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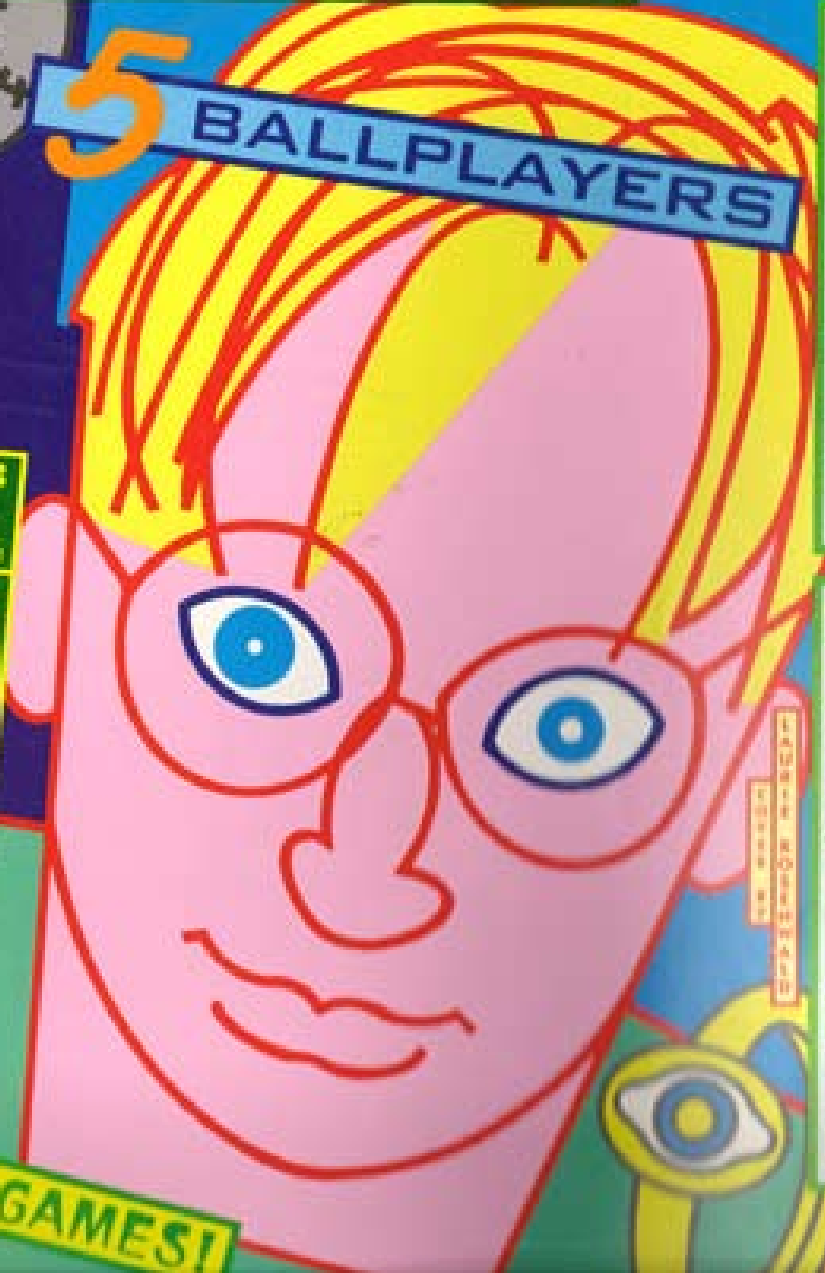
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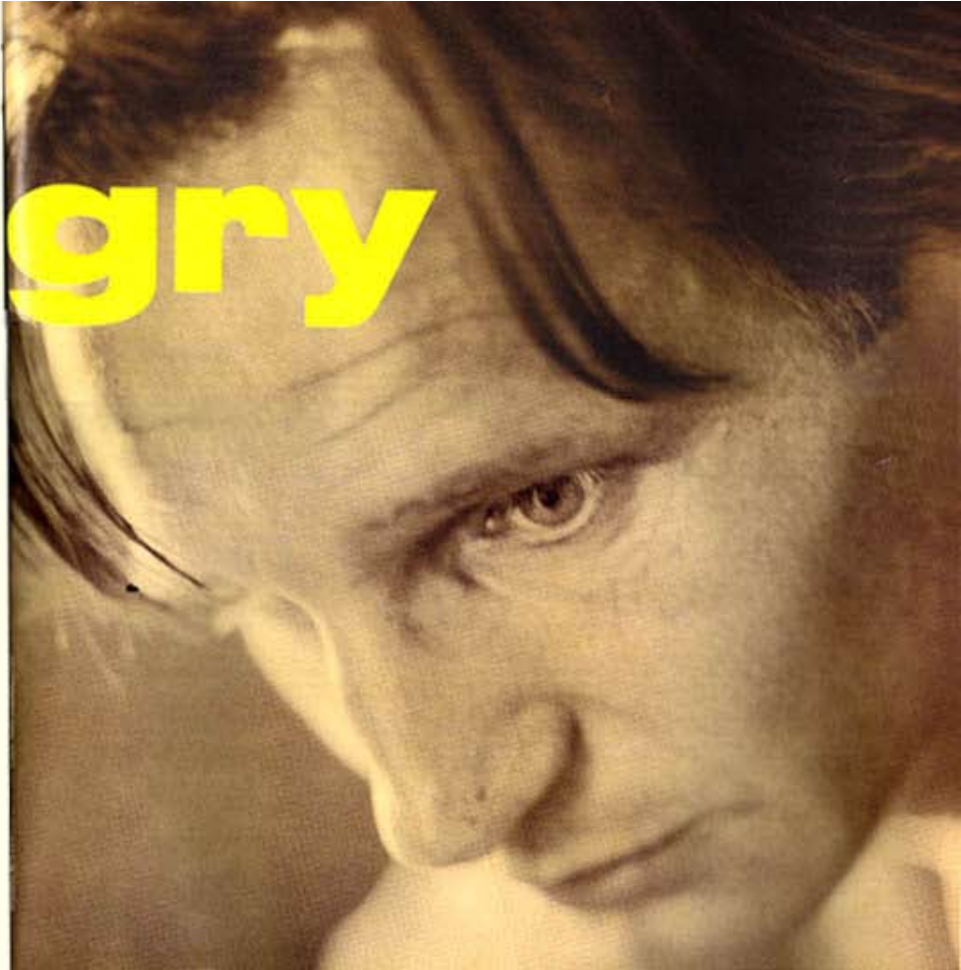
THE GREAT KOREAN WAR



by
Mollie
and
Pearson
aron

STAY
Hungry

He's about to become a matinee idol, but LIAM NEESON's had two dates in six months – and he was bored. Not that he's blaming his dates. It's just not something on his agenda. Neeson would rather read, eat, swim, eat, talk, eat. And act. If *Darkman* and *The Big Man* make Neeson a big dark leading man, nothing would make him happier. Except maybe a lifetime supply of bran muffins.



FIRST SET

Liam Neeson is starving. Sitting at the window table in his favorite dive, Joe's Diner, a short drive from his Venice apartment, he is scarfing down an omelet, two bran muffins, six biscuits, fries, apple pie with ice cream, and about six cups of decaf because he has spent most of the day being fitted for the ultrablue contact lenses (as if he needs them) he'll be wearing as Dr. Peyton Westlake in Sam (*Evil Dead*) Raimi's tongue-in-cheic thriller *Darkman* and has forgotten to eat. Teenage girls stroll by, pausing, giggling. Neeson is oblivious. This is what happens when, despite a thriving career and a very necessary move to Los Angeles, you've grown up in a Catholic family in provincial Ballymena, Northern Ireland (population 30,000), with a dad who was a primary-school caretaker and three sisters who teasingly tormented you and still view you as a boy from the sticks. "My father was a simple man of few words," Neeson says in between bites, "and his life had two speeds: dead slow and stop. He used to get stopped by the police for driving too slowly. I've inherited a wee bit of that."

Neeson, however, does not drive his sky-blue Jeep Cherokee (one of the few vehicles around, he claims, that can accommodate his 6'4" lankiness) slowly, and his career is anything but at a stop. That he answers questions in a gently seductive lilt—self-deprecating in the wry manner of one who has not yet become entirely comfortable with the process of Plugging Himself—does not lessen the fact that under this guileless demeanor is a man of intense ambition. And why not? The talent's there. So are looks, charm, and enough of an accent to make women swoon.

Yet this is precisely what you talk about when you want to make Neeson, who once thought of entering the priesthood, blush. "I didn't go out with girls till I was 18," he murmurs. "I was shy, really studious. And I boxed," he says, pointing to his smushed-up nose. "I was dead boring. Then I discovered older women, and I realized I'd missed a lot." Funny, the blushing stops. Such a revelation must have caused some conversation in the confessional. "It was," he says now, grinning like the devil, "intoxicating."

Almost as much as acting. After studying math at Queen's University, Belfast, teaching in Newcastle (he dropped out of both programs), and working as a truck driver, a forklift operator at a brewery, and a repro-

graphic assistant for an architect, Neeson became an actor, first with Lyric Players Theatre in Belfast and then with the Abbey Theatre in Dublin. Director John Boorman, impressed with Neeson's Lennie in an Abbey production of *Of Mice and Men*, cast him as Sir Gawain in 1980's *Excalibur*. Subsequent featured roles followed rapidly: in *The Mission*, *The Bounty*, *A Prayer for the Dying*, *Duet for One*, *Sweet As You Are* (for the BBC), *Suspect*, *Satisfaction*, *The Dead Pool*, *The Good Mother*, *High Spirits*, *Next of Kin*. That none of these films were boffo box office might have hurt the names above the title, but they hardly weakened the growing appeal of Neeson's vulnerable sexuality.

Now, almost 10 years after his debut in shining armor, Neeson may have finally found a white horse to ride in on. In his first American top-billed role, he's *Darkman*, a disfigured scientist; to achieve the look, Neeson underwent four hours' worth of daily applied grotesquerie. "It was crucial to find someone who could sustain an audience's empathy through personal charm and charisma, even though he was no longer charming to look at," Raimi explains. "I could have gotten bigger box office, but Liam has such ease and warmth onscreen that you want to watch him. He's like the star of old westerns. Like Gary Cooper."

That role will be followed by top billing in *The Big Man*, directed by David Leland (*Wish You Were Here*) and co-starring Joanne Whalley-Kilmer (*Scandal*), in which he plays a Scottish coal miner who regains self-respect in a bare-knuckle boxing match. Perfect casting for a former Ireland Youth heavyweight boxing champion.

Neeson inhales apple pie and then leans back, satiated. "When I was a kid watching matinees, I was just so into it; I feel I almost willed my career into existence. Maybe that's what it was. Or maybe it was incredibly good luck. Unbelievable good luck."

2 SECOND SET

Three months later, Neeson has moved to Hollywood Hills into what he calls his "sleazy bungalow." He washes down his smoked-chicken sandwich with endless cups of decaf caffe latte at Caioti, certainly not as great a dive as Joe's and with many a limo in its parking lot. Clad in a rumpled linen blazer, equally rumpled trousers, and a white T, he looks disgustingly relaxed, tanned, healthy, and well fed.

KAREN: Have you gone back to Joe's?
LIAM: I did, about two weeks ago, and they remembered me. It was on the house. I was invited to the opening of his new place. Me and all the truck drivers. Caioti used to be a pub, and Jim Morrison used to stagger in and hang out because he lived just up the hill. I was here with Noel Pearson [producer of *My Left Foot*] not long ago, and Joanne

Whalley-Kilmer was eating with her husband, Val, who's starring in *The Doors*. We both did a double take because Val looked like Jim Morrison, reincarnated. The hair, the belt and trousers, little actor things to get into the part... And these bald-headed guys with ponytails were coming in and muttering, "Is that Jim Morrison?" But does all that "show" really help you as an actor?

It's good to hide behind something. In *Darkman* I actually become a replica of myself, with stylized makeup. The film is very theatrical, and I saw myself covered in bandages and in this costume so wonderful I knew I could fly with it—not like *Phantom*, but more like the *Shadow*. [dropping voice] A sexy, sinister *Shadow*. And when you're covered up you have a more operatic kind of body language, as you would on the stage.

Yet though you had four hours of makeup on, didn't you get up early to work out every day?

Aye, but I knew I was doing *The Big Man* afterward, so I had to stay fit. One thing I learned from De Niro when we did *The Mission* was preparation. His physical commitment was amazing. He'd be up at 3 AM to work out with his trainer for two hours. In the jungle. In the heat. So when we were doing the contracts for *The Big Man*, I insisted on a Precor 825E—my workout bike—and they shipped one over. By the time I came back from Glasgow in December I was exhausted. I just sat in my backyard and was a vegetable for a while. Still am. I recently read an interview in which you said you wanted more power and

control. What kind of vegetable can do that? I don't think I'm at the stage of initiating, you know, but I'm starting to flex muscles within myself. Listen, I'm 38 this year. In your early 20s you go through a kind of invincible stage, thinking you can do anything. The older you get, the more you see what your true range is. So back when you were driving a forklift at a brewery you realized what your true range wasn't?

Aye. You don't want to feel like you're nothing. Since I was 17, I had done a lot of amateur acting, and each time there was this unbelievable surge, the greatest feeling in the world. It was and still is. Whenever I'm acting I know this is it. This is me, Liam. To say somebody's lines and dress up and do it with other people who feel the same way you do—and then people clap. Aye, to be revered. When Gregory Peck got his lifetime-achievement award [from the American Film Institute], he really epitomized it; the first words he said were something like: "And they give you awards as well." And I thought, That's a man who knows it. Wasn't your first audition one of those spur-of-the-moment decisions?

I phoned up the Lyric Theatre at the right time—they were looking for somebody who was big to play Jim Larkin, the founder of the Irish Transport Union during this strike in Dublin in 1912. It was a battle between those that have and those that haven't. I did this awful audition, but at least I had balls, went for it, and they must have seen something.

It's still a battle between those who have and haven't in Ireland.

Yet no one in this town ever asks me what's happening over there. Seriously. People say they think I'm Canadian or Australian. Sometimes Scottish.

They reran your IRA-terrorist episode of *Miami Vice* on *St. Paddy's Day*. It's really popular because Sonny's car gets blown up. I was switching channels the other night and I saw my big stupid face. Oh God. [mimicking, one of his great talents] "It's me, Sean, Sean." Jesus. I hope those residual checks come in.

Adjusting to residual checks is easy, but has it been hard adjusting to life out here?

If you love what you do, you'll always find a

to touch the 20th century. To be able to do that is wonderful screen acting. That's the process, what everybody aims for. It can last moments or just seconds, but it's bliss.

During *The Mission* I saw it happen all the time, with De Niro, and with Ray McAnally. God rest his soul. I don't believe he's dead. To use a bad expression, he was a guru to me. When I was in Dublin he often directed me, and we acted together and socialized a lot. I once got a message from him on my machine saying, "It's Ray. I'm in Birmingham. England—not Alabama." I kept that message on my machine for months because I didn't want to lose his voice. I just found a photograph of him from *The Mission*—as always, with his mouth open, talking.

Something you might know a little about? There's a great oral tradition in Ireland—in all of Great Britain. We call it "rabbiting on." Never say A is A, or B is B, when A might be B. So you keep your imagination open to that way of thinking.

That keeps your imagination open?

Aye, though a lot of it's just blarney.

But isn't blarney what's most interesting? I heard that when you had diverticulitis during High Spirits, they asked you on the operating table for next of kin, and you said, "Call my agent."

Swear to God. I haven't had any problems since, just a nice wee \$30,000 scar. I don't like being sick. That's why I don't drink anymore. I've never smoked and I don't eat red meat.

No vices?

I guess not. But I don't get bored. Mostly I sit in my yard and I read.

That's awfully disengaging for someone living in Hollywood.

It helps if you're on your own. It also helps if you're not 17 or 18 and have a fair idea of who you are. In my case I have very Irish standards. A sense of fair play, of loyalty, and a pace which I know people find very—*Somewhere between dead slow and stop.* For me it feels as if I'm going 900 miles an hour now. I'm the same as I ever was; however, people at home tell me I'm speak-

ing in an American accent. Maybe you can't tell, but I must be adapting, changing.

At least you didn't have to worry about an American accent when you were shooting The Big Man. I enjoyed this film. It has a wonderful John Ford dimension to it, so that even though it focuses on a family in a tiny coal-mining town outside Glasgow, it has great universal appeal. Also, because of the miners' strike, it has a nice focus on Thatcherism. After spending a lot of time with the miners, the great thing I took away with me is that they're real, rooted people. Miners who've been digging with their fucking bare hands for generations have this incredible bond. And anybody who says Thatcher broke their spirits—ballocks. She didn't.

The story of The Big Man is about having to rethink in light of what's happening in the world. You can no longer live by those old inflexible standards of working-class ethics. Did you enjoy boxing again? It's not a true boxing film, but I had to train in gymnasiums, even though the fight in the film departs from the rules very quickly. Still, the smell of the gloves, all that stuff. I hadn't boxed in 20 years, and it made me happy. Shall we go?

I can't believe you've whipped out a Platinum American Express card.

Nice color, isn't it? My business manager said I should have it. I've never had so much plastic in all my life. The one I really like is the Wells Fargo Bank with the stagecoach, especially when I'm in some wee dinky store in Ireland and I put it down and they say, "Ooh noo, we can't take this, now, it's a western." I used to plead, "No, no—it's a real bank. I promise." Now I just say [sounding like John Wayne], "Get that, baby! I want it now!"

3 THIRD SET

Neeson's sleazy bungalow, later that afternoon. As homes go, it is as unglitzy as you'd expect of someone who, despite his platinum AmEx, will not wear shades for fear of seeming stuck-up. Small but airy, it's filled with books and scripts, and bran muffins in the freezer. Neeson puts on a Van Morrison tape, and we sun ourselves in his concrete "yard," filled with comfortable furniture and potted plants—all left by previous owners. Wind chimes sing. The pool is unheated but used daily. Surrounded by tall hedges, the house is about as far removed from glamour as you can get in this town, yet it only takes 10 minutes to drive the hill to Hollywood Boulevard.

Stay in this house long enough and you could become a permanent recluse.

You're only about the third person to come here, but I think I do go out more often than when I lived in Venice because it's such a convenient retreat and I know it's always here to come back to.

Just the hideaway for when women start throwing themselves at you.

Are you kidding? Why would women start throwing themselves at me?

Because you're sexy.

Never. I've never been aware of that. I swear.

You don't think women look at you and find you sexy?

Well, if they do, they never say it to me.

You're an actor, you're single, you make money. You're a catch.

I don't go to parties. I don't know... I think if you're from a different country and reasonably successful, it's an attraction of some sort to the opposite sex.

Yeah, except women who are fascinated by actors have probably never gone out with them.

We're always attracted to things we don't trust, or that we're wary of. And actors have been rogues and vagabonds for centuries—outlawed by society. Being an outlaw is sexy, I guess.

Speaking of girls, your ex-flame Julia Roberts's price is up to about a million.

She's become a major star. I knew she had it—I think everybody else did, too. She's really special.

But you're not seeing anyone?

Seeing who, Karen?

Women.

I'm not in the mood. There's this timing thing, you know. And if you're not in the mood, what's the point? Since Christmas I've gone out twice, and the girls have been really sweet, but it's just not meant to be. They were bored, too. It's so taxing. And bloody terrifying in this day and age. Unfor-

I'm listening to this director go on about Conrad and the making of a movie about the fashioning of a republic and the quest for silver and greed and debauchery. In a way I felt privileged to be there, listening and watching these different worlds collide. *Even though you're being offered films like Nostromo, do you worry about competition with other actors of your age?*

Not at all. I worked at getting rid of those feelings quite a few years ago, of thinking I'm better, because that's all negative. There's room for everybody. [joking] But I bloody hate Kevin Costner. Don't even mention his bloody name.

What do you find most provocative in other actors?

What appeals to me most is the seamlessness—not seeing the technique. Gene Hackman does it—sometimes he appears in unbelievable shit, but he's a brilliant screen actor. I'd like to work at that. To seem so easy in front of the camera yet employing a lot of technique. It's awfully hard to disguise it, or to repeat it from different angles, picking it up three months later. That's where you need discipline, forbearance, training, practice, and a subconscious sharing with the other actors. A shoot may be incredibly hard, yet when the film is completed you can't put a sign up saying, "Dear Audience: Before this film begins, we would like you to know that we had dysentery for 10 months." They want something flawless to go with their popcorn.

4 FOURTH SET

Breakfast, Beverly Hills Hotel, the next day. Neeson is perched on a sofa, rolling his eyes. He is endearingly rumpled among the suits and portable telephones at the breakfast tables, and wearing the black high-tops in which he seduced Diane Keaton in The Good Mother. His order of two bran muffins with a side of dry toast, bowl of fruit, decaf, and skim milk has the waitress thinking he's definitely a bit strange—until he opens his mouth for a wee dinky bit o' blarney. His voice lilts. She melts. In her eyes he's not even wearing the high-tops.

Since it's on the waitress's mind, let's talk bodies. You work so hard at staying in shape; why do you think other actors let themselves go?

In Los Angeles you're made incredibly aware of your body; the media constantly bombard you with messages about how to look. But I don't think Dan Aykroyd would be as funny if he were built like a marathon

runner. I find it refreshing that people like Dan let their bodies go to seed. Gerard Depardieu is the same—a huge big hulk—yet he shows it all. And he's a really sexy guy

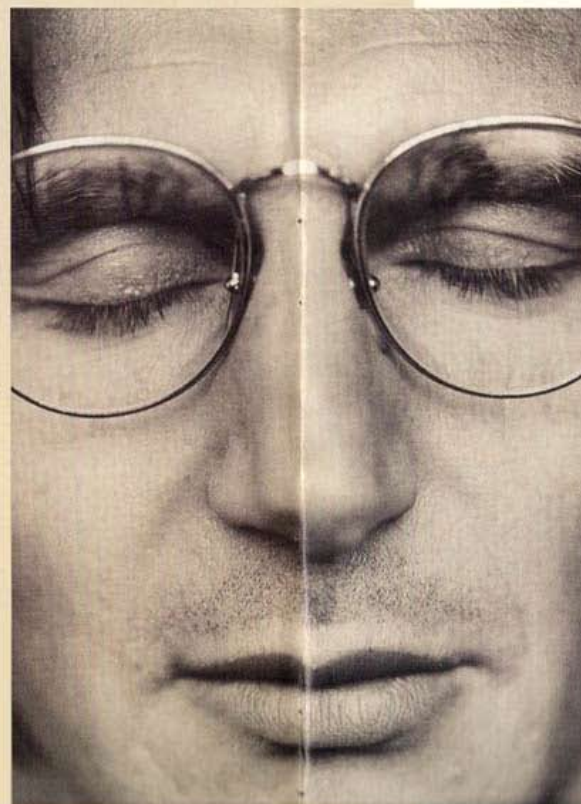
and a great actor. I'm tired of seeing actors whipping off their T-shirts at the drop of a hat to show they've done their press-ups. *But a woman can't be blubbery and still be perceived as sexy.*

That's true. But I keep in shape because my body is my instrument, what I act with and earn my money with and pay my bills and a few other people's bills with as well. My driving force is to keep as good a shape as possible without showing off. For years I had a little rebounder trampoline, and I did 20 minutes a day running on the spot. But

5 TO THE SHOWERS

Sam Raimi recalls that during the making of Darkman "we were shooting this big rain scene after Liam's character is terribly burned. He's staggering from the hospital into an alleyway, and he has to fall face-first into a giant, filthy puddle. It's asking a lot of an actor. But Liam insisted on doing as many stunts as he could. Before he's to take his first fall into the mire, a rat goes swimming by. The two of us are standing knee-deep in water, and this rat is swimming. I thought, Forget it. No one in his right mind would want to go swimming with rats. Liam looked at me and said, 'Hey, Sam, really realistic mechanical rats.'" □

when I was doing a film, inevitably my trampoline would end up in Taiwan and I'd end up in Glasgow. I'm dreading the time when a director says, "Look, I need you to go to seed a bit"—you know, because it's going to happen. And I'll do it as long as it's not written in to show off, or to claim if De Niro can do it, so can I. But at the end of the shoot I know I'll wonder if I can ever get back to the way I want to look, and that's when the whole torture will start. But I'm game for anything, including some more decaf. Waitress...



fortunately this profession gets highlighted because there's such a focus on it through the media. But the *fickleness* of people.

Shakespeare wrote about it in *Julius Caesar*: Marullus says, "You hard hearts, / You cruel men of Rome, / Knew you not Pompeii?" Actors must guard against blinking themselves. What I love about acting is how it opens you up, but the best actors are always able to view themselves not just as actors but as human beings—see the other side. Words from Chairman Neeson here. Transcripts are available for a small fee. Ten percent, of course, to myself.

Then tell me, wise young actor, how could you turn down a lead in David Lean's Nostromo?

I find the novel incredibly complex and hard to read, and when I admitted that to David Lean, he said, "My dear boy, I read it six times before I could get into it." I know this sounds incredibly blasé, but *Nostromo* dealt with *The Mission* territory a great deal, and I felt I'd been there already. Also, I was informed that Lean starts at 10 or 11 in the morning and stops at four, and the shoots are six or seven months long, and there are four or five leads in it... And the pulse of the character wasn't enough to keep me interested for that length of time. I know he's perhaps the greatest living director and this will probably be his last film, but my heart said this wasn't for me.

Many actors still would have gone ahead despite such misgivings.

I'm really glad I met him. It was an extraordinary visit. Do you remember the horrible boating accident on the Thames when all those models died? Well, David lives in a big converted warehouse right on the Thames. We were sitting much as you and I are now, out in a lovely little gazebo; servants brought us tea, and David was holding his walking stick and wearing pajamas because he was just out of the hospital. Yet as we were regaling each other with stories at the end of his garden, one could see the tide was down and the police were searching for the bodies. I'm not a writer, but this image hasn't left me of the looks on the faces of the policemen, of the most bizarre hope that they wouldn't find a body—and