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July 2008



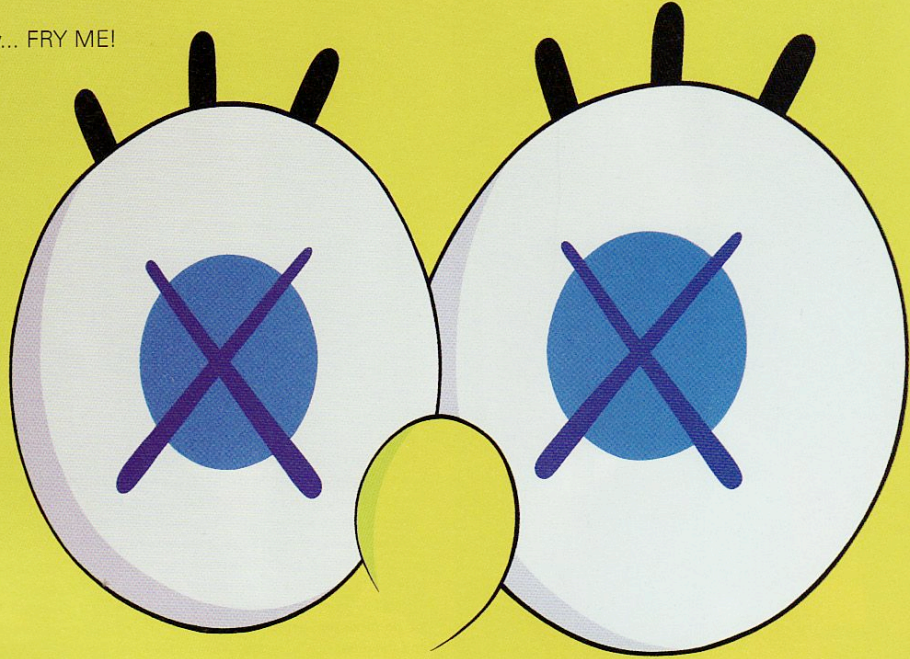
THE STEPPING STONE ISSUE

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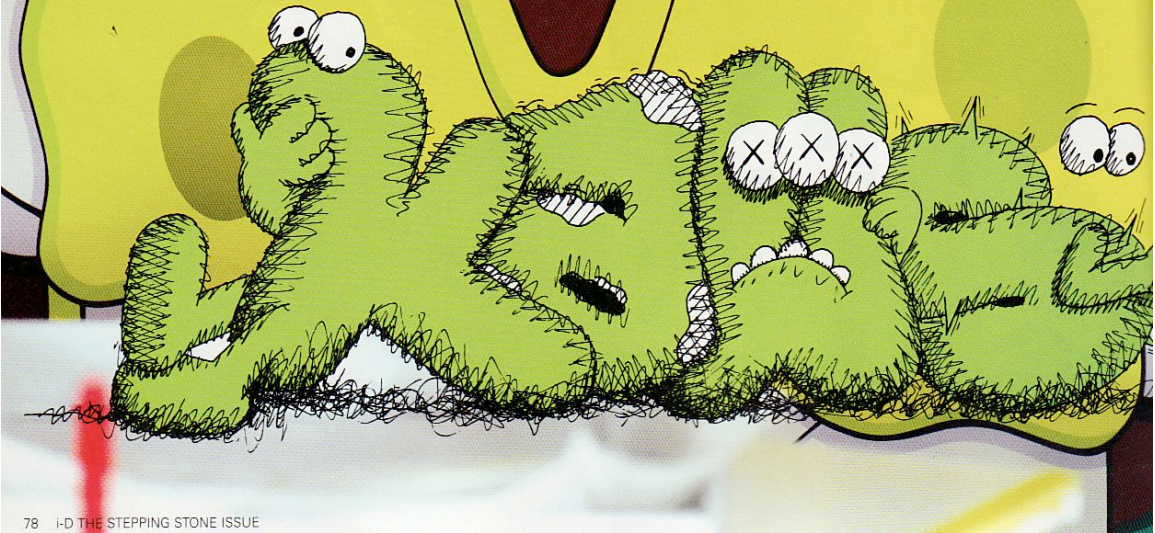
1.00 \$10.99 ¥1800

I'm meaty... FRY ME!



BIG UP TO KAWS – the man
behind the cartoons!

TEXT JEREMY ABBOTT
PHOTOGRAPHY KAWS



FROM TIME SPENT TAGGING PUBLIC SPACES AND REAPPROPRIATING FASHION BILLBOARDS, WORKING AT DISNEY AND DESIGNING WITH A BATHING APE, LAUNCHING HIS LINE ORIGINALFAKE AND BEING COLLECTED BY PHARRELL AND NIGO, THE BRILLIANT PAINTER, EX GRAFFITI ARTIST CUM FASHION DESIGNER, TOY MAKER, DOER, PLAYER, CULTURAL MAGPIE, LOVER OF CARTOONS, ORACLE ON COOL AND ZEITGEIST FOR EVERYTHING HOT RIGHT NOW – KAWS – HAS GROWN OUT OF THE SHADOWS AND EMERGED AS ONE OF THE MOST VIBRANT, EXCITING AND COMMERCIALY VIABLE ARTISTS WORKING TODAY. USING HIS SKILLS THROUGH VARIOUS DISCIPLINES AND MEDIUMS, KAWS TIES TOGETHER HIP-HOP, SKATEBOARDING AND CARTOON CULTURE ALL IN ONE PERFECTLY POSITIVE, PRISTINE VISION OF IMPOSSIBLE PERFECTION. HIS WORK IS A JOY TO BEHOLD; AN ALL-SINGING ALL-DANCING FUN-PACKED CELEBRATION OF POSITIVITY, LIFE AND FUN. A CRAFT, A SKILL THAT MOST MERE MORTALS COULDN'T EVEN BEGIN TO COMPREHEND. IN FACT – JUST HOW DOES HE DO IT? HIS IS A GIFT DIRECT FROM THE GODS, HAVING RECEIVED A HAND AS STEADY AS A ROCK, AN EYE FOR BEAUTY AND AN INSTINCT TO MAKE APPEALING ARTEFACTS THAT WOULD MAKE JIM HENSON, MATT GROENING AND WALT DISNEY THEMSELVES PROUD TO CALL KAWS THEIR PEER AND ALLY. X MARKS THE SPOT WITH KAWS AS HIS SIGNATURE STATEMENTS ALWAYS COME WITH A CROSS THROUGH THE EYE, RENDERING THE SUBJECT MATTER SOMEWHAT DEVOID OF HUMAN CHARACTERISTICS AND INSTANTLY CARTOON IN THEIR EXAGGERATIONS.

Obsessed by skeletons, worms and eyeballs, his work is like that of a pre-pubescent boy. KAWS lives in a world where everything is animated and monsters live under your bed and ghouls climb out of your closet, to scare you half to death in the middle of the night, all for the hell of it... BOO! He paints heads over famous faces, adds horns in hairlines and sketches monster tails between legs in a stepping stone between sketchbooks, comics, fantasy and reality. His art is jaw-droppingly impressive; to see one of his creations in the flesh is to amaze over how one man could create such a seemingly perfect product, all by hand and devoid of mechanical aid. KAWS has been part of the i-D family since he first bumped heads, back in the day, with New York Editor Matt Jones following their introduction in '97 by Gimme 5's director, Michael Koppelman. Over the years, Terry has seen him mature as an artist and successfully marry his art with commerce, of which Terry talks proudly, "Meeting up with KAWS in his studio in Brooklyn last year and seeing the beginning of the Spongebob Squarepants paintings, I was extremely impressed that he was selling paintings faster than he could produce them." With an east/west issue in the pipeline, TJ thought it would be a really cool idea to hook up their mutual ideas and celebrate the crossover of cultures and international audience that KAWS was uniting. "The crossover seemed really exciting, I just had to make sure we could work together before he was too busy with an exhibition," confirms Terry. Of the hook-up, Terry states the issue turned out better than expected. "It's a total entity, from cover to cover and much respect to the lucky collectors who manage to find the limited cover KAWS cover."

What were the first things you remember drawing as a kid?

I drew some little comic books, I guess.

Did you draw all over your schoolbooks?

Yeah, that's all I did in school. Drew all around the borders. Monsters and things like that. Probably anti-religious stuff cause I went to Catholic school.

When did you realise art was going to be your calling?

Definitely during elementary school. Probably fifth grade. One of my art teachers called my Mom saying, 'Maybe he could pursue art?' Because my grades were always really, really bad.

Were you happy with that?

I was stoked. But at that time it just seemed like a joke. It was never something that really seemed like an option.

So later you went to art school?

Yeah, I went to the School of Visual Arts in New York.

Is this when things really started to pick up with graffiti?

I mean, even before that in high school I was already painting on the street. Really through graffiti, I finally got to meet other kids who were already into that kinda stuff. It just really opened up the possibilities.

So how old were you when you started, like 15 or 16?

Ha, no no. Earlier than that. It was when I was in elementary school when I was skating like 7th or 8th grade. Like the last two years of high school in '92, I was painting a lot, especially in high school. '93 was when I started doing pieces, full-on walls and billboards, when I really started getting out there.

Were you nervous when you first started defacing public property?

Yeah, that's pretty much why I started doing it. You could be nervous. It's fun. I've always enjoyed doing graf and piecing, and just always wanted to do stuff like billboards and street spots. It's more of a sport.

And which crews were you a part of?

A few. Mainly FC and TC5.

Did you ever get caught?

Nothing really serious. I've been in Central Booking in Manhattan. I was caught putting up stickers, ironically, after everything. Yeah, never really been caught.

So how did you manage to not get caught, what were your tactics?

I guess not to have tactics. I just used to do it in the daytime, and I'd ask people to move out of the bus shelter so I could put something up. I guess the bolder you are, the less people question. I've been out painting with people heckling me, and then having them just walking away.

So the best way is to be quite brazen?

It's the only way really, or you're not going to get anything done. Definitely if you want to go out painting you can go out at night, but you can get just as much done in the day.

So you started with billboards and then bus shelters?

It started with billboards in '93, full pieces right over it, and then writing on top of the ads. And then Barry McGee gave me the key to open up the phone booths, and then once I did that, that gave me access to all of that. I moved to Manhattan in '96, so growing up in Jersey I had access to freight trains, billboards and a lot of walls, then when I moved I was more heavily into phone booths. I also made a key to open up bus shelters, and did that also when I first moved to London.

So the challenge is paramount obviously?

Yeah, definitely. You think, 'Well, somebody doesn't want me to do that, but how can I do this?' and then try to figure it out.

What is the driving force behind you?

I dunno. Boredom. Get imagery out there. Basically you grow up drawing and suddenly you start doing graf and you get feedback, and not only is it a fun experience but you're building and constructing things.

How did you decide which brands to attack?

It was definitely brands that I liked or ads that were better. But then there were really bad ones that worked really well. For the most part Calvin Klein were doing great ads and they fit with what I was doing at the time.

So they were an aesthetic choice rather than an anti-corporate statement?

Yeah, it wasn't like I did it because I liked them, or didn't like them. I just thought it was all fair game.

When did you actually become KAWS?

It was in high school.

Is it a name you gave yourself, or is it a nickname someone gave you?

No, I just came up with it. I liked the lettering. The way the letters looked together. I liked the fact it wasn't anything, it wasn't a name.

Does it have a meaning?

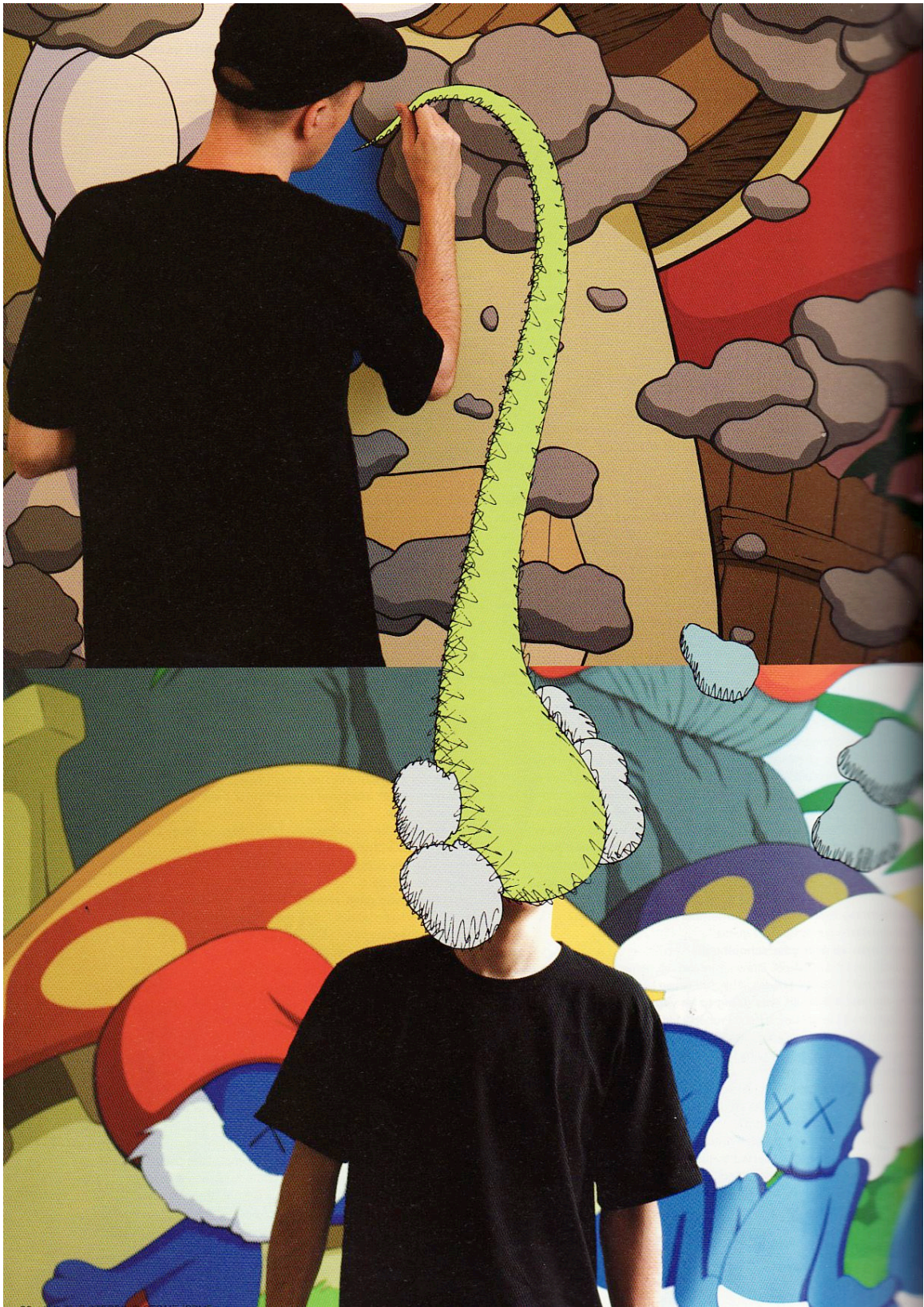
No, not at all. Ever. I mean people always assume it does.

Are there any graffiti pieces that you're particularly proud of?

There's definitely a few pieces I like still. There's one in Connecticut, which was a piece I did with a bunch of friends where we rolled the whole backdrop of a wall to look like film, and drew pieces over it. There are always different things that go into pieces. You do it because a lot of times you're painting with different people, so it's all part of the experience. You hang out and it's much more than just painting.

So what are some of the best experiences you've had?

Actually the best ones are the worst ones. Like sleeping in bushes, laying there in this little area and looking out through the bush, and having to lay there for what seemed like forever while people stomped around the area looking for you. I did a train in a full-on blizzard once with my friend Nate, who just passed away. That was fun in '96; we probably wore all the clothes we owned to keep warm. It was funny, because it was super bright, even though it was night time and it was super quiet. Y'know when there's heavy snowfall it's great. It was peaceful.



So how did you end up working at Disney?

When I got out of college I started working at this company called Jumbo Pictures, and Disney bought out that company. All through college I was never really into animation.

So you just fell into it?

Well, I was doing it to receive a steady cheque straight out of school.

What was your role at Disney?

Painting backgrounds. With watercolours, you'd get the description and direction and produce the backdrop for the animation.

Any particular films you were walking on?

There was a *101 Dalmatians* TV series. At MTV I did this show called *Daria*, which was kind've short lived, for that I was just doing cell painting. The main thing I spent time working on was this show called *Doug*. It was good, I was painting and getting paid well.

Who's your favourite Disney Princess?

I guess Snow White's the one. Like, why is she with those dwarves all the time? There's something intriguing about that.

Why did you end up leaving that world?

Actually in '98, I won an artist grant from Pernod liquor. I'd actually already moved away from that world and was freelance directing children's books. Then when I received the grant it seemed like a tonne of money back then, it was ten grand, and it gave me the opportunity to move on. Then I started to develop the painting, and travelled to Tokyo in '97 and started working with Hectic, then in 98/99 started working with Jun (Takahashi) and Undercover.

When did you realise that you could make money out of the painting?

It just happened little by little. It's crazy now thinking about it and now it's been pretty full-on the last few years

When did it all start stepping up a gear?

After 9/11, it went weird and quiet a little but after that I started getting a lot of commissions from Nigo, and started designing for A Bathing Ape. I think those designs started to put it out there a lot.

When did you first meet Nigo?

In '98, I met him through a mutual friend of ours, Yoppi, who has a company called Hectic, and it was through him that I also met Jun, Hikaru (Iwanaga, from Bounty Hunter), Shinsuke (Takizawa) and the Neighborhood guys, basically everybody. It was much smaller back then and a tight group of friends.

Is it through those connections that the KAWS toys came about?

Yeah, through Hikaru from Bounty Hunter, he asked me if I wanted to do them, and I just said, 'For sure!' It wasn't anything I'd thought about doing, but yeah great. I'd always loved sculpture when I was in high school and I always loved the Pop Art guys, but sculpture always seemed like an impossible thing to do. Then the opportunity came along. I was really bad at sculpture at school, and I always thought I'd have to wait till much later life before I could do that, and suddenly I had this access. We did the first one and it went really well.

The 3D figures you're creating keep getting bigger, how big do you want them to get?

Ummm - as big as buildings! Honestly. The one in the OriginalFake store is three metres high. There are plans in the mental pipeline that I'd like to fulfill definitely.

What else do you have planned for the future?

I've been working really hard these last few years trying to set up a foundation. As I get older I can be more and more selective. I just want to be stable. I always want to be able to afford a decent studio to work in. I definitely want to do the things I'm doing on a bigger scale. I've just got to figure out how to do that. They don't even necessarily have to be seen in a gallery, I honestly just want to make paintings and have people see them. That's the great thing about graffiti, you just sidestep all the red tape and just do it.

Did you ever think you'd be making big money through your art?

It's been strange, it's not like I make a tonne of money. Like when you grow up, you have bad grades and you think you're fucked, and you think that doctorate thing is not really going to work out. And then if you're lucky, you realise you can make a living out of what you're doing, and the cherry on top, is that you can survive.

So where's the most unusual place one of your pieces has ended up?

One of the first shelters I did with Barry McGee we left on the street in San Francisco, and it turned up at a Philips (de Pury) auction. It was fun; I thought it ended up in the trash. I only found out because I found out who bought it - it was Murakami! So that was awesome.

Do you prefer your work to exist in a public space or in an art gallery?

Honestly, I like both worlds. I mean if I were only making paintings I wouldn't have had a fraction of the experiences that I've had, you know.

What else are you working on at the moment?

I'm working on a shoe with Marc Jacobs. It's not out yet, but it'll be a leather woman's shoe with both our names on the label. I don't want to spoil the surprise. I like being put out of my element and working on different things with other people, which for those who know my past work might not make a connection to. It's interesting for me to work with different people and see what their take is on things or how they view my work.

Who else would you like to collaborate with?

Everything this far has been quite natural. I've met this person through this person, and it seems great, let's do it, and it'll be fun. You know I like to meet someone on the train and then have it stem from there.

What's the whole concept behind OriginalFake and the store in Tokyo?

I'd been working with Medicom for a few years, and we started work on a few projects and the idea of a store came up. I thought it would be cool if we did it with Masamichi Katayama from Wonderwall who designs all the BAPE stores. It all seemed like perfect timing since they'd just finished work with A Bathing Ape and wanted to do something independent of that.

Did you always want your own brand?

Not necessarily my own thing, but a platform that I could also bring other artists into, and do projects with.

Who are you currently working with?

I've always liked working with other people. I saw OriginalFake as potentially being an umbrella that I could use to introduce people into Tokyo. It let me do things, which without an outlet I couldn't necessarily do, and now I know there is a place to sell it once it's made.

So you have some big shows coming up soon?

In September I'm doing a show in Miami, and then New York.

Showing all new work?

It's all new work.

These are your first big exhibitions, what are you showing?

Painting and sculpture. I mean I've been painting for so long, but it's all been commissioned work, so unless you go to Pharrell or Nigo's house, you're probably not going to see it! So it's nice to get it out there.

So Nigo and Pharrell are two of your biggest collectors?

Yeaah. Ha! I mean Nigo has been there since the beginning. And there was a period there where he... really... Bought! You could say he's a serial collector. For me it's great, because he's living with the work. When I go to his house, I see it and I know it's there with him, so it's ideal. It's better than it going into storage. I'm fortunate that it goes to people like Nigo, and it's not necessarily people buying it as an investment. Pharrell has it all in his house in Miami. It's weird because I feel like my paintings are my kids, and they live in a better house than I do. It's like I sent them to a really good school!

What's your strangest habit?

I don't think any of my habits are really that strange. I drink tea non-stop. I drink tonnes of tea. I like the mellow consistent all-day replenishment of tea.

What music are you into right now?

Gnarls Barkley. I've listening to a bit of A Tribe Called Quest recently. I'm doing some work with Q-Tip that got me back into the old stuff. He's working on a new album, and I'm working on some artwork with him.

How do you feel about people having KAWS tattoos?

It's strange... yeah, it's strange. I mean it's cool that someone would want to do that.

Would you get one?

A KAWS tattoo? Me? No! I have enough of myself around me all day; I don't need it on my skin as well. And I'd only be trying to change it all the time, and I'd just end up a black ink thing after a few years.

Who's your muse?

The Companion. The figure. Not my life companion. He pretty much has the final say in everything I do.

Do your characters talk to you?

Yeah, they all talk to me. And it's really annoying. They all exist in this grim little way. I don't know if they each have a personality, but the Companion and the Accomplice are definitely key... people ☹️

original-fake.com