

MEMOIR

Reaching for the Stars

When the pandemic hit, a Port Perry inn and café owner tried to find a way to keep the lights on. Then she got a call that changed everything

BY CHRISTY STONE-CURRY

I REMEMBER THE DAY I realized how serious this pandemic was going to be. It was March 12, 2020, and Doug Ford was on the news talking about closing schools and restaurants. That mattered a lot for me. I own and run a restaurant and inn in Port Perry. St. Patrick's Day was around the corner, and I'd just ordered \$5,000 worth of food.

My husband, eight-year-old son and I live upstairs, so we closed the inn, even though we weren't required to. My family owns the building—my grandfather purchased three adjoining Victorian structures back in 1972—so thankfully there was no rent to pay. But with the inn and restaurant shut down, we had no revenue coming in, except from the tax company that rented out commercial space from us.

During that first year, we'd occasionally be allowed to open for indoor dining, and then ordered to close again, over and over. I came up with creative ways to make money, like offering pop-up grocery days. I'd sell things that were scarce at the time, like flour, yeast or bacon. That allowed me to keep a few members of my staff of 15 sporadically employed. But I was scared—no one really knew what was going to happen next, and my family's livelihood hung in the balance.

Then, in October 2020, I got a phone call that changed everything. It was a producer for a new Amazon show called *Reacher*, based on the novels by Lee Child. This was the latest adaptation of the blockbuster *Jack Reacher* series, which had previously been made into films starring Tom Cruise. As location scouts searched for quaint venues that could double as small-town Georgia for the show's first season, they found their way to Port Perry. They wanted to use the building that housed our café and inn as a home base for two days. I was a little freaked out by Covid, but I needed the money, so I said yes.

It wasn't the first time we'd had productions come through. In 2005, the producers of *The West Wing* asked us to cater a shoot for one episode. Over the years, a few more celebrities came through, including Gene Hackman and Ray Romano for the 2004 film *Welcome to Mooseport*. I was proud that my restaurant could bring in people from all over, but I didn't know at the time just how important our connections to the production world would become.

The *Reacher* crew arrived later that month. They used the restaurant to feed crew members while shooting brief footage of Alan Ritchson, the show's star, running through the streets. They came and went in a hurricane of equipment and personnel. Then, the following spring, I got another call—they hadn't

gotten the shot they needed, so they came back for a reshoot. Both visits were fun and exciting for our town, and they brought in much-needed money.

Months later, *Reacher* wanted to use my building for a fight scene. This time, they had to get a film permit from the town. There would be more people, and they would be building a set as well as a staging ground. The morning the shoot began, my husband came to ask me what the hell was going on outside. In my excitement, I had neglected to tell him the exact day that the crew would be arriving.

The block was carpeted with gear and hundreds of people. My little parking lot was host to a generator and tents crammed with cast and crew members. There was a private chef and people lounging in lawn chairs, dressed for cold weather. It was June. Inside, a group of workers was unplugging all of my appliances and repainting my walls. I bumped into a camera operator who sent me to a Covid-screening trailer where a man was handing out wristbands to those who'd been cleared. The screener ran out of wristbands—he distributed 300 that day.

I parked myself on a bench across the street and watched the production for most of the day. The crew made my restaurant look beautiful—all white tablecloths and Southern polish. Alan Ritchson came through my front doors over and over again, sometimes covered in fake blood. Between scenes, I snuck in to take pictures and got one with Alan. He invited me to Orangeville, where they were shooting the next day, but I assumed he was just being polite. Afterwards, a crew member told me he was totally sincere, and I wish I'd taken Alan up on it.

When they left, they put my Piano Café signage (which had briefly been replaced with a sign for JJ's Ale House) back up and repainted my walls to their original colour. They left the place in better shape than they found it.

The last couple of years have been hell on the restaurant industry. We were lucky to have avoided the worst of it. We were allowed to open the inn after the initial panic subsided, and that helped sustain us. But it was the unexpected income from the shoots that really gave us the ability to weather the pandemic. We're open at full capacity again, and we get customers coming in from all over who saw our building on *Reacher* and want to see where the fight scene was shot.



Alan Ritchson, a.k.a. Jack Reacher, walked in covered with fake blood

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