



"I sometimes lose myself in this costume," Charlotte says and tugs at her dress. "It takes twenty minutes to put on and twelve to take off. That's like forty-one minutes each day, for the last eight years of my life." I ask her what she thinks about while she dresses. "Oh, nothing much." She admits, then changes her mind: "Usually I try to focus on the character I'm portraying, to remember her past—all the crap she's been fed." Her hands work their way up her costume, adjusting folds and knots that are invisible to me. She finishes fussing with her cap only reluctantly and continues: "But it makes me more believable to my guests, even though most of them just stand there like dumb kids with their mouths open." I zoom in while she talks, trying to pick up details in her dress. "Anyway," she yawns. "What the hell do you think about while you're dressing?" The interview is almost over. Both of us had too much to drink. "I don't know," I tell her. I really hate it when my subjects start asking me questions. "I think about what I was wearing the night before." She nods. "I try to vary my clothing. I guess it helps me keep track of the days." The camera beeps three times, meaning the tape has run out. "You know what that reminds me of?" Charlotte is suddenly alert. "My mother used to sew my clothes when I was young. Horrible hand-made things that looked like potato sacks. Every night before school, she would lay them out on a chair next to my bed, while I was sleeping. It wasn't really an issue of money, although as a single mother she didn't have too much to spare. It was more a matter of principle. I'd been spoiled ever since the divorce and needed to build up my character. I tried to argue but she couldn't care less if the girls at school were calling me names. I would grow up to be a strong independent woman and not some Barbie homewrecker like the bitch my father ran off with. When I turned thirteen, I started stealing money from my mother's pockets and digging for change inside the couch. I also went to the mall, where I shook loose coins from payphones or picked off from the tips people left at the food court. After two weeks I had enough quarters and nickels to buy my first Champion sweatshirt. After a few more weeks, I realized it'd be easier to shoplift the rest. Every morning, I put on one of my mother's horrid creations, kiss her goodbye and headed out for the school bus. Our neighbor had a thick set of bushes dividing his backyard from ours. I would walk down the street, turn back, then cut along the fence to his bushes where I pulled out clothes from my school bag and changed. On the way home, I'd do the opposite; changing back into mom's dreadful clothes. That very week, the girls at school found another target to pick on. Eventually, I even started making some friends. One day, while I was changing, I saw the neighbor looking at me from behind his bay window. I'm not sure how long he'd been doing this but the bastard

didn't even bother to pull down the blinds. The same thing happened the next day so by the end of the week I decided to move to another backyard in a similar house just down the block. Everything was cool for a couple of days, but then one afternoon I found a note tied to one of the bushes. It was from my neighbor. It said he would tell my mother what I was doing if I didn't come back to the old bushes in his backyard." Charlotte pauses for the first time and shrugs, apparently for effect. "The first few times back were kind of creepy but after a while I just tuned him out. Then, once every week, usually on Fridays, a new piece of clothing waited for me in the bushes, wrapped like a Christmas gift with a card. Wonderful things I could only dream of from labels like Guess, Sergio Tacchini, Calvin Klein and the Gap. Occasionally there would be other stuff: little poems, drawings or weird things to wear under the clothes, along with instructions for how to return them. To be honest, I didn't mind that so much. As long as the gifts kept coming, I was happy to keep up my end of the bargain. In any case, the gifts kept getting better and the bargain was having a super effect on my social life. Then it all came apart: My mother was called in for a talk with the school counselor. He told her one of the teachers complained after seeing me in what she swore was a fur coat and a diamond tiara. The meeting went fine, my mother always kept up appearances in public, but when I came home the shit hit the fan. She had already been through my closet and arranged what she found on the floor, like it was some kind of drug bust. She kept screaming: 'You little slut! Who gave this to you? Was it your bastard father?' When she realized I wouldn't talk she sat down, started to sing and ripped through my clothes alphabetically. When she reached Benetton I was all tears and confessions. The next morning, my mother came back to my room and sat on the bed. She took my hand in hers and told me she loved me. Then she said that she made an important phone call, that I could wear what I wanted and that everything would be normal again. She left smiling and closed the door behind her. For the first time in months, I dressed up indoors and walked straight to the school bus. I only went back to the neighbor once, on Friday, and stood around the bushes at the usual time. I waited and waited and waited but went home with nothing." Charlotte shrugs again. "I was obviously disappointed — wouldn't you be? But there was also this sweet and sad feeling, like when an old actor you know from TV suddenly dies from a heart attack. I don't remember much else from that day. I was popular by then and part of the in-group. Still, when I came home I did my usual



rounds, fishing for loose change in my mother's coat pockets. While looking through her closet and sifting through old clothes, I suddenly found a new handbag. I'm pretty sure it was a Fendi. Then, once every week, usually on Friday, new items turned up in her wardrobe: A suit by Carolina Herrera, jeans by Gloria Vanderbilt, a dress by Versace, shoes by Manolo Blahnik. On Christmas Day I still had nothing new to wear but my mother was becoming the best-dressed divorcee in the neighborhood. I ran out of the house and went straight to the neighbor. The lights were on but the blinds were down. I tore off my clothes and stood in the bushes for almost an hour, naked and shivering on a thin carpet of snow. I could see silhouettes sitting at a table and realized with growing anger that the man had company. The first day after vacation I went to the school counselor. I told him everything. I told him about the clothes, about the bushes, about the weird stuff with instructions and the diamond tiara. For the second time in my life I broke down and cried. But I also made sure he understood how selfish my mother was being, the awful crap she gave me for Christmas and how cruelly I was being treated at home. He listened patiently until I was finished. Then he asked me to wait outside and called the police. I talked to them for a while in the counselor's office and then I got into one of their cars. The whole school was looking. All the teachers and students stopped and came out: the principal, the high-school quarterback and the cheerleaders, even the metalheads and the black guy who cleans out the trash." Charlotte laughs and wipes a tear from her eye. "It was the happiest moment in my life." She says. "Anyway, you can imagine the rest. They knocked on our neighbor's door and took him away. He came out looking tired, almost relieved. I think it's the first time I saw him out of his house. My mother also ran out, crying hysterically, yelling all kinds of things, kissing and hugging me. The police talked to her for a long time and then we all went into our house. A lady cop and a guy with a camera went into my room, took pictures and eventually carried out three cardboard boxes. Then they did the same thing in my mother's room but this time they came out with six. The rest of the cops just sat in our kitchen and sort of talked over the noise of their walky-talkies. My mother was hyperactive like it was her birthday party and kept running around, teasing the cops, making jokes and offering coffee. I was also caught up in the excitement and stayed awake way past my bedtime. When I did go to sleep I thought about going back to school and telling everyone what happened. I thought they would make an announcement or call a special assembly or something. I was so high from all the attention that I didn't notice until the next day that my closet was emptied. On a chair next to my bed was a hand-sewn dress."



Gace's interview lasts only minutes. He sits down and we just stare at each other. I ask him what it's like to travel in time. I ask him if it's better to live in books or in costumes. I ask him if he's seen *Groundhog Day*. I ask him about his time in the Air Force, about the experiments they did, making him watch every episode of *The Jeffersons* while strapped into a supersonic airplane flying backwards in a circular tunnel under Mount Rushmore. I ask him which book is more authentic: *The Invisible Man* or *The Man Who Mistook His Wife For A Hat*. I ask him if he ever mistook his visitors for Inquisitors and, if so, how many spoke Spanglish as a first language. I ask him if he knows Columbus discovered Fort Lauderdale on the same day Jews were expelled from La Mancha. (I don't tell him that Columbus was a double agent working for both the Inquisition and the Mossad.) I ask him if Virginia has any windmills. I ask him if Colonial Williamsburg has a Bedford Avenue. I ask him if he can remember a time before the Indians and Puerto Ricans disappeared and the place was overrun by tourists and artists. I ask him which is more credible: Will Smith's portrayal of Muhammad Ali or Adam Smith's principle of the invisible hand. I ask him if he believes what he sees. I ask him if he sees what he believes. I ask him which animal lives longer: the butterfly or the bee. I ask him what is a still life. I ask him to quit staring at me. I ask him if he has any questions. I ask him to answer me. I ask him to be quiet. I ask him to leave. I ask him to come back.





I met Jack Burgess in a barn. After what happened last month, he has to lay low for a while. We talk about his time in the Navy, the places he's lived in like Okinawa, Saudi-Arabia, Kuwait and Guam. He tells me about a child he fathered with a Japanese prostitute. This happened right after his first tour in Iraq. The child was born with a thin coat of light-colored fur. It had flippers instead of legs and arms. Jack spent a year with the child, taking him to the beach at Oura Wan every morning, because his mother needed to rest after working all night. He would put the child in the shallow water and watch him disappear under the waves. The child would emerge an hour later, his head bobbing in the surf, holding a starfish or a stunning shell in its mouth. Jack would unpack the lunch bag he brought and they would eat raw fish and rice cakes prepared by the child's mother. Jack tells me this was the most peaceful time of his life. When he finally got back to the States, after the child's death, Jack knew things had changed but he couldn't say why. The eighties were over and a new hostile age had begun.

Jack kicked about for a while, doing odd jobs, going hunting and fishing alone when he could. He joined the militia after getting a call from an old Navy friend who had told him he'd just had enough. They have sixty-two members in their local chapter. They carried out their first action two years ago and have never looked back. Jack says it's not about politics. It runs much deeper than that.



Frances cries during the interview. Four of her nine children – the four oldest boys – have gone off and only one has come back. Those who died, she says after wiping her face, died fighting for our freedom and our independency. Matt and I look at each other in dumb disbelief. None of the persons we previously talked to had cried. Frances takes off her gloves and puts one on top of the other. She winds up her watch. Every Sunday, she puts on this costume and goes to the cemetery. There's a revolutionary war cemetery and a civil war cemetery at the church. After the service, she goes out to the graves and cries for almost an hour. Her husband, Gerry, and the Reverend, Clive, usually stay inside and talk about building projects. Reverend Clive wants to renovate his garage. He tells Gerry his garage is like purgatory. It's filled with all sorts of things whose practical life has expired but whose ultimate fate remains undecided. Gerry laughs and looks out the window. Frances is back on her feet, brushing the leaves from her dress. She'll be ready to go home in a few minutes. The two men finish their small talk and stand up. They've discussed Frances' predicament over and over by now. Their positions are clear to each other. Neither wants to rekindle the argument. "She'll get over it," Gerry says, staring up into the aisle, noticing a corner where the paint's flaking. "You know, this place could also use a little work." Reverend Clive opens the door. He looks irritated. "Gerry." He says, "She cries at a different grave every time!" The door closes softly. Matt and I start to pack up. I tell him I think this was the best interview so far. "Finally someone with a real story to tell!" I'm excited, "especially the part about losing her sons." I grab the camera and the microphone and leave Matt with the two tripods and cables. He waits, looking irritated while I hold the door open. "She can cry realistically," he says, "But she's not a good actress."



As soon as he walks in, George Wythe announces he's got Strabismus. I ask him what he means and he tells me he's cross-eyed. A moment passes with no reaction, so George continues: "I've actually got Intermittent Strabismus. It's more noticeable when I'm sick or in stress." I look up from the viewfinder. George is wearing knee-length leggings, a pair of breeches, a black waistcoat, a dotted shirt that flares out at the neck and a hat. His right eye is looking directly at me. His left eye looks to the right. I nod for George to sit down and discreetly switch off the camera. Our mock interview starts. George pretends to be a signor of the declaration of independence and I pretend to be interviewing him for the camera. We're both practiced and talk effortlessly. Near the end, I ask if he's OK with a few personal questions. He says sure and leans back. "What's it like to have Strabismus?" George smiles and I quickly add, "I mean, what do you see when you're cross-eyed?" There is reason to be embarrassed but George seems to take it in stride. "In most cases, the brain simply learns to ignore input from the turned eye." He takes off his hat. "My case is rare though; I'm able to see clearly both straight ahead and to the side at the same time." Without turning, George snaps his wrist and flings the hat sideways. It glides across the room and lands on a hook, which is almost behind him. "It's difficult when you're young," he continues, "But being cross-eyed has some clear evolutionary advantages." There's a pause. George gets up to retrieve his hat. Before he returns I quickly restart the camera. "Can you repeat that?" I ask, "There might have been a glitch in the footage." George sits down again. "Sure." He says and takes off his hat. "In most cases, the brain disregards input from the bad eye." He snaps his wrist and the hat flies directly at me. It lands at my feet, just in front of the camera. "My case is rare though." George smiles. "I disregard nothing."

The guy in the picture is either called Dennis or Richard. Our meeting begins awkwardly because it's too hot. I'm unprepared and start sweating almost immediately. Dennis/Richard keeps sipping his wine, forgetting that it is a two-year-old prop. The bottle's been sitting open for so long now its content has basically turned into vinegar. It's undrinkable and Dennis/Richard has to spit it out every time after tasting it. There's a puddle of the prop slowly growing between his feet. He apologizes. I tell him it's OK. I will edit it out afterwards anyhow. When we finally get down to the interview, Richard/Dennis turns out to be quite a slippery fish. He won't answer my questions about what it's like to be a Scottish immigrant playing an English Loyalist for twenty-first century American audiences. He prefers to pretend he's his eighteenth-century avatar. I try to loosen him up by talking about David Beckham and Kenny Dalglish, two soccer players I know nothing about. Dennis/Richard smiles politely and brings the glass to his lips, but only pretends to be drinking this time. We're not getting anywhere and the tape's running out. I look at him, thinking he looks like the current president from the side and Mad Max from the front. It's 2004. I ask him if he's voted. He tells me a long story about having to ride a white horse on a previous shoot for Japanese television. I ask if he's ever read Raymond Carver. He takes his last sip of the wine, spits it out and asks if I've ever ridden a horse.





Elizabeth asks if I want to have a quick 'lookie' under her costume. For almost a minute I do not know what to say. What's this about? Is she serious? Why is she using childish words? There's a tension building between us and I worry about insulting her if I say no. "Do you always do this with visitors?" I ask, looking around the room avoiding an answer. There's no one in here but us and the camera. Elizabeth asks again, this time not taking her eyes off me. I agree. I take off my headphones and get up, putting my hands in my pockets: a reflex. She leans back in her seat and also reaches into her pocket: fishing around for a secret button or a zipper perhaps? When I get closer she suddenly whips out her hand and slaps me hard on the face with some kind of object. I teeter a bit, almost falling backwards and realize I'd forgotten to turn off the camera. "You would never ask a woman of my stature a question like that in the eighteenth century!" She acts angry but underneath she looks satisfied. "In the eighteenth century, I'd have been perfectly justified in responding with violence." I remain standing, stupidly blocking the shot with my back. The object Elizabeth hit me with is a fan. She holds it up for me to see, unfurling it like a poker hand. "Most of the time, we don't slap our guests for the sake of historical accuracy." She smiles. The fan has a scene printed on it: two women in kimonos are leaning in front of a man under a cherry blossom. A tea ceremony? "I'm really sorry." She starts fanning herself. The two geishas, their client and cherry blossom blur into a pink streak. I realize I've seen exactly the same scene embroidered on towels for sale on Canal Street. Elizabeth leans forward. "I did not mean to hurt you," she says and allows me a quick lookie, "but you did ask me to step out of character."



Will was ten when he first saw Jesus walk into church. That was the last time he'd seen anything actually. Jesus walked in, right in the middle of Reverend Hill's sermon, leaned over and asked Will if he could have a word with him outside. Aunt Virginia was busy singing so Will and Jesus snuck out and sat on the ground, right under the oak tree. Jesus asked if Will was hungry. Will said yes and Jesus drew a circle in the air with two fingers and suddenly a shower of apples and acorns fell down. Will said thank you, rubbed an apple on his shirt out of habit and ate while Jesus explained what he wanted from him. On the way back, Will slipped on the stairs in front of the church and hit his head on the railing. It was a long while before the service was over. By that time, blood had hemorrhaged in the back of Will's skull, building up too much pressure around the optical nerve. The damage was irreversible and Will had become blind. Later that summer, the local museum started recruiting from the community. Two representatives came to Will's church. They stood in front of the congregation, introduced themselves and asked if anyone knew what "Living History" is. Jesus yelled out, "Old aunt Virginia could teach y'all something about living history" and the whole congregation started whooping and howling. The two men explained that the museum was a special place: a great theater under the sky where history was brought back to life so that the future may learn from the past. They used words Will already knew, like tradition and dignity, but also repeated ones he wasn't so sure about, like moral obligation, community outreach and presenting a well-rounded picture. Since his family was poor and the blind school in Richmond was out of the question it was agreed to send Will to the museum for the rest of the summer. He would learn old stories and songs and be taught about history. Then he'd appear before visitors in a costume, teaching them what he had learned. In exchange, the museum would pay for his schooling in Richmond. When Jesus heard about the contract they signed, he called it a white devil's bargain. Aunt Virginia got angry and told Jesus he should go find a job. "You sure like to talk," she was crying, "But other than them apples you be stealing from Mr. Wyth's orchard, I ain't see you putting no food on the table." Jesus put his fork down and got up. He whispered in Will's ear, "I'll be back" and walked out. Will says that even to this day people still talk about Jesus at church and in the museum sometimes.



Anne Randolph is the first person I interview. We meet at the Raleigh Tavern, a restored eighteenth-century bar. I order a Pepsi and Anne drinks apple juice from a whiskey glass. She tells me about going to court and fighting for custody over her daughter. Her husband died three years ago, leaving behind a mountain of debts. According to Virginia Law, the child had to be given over to the dead husband's brother, Turner, because Anne is penniless. Now her in-laws won't speak to her. The child's suffering but the court won't hear her case. "Fools!" Anne shouts, "They act from belief and refuse to accept what they're seeing." She tries to cry but no tears come out. She apologises. I tell her we can try again later and turn the camera off. I am bored and try to change subject. I want to focus on every-day details so I ask what she does to break out of routine. Anne tells me about being courted by someone, then about the witch trials she participates in every night. These special occasions give her the chance to interact with other characters in town, which is a welcome change after sitting for hours inside the house. I ask what she thinks people expect to see when they come here. She says there is a lot of patriotism now. People need a connection with history. Others just come to escape for the weekend, to return to a simple life. I nod and a door opens. George Washington walks in. "For fuck's sake, Lee!" he screams. "What have you done with my wig?" He suddenly notices the camera and cringes. "It's not on." I tell him and take out a dollar bill from my wallet. The likeness is astonishing. "Do people ever mistake you?" George Washington is too busy looking for his wig so Anne answers: "We're all mistaken for someone else. His just happens to be famous." She takes off the white head cover every woman around here seems to be wearing. Her hair falls down in thick rust-colored curls. "In 1987, there was a Head & Shoulders commercial starring a hair model who looked just like me." Anne turns in her seat to demonstrate. "Mind you, only from the back, but the likeness really was astounding." She starts laughing. "People with desperate looks in their eyes used to run after me on the streets and ask if it's true, if the stuff really works, if I could help them..." Anne laughs so hard even George Washington looks up. "Even when they realized their mistake, they would still not let me go. They wanted someone just to tell them it's true, that they could have beautiful hair and get rid of their dandruff!" Anne gasps for air, her laughter turns into crying. ~~She~~ she makes a quick gesture for me to restart the camera. "Idiots!" She cries, this time with tears streaming down, breaking down, sobbing. "They want so much to believe, they refuse to accept what they're seeing."



Ariana asks if I can imagine what life after death is like. "How should I know?" I tell her. "I'm still sitting here talking to you." She looks down at her hands, disappointed, and tries to answer the question again. She tells me about a dream she has once in a while. Actually it's not really a dream; it's more something that happens to her in the middle of the night. "I wake up and I am my character," she says, "Only not the way my character was two hundred years ago, like what I do at work, but the way she is now, at this very moment." Ariana is visibly moved. I need to deal with this delicately. "And?" I ask, "What's it like to be dead?" She doesn't answer. Instead she looks once at the camera, makes a strange gesture involving all of her fingers and then just looks out the window. I admit I am having a hard time following this. "Look," I tell her, "Either you're dead in the conventional sense, meaning you're under the ground; it's over and you're part of the scenery." I try to conjure up a convincing alternative. "Or you've moved on and joined something bigger, like a tailgate party outside Fenway Park: the same feeling of camaraderie with a bit more diversity and some organ music." The joke falls flat, even though Ariana's originally from Boston. "You asked me to describe what I feel when I'm in character," she hisses, "And when I explain, you react like some wannabe Woody Allen." I tell Ariana I'm really sorry and start fiddling with the camera, like there's suddenly something wrong with it. Much to my relief, she doesn't get up. "Well," she tries again, collecting herself, "Mostly, it's jealousy. Especially in the beginning, when you're freshly dead and all those you left are still walking around over you." I guess I am visibly surprised because Ariana starts smiling. "I heard someone on the radio say that jealousy is the most creative passion: A person in love is usually prone to all sorts of conceits and clichés about nature. But a person betrayed can create whole scenarios and imagine human relations to the tiniest detail, usually the worst." Ariana's smile turns into bright laughter. "And man is my character jealous of all those who are living; boy does she feel betrayed by how her life ended and how little people remember of her." I finally understand what she's getting at. "So you feel jealous and betrayed when you're doing your character?" I ask. "No," Ariana sighs and gets up. "I feel like I've wasted my best years performing someone who only cares about being creative."



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