

Actor-Activist

by vic fortezza

A dark-haired, handsome man adjusted the headset he was wearing, leaned toward a microphone, and eyed his host, a curly-haired man with a toothy grin, who sat up straight as he received a cue from his producer.

"We're back. If you're just joining us, we've been chatting with actor-activist Alfred Tinto." He looked at his guest. "Al, in our remaining moments, why don't you sum up."

"Thanks, Frank. It's simple, really. The administration lied to justify its war for oil profits. They aren't fooling anybody any more. They have no regard for the working stiff, let alone the poor, women, minorities, or the environment. They're plunderers. The hurricanes revealed them for what they truly are. People are starting to realize this, as the polls indicate. The war in Iraq is doomed. Let's support our troops by bringing them home."

He leaned back, satisfied. His host was smiling.

"I couldn't have said it better. Thank you."

Minutes later Tinto was at a bathroom sink, snorting a line of cocaine. He looked in the mirror and straightened his tie. His suit was tailored perfectly, hugging incipient paunch. His hair was slick, not a single one out of place. He had a gold ring on each pinky.

He hit the street gazing at his Rolex. He did a double-take as a man in uniform, knife handle protruding from his back, brushed past him. He assumed it was some sort of counter protest, and smirked, the issue too serious to have one nod to the clever humor of the ruse.

"Open your eyes," he said. "Read the Times. Don't believe everything your leaders tell you."

"Only the ones you'd vote for," said the ex-Marine, continuing on his way.

"We're not the ones stabbing you in the back. The administration is."

Tinto followed him with his eyes. Apparently the display hadn't

been intended solely for him, as he'd first believed. So many know-it-alls yelled at him in the street.

Brain-washed, he thought.

A chauffeur was holding open the door of a limousine.

"Thanks. What's your name again?"

"Dan."

"I get a different driver every time. They must all be Republicans."

Dan chuckled.

"Or maybe it's because I smoke. You mind?"

Dan shook his head. "Customer's always right."

Tinto held out the pack. "Want one?"

"Nah. I done a lotta dumb things in my life, but smokin's not one of 'em."

Tinto begrudged the point, although it was a bit insulting.

As soon as he was seated, his cell phone began playing the theme to *The Exorcist*. He made a face.

"What d'you want?" He pulled the device away from his ear.

"Central Park, Don. I have to stop off at my apartment."

"It's Dan," the chauffeur corrected, shifting into "Drive."

Tinto excoriated the caller in the bluest terms. "You turn my kid against me and you expect me to be civil. Go...."

He cut off the call.

"Don't ever marry an actress, Don."

Dan's shoulders rolled briefly in a titter. "I'll never hafta worry about that."

Tinto leaned back, loosened his tie, and pressed a button on the cell phone. "It's Al. Anything new?" He listened a moment. "What am I paying you for, you lowlife? You've seen the reviews for my last two films. I'm hot. I want leads, not supporting roles - and I want the dough that goes with it. And you better not skim. You business guys are all alike, all shysters. I'll make your life more miserable than I make my ex-wife's."

He hit the "End" button.

"Pull over. I want to get a paper."

He approached a kiosk, plucked a copy of the *Times*, and reached

for his billfold.

"Beautiful day, huh?" said the proprietor, a young Latino male, beaming.

With so much on his mind, Tinto hadn't noticed that the sun was shining and the temperature was ideal. He assumed he'd been recognized and dreaded the thought of having to pretend he was flattered. He froze momentarily as he noticed that the man was wearing an Army jacket and that one of its sleeves was folded neatly and pinned at the shoulder. He wondered if the arm had been lost to a roadside bomb. He was baffled by the man's smile.

"Keep the change," he said, handing over a five.

"Thanks. Enjoy the day."

As Tinto entered the limousine, anger welled within him. He did not understand why the young man was not embittered. He himself had never served and yet he was as bitter as could be about the loss of life in Iraq.

Ignorance is bliss, he thought.

He directed the driver to a luxury co-op in midtown.

"Wait right here," he said. "I'll be right down. Leave it running."

The doorman tipped his hat. "How are you, sir?"

"Peachy."

He rode the elevator to the 20th floor and knocked at a door.

"Lynn?"

There was no reply.

"Probably out sucking...."

Annoyed at having to negotiate the security requirements, he burst into the one-

bedroom flat, which he used whenever he was running late and didn't feel like making the drive home. He hurried to the bedroom. He was almost disappointed that Lynn wasn't having sex with someone her own age. He was tiring of her.

He found a note on the kitchen counter. "Audition," it said.

"Yeah, you have a shot," he said ironically, "stupid...."

He opened a drawer and pulled out a sandwich bag that contained

cocaine. He muttered peevishly, as there was much less in it than the last time he'd checked. Lynn was obviously developing an uncontrollable taste for the stuff. He put the bag in an inside pocket of his jacket.

He emerged from the building munching on an apple. He stopped in his tracks and gazed about, arms outstretched.

"Where's my driver?"

"The cops chased him," said the doorman.

"I told him to wait right here."

"He should be pulling up any second. He's been around the block twice already."

Tinto stood there muttering. The driver avoided eye contact as he approached.

"Don't let them push you around," said Tinto, seating himself.

Dan shrugged, apparently at a loss for words.

"Let's go back downtown. I'm in the mood for a shrimp parm' hero."

"I know the place."

"Take Broadway."

"You sure? I know a faster way."

"It's right off Broadway."

There was a demonstration underway near 42nd Street. Tinto smiled, despite the delay it caused him.

"Pretty soon the antiwar movement'll be as big as it was in the sixties."

"I hope that don't hurt our boys over there."

"It'll help them in the long run."

"I hope you're right."

"Of course I am. How many Vietnam vets were saved by the last movement?"

"That's not what they tell me."

"You must be talking to lifers."

"Ain't everybody in Iraq a volunteer?"

"They didn't volunteer to get shot and blown to pieces."

Fortunately traffic wasn't bad. They traveled the two miles in 15

minutes.

"Do me a favor, Don. Go in and get it for me. I don't want to get tied up shaking hands and taking pictures. I'm in a hurry. Buy yourself lunch too."

He handed a twenty to Dan, who hesitated.

"I hope we don't get a ticket."

"Don't worry. The cops know me. They know nobody's a bigger union backer than me."

As he was waiting, he peered through the window and spotted two men at a street corner. He exited the car and approached the pair. They smiled, apparently anticipating work.

"Do you speak English?" said Tinto.

"I do," said one, accent thick.

"You shouldn't allow yourselves to be taken advantage of."

The man looked away, apparently disappointed. The other gazed at Tinto perplexedly as the latter continued to speak.

"*Que dice?*" he said to his companion when the stranger had ceased.

The other shrugged.

As Tinto turned, a man in fatigues limped past him on a cane.

"Hey, it's what's his name?" said the ex-soldier, who apparently was missing a leg.

Tinto squelched anger. He hated when fans got his name wrong or mistook him for another actor or mocked him, as he sensed was the case here, although he wasn't entirely sure, as the jibe, if it was a jibe, had been delivered deftly. To his surprise, the man seemed to be on the job, as he was carrying a large bundle of envelopes — and he was smiling as if everything was right with the world.

What a sin, said Tinto to himself, anger again welling in him.

He reached the limousine the same time as the driver. There was a ticket beneath the windshield wiper. Dan's shoulders slumped.

"Must've been a meter maid," said Tinto. "I'll take care of it."

Dan seemed skeptical. Miffed, Tinto snatched the ticket from him.

"I know people. Who d'you know?"

Dan looked away. "Did you want a soda?"

"No. I'll eat at home."

"Here's the change."

"Keep it."

"Thanks."

As Dan opened the passenger door, Tinto paused.

"Wait."

He pulled a ten from his billfold and approached a homeless man who was seated with his back to the wall of a soup kitchen.

"Here you go, pal."

"Bless you," said the man drunkenly, arms outstretched.

Dan was grinning broadly. "Free meal and a ten — God bless America."

Tinto smirked. He hated people who lacked compassion.

The limousine rolled passed the day laborers.

"These guys have no idea they're being exploited."

"I dunno," said Dan. "They wanna make a better life for their kids, like my ol' man did. They're willin' to do the dirty work people on welfare won't do."

"My father worked hard too. He taught school for thirty years."

Dan tittered. "Mine pushed a wheelbarrow 'til he was sixty-five, God rest his soul. Now that's work. I got it so much easier than he did."

"We have an obligation to change things for the better for these people."

"Ain't they tryin' to do that for themselves?"

Tinto sniffed. "All they're doing is making it tougher for union guys."

"I was in a union once. I paid dues and still got laid off."

"That should be against the law."

Tinto dialed his phone and was connected to a talk show host on the west coast. By the time the interview was finished, the car was on the Long Island Expressway, which was bumper to bumper. The phone again played the theme from "The Exorcist." He muttered angrily.

"Die," he said into the receiver, and shut off the phone.

He surveyed traffic. "You'd think people would've learned to use mass transit by now."

"I'm glad you ain't," said Dan, chuckling.

Tinto shot him an icy look, as if he suspected he'd been mocked. Soon the way was less congested.

"Get in the H.O.V lane," said Tinto.

"Better believe it."

When they turned off the highway they hit another snag, as a protest rally was underway.

"I'll never get home," Tinto grumbled.

"Maybe you should get out and say a few words. It's right up your alley."

Again Tinto sensed he was being mocked. He wondered if the driver was playing dumb, then dismissed the thought, as acting was his department, and he would see right through any that wasn't genuine. He was about to say something when his attention was drawn to a small band of silent counter-protestors, some of whom were in fatigues, including one in a wheelchair. Several held placards. One read: "Have you heard about 9/11? It was in all the papers."

"Stop," he said, reading the signs, making a face. "Not one of those thoughts justifies the invasion of a sovereign nation."

"Maybe they think that's where we should be drawin' the line."

"They're blind."

"Actually, one of 'em is."

There was a seeing-eye dog at the side of a tall black man.

"What a waste. It's a crime what the administration does with the poor and uneducated."

"I was in the first Gulf War. I didn't see no dummies. Everybody was smarter than me, though that ain't sayin' much."

"I thought the government was supposed to take care of vets. What're you doing driving a limo?"

"It's my second job. I want my wife to be home if the kids need 'er.

I work data entry in gold futures."

"Another bunch of thieves."

Dan shrugged. "They're good to me. They drive a hard bargain - just like you did on the phone before."

"If they were really good to you, you wouldn't have to work a second job."

"I'd probably do it, anyway. You can never have too much money when you got kids, unless you're a movie star or a ballplayer."

"Then you have too much," said Tinto wistfully. "It's not all it's cracked up to be."

"I'd love to have that problem. Still, I like bein' a chauffeur, even when I hafta drive jerks around - and, believe me, you get a lot of 'em. I could tell you stories about at'letes and entertainers that'd make you think twice about ever watchin' 'em again."

Tinto was beside himself, certain he was being ridiculed indirectly. Only the belief that the driver lacked the faculty to be clever kept him from retaliating.

Finally they reached the estate.

"Wow, some house. What a country."

Tinto would swear the comment was ironic. "Do you have a problem with me, Don?"

The driver's reaction was one of such genuine surprise that Tinto let the issue slide. He would save confrontation for those in the spotlight, for those whose unmasking would benefit the movement, not some small fry who could barely express himself.

He opened the security gate by remote control. It locked once the limousine rolled past it.

