

July 17, 1987.

The morning WLOX weather dude, the wacky one who shouts so loud his golden pompadour threatens to fly off, predicts the heat will be coming fast and sticky all day, smoking Ocean Springs like a barbecue. Typical. You wake up hot and by mid-afternoon, you're up to your neck in *swamp*. But today dawns anything but typical. Today the boys will blow up Belloq's face.

Jayson has the effect down. Weeks ago, he borrowed a new book on special effects from Chris. Jayson spends hours studying the pages that describe the effect, folding back the chapter so often that the binding breaks. The instructions committed to memory, he calls Eric and lists the materials he needs—a metal mixing bowl, a large spoon, a box of straws, a box of gelatin, a jar of dental plaster, and a shotgun.

The morning of the effect, Eric glances at himself in the downstairs bathroom mirror. Reddish stubble sprouting, long eyelashes, rust-colored eyebrows, thick brown hair. Dashing. He pictures himself a young Paul Freeman, Belloq in the original.

"Let's do zis," he says in Belloq's French accent.

He grabs a shower cap and stretches it over his head.

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Consulting with Jayson, Eric envisions the exploding face effect in fifteen steps and jots them down in his notebook:

1-Make plaster mold of my face. Remove.

2-Mix red gelatin. Pour into impression of Eric's face in "plaster bowl."

3-Take plastic skull bought from hobby store, pack cranium with Jayson's secret recipe of fake brains and gore.

4-Place plastic skull face-down in gelatin-filled bowl, lining up skull eye sockets with the plaster mold's eyes.

5-Put "plaster bowl" filled with red gelatin and face-down plastic skull into Mom's fridge to chill and harden. Chris, do not eat!

6-When gelatin hardens, remove "plaster bowl" from fridge.

7-Flip skull onto counter. Lie on nest of old towels.

8-GENTLY lift plaster mold off, revealing plastic skull encased within an outer layer of hardened red gelatin.

9-Paint surface—over the blood and gore layer—with flesh-colored paint. Paint in Eric's eyes, nose, lips, and screaming mouth. Face should look like me!

10-Once dry, stick fake head-skull onto a pike.

11-Slide pike with fake head into torso stand. Drape on Belloq costume—Hebrew High Priest robes and headdress that I wear in melting scene.

12-Film shot of fake screaming head wearing my costume.

13- With camera running, fire shotgun at head and blow it up. Be sure to blow up fake head, not mine!

14-Put on costume. Film shot of me really screaming.

15-In editing, cut from shot of me screaming—to shot of ghosts—then back to fake head exploding. Seamless!

Eric pulls out two separate storyboards, one of a face melting, one of a face exploding. Beneath each drawing, he writes specific instructions. He's got every angle covered.

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In *Raiders*, when the bad guys open the Ark, spirits shoot out and flutter here and there, circling, serene and mesmerizing. Then they turn horrific and attack the Nazis, going right for their faces. As the spirit dives into Belloq's face, he screams and his head explodes.

Eric's problem?

How to capture Belloq's scream inside the mold.

The dental plaster Jayson bought takes thirty minutes to dry. No way Eric can keep his mouth open in a scream for thirty minutes straight. He needs to wedge something into his mouth that will keep his face contorted in scream position while the plaster dries.

He rummages through the fridge and finds a pear.

He carves a section away with a knife and stuffs the pear slice into his mouth. He checks his expression in the mirror. He blinks in amazement. His expression nearly duplicates Paul Freeman's screaming face in the original.

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Eric, the pear cupped in his hand, shower cap yanked over his hair like a cafeteria worker, pushes through the screen door onto the back porch and finds Chris and Jayson at work. His mom, arms folded, stands to the side. Since they almost burned down the house and nearly incinerated her son, Mary has kept close tabs on the production. Chris, on hands and knees, covers the final square of the floor with newspaper, then picks up a faded lime green deck chair and places it down in the center of the porch.

Chris stands and grins at Eric's shower cap. "Jayson, your date's here."

Jayson grunts, doesn't look up. He's too preoccupied stirring a white pasty concoction in a metal mixing bowl.

"Well, it looks like you boys have everything under control," Mary says.

"Looks can be deceiving," Eric says.

"That I know. If you need anything, holler, I'll be working in the office."

"We will, thanks, Mom," Eric says.

"Hard to take you seriously, Eric, with that on your head," Mary says, heading inside, Chris's laughter trailing behind her.

"This is exactly how Chris Walas did the original effect," Jayson says, eyes fixated by his deliberate stirring motion. "It's like we're recreating history."

Chris and Eric grunt in agreement.

"That should do it," Jayson says. He halts the stirring, pats his palms dry on the bottom of his fraying tee. He looks at Eric for the first time, snickers at the shower cap.

"What?" Eric says. "I don't want to get a bunch of plaster in my hair."

"Wuss," Chris says.

"I'm ready," Jayson says.

"Chris." Eric's eyes cloud. Chris reads something in them. Concern.

"I'm with you all the way," Chris says. "I'll give you the blow by blow."

"Good. That's what I want. Thanks."

Eric lowers himself into the deck chair. He adjusts the shower cap, flattens the top, shows the guys the browning slice of pear, and sticks it in his mouth.

"Did you forget this part?" Jayson says. "You won't be able to breathe."

"Umph?" Eric says.

Jayson produces a box of straws, eases one out, and with scissors he pulls from his back pocket, snips the straw in half. He inserts a half into each of Eric's nostrils.

"Breathing tubes," Jayson says.

Chris steps back and studies Eric—shower cap stretched over his head, mouth in scream position propped open by a piece of brown pear, straws stuck up his nose. "Damn, you look sexy."

"Hold your head back," Jayson says.

Eric closes his eyes and leans back. Jayson spoons out a heaping portion of gooey plaster and slathers it onto Eric's

cheek. Eric flinches. Jayson holds until Eric relaxes, then spreads the plaster carefully as if frosting a cake. He ladles out a second spoonful and deposits the glop onto Eric's other cheek. Chris closes in, watching Jayson work, smoothing the plaster, forming Eric's face into the mold that they make into a fake head and blow apart with a shotgun.

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I can't see a thing. Everything's black. I feel like I'm walled up in a tomb. Sound is muffled, too. I can hear people talking but I can't make out any words. It's all glub, glub, glub, as if I'm underwater.

I need to tell Chris something. Shit! This damn pear. I can't open my mouth. My jaw muscles ache like hell. This was a bad idea. Who shoves a pear in his mouth for thirty minutes? Maybe I should just eat it. No. That would kill the effect. We've come this far. What I do for this movie. Remember—pain is temporary, film is forever. I have to keep telling myself that.

Damn, my mouth hurts.

Relax. Breathe. Out. In. SHIT. Plaster just went up my nose! Fuck! Okay, okay, okay. Got air coming in one nostril. That's fine. One nostril is all you need. Gives you enough air to sustain life. More than enough. I'm pretty sure. Did Paul Freeman go through this? Easy, Eric. Slow down. Slow... yourself... down.

There. Better.

See? It's just a little dark and your face is slightly uncomfortable. That's all. A little sore. A little tight. And—

Warm.

Tiny bit warm.

Getting warmer.

Think cool thoughts. Dipping my feet into a pool. Sucking on an ice cube. Rolling around in snow. Sticking my head in the freezer—

THIS PLASTER IS SERIOUSLY HOT!!!

FUCKING HOT!!! I'M BURNING UP!!!!

Chris! Can you hear me?

CHRIS????

Glub. Glub. Glub.

Chris stares into Eric's eyes. Silver circles hard as nickels stare back. Chris leans farther in. "I think he's trying to tell us something."

"The mold looks good," Jayson says. "Beautiful."

"Eric? Can you hear me? The mold looks beautiful, man."

"It's just..." Jayson says.

Chris narrows his eyes at Jayson. "What?"

Jayson points a finger at the mold that now encases Eric's entire face. He taps his fingertip on Eric's plaster cheek. The sound careens at him, a too loud echo. Jayson retreats, newspaper bunching at his feet on the porch floor.

"Where's that jar?"

Chris slaps the jar of plaster into Jayson's palm. Jayson spins the jar, searches the label, stops, reads, his lips moving.

"Yeah," he says. "Shit."

"What?" Chris says, voice cracking.

"Okay, see, this is *industrial* plaster—"

"So?"

"It's fast drying. I got the wrong stuff. I meant to get *dental* plaster. There are way more kinds of plaster than you would think and they're all in a row on the shelf. It's totally confusing. Bonding plaster, finishing plaster, browning plaster, undercoating, limestone, Venetian, Gypsum—"

"Jay!"

"Yeah?"

"How fast?"

"It's already dry," Jayson whispers.

Chris whips around to Eric. He grips the mold with both hands.

Hard as granite.

Chris grunts and pulls.

Someone is pulling on my face!

Where's Chris? CHRIS!

Voices.

"Glub... grab him... glub... glub... one... two... three... pull... PULL!"

OWWWW!

My eyebrows! They're stuck in the plaster like footprints in cement.

Stop pulling!

A tap on my shoulder.

CHRIS! CHRIS!!!

My voice bounces back at me.

* * *

Eric punches the air with both fists, then flaps his arms like a deranged bird. Jayson stares, stumped.

"What's he doing?"

"A pad!" Chris shouts. "Get him a pad and pen!"

Jayson scrambles into the house, the squeaky screen door whapping closed behind him. He's back in ten seconds holding out a pad and pen advertising Mary's insurance company. Chris gently places the pad into Eric's hands. Hands shaking, Eric scratches something onto the pad.

"He's writing," Jayson says.

"No shit."

Eric blindly thrusts the pad and pen in front of him. Chris snatches the pad, reads: "Help."

Silence.

Followed by the crackle and hum of teenage boys thinking.

After a long moment, Chris clears away the static, straightens up, speaks to the Gulf of Mexico.

"Get the toolbox," he says, Indy all the way.

Sneakers slap on the porch floor. The screen door bangs, hisses. Chris, all business now, moves his mouth near Eric's ear.

"Don't worry, brother. We're gonna break you out of there."

* * *

They begin with a hacksaw.

"This won't hurt!" Chris screams.

Jayson, miserable, the guilt washing over him, waves weakly at Chris to give it a go. Maybe Chris can slice through the plaster and form a ridge, a place they can grip so they can pull the mold off. Or maybe he can lob off small pieces, one at a time. He feels useless and full of blame.

Chris, his face reflexively folding into the Indy scowl, white knuckles the hacksaw handle, aims the hacksaw above Eric's cheek, drops it down hard, and cuts.

The saw blade snaps in half.

"Shit," Chris says.

"This is all my fault," Jayson says.

A man possessed, Chris forages through the toolbox and, clanking through pliers, wrenches, files and drill bits, pulls out a screwdriver and hammer.

"Back away," he says, a trace of menace.

He arrows the point of the screwdriver into Eric's plaster cheek and gently taps the handle with the hammer.

Nothing.

Which is a better result than before.

Chris taps the screwdriver harder. No give but he feels the screwdriver creasing the plaster slightly, jabbing in, taking a mini divot. That's all the encouragement he needs. He goes for it. He cracks the hammer down, and—

Crrrunch.

A small shred of plaster pops out near Eric's nose.

"Yes!" Jayson shouts.

"Eric!" Chris shouts into the tiny hole.

"He's alive!" Jayson howls.

“Can you hear me?” Chris says.

“It’s all my fault!” Jayson screams. He puckers his lips against the pin-sized opening in the plaster. “I’m so sorry, Eric. I’m so, *so* sorry.”

With surprising calm, Eric raises his arms and mimes writing on his palm, as if he’s in a restaurant, asking a waiter for the check.

“Get him the pad!” Chris says.

A flurry on the porch. Jayson, a handoff of the pad, Chris shoving the pad into Eric’s hands. Jayson, fumbling with the pen, drops it, chases it as it skitters along the porch floor, picks it up, places it between Eric’s thumb and forefinger like a chopstick. Chris, pacing, plowing a hand through his thick black hair, watching Eric as he slowly scratches out a line of letters. Eric finishes, nods his clunky plaster creature head. Chris and Jayson lean over the pad, read it together. Chris says the word aloud.

“Hospital.”

* * *

Mary, in her office in the back of the house, works over a claim, fingers rubbing her temple, trying to block out the odd soundtrack pounding from the back porch: someone running, footsteps slapping, the screen door slamming, muffled, anxious voices. Mary doesn’t like what she hears. Something’s off. An earsplitting *clang*—tools knocking together?—and she’s out of her chair.

* * *

A squad car pulls up from Front Beach, belching sour exhaust onto the porch. Eric hears the car door open and heavy footsteps climb the porch steps. A whoosh of someone’s minty breath blows over Eric and a deep male voice, thick and sure, whistles. “Damn, boy, what you got on your *head*?”

“Eric!” Mary swallows a scream. “What in the world is going on?”

“Mary,” Jayson says. “We didn’t want to worry you—”

“Jayson, I was right inside. I told you boys. Why didn’t you get me?”

“Want me to drive him to the hospital?” The cop, going for *Magnum P.I.* Failing. Because Eric’s plaster head has him coughing to keep from laughing.

“No, thank you. I’ll take him.” Mary says, her mouth a slit.

“Why don’t you just follow me then?”

Hands help Eric off his chair. Arms lift him, guide him, Mary’s occasional, controlled “*I got you, Eric*” sneaking through the nick in the plaster hive covering his head. Eric hears a car door open, a crank of a seatback lowered, and he’s stuffed into the front seat. He falls almost all the way back as the door closes, then Mary lands on the plastic seat next to him and the car jerks down the driveway.

“You’re going to be fine, Eric,” his mom says, and like a little boy, he believes her, trusts her. “I know you’re in a lot of pain, but try to relax. Just tell yourself that it’s only pain, that’s all, and let it wash over you, and it’ll go away for a little while.”

He tries it. He lets the pain come, allows himself to feel it, to flow over him like water, and then, just as his mom says, it ebbs a bit, eases up.

As they drive, he pictures the hometown newspaper. The police report. His mom often turns to that page first, sometimes reads it aloud when an item leaps out that’s ridiculous or bizarre, so small town it’s funny.

“*Residents Spot Suspicious Squirrel on Holcomb Boulevard,*” she read aloud just that morning.

To distract himself, he imagines the headline in tomorrow’s edition. “*Local Boy Gets Face Stuck in Plaster.*”

When the paper comes out the following morning, he hits the headline word for word.

* * *

Shafts of light stab him. The smell of ammonia seeps through the plaster.

“Chris?”

The word bangs inside his head, an echo.

“I’m here, Eric. You’re in the E.R. You’re gonna be fine. The docs are gonna saw that thing off your face. Gonna set you free, man.”

Wait. My mouth works! Chris can hear me! But I still can’t see.

He feels in a daze. He remembers now that the young orthopedic surgeon knocked off chunks of plaster with a sledgehammer, freeing his mouth and sections of his cheeks. The surgeon left to find a chainsaw and a posse.

“You look like something out of a movie,” the doctor said when they wheeled in Eric.

If you only knew.

“You’re not in any serious danger,” the doctor said. “You’re gonna live. But I don’t see how we can get that off. You’re gonna have to wear that over your face for the rest of your life.”

But I can't see! What good is a blind director?

"I'm playing with you. We'll get that thing off in a few minutes. It'll be like sawing off a cast."

A hand presses his shoulder. Then footsteps. Then silence.

"Chris?" Eric says.

"I got you, man."

"I need you to do me a favor."

"Name it."

"Tell Kathy I always loved her."

Pause.

"You're not gonna die, man."

"Well, you know. In case."

"Okay, if you die, I'll tell her."

"Thank you. Means a lot."

"No problem." Chris waits. Eric can hear him clear his throat. "So, hey, quick question. How attached are you to your eyebrows?"

"My eyebrows? I love my eyebrows. I'm very attached to my eyebrows. Why are you asking me this?"

Chris swallows. "No reason."

"Eric, it's Jay."

"Hello, Jayson."

Eric feels a hand drop onto his arm.

"I want you to know that it's okay if you never forgive me. Because I will never, ever forgive myself."

"Jayson, I forgive you."

"You do?"

"I do. Now, please, shut the fuck up about it."

"Thanks, Eric."

"Don't mention it." Eric tilts his head up slightly, barely, searching for Chris's voice. "Chris?"

"Right here, man."

“What did they say about my eyebrows?”

“Nothing. Nothing about your eyebrows. Except, you know, they usually grow back.”

Then the invisible medical team, flashing scalpels and firing up chainsaws, descends.

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The orthopedic surgeon removes the rest of the plaster mask in front of an audience of interns and medical students gathered in a horseshoe around Eric. When the surgeon saws off the last piece, he hands a couple of chunks to Mary, as souvenirs. Hands shaking, she slips them into her purse. Then, instructed not to move, Eric lies completely still as the doctor runs water into his eyes to prevent dust from collecting. Eric keeps the fear at bay, following his mother’s advice to allow the pain to flow, to accept it, then to let it pass, even as the water runs into his throat. Finally, Eric’s vision temporarily impaired, lost in a blur the color of charcoal, an attendant wheels him out of the emergency room, the casualties his eyelashes, one whole eyebrow, and half of the other. He looks like the survivor of a strange lab experiment or nuclear accident. Until his eyebrows grow back, which they do, he uses his mom’s eyebrow pencil to draw fake ones.

“They said you were unbelievably brave,” Mary says, driving home, her calm long gone, her heart thumping.

“I’m scared, Mom,” Eric says. “I’m afraid I’m going to go blind.”

“It’s only temporary, I promise.” She reaches across the seat, presses Eric’s hand. “You deserve something special. What’ll it be?”

“Popeye’s,” Eric says, no hesitation.

With money so tight, Mary simply can’t afford to treat herself and the boys to a meal out, even if it’s only fast food.

“It is a special occasion,” she says.

She turns off the highway in search of the nearest Popeye’s Famous Fried Chicken.