

Confessions of a Teenage Actor / Addict! ®©
by Mike Hammett

I have filmed over 500 episodes of an Emmy award winning TV show, but you have probably never seen me. I've done over 100 on-camera principal television commercials but I am unrecognizable to you. I've been a member of the Screen Actors Guild for over 40 years and I don't even act. Well, that's not entirely true. I just haven't used that particular talent in front of a camera for many years. Real Life however is another story. You could almost say it's like Another World.

I've always been pretty arrogant, but I think you've had a lot to do with that. You see, some people have looked at me with such envy and desire behind their eyes. They knew me because they had seen me on their TV's. I had spent time with them in their living rooms and even in their bedrooms when no one else was around. But I knew none of them. Although they were always watching me I have never seen any of them. There were times when this caused a conflict between our separate worlds. It was almost as if we were two completely different materials coming into temporary contact with one another, like steel meeting straw or sand caught in a towel. Then there is the crudely honest example of oil and water. It's obvious that these things don't belong together. They are dissimilar, and knowing this they ultimately separate, being brushed off, shaken out or simply opposing each other, they will find and accept their appropriate relationships. But still they will try. As my buddy Bob once told a confused fellow traveler trying to figure out where she knew me from, "You can see in but he can't see out." Or when Mr. G. so kindly guided a "fan" through the number 7 train, my train, following me car by car towards the front, all the while telling the woman, 'Hell yes! I'll introduce you", while I, only feet ahead of them, tried frantically to escape. The problem was that we were both on acid; George and I, not the woman, and the train had only a limited number of cars. As they burst into the final car I was trapped against the front window, watching them inch closer and closer, George cracking up as he guided her towards me, fuckin Guida! But most of all I remember the look on her face, those eyes salivating with anticipation. The ear-to-ear smile as she yelled, "Hi, Dennis!" Then much to my relief, and to her dismay, before she could make final contact we arrived at Queens Plaza Station, at that moment it's the equivalent to me of Dorothy reaching the land of OZ, or perhaps K finally being admitted into the castle. As the subway doors opened I bolted to freedom screaming, "Sucker!" and even threw an "Asshole!" in George's direction. Meanwhile the woman stood there bewildered, just moments short of meeting a "star". She gasped and the suddenly beautiful look on her face begged "Why? How could this be happening? Why would sweet little Dennis Carrington, Irises son, with the heart condition, from Bay City, U.S.A. do such a thing? WHY?" Well I'll tell you why lady. "Because, God damn it, I am not your sweet little Dennis Carrington! I'm not Iris's son with the heart condition from Bay City, U.S.A.! I'm Mike Fucking Hammett! I don't know you and don't ever want to know you! More importantly, you don't know me, and never ever will. But most importantly, right now I'm tripping, so leave me alone. This is my time."

That was then. Now, many days from those moments of notoriety, it seems there was a time, somewhere back then, when I may have had a possibility of becoming one of them, the normal ones. But that time is gone. It happened long ago as I willingly watched it leave and even helped it on its way, unable to take that chance and surrender all I could become for the apparent mediocrity of a typical life. It was

almost as if one day, suddenly, someone had shaken me from a deep, happy sleep, and screamed at me, "Hurry, they're leaving! You'll miss it!" And in the next moment, as I lay there wiping the beautiful fantasy from my eyes that had moments ago held me safe from this harsh, loud, cold world, I discovered that they - while I was enjoying a wonderful little nap on a cool NYC summer morning, dreaming of intoxication with sweet libations and imaginings of free love and cheaper lust - they had started down the road on their bus to reality. As it pulled out I looked up from where I lay and gladly accepted the fact that it was gone. It kicked up dust and rocks, and dark thick diesel exhaust in my face as it gained speed with a sound that bellowed of planning, intention, and focus, and most of all of progress and success. The thought of their so called success made me nauseous. There went my chance to be normal. I watched it go. Then, as silence returned, I thankfully rolled over while muttering some obscenity at all that the world represented, and smiled to myself as I embraced the warm sweet blanket of oblivion that is addiction.

Looking back, I often wonder if it could have been different. If somehow I might have caught that bus and happily strode down the aisle acknowledging the welcoming faces of my friends, the high fives and accolades: "Glad you made it!", or "Hey come on, sit here with us! This is gonna be great!", or maybe even "Don't worry, I'll help you catch up. You'll be OK.". You see, even then I knew that I had no idea how I was going to make it in this life. Inside I craved for someone, anyone, to show me, to help me onto the right bus. But now, as I get on their bus of reality, which has been traveling for long days and nights through storms, down dirt roads, and around blind turns, without me aboard, it's clear that the passengers have built a type of camaraderie that can be found among tragedy survivors or platoon members. That sense of separation from all that wasn't there with them through the hard times. In a way the worlds of success and failure, though distinct in their differences, are very much the same in their experience of separation. Now, boarding the bus already en route, I see faces of people secure in their successes: dentists, doctors, professors, artisans, and even fellow thespians. These are all people who have worked and educated themselves and reached their goals through experience. To achieve their individual successes, they have each sacrificed pleasures that I have bathed in. They have denied themselves the joys of the present for a secure foothold in the future, while I have sacrificed that same future for a blissful experience of *now* with no care or thought as to what may come. "If it comes, OK, I'll deal with it then!" had always been my motto. Well suddenly here it was the future. Right now, right here and absolutely as bleak and as empty as I had imagined it would be. And now, when I was finally ready to step aboard and join my fellow travelers, I felt no warm welcome but that familiar alienation, that sense of being truly alone, and this time there was no running away. There was no sweet release. This time I would feel it all and I would remember it because this time I was sober.

My father took me out to lunch one day. I must have been about ten because I don't remember really hating him yet. We went the short seven mile cab ride from Queens where we lived into Manhattan. To the Lambs Club, a private club for actors that was established in 1874 in the heart of the Times Square theatre district. Going there wasn't really that special in and of itself, you see my dad was a member and I had spent many hours there, shooting pool and drinking Shirley Temples while he played poker downstairs. The bartenders knew me by my first name. The area where we sat to eat was a dark cluttered smoke filled room decorated in deep reds and rich black wood adjacent to the pool tables where I normally hung out. But there was a reason he took me there that day. I slid into a booth against a wall that was covered with

caricatures and photographs of famous actors. I was always enthralled by the fact that they were all autographed. They had all been here at one time or another over the past hundred years, all of these famous actors, each and every one of them, here in this room. They had sat in this same booth that I was sitting in. They had eaten the same food I was about to be served. Even shot pool at the same tables with the same house cues. Here I was among the privileged; in fact, I was one of them. After all, I really was. I had often signed autographs for people who recognized me from TV. I was attending a private school for actors, entertainers, Julliard ballerinas, and gifted Broadway singers. I was regularly driven to work in limousines when none of my friends had ever seen the inside of one. Yes, it felt damn good to be alive, to be among the privileged, and to be one of them. If I wasn't only ten and had smoked cigars I'm sure I would have had a Cuban, and maybe even a nice single malt scotch.

There are those moments in our lives that just seem ordinary and of no real consequence, not like a car crash or a wedding that you would remember, but just another passing moment in the list of nows that come and go, when life just is the way it is. There, that day, in the exclusive, private Lambs Club, above bustling 44th street in the heart of NYC, there with my father and the other privileged members, smoking Cubans and drinking single malt scotch, this was one of those moments. It was just a regular day with, I thought, no real life shaping event to remember. Now, many years later, as the memories slowly return through the haze that I had intentionally wrapped my consciousness in, I can see this specific moment frozen in time as a key underlying premise for my life. It was a building block, as the old Newtonian physicists would call it; a tiny unseen bit of matter that makes up all that we are, although the particle itself remains hidden.

The moment happened like this. After my father and I had settled in and ordered our meals the experience really kicked in and implanted itself in the innermost part of my psyche. I felt the cool leather of the booth on my naked legs that were sticking out from the shorts I was wearing. I felt the heavy red cotton table cloth and saw the fine china and crystal glasses, and the familiar bar and the pool tables. There in this safe haven from the common people in the street below, I felt at home, comfortable, protected, and surrounded by the ever-watchful gaze of the famous actors gracing the walls.

Then it really began.

Casually my father started pointing out individual autographs. He came to rest on one just above my head and asked me to tell him who it was. I stretched to see. "Errol Flynn?" I replied, and turned to him questioningly, seeking some enlightenment from someone who clearly knew more than I did. He acted as if something, as Ed Sullivan would say, "*Really big*", had just occurred. It was significant that it happened to be Mr. Flynn. It was as if Errol, who personally meant nothing to me, was being acknowledged as being one of the really important people. That if together, my father and I, had spent hours scouring these walls of the club, well adorned with the images of so many truly important people, we would be pleased when we finally came upon his framed likeness and the bit of wisdom that he had taken time to scribe for those who would seek his guidance in the future. How lucky and coincidental it seemed that we should be sitting directly in his presence. My father then asked me, "What did he write?" I turned back to the figure in the frame, excited to find out myself, and then slowly read aloud the words etched there.

I read this statement by someone famous and special, who had his face on the wall of a room in this exclusive private club, where famous special people gathered to do famous special things. He was one of the big guys, and judging by my fathers' reaction a particularly important big guy. This was what Mr. Errol Flynn had to say to me on that ten year olds' day so long ago in New York City...

"Anyone who dies with more than \$1.15 to his name is a jerk"

I read this and thought, "What the fuck does that mean?" Of course I simply thought it but didn't speak it aloud. I couldn't, I mean hell, I was ten years old and with my father. But trust me; I thought exactly that. At ten I had already heard it many times over on the sets where I worked, and at home from the loving and gently supportive words my dad often chose to guide me towards my future. So quietly I slid back down into the booth contemplating those words. Then I saw his face. He said nothing; he knew he didn't have to. Like the perfect salesman he just let it hang there in the dark, still air. He smiled ever so slightly, took a long slow drag off his cigarette, and with that relaxation that comes from a good drag or a nice shot, he exhaled, and looked around the room as if to say, "Son, that's what this is all about. That's who we are, the famous, the privileged, the special ones, and you my boy can have it too. All you have to do is choose." As I sat there, it came to me as if a universal truth was suddenly laid out before me, like a monk, finally being enlightened after years and years of searching. Yet now it was being handed to me as a gift, here in the innermost sanctum, in the privileged world of the Errol Flynn's. Of course! Now I fully understood. I could see it all clearly. I had been given the secret to real success!

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Contact Info:

***Mike Hammett
P.O. Box 241721
Los Angeles, CA 90024***

mike@mikehammett.com