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WRY SOCIETY

the struggling actor

A thesp finds himself forever losing out to an old school chum, but has the winter of his discontent only just begun?

Luke needed a new agent. That or to get his teeth whitened. But teeth whitening, he thought, as he studied his still incredibly handsome self in the Groucho Club cloakroom mirrors, would cost a fortune, whereas firing his hard-working agent of 20 years would merely cost his integrity. And, after this evening's all-time low of declaring undying love to Priscilla, London's least fanciable casting director, he was pretty sure he had none left to lose.

He looked at his watch: 4am. That had been at least four hours ago, and he was

fairly sure Priscilla would no longer be waiting for him in her grotty Earl's Court flat. She'd have cried off her mascara into her fat ginger cat by now. And almost certainly struck him off the shortlist for that seven-part Trollope she was casting.

"Dum, dum, dum, another one bites the dust," he sang to himself, as he rolled his umpteenth cigarette of the night.

"No drugs on the premises, sir," said the weary cloakroom attendant.

"If only, mate," sighed Luke, stumbling past him with the wink that had recently become more of a tic. He must stop doing

that. It was what had got him stuck at the bar with Priscilla, discussing whether he'd be a better Caesar or Willy Loman.

Because somehow, without him really even noticing, that was what it had come to; he had bypassed the breeches years, hurtled past Hamlet and was meandering slowly towards the meatier, middle-aged roles, with (he could but hope) the odd jump into the voiceover abyss on the way.

In his darker moments, he wondered what exactly – in the 20 years since, fresh from Rada, *The Sunday Times* had declared him the Leading Light of his Generation – had got in the way of his path to certain Oscar glory. He knew the answer, of course. Knew it deep in his 6ft 1in, perfectly proportioned bones. Orlando Hetherwick, that was what. That whey-skinned, wavy-haired, poetry-reading nonce who'd been the bane of Luke's life since he'd beaten him

Who needs Trollope when you've got a job on a frozen pea commercial?

to the part of Heathcliff in the Donmar's seminal acid house version of the Brontë classic the year after graduation.

Ever since "Oz" had appeared on the heath shirtless, covered in fluoro paint, Luke had been chasing his coat-tails. The same tails he'd worn at Eton (naturally), and to play Charles Ryder in *Brideshead*, Charles Stringham in *A Dance to the Music of Time* and to bow obsequiously to Prince Charles when collecting his MBE, to the joyful cries of huge groups of Union Jack-waving Hetherwicks, the hormonal harpies who followed his every schmooze.

Lolling in the doorway of the Groucho Club, Luke pondered his next move. He was due at Dean Street Townhouse for breakfast with his sister and her new boyfriend in less than five hours so he might as well hang about in Soho rather than trek home to Finchley, where he would only raid the fridge, vomit on his shoes, turn around and go out again.

Or he could call Priscilla, plead Rohypnol amnesia and try and get back in the game. But, on second thoughts, he'd rather vomit on his shoes. And besides, he had a two-day job on a frozen-pea commercial next week so who needed the Trollope trollop anyway?

No, he'd go for a lap dance, or a shish kebab or – hell! – both at once.

But first, he thought, pulling his hoodie up against the cold and slipping slowly down the wall, he might just get a bit of shuteye. "Sleep," he muttered to himself. "The death of each day's life, sore labour's bath. Balm of hurt minds." God he'd have made a great Macbeth...

He was woken, several hours later, by a £1 coin in the face. "Get yourself a hot coffee, mate," said a charitable passerby. "And a job." Ouch.

As he walked, head pounding, to the Townhouse, he wondered why there were so many barely dressed girls giggling over their mobile phones. Distracted by the promise of a full English, he scanned the room. There they were, in a cosy huddle, both drinking green juice and dressed in weekend cashmere.

When the boyfriend stood up and pulled him into an intimate, musky bear hug – to a chorus of muted squeals from outside – Luke's heart sank.

"I hear we might be working together on the Trollope?" beamed Oz, with a nauseating wink. "My friend Priscilla says you're top of her list." **CHLOE FOX**