

Author's Note:

Act Well Your Part does not take place in our world. Oak Grove High School exists only in that misty, far-off place called "The Best of All Possible Worlds." It is a parallel universe just a few steps away, a world in which sexual orientation matters only as much as eye color or left-handedness, and young love is a sweet and beautiful thing for all young lovers.

This is an unabashed romance story, set a few decades ago, not in the world as it was, but in the world as, perhaps, it *should have been*.

Act Well Your Part is a piece of fiction. But I know that my readers join with me in the fervent hope that one day we may live in a world in which high school students, teachers, parents, and the general public will be just as accepting as the characters in this book.

Don Sakers

CHAPTER ONE

Keith Graff looked at his watch and stifled a moan. Only two-thirty. It seemed that this class would never end.

Miss Spivak continued her lecture, and Keith stared out the window. It wasn't that he didn't like the class...but tryouts for the fall play were this afternoon after school, and this was the last period of the day.

Outside it was a glorious October day. The sky was abroil with fast-moving clouds in every shade of grey and white, and a crisp wind darted through the schoolground, carrying odd bits of trash as it went. Keith knew that it was chilly outside, a delicious kind of chilly that would have found him sitting by the fire to do his homework, back in the other house. Here, of course, they had no fireplace.

Old windowpanes rattled in their frames, and Keith could hardly contain his restlessness. This was a time of year for possibilities, when the smell of burning leaves filled the air and energies that had run free all summer could be chained and disciplined to new tasks.

Miss Spivak droned on, and Keith snuck another look at his watch. Twenty-five minutes to go!

Until last week Keith had wanted time to stand still, or preferably to move backwards. It had been a busy summer, what with Mom getting a new job and the two of them moving to Oak Grove just in time for Keith to start the school year in a new school. And he'd hated it.

He had been all set to spend his last two years at dear old familiar Kinwood Senior High. Finishing sophomore year near the top of his class, he had a comfortable circle of friends and was anticipating a marvelous year in eleventh grade.

Well, that was all over now. And he'd hated Oak Grove. Hated the idea of being without friends, hated being the new kid who didn't fit in anywhere, even hated the dingy twenty-year-old brick building itself.

Then tryouts were announced, and Keith decided the new school wasn't so bad after all. He had always enjoyed acting, and was involved in dramatics at Kinwood. Here was a chance to get involved in something he liked, to get to know some of his classmates, and finally to have a way to fit in. Keith didn't mind if he got just a minor part — all he wanted was to be involved in the play.

If this stupid class would ever end!

When the bell eventually rang Keith was up out of his seat in a flash. He threw his books into his knapsack and raced out the door, threaded his way through the crowded halls, just about flew down the main stairs, and skidded to a halt in the broad corridor outside the auditorium. Sure enough, there was the sign: "TRYOUTS FOR FALL PLAY here after school."

The door was locked; Keith waited as patiently as he could until the drama teacher, Mr. Hening ("Call me Bob") showed up. Hening grinned when he saw Keith leaning against the auditorium door.

"Hello, Keith. I knew you were eager, but I didn't think you were going to be the first one here." From a belt hook Hening produced a jumble of keys and fumbled through them trying to unlock the door. "You could have stopped for a coke. It'll take me a while to set up."

"Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Not unless you know which key unlocks this door. Ah, *here* it is." He inserted the key, tried to turn it, and swore under his breath. "No, that's not it either."

"Third from the end," a new voice said.

“Thank you, Bran.” Hening unlocked the door, then put an arm on Keith’s shoulder and turned him to meet the newcomer. “This is Keith Graff, from my second-period class. He’s destined to be the next Peter O’Toole, so watch out for him. Keith, meet Bran Davenport.”

Bran Davenport was two or three inches taller than Keith — five-foot-ten or -eleven. His short black hair was a little mussed. He wore a threadbare t-shirt imprinted on the front with “Oak Grove Stage Crew.” Bran’s dark eyebrows gave him a somewhat satanic look, but his boyish face and easy smile softened the impact. A slight growth of downy fuzz lined his chin.

“Please to meet you, Keith.” Bran carried a cardboard box filled with playbooks; he balanced it on one leg and offered his right hand to Keith.

Bran’s grip was warm and firm; his hands were slightly bigger than Keith’s but his fingers were thinner. His fingernails were trimmed; Keith, an incurable nail-biter, felt a little ashamed of his own hands.

Hening patted Keith on the back, then held open the door. “Let’s get inside now, that box can’t be light.” As Bran passed him, Hening looked back at Keith and said in a stage-whisper, “When Bran signed up to be a last-period drama aide, he didn’t know I’d be using him as a beast of burden.”

From the darkness ahead Bran laughed. “Don’t let him kid you, Keith. Bob uses *everyone* as a beast of burden.”

“You can transfer to social studies if you want,” Hening offered, jokingly.

“What, and leave show business?”

The auditorium was lit only by two glowing green EXIT signs over the doors; Keith moved carefully to avoid bumping into something. He was impressed by the way Bran and Bob Hening moved with calm assurance. Bran put his box down on the stage, leaped up, and vanished into the wings. A few seconds later there was a massive “thump” and the house lights came up.

"Why don't you take a seat, Keith; everyone else will be here soon." Hening jumped onto the stage himself, and went into the back with Bran.

A few more kids trickled in while Mr. Hening and Bran adjusted the spotlights, and finally Hening appeared onstage to give a little pep talk about the fall play, and how he knew that everyone wanted a part but after all there were only a limited number and he hoped everyone would help out even if they didn't get a role in the play. It was the same speech that the drama teacher at Kinwood used to give, and Keith idly wondered if all drama teachers knew it.

Keith was one of the first people to go on. He gave a short speech from *Man of LaMancha*, the speech that his friend Frank had delivered last year during Kinwood's production. Keith had worked with Frank so often on the bit, he knew it inside and out.

"Thank you," Hening said. "We'll post the cast list on the drama room door by tomorrow morning. You can stick around if you'd like."

As he walked down the stairs off the stage, Keith saw Bran Davenport flash him a smile and make a thumbs-up motion. At least *someone* thought he had done well.

Keith had told his mother he would call her for a ride home, and she wouldn't be back from work until at least five-thirty. It was only about three-thirty now; he decided to hang around for a while and see how everyone else did. One or two of the other kids were good, better than he was...and quite a few were worse. Even some that he knew were leading lights in the Drama Club.

When Bran Davenport came on stage, Keith sat up in his wooden seat and brushed back his hair. This year's play was *Arsenic and Old Lace*; Bran delivered from memory a speech from the second act, with one of the senior girls reading all the other parts.

When he finished, Bran came into the auditorium and sat down next to Keith. "Hey, you did pretty well."

"So did you. A lot better than I did."

"Well, I've probably had a lot more experience than you. Hening is a good director. You're new at Oak Grove, aren't you?"

"This is my first year. I'll say you've had experience. Didn't you play the lead in the spring musical last year?"

"A fan. How did you know that?"

"Mr. Hening showed us old programs in drama class. I recognized your name."

At that minute Mr. Hening looked right at Bran and frowned. "Bran, perhaps you could extend your fellow actors the courtesy of being quiet through their tryouts? Thank you."

Bran smiled and motioned to Keith. "Come on, let's go out in the hall. Then we can talk."

"Okay."

After school a coke machine was set up in the hallway between the cafeteria and the auditorium; the two boys bought soft drinks and then sat against the brick wall. Bran held up his can. "To a successful audition."

"Cheers." Both took a sip, and then Keith sighed. "What part are you after?"

"Teddy."

"I thought you'd go for the lead."

"Nah. Jerry Todd is going to get Mortimer. It's a simple part, and Jerry needs the experience. I'm hoping Bob will let me tackle Teddy. What a *great* part." For a second he fell into a Teddy Roosevelt impersonation. "Bully, bully!" He took another sip of coke. "Did your old school have a chapter of the Thespian Society?"

Keith nodded. He was well acquainted with the international society of high school dramatists. "Yeah. I had two and a half points when I left Kinwood." Points were awarded for various activities connected with dramatics, from prop-management and costumes to directing and playing the starring roles in a performance. Ten points were

enough to become a Thespian.

"Well hell, we'll have you initiated by the end of the year, then. You can carry over points from your last school, you know." A last swig of coke, and Bran crushed the can absently.

"I'd like that."

There seemed no way to continue the conversation, and yet Keith didn't want Bran to leave. He looked sideways at the older boy, and for a second Bran met his eyes. They stared at one another for a few second, then Keith turned his head away, a little embarrassed. "I guess I'd better be getting home."

"How are you getting there?"

Keith shrugged. "Walk, I guess. My mom won't be home for a while yet."

Bran stood up, a process that he accomplished with a throw of his shoulders and levitation. "Want a ride home? I've got a car, and I'll be giving a couple of the others a lift. You can't be too far out of the way."

Keith stood, trying to conceal a sudden shiver. "If it's not putting you out too much."

"Okay, then. Debbie and Laura ought to be done by now. Let me get them, and we can go." Bran dashed into the auditorium, and Keith leaned back against the wall. His knees felt weak.

Whoa, Keith boy, he thought to himself. Take it easy. You've just met the guy. Star actor, and good-looking to boot...he probably has half the girls in the senior class crawling over him. He's probably going steady with one of them. He's probably....

Bran was back, with two girls. "Keith Graff, this is Debbie Vovcenko and Laura Birtonelli. Keith is new here."

Debbie, a thin redhead, waved her fingers. "Pleased to meet you. How do you like Oak Grove?"

"Okay, I guess. I'm still getting used to it, I mean."

Laura, a short, chubby dark-haired girl, smiled. "Just don't

let anyone try to sell you an elevator pass or send you to the pool with a message." She shrugged. "No elevator, no pool. They caught me with both of them when I was a freshman."

"Thanks for the warning."

Bran put his arms around Debbie's shoulder, and Keith did his best not to react. "We're going to drop Keith at home, if you girls don't mind."

Laura chuckled. "Keith, *you* must be the one who minds. If you've never seen Bran drive...."

"I haven't."

"Well, you're in for quite an experience."

Bran started toward the door with Debbie, then looked over his shoulder. "Nobody's died yet."

"No fault of your."

"You can always walk if you want."

Laura snatched at Keith's hand. "Come on, he's just liable to leave without us."

It was only a fifteen-minute drive from school to Keith's house. He couldn't find anything to fault about Bran's driving; in his opinion the older boy drove with great care. Keith had been in cars where all he could do was hold onto the seat and pray he would survive — Bran drove better than his mother.

When Bran pulled up in front of the two-story frame house that Keith was only now beginning to call home, Keith opened the car door and put one foot on the ground. "Thanks for the ride. Hey, can I ask you guys in for a drink or something?"

"Thanks for the offer, kid. But I have to get Debbie home, she's got to be at work in half an hour."

"Oh. Okay." Keith tried not to show his disappointment, and he didn't think he succeeded completely.

"But now that I know where you live, I mean, well, you'll probably be staying after school for rehearsals, I could give you a ride sometimes."

"Hey, I wouldn't want you to have to go out of your way."

"We can talk about it later. Don't forget that the cast list will be posted tomorrow."

"I'll be there bright and early." Keith waved. "Nice to meet you, Debbie, Laura. And thanks again," he said to Bran.

The older boy gave him a smile, and the car pulled away.

Keith let himself into the house, threw his books on his bed, and went to the kitchen to fix himself a snack. He glanced at the morning paper still scattered about the kitchen table, and read half the front page without paying attention while he nibbled cookies.

Something was happening. Again.

It had been like this with Frank — except, with Frank, it had come on slowly. Frank and Keith had been friends since elementary school, and only during the last year had Keith come to realize that he cared about Frank more than one friend usually cared about another.

They had skirted the issue, enough for Keith to be sure that Frank felt the same way...and then Mom got her new job, and Keith moved. And just as well, he thought at the time, because it was after all a pretty scary thing. And for all that he missed Frank, he was also glad that nothing had... happened.

He crumpled his paper towel, ricocheted it off the refrigerator into the trash can, and rinsed his glass in the sink. Be honest, fella, he said to himself as he looked out the window at the cloudy October sky. Bran Davenport probably doesn't even like boys, at least not in the way *you're* thinking of. And if he did, which was a pretty big if, even if he *did* he probably wouldn't give you a second look. He's a senior, member of the Thespians, star of last year's play, and aide to the drama teacher. You're a newcomer, lower than a freshman.

Forget it, Keith. Your job is to get yourself accepted by some of the other kids at school. You did a good job today with Bran and the two girls, just keep it up. And don't cause trouble by letting your feelings lead you into doing something stupid.

Keith turned on the television, and an hour and a half later his mother found him there when she walked in the door. "Okay, son, get up. You set the table and I'll get dinner. Then there's time for you to gather up the trash before we eat."

"Aw, Mom...."

She tousled his hair. "Don't 'Aw, Mom' me, trash day is tomorrow and you know you're not going to feel like it later tonight." She kissed him. "How did school go?"

"Okay."

"Didn't you have play tryouts today?" She looked at her watch as they moved to the kitchen. "I thought I'd have to come get you."

"I got a ride with some kids who tried out."

"That's good." She started making dinner while Keith cleared away the paper and set the table. As he worked he told his mother about the fall play, about Mr. hening, about his history class and the latest experiment in physics, and about the TV shows he's watched while waiting for her to come home.

After the table was set Keith went about the house emptying trash cans, and dragged the big metal can out to the curb for the garbage men. Rain or shine, they would be here at six o'clock tomorrow morning, their truck snorting and can lids crashing, and Keith would know it was time to get up. He never overslept on Tuesdays and Fridays.

On the way back to the house Keith looked up at the sky. About half of it was obscured by clouds...but there was a gibbous moon dating in and out of the clouds, and where the sky was clear the stars shone through with bright jewel-like light. For a while he stood in his shirtsleeves, looking at the sky and smelling the clean air. Then he caught himself shivering and went back inside.

During dinner his mother read the latest letter from his grandmother, and they spent the rest of the meal in animated conversation about various relatives.

Over dessert Keith's mother stared at him and a smile

played around the corners of her mouth. "Offhand, I'd say you like Oak Grove a lot more than you did a week ago."

"What makes you say that?"

"You've been talking nonstop since I walked in the door. A week ago all you said was variations on 'I hate Oak Grove and I wish we had never moved.'"

Keith laughed. "Yeah, I guess I was in a bad mood."

"So why the change?"

"I don't know. Tryouts, I guess."

"You're probably right." She stood, picked up her plate and Keith's, and started loading the dishwasher. Chuckling, she said, "One thing's for sure, this is a different Keith than the one who lived here last week. And I think I like the improvement." She was silent for a moment. "An outside observer would probably decide that you were in love."

"Mother."

"I know, I know, it's none of my business."

"I'm *not* in love. I'm just in a better mood because of tryouts."

"Oh, I know. I was just telling you what an outside observer would say."

Trying to hide a blush, Keith handed her the dirty glasses and then turned away. "I'm going to my room. I have some homework to do."

She smiled tenderly. "Don't forget that movie you want to see is on at nine tonight."

"I won't forget." Keith went to his room, took out his history book, and did his best to lose himself in studying.

