

The Body Double

“I get the feeling you don’t believe me,” I said as I grabbed a stick and stirred the dying fire. I looked past its struggling flames to the bearded man wearing a Lakers jersey and a painter’s cap.

“What makes you think that?” he said. He looked around the circle at the others. “Hey, I mean, don’t we all believe her story? She says she was the body double for Judy Garland – what’s not to believe?”

“Actually, I meant ‘Stand-in.’ I said. “I mean, I was a body double for her a couple of times, but mostly I was her ‘Stand in’.”

“Right, stand-in.” He rolled his eyes, looked over at Crazy Jane and shook his head. “God knows, she’s old enough.” Then he looked back over at me. “So... when can we expect the invasion of flying monkeys?”

“Well, that certainly shows you weren’t listening.” I said. I straightened up and glared at his shifty eyes. “Everyone knows Caren Marsh-Doll was her stand-in for *The Wizard of Oz!* I was her stand-in for her later roles: *The Pirate*, *Summer Stock*, *Easter Parade*, and *A Star is Born.*”

The man fell back onto the ground, and started laughing hysterically while beating his hand against one of the pillars holding up the bridge. “Right! Right!” he said when his laughter abated enough to get out the words. “And now you’re

slummin' with all of your other famous friends livin' under the frickin' Burnside Bridge!"

"I believe her." The words had quietly left the mouth of an older man who sat partially hidden in the shadow cast by the pillar. I had seen him before. He was always grizzly, but the beard never seemed long. His face appeared perpetually sad, but kind.

"Really?" the Lakers guy said incredulously.

"I believe her, too," said Crazy Jane. "I went to Julliard and I'm here with you. I was good, too. Not playing for any of you street trash, but I was good. Played the viola until I broke the strings—"

"God, that was a frickin' movie! *The Soloist*. And it was a black dude. If you're goin' to lie—"

Crazy Jane hugged herself tightly and rocked violently back and forth.

"Not lying! Not lying! Not lying!"

"Apologize." The directive came from the man in the shadows. He voiced the word respectfully, but with the authority of one used to being listened to.

"Hell, I should apologize for tellin' the truth to a crazy bag lady?"

"Come on, Cole, you know you should."

"Alright, alright. Sorry," the guy I now knew as Cole said. "Hell, you're not any more crazy than the rest of us. You say you went to Julliard, I guess you went to Julliard."

Crazy Jane stopped rocking.

“And I shot Osama bin Laden.” This revelation came from a young man with broken glasses, wearing an army fatigue shirt, as well as the baggy pants so popular with the young. “Shot him right between the eyes, and now all of them radical Muslims are out to get me. The gova’ment won’t protect me, neither – I know too much about what’s really goin’ on, an’ they would just as soon have me dead, too. Got all of the CIA out lookin’ for me. Every building in Portland is bugged. That’s why I’m out here on the street.”

Cole shook his head. “Really, Snake?”

“Hey, mark my words, one day you’re goin’ to find me dead out in the street somewhere, and you’ll know it was the CIA.”

“I believe you about the buildings,” said Crazy Jane. “I stay out of most buildings. Sometimes, though, I think they are watching me when I do my business in the street.”

“Sick bastards.” said the man who called himself the Snake.

“Well, all of you have inspired me to tell my story,” said Cole. He stood up. “You see, my real name isn’t Cole. It’s BILLY FUCKIN’ IDOL! Woo-hoo!” Then he began pretending he was playing a vertically-oriented air guitar, which he stroked like a giant erection coming out between his legs. “It’s a nice day for a white wed-ding--”

“Okay, I’m out of here,” I said, standing up. Admittedly, the move would have been more dramatic at a younger age, but at 90 I no longer got up quickly from sitting on a city street. “I am a lady of sophistication, and I do not have to tolerate such language and vulgarity.”

“Oh, give me a break!” said Cole.

“Come on, stay,” said the man in the shadows. “Hey, we’re all out in the street. We have to tolerate stuff from each other. That’s just Cole’s way.”

“Hell, yes,” said Cole, sitting down again as he spoke. “Don’t be such a priss. Besides, that’s the way he really talks. I saw a concert the old dude played at Riverfront Park. Every time he talked about himself, he said ‘Billy Fuckin’ Idol’.”

“Stop saying that or I will leave!” I know a 90-year old woman waving a fist is not really intimidating, but I did it anyway, just to drive my point home. “Portland is a big enough city that there are other places to go.”

“Stay,” said the Snake.

“Stay, stay, stay--” said Crazy Jane as she started rocking back and forth once again.

“Tell us about Judy Garland and being her body double,” said the man in the shadows.

I eased myself back down on the ground.

“I should tell you that I really loved Judy Garland,” I said. “She had elegance, even though she hardly saw it in herself. She saw herself as a rather plain girl in a world of glamour. Like I said I was not usually her ‘body double’. That term is only used if you take the actress’ place to dance or do something dangerous. Or today, to do a nude scene, but they didn’t do that sort of thing then. People had class.”

I looked over at Cole, but he ignored my glare.

“Anyway, Judy could really dance, so I rarely danced for her. Although I could have. I was quite a dancer in those days. Danced with Fred Astaire once, for *Easter Parade*, although it didn’t make it past the cutting floor. And I did dance for Judy a time or two in a couple of her other movies – *Summer Stock*, *A Star is Born* . She was having her troubles. Well, she was depressed a lot. Mostly, though, I served as a stand-in. I took her place when they were setting the lights for a scene. I was good for that, because I was her height, weight and approximate skin color.”

“Ever do it with Gene Kelly?” Crazy Jane asked.

“What? You mean, dance?”

“I sure would have done it with Gene Kelly.”

I ignored her. “Stood in for Judy Garland a few times as a mother, too. I couldn’t count the number of times I held Liza Minnelli on my lap. Such a cute little child.”

“I would have done it with Liza Minnelli,” said Cole.

My jaw stiffened, and reconsidered whether to say any more.

“So, what happened?”

I looked over toward the man in the shadows. While I still could not see much of his face, his question came to me gently and with a tender sympathy.

“Well, they paid stand-ins okay, but they didn’t give us much of anything in the way of health insurance. So, of course, my husband got cancer. He had been working as a grip, and didn’t have insurance either. I had a little saved up,

but it was quickly gone. Couldn't work much because I had to look after him. By the time he died, there was no more money."

Colored lights flashed from behind me. I turned around to see the source.

"Talkin' about getting thrown out, here we go." Cole stood up even as he spoke. The Snake got up and ran. Crazy Jane grabbed her shopping cart full of belongings and followed him.

"My friends and I aren't harming anyone, officer," I said. "We're just sharing stories."

"Doesn't matter, Sweetheart," the officer said while strolling up beside us. "You can't be doing it here. Sorry, but it's the law. And you can't be lighting fires like this either."

No sooner had he said this than his partner came out of the car with a fire extinguisher and sprayed it on our fire. Smoke, soot and chemical fumes billowed up into my eyes and I started choking.

The first officer walked over close to me. "Are you okay? Pardon me, but aren't you a little old to be out on the street? Why don't you let me take you to a shelter?"

He put his hand on my shoulder and I jerked away.

"I'm okay," I said. "But no shelters. I don't trust shelters. I'll go. You don't need to take me anywhere. I'll go. Okay?"

"That's fine, that's fine," said the officer. "I'm not going to hurt you. I haven't seen you on the street before, though. Are you new around here?"

I looked into his eyes. They looked sincere.

“Yes, well, I am new to these streets. I lived for a while in an apartment over on Yamhill, until they threw me out. Before that I was down in Los Angeles.”

“LA, huh? I was raised there. What’s your name, Sweetheart?”

What did he want with my name?

“You must be new on these streets also, officer.” The words came from the man who had been in the shadows, but who now strolled up beside me. He was about six feet tall, a foot taller than I am, and he had salt and pepper stubble on his face. Still, his clothes seemed clean and well-kept. He was the only one of the others who had remained. “Because if you had been here long you would know that sharing one’s real name is a lot to ask from someone living on the street.”

The officer nodded. “And you, if you won’t give your name either, at least how do you identify yourself?”

“They call me the Peacemaker.”

“‘The Peacemaker’, huh? Well, I’m a peacekeeper, so we’re kind of related in our work, and I’ve got to ask you to warn your friend here that these streets are a dangerous place for an old woman at night, okay?”

“I’ll do that.”

“I’ve been taking care of myself for forty-two years, ever since my husband died,” I said, without even so much as raising my voice. “I can take care of myself now, too.”

“She used to be a body double for Judy Garland,” the Peacemaker said.

“Well, I mostly was just her stand-in.”

“Really?”

He didn’t believe me.

“Well, I don’t know a lot about Judy Garland, other than she supposedly took her own life,” said the officer. “But I’m glad you have decided not to follow in her footsteps in that regard, and trust you won’t expose yourself to needless dangers on our streets.”

“I’m not crazy!” I said.

“I’m sure you’re not. And now my partner and I have to get back to our rounds,” he said. “So you two need to move along. Please don’t let us find you starting any more fires on the street.”

“You won’t, officer,” said the Peacemaker.

The officer joined his partner in the squad car, which pulled back into the street.

“You don’t have to take care of me!” I said to the Peacemaker. “I am neither a child, nor a senile old woman!”

The Peacemaker shrugged. “Have you met my friend, MAX?”

I started picking up my things, which consisted of a purse and a backpack, both filled with my most essential items. “No, I have not had the pleasure. But whoever he is, Max does not need to take care of me either.”

“MAX is the Metropolitan Area Xpress – the light rail.”

“Oh, of course. I’ve heard of that. But I’ve been doing everything downtown. I don’t need to go anywhere else, so—”

“Getting out of downtown is not the point,” he said with a gentle smile. “You can travel on MAX and sleep in the seats all night, and no one will bother you. So, if you would allow me to buy you an all-day pass—”

“Oh. Well, that would be nice, I guess. But you do not have to pay my way. I have a little.”

“But, I insist,” the Peacemaker said. “I have actually seen *Summer Stock*, and enjoyed it immensely. You can consider it a token of my appreciation for your role in making that movie happen.”

It was a gentlemanly thing to do. I accepted.

We found seats facing each other, so both of us could stretch out. It helped, of course, that hardly anyone else rode the train at that hour. I put my backpack next to me and looked out the window. I had forgotten the joy of going somewhere, even though I knew we would be covering the same parts of the Portland metropolitan area over and over that night. I could see all of the hundreds of cars passing by on the highway, each one going somewhere important, and I knew they could look out their windows and see the train, and they could believe we were all going somewhere important as well. I liked thinking that.

I looked at the Peacemaker. “You know, you were the first person since I came to Portland who believed my story. Thank you.”

He smiled at me and gave me a little nod.

“And I think because you believed my story, the others around the campfire believed it too, at least a little.”

“I think they did,” he said. “I think they really did.”

I glanced out the window again. “I mean, that’s not to say that even you might have doubted it a little.”

“Everyone on the street has fallen from something a little higher,” he said. “That’s what I think. So I believe people’s stories, until they tell me differently.”

“Even Crazy Jane’s? I mean, I have to admit I had a little trouble with that one myself. And the Snake – you didn’t believe him, did you?”

The Peacemaker smiled. “Well, believing is what I do. But it is true that I do not always do it perfectly.”

“As I suspected.”

His smile broadened even more. “But I tell you what, I do believe the spirit of his story. I believe he served our country, did some killing that made him fearful of retribution, and does not trust the government to do right by him.”

“That describes every veteran on the streets. And Crazy Jane?”

He shrugged. “Have you ever eaten over at First Baptist Church’s free kitchen?”

I nodded.

“Next time you eat over there, duck into that ornate reception hall they have by their sanctuary and listen. After you do that, we can talk again.”

The Peacemaker pulled off his coat, put it on the chair arm for a pillow, and curled up as best as he could on the short bench seat. I followed suit, but even as short as I am, I had to squeeze into the seat. As I started to settle in, a question

eased its way into my mind. I nudged the Peacemaker with my foot, and his eyes opened.

“So, what did you fall from?”

He looked at me for a moment. “What?”

“You said that everyone on the street has fallen from something a little higher. What did you fall from?”

He closed his eyes again. “That conversation is for another day.”

Standing in a food line is not one of my favorite experiences. The people driving by are looking at you, judging you. They wonder why you cannot make it on your own, and when they ask themselves why, they figure it's drugs or alcohol. I haven't had a drop of alcohol since my wedding in 1940, and the only drug I have ever taken **was** the one the doctor gave me when my husband died in 1969. It didn't take away the pain.

The other thing about standing in line is that it feels so much more competitive than I want to feel. You are hungry, and every person ahead of you is an obstacle rather than a person. I fight that feeling, but it's still there.

Inside the church the aromas coming from the hot food so overwhelmed my senses that I almost forgot the other reason I came. Checking out what that ornate reception hall might reveal just didn't seem like a very pressing matter while relishing seeing servers heap meatloaf, green peas and real mashed potatoes onto my plate. I didn't rush through the experience of eating this food, though, since each bite not only filled the emptiness in my stomach, but also a certain

emptiness in my memory – my memory of when food brought primarily comfort rather than just sustenance, and served as a gathering mechanism to bring together family and friends. I hungered for those times, but for some reason I had been having trouble of late remembering many of them specifically. Now, however, homemade mashed potatoes and green peas brought back a picture of my mother's face. Meatloaf, my husband's favorite, resurrected his once-again healthy presence beside me.

Only when the last white fluff of mashed potatoes was gone from my plate did I hear it. A soft, muffled melody coming from somewhere within the church.

I walked through a set of doors, and past a desk where a young woman sat. She motioned for me to stop.

“The music! I just want to--”

She waved me on with the smile of an aficionado.

At the top of the stairs the music pulled me down a hallway into what I knew must be the reception hall the Peacemaker had spoken about. Rich walnut paneling flanked stained-glass renderings of biblical figures, and elegantly-framed portraits of what I assumed were former pastors. Overhead arched a domed ceiling featuring sky lights and more stained glass. In the center of it all stood a mahogany grand piano, and on the bench of that piano sat Crazy Jane.

She played what I recognized as Chopin's Nocturne in B-flat minor, #9, and she played flawlessly.

I marveled at how the person at the piano bench seemed like someone else entirely than the frightened, disoriented person whom I had sat beside on the

street. Her fingers flowed across the keyboard, and her body swayed with power as the music seemingly infused her battered soul.

I walked up closer, not wanting to disturb or embarrass her at the prospect of an audience, and yet something within me couldn't keep quiet.

"I didn't believe you," I whispered, but within her range of hearing.

She looked back and smiled. She did not respond verbally, but her music transitioned effortlessly into the more recent classic which she knew would delight me, *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*. No, I had never danced it in performance, nor was I a stand-in during the movie from which it had come, but ever since I had met Judy Garland it had spoken to my imagination. Now, once again the piece spoke to my heart. In my mind's eye I could see that rainbow which had been missing from my life; and perhaps my mind played tricks on me, but I could also envision my younger self in a gingham dress, dancing along a yellow brick road.

I lost myself in a dream.

"Was it all a dream?" I asked when Crazy Jane finished playing. She cocked her head like a confused puppy. "When I was a child my mother always used to say I had an imagination like no child she had ever known," I said. "And of late my imagination is all I have had. I don't know. You know what they say about old people. I have these memories, but were they ever any more real than a yellow brick road or flying monkeys?"

Crazy Jane turned to her piano keys and started playing again. This time the melody which came spoke to my whole body. "Get Happy" from *Summer*

The Body Double

Stock. It was one my clearest memories, dancing to that song, but what amazed and delighted me was not how my mind remembered it, but how my body did as well.

“*Sing Hallelujah! Come on, get happy!*” The words danced through my mind as my 90-year old feet began to tap, and my arthritic body began to sway and twirl as if I were once again in my late 20’s. I shuffled under a church dome to music about a judgment day, and strutted past stained glass with words singing in my mind about taking the Lord’s hand. My body became the song, and my mind just watched. Still, the watching was pure pleasure, as if after a whole lifetime I returned to my adolescence, rediscovering orgasm. My heart raced, but in an excited, not a frightening way; and all the time I had a picture in my mind of Gene Kelly in the wings, watching me.

The music so took hold of my spirit that I only slowly realized that Crazy Jane had stopped playing. The clapping in the wings alerted me.

From the hallway I had come down earlier emerged a man with salt and pepper stubble, applauding with enthusiasm. “Bravo! Bravo!” said the Peacemaker.

I looked over at Crazy Jane, who rocked back and forth on the piano bench.

“I missed that note,” she said. “I missed it. I’m no good. No good. I missed it. I never should have tried that song. Never should have tried. Never should have tried.”

“What note?” I said. “You were great!”

“She won’t hear you,” said the Peacemaker. “Right now, the only voices she can hear are in her mind.”

“But she played so well! Can’t she see that?”

“No. Seeing it would be scary for her.”

“Why?”

The Peacemaker shrugged.

“You told me to come here, and I found... maybe she was telling the truth. But why did she say she played a viola?”

“Perhaps she did. I know she played the flute and the violin. Anyway, she can’t carry a piano around on the street. And she had seen *The Soloist*. I managed to score a couple of tickets, and I gave one to her.”

“I danced!” I said, my mind not letting me flee too far from the moment.

“I saw!”

“I didn’t even know I could do that anymore.”

“Well, your body apparently did.”

I smiled as the memory refreshed itself. Then I looked back over at the Peacemaker. “You said we would talk later about what you had fallen from.”

He put his hands in his pockets and looked down at the floor, but before he did I saw escape in his eyes.

“Of course, maybe this still isn’t the right time,” I whispered.

He stood there for a moment, shaking his head. Then he looked up at me and smiled himself. “I fell from what was perhaps the greatest height of all.”

“You are an angel, fallen from heaven?”

The Body Double

He shook his head. "I was a teacher."

It rained all that night, but the next morning the sun broke through, and that meant I awoke to the sound of birds singing, and a rainbow lifted over Portland. All that day I sat and imagined yellow brick roads for people on the streets of my city.

I never did find the Peacemaker again. Three nights after he had seen me dance, the police officer who had ordered us to disperse from under the bridge, found him at the base of that same bridge, dead.

I never learned how he had fallen from being a teacher, or what kind of teacher he had been. I didn't need to know. Mostly, I just wished I could have let him know he really hadn't fallen so far.