

## THE ACTOR AMONG US

It was August, 1979, a rainy night in an old beach house on the Atlantic coast. I was fourteen years old. John Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men* was on my summer reading list for boarding school, and after dinner, as my family drifted back into the living room to sit by the fire, one of our houseguests – a famous, energetic, and physically unprepossessing actor with a prominent nose and flat, nasal voice – picked up my copy of the book, opened it to the first page, and began performing it aloud, inhabiting the disparate minds and voices of the protagonists George and Lenny with uncanny precision. At first, self-conscious smiles appeared in our makeshift audience, though we quickly realized that this extraordinary display was no laughing matter. We were meant to watch and listen, which we did – for hours, as the rain beat down on the roof, the branches of the pine trees scraped and tapped against the windows, and the fire burned to embers. And when the hulking man-child Lenny (twice our houseguest's size, one had to assume) ended up crushing another man with his bare hands, and the rage drained from his powerful limbs, his terrible confusion – he'd wanted to protect, not to hurt – made him, in the actor's sublime incarnation, what he truly was, both wolf and lamb.

I stayed for the duration, hardly moving in my seat. A trip to the bathroom was out of the question; the bathroom from which, earlier in the day, behind the locked door with the whaling ship painted on it, I'd overheard my mother quietly sobbing (three months later, she asked my father to move out of the house, which he did). When the performance was finally over, and with a curtain-call bow of triumph the actor handed me back my book, his sweaty fingerprints still on the cover, tragedy for me was no longer just a notion in a story, but a ghost in our house.

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For a couple of years at the end of the 70s, Dustin Hoffman was a fixture in our family. My father was his lawyer and friend. Dustin was a movie star at the peak of his fame, the most intelligent and brilliant actor any of us had ever met, and he was with us a lot, making us laugh, entertaining us, opening doors to worlds brighter than our own, observing our ways and moods and accidents, our spilled drinks and sullen glances and careless goodnight kisses, never missing a beat. And we enjoyed it mostly, and depended on it, until in every respect that particular show came to the end of its run.

I have my own family now, and have come to believe that there's no such thing as an unimpressionable age. Certain experiences you never forget, no matter how old you become. Which reminds me, when I catch a glimpse of Dustin in a film or on a morning talk show – or, especially, when I look at this portrait taken for *Vogue* in 1979 – of the times he spent with us when I was a kid. Of how, watching us so closely and projecting us back at ourselves as only a consummate actor can, he became, for a little while, a complex mirror for our troubles.

Of course, all of us are actors now and then, if only inadvertently; faking courage, leadership skills, and a calm bedside manner, say, while watching our little ship (or one of our meager fleet) go down. The difference between great actors and the rest of us isn't simply that they know how to make more out of less, but that, like lions at the waterhole, they will always take more than their share from the pool of available resources – extra air from the room, added knowledge from our faces. Because they can. Because that is what they were born to do. They have a reactive intelligence which may or may not be connected to intellect. They are highly sensitized predators, who consume the young, the elderly, the weak, and pretty much everyone in between. But especially the weak. Which doesn't mean they can't be a whole lot of fun. And Dustin *was* fun. I wouldn't call him nice,

exactly – he was far too clever for that. But then, nice has nothing to do with being a movie star.

From the beginning, he took a particular interest in my mother. She was blond, beautiful, WASPy, intelligent, desperately unhappy, and married to a Jew. She was – there could be no ignoring it – not unlike the blond, beautiful, WASPy, intelligent, desperately unhappy character married to a Jew that Meryl Streep was preparing to play opposite Dustin in the movie that would eventually win them both Academy Awards.

Dustin and my mother used to have lunch together at a little restaurant on the Upper East Side not far from his apartment. My father knew about these outings, possibly even encouraged them for professional reasons. Dustin was a glamorous, funny, and engaging companion. (He did have a habit of talking about sex every chance he got, which for a while made me want to be an actor just like him). One afternoon, as they were walking by his building, he turned to my mother with a sly look and asked if she didn't want to come up to his apartment. She believed he was bluffing – playing a role so he might observe her response. As though she were a little white mouse in a laboratory run by a brilliant and very entertaining scientist. In the end, however much fun it was to be hit on by a movie star, she was still a mouse, and she knew it. She laughed and did not go up to his apartment, then or ever.

Dustin was working on the script for *Kramer Vs. Kramer* with the writer/director Robert Benton, trying to get the character details right: who Joanna Kramer really was, what special misery might lead her to abandon not only her marriage but her child. Was such a woman credible, and would the audience accept her? In my mother, I think it safe to say, Dustin recognized not simply a feminine type, but the sort of individual who makes an unforgettable character. His own marriage was breaking up – we soon got to know his attractive young girlfriend Lisa, whom he later married – and by nature and experience he was highly attuned to stories of unfaithfulness and

emotional betrayal. In the details of my mother's isolated drama, perhaps, he saw the difference between an average film and a good or even great one.

Still, it's one thing to recognize certain potentially useful affinities, and another to act on them. Dustin asked my mother if she would meet with his producers. She was reluctant but agreed – her self-confidence had by then dipped dangerously into the red zone, where “yes” became the default answer to almost any unpleasant demand – and one day she found herself at the Carlyle Hotel with Dustin and a couple of film people. They began with some simple behavioral questions – where did she buy her clothes; did she ever shop at Bloomingdale's; what French patisserie on the Upper East Side did she frequent? – before prying more directly into her marriage. They asked if she could ever imagine leaving her children as well as her husband. But my mother would not entertain these last questions. She had reached the aching limit of her unhappiness, and eventually she fell mute.

Dustin, however, was persistent. More than anything, he wanted to arrange a lunch with my mother and Meryl Streep. He told my mother that she and the great actress had much in common, and assured her that they would become good friends. My mother believed him (it was probably true). But with her marriage crumbling, she didn't feel strong enough to sit across a lunch table from a brilliant woman she admired, with another brilliant actor observing her every move, and keep up her end of a conversation which, given the present state of her life, would have felt horribly like a bad movie. Beyond that, she didn't want to be studied. She was becoming – for all the wrong reasons – like many tribal people, who fear having their photographs taken because they believe the camera will steal their spirits. So my mother never did meet Meryl Streep.

I wasn't a direct witness to most of these ambivalent negotiations, of course. What I know about them I know from my mother, who is naturally rather cautious about it all; you don't easily dive back into a deep pool in which you almost drowned. (I should say that, despite everything, she

remains fond of Dustin – as, curiously, I sort of do too, though none of my family has been in touch with him for many years.) For me, on the other hand, with a fourteen-year-old’s hormonally warped radar, the two weeks that Dustin and Lisa spent in our rented house on Nantucket in the summer of ‘79 were momentarily weird and exciting. The floors and walls of the house were as thin as birchbark and the beds decrepit, giving our guests’ post-lunch “NAPS” a springy, high-fidelity resonance that I can hear to this day. Nor could I ignore, even if I’d wanted to (which I didn’t), the smell of high-grade pot wafting through the open windows of my brother’s and my room from the back porch, where my father and Dustin would sometimes retire for a late night smoke. Nor will I forget the morning when, glancing up from my reading – I’d finished *Of Mice and Men* and moved on to Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* – I discovered Dustin staring at me through a camera from two feet away: *click, click, click*. I still have a copy of that photograph, affectionately signed to me by the artist. And I probably don’t need to add that it’s an excellent picture, unsettlingly observant, not so much catching me warts and all as mercilessly anticipating some arrival just beyond the limits of my vision – a train I’m looking out for nervously, hoping it’s not going to run me into the ground.

Through all this Dustin was able, as if by natural magic, to keep his eye fixed on his own horizon. He looked out for all of us, in a sense, by keeping us entertained and distracted from our domestic traumas, but along the way he never for a moment forgot where he was headed and what fueled his engine. Discovering that Arthur Miller was renting a place up the beach from ours and would be coming to dinner, Dustin immediately devised a plan to convince the playwright that he was the man to play Willy Loman in the upcoming PBS version of *Death of Salesman*. No matter that Dustin and Willy, as characters were entirely different species and that Arthur had no intention of offering him the part. In the afternoon, we could hear Dustin up in his room preparing himself for the ambush audition. And almost as soon

as Arthur stepped through our front door he was met head-on by his own legendary creation, in the form of Dustin. You have to remember that Arthur was quite tall, and Dustin quite short; and to picture the tall Arthur looking down, from a height and distance shrinking by the minute, at the short, intensely emoting Dustin, and perhaps there and then knowing that he's been successfully hijacked. *Attention must be paid.* And so it was. Dustin got the part – as, in those days, he almost always did.

That was the last summer we were all together. By the following August, my father was living across the country in California, and he and my mother, already separated once, were experimenting with getting back together. My father had been seeing another woman, but he swore that that was finished, and my mother flew out to spend time with him and see if things perhaps could be different between them. From my own particular life raft – much battered and yet, to my constant surprise, still afloat some distance from shore – this prospect of my parents' reconciliation filled me with dread. I simply knew it was wrong, as horses can sense an earthquake hours before its arrival.

Dustin was in Los Angeles then, too. He and Meryl had won their Oscars for *Kramer*, and he was riding as high as high could be. He was flying back to New York that weekend, and when he learned that my mother would be on the same flight, he arranged for her to sit next to him. They talked most of the way across the country. They'd always gotten along. Dustin had seen my father recently, and with his shrewd, miss-nothing eyes couldn't have failed to observe the doomed state of their marriage. He would have known that certain kinds of emotional damage cannot be undone, not ever, which of course does not make for a less interesting story.

Which perhaps was why, somewhere seven miles above sea-level, he turned to my mother and with a barely perceptible smile said, "So, think you two're really going to make it this time?"

My mother never answered him. She didn't have to. And by the following year Dustin had a new lawyer, and our old house sat empty.

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