

The Walking Cage

By Brian Farrey

“I import the bamboo from a remote region in northern China,” the old man says and I think I’m supposed to be impressed. So I nod. He runs his wrinkled hand across a horizontal bamboo pole. It’s dark, like it’s got a dozen coats of lacquer on it. Not a natural color for bamboo. Which makes me wonder why he imports it if he’s just going to paint it. Wouldn’t any stick do?

“I built it myself,” he says and, again, I think I’m supposed to be impressed. So I smile this time when I nod.

“It looks...sturdy,” I say.

We’re standing in the garage behind his house next to a cage made of bamboo. It’s a roughly three by three by three cube. The ends are lashed together by a combination of twine and hot glue. Or maybe it’s tree sap. If he wanted authentic bamboo, maybe he wanted an authentic bonding agent.

Inside the cube is a harness made of eight ropes, each with one end tied to a corner of the cage and the other ends tied to one of two black belts, like the one I have at home that goes with my dress suit.

The old man—he asked me to call him something but I can't remember what—easily lifts the cage up over his head and before I can say anything, he lowers it over top of me. I slither between the ropes to fit myself into the harness, tighten the first belt just under my arm pits and the second around my waist.

“A perfect fit,” he announces. “It's like you were born to play the part.... Sorry, what was your name again, son?”

“Logan,” I remind him. I should ask his name again but I'm embarrassed I don't remember. He's the local celebrity. I should know his name.

I try walking around in the cage. It's pretty easy. With the harness, the cage “floats” around me, rising just above my head and stopping mid-calf below. It's really light. Maybe that's why he uses bamboo instead of regular sticks.

He slips me a couple sheets of paper through the bars of the cage. “Here are the script pages. We stick pretty close to what's written but it's a Renaissance Festival, so be prepared to improvise. You ever done that?”

“Yeah, sure.” It's a lie. Unless he's talking about that time last year in the school musical when I forgot the lyrics to “People Will Say We're In Love” and I sang-spoke a list of lovey-dovey things I thought Curly might say to Laurie. Which made no sense in the context of the song. But, hey, if claiming that as proof of my improve skills will get me this job, then I improvised.

The old man leans against the wall. “Why do you want this job?”

I'm caught off guard. I'd rehearsed an answer, expecting it to be the first question when I arrived. But instead he whisked me back to the garage before I could say anything and started

showing me this cage. I found the job on Craigslist. Guess I should be grateful he's not a perv who's feeling me up right now.

"I'm going to major in theatre," I tell him. "I want to get as much acting experience as I can before I start college in the fall." Meh, close enough to what I planned to say. He doesn't seem like he'd be impressed by some speech about honing my art and dedicating my life to my craft.

I peer at him through the bars of the cage. He's got this look on his face. Like he doesn't believe me.

"Do you have any questions?"

I want to ask him what it was like working on Broadway. I want to ask him if living in New York is really as great as it sounds. I want to ask him what he gave up to be an actor. Instead, I smile and shake my head.

He pats me on the back. "You're hired. We start rehearsing Saturday."

I blink. "That's it? Do you want me to read? Do a monologue?"

"I've got a feeling you'll do just fine."

Suddenly, this doesn't seem right. "But you don't even know if I can act."

The old man walks me out the garage door. "Are you kidding? Everything about you says actor."

Garrett won't look at me. We're sitting side by side, hip to hip, on top of his dad's garage, our feet dangling over the edge, and he won't meet my eyes.

I can't blame him.

“I thought we’d agreed,” he says, focusing his eyes instead across the street at Mrs. Markham’s house.

“We did, but—”

“No jobs. We weren’t going to work so we could spend summer together before college in the fall.”

We’ve both been working since we were sixteen. We’ve spent the last two years skating around our work schedules to be together. A free-and-clear summer had been the plan since we started senior year. A plan I just blew.

‘College in the fall’ for me is New York. For him, it’s Oregon. Garrett’s been giving that distance the stink eye for a while. Quality time is about to become scarce.

“I know, I know,” I say. “I’m sorry. This was such an amazing chance.”

He shakes his head and laughs. “It’s always going to be something.” Now, when he finally turns his head and looks me right in the eye, it’s like I’m in the path of a wrecking ball. “If you want to break up with me, do it. Don’t pull away slowly until I get fed up and break it off. If you want this to be done, you have to suck it up and say it.”

I thread my fingers between his and squeeze. He doesn’t squeeze back. “No, hey, no. That’s not what I’m saying.” Probably the worst performance of my career. I was going for sincere. It came out wishy-washy.

“I know you don’t think we can survive long distance. I’m tired of arguing that, so stop dicking me around and break it off. Don’t think you can just ghost me.”

I lay my head on his shoulder. He’s tense and it’s my fault. “I’m sorry. I’m really sorry. I’m not ghosting you. I swear. And I swear we’ll find time to do everything we said we’d do this summer. We’re only fighting one work schedule now, not two. Right? Right?”

That was better. Sincere with a little desperation. God, I'm a calculating ass.

He doesn't say anything but after two years together—four years before that as just neighbors—I can feel any shift in his mood like a feather brushing my skin. He softens. It's just a tiny bit but it's all I need to know I haven't ruined this.

“Someday,” he says, kissing my forehead, “you're going to run out of things to put between us. I hope I'm there when that happens.”

When I get home from Garrett's, I find Paula raiding the liquor cabinet. Which means...

“Dad ‘working late?’” I ask. Translation: off with his girlfriend.

She answers by gulping a shot of vodka. “And Mom's ‘doing yoga’ with Mike.”

Translation: skipping yoga and boffing her boyfriend at his place.

Our parents are both out with their not-so-secret significant others. Or, as Paula and I call it in our house: Tuesday.

Paula pours me a shot and I down it. “You know,” she says, “I could respect them if they had an open relationship. It's the 21st century. It's a thing now. Why do they have to pretend they're not screwing other people?”

“They were raised different,” I say, holding out my shot glass for a refill. “Sanctity of marriage and all that. Got to keep up appearances.”

“Not me. When I graduate next year, I'm moving to Paris. I'm going to shack up with six of the hottest French guys I can find. We're going to drink wine, eat baguettes, and have sex every waking minute. It's called polyamory.”

“I'm, uh, familiar.” It's somewhat weird to hear my little sister say this.

Paula puts the vodka away and switches to rum. Harder to get caught if you just take a little from each bottle. “My friend Allie’s parents got divorced last year. She said it was the best thing that could have happened. She said she wished they’d done it when she was ten. She got sick of them arguing and her dad sleeping around. He didn’t even hide it.” She stops and thinks. “Do you think it’s good our parents at least try to hide it?”

“Couple years ago, I might have said yes. I don’t think I care anymore.” I bang my glass on the counter until she fills it with rum.

Paula clinks the bottle with my glass and sucks a swig straight from the source. “Me too.”

We spend three hours on Saturday rehearsing in the old man’s garage. I *still* can’t remember his name. Which is a travesty. The guy’s a small town hero, a local legend. Went off to the big city after high school, served his time waiting tables for years before landing a role in the chorus of a moderately successful Broadway show. I guess he was all the town could talk about.

That was before I was even born. He stayed with the show until it closed, then spent a few more years in New York trying to find work. Never got cast after that. Moved back to rural Minnesota and became the guy who’d “made it.” I’d heard he worked at the Renaissance Festival but I’d never met him until he advertised this job online. I’m not the kind to get star struck but it’s kind of cool that he hired me. I just wish I could remember his name.

My costume is a burlap bag with holes punched out for my arms and head. The opening of the bag hangs just above my knees. I’m barefoot, which he tells me I’ll be grateful for if it rains at the festival. He points to a shelf of ruined, mud-caked Renaissance-like boots in the corner. I’m also wearing the cage.

The old man is wearing a Grateful Dead t-shirt, cargo shorts, and flip-flops. His costume, he says, is much heavier and he won't put himself in heat stroke's crosshairs until an actual performance.

We go through the script several times. It's four short skits and they're cheesy as hell. The dialogue is fast paced and kind of funny. The old man's character is Senore Pastacelli, an Italian con artist who poses as a world explorer. He's got a shaky grasp of English and an over-the-top accent. Everything he does in character is big and bold.

I'm playing Ratboy. He's a kid Pastacelli is trying to pass off as part-rat, part human. The joke is that he wants to sell me to passers-by, suggesting I might be good in a freak show. But I give him lip and do everything I can to undermine him. The Ren Fest folks will eat this up.

We get faster and faster. We add bits: double takes, spit takes, slow burns. At one point, he reaches through the bars and pretends to throttle me while I squeal like a baby. By the time we're done, we're both sweaty and tired.

"That was good, that squeal," he says, offering me a Coke from his mini-fridge. "You've got a gift for comedy."

"Thanks," I say, trying not to blush.

He suddenly looks like some sage, about to dispense wisdom. Which he does. "A good actor puts himself out there. He takes risks. He lowers his guard. You won't get anywhere unless you're willing to do whatever it takes to commit yourself. Don't be afraid to look like a fool. Be vulnerable."

I nod and, when I do, the cage bobs around me. It occurs to me that I don't know what he does for a living. He's been back in town for a long time now and there aren't any professional

acting gigs nearby. We're splitting the Ren Fest money fifty-fifty, and his half's not enough to live off.

So I try to feel him out without seeming nosy. I look out the garage window at his house.

"Nice place. You married?"

He laughs. "No. Spent the best part of my life giving everything I am to acting. Couldn't find anyone willing to come second to that."

I wonder what my parents' lives would have been like if they'd chosen to pursue what they loved instead of who they loved. Or thought they loved. Or only maybe loved.

The old man folds his arms. "How bad do you want it, Logan?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You told me you're going to study acting in New York in the fall. I'm guessing your head is filled with dreams of Broadway, maybe making the move to California to do movies someday."

Ugh. It sounds so cliché. But it's so true it hurts. I nod.

"I'm going to help you. I'm going to make sure you're ready for New York in a way I never was."

My jaw drops. It's completely rehearsed. This was pretty much what I was hoping he'd say from the minute I saw the Craigslist ad. But I don't want to be that obvious about it.

"That...that would be awesome."

The old man smirks. "Don't let anything get in your way. And you know what that means? We're going to be rehearsing more. A lot more."

Dad's manning the grill. Mom's making a fresh pitcher of fresh squeezed lemonade. Paula's in the backyard with Allie and their friend Zoe having a water balloon fight. Garrett and I are stretched out on the deck, getting tan.

We're the goddamn picture of Americana.

No one in our family uses words to say 'sorry.' We make gestures. A cookout is how our parents say, "Sorry we didn't coordinate our extramarital activities and left you kids home by yourselves until late." Guilt makes them throw us all deeper into the fiction that our lives aren't what they are. The gestures are walls meant to hide what we're not supposed to know. But Paula and I stopped trying to peek over the walls a long time ago.

I reach across and take Garrett's hand. *See?* My gesture says. *We're still spending time together this summer. My job isn't affecting us at all.* When I think about my last rehearsal, I also silently add, *For now.*

"So I was thinking," Garrett says with that voice that means he's dreaming and planning and a million miles away mentally, "about visiting you in New York for Thanksgiving."

"Really?" It's a dumb thing to say. And it comes out sounding more shocked and unsure than I mean. But maybe not more than I feel.

"If I can find a cheap flight. Which will probably be impossible, because of the holiday. But yeah. That's the plan. You'll be in charge of the turkey."

I grin. "The one for dinner or the one you're dating."

He shrugs. "Take that how you will."

"I thought you were coming back here, to Wisconsin, to see your family." I, on the other hand, was not. I'd planned on staying in New York. Why come home to watch Mom and Dad inflict their guilt-induced Normal Rockwell holiday on us?

He shrugs his parents—his madly-in-love, totally normal parents—off. “I’ll see them at the semester break, end of the year.” Then he pulls his sunglasses to the tip of his nose. “It’s okay if you don’t want me to come.”

“Maybe we should just see,” I say. “I’ll definitely have a job in New York. I’d hate for you to come all that way and—”

“That’s fine,” he says. “We can talk about it closer to November. It was just an idea.”

For a guy who was just pissed at me for cutting down the time we could spend together this summer, he’s too laid back. I squeeze his hand again.

“It was a good idea,” I say. “Yeah, let’s talk about it closer to November.”

Garrett kind of nods and tilts his head back to sun his neck. Two hand squeezes and nothing back. It’s terrible that I think it’s weird when someone doesn’t talk in gestures.

Time in the old man’s garage isn’t just about the Ren Fest anymore. Night after night, we still rehearse—we’ve practically got the routine down to a science—but now he’s got me doing other things. I’m reading monologues and he’s coaching me. We do funky breathing exercises where I hoot through my nose. We do speech exercises where I say things like, “Around and about the old, oaken boat, the godless shepherd smote his pet goat” and he smacks me to drive the Midwestern “oh” from my vowels. We do movement exercises where I pretend I’m a tangerine and get told that I look more like an orange. It’s bizarre and cool at the same time.

I’m exhausted when I hop on my bike to go home. At the corner of Herald and 5th, my phone rings.

“Missed you last night,” Garrett says.

Shit. We were supposed to go to a movie. I'd been rehearsing so late I'd completely forgot.

Which means that not only did I blow him off without letting him know last night, I'm also an ass for not calling him all day today.

"I'm so sorry," I say quickly, only just now noticing the half dozen texts from him asking where I was. "I suck, I suck, I suck."

"Yep."

He's not letting me off the hook.

"Come on. You know this happens. I've been in six shows since we started dating. The Ren Fest opens next week. You know that when the performance gets closer, I become less available."

"Yep," he says again. "I know that."

"You're gonna come, right? To the Ren Fest? See me perform?" Garrett hasn't missed a single show I've ever done.

He's quiet. I-have-to-check-my-phone-to-make-sure-he-didn't-hang-up quiet. Then, he says, "It's play practice. It's dance class. It's helping your sister with her homework. It's a thousand reasons. I get it. You want to live your life. I'm good with that. But there's always going to be a reason we can't get together. And it's gotten worse in the last, I don't know, six months. Admit you've got doubts. Please, do me this one solid and admit that."

A thousand responses flood my mouth. And it hurts to admit—to myself, at least—that none of them are true.

"Yes," I say, which I guess is the closest I've got to the truth. "I have doubts. I'm scared. You win."

He sighs. “This isn’t about winning, Logan. It’s about you knowing what you want and not letting anything get in the way of it.”

Which is what the old man had said. He was talking about my acting career. Garrett means something else entirely. And I wonder—maybe for the first time—if they’re mutually exclusive.

“Call me when you figure it out.” And my phone goes dead.

Two days before the Ren Fest opens and I get a rare moment alone with Mom.

It’s by design, that much is sure. She asks me to help her go grocery shopping which she hasn’t done in eighteen years. She’s always claimed that shopping was her ‘me time.’ But today, I’m invited into the *sanctum sanctorum* of Festival Foods.

I’m braced for a “talk.” She’ll miss me when I’m in New York. She wants me to call once a week. She wants me to stay in touch with Paula and keep her from going insane.

Mom doesn’t say anything. We hardly speak a word up and down the aisles as she throws cans of cream of mushroom soup and boxes of Ritz crackers into the cart. It’s not until we’re in the parking lot, loading our bags into the trunk, that she says, “Are you and Garrett breaking up? Or did you do it already?”

“No,” I say. “Why would we do that?”

“I like Garrett. You know that. But high school romances rarely last. I think you’re only setting yourself up for hurt if you think you’re going to try to keep things going from across the country. Better to make a clean break now, stay friends, and then keep yourself open to meeting new people at school.”

Way to pep talk, Mom.

“We’ve talked about it. We’re going to try. We know it might not work but—”

“I’m only trying to protect you, Logan. You’ll meet lots of guys at school. Guys with similar interests. And wouldn’t you rather keep Garrett as a friend than make things awkward with a messy break up down the road?”

“I don’t want to hurt him.” Or myself, really.

“You’ll both move on. You’ll realize by the end of the year it was for the best. Just make it a clean break. Don’t push him away little by little. That hurts much worse. You’ll meet other people. Or maybe you’ll stay single. That could be good too.”

As we climb back into the car, I notice for the first time how tired she looks. I think she’s looked this way for a while but I’m really just seeing it now. There’s nothing malicious in her voice. She really thinks she’s looking out for me. There’s something odd in that: a voice that cares and pleads vs. a face that’s worn and immune to care.

We don’t say anything else on the way home. When we hit our driveway, the garage door lifts and the garage is empty. Dad’s Audi, there before we went shopping, is gone.

Mom pulls in and throws the car into park. “It’s hard to love someone who isn’t there.”

The old man helps me load the cage into my hatchback.

“You look nervous about tomorrow,” he says. “Don’t be. We’ve got this down.”

I nod. “Thanks. For everything. It’s...been an honor having you coach me.” I feel like I’m saying goodbye. But we’ll be performing together the rest of the summer. Tomorrow’s just the beginning.

“Stay focused,” he says. “Eyes on the prize and all that. Your family coming to see us?”

I almost laugh. Mom and Dad haven't exactly been consistent about attending my shows. "Probably. At some point." Paula will come. Outside that...who knows?

He waves it off. "My parents didn't make it to opening night of my Broadway show. It's not a big deal. I'm much better off as a lone wolf."

"Do you...ever regret it? Not getting married. Being on your own?"

He throws his head back and laughs. "Are you kidding? I'm living the dream. I've got everything I need. It's just me."

I look over at his house. It's a small one bedroom. It desperately needs some paint. The weeds are growing wild everywhere. There are hardly any shingles left on the roof. I'm not judging but...this is the dream?

"I wasn't going to tell you this until later," he says slowly, "but it's probably best you know. Some people are coming to see you at the Ren Fest. New York people. Old friends of mine. If they like what they see...well, you might be headed to New York earlier than the fall."

I wasn't ready for this. I was ready to have him offer to coach me, yeah. I'd been counting on that. But this? This is crazy. "Earlier?" It's dumb but it's all I can force out.

"They've got a show starting rehearsal soon and they're having a hell of a time filling this one role. I told them they need to come see you." He puts a hand on my shoulder. "I think you've got that illusive 'it,' Logan. I think you can make it."

I'm trying not to panic and failing spectacularly. "But...I just can't abandon you. After one show."

He scoffs. "Forget about it. I'll figure something else out. I'll find another Ratboy. Don't worry about me. Worry about you. Go after what you want."

I slam the hatchback door shut. We shake hands. Before I drive off, he says, “Tomorrow’s just the start, Logan. After that, you get everything you ever wanted.”

A job in New York. An *acting* job in New York. That’s what I wanted, all right. That’s why I answered the ad.

Isn’t it?

I show up at the Ren Fest in costume. The burlap is itchy. I’d never noticed that before. It rained the night before and my toes are squishing in the mud. The old man was right. Glad I’m not ruining any shoes in this mess.

I wander around, dodging jesters and hawkers, trying not to be tempted by the smell of fresh roasted turkey legs. People point and laugh at me. Kids try to reach through the bars of the cage. I playfully growl and paw at their fingers. They scream and run away.

The old man said to meet him at the entrance to the jousting grounds. But when I get there, he’s nowhere to be found. I wait and wait and nothing.

The grounds fill with people quickly. I watch them all go past, feeling like a prisoner with the bars all around me. *This is how it feels for the animals at the zoo*, I think. I’m not sure why but the cage feels heavier today. More than it did in rehearsal.

I don’t want to be here. I can’t stop thinking about Mom and Garrett and this shitty summer and all the time I’ve put into rehearsing these stupid skits and the old man isn’t even here. People keep walking by and laughing at me. I’m not even doing anything and they’re laughing. It’s funny to be caged. It’s freaking hilarious.

Then, on the other side of the jousting grounds, I see Garrett. My heart skips a beat. He came. He came to see me. I didn’t realize until just this moment how badly I wanted that.

Tomorrow's just the start, Logan. After that, you get everything you ever wanted.

But, no. Garrett's here with a bunch of friends. They're laughing and moving away from here, where I told him we'd be performing. As he walks away, I frame him perfectly between two bars of the cage. I pivot, following him with my eyes as he disappears into the crowd.

Cheers go up around me. The jousting has started. My stomach churns. Garrett's gone. Having fun with his friends. Not with me.

Unacceptable.

I take off, darting around Ren Fest workers dressed as wenches as I make my way around the jousting field. The cage bobs and floats around me, scraping people I zoom past. I feel rocks and dirt and wet grass under my feet. It's all I can feel. Everything else is numb. I hate that.

Finally, I spot him with his friends near the booth where patrons pay to throw tomatoes at a jester who hurls insults right back.

"Garrett!"

He turns and his eyes widen as I charge up to him. I want to reach out but the bars are between him and me.

"We can make this work," I tell him. "We're *going* to make this work."

He looks me up and down, like I've gone crazy. But there's a smirk on his lips. Which means I've got a chance.

I fumble with a pouch on my waist where I stored my phone. A second later, my thumbs fly across the screen. "Screw everyone. Screw the old man. Screw my mom. And screw you for saying I don't know what I want. I know what I want. I want to be an actor. And I want to be with you. I can have both. I *will* have both. Nothing I've done has said that. So let's try this."

I hold up my phone. He peers through the bars at the screen. “I just reserved a plane ticket to visit *you* in Oregon for Thanksgiving. *You’re* in charge of the turkey. Take that how you will.”

The smirk becomes a full on smile. His friends edge away, giving us a moment. He’s smiling but nothing else. I close my eyes. “Please. Say. Something.”

He doesn’t say a word. Instead, I feel him wrap his arms around me. I choke up and hug him back. He’s never felt so good. And maybe I sob a little into his shoulder.

It’s a long time before he pulls away. I open my eyes and he’s staring right back at me.

“Wanna throw a tomato?” he asks.

Any moment now, the old man is going to show up with his New York friends. I can’t be here when that happens. The temptation will be too great.

“No,” I say. “I want to go. Let’s go. Somewhere, anywhere.”

He cocks an eyebrow. “We could go to my house. My parents went to the cabin up north for the weekend.” He cups his hand around the back of my neck.

“Perfect.” It is. He is.

Then he looks past my shoulder toward the jousting area. “But, don’t you have a performance? You should get into costume.”

I blink at him. He’s joking, right? Why does he think I’m wearing this big bamboo—

It’s only then that I realize the cage is gone. As if it had never been there. The burlap sack is also gone. I’m wearing a t-shirt, shorts, and flip-flops. For a second, I’m dizzy. What just happened?

When I look back at the jousting area, I see the old man—wearing his Grateful Dead shirt—leaning against the lemonade stand. He smiles and waves. And then, he’s not there anymore. Vanished behind a sea of Ren Fest patrons. Or maybe just gone. I can’t be sure.

“No,” I tell Garrett. “We’re good. Let’s go.”

Garrett excuses himself from his friends—who tease us with “ooh”s and “aah”s—and we leave hand in hand. I make sure we’re standing shoulder to shoulder all the way back to my car. I make sure there’s nothing between us anymore.