

The Perfect Life

The lights flashed up into his eyes as he stepped out onto the stage. People from all walks of life were gathered around tables, waiting for the famed singer to address them. All walks of life—that was Coconut Grove’s little lie. They may let carpenters in alongside actors, but they were not about to admit anyone who was not prominent in society. Bryce had noted, as he walked up the back stairs a little while ago, that every business had their own little lie. You might say that these didn’t matter, but to Bryce it just seemed another reason to hate Hollywood. Anyway, he was on stage—he better say something. He cleared his throat and began again this nightly routine: “Thank you all for coming.” (wait for applause to die down) “All of us here at Coconut Grove love to see our friends and fans.” (wait for applause to die down) “Our first selection tonight will be by the prestigious Cole Porter. A song you all know and love, *Night and Day*.” As he started to sing, his mind began to calm down, but he still had the feeling that he didn’t belong here. *When all this fame is whittled down, it’s just another career*, he thought. Bryce sighed slightly and started on the second verse.

After the show, as he changed from his evening clothes to shirtsleeves and slacks, he heard a knock on the door. “It’s me, Bryce. Can I come in?” As the door opened, Al, his manager and friend who had arranged for his job at Coconut Grove three weeks before, stepped in and asked, “You all right?”

“Yeah, I’m just tired. This nightclub stuff is really getting to me.”

“Listen to you! Bryce Miller, the singing superstar--what haven’t you got?” Al queried.

“Peace and quiet, for one thing,” Bryce said and slumped onto the stool before his dressing table.

“Well, you have five days off coming,” Al ventured. “Maybe you should take a few more. You look tired.”

“No, no, that’s not what I meant. I want to go somewhere that I’m not me,” Bryce replied. “Just be a normal guy for a while. Just be someone with no big problems.”

“I wish you could, but no one has that, you know. And besides, what’s wrong with what you’ve got?”

“Nothing’s wrong with it—it’s just that I’d like to be somewhere else. Somewhere that’s quiet,” Bryce responded. Then he chuckled and said, “I suppose I’m daydreaming, but you know, somewhere that’s—“

“Perfect?” his manager filled in. “Look Bub, if you can find a life without any problems, you let me know.”

Bryce looked up and grumbled, “Oh, I’m sure there’s someone who has a life like that. It’s just that the only one we’ve been exposed to is the glitzy, supposedly ‘carefree’ life of show business. I’m sorry. I must sound pretty down. I’m just tired--tired of it all.”

Al nodded his head and then added, “Yeah, you just need a good night’s sleep. Why don’t you go home now. And try not to talk to anyone—you might make ‘em jump off a cliff!” He gave Bryce a pat on his dejected shoulders and closed the door behind himself.

What’s wrong with me? Bryce wondered. How long had he been this way? He leaned his head on the counter and sighed. Suddenly he made up his mind. Taking a piece of notepaper out of the drawer, he scribbled a note for his manager: *Al, I’m going to find out who’s right about the perfect life. Please beg off about a month of free time for me. Hope to see you soon, don’t come looking for me, I’m going somewhere far away from here. As far away as I can get. Bryce*

Once outside, Bryce stopped to reconnoiter. He would have to change his name. He decided to keep his first name and just change his last. After a moment’s thought, he announced to no one in particular, “Bryce Finn.” He chuckled and walked down the street. As he reached his car, he stopped again. If he was to be just another of the poor masses, he could not own a Rolls-Royce. Al would take care of it until he returned. Giving it an affectionate pat, he walked down the street and into the night.

The next morning at 4:00 am, ‘Bryce Finn’ left for the train station. Setting down his suitcase, he said, “A one-way ticket to Alabama, please.” *Alabama is about as uncultured as you could get*, he thought.

“A one-way ticket to where in Alabama, sir?” the ticket-man asked.

“Oh...um, Dodson,” he stammered. Dodson was a small, out-of-the way town with a population of roughly a thousand people. He had passed through there in 1931, four years before, and had been greatly amused to see that the movie theater’s sign read, ‘Charlie Chaplin’s Second Great Hit—Gold Rush!’ He smiled as he remembered that it would take this town roughly a new movie every hour for the next three years to catch up with all the other movie theaters in the country.

“A one-way ticket to Dodson, Alabama, sir,” the ticket-man said, handing him the slip of paper.

As he boarded the train, he was aware of a keen sense of freedom. It was somehow rather satisfying to know that at the end of this train ride there was no hurried rehearsal in a dark nightclub and no performance the next day. He sighed and settled back in his seat.

By 3:00 pm the next day, the train had reached the Dodson station. As Bryce looked out the window he saw a small platform where two boys played, racing around the wooden structure. Other than the sleeping ticket manager, there was no one else in sight. As he got off the train, he saw the half-amused expressions of the other passengers and wondered if this was such a good idea after all. He had a sneaking premonition that Al was right and that there was no perfect life, but he also conjectured that there was probably someone whose problems in life were inconsequential. Well, this certainly would be the place to find such a person. He stood near the platform, undecided as to which of the two branches of the road he should take. He took a coin out of his pocket and flipped it. The left branch won, so he started down that road. About two minutes later he saw a sign that read, ‘Dodson—5 Miles—if y’all be heading to Cloverville, best turn round and head for the fork.’ “Why would they put a train station five miles from the city?” he wondered aloud. Well, he would soon find out. In half an hour, he reached another sign that simply read, ‘DODSON’ Underneath this, the paint was worn so thin that all he could make out was, ‘W E R E P I E S F O U N D .’ He smiled and wondered what possessed a person to put on their town sign, “Where pie is found.” He walked through town, and it seemed just the same as it had been four years ago. Although small, the hotel was clean and inviting. As he signed the receipt he was careful to use his new last name. Although no one in this town had probably heard of him, he felt it would be good to become a different person for a while, a

person with only one problem—to find the man with the perfect life. The life with no problems. He walked past the movie theater and was amused to see that they had caught up only to 1931. Now, instead of advertising Charlie Chaplin, the sign read, ‘The Bandwagon.’ He walked across the street from the theater and onto the boardwalk of the store. The sign above it read, ‘Gary’s General Store’. As he entered, he saw two men leaning over a checker board playing by the light that freely streamed through the large window which made up one entire wall of the store. He walked further in and saw a soda fountain. Behind that was a wall holding everything that you might find in a drug store. Bryce wondered how they were able to fit all of those things onto seven mid-sized shelves.

“Somthin’ I can help you find’, Mister?” asked a man, suddenly appearing from behind another counter.

“Oh, no thank you—I’m just looking,” Bryce replied.

“Well, if there’s anything I can help you find, let me know. By the way, are you new in town? I don’t recall seein’ you here before.”

“Oh yes, I’m on vacation. I thought this would be a nice place to come for some peace and quiet. And maybe some pie,” Bryce added, remembering the sign.

A puzzled expression came over the storekeeper’s face, but he just smiled and replied, “Why not come over to my house for a little supper. My wife hasn’t got used to cooking for just the three of us yet, with my sons gone,” the man added with a slight catch in his voice.

Bryce smiled and said, “That sounds nice. By the way, my name’s Bryce—Bryce Finn.”

“Nice t’meetcha, son! And my name’s Gary Winslow. I close at five. Why don’t you come back then?”

Bryce agreed and continued to look through the rest of the store. The opposite wall from the soda fountain was filled with all things imaginable which a small-town farmer might need: seeds, rakes, hoes, and other farming paraphernalia, as well as cloth, canning jars, pencils, paper, ink, cans of whitewash, tools and nails. The last wall was bare, but nestled in the corner was a pay phone and in the other corner, a newspaper stand. He walked up to it and saw that the newspapers were all from last year and the magazines ranged from 1924 to 1930, but nothing recent. The only current paper was the *Dodson Daily*. He picked it up, but there was nothing of

interest in it. He sighed and put it down. He was determined to learn about the simplistical, perfect life, only he hoped he wouldn't die of boredom before this was possible.

For the next half hour he walked around the town. It seemed small and simple and slightly behind the times. At 5 o'clock he returned to the store. Gary was just closing up, and when he saw Bryce coming he smiled and said, "My wife loves having company. We'll have to walk. Hope you don't mind--it's only two blocks." He smiled again and added, "Most places in this town are just two blocks away."

As they reached the house, Bryce saw that it was small, but the yard was clean and the house was inviting. As they entered the house through the screened-off deck in front, a voice called from the far end of the house, "Gary, will you never learn to come home in time for dinner? It's already in the oven and—" Throughout this recital, a woman in her late forties had stepped through the kitchen door, drying her hands on a light-blue dishcloth. She broke off when she saw that her husband had brought a visitor. "Oh, you brought us some company! My lands, Gary, you should've told me."

"And have you fussin' about all afternoon? I'm sorry, Mr. Finn, this is my wife, Mabel. Mabel, this is Mr. Bryce Finn. He'll be stayin' in town for a while, and I've invited him over for dinner."

Mabel smiled warmly, and addressing Bryce, she said, "Here, sit down. You look exhausted!"

Gary sat down too, and added, "And somewhere around here is my seventeen-year-old daughter, Marilyn."

As Mabel again took up preparations for dinner, the three began to talk. "There's good fishin' around this part of the country," Gary said.

"Oh, uh, yes," Bryce stammered. "That's one of the reasons I picked this place," he lied.

"Yeah, there's a small lake 'bout a mile from here. Real nice for a weekend," Mable interjected.

As they continued to talk, they all heard someone clattering down the stairs, and a young woman with curly brown hair and large green eyes came into the kitchen, saying, "Boy, I'm

starving, Mom! When's dinner?" Then, suddenly noticing that there were two other people in the room, added, "Hi Dad. Who's this?"

Her mother burst out laughing and said, "Marilyn, if you'd ever take time to let someone get a word in edgewise, you'd get along much easier. This is Mr. Finn. He's staying in town, so your father invited him for dinner with us. Why don't you show Mr. Finn my garden?" She smiled and turned back to her cooking.

Marilyn looked at Bryce and said, "It's this way, out back."

As they walked between the carefully cultivated rows, Marilyn explained, "My mother grows flowers for a seed company in Bridgeton. It's in California. She's pretty proud of her garden here."

Bryce smiled down at the young lady. "I know your father works at the store. What do you do?" he asked.

"I'm working in Hollendale. It's some miles from here. I'm saving money to go to college."

"And your brothers are away at college?" Bryce queried.

Marilyn looked up sadly. "No, no they were on their way to Europe, but something went wrong, and the boat—," she could not continue.

Instantly, Bryce realized that this was the reason for the sad tone in Gary's voice when he had mentioned his sons earlier. "I'm sorry," he said.

She smiled and replied, "That's alright. You didn't know. How could you have? We'd better go in. Dinner's probably ready."

As they ate the simple, but substantial, meal, Gary asked, "You plan on fishin' tomorrow?"

"Well, yes, I'd thought of it," Bryce replied.

"Good!" Gary replied. "Fishin's good this year. The lake's about five miles out of town."

After their meal, as Bryce walked down the street toward his hotel, he remembered his thought that Alabama was as uncultured as you can get, and wished he hadn't been so negative. Maybe this family was an exception. He sighed and continued down the street. In spite of

himself, he found that he had begun to take an interest in this small family. Maybe Al was right, and you couldn't classify a person's value by their lifestyle.

The next morning he was up early, and seeing that it was a fine day, decided to go fishing. Then, remembering the problem of no gear, he stopped by the front desk to ask where a good place to buy fishing tackle was.

"Fishin' tackle? Let's see...most of us folks 'round here's got our own. You wanna borrow mine?" the desk clerk asked.

"Well, if it's an inconvenience, I can--," Bryce started.

"No, no," the desk clerk chuckled. "Have a good time now! Oh, here's the key for the back shed. You'll find the gear in there."

In roughly a half-hour of walking he reached the river that branched away from the lake. He figured it would only be about another ten minutes' walk, so he decided to continue all the way to the lake. He sat down by the bank and leaned up against a tree.

"Hey! Mr. Miller!" Bryce jumped up and saw that Marilyn was standing at the foot of the path with a mischievous grin on her face. "Bryce Finn, my foot! You're none other than the famous singing star, Bryce Miller! What's with the getup?" she queried.

He smiled back at her and replied, "It's no get up. I'm just out on a sort of a mission."

"Well, what sort of mission would make a famous singing star want to come to a backwards town like this and change his name?" she asked.

"Well, being a singing star is just plain hard sometimes," he said. "You get tired of people telling you things and asking you things, and—"

"And--," she finished, "it's just like any other line of work. So, did you come out here for a vacation, or what?"

"Well, no, my manager and I had a disagreement about whether or not someone could have a perfect life." Bryce paused, and then went on. "Well, I guess not a perfect life—just one with no major problems," he finished, and sat down with a sigh.

She sat down herself and said, "So you thought you'd go to a small town and maybe find someone like that?"

"Yeah, I guess so," he replied.

Looking far out over the lake, she said, “Well, your problem sounds logical, except for one thing: I don’t think you can put people’s lives in categories. I think it’s all rather relative. See, everyone’s problems are relative to their own lives. For example, someone who lived my life might think your problems are silly—people ordering you about, no peace and quiet—things like that. Anyway, I guess what I’m trying to say is, all people’s problems are relative to their own lives. If you were put in a different environment, the problems would change. No one has the perfect life. I don’t know, you must think I sound kind of crazy. I think about stuff like this a lot. Actually, it’s kind of depressing—unless you believe we’re all part of a bigger picture.” She laughed. “Anyway, that’s what I think.”

He looked across at her and replied, “Well, I think you’re right. I think I’d better go back and tell my manager he was right all along.”

She got up, and seeing that she was about to leave, he said, “I just have one more question.”

She turned and asked, “Yes?”

“How did you guess who I really was?”

“Well, a couple of things, she said. First, you said you came here to do some fishing, but I saw you come into town. You didn’t have any fishing tackle with you. And second, I like to read up-to-date magazines, and you’re often in them. Oh, and Dad said you mentioned something about pie. If that’s in reference to our town sign, it’s supposed to say ‘Where Peace Is Found.’ The man who painted it just couldn’t spell. No one’s ever bothered to fix it, and the paint’s just all worn anyway. Well, I have to go” She turned and started back down the path.

He smiled and stood up.

An hour later, as he started down the road toward the railway station, he paused as he came to the town sign. He remembered their conversation and he smiled. He had found the answer to his problems. Remembering the thank-you letter he had slipped under Marilyn’s door, he thought he probably owed a thank-you letter to Al, too.