

Knew and Seen by Ian Kolesnikoff

You say stop. And I'll say no. Say I'm on one, that I have something to prove. It means pursuing a better job, and many things to fill the emptiness you feel growing inside your core person. Say picture this, Melo said. He's an old soul, primed for a war that isn't being fought. Close your eyes, Kali, and actually try to picture it.

Write it down the way I say it.

Say the money lures the boy in too deep. Say that it felt like oxygen in that it felt necessary for us to exist, and near automatic to take in, greedily, because this is a race, no matter what anybody else says.

What are you on?

What are you talking about, Melo?

Don't overthink this.

Say it the way I'm telling it to you.

Say it's for you to decide what's real, and what's an act, said to provoke your critical, intuitive senses into action, moral obligation, or sympathies. Or maybe think the opposite, that it's wordnoise, so you can dismiss me like everyone else dismissed me, which was a mistake, Melo said.

He stood up from the brickwork steps. He wasn't looking at her. He held a faraway look. He said it was nice catching up, sis. But, I gotta go. I gotta run.

Then he turned his back to Kali, and she didn't appreciate that.

Melo, where are you going?

Don't be like that, he said. I'm going for a likkle walk. I gotta take a piss. Don't be clingy. We don't like clingy. I'm not going anywhere, across the street, he gestured, to the corner store for an orange drink and a candy bar.

You want something?

Say it lubricates the whole swallowing ordeal.

It started, he was pointing, on the left side of the staircase, with a vision, or a gut feeling that you're supposed to be doing more to help the cause. But it's abstract.

Hands and feet.

Say it's pulling him away from the pursuit of art, because it's for profit.

Say that's how it happens.

It becomes the new natural.

You think you know me, but you don't know shit. Tell them that. Living in the middle means living in the extremes, and we are defined by our extremes, lately. Say the boy branches out. He's moving up in the shitstem, to the insipid right end of the taste marketability spectrum. Like, *if you work in marketing or advertising, kill yourself*. Who said that?

Melo was looking at her.

Make it seem like everything he thinks he thinks in broad brush strokes. Say the boy wants to diversify his portfolio. Say he puts music on the back burner, and gets a feel for the other branches of the performing arts. He has a symmetrical face, eyes that span from cool grey, to hurricane black without adequate warning, and a square jaw line. He does the fashion thing. From there, he meets people. He dabbles in acting. Say he gets good fair reviews for his first bit performance, a small role in a campy thing, which shows that he's eager and versatile. Big surprise. He's not hardcore. He's not defined by his lyrics. He has talent, and the skill to seem vulnerable, on camera. The boy has a winning smile and he is winning people the world over with his show of depth.

Say it seemed, at one time, like he's on the fast track to superstardom.

Say that.

All the magazines that think they are gatekeepers to legitimacy want the boy for a cover story without saying anything tangible. They fall to their knees, they fawn. Say that's

the dream. He's got that rare gift, he excites our collective imagination, although some people in the industry act surprised, like what he was supposed to be was fatalism, that street stuck attitude.

Producers flock around the boy. They invite him inside their small, and getting smaller everyday circle. Say it's been arranged beforehand. He's making moves, but the boy's smart. He doesn't make rash, or pressured decisions. Ultimately, he remains patient. Say he's not going to do anything super dumb like make his art into a political statement, or a secret message for the audience to decode, anything that might undermine his progression within the establishment. Say the boy waits for the right script. He knows his next movie has to be a step forward, not backward, or side to side. Say he's a rare breed. It has to be the best, or don't talk to me, because he's a perfectionist.

Out of the pile, one day, the boy picks a thread and reads himself into the main role. He feels inspired by the arc, like it was meant for him, it feels that true, and alive, and honestly, the boy thinks, I was born for this.

At the shoot, he meets a talented young actress and they hit it off spectacularly. Say when it's a wrap they are seen around Hollywood conspiracy holding hands in paparazzi pictures so sepia tinted people get the idea that they're dating!

Say it's a misconception.

They don't feel strong feelings for each other.

It's only done to further their commercial appeal.

Say a couple of months later, the boy puts out an album, and it does numbers. And yet, before he goes on tour, he decides to take on a third, more mainstream film, a role he's not exactly comfortable with, but thinks he can summon.

It's a war drama opposite a seasoned vet who is nominated for best actor practically every time he decides to do his belt up.

The movie is a win. It's like the texture of buttered popcorn, oversaturated and easy to swallow, because we are familiar with a barrage of bullets. When the award season comes around, the boy is nominated for best supporting role. Some people say they knew and seen all along. His star is bright.

He's a shoe in for the big award. It's not a matter of luck, or fate, or taste, which is fickle. It's in the cards. All he has to do is crawl on his hands and knees, but he doesn't have to beg for it.

The boy does the interview circus, says the right things and stays above the fray when they attempt to bring him down to their level like, Did he ever imagine dumb shit from where he was at, you know, gang affiliate, ghetto to greatness, that toxic narrative that continually sells our people short.

The boy, having been put on the spot, thinks about his response, actually takes a moment, and chews his food with his mouth closed, executing his will with precision.

*Bap-bap.*

It's his time and he knows it. That's the problem. He knows it. Say it's not one of those overdoses where you know thumbs up what's going to happen, that you're going to black out and get rescued by the medics lurched over like a zombie on the staircase outside Jackson Square.

Say stop this!

Say on the red carpet, the boy wears his mom on his arm, which causes a few groans from the scrum because they were expecting someone younger, and more fashionable, though she's dressed well, and looks pretty good for her age, it's hard to tell because her face is pulled back and plumped in places from plastic surgery, which doesn't make her look good, or feel any younger, but does make it seem like she has enough of it to burn, and a willingness to prostrate herself before the throne of: I am not good enough, yet.

In the scrum, everyone expected he'd be there with his girlfriend slash actress, but the boy says that she's away on set doing something way up north Hamilton, some post epoch, or apocalyptic survival picture, when, in truth, he'd seen her flirting with a film producer at a pre-party, tilting her chin back laughing then touching his chest like she thought no one was watching her debase herself.

He receives many compliments and directions where to face.

The flashes pop.

Cue the music. On screen, we are welcomed inside the auditorium. The camera pans over the crowd. See the grand stage. They've spared no expense for the set decorations. You'd think it's a real winter palace from the way it looks like a gilded toilet seat that squirts lukewarm water when your finished scrolling through your news feed. Say the host is politically motivated, satirical, self-effacing, but not hard-hitting.

Say he doesn't have to wait long. The boy's category is one of the first to be called, best supporting actor. Show a clip of his performance, along with the other nominees not even worth consideration they're that affected seeming.

The moment of truth arrives. The envelope opens and press the button they say the name that's written on the cue card almost exactly in unison.

Some Other Guy.

Who?

Say the boy is crestfallen.

Don't say that he's upset, or disappointed, in the result.

You must use the word: crestfallen.

He didn't win the prize. He was supposed to win.

Someone else won.

Some other guy.

Fkn goof.

Around him, people are standing, and yet the boy remains seated. Say he doesn't know what to think. He doesn't know what to do. He feels the bitterness in his gut, rise to his tongue, watching the scene unfold with nonchalance, but inside he is shook. He is crestfallen.

Slowly, drinking it in, the crowd, the cheer, the respect, some other guy takes the stage, stands at the microphone, adjusts his suit jacket, then waves to the crowd.

Sit down, or I know you.

Thank-you.

Most of the audience are still standing ovation. They seem truly happy for the moment. It is a recognition of talent, a star is born, or they are fabulous at pretending to love one another, dressed fabulously because they are attention fetishists who represent themselves materially.

Into the microphone guy coughs up a lung, thanks everyone and sit down please he says he is truly humbled (hand over heart gesture). Some other guy emits a stereotypically white bread speech, dedicating everything he owns to his family, and to God (upper caps), and to the spirit of Bill Hicks, may he rest eternally in peace and in laughter. Say this fkn guy points to the sky inside, and says, in his best Shakespearian timbre, Whatup Gus, thx mama for all your support, and 4 tying my bowtie tonight, I was XOXO so nervous, I'm telling you, my hands are still shaking.

Fkn guy touches all the spots he's prepared to touch, and when he's done with his speech there's still ten seconds left on the clock. Say he's that economical. So in with a breath five seconds left, before the orchestra plays him off, fkn guy reaches into his tweed jacket, and, from his pocket, takes a hand-carved, crystal, basketball, a globe paperweight that he reveals to the audience, holding it out towards the camera, then starts manipulating between his fingertips like a busker looking for a handout on the corner of Main and James North.

Zoom in so we can see it. The language of the ball is simple. But time's up and the screen goes fuzzy with visual noise. Cut to commercial.

Say the first commercial is for body wash.

The second ad is for condoms.

And here's the thing, Melo said, he was pointing.

Back from commercial break, it's not the auditorium anymore. What we see instead is one of those prerecorded scenes they have in award shows because living life in real time has its risks, and the thing with big money makers is you can't afford to alienate the vocal minority.

It's hard to tell if it's a movie, Melo said, it's so well lit, and professionally shot.

All you need to know is that there's money behind it.

And then (snap your fingers) we're back.

Back to life.

Or, back to me.

You got it?