

the stock character

The Stock Character

a little winter chill
by
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Her real name was Janet
Milliner.

Janet Milliner turned the lights
on around the mirror, although
it was still day. They were only
cheap Christmas lights but they
made her feel special for a few
moments.

The dressing room was a mess. Too
many people in such a small
space. And half of the
production stuff too. But for a
bit she had it to herself. She
looked down at the piles of
programmes stacked around the
formica table. Reached down and
picked one up.

She took a moment to look at her
name.

Her real name was Janet
Milliner. And there, in the
programme, her name was Betty
Winner. It had seemed romantic.

To change her name.

To be an actress.

To pretend.

Janet Milliner stared at Betty Winner's face in the mirror and gathered her long, dark hair into a tidy bun. She began to arrange the make-up on the table.

Tonight she was Betty Winner playing Margaret Joyce.

Margaret Joyce was an old woman's part.

A character role.

A comic interlude.

Betty Winner was furious. She prodded her firm lips with her finger. She pulled at her young skin and fluttered her young eyelashes. Her clear eyes flashed and her smooth cheek flushed.

A character role, indeed.

"You'll have fun, Betty" the producer had said. "Build her up from nothing. Find out how she walks and speaks and sings. You can act, Betty."

Betty Winner realised she did not want to act.

Janet Milliner had thought she wanted to act.

Betty Winner wanted to perform.

"And think of the make-up. My God, Betty, it's a dying art. And you're a young thing. You should learn."

Betty Winner did not want to learn, but the producer had given her fifteen pounds to buy make-up - and a small blue hardback book he said he had picked up at Mencap.

The book's woven binding was stained and smeared. The pages were greasy. The title in gold lettering on the spine was "Stock Characters".

The book was on her dressing table now, propped open at Chapter Two.

Chapter One had been a list of make-up to buy and gather.

Precise colours and brands were inventoried (all surprisingly easy to get hold of), plus recipes for various arcane concoctions (all of which sounded very impressive, but could be mixed using common household products).

Chapter Two showed exactly how to arrange them on a dressing table for ease of use. It seemed very elaborate, but Betty Winner was following it precisely.

She had chalked the complicated diagram onto the melamine surface and was now standing all the bottles, dishes, jars and vials in their proper places.

When it was done, she turned to Chapter Three: Stock Characters.

Every double page held a new face, with meticulous instructions. Tinted photographs showed them staring out at her. The Tramp, The Chinaman, The Gentleman, The Widow, The Drunk, The Fisherman, The Duchess.. The words underneath each picture proclaimed their limited identity. The Fat Man, The Priest, The Nurse.. The Old Woman.

Betty Winner began to note the positions of the ingredients needed for The Old Woman, passing her hands over the table, marking out the order of things.

She studied the picture carefully. It didn't really look like an old woman, not really, no more than The Chinaman looked Chinese. But it did look somehow consistent. All the pictures were like that. She found that if she covered up the names she could guess what each one of them was supposed to be.

Although the first characters were crude, towards the back they got more obscure. The Plumber, The Beautician, the Children's Entertainer, The Charity Worker. Betty Winner guessed them all and this surprised her.

She returned to The Old Woman, and began to apply the foundation.

She sat for a long time in front of the mirror.

Her hands passed from her face to the table, over jars and tubes, brushes and sponges, eyebrow pencils and crepe hair. At every stage she carefully consulted the little book.

When she finished she sat back and closed her eyes. The sunlight had faded from the window and she was lit only by the string of Christmas lights. She tried to clear her mind of the process, to return to a memory of her own unmarked face in the mirror. When she had it, she opened her eyes.

Looking back at her was the face from the book. She gasped. She blinked. The reflection blinked. Forgetting her previous lack of enthusiasm, Betty Winner clapped her hands with joy. She was unrecognisable. Not quite like a real old woman, but not like herself either.

She glanced down at the book in admiration but it had fallen closed.

She gave her full attention to the mirror.

She turned her mouth up. The old woman smiled. She turned it down. The old woman looked sad. She lowered her brows. The old woman glowered back at her. She supposed that from a distance it might not look so fake after all. This, then, would be Margaret Joyce.

Margaret Joyce proudly strolled out into the rehearsal room where she was met with laughter and amazement. The rehearsal went splendidly, and at the end the producer smiled and gripped her hand for a moment.

"Is that really you under there?"

The producer shook his handsome head in wonder as the actress returned triumphantly to the dressing room.

She sat down at the dressing table and did not even think to reach for her customary bottle of gin. Smiling and humming to herself she reached instead for the jar of remover.

This was one of the things she had mixed herself in the kitchen. She had followed the book's instructions exactly, so she did not stop smiling even though it smelled awful.

Dipping the sponge in the mixture, she closed her eyes and thoroughly wiped her face. It stung a little. When she opened her eyes the sponge was dark and stained.

When she looked up at the mirror she stopped smiling.

The face of Betty Winner was not looking back at her.

In the mirror, holding a sponge, mouth hanging open was an old woman.

Betty Winner tightened her grip on the sponge. The old woman did the same. Betty Winner whimpered. The old woman's face crumpled in sympathy. Betty Winner lifted a hand to her face. In the mirror the old woman's hand was smooth as her own.

The skin on her face felt thin and old. She matched the mirror sure enough. An old woman. A real old woman. Not paint, but skin. The paint was on the sponge.

The old woman looked down at the sponge and shuddered. She looked at the jar of remover. She looked at the little blue book.

She turned the pages.

There was no Old Woman in the book.

No Old Woman in the book.

The Old Woman... looks around the dressing room. Looks at the costumes and wigs, and the lights around the mirror.

She turns a few more pages in the book. The Beautician, The Children's Entertainer, The Charity Worker, The Actress. *The Actress.*

A flicker of something moves across The Old Lady's wizened face and is gone.

She looks at the bottles and jars on the tables. Make-up. She looks at the faces in the book. She fiddles with a jar, with a brush. Who to be? Who to be? Her memory is not what it was. She stands up. Better leave it to somebody who knows what they're doing. These are somebody's things.

And if not? Somebody else will
find them and make use of them,
I'm sure.



