWISTER ON STAGE 14

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I met Dane in the twister on Stage 14. I'd been helping out the Props Department while they built the Kansas set for *The Wizard of Oz's* last weeks of filming. I had doubted that a giant muslin windsock would pass for a tornado, but Martinez assured me that it'd all come together. It always did. Besides, MGM sunk so many thousands of dollars into this floor-to-ceiling twister, he said, it was bound to work. I thought the money would be better spent driving the crew to Kansas and waiting for Mother Nature to perform. We sprayed fuller's earth and dirt from air hoses, and the muslin inhaled it, chewed it, then spat it back out. For the past couple of days, I returned home with layers of dirt caking my skin. I'd swept the yellow brick road. I'd stuck individual poppies into a set piece. But this was something else.

On that day in March by ten in the morning, I had sprayed fuller's earth over Dorothy's house for two hours. I breathed dirt, tasted dirt, became dirt. The director yelled cut, and that's when the kid emerged from the catwalk dirt clouds.

"I'm Dane Gray," he said in a voice too chipper for morning.

As the dust cleared, I got a good look at his face. He was a young kid with sticks of blonde hair groomed up and away from his round face. I shook his smooth and callus-free hand. He pulled away and sneezed into a clean shirt sleeve. He couldn't have been on the dirt crew.

"I'm replacing Bobby. Mister Gillespie wants more clouds."

Martinez would have been furious to see his inexperienced successor. The kid lacked the cherished cynicism of a well-lived life. But Martinez didn't have a choice. He coughed up yellow mucus and they sent him home.

I nodded to Martinez's air hose and the kid picked it up. He held it with a gentle grip, like it was made of glass, like he'd never held anything before. They called action, and yellow-black smoke spilled from Martinez's hose and over the miniature set. I assume the twister spun again, though I couldn't see much but myself, the kid, the gantry, and the

huge sock twister making its way across the stage.

By lunch break, the kid had inhaled entire clouds of smoke and dirt. As I smoked my cigarette on the wall of Stage 14, he welcomed the clouds of tobacco like fresh air. I liked the silence of lunch time and the California sun, but quiet made the kid restless and more talkative. He told me that he turned eighteen one month ago, that there was a girl he fancied in the costume shop, that he fell in love with horror but couldn't get a job at Universal. That's why he was here. That, and he had an aunt who worked for someone in the "White Lung," that shiny building full of executives that loomed over the MGM walls.

"I've never had the looks or brains for acting," said the kid, "but I think I might like special effects, like what Mr. Gillespie does."

The cigarette smoke burned the back of my throat. "Mr. Gillespie's a set designer."

"Not for WOZ. He's special effects."

Wizard of Oz, I wanted to correct him, but there was no point in correcting this generation. He'd try the full name then slip back into the short version before long. Kids these days wanted ease and speed. I allowed the cigarette to droop from my lips, as the kid looked to his feet and kicked the toes of his shoes against the pavement.

"Rumor has it you got shot in the leg during the war," Dane said.

I considered whether I could feign a limp through the rest of production. "That's a good one, kid. Who told you that?"

The kid was silent.

"What else you got? What else do they say about me?"

He blushed pink. "Well, if you want me to be honest..." He licked his dry lips. "They say you cried when you heard Miss Garland's song the other day."

I removed the cigarette from my lips and pressed it into the ground with all the other littered cigarette butts. Then I strolled in the opposite direction without a look back. I

thought I was rid of him and there was a brief moment of relief, until I heard the beat of footsteps marching toward me.

“Can you give me a tour, Mr. Ross?” he said, though I had never told him my name.

I hastened my steps. “Go ask your aunt, kid. She works with the big names.”

“She said the crew would do a better job.”

“I’m no tour guide. I’m just a stagehand.”

“And I’m eager to learn from a stagehand.”

“I’m just some guy who was plucked off the street. You’d be better off finding someone with connections.”

The words stung with truth, and I expected the kid would leave a nobody alone, but his feet stayed planted. His eyes were bright and unblinking. I looked him up and down, tracing no smugness in his expression. He must have needed a walk, something to cool him down. Sweat had drenched his shirt. “You can join me,” I said, “but I won’t be explaining nothing.”

I continued forward, hands in the pockets of my overalls. I left my offer in the air and was surprised when Dane walked at my side, keeping my pace. We didn’t stop for lunch and the kid didn’t complain. We crossed the street to Lot 2, where the security knew my face. They returned the tilt of my cap and welcomed us inside. The kid asked questions like “where is your favorite place on the lot?” and “how long have you worked here?”

“Three years,” I grumbled. Jack McMaster was plucked from the street at the same time as me. Jack climbed his way up the ladder to prop shop star. Jack sewed that muslin windsock into a twister. I could do more than throw dirt at it, surely, but work like that was above my pay. We’re not all as lucky as Jack, I thought. I took Martinez for example, who had paid his dues and had yet to design a set.

Dane was tongue-tied when we hit the first set. We walked through a grimy New York street lined with multi-story buildings, an old English village with timber-lined houses, and a Western saloon. We strolled through a road of suburban households with green lawns and perfect landscaping. We nodded to cameramen and actors, who were dressed in costumes from every place and time in history. In less than an hour, I had lived a million lives that were not my own. Memories of my youth vanished into each new landscape until only the current day remained and I savored the detachment.

On the way back to Lot 1, Stage 14, all I could think of was dirt and the creation of the twister. Generate a flawless storm. That was

the mission. We’d wrap *The Wizard of Oz* in a week or so, and the luxury of certainty would disappear. I’d beg for another project, but it would be pointless without Martinez’s help. He was my only friend on set. “My dad served, too,” he’d told me once. And it was like he knew me, though we never spoke of it again. Until now, the man had never taken a sick day in his life but happened to be out on the one time I needed him most.

At this time of day at the open stage door, Martinez would have been resting his back against the wall outside and saying, “In or out, my friend,” knowing both choices were about 100 degrees. Then I would have said something like, “We’ll sweat it together.” And he would have said, “Let’s see which one of us will fry first.” He did, apparently. He was probably bedridden, his condition worsening like the sickened stagehands and props men before him.

We were up in the rafters when Dane Gray, who should’ve been the epitome of wellness, hacked into his sleeve. I barely dodged his flying spit. He coughed so hard that his spine tucked into his thin back. I placed a gentle hand on his shoulder while he hurled, arm pressing into his stomach. The stage lights illuminated specks of static dust. There was no clean air for Dane or for any of us. He lifted his head, his face purpling for lack of air, dribbles of saliva hanging from his lips. He gazed up at me with the eyes of a dying animal.

I patted his back once, just once, so that he’d know I was there, and whispered over his hunched frame. “Wipe the spit from your chin or they’ll send you home.”

I took a step away from him, but he followed.

“I can’t go home.” The kid’s voice was weak. “This is my dream.”

“Then you have to shrug it off. Just take a moment to breathe.”

“Five minutes, Art,” called one of the stagehands below. I waved them back to work.

“Is anyone watching?” the kid asked.

“No,” I lied, “You’re fine.” The kid sighed with relief. “Here’s what we’re going to do, kid. Stand yourself upright and let the color come back to your face.”

While the stagehands tested an air hose, the kid mustered the strength to lift himself. I put my hand to his forehead. A cool sweat gathered at his hairline.

The hose hissed, and then a thunder shook the stage. Something sparked and exploded, rattling the walls of the set, like a cannon, like a grenade. There were screams from the crew. I dropped to the ground for cover, taking the

kid with me, but he wasn't the kid anymore. He was Frank, in the flesh, eighteen years old, pale as a ghost and terrified. A thousand bullets whistled over us, and I covered our heads for protection. "Stay down," I commanded. "Stay down." Then all went quiet. The packed earth became the metal catwalk again and Stage 14 reappeared below me, miniature cornfield and farmhouse and all. The muslin behemoth was unmoved. I inhaled, my lungs pressing hard against my ribcage until they filled with dust.

"One of the compressors exploded," a stagehand called. "We're getting another one."

I climbed to my feet, retrieved my hat, and dusted my overalls. "See, kid. Nothing to worry about." When I offered a hand to Dane,

who was gripping the catwalk, he was too petrified to take it. "They said five minutes," I mumbled. I moved behind him, dug my fists under his armpits, and raised him to standing position.

The afternoon was reserved for the twister. The muslin

sock went up and down the track a hundred times, spinning and gathering dirt. The two of us lived in carbon clouds and dirt storms, and the kid was polite enough to cough between takes. At the end of the day, the kid's coughing got us reassigned to the fans, where we threw leaves and debris into the air and watched as they disappeared into the set. I wanted to tell the crew that we barely knew each other, that they should put me back up on that catwalk. I could handle it. I could go all day. I could be a stagehand, a prop man, a set designer. I could direct this whole production if they'd let me. But when I looked into the kid's glossy eyes, I knew that he needed somebody, and I happened to be the only body around who he knew. So I kept with Dane.

The crew was dismissed at eight o'clock as soon as the cameras were packed up and returned to the Technicolor plant for the night. No cameras, no filming. The twister rested dormant and upright between the parked car under the stage and an unmoving gantry. The crew's chatter released into the open air. We exited into the sliver of road between stages, made notions to the stars above, and dragged our feet to our cars. As we dispersed, the kid didn't budge.

He admitted, with some prying, that he had left too late to grab a ride with his aunt in payroll.

"She didn't wait up for you?" I asked.

"She said I could bike home," he said.

"No," is all I said.

The kid followed me to my car, and I drove him twenty minutes northeast in the opposite direction from Mom's house. The kid's long legs barely fit in the small car. At first, he sat stiff and upright, trying not to get dirt on the seats, but when he saw my dirt handprints across the steering wheel, he eased. He didn't ask any questions, but he gave straightforward directions, and we never got lost. We pulled up to his aunt and uncle's house, a modest, symmetrical bungalow set upon an extensive, well-groomed yard. Their nephew was covered in dirt with his slicked back mane coming undone.

When the kid disappeared into the pitch of night, I waited for the door to slam. It didn't. I craned my neck across the passenger seat and saw that he was standing there, staring at the front door.

"You need me to escort you?" I asked.

He breathed deeply; his breath whistled.

"Do you want me to stay for a minute?"

"Why do you do it?" the kid asked. "You stand in the dirt all day. Nobody thanks you for what you do. Don't days like this seem ridiculous? It's a long piece of stocking and a three-foot-tall house. Will people really believe it's a twister?"

We waited in silence for a minute and I watched his young face wrinkle in desperation. I wanted to say something that could relieve him, but I feared no words could quell his doubts. "Why do you think we do anything, kid?" I put the car in reverse. "I'll see you tomorrow," I said, though I didn't believe it. The kid slammed the door shut and as I pulled away from his driveway he didn't look like a kid anymore, but someone different and older, with shoulders hunched and life drained from him. He dragged his feet to the door and disappeared into shadow.

As I drove home, I recalled the day on set two weeks ago, when I overheard Miss Garland's recording of *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. I didn't think us stagehands were meant to hear it, but when Director Three ran off to direct some other big picture and Director Four entered the scene, the new director wanted to hear the music. Every stagehand stopped to listen. There were no dry eyes in the crew.

Who told Dane that I had cried? Was it told to him in caution? *He might have a hard exterior, but he cried to Judy Garland's song.* Everyone cried then, me included.

Memories of my youth vanished into each new landscape until only the current day remained and I savored the detachment.

Dane Gray didn't come to Stage 14 the next day, but I saw him during my visit to Lot 2. He was cleaned up, dirt free, following a gaggle of "White Lung" executives into a Western saloon. A woman my age trailed behind him, notebook in hand, stiffening the lines of his shirt collar. I removed my hat as they passed, but they didn't notice me. I combed the sweat away with my fingers, but when I remembered the silver streaks of hair gathering above my ears, I slid the hat back on. I'd be better off suffering the merciless California sun.

On the way back to set, I saw Dane in every kid under twenty. I saw him as props men, stagehands, designers, and assistants. He was camera operators, carpenters, and costume stitchers. Perhaps Frank would've found a home here if Fate hadn't shipped him overseas with the rest of us.

Without Martinez's banter or quips, I buried myself in work. When they called a wrap on the twister, I was the first one at Jack McMaster's side ready to pull that raggedy muslin windsock down. When the giant fans and fuller's earth needed to move, I was there with ready hands. My back ached and my fingers blistered, but the pain was worth the magic. People sitting in the theater wouldn't see a muslin stocking gliding across a stage. They'd see a twister. They wouldn't see a group of stagehands shooting dirt from an air compressor. They'd see damage and danger, nature and destruction. For a couple hours in the theater, they would be transported. And perhaps for some, when they saw the right picture at the right time, it would be all they needed to feel alive again. ●

**We waited in
silence for a
minute and I
watched his
young face
wrinkle in
desperation.
I wanted
to say
something
that could
relieve him,
but I feared
no words
could quell
his doubts.
"Why do you
think we do
anything, kid?"
I put the
car in reverse.**
