

Out of Character

by Oliver Hunt

By day the Actor's supposed to look professional, which simply means button-up shirt, tie, no jeans and no street shoes, a dress code he adheres to without complaint. He works in data entry, a cubicle gig he'd landed as a temp. His Manager, a little pink nervous man, motions him into the back office, where he stands across from the Manager's desk as the Manager sits, tapping his stubby fingers on his day planner. The Manager says You know what I'm about to tell you, right?

The Actor nods, his longish hair tied back, his Beard a Thing now-a thick, wooly distraction, a Presence. Co-workers have started calling him Jesus, Manson, Foghat, Doobie Brother, hippie, hipster, Grizzly Adams, Dude Lebowski... there's really no end to it.

Weeks ago, a known and respected Director offered him a role in a play he was helming. The Role is that of a Homeless Canadian Native American. The Actor is none of those things. The Character has no name in the play, he's listed simply as The Man. The Director asked the Actor if he'd mind growing a Beard. He told the Actor up front he won't have many lines. He'll mostly terrorize and rough-up one sexually confused and mentally unstable character, and quietly stalk the rest of the cast from platforms in the set's background. The Director knows growing a Beard is a sacrifice for a not very large role.

The Actor agreed to it, however. Even though it looks like a small role in the script, it's a challenging and physical one. It gives the Actor a chance to play Menacing and Intimidating, things he isn't in his regular life. Plus he'd be a fool to turn down a chance to work with this Director.

A couple of days into growing the Beard, the Manager called him into his office and said he didn't want to say anything, but the Actor looked a bit stubbly, like he'd spent the last few days blowing his paycheck on penny slots, heh heh. The Manager laughs after every

sentence, like he's always just kidding but not really. Then he cleared his throat and said it just looks unprofessional.

The Actor told the Manager he was in the process of growing a Beard, for a play. Since he doesn't work directly or face to face with the public, he didn't think it should be a problem. The Manager nodded and said Okay, but told the Actor he'd better grow a full Beard and keep it maintained. You can't just be stubbly and unkempt looking, the Manager said, and the Actor said Of course.

The Actor's Beard crawled up his cheeks and around his jaw like ivy. His hair grew past his shoulders. The Director and other cast members made comments during rehearsals, saying You are really bringing this scene to life, man! I mean, the Beard really does something to you! It makes your eyes look crazy! It makes you look more ragged, more feral. The Director and other actors joked about how the Beard will start stealing scenes. How the Beard has a great future in acting and how they should just feature the Beard on the marquee. The Actor, not wanting to be upstaged by his own Beard, actually panhandled- for research- but gave anything he'd received to actual homeless people. People evaded, sneered at, and verbally abused him, displaying contempt, pity, and avarice. There were a few people, who looked well-off, who looked like they could kill him.

Soon enough, The Actor disappeared into his role. The Director said Next time I cast you, I've gotta give you something with more meat, man. You're killin' it. The other actors agreed, they said At first I thought it was the Beard, but no, you're channeling something. It's kinda scary.

So the Actor knows what the Manager's about to say. People think the Actor's job is to pretend. Maybe that's what he'd done most of the time, pretended to be one thing or another, depending on the time of day or where he was. But now he's made a thing happen and let a thing happen, he's cultivated and so earned something. The Actor is a distraction, a Presence. The little pink man behind the desk tapping his fingers winces. He can tell the

Actor's done pretending anything, and the Actor knows he can't
rehearse the next moment.

