

How to Make a Star
by Mark J MacNamara

First day at a new job is always a bit terrifying. Tony had seen a few. He remembered many things about the jobs he'd had but surprisingly the first days escaped him, all of them. Just the feeling, it was intensely familiar – an odd mixture of fear, excitement, anxiety, optimism and apathy.

There must have been a first day at his labouring job but all that came to mind now were the early starts on cold winter mornings, the bump and scrape of bricks on frozen fingers, hands cracked dry from mortar and the lime that burned into them. There was undoubtedly a first day at the call centre but all Tony could remember was the Gold Coast edition of the Yellow Pages he was handed – his 'territory', sifting through it daily, cold calling every company that might vaguely have a use for his products, dreading the ones who'd tried them.

"Grab yourself a fitted sheet, flat sheet, four pillow cases, four bath towels, two hand towels and a bath mat from the trolley and follow me," said Mandy.

A four star hotel was a new environment. Almost six months had passed since he'd completed the application. The interview was almost a formality, more a sales pitch for the wonderful career he could have with the hotel chain. There was a sense of incredulity about it all for Tony as Mandy showed him how to change sheets, clean bathrooms and restock mini-bars. This was not his world, this was not him.

Extraordinarily for a person his age Tony was a huge fan of the great crooners – Sinatra, Dean Martin, Bing Crosby, even Elvis. He enjoyed nothing more than settling in with a stack of DVDs. He'd seen all the old greats – *High Society*, *Oceans 11*, *State Fair*, movies that could transport you to another place. Those were the days when movie stars were *entertainers*. They could sing and dance and act, and create a sense

of fun. Nowadays actors don't have to perform at all, just pout or pump up their muscles.

For Tony one of these magnificent entertainers stood head and shoulders above the others. Tony considered himself more than a fan of Mario Lanza. Lanza's story and his performances spoke to Tony on a whole other level, he felt a great sense of fraternity with Lanza. One day Tony would formalise his special relationship with Lanza. One day he would write, direct and star in a movie about Lanza's life. Of this he was certain.

It didn't matter that Tony had no directorial experience, or that he'd not written since high school. What he lacked in training he would easily make up for with natural ability. While people may smirk about singing in the shower it was here Tony learned he had a smooth and faultless tenor voice, and here he would keep it a secret til the day he was ready to unleash himself on the world. The one area where he had a track record, at least some tangible experience was in acting. Tony's high school English teacher had convinced a number of his charges to give up their lunchtimes to work on a production of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Tony had only a couple of lines but his English teacher, Mr Gibbs, told him he was the most convincing Soothsayer he had ever seen. A decade had passed but Tony could recite it still:

Caesar: The Ides of March are come.

Soothsayer: Aye Caesar, but not gone.

In the event the headmaster hadn't supported Mr Gibbs's initiative and sadly the high school's production of *Julius Caesar* didn't go ahead. It was enough however to convince Tony he had what it takes.

"Hey!" interrupted Rosita from the hallway. "Is she getting you to put fitted sheets on that bed?" Something about Rosita's frown and her tone of voice suggested

displeasure. Tony looked at her unsure what to say. Mandy appeared in the bathroom doorway to face her.

“What business is it of yours?” she said, aggravated.

“A four star hotel is no place for fitted sheets. If you cut corners it gives us a bad name. I’ve never seen it at any other hotel. It looks cheap and lazy.”

“Yeah? Well times are changin’, sweetheart,” retorted Mandy. “I don’t have time to stuff around with square corners.”

“It doesn’t take any longer. I always do square corners – it’s called making the bed properly,” said Rosita pointedly. “I tell you, we would not have it at the *Don Quixote Hotel* in Seville.”

“Well there’s your answer. Why don’t you go back to your bloody *donkey-hottie* and let me get my work done.” Mandy reached over and closed the room door in Rosita’s face.

From behind the door Rosita flapped her arms in exasperation, “Qué te pasa? Sólo se tarda un minuto.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be doing the other corridor?” Mandy yelled through the door.

Tony stood bewildered, unsure how to proceed. Mandy began to demonstrate again. “That woman! Why does she think we *have* fitted sheets?”

At the end of his first shift Tony was greeted by Brent, Team Leader, Housekeeping. Brent was very earnest about his work. He came across almost military, almost clipped. In this he gave the impression of professionalism which no doubt secured him his lead position.

“So how’d our new man go?” he quizzed Mandy. “Hope you didn’t wear him out.”

Mandy, setting down her vacuum cleaner and straightening up with a subtle flick of her hair, faced Brent with her hands on her hips, looking ever so slightly down her nose at him - a posture which demonstrated an interesting power relationship. Along with a disdainful look on her face it said 'I could eat you alive, matey,' which might be either a very good thing or a very bad thing for Brent.

"No he did just fine," she said.

"Good. Good to hear," he smiled, his entire body rigid. "What do you think about trying the night shift tomorrow Tony?"

"Night shift?" said Mandy, shifting her weight. "I thought you hired him to help *us* out."

"Don't worry. We're just training him across all areas of housekeeping," said Brent. Turning his attention back to Tony he explained, "During day shift you're working with hardly any guests around. You wait for them to go out and then you make their room. If a room's occupied you move along to the next. Night shift is different. You're only called to the room when a guest needs something - a new towel, red wine sopped off the carpet. When you're not looking after the guests you're doing laundry. Nobody minds if you watch TV or listen to music while you're doing it."

Mandy guffawed. "I've got a bus to catch. Thanks for your help."

"Bye Mandy," said Brent with a stilted wave. "You'll love night shift," he told Tony. "Come in tomorrow at five and I'll introduce you to George."

George wasn't sure how to view the intrusion. Was his job under threat? Was Tony installed to keep an eye on him? His challenge would be to give the impression of being busy without training Tony too well. He would hold a bit back to ensure he

remained indispensable and that Tony was trained only inasmuch as he might be useful to George.

Before working at the hotel George had been in 'management' and found it was a mug's game, he was too honest for the job. He'd also spent some time in business but the bank had done him over. He'd been married but she'd taken him for everything he had. His grown up daughter moved to another country, he only knew his grandchildren from photos. Tony got the feeling that for George, in the third trimester of middle age, as he looked down at a trolley of soiled linen it was a case of 'so it has come to this'.

The first few callouts George attended on his own, leaving Tony folding linen in front of the TV. As George began to realise the depth of Tony's disinterest, having reassessed the risk he decided to take Tony with him. He'd also noticed Tony too relaxed into the comfortable monotony of folding where he could escape into his imagination.

"Fold-up bed required in 302," said George hanging up the phone. "Know where we keep them?"

When the elevator arrived on the third floor, taking the opportunity to reassure himself of Tony's limitations George asked, "Know which way to 302?"

The door was answered by an elegant American woman who Tony thought looked vaguely familiar.

"Oh great. Can you set it up over by the window? My husband's had too much to drink and passed out. I can't sleep with him, he stinks of booze."

Tony and George looked at each other, hardly concealing their smirks as they stepped into the room to find the husband, a big lump of a man sprawled across the bed in full suit and tie, snoring like a bulldozer.

“Yes, yes I know,” said the lady, finding little humour in the situation.

George smiled as he began to unfold the bed, “Well madam, I understand entirely. We’ll have this up in a jiffy and you can both sleep in comfort.”

“Thank you so much.”

As George motioned to Tony, to both their surprise Tony knew just what to hand him – fitted sheet, top sheet, blanket, pillows. They looked like a team.

“Will that be all, madam?” said George making for the door.

“Well actually, I got you to set that up for him. I intend to sleep on this lovely big bed. Could you help me move him?”

George looked at Tony with a grin. “I think we can help the lady.”

“Oh thank you so much,” she said as they began to grapple at the big man on the bed. “Be careful he’s heavy.”

As they bent him upright to a sitting position the man let out a thunderous fart.

“Oh, I’m so sorry,” said the lady, more clearly embarrassed. “We just flew in from the States this morning and he had a few scotches on the plane. He went straight off to a lunch meeting,” she tried to explain.

When they lifted the man to his feet he groaned and yawned. As they shuffled him to his bed he looked at Tony, smiled and said, “You’re a good kid, Bran. Have I ever told you that?”

“Just over here sir, we’ve got a bed set up for you, you can sleep all you want,” said Tony.

“You do? Thanks Bran. You’re a good kid.”

“It’s not Bran,” said the lady. “You’re in the hotel, Mel. Bran’s back in LA.”

“Whoa there,” said George as they strained to keep him from stumbling onto a table.

They managed to drop the man onto the fold-down bed amid more gibbering, more farting and profuse apologies from the lady. Looking down at the man Tony felt a sense of recognition.

“You’re a good kid, Bran. Did I ever tell you that?”

“It’s not Bran, Mel,” yelled the lady. “You’re drunk and you’re hallucinating.

“Thank you,” she said, ushering the pair to the door with a twenty dollar tip each.

“Thank you so much.”

Back at housekeeping they had quite a laugh.

“Can you pass me a vase, Bran?” teased George.

“Who do you think they are? They look familiar.”

“Dunno,” said George polishing the silver vase. “You see all types in the hotel.”

“You mean, like, celebrities?”

George frowned. “Of course. Celebrities are people. People stay in hotels. Sometimes it’s this one.”

“Yeah? Who have you seen?”

“Actors, politicians.”

“Like who?”

George was no victim of the whole celebrity hoopla and generally had a small opinion of anyone overawed by it. “Politicians, let me see. Tony Abbott and Bob Brown both stayed here. Not together, obviously. Naomi Watts. I collected her bath towels. Natalie Imbruglia, Keanu Reeves, he was a nice bloke. Andre Rieu, Leyton Hewitt. He was a cranky little bugger. The All Blacks, the Pakistan cricket team.”

Tony’s eyes gleamed wider with every name.

“Who do you think the people in 302 are?”

George put down a table cloth, walked over to a computer buried under a pile of bathrobes. Pulling out some reading glasses he tapped uncomfortably at the keyboard.

“Mel Thwaite and Andrea Montpellier. I remember her. She used to be in that TV show in the 80s.”

“Mel Thwaite? Mel Thwaite just said I’m a good kid?”

“Said ‘Bran’s’ a good kid,” George corrected.

“This is fate George. It has to be. It could have been any movie producer in the world but Mel Thwaite? The guy who made *Tango in Blue*?”

“Never heard of him,” said George flatly, trying to tone down the excitement.

“Does it say how long they’re staying?”

“Five nights,” he said frowning.

Despite florid protest from Mandy it was agreed Tony would work day shift Friday to Sunday then night shift Monday to Wednesday. This provided Tony his timetable for capturing Thwaite’s attention. All he needed was a few minutes with the guy.

Back on morning shift he was sent out with Mandy. He began to realise that Mandy and Rosita had informally marked territories. He would need to be working with Rosita to get anywhere near Thwaite. Brent, who himself assisted Rosita while maintaining his own small area close to housekeeping where he could cover guest callouts, was not easily convinced about breaking up his small teams. This was likely out of fear of Mandy, for to put Tony with Rosita would mean he himself became Mandy’s second pair of hands. Rosita liked the idea and Brent allowed himself to be persuaded.

Rosita seized upon the opportunity to begin grooming Tony in the more skilful execution of their profession. Tony did his best to conceal his ambivalence.

As they set out with their trolleys leaving an uncomfortable looking Brent and a sulking Mandy filling her trolley in silence, Rosita looked back with a measured squint and whispered, "Ooh that girl!"

When they got to their first room Tony commented, "You don't like Mandy, do you."

"I don't mind her. She's just a little selfish," Rosita explained. "Selfish in a way that young women can be."

"Brent is a good man. Last year he bought her flowers. It was a few months after she broke up with her boyfriend but she was still very down. A little while after that Brent asked her out and she declined," said Rosita, biting her bottom lip and passing Tony a little nod. "After that he lost his confidence.

"Ok," she said abruptly, standing before a bed they'd just stripped. "I am going to show you how to make a bed properly. When you learn this secret no guest will ever be safe again. They will experience such comfort and sleep so soundly they will yearn for it forever after.

"Brent is a good man. The problem is she believes he is not good enough for her. She can do better than a boyfriend who's a housekeeper."

"It's like *The Pajama Game*," said Tony knowingly, the old movies providing excellent reference for relationships in the real world.

"Now, the bottom sheet." Rosita stood at the base of the bed and tossed the sheet high, it fell with extraordinary precision upon the bed. "Smooth it over and even all four edges," she demonstrated. "The sides are tucked under first."

Tony found the seriousness with which Rosita treated each detail absurd.

“Fancy jobs and fancy accessories are fine but a good man is much harder to find,” said Rosita.

“And a rough diamond underneath is still the most precious of all stones,” added Tony.

“Yes,” agreed Rosita, pondering Tony anew.

“Take the corner, pull it up into a triangle, put your hand along the edge here to keep it smooth, then tuck it neatly and tightly underneath the edge of the mattress. Like that.”

Rosita demonstrated again on another corner, then swiftly shaped the remaining two. She unfolded a second sheet, explained the up and down side, then launched it over the mattress as precisely as the first.

“Pull the top sheet to the top of the mattress, smooth it out, make sure both sides are even.”

She picked up a blanket and held it out for Tony to inspect.

“Feel this blanket. Beautiful isn’t it. Made from the best merino wool.” She rubbed it between her thumb and fingers. “Makes you feel warm and cosy just looking at it hey?”

“The blanket is placed only up to here, less than a hand width from the top of the mattress. You have a man’s hand so maybe half a hand width.

“Take the top sheet and fold it back over the blanket.” Rosita smoothed it along the top from either side of the bed with geometric accuracy.

“Now, back down the bottom, you know what we do?”

He looked at her blankly.

“Square corners, just like before.” After demonstrating the cornering technique Rosita explained how to spread the comforter just right, how to position the pillows.

“And finally,” she said triumphantly, “we take a chocolate and place it on each pillow.”

She went on to demonstrate how to place the towels just so, how to position the toiletries and items in the mini bar so that the labels faced precisely toward the guest, then the dusting, the vacuuming, adjusting the hang of the curtains.

When they were finished they both looked back at the room from the doorway. Something about the room, more than just its crispness, made Tony feel his next guest could not fail to be drawn into it. Tony could not remember having achieved anything with such perfection in his life. Rosita looked at him and they both smiled as they closed the door behind them.

“So you’ve been doing this kind of work a long time,” said Tony.

“More than twenty years,” she nodded with a smile. “I was twenty five when I started.”

“You must have made lots of rooms up.”

“Yes.”

“Ever get bored with it?”

“Yes, sometimes. But overall it’s been good to me. I met my husband in a hotel,” she said with a cheeky grin.

“Was that back in Spain?”

“No, that was in Canada. I worked in a ski resort.”

“A ski resort?” Tony’s imagination was inspired.

“Yes. I used to work in a resort in Spain during winter. That’s where my girlfriend and I got this idea to go to Canada. That was 18 years ago. I met Michael, my husband. He was a waiter in the hotel. There were many Australians working in the

resort. He was young and adventurous, out there seeing the world like my friend and I, and so handsome.”

“So you met your husband working in a hotel then he brought you back to Australia.”

“No, my friend and I went and worked in the Cayman Islands, then I went back to Spain for a while. Michael and I kept in touch. It wasn’t til two years later, he was working in Paris and I was back home, he decided to come down and see me.”

“Paris?!” exclaimed Tony.

“Yes, I guess we were just reaching a different stage in our lives. We were both ready for marriage, the timing was right. And he was so so charming. He fell in love with Seville and my family loved him. I got a transfer within the hotel chain and followed him out to Australia.”

Romance and adventure across all those exotic locations - there were any number of old movies Tony could think of but none of them quite as rich as Rosita’s story. Rosita could see he was thinking.

“You’re young, Tony, you have no ties. It’s a great time to travel. Work in the hotel a while, get some good experience, save some money. There are so many places for a young man to see.”

Not wanting to offend Rosita, Tony smiled and said “hmmm”. He knew he was destined for greater things. This was a place to bide his time before he was truly launched on the world.

When the pair’s route took them to level three Tony stood in the elevator rehearsing in his mind what he’d say should he meet Thwaite. His heart dove into his throat when waiting for the elevator were Mel Thwaite and Andrea Montpellier,

resplendent in Gucci and Gaultier respectively. He froze a moment then opened an expansive smile.

“Good morning,” he said enthusiastically.

“Good morning,” said Montpellier without interest. Thwaite grunted and stepped into the lift.

“Feeling better I see,” said Tony standing in the elevator doorway.

“Huh?” said Thwaite. Montpellier, noticing the lift wasn’t moving raised her head from a Chanel purse where she’d been rummaging. She looked at Tony quizzically.

“The other night,” he said, “the fold-down bed.”

“Oh, right,” said Montpellier. “Mel, ah... this gentleman helped me get you to bed in your inebriated state the other evening. Thank you so much,” she beamed at him before returning her attention to the purse.

“Oh,” said Thwaite with a sheepish grin, “Much indebted.”

“No worries. Any time,” said Tony smiling broadly as he stepped back from the elevator door. He was almost skipping when he caught up with Rosita at room 301 and was lost in his thoughts the rest of the workday.

The following day Tony returned to the evening shift. George was surprised to find Tony already in his uniform and absentmindedly folding linen when he arrived just before five.

“Cripes, you’re keen.”

“On a mission.” said Tony not looking up. George raised his eyebrows.

By midnight the shift appeared to be passing without a call to room 302 and Tony was beginning to feel deflated. He perked up though when the late night movie came onto the TV which had been quietly humming in the corner. George, starved of

any conversation that wasn't preceded by three pots at the *Oak and Iron*, keenly felt Tony's withdrawal into the imaginary world on the screen.

As they changed out of their uniforms at the end of the shift George could see Tony was still preoccupied.

"You know, it's ok to have dreams," he said. "I mean I admire anyone who sticks to a plan and achieves everything they set out to. It's just a good idea to be... open to other opportunities and able to recognise them when they come."

Tony gave a disinterested "hmm".

"What I'm trying to say Tony is don't do what I did. Don't spend your life chasing dreams and forgetting what's important, what's real, and missing what you could have had."

Tony found the tone of this somewhat discomfoting. Finally, with a moistening of the eye George said, "You might wake up one day and you're living in a rented bedsit in a cheap part of town, you drive a fifteen year old car and you realise its all gone, everything you ever had, even your dreams. And there's nothing you can ever do to get it back. It's just too late."

Wednesday night Tony knew he had to do something. Thursday was his day off and Thwaite could be checked out by the time he returned Friday morning. He couldn't depend on a call to room 302. Any call to the third floor would provide the opportunity, but he'd have to invent a reason to knock on their door.

When the moment came no such invention had materialised. He walked past the door twice before plucking the courage to knock. Even as he knocked he had a strong compulsion to turn and run. He felt relieved when the door wasn't answered. As he

began walking away the door opened. He stepped back against the wall but it was too late. Ms Montpellier poked her head out the doorway.

“Yes?” she said.

“Er... I just...”

“Is everything alright? Is there anything I can do for you?” she asked.

“I was just wondering if I could talk to Mr Thwaite.”

She looked at Tony sideways. “What about?”

“I have an idea for a movie and I...”

“Oh. Well you’d better come in then.”

Thwaite was sitting in an armchair having just taken off his shoes. Rubbing his feet he barely acknowledged Tony as he said “Room Service, good thinking.”

“No Mel, the young gentleman would like to speak to you about a script.”

“Wha’?” Thwaite breathed an exasperated puff. “Alright then,” he said in resignation, “let me have it.”

Tony stood speechless, trying to remember how this conversation had played out in his imagination. Thwaite looked at his wife then back at Tony.

“OK then. So you have a script. Would you like to leave it with me?”

“No,” said Tony nervously. “I mean, no I don’t have one.” Thwaite’s eyebrows raised. Montpellier could hardly bear to watch. She found a chair in the corner of the room.

“I see. Well, do you have a treatment?”

“Er...”

“A treatment – a synopsis.”

“Er...”

“Like an outline of the story, the idea.” Thwaite was frantic to get something out of this kid so he could blow him off, get him out of the room.

“Not yet.”

“Oh. Well then just tell me. What’s your idea?”

“Er…”

“You don’t have an idea?”

“No,” said Tony, swallowing heavily. Thwaite blinked a few times, looked at his wife then back at Tony.

“Well then, what exactly is it you want to do?”

Tony drew a blank. When something finally came into his head it was all he could do to go with it.

“Do you remember the audition scene in *Serenade*?”

“Serenade? No.” said Thwaite.

“*Serenade*. Mario Lanza and Joan Fontaine. Remember?”

“Mario Lanza?!” Thwaite exclaimed. Finally something. “Right, OK.” He said, paying attention.

“Mario Lanza’s just been introduced to Maestro Marcatelli and he agrees to sing *My Destiny* for an audition.”

Just then Tony broke into song.

“My Destinyyyy, your smile is my destinyyyyyy

And I must be what you want meeeeeee to beeeeeee”

Thwaite and Montpelier’s jaws dropped. Tony’s voice was faltering at both extremes of his range, and several places in between.

“My future lies

Beyond the stars in your eyes

When you are near life is sheer ecstacyyyyyyyyyy”

“Right, thank you,” interrupted Montpellier.

“It works a lot better with Vincent Price’s accompaniment,” explained Tony.

Thwaite looked at him dumbfounded. Ms Montpellier sat back, aghast. After a heavy pause Thwaite tried to respond thoughtfully.

“Kid, if I had a dollar for everyone who ever came to me looking for a break in Hollywood I’d be a rich man now.” Thinking a moment he added, “I mean richer. There are people in that town with big ideas all over the place, you have to step over them on the sidewalk. Now, I don’t mean to be discouraging but that has got to be by far the worst pitch I have ever heard.”

“Mel!” Ms Montpellier said, steadying Thwaite with a hand on his arm. Turning her attention to Tony with a gentle smile she said “I’m sorry, Mel’s just a bit jaded. He forgets that once upon a time he started out with nothing more than a dream.”

“Oh here we go,” said Thwaite rolling his eyes.

Tony’s shaking knees steadied, a sure sign they were ready to give way.

“So here’s what I think you should do,” said Ms Montpellier. “First thing you should do is go and take dance lessons - samba, tango, maybe some classical. Find a good acting school. After three decades in the business believe me it makes a difference. The singing I wouldn’t worry about, it’s probably too late to start - we can get talent in for the musical lines...”

“What’s this ‘we’?” interrupted Thwaite, glaring at his wife like a bull at an offensive fencepost.

“Kid, if you want my advice, go out and get yourself a cheap video camera, not too cheap, and a computer. Round up a bunch of your pals, sit down and story-board something then go out there and mess around with it. Aim small first, maybe five

minutes. When you finish editing it if you haven't lost interest then do it again, make it ten minutes, then fifteen. By the time you get to two hours you've made so many films you'll either be bored out of your brains or a fuckin' master."

"Mel!" hushed Montpellier, feigning shock. She reached over to read the name tag on the young man's uniform. "Tony, what we're trying to say is nobody is born a film star. People begin their film careers after years of painstaking training. You need to go out there and develop some skills," she concluded, taking him by the arm and walking him to the door with a friendly smile.

"Thank you so much," she said as she disappeared behind the closing door.

Friday morning Rosita decided Tony was ready to tackle a room on his own. She double checked his trolley had everything he needed before setting off to work on the next room.

"Come and grab me if you need help with anything."

The bottom sheet spread over the bed more smoothly than he expected. He tucked the sides tightly, took a corner and pulled it upward into a triangle, placed his hand along the side, folded and tucked neatly. The blanket felt soft and warm in his hands. It took two tries but the comforter was folded with precision, pillows placed perfectly, a chocolate on each. The towels were positioned just so, toiletries and mini-bar replenished, labels turned toward the guest, the curtains arranged with Zen-like precision. Tony took one last look at the room before closing the door behind him. He looked up at the number on the door and took great satisfaction in the knowledge the next guest in room 302 would enjoy such comfort and luxury they could not fail to be transported to that other place.