

What it is in Practice to be the Fool

We're watching 22 people in the U-Dub (University of Washington) underground parking garage. They're playing Live Action Role Playing. LARP. The game is Vampire: Mind's Eye Theatre. 22 people standing around in white-face and evening gowns and shredded jeans.

14 of the assembled are "Ave-rats", homeless kids, so called because they hang out on, "The Ave", the local name for the street, "University Way." Don't ask me.

All the kids just want to get out of the rain. This is a heaven. This is some degree of peace in their world. A place of warmth in the Winter. A respite. There is safety here, not in numbers, numbers mean more drama, but in a truce brought forth by Fuzzy, the GM.

He is presiding over a fight between a Gangrel and a Methuselah. The eight actually playing the game stand in faux-surprise. "Your fortitude attempt fails. Full damage." The eight gasp in unison.

Nearby, a group of Ave-Rats sit in a circle, smoking. One of them, Pooka, pops up. She has noticed a couple, maybe in their 30's, walking towards their car.

"Hey, so Fuzzy, we can feed if we ask someone the time, right?" "Feed" cause they're vampires.

"Let them be. No, really, Pooka, leave them..." Fuzzy gives chase but it's clearly too late and he's too slow.

"Just gonna ask them the time. 'Scuse me miss?"

"Jeremy, this kid..." The woman exudes tension. You have to understand, Pooka is quite the spectacle. Every morning, she lathers her hair in Murphy's Hair Gel (keeps the jar on her at all times), and shapes it into liberty spikes. You know how long that takes? Every day? She's punk-rock as fuck, no ounce that isn't. Clearly this woman Pooka's decided to pick on isn't a fan of the Ramones.

"Do'ya know the time."

"Jeremy? Jeremy!"

"Fuck'n pricks," Pooka, under her breath.

"You want some change? You need some change?" pleads Jeremy.

"Just get to the car!" Full-on fucking fear. She and Jeremy increase their pace to a run, make it to the car. Pooka follows. Clark is close behind, other Ave-Rats behind him.

Clark's a sweet kid. He's not a kid at all. He's a lot older than the rest, something that happens on the streets. If someone older fails and gets caught on the streets, they can either become a bum or, I donno, let's call them a "watcher"; someone on the streets who keeps an eye on the kids. Clark's a watcher. He's really good at it, always trying to keep the kids happy, joking; clowning. You'd never guess how old he is. It's good he doesn't fuck Ave-Rats, some are half his age.

"I only wanna know the time, fuckers." Pooka points to her wrist.

"Go Jeremy. Just Go!" the woman can be heard screaming through the car-door window.

The Ave-rats catch up. They surround the car. This kind of shit happens more often than you'd think around here. Before there can be a reaction, the car jerks forward. Pooka is hit, foot run over by the tire.

"Fucking stop! Someone's hurt," yells Clark. The car drives off.

Some people don't listen. Maybe they listen to their wife or their son or lover. Not to the guy right in front. Naw, they ignore, try to pass by, even those hurt, and leave them for what might as well be dead. These are the type of people, now gone from the scene, who we just met. Cowards. The girl just wanted the time. And now she's wounded. Her foot is broken. She's in pain. But they are safe in centralized heat.

It needed to be said.

Clark helps Pooka to her feet.

"Shit fucking hurts!" Pooka is known for her subtlety

"No doubt. We have to get you to University Hospital."

"I'll deal. GodDamit! Shit Fucking hurts!"

"University Hospital. It's like 8 blocks and downhill. Maybe get a ride. Fuzzy?"

"That's broken, kid."

"No, but can you give us a ride? To the hospital?" asks Clark.

Fuzzy laughs. There really is no reason to laugh.

Clark says, "Fuzzy! Hospital!"

Fuzzy laughs more. "You can't keep up with me."

"Whadaya mean?" asks Clark.

"I drive too fast. You can't keep up with me."

"But we'll be in your car."

"Oh hell no. Sorry. I can't let you ride with me. I just got new car seats."

"Fuzzy!"

"I could drive slower, but you'd have to find another car."

"If we could find another car, then we wouldn't need..." Clark looks around.

Having seen what happened, everyone with a vehicle has fled.

"No then," Clark says, not as a rejection, but an understanding of Fuzzy.

"Peace be with you. I just can't. You know."

"I know," Clark responds, "It's just gonna make shit harder, but it's all good.

We'll make it a picnic."

"Yeah, fuckin picnic with a broken foot." Pooka's not in the mood for happiness.

Fuzzy leaves. There are five Ave-Rats left: Clark, Pooka, Lone Raven, Little Bear, and Danica.

"We could carry her, Clark." Little Bear resembles his name and probably could.

"We could call an ambulance," says Danica, matter-of-factly.

"They'll fucking make me pay for it," Pooka responds. "We're gonna have to hoof it."

"Yeah, but you don't have any money so they can't bill you. It's a shit-load easier." Danica wears all black all the time without exception except now, because her Vampire character is a 12 year-old girl. She's currently wearing a pink tutu, fishnets, and a skin-tight vinyl top.

Technically, Danica isn't an Ave-Rat. She just hangs out on The Ave all the time, so she might as well be one, but she has a home. Right now, she's got nothing better to do so why the fuck not?

"Well, I ain't gonna get in one of those corporate death-wagons, so, you commin?"

"Pooka...", Clark can't finish his thought. He is overcome by her strength.

Everyone knows, it is customary for Clark to cry. Clark cries a lot, not unhappiness, just the fluidity of the universe pressing its self upon him in tears. Clark weeps now.

Lone Raven has fashioned a dilapidated splint out of a discarded beer box. Pooka is supported by Clark and Little Bear. They make their way out. Danica follows cause she's got nothing better to do.

In Seattle it doesn't rain as much as people think it does. In Seattle it mists. Falling for days on end is a microscopic mist that covers everything in dampness. In the Winter, these particles of water turn to ice, and, when it's windy, they feel like hundreds of ball pen points prickling the skin. These are the conditions tonight.

The going is hard. The wind is blowing from behind them, pretty stiff. One might think this is helpful. It is not while transporting the wounded. Pooka falls twice, nearly goes down many more times. The party is miserable when they finally get to University Hospital, all, that is, except for Clark, who no one has ever seen frown. Even when he cries, still that shit-eating grin.

Pooka says, "Lets stop for a smoke before we go in."

"I think that's dumb." Clark replies, though Pooka is already being helped onto a park bench in the designated smoking section outside the hospital.

Lone Raven begins snipe hunting, looking in the ashtrays for half-smoked cigarettes. He finds one, soggy from the mist. He holds it under his lighter to dry it off. It crackles.

The hospital doors open. One of the workers, a seeming tech by his mannerisms, walks out on break. Before making it to the outskirts of the designated area, his cigarette is in his mouth, hands on lighter. The moment he crosses the threshold he lights it. He looks up.

"Chris?" He's looking directly at Clark. Clark doesn't flinch.

"Chris? Chris Clark? It's Brent. You know, from radiolo..."

"Hi Brent," says Clark as he walks away, headed to the hospital doors. "I'm gonna check you in," he says to Pooka.

"You know Clark?" asks Pooka once Clark has entered the building.

"Are you hurt?" Brent is staring at the disgruntled beer box splint.

"How do you know Clark?"

"Oh. I shouldn't'a said anything. Doctor – patient. I'm not a doctor, but... I shouldn't have said anything."

"Got a smoke?" asks Lone Raven. His snipe won't light.

"Yeah, and got some spare change? We just need a cup of coffee." Little Bear is always thinking ahead.

"Oh shit. My, uh, break is over. Gotta get back in. Save lives." He hands Lone Raven a cigarette, twirls, and walks, briskly, to the door, still smoking. He realizes he's

still smoking, turns back, dejected, reaches into his pocket and gives Little Bear two dollars.

“Weak,” responds Little Bear. “You got a smoke?”

“Man. I got two packs to last me... Here.”

“And one for me?” asks Pooka.

“You’re clearly underage.”

Little Bear lights his smoke, hands it to Pooka.

“You got a smoke?” Little Bear reiterates.

“Shit,” says Brent as he hands over the cigarette. “Can you let me be? For the rest of my break?” Brent is interrupted by Clark, returning.

“I checked you in. We’re gonna be here for a while.”

“Very quick,” says Little Bear.

“I know some things,” Clark responds.

“Still got those rollies?” Lone Raven asks Clark, having pocketed the smoke given to him by Brent and still unable to get his snipe to light. Little Bear stands up, crosses to Brent.

“Got a smoke?”

“This is harassment,” Brent squeals as he hands over his second to last cigarette. Little Bear hands it the Lone Raven. Lone Raven looks at it, puts it in his pocket. Clark hands him the packet of rollies. He starts to roll one. Brent watches in horror. He puts out his cigarette, edges backward and is gone.

“I wanna wait out here. They’ll come and get us, won’t they, Clark?” asks Pooka.

“No, but I’ll keep checking in for you.”

“How do you know ass-face?” Pooka inquires while taking a drag from her cigarette.

“Stop caring so much. The man’s got his secrets.” Danica, who has been standing the in ice-mist, returns to the group. Her tutu sparkles from the dew.

“Don’t say shit, Danica.” Clark heads her off.

“I said, you have your secrets, nothing more. I won’t say shit. Not for me to say. But you should tell them.”

“Fuck you.”

“What the fuck’s going on, Clark? What the fuck is she talking about?” Pooka is in Clark’s face. Somehow, injured, she’s in his face. Lone Raven lights his rollie, hands the pack back to Clark.

“Maybe if I got a pack of gum. So we don’t go through these smokes so quick?”

“I’ll fucking kick your ass, Clark. What’s going on?”

“I’ll... I’ll never tell you, Pooka. You’re like one of my kids.”

“More reason to fucking tell the truth.”

“I ain’t lyin’”

“Cause you ain’t said shit,” Pooka has began punching Clark in the arm. Hard. Again. Harder.

“Fuck you, Pooka. I am not gonna say. And you’re a bitch, Danica, for saying anything in the first place. Ow!”

“It was that dipshit Brent,” says Danica, not one to willingly accept responsibility for anything.

Pooka continues to hit Clark. “Bastard! Dumbass! Cunt!”

“Seriously?” exclaims Clark. “Cunt?”

Little Bear starts to laugh. Lone Raven joins in. They sound like Bevis and Butthead. Clark laughs at the other two laughing. Pooka stops hitting Clark, grunts in complete frustration. Danica laughs at Pooka, though she covers her mouth. Pooka gives a chuckle, then breaks out in full guffaw. The shaking of her body hurts her foot.

“Ow. Stop laughing. Foot.” This makes everyone laugh harder, a full-on case of the giggles. In front of a hospital.

It takes four hours for Pooka to get seen by a doctor. Though tough, Pooka is in pain. She doesn’t show it, but life is gritting teeth to her, a constant exposed nerve receiving stimuli at even the smallest of movements. It affects her personality, as if she were kind to begin with. Clark takes the most of it.

“Fuckin’ Clark fucker! Jesus!” Clark attempts to get her foot, now in a cast, on to a chair at IHOP. Clark has come through with the missing cash. Now, everyone is “coffee-camping”, sitting in IHOP at 4:00 in the morning having ordered only coffee. This is one of the ways to stay dry while on the streets.

“The pain is temporary. Better?”

The waitress named Beth, a kindly lady, knowledgeable about the needs of the kids, must be stern. A raised tone, experience has shown, is the best form of Ave-Rat communication.

“Don’t be rearranging the room, now. Clark! Honey! You can’t be... What happened to your foot, dear?”

“Auto-accident.”

“Well, ok, so – well... Roll her over there.” She points to the corner. At IHOP, the chairs have rollers.

Clark abides.

“Hey. That ain’t no way to treat a... Hey! Paying customer! Hey!”

“Shut the fuck up, Pooka.”

“Why you defending her, Clark? Some dishrag server bitch. Some corporate whore!”

Lone Raven can’t let that slide.

“We’re warm, Pooka. You wanna be out there with your foot like that? There’ll be plenty of time for that later. Chill.”

“You still have those Percocet?” Pooka asks Lone Raven.

“You’ve asked me 10 times. No. Plus I know you don’t have the cash.”

“You’re in a lot of pain, huh? I know.” Clark is frowning. Lone Raven notices.

“You know, man, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you frown. I’ve seen you cry. But with a fucking smile.” Clark returns to his perma-grin. “Don’t do that with me, man. You can be sad.”

“I... I donno. Just tired... lot on my mind.” Clark puts his head down on the table.

Pooka suddenly sits up straight. An inner light has spoken to her. She is overcome with an esoteric knowledge.

“Radiology. You’re going to die. You’re dying.”

Clark lifts his head. The frown has returned to his face.

“Of course not. You know, I think I have enough for some fries. You guys hungry?” Clark tries to wave Beth over.

“That proves it. Evading. You’re fucking sick or some shit. That guy at the hospital. He knew you. You’ve got cancer.”

Clarks laughs hardily at this. No one else does. Clark stops in mid chuckle. Upon his face, the look of a vice, tightening.

“Caught,” he says.

“Finally,” says Danica.

“How long?” someone asks.

“Do I have, or have I known? Soon. Not long. Who gets tested for cancer at 28.” Clark is 28.

“Holy shit.”

“You know I try to keep up this happiness, to turn away the way you guys are looking at me now. I’m still me. I worry you’ll stop looking at me that way. I just want you all to be happy, to laugh, not to get hit by fucking stuck-up yuppies. I never wanted you to know. I should have told you guys. I’m sorry. I guess I just wanted you all to still think of me as a fool, you know?”