

The Stand-In

The phone rang and she shouted from the basement stairwell, “I’ll get it!” But her mother, either not hearing or ignoring her daughter, picked up the phone. Now Marie was thinking, if she had reached the phone first, she could have preempted the whole conversation right then and there: *Oh. Sorry, but I’ll be in Rio that week. Hey, maybe I’ll see you at the 20-year reunion, huh? Well, bye now!*

She would have been lying of course, but it would have been a white lie, harmful to no one, yet guaranteed to fuel gossip. And more importantly, it would spare everyone the blunt truth: she didn’t want to feign interest in people she’d never felt close to and hadn’t seen in five years.

So when Brenda Barclay asked how she could reach Marie to invite her to their 15-year high school reunion, her mother said that Marie was living back at home again.

“Oh isn’t that interesting?” Brenda said. “Well! She’ll be easy to reach then, won’t she?”

Five years had passed since Marie went to her last high school reunion. She didn’t feel like going back then either but a friend had talked her into it. Afterward, her mother had asked if she’d had a good time. “High school reunions are just pissing contests,” she’d answered, “a so-called party where every contestant is measured one against another.”

Her mother made the face she always made when Marie went on like that, like she had just bit into something rotten.

“The number of tokens displayed—” Marie continued, “cars, designer clothes, jewelry, trophy spouse, adorable children, youthful looks—tags everyone there as Winner, Loser, or Also Ran.”

Her mother had turned away, muttering the word, “negative,” her lip trembling like a scolded child’s.

So this time, five years later, Marie kept her mouth shut, merely shrugged when her mother asked, “Don’t you want to see your old friends? Don’t you wonder what they’re up to?”

On a good day, Marie might admit that a high school reunion could be more than a pissing contest. But on a bad day that’s how she felt.

Her mother thought that Marie should try to put the bad days behind her.

Anyone who had seen her perform agreed: the girl had talent. Her instructors at the Institute of Performing Arts saw real promise. She had poise, grace and stamina. She was gifted with natural rhythm, was a quick study with the classic steps, and demonstrated what one choreographer called “that unteachable instinct for improvisation.”

In the middle of her fourth year, a sport utility vehicle clipped her bicycle and sent her rocketing backwards into a mail box. She spent the next nine months in a body cast. Despite a regimen of physiotherapy she never recovered full range-of-motion.

Eventually, she had to face the fact that she would never dance the way she did before the accident. Nevertheless, she managed to find a job teaching Modern Dance at Frobisher, a private girls’ academy. But after a series of budget cuts she was let go (even though she learned later that a younger, more elastic instructor was hired in her place).

Disheartened, she set off for Europe, seeking a change in perspective. In Seville she met a veterinarian named Guillermo. Six weeks later they were living together, five weeks after that she was pregnant. Then their baby, Nicolette, at eighteen months of age, died in her crib. Guillermo blamed Marie, said that “a real mother would have known something was wrong and could have prevented it.” She charged out of their *pied a terre* and booked a flight home to Baltimore.

It was two-and-a-half years before she found a full-time job, this time as a dance instructor at

an Arthur Murray studio. Day after day a parade of lonesome bachelors queued up as if to squeeze the warmth from her bosom into their frostbitten hearts. Night after night she felt the absence of a true partner all the more sharply as she turned down her clumsy students' desperate invitations. Eventually, this led to her dismissal because, as her employer informed her, he had received one too many complaints that "Ms. LaLonde is stand-offish."

Then there was a brief stint teaching a dance therapy workshop at the Glen Burnie Home for Seniors. But watching bent, twisted cronies shuffling through slow-motion fox-trots gradually made her feel like a cold, damp fog had settled in her world with no prospect of clearing. After six months she left the nursing home job and took a part-time position at The Dance of Life, a sliver of a storefront in a suburban mall. There she sold dance outfits, ballet slippers, tap shoes, and found herself dwelling far too often on Thoreau's line, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation."

One evening a woman came into The Dance of Life with her preschool-age daughter. After chatting for a while the woman asked, "Pardon me, but did you ever dance with The Mobius Troupe?"

Marie was stunned. She had performed two summer seasons with the D.C. troupe but that was eleven years ago.

"No, not me," Marie denied it with a laugh, not knowing why.

"That's incredible," the woman said. "I know it was quite a while ago but I remember it so clearly because I had a front row seat and I was riveted by the whole performance. I couldn't take my eyes off the dancers, they really made quite an impression on me."

Marie smiled but let it go. She had only one thought: it had been an awfully long time since she'd really felt like dancing.

On the night of her 15-year high school reunion Marie stayed home. Instead of retreating to the privacy

of her own room she remained (peevisly?) in view of her mother all evening. Her mother accused her of being obstinate, said that she was “determined to be miserable.” But misery was precisely what Marie was trying to avoid. And step one in avoiding misery meant staying away from 80 people who were bound to dredge up every single point she was trying not to dwell on.

Two days after the reunion, her mother once again answered the phone before Marie could.

“It’s for you,” her mother said, “some guy named Vinnie, sounds like he’s from New York.”

Marie gave a cautious Hello, then was startled to hear the voice on the other end: Eric Onessian, McArthur Heights High, Class of ’85. Back then Eric was the guy nearly every girl at McArthur had a crush on. He was nicknamed ‘Vinnie’ because he looked like Vinnie Barbarino, the John Travolta character in *Welcome Back, Kotter*. Along with the TV show, Eric, aka Vinnie, grew more popular every year.

Many high school students search long and hard for an identity that fits. But for Eric, Vinnie Barbarino came to him. The first time he did his Vinnie impression it got a big laugh. It was such a kick making his classmates laugh that Eric began to pay much closer attention to Travolta’s speech patterns, gestures and mannerisms. The more Eric aped Vinnie, the better he got at it. His classmates ate it up. By the time he graduated, almost everyone in the entire school called him ‘Vinnie.’ Ask about Eric Onessian and the name might draw a blank.

“Sorry I missed you at the reunion,” Eric said. “How come you didn’t go?”

It was five years since Marie had spoken to Eric (at their 10-year reunion, in fact). “I had another commitment,” she said.

“That’s cool,” Eric replied. “It was all right seein’ a lot o’ them McArthyites. But I tell ya, a few of ’em are pretty friggin’ scary. Hey listen, I was wondering if we could get together for coffee, brunch, whatever.”

She'd forgotten that he sounded so . . . Brooklyn. He'd grown up in Anne Arundel County, Maryland, but over the years his Vinnie Barbarino shtick had become second nature. What could she say? Five years is a long time.

"Tell you the truth," he said, "I always enjoyed talkin' to yous, which I know is a weird thing to say after all this time but you always was a good listener. And there ain't that many good listeners out there, know what I'm sayin'?"

Marie had always liked Eric, though back in high school she had no illusions about going out with him. She was well-liked but quiet, too far in the background for a guy like Eric. No, a star like Travolta needed his Olivia Newton-John and Eric found her in Jennifer Colfax. Jennifer offered the total package: honey-blond hair (bangs and all), bright blue eyes, perky, dimpled smile. The bonus? She was front and center in the starting lineup of the Golden Cougars varsity cheer leading squad.

Marie and Eric were in several classes together, and both joined a number of the same extracurricular activities: Yearbook Staff, Photography Club, Drama Club, and of course, Dance Club. In their senior year The McArthur Heights Dance Club staged an ambitious production of *West Side Story*. Eric saw that Marie was a better (and less uptight) dancer than Mrs. Gordon, McArthur's regular dance teacher, so he asked Marie to help him with the tricky numbers. When they slow-danced together all their friends said that they looked like they were totally in love, just like Tony and Maria in *West Side Story*.

Jennifer had the cuter face, Eric felt, but Marie sure had the moves. Watching Jennifer tumble through her cheer leading cartwheels, he saw a stiff and mechanical routine. Watching Marie whirl across the stage, white dress swirling, flashing a smooth arc of muscled thigh—now *that* was moving!

They agreed to meet at a bistro in Fell's Point. When they found each other it was like a scene from a

too familiar movie: they actually said the same thing at the same time—*You look great!*—then laughed at the coincidence.

Yep, Eric still had it, the trademark dimpled chin, the steel blue eyes. The resemblance was uncanny. Seeking a table on the patio he kept getting double-takes. One guy started fumbling for his camera when Eric walked up to him and said, “Relax, I get it all the time. But lemme tell ya, if I was John Travolta I wouldn’t be eatin’ in this dive!” He high-fived the guy then escorted Marie to their table.

After ordering two *espressos*, he said, “So. . . You’ll never guess what I’m doing these days,” and launched into his story. He’d been waiting tables at a restaurant in Miami when an agent noticed him. The guy interviewed him on the spot, invited him to a screen test, flew him out to Hollywood, and offered him a contract, Eric said, “that I couldn’t refuse” to work as one of John Travolta’s stand-ins. He summed up the whole unlikely coincidence as Vincent Vega, Travolta’s character in *Pulp Fiction* might: “Totally unbefuckin’lievable!”

“So it looks like all those Vinnie Barbarino impressions paid off.” Marie said.

“Yeah, it paid off. I make 10 k a month, all my travel expenses are paid for, plus I get to hang out with all these really cool people.”

She wondered why, after all this time, he was telling her this: to see if she would fall for the biggest bullshit story in the world, or to rub her face in his outrageous good luck?

“But,” he said, suddenly assuming a somber face, “I know it can’t last. Sure, ten-grand a month is sweet now, but I have to ask myself, Where am I when all this is over?”

“A lot better off than you would be waiting tables,” Marie said.

He swallowed a hiccup, then said, “Yeah, but I keep thinkin,’ what is it exactly that I do? I get timed walking in and out of doors while a camera’s rolling. I sit behind the wheel of a car and someone

holds a light meter up to my face. I mean, these are not exactly skills that make for a killer resumé, you know what I'm sayin'?"

"Eric, listen: I know lots of people with killer resúmes, and believe me, they're not making ten-thousand dollars a month."

He frowned, then said, "What about you? You stuck with it and got your degree. You're prob'ly doing OK for yourself, am I right?"

"I'm doing OK. But everyone feels like they could be doing better. I mean, Bill Gates probably worries that he should be doing better too."

"But at least you've worked to get where you are, right? I mean, you don't get paid just for lookin' like somebody famous, am I right?"

"I'm also not making ten-thousand dollars a month or partying in Tahoe with Bruce and Demi."

"Yeah, but at least you're doing what you set out to do—sorry, what *are* you doing, anyway?"

"Well, I'm still involved in dance, though not so actively as a performer these days."

"See? There you go. Me? I'm a freakin' mannequin. The day Travolta can't draw box office, I'm history."

She was overcome with the urge to scream, *You make ten-thousand dollars a month for mugging with a bunch of coke-snorting narcissists and all you can do is whine about it? You think you got worries? I can tell you about worries, pretty boy!* But she didn't want to lose her cool. She didn't want to expose herself by parading tales of all her disappointments and setbacks.

"You know what I regret most?" He asked her.

He wasn't waiting for an answer, but she was pretty sure that she could trump any of his regrets.

"I should'a stayed in college and got a degree. 'Cause when this party's over I got squat to fall

back on.”

“You’ve got 10 k a month to fall back on. That’s more than a lot of us have. And you can buy a college degree anytime. If I were you I’d milk this thing for all it’s worth. If Travolta is still hot in twenty years you’ll be on Easy Street. If he fades in five you’ll still be better off than most if you manage your money intelligently.”

“Yeah?” He grinned, “you think?”

After finishing a second espresso, Eric checked his watch. “It’s a Rolex knock-off,” he admitted. “Course, Travolta has a real Rolex. A ton of ’em, prob’ly.”

Marie regarded him in the sunlight on the patio. It was spooky, his resemblance to Travolta. Not like Travolta in *Grease* anymore, but very much like Travolta in *The General’s Daughter*.

He signaled the waiter. “Hey listen Marie, this was really great. You always had a way of puttin’ things straight, cuttin’ through all the bullshit. I always appreciated that about you. That’s why I wanted to talk to you. It may sound crazy but I don’t know too many people that can tell the forest from the trees, know what I’m sayin’? Seems like everybody’s got their heads so far up their asses they don’t know where they’re at, let alone know how to give good advice.”

“I hear you,” she said, “I hear you.”

“Well,” he said, glancing at his fake Rolex again, “I got a plane to catch. Gotta be back in LA by six.”

He stood up and gave her a brotherly hug. “It was great seeing you again,” he said, then kissed both her cheeks.

“I’ll be back east in three months,” he said. “Let’s not let another five years slip by before we get together again.”

As he climbed into a cab she smiled and waved good-bye.

It was a beautiful Sunday: sunny, mild and breezy. She was in no hurry so she decided to stroll around Harborplace. A water taxi pulled quayside and sounded its air horn. Sea gulls were feasting on French fries thrown by laughing children. A little girl in her Sunday frippery balanced on her father's shoes while he held her hands and stepped in a slow-turning circle. The man crooned, *I could have danced all night, I could have danced all night*, sending his girl into a fit of giggles.

The girl's white dress made Marie think of the one she'd worn in her high school production of *West Side Story*. Could she remember the steps to those numbers? Could Eric? Maybe since then, Eric had only practiced Travolta's moves in *Grease* and *Saturday Night Fever*.

She pictured Eric alone in his room, standing before a full-length mirror, a videotape of *Saturday Night Fever* playing on the TV as he mimics Tony Manero. He stops the tape, hits the rewind button, replays the scene and studies himself in the mirror.

This makes her laugh out loud. The dancing father and daughter look at her. She wants them to know she's not daft, walking alone and laughing at nothing in particular. So she does a Julie Andrews curtsy and pirouettes, as if she'd been rehearsing this number for the past six months, and it all feels absolutely perfect when she surprises them—but even more so herself—as she whirls in a circle and also sings, “I could have danced all night, I could have danced all night.”

The little girl doesn't laugh like she did at her father's singing. She stares at Marie as though Julie Andrews herself has magically appeared right before her eyes.