

WELCOME TO PICKETWIRE

INSTALLMENT 6

By Tim Wintermute

AS SHE LIKES IT

It was a broad proscenium with an orchestra pit beyond the footlights followed by rows of plush, red upholstered seats. And above the main floor there was a balcony with more seats although less legroom. As far as Max was concerned The Tumbleweed Theater was as good a venue as anything on the “great white way” except that it was a couple of thousand miles off Broadway. Although the house lights were on, Max had arranged with Fred Binsdale to go to the lighting booth and turn them down and switch on a spotlight at his signal.

"It sure is different up here," Zelda said in a whisper.

She must be in awe, Max thought, which is exactly what he expected from someone who had never been on a stage before. Although each new member of the Bard Wired Theatre Company got a personal orientation from Max he had particularly been looking forward to this one since Zelda had never acted. Usually a new member had been in a school play or musical or some amateur theater group. They had no idea how bad they were and Max had to patiently listen as they recounted how they had honed their theatrical skills performing in My Fair Lady in a high school auditorium or Our Town at a Moose Lodge. That’s why it was a relief that Zelda, who had never performed before, was a clean slate rather than blackboard that needed erasing.

"It should," Max answered. "You're up here instead of out there."

"I've only been in this place once and that was to see a stupid movie. Where's the screen?"

"Above you?" Max pointed up. "It's lowered when there are films but otherwise it's stored up there. This was a theatre for the performing arts long before movies were shown. They had performances of operas, concerts, musicals, some vaudeville and, of course, melodramas."

"Mellow dramas? You mean everyone was stoned?"

Max gave a mildly condescending smile and explained. "No, melodramas not mellow... dramas. A melodrama is a play in which everything is exaggerated and there's plenty of slapstick. They were very popular a hundred years ago. Usually some dastardly villain with a name like Snidely Whiplash would kidnap a young girl with a name like Nell, and when she rejected his amorous advances he'd tie her to the railroad tracks. Then the good guy, who's a real super straight Dudley Doright type, would rescue her."

"Why?"

"Because if she wasn't rescued a train would run over her."

"I mean, why did she need to be rescued by some super straight jerk with a name like Dudley?"

"Because then Nell would fall in madly in love with Dudley and live happily ever after."

Sounds like something a guy would make up, especially the kinky, bondage stuff."

"Times were different then, Zelda."

"But not the male fantasies."

Changing the subject, Max pointed up. "The scenery is also hung up there so that it can be lowered and raised during a play. It's called the fly tower because the scenery flies up and down and the stagehands who pull it with ropes are called flymen." He pointed in front of the fly tower. "In front of that is the curtain and then going all the way around is the proscenium," Max continued pointing as his arm swung in a three hundred and sixty degree arc. As he did so right on cue Fred, hidden in the lighting booth at the back of the second balcony, dimmed the house lights and Max was suddenly lit up by a spotlight. "The proscenium is the frame within which the play is performed." Max walked boldly to the front of the stage with the spotlight following him and stopped and put his right hand palm up as if it was pressing against clear glass. And this is the fourth wall."

"I don't see any wall," Zelda said.

"Of course not, Zelda," Max replied, disappointed that she didn't seem to notice the dramatic change in lighting. "It's an invisible wall that stands between the actors on stage and the audience on the other side."

"So it's invisible because it doesn't really exist?"

"Oh," Max shook his head and gave her his best, bemused smile. He wanted to reach out and put his right hand gently on her left shoulder. That would have been a nice, dramatic touch. But Zelda being a teenage girl might get the wrong impression as to his intentions so he just waved toward the empty theatre and launched into the soliloquy that he gave to new members of the Company. "It exists, even though it's invisible. The people out there, on the other side, the audience can look through it but what they see and hear exists only behind this wall. And what we do on this stage, on this side of the wall," He pointed to the floor of the stage. "Is to create such a vivid world that while it exists they don't." He pointed, forcefully toward the seats now shrouded in darkness. "They will be so absorbed that they are unaware of anything else, including themselves. This world that we create on the stage becomes their world although they can only watch."

"Like all the world is a stage, right?"

"I bet you didn't know that you just quoted Shakespeare."

"You mean As You Like It, Act Two, Scene Seven?" Zelda replied as she walked quickly over to where he was standing. He was forced to move aside and she took his place in the spotlight. Then thrusting her right hand out, fist first, she pushed past the edge of the stage into the darkness.

"For someone who's never acted before you sure know your Shakespeare," Max said, unable to hide his surprise at her response as well as her actions.

"I just haven't acted on a stage," Zelda answered then, without waiting for a reply from Max, she asked. "Are you going to show me the rest of this place or should I just stay here in the spotlight?"

Max was actually relieved at her request to be shown the rest of the theater. He could escape the improvisation and return to his orientation script. As he gave Zelda the grand tour of the rest of the beautifully restored, historic Tumbleweed from the dressing rooms back stage to the lighting booth in the balcony his

confidence and command returned. He talked and she listened in silence. After they finished the tour in the ornate lobby, standing on the plush burgundy carpet, he asked if she had any questions.

"Only one - why is this play supposed to be a big secret?"

"Howdy just wants to keep people in suspense," he replied calmly although her question was both unexpected and, he had to admit, unsettling.

"Why?"

"He didn't say. He just made it a condition. Anyway, audiences like to be surprised."

"But I don't see why the actors need to be surprised. Why don't we get to see the last act now instead of waiting? You've seen it, right?"

"Of course." After all, if you couldn't tell a convincing lie then how the hell could you call yourself a good actor? The truth was, he was embarrassed that Howdy hadn't shared the entire play with him. He could have demanded it but Howdy had made it clear that he wasn't going to share it until they were ready to rehearse it. He told Max he should just think of it as just in time production. After all, he'd joked, what's the point in having it until you need it? What could Max do but trust him since he could hardly afford to cancel the production and lose his chance to show everyone that this wasn't some podunk playhouse.

"So why can't we see it as well?"

"Howdy doesn't want the cast to see it until they've rehearsed the previous acts. Until you're ready."

"What if I hate it. I don't want to be in a play I hate."

"Listen, Zelda, trust me, you'll be happy with the ending."

"Not if it's a sappy ending."

"Of course not." Max replied, doing everything he could to hide his exasperation. "Howdy doesn't write sappy stuff. In any case, as soon as we finish rehearsing the first two acts we'll rehearse the final act so you don't have long to wait. You know,

Shakespeare, himself, would still be working on a play even as the actors at the Globe were rehearsing it. Apparently they would often get their lines just before they were ready to be spoken."

"You're saying that the reason Howdy is called the Sagebrush Shakespeare is because he doesn't finish his plays before rehearsals start?"

"No, I'm not saying that. The play is finished. It's just that, well," Max paused at a loss for words. He felt he'd been ambushed. "Let's just say that ours is not to reason why," he said firmly.

"That's not Shakespeare."

"No I'm paraphrasing a line from Tennyson's poem Charge of the Light Brigade. You've never heard of it?"

"Just because I like Shakespeare doesn't mean I like everything that's written by old dead men."

"Tennyson is very famous as is his poem."

"Okay, so what happened to this charging light brigade?"

"Most of them were killed in the charge."

"Not exactly a happy ending."

"No, but..." Max stuttered as he searched for a comeback line.

"That's good because I hate happy endings," Zelda declared.

HARRY MEETS HOWDY...AGAIN

Harry settled onto a stool at the end of the bar. The MJ Bar was a long, narrow room with a bar that stretched almost its entire length so even though it was daylight at the front it was twilight where Harry sat. MJ's was the oldest bar in Picketwire and was the first tenant in the Wobbly Building. In fact, the first beers were being served before the last brick had been laid in 1916. Because MJ are the initials for Mother Jones some people call it "mothers". These are people who not

only know what MJ refers to but know what Mother Jones stood for and why the massive brick building with an imposing clock tower that is as straight as a plumb line was named the Wobbly because that was the nickname for the International Workers of the World. Harry and Howdy knew about MJ, Mother Jones and the Wobbly but that wasn't why they were meeting at "mothers". Howdy had suggested it because it was where they had last seen each other thirty years ago.

There was no way Harry could mistake Howdy when he appeared. His broad shoulders, narrow hips and a Stetson hat were a silhouette against the sunlight from the doorway. Without hesitation he followed the long bar into the darkness to where Harry was waiting. There was a slight hitch to his step as if the heel of his left cowboy boot was lower than the right although Harry knew that wasn't why. When he got there Harry stood up and they just looked at each other for a minute then shook hands.

"Hell, Harry, you haven't changed a bit," Howdy said, slapping Harry on the back as he sat on the stool next to him.

"Just less hair and more belly and, then, there's the glasses."

"But you've always worn glasses."

"Only now they're bifocals," Harry chuckled.

"You got me beat, Harry. I just have cheap ones that I buy at the drugstore, a half dozen at a time because I keep losing them. Got one right here in my pocket." He patted a bulge in the breast pocket of his jean jacket. "Can't read anything without them."

"There's nothing to read in here. They still don't have a menu but, then, they still don't serve any food except pretzels and potato chips and if you don't already know what you're going to drink before you come in then you've come to the wrong place."

"Speaking of which what do you want? I'm buying."

"That's mighty generous of you."

"I get a discount since I'm staying here."

"In the Wobbly?"

"Yep."

"You're a member of the Ludlow Lodge?"

Howdy nodded. "And membership has its privileges although being allowed to use the Lodge is the only one as far as I know."

"How did you get to be a member of the Lodge? It's not like you can just apply, you have to be invited. The whole process is a big secret."

"There's an exception for direct relatives of founding members and it turns out my grandfather was a founding member. I guess you could say I was grandfathered in. Since I didn't become a member through the regular process I don't get a voice in who is invited so I can't enlighten you on the process. Even if I could I couldn't because, as you pointed out, it's a big secret."

"I never knew your grandfather was part of the Ludlow strike."

"He survived the massacre. Picketwire was one of the few places that offered them sanctuary from Rockefeller's goons and the Colorado National Guard that was called out to break the strike. Sort of ironic since the Purgatory Penitentiary was right outside town and more than a few strikers who were caught ended up there. Anyway, he met my grandma who grew up in Picketwire and decided to settle here. He died young just a year after he married my grandmother. She was pregnant with my dad when he died. My grandmother remarried so he wasn't mentioned much: Sort of a rumor more than anything. My dad didn't even know anything about him and considered his stepfather his real father. He only found out about his real dad's involvement in Ludlow after he was invited to join the Lodge. It seems that my granddad was an organizer for a labor organization called the Knights of Equity. I've done some research and found out they took the name as a combination of the Knights of Labor, one of the country's earliest labor unions and the American Society of Equity, a group that organized workers in rural parts of the country. Both of those groups are long gone but the Knights of Equity's is still around. At least in Picketwire since the Ludlow Lodge turned out to not only be their first chapter, it's also their only one. Fortunately, membership is for life so when I showed up after three decades they welcomed me like I had come back from the dead."

“In a way you have come back from the dead. Its like the Odyssey, Odysseus leaves his home in Ithaca to go off to Troy and after ten years of war and another ten years he returns home but by then everyone thinks he’s dead and they don’t recognize him so he’s a stranger.”

Howdy shook his head. “I’m no Odysseus even though I’ve encountered more than a few sirens. You know, Leo Tolstoy wrote that there were only two stories. In the first a man goes on a long journey and in the second a stranger comes to town. I guess me and Odysseus have that in common.” After sipping the beer he'd ordered he added. “But my stories are hardly Homeric epics.”

“Speaking of which, can you tell me what this play of yours is about exactly? Max Bergmann won’t tell anyone. He says it’s a secret”

Howdy nodded. "It is a secret but I can tell you that it’s about history."

"You mean something that happened a long time ago?"

"I guess so since you and I are old farts."

"You don’t mean that I’m a character in it?"

"You are a character but don’t worry you’re not in my play,” Howdy chuckled. “No, it’s based on some things that happened here when you and I were younger – before I left town. In fact, I think you can help me with something."

"How can I help?"

"With how it ends.”

“But you already know that since you’ve written the thing.”

“Not the ending.”

"You're not finished?" Harry asked in astonishment. "Isn’t it supposed to open the end of the month at the Tumbleweed?"

"Yep, and rehearsals just started today. I guess you could say it’s my version of just in time production."

"You use that method to write your plays?"

"No, just when I don't know what the ending is."

"Why didn't you wait until you did know before setting an opening date?"

"Because then I would never know. Agreeing to the play forced my hand, so to speak. It made me come back and without being here I'll never know how to end it. So I had to do it this way."

"Sounds crazy to me."

"Probably because it is."

"And you think I can help somehow?"

"I sure as hell hope so." Howdy replied and then picked up his bottle of beer by its long neck and drained it.

SLEEPLESS IN PICKETWIRE

Money never sleeps and neither did Wylie Boone. For years he boasted about his ability to get along on only a few hours of sleep as a strategic advantage that gave him an edge. The point being that he had the ability to exert mind over matter in pursuit of money. But the truth was that it wasn't his desire to make money that kept him awake, it was his fear of the nightmares that came when he slept. The nightmares had started when he was in high school and avoiding them had played no small part in his accumulation of wealth. Instead of counting sheep to get to sleep he counted dollars and pounds and euros and pesos to stay awake. Not that he would have counted sheep since Boone grew up on a cattle ranch where even one sheep was too many. It was two in the morning and his mind was getting uncharacteristically fuzzy. The numbers from different stock, bond and currency markets throughout the world that were displayed on the three monitors in front of him were starting to dance. Was it sleep deprivation or was the cause post-traumatic stress syndrome from the crash or was he worried that the driver of the van who hit him was still at large or was it being back in Picketwire? He swiveled in his black Herman Miller Aeron chair, got up and walked out of the bedroom of the ranch house that he'd converted into an office. What he needed was some fresh

air and not the kind that comes from a stroll but through the open window of a 57 Chevy going full throttle.

It was his first car. A classic even in 1973 and after the candy apple red paint job, the four shining mags on the wheels, the overhaul of the V8 engine and the installation of a four speed stick shift on the floor with a black number eight cue ball as the knob, it was perfect for picking up girls and impressing the other guys. He had bought it with his own money and paid for the upgrades out of his own pocket. Boone thought of it as his first investment and the only one that he hadn't sold. He'd told the reporters how upset he was that his 1960 Porsche Carrera had been totaled in the hit and run but the truth was that the only car he really cared about was the 57 Chevy. For years it had been kept safely in its own garage at the ranch. Kept in tune and checked out regularly by a mechanic so that it would be ready when Boone decided to come back and take it for a spin. Now he was back and he was ready.

Boone told the bodyguard (whose name he couldn't remember) on duty that he would be taking the car out for spin.

"Are you sure, Mr. Boone?" The guard asked as he walked with him to the garage.

"Of course, I'm sure."

"But wouldn't it be better if I drove you in the Suburban? Its armor plated."

"That sort of ruins the whole idea. No, I want to drive myself and not in some two ton tank. I'll stay on the ranch so you don't have to worry and I'll be back in less than an hour."

After helping him take the protective cover off the car, the bodyguard opened the garage door. Wiley sat in the driver's seat. He didn't buckle the seatbelt, which wasn't original and had been added because it was required by law. His left foot pushed in the clutch, which was called a suicide clutch because you barely had to lift your foot for it to engage, then shifted the stick through all four gears before settling back in first and taking off. He quickly realized that he wouldn't be able to get beyond second gear without stirring up the gravel on the ranch road and pitting the candy apple finish so when he got to the front gate he ordered the guard to open it. A few minutes later he pulled onto the hardtop of the county road. He stopped and listened to the throb of the V8, inhaling the mix of leaded gasoline and sagebrush. There was a half moon so he could see the road beyond the arc of his

headlights as it ran straight across the flat, silver prairie. He knew that there wasn't a bend in it for at least five miles until it turned toward town just past the cut off to the old penitentiary. He pumped the gas pedal a couple of times then pushed it down to the floor as he released the clutch and with a squeal the Chevy shot forward. When he reached a hundred he shifted into neutral, turned off the engine and the headlights. Silently he coasted, surrounded by the silver, moonlit prairie and a rush of memories. When he finally rolled to a stop he pounded the wheel several times, leaned out of the window and yelled like a coyote. He turned the key, shifted into first and switched on the lights. Suddenly there was a bright light flashing above him. Looking up at the rearview mirror he was surprised to see a pair of headlights on high beam. They had come out of nowhere and were closing fast.

END OF INSTALLMENT 6