

Holly Day and the Old Swans

(Holly Day #3)

By Gail Vallance Barrington

If Holly hadn't taken a different bus route, she wouldn't have seen the sign. With all the disruption due to the Los Angeles fires, she figured she was lucky to be on a bus at all. Robart, her boss, had lost his house, along with all his props and toys. Only smoking rubble remained. The studio closed temporarily. The cooking show was surviving on reruns. Instead of being his kitchen assistant, she was now his messenger, standing in endless lines at banks and insurance companies.

As her bus passed an unfamiliar stone church, a battered sandwich board caught her eye.

Old Swans' Repertory Theatre. New actors welcome.

As soon as she got home, she called for an audition. Just then, Malcolm, her new roommate, walked in.

"I need a place to stay," he'd said the week before, as he leaned against her door frame, exhausted. "My roof's started to collapse. It's pretty much in cinders. We've all been evicted."

"You can stay here," she said, her blue eyes shining. "I need help with the rent anyway." She grinned. "We can practice our custard sauce." Their cooking instructor's mocking comments still rang in her ears.

He exhaled slowly. "Thanks. It's good that I lived in the basement. My stuff's still intact." He returned with his smoky vintage wardrobe and a couple of crates of computer equipment, wires and cords snaking around his skinny legs. After he'd settled into the back bedroom, it was as if he'd always been there.

“Hey, I’ve got an audition in the morning,” she cheered as she ended the call. They did a celebratory high five, then talked about their day. With both their jobs on hold, they now volunteered at the local distribution centre, doling out food baskets, bottles of water, and diapers. They saw in real time the devastation Los Angeles had suffered. Even though the fires were dying down, more people found themselves in need every day.

When Holly arrived at the old church, the company director peered at her over his half-moon glasses.

“Any stage experience?” he asked in his rich tenor voice.

Maybe this isn’t such a good idea.

“Not much,” she said. “My program focused on screen acting.”

“Well, being on stage is a completely different ballgame. You need to project your voice and memorize reams of material. Remember, it’s live. Your first take is your only take. How do you feel about that?”

Holly held her breath, a faint line between her perfect brows. She blurted, “I want to learn.”

“That’s good. We like young actors. We need your fresh energy.”

She breathed again.

“My name’s Jon, by the way,” he said, shaking hands. “We’re working on Hamlet right now. Any Shakespearean experience?”

“Only a few scenes. I could do Ophelia. We studied her in school.”

Hope bloomed in her chest.

Jon's mouth twitched. "Maybe, one day. There's a long line ahead of you but no one can hold a candle to Margot Strathern. You'll have to work your way up. Many of our actors have been with us for years. They come back between gigs.

Hope deflated again.

"Right now, there's only one part left. Francisco, a guard. Here, read this." He shoved a sheet of paper into her hand.

Holly brushed back her bangs, then stumbled through the lines.

Iambic pentameter. Gosh.

"Okay, I guess you'll do," said Jon. "Here's the scoop. Francisco, along with two other guards, sees Hamlet's father's ghost." He paused over the words, holding up a finger. "It's a key moment in the play. You may only have a few lines but one of them is famous.

It's bitter cold, and I am sick at heart.

He intoned the line in his beautiful voice, his hand on his chest, transported to a different time and place. Shivers ran down Holly's spine.

How did he do that?

At the first rehearsal, a crowd of seniors milled about, clutching their mugs of tea, laughing, and catching up. She felt like a kid, spying over the banister at one of her parents' parties.

They seem harmless enough. This should be easy.

It turned out that the Old Swans had long stage and screen careers, many famous enough that even she had heard of them. Grabbing her courage, she began to circulate, asking people which one was Margot. There she was, near the stage, a tiny woman with a mop of silver curls and a circle of admirers.

Someone whispered to Holly, “She’s eighty-three.”

Holly held out her hand. “Hi,” she sparkled. “I’m Holly Day.” The old woman’s hand felt like the bones of a tiny bird but her grip was firm.

“Yes, hello,” said Margot. “I heard you’d joined us. I knew your grandmother. You look just like her.”

At last. Someone who knew her.

“Could we get together and have tea?” asked Holly. “You could tell me all about her.”

“Yes, dear, we must do that,” said Margot, turning away as Jon called them together.

He distributed their schedules, and he had special instructions for her. “When you come, you have to stay for the whole rehearsal even though you have a small part. You never know when we’ll need you. Have your lines learned by next week.”

By then she’d not only learned her lines, but Ophelia’s as well.

You never know.

She was fascinated to watch the troupe in action.

They’re so confident. They just fall into their characters. It’s like watching a bunch of chameleons.

Whenever Jon yelled, “Stop,” they morphed back into themselves, to listen, regroup, do it again, then again, until they got it right. There was none of the ego she’d witnessed in the TV studio.

She got to know the other guards. Marcellus, played by stout, red-faced Stephen, and Bernardo, played by towering, bean-pole Bill. Because they spent a lot of time standing around together, they were soon good friends, and they were a humorous trio—tall, medium, and short. They named her Baby Bear and kidded her mercilessly. She loved it.

After several weeks, Holly finally got to see Margot on stage, but the elderly actress had disappeared. In her place stood a fragile young woman, held captive by her father and brother, her chastity their only interest. Hamlet, her lover, tormented her, his affection turned, unaccountably, to obscenity and rage. She was all alone. Confused and powerless, she lost herself and fell into a despair so deep that madness and death followed. It was a stunning performance.

“She’s fabulous,” Holly ranted to Malcolm as she paced around the kitchen. “She’s eighty-three years old and she’s fabulous. You actually believe she’s this vulnerable young woman who loses her mind. It’s amazing. How does she do it? Why can’t I do it?”

Malcolm was silent.

“My acting program didn’t teach me that. It was like dress-up in comparison. I’m not a real actress like her.” Her beautiful eyes filled with tears of betrayal.

“But Holly,” reasoned Malcom. “She’s had a lot of time to figure it out. Get to know her. Find out what makes her tick.”

“That’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

Thinking about her strategy, her eyes narrowed, her fingers zinging her tiny diamond back and forth, unaware that the future had another plan entirely.

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