



A Life In Pictures

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A Life In Pictures

"Let me see if I understand," said JJ, knuckles white as he made fists to stop his hands shaking. He looked between Frankie Hornbluth sat behind the desk and Pip reclining on the arm of the other chair in the agent's office. "You want to cast Pip here, a squirrel, as the leading man in my movie."

"I do," said Hornbluth. "It's finishing what Tim Burton started with Charlie and the whatever."

Hornbluth turned to the squirrel. "Pip, honey. It's the perfect role for you." He clenched his fists. "Gritty. Urban." He cupped his hands over his heart, then wiped away an imaginary tear. "Tender. Warm. A breakout role. You're made for it. And it gives JJ here something to do."

"I only need to know one thing," said Pip, the little silver choker that turned muscle twitches to talk flexing as he looked between the two men.

"Just ask," said Hornbluth.

"Are there any squirrels in it? I don't want to be typecast. I'm sick of being a plucky sidekick and working with rats."

"Humans? Vermin? It's all the same to me." With a sweep of his arm he took in the blondes, brunettes, cats, dogs, parrots and skunk visible through the glass walls of his office. Finished, he turned to JJ. "No squirrels in your opus, right?"

"Squirrels? No. There's a fight about a fish. But I, err, I guess I don't write good parts for animals."

"No one does," said Hornbluth. "Which is why Pip is perfect for you. For this film. As the lead. He wants to move on, you need a solid name. It's gold. Already." One hand described an arc in the air as if revealing the movie title in lights.

"You really see this working?"

"Sure." said Hornbluth. "When I look at you two it's like seeing De Niro and Scorsese all over again."

"You got them together?"

"No, but you see what I mean. Great partnership." He brought his hands close like he was strangling someone. "Even better, Pip brings money, backers, to the table so you can get shooting straight away." Hornbluth cocked his right eyebrow.

Feeling like there was a trapdoor opening beneath him JJ realised he had to agree. He hated how it happened. He had always thought he would pick his route to the top. Like a prim schoolgirl saving herself for Mr Right which, for him, was creative freedom, the cast of his choice and a huge budget. Oh, and a fat stack of points on the back end. But with his peers popping their cherries on soundstages up and down the Valley he'd become so desperate he would put out for anyone with a glad look in their eye. Forget Mr Right. He would go for Mr Right Now. But he had never thought that would be Frankie Hornbluth — agent to the stars both human and animal.

"Sure," said JJ. "Why not?"

"Marvellous, now..."

"But..." said JJ.

"What?" said Hornbluth. "You're negotiating? Now? Please, have some respect."

"I'll sign the deal," said JJ, "But I want Pip to audition. To read a scene, just to be sure. Soon. Tomorrow."

Hornbluth cocked his other eyebrow.

"Sure," said the squirrel. "Why not?"

"When can I see more of you?" said Pip.

After a long pause, Pip said: "It's your line."

"I know, that delay was me acting." JJ sighed. "Shall we try it again?"

"Okay."

JJ looked round the scruffy rehearsal room. It had the usual distressed décor, mismatched chairs and a few stackable plastic tables. JJ and Pip sat on a lumpy green sofa set between the room's two windows.

"When can I see more of you?"

The pause built and built.

"Did you just ask me to take my clothes off?"

"What? God, no. Oh, it's got to that part of the night hasn't it?"

"Night? It's almost morning."

"Really? I hadn't noticed, but you know what I mean. When everything has a double meaning."

"Everything? Really?"

"Really. Try it."

"Okay, but as it's nearly morning do you want something hot for breakfast?"

"See?"

"Hmm, that sounded like it had just one meaning."

"Meaning we're thinking the same thing."

"I guess. So, when *do* you want to see more of me?"

"Don't know. How quickly can you get undressed?"

JJ got up and paced, script clenched in hand. Pip had the lines right but lacked conviction.

JJ called Bob over and said: "I'm not sure this is the best scene to perform."

"No? Well, I think it's perfect. You wrote this so you know it's movie's crux, where they both realise what's at stake."

JJ looked at Bob. *Am I being played?* he thought. He'd laughed when Pip had said they would be doing Scene 6 — the one JJ had always called the seduction scene.

"And anyway," said Bob, "it's the only one we've rehearsed."

"Can't he just read another one?"

"Not off the bat, no. He has to be coached. But once he has the words, the feeling behind them, he's fine."

"This just gets better and better," muttered JJ, wondering, if he called a halt now, would he regret seeing the money walk more than he would selling his story so cheap. A lot of his life was in the script, thinly disguised, and a few old girlfriends would be angry when they saw the movie. Not least Josie as the seduction scene had been based on their fling. She'd been his waitress at lunch, lover next morning and a story to make his grandsons envious a week later.

"Do you really think this is going to work?" said JJ, gesturing towards Pip who was reciting nonsense to keep his voice warm.

"Look." Bob bit off the word.

Seeing the hard look on Bob's face, JJ swallowed. If I was an actor I would remember this feeling, he thought, I could use it when I have to look scared.

"Both you and I have a chance here, Pip is something we can use..."

"Something or someone?"

Bob stepped closer, the light from the window behind him made him loom over JJ. "Take your pick. Either way he's my, and now your, ticket to ride. He's a novelty act, in a way, but a trail-blazer too. We get this right and we're made. Once it's done you can worry about your precious integrity. I know how to flatter him and get the best out of him. He's like any other actor, he needs a little handling is all."

"That seems a little harsh."

"If it makes you feel better, think of him like a cripple."

"What?"

"Well, losing a limb wouldn't change you, would it? The real you? Who you think you are? Not even two? Compassion, common humanity, urges you to say no, right? Same with Pip. He's not all human but he's human enough. He can act. And you could say he's a living metaphor of all that's fine, honest and vulnerable in a man. No amount of CGI will capture that so well.

JJ spluttered. "Do you really believe that?"

"You'd better hope I do. And you better start believing it too. But here, maybe most important for a poor boy like you whose been cut free of mommy and daddy's credit cards, is that Pip is cheap. Free if you consider I come with him and *I* bring the money men."

"I don't know," said JJ, appalled at how fast the corruption took hold.

"Look, it's not just Pip who is key here, we need you too. This script is great. It's honest and you don't get that in Hollywood very often. Plus your teachers said good things about you. Soon as you adjust your attitude we can get to work."

JJ scuffed his sneakers into the floorboards, then looked up. "How do I know I'm not being flattered too? Handled?"

"Simple. This is Hollywood where it is a good idea to believe anything said by those giving you lots of money."

"Okay." JJ took a moment, seeing a way out. "But I want Pip to move in with me."

"What! Why?"

"You said he needs coaching, right?"

"Sure, but just the...."

"It's my script, I know it best, what each scene, moment, calls for. I can coach him better. Better than you."

"Well, I guess but..."

"You said you needed me, prove it by letting me look after Pip. Protecting your investment, if you like. And it'll be my fault if it crashes and burns."

"Yeah, but there are..."

"Hey, Pip!" said JJ. "Do you want to move in with me while we're working together. So we get to know each other? I can coach you on the script. Take you through it scene by scene."

"Sounds great," said Pip, bounding over. "All boys together."

JJ cocked an eyebrow at Bob who looked between them both. "Sure," he said. "Why not."

It was supposed to be a garden party, thrown by the Hollywood Reporter for this season's fresh faces, but JJ had never worked so hard. The news about their search for a leading lady had leaked so as soon as JJ stepped onto the lawn he soon ran out of hands for the glasses of punch, business cards, canapés, handshakes and phone numbers forced on him.

He remembered Bob's advice and within ten minutes hated the sound of his own insincerity. Glib, he promised to keep in touch with people he had just met, faked emotion when talking about how good it would be working with an old pro like Pip and put a crack in his voice when promising places on the production crew for long forgotten classmates.

When an eddy in the flow of people cast him adrift near the bar, JJ looked for Pip and Bob and saw them holding court in the middle of a small crowd of party goers. They looked to be having a great time.

"JJ! How long has it been?" He turned to see Ted Carcher approaching.

"Ted! Great to see you." But it wasn't. At film school JJ had always felt his projects had been the intellectual counter-weight to the high concept candy floss Carcher wanted to helm.

"So," said Carcher. "Pip, huh? Good catch. How's that working out for you?"

Suspicious, JJ stalled, mouthed platitudes, then realised Carcher hung on his every word. It hit him like a bullet. I've got an angle, he thought. A squirrel for a lead. Preposterous, but who knew? He could use the squirrel to get somewhere. You'd have to be so careful, though, but just maybe... His stomach lurched like when he got the acceptance letter

from film school. He let the warmth in his stomach heat up a proper smile and he nattered to Carcher about showbiz. They stopped to watch Pussy Geller make an entrance. On hind legs she stood, white fur coiffured to perfection, a glittering tiara between her pointed ears and carrying a dwarf hamster like a human would a chihuahua. At the top of the terrace stairs she pirouetted so they all got her best side.

"They say she had surgery to walk upright," said Carcher.

"Have to," said JJ. "I never saw Mr Pickle stroll around like that."

"Who's Mr Pickle?"

"My mom's cat."

"Oh."

They fell silent as Hella Feinberg and her white-clad entourage stalked past.

"That girl is soooo hot," mumbled Carcher. JJ did know whether Carcher meant because she was so gorgeous or the maid of the moment.

"She was in acting classes alongside us, wasn't she?" said JJ.

"Uh-huh. And don't that make me feel better. What with me being second unit assistant head on Rocky 9 and all."

"Look out, she's coming over," said JJ.

They tried to keep talking and look nonchalant but the fierce aura of her celebrity struck them dumb.

"Hi!" she said.

"Hello," they both muttered, heads bowed.

"It's, err, JJ isn't it?" Up close she was stunning. Her skin was flawless, hair world-class, outfit immaculate and she smelled like no one he had ever met. That was success, he supposed.

The entourage swept in and cut Carcher off who waved like a drowning man as he was jostled back into the crowd.

"Yes," said JJ. "Yes. Yes it is."

"I wonder," she said, nodding toward Pip. "I'm looking for a new project and... Is your friend seeing anyone at the moment?" A hitch in her voice betrayed something and for a moment, Hella was approachable, then the lunacy of the moment re-asserted itself and her cheekbones and steeply fame dazzled him again.

"He's not my..." JJ stopped himself. "He's not, no, seeing anyone. That is. Not as far as I know." Seizing the moment, he said: "Do you want me to introduce you?"

Pip leaned on the scuffed frame of the apartment's open window, arms crossed. Beyond, past the picket fences, backyards and weed-strewn lots, scrubby Hollywood hills marched away and away until, at the limit of vision, they faded away. The muted roar of traffic could be heard and somewhere an ambulance raised its mournful howl.

"I've come a long way," he said.

"We both have, hon." Hella pattered past wearing a tight white cami top and panties with faded flowers on them. She rummaged in a nearby cupboard, grunted with satisfaction, got up and walked out again.

"Have I left it all behind? Have I given up too much?"

"Whatdyasay, hon?" Hella came back, knelt, leant on the sill and looked at the hills too.

Pip half turned, leaned over and tucked a hair or two of hers back into place. He looked at her like he looked at the hills. "Just looking back to where I came from," he said. "Trying to remember why and when."

"We were going to set the world on fire," she said. "Now look at us, domestic as all get out."

"We set something on fire," he said. "Or at least I remember a lot of shouting. Maybe that was it." She made to poke him and he shimmied sideways, then pirouetted, on the edge of falling, always on the edge of falling.

He walked toward her along the sill and said: "I do wonder if we've lost more than we gained. I've left my wilder past behind and joined you here. Forgotten what I swapped that earlier life for. Forgotten that earlier life." He gestured at the chipped crockery, the mismatched chairs and the wheezing refrigerator.

"But it's not all one way," she said, with affection.

Feeling vulnerable, he stepped within her arms and said: "Tell me I'm not just a project for you? Something to refine, improve. Tell me this has no end. Tell me there is more."

"Of course there is," she whispered. "I've gone through experiences with you I would never have had any other way. Without you. It's changed me too. Neither of us are what we were."

"Is that good or bad?"

"It's us," she said, "It's honest. It's enough. It's love."

"Cut!" said JJ. Perfect. One take.

"Are you sure about this scene?" said Mr Pongo. They were wrapping for the day and JJ, Pip and Mr Pongo stood close to the sound stage's open door. Outside a giant fruit basket was wheeled past, fake cream on its giant cherries glistening in the sun. "Because I think it's a bit much."

"We need it," said JJ, trying to stop staring at Mr Pongo's crotch. He might be a talented script doctor but the traditional waistcoat and fez he favoured left a lot of ape on show.

"We need it," said Pip from the top of a plyboard credenza. "It shows how deep the affair goes."

"But it's post-coital," said Mr Pongo. "They're in bed. Pip's got balls I'll grant you, but sticking it to Hella? Come on. I've got a warehouse full of apes and typewriters downtown that can work miracles but this...?" He pushed the fez up and scratched his long, wrinkled brow.

"If this was the first scene in the movie, sure, it'd look nuts," said JJ. "But I've seen the rushes. The chemistry between these two is there."

Pip interrupted. "Hella and I connect. It can't be an on-screen love affair without this. Really."

Hella and Pip had more than connected, they had moved in together. With Hella aboard interest went stellar but when Pip and her began dating the tabloids went berserk.

JJ realised he was jealous of Hella and Pip. Coaching Pip had been fun, having him around the apartment good too, JJ had enjoyed those short weeks maybe too much. Reliving all those good memories helped. *And maybe I don't want to shoot the scene because then I have to admit Pip has gone and everything has changed.*

Mr Pongo rocked back, held the script in one foot and read it again. Then he said: "Give me till morning, I'll see what I can do."

When Mr Pongo had peddled off on his little bicycle, JJ said: "Look, Pip."

"What?"

"Hella. I don't think... you just need to be careful around her."

"Really? Why?"

"I'm worried for you, don't want you to..."

"Drop out of the movie? Throw the shooting script off schedule? Get married?"

"No, no. Do you think she might just be using your, ahh, unique, ahh, status?"

"For what? Sex? I'm only sleeping with her in the movie. And she has way more money than me. More famous too. Nothing I could give her. Maybe you need to take time to see that. We're an item for other reasons."

"No, but, there's something else."

A slim shadow fell between them before he could finish.

"Pip!"

Hella stood in the door, hand over her brow searching him out in the gloom.

"Hey, honey. Over here." Pip waved. "Let's talk about this later."

"Don't worry about it, just my director's paranoia." said JJ, watching them leave.

Opening the door JJ found Pip standing in the corridor, little hands clasped before him. Hazelnuts spilled from a sack slumped against the wall behind him.

"She's thrown me out," said Pip.

"Come in, come in," said JJ, stepping back, far less calm than he sounded.

Pip leapt on to the sofa than stalked back and forth along its back, tail bristling.

JJ sat in an armchair in the shadows. "What happened?" he said. "You two were so good together. Does this mean the movie...?"

"Don't worry. We'll finish the film. We only have a few scenes to do."

JJ let him talk, he'd seen him like this on the nights before a big scene, when they still shared an apartment.

"We had a fight," said Pip. "It got very heated. She came in after staying out all night. With him." He spat the final word.

"Hank..."

"Don't say his name," Pip cut in. "Do you know what I gave up for this?"

"No," said JJ. "Were there other offers, better parts?"

"Not for your film," said Pip, tail twitching. "To be able to talk? To be like this. I, we, my kind have a very good memory. That's how we can find nuts years later, even in the snow. The gene therapy boosted that but every word that goes in means some squirrel comes out. Childhood memories, other squirrels, family, my home, all gone. All for what?"

For me, thought JJ. The weight of what Pip had lost silenced him. Pip's hands scrabbled like he had fallen from a tree and was flailing for handholds.

"I said to her, I said, no one can love you like I do. All other humans can give you is sex, but between us, there is more, a fine feeling. No one else could know, or need, each other like we did. She knew I didn't need her money, didn't care for her looks. I thought she saw that, saw its purity and that she would honour it while it lasted. I'm going to die soon and she couldn't stay true even that long."

"You're going to die?" JJ said, aghast. "Soon?"

"We're not long lived," Pip said, "and the gene therapy has cut into that. Add the time it took me to learn to speak and I'm very old for a squirrel."

"So this movie is..."

"All I have left," Pip said. "I thought my time with Hella would make up for what I abandoned. Prove it was a good choice. How cheap human notions of love seem to me now. How soon you forget."

"Maybe she had just played too many roles," said JJ. "And couldn't spot the real thing."

"Maybe," Pip said, "and maybe I should have stuck to my own kind. We mate for life. And I don't think all the squirrel has been taken out. Yet. Throw a nut."

"What?"

"Throw a nut, hard, make it bounce around. I want to find out what's left."

JJ fished a kernel from the sack and cocked his arm. "Ready?"

Pip nodded, he tensed on the sofa arm.

"Go!" JJ flung the nut as hard as he could. It pinged off the light shade setting it swinging, caromed off a bookshelf and soared across the room

where Pip, after racing along the sofa top and bouncing off the air-conditioner cowl, intercepted it. He somersaulted in mid-air and landed on the armchair across the room sitting upright — the nut held tight.

“Wow!” JJ said. “That was incredible, do it again.” He flung another nut.

They watched as it pinged around the walls, dinged off the light shade and bookshelf and then skidded across the floor. Where it span to a stop trailing dust bunnies like a scarf.

JJ looked up to see Pip standing tall on the seat, tail twitching.

“I am not a pet, JJ,” he said, and stamped off to the bedroom.

I’m worried about a squirrel, said JJ to himself.

The last fortnight had been fraught, his stars were frosty on set and their bitter break-up made the final scenes fraught. Every day every crew member, camera man, dolly grip, focus puller, and wrangler left with a smile on their face. They were doing good work, maybe their best, though it left JJ drained to keep it all spinning.

In the evenings Pip disappeared, spending time who knew where, coming home late dusty and dirty, silent until on set. Every night JJ stood at the apartment window wondering, worrying, about where Pip had gone. This time Pip had been out all night.

JJ had paced the hours away, unable to settle. He’d tried sitting on the sofa flipping through channels of rabbit porn, docusoaps, ape debates and game shows until they sickened him.

He went back to the window, one hand on the cool glass as he looked out. Dawn revealed a red scrap of cloth on the fire escape probably dropped by the rich brats upstairs. Some hootchie’s designer thong, no doubt. He wanted to grab it, take it upstairs and fling it in their face when they answered the door.

He threw up the sash window and leaned out to grab it.

“Oh, no.”

It was Pip.

Twisted like a wrung-out dish rag, Pip lay curled around his tail, hands palsied, reaching for JJ.

“Pip! Pip!” Sobbing, JJ found himself on the fire escape kneeling over the squirrel. “What’s happened? Who did this?”

"Just. Age," Pip said.

"I'll get you to the hospital. We can help you. They can fix you."

"No," Pip said. "Too late. Need. You to. Take me."

In the apartment, JJ wrapped Pip in a faded pink towel — his red fur in the cloth made him look like a wound.

"Where? To see Hella?"

Pip shook his head then bared his teeth at the pain.

"Gah. Woods. Top of. Cygnet Drive. Quick."

JJ called a cab and was on the sidewalk pacing with Pip in his arms when it arrived. Pip was so light it was like holding a heartbeat in a jar.

JJ snarled at the taxi driver to get him moving, promised a fat tip if he got there quicker.

The city was a bright blur around them, JJ wishing he had hooks for eyes so he could hold Pip's gaze more firmly.

"Hold on, Pip. Hold on. Nearly there." He could not trust himself with long words lest the sob hanging inside broke free.

"We needed you too," Pip choked out.

"I don't..."

"Knew you would. Do it. Not just. Random. Choice."

"25 bucks," said the driver, "and that ain't including that fat tip you promised. Remember?"

"Wait here," said JJ, stumbling from the back seat, Pip already calling directions. Headed up the hill, running toward the rising sun like its lost children. Even in dawn's half light Pip was sure and soon JJ set him down against the roots of a huge oak.

"Forward. Stop. Right two. Paces." Pip choked out every word then told JJ to dig. An inch or two down JJ unearthed an old acorn, gritty with a notch bitten into it. He carried it back like a chalice.

Pip grimaced when he saw it. It could have been a smile or because of the pain. JJ placed Pip's paws on the muddy nut.

"Knew there. Was some. Squirrel. Left in me," he said. "Two things. To show. You. Last memory. And legacy."

"Pip," said JJ. "You can't go now. Not after you've given me so much. You need to stay. I've realised that everyone uses you, no one treats you like a friend. But I know I could. The film shows who you are, that it

does work, and I know it can work between us as friends. Don't go. Please don't go. Don't leave it like this."

"Haven't. Look around." Pip said, then his head fell forward and he crumpled into the soft towel. His little black eyes dulled before the lids closed over them.

JJ sat and wept, then dashed tears away as Pip's voice came again, though fainter than ever. Blinking his eyes clear he saw a semi-circle of squirrels, standing round, heads bowed, all wearing little silver collars. One bobbed forward, leaning on the towel, edging toward the gritty acorn. It looked up at JJ and said: "Can I have that nut if he's not going to eat it?"

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