

How To Make A Stuntman

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Originally Published In *Medulla Review*

He fell from three stories and landed on two mattresses. The ground seemed to come at him slowly. Like falling through warm water. The smell of the orange groves, the tartness of rinds. The smells he'd meant to escape—the tastes he couldn't forget. Had she ever seen him in the pictures? Ever seen the man he became? The fighter, the lover, the leading man? How much longer could he play that part?

He looked toward the window. Sugar cane. Stunt window. If he were to snap a piece off, would it taste like rock candy? The building flew farther and farther and farther away. Until he was at the bottom.

“And cut! Jesus Madrid! You alright?”

Madrid nodded and pulled a shard of rock candy from his leg. He wiped the peppermint colored streaks of blood on his shirt and put the jagged piece of window into his mouth. He sucked on it for a while, until the pounding in his ear began to drift back inside his head and the slight twinge of cream of tartar lingered in his mouth.

Years ago—another time, another country—he had sat with her, secretly, in a dark theatre that smelled like lamp oil and sweat and melted chocolate and watched as Cleopatra kissed a fisherman—her own slave—and loved him with all her heart.

Madrid had taken her hand in the theatre and she leaned in close to his ear so that all he could feel was the velvet of her curls against his neck and the tickle of her breath as she whispered to him.



And they had left and missed the end.

They breezed out, into an alley, where torrential rain pounded on their skin and sizzled away in the heat as they kissed and they forgot the history of the exotic Egyptian queen.

They missed Cleopatra forsaking the slave for a king.

There were rumors. Madrid had heard them. Everything was changing. His life's work was jumping out of buildings to save the heroine, to defeat the villain, to ride his horse into the sunset. He could see what lay ahead, down the dusty California road. He could see the direction

his life was taking—jumping out of things, off of things, into things for the glory of another man—a speaking actor.

His job. His life. The pictures. Moving pictures. Not talking pictures.

The man, Joe, his friend and a former farmer from the hills of northern Tennessee, told him not to worry.

“Christ’s sake, Madrid. Your English is good. It’s really coming along.”

Madrid doubted it. He’d seen the new films, men and women speaking into potted plants. A ficus concealed the microphone that would allow Madrid’s dialect to betray him.

“Besides, it’s not like they won’t keep using you. No one can do the ‘Postage-Not-Paid’ like you.”

Madrid laughed as he rolled cigarettes for both of them.

“Hell, it’s true. You’re the only one.”

Madrid tapped it on his knee twice before it vanished, an old magic trick, a silent prestidigitation. Joe laughed a loud—Ha! and Madrid moved one hand mysteriously between them. He pulled it from behind Joe’s ear, tapped it against his leg once more, and handed it to his friend, who looked over the little white thing before sticking it between his lips and smiling broad, crooked-toothed smile.

They both sat on a bench in the remnants of a Western set, looking out at the California desert. The orange groves somewhere in the distance carried that too-familiar, bittersweet scent. Madrid inhaled and smiled until a voice in a megaphone shouted—“Places!” and they shuffled off, toward the train that Madrid would soon jump from as it chugged its way over a precarious and hastily built bridge.

Madrid's dark, foreign looks and somber eyes had given him a leg up. This town was in the mood for something exotic, something that would look good next to the porcelain skinned starlets that sold tickets. He had arrived at the orange groves hoping to break away, to pick something more than fruit from the California land, to bite into something more than his social standing at home would have allowed him.

When he'd been discovered, bounding from ladder to ladder, by a director and the diamond-clad, doe-eyed ingénue at his side, he bowed deeply and asked permission to peel their oranges on the spot. They agreed and he flipped his knife over and over his hand, then cut the peel from the flesh in one, curling and beautiful movement. The ingénue blushed and clapped when he kissed the bitter peel and laid it in her soft hands and the director offered him a ride to the studio where they were headed. Just like that.

His inability to sound American had not yet hindered his performance as a passionate lover, a dashing buccaneer, or a daredevil cowboy. He had kissed more distressed damsels, ripped through more canvas sails, and jumped onto the backs of more proud Paso Fino fillies than he could remember now. But this was coming to an end.

“Madrid, it's time!”

They started the train and Madrid ran like mad behind it. His arms pumped and the muscles in his legs throbbed as he jumped from the tracks, onto the caboose ladder and climbed his way to the top.



As if he were a stranger. As if he hadn't grown up across the Grecian grove from her. The invitation was printed on velum and smelled of her mother. He had pulled fish out of the sea all morning and was covered in salt when he read it. His skin was dry and cracked and, as he read the artfully inscribed words, the feeling traveled throughout his core. As if his heart were parched.

He strode though the grove to her house, holding the invitation, his salty fingers leaving no print on the fine paper.

He remembered when they were almost no longer children. When they played together, under the trees, pretending to exist in another world.



He had pulled a bright leaf from her curls and kissed her, on the forehead, had fallen in love with her for the hundredth time.

He looked again at the invitation and at her window as he approached. She stood as a silhouette, dark and naked, straight from the bath.

When she saw him approach, she jumped and hurried to cover her round breasts and Madrid knew she was no longer his.

Madrid ran along the tops of the train cars, leaping over the spaces between them as the camera followed along. A director and cameraman in a Ford Runabout, did their best to keep pace with the locomotive—with the man on top.

Madrid watched ahead as the train neared the studio bridge. He wiped his palms against his trousers and kept running.

Run.

Leap.

Run.

Leap.

Joe, in a waxy mustache, and two other men climbed to the top of the train to meet him. They fired blanks in his direction and smoke blew in quick gusts from the barrels as they laid chase, looking awkward and shaky as they followed.

Run. Leap. Run.

Water rushed under the bridge and Madrid became invigorated by the hollow sound that echoed from under the train as it left the safety of the earth. Men and women on rowboats floated beneath him, beneath the tracks and the bridge and pointed at the man atop the train.

Run.

Leap.

And he could smell the oranges again. So like his home. And for one second, he seemed paralyzed. For one second, he believed her could smell her again, could almost hear her voice as she whispered to him. Could almost taste her in the air.

The train and its passengers cleared the bridge and Madrid could suddenly feel and see the ground beneath the tracks. He spotted the mailbag, hanging from a pole, up ahead, and the car with the next camera, waiting for him.

Wait.

Wait.

Jump.

He caught the bag with both hands, swung to the side, and leapt into it before waving, jovially, to the angry looking Joe who popped off blanks as they rode the train away from the camera's lens.



Tiny, flowering cacti basked in moonlight and surrounded them. She smelled like olives and cilantro and oranges. Cilantro. Like her kitchen.

The lace collar of her dress collected fruit scented beads of sweat. She fanned herself with the invitation and sighed, her breath the same warm temperature as the air.



Madrid could only nod. The sight of her made him long for the taste of her. He put his hands in his pockets and kicked at the dry earth under his feet.

He hated the cactuses. Hated their nature. Their ability to thrive in this land. His land.

Madrid rushed forward and pulled her close to him. He kissed her, hard, inhaling the smell of her body, of the party he was leaving, of the man she would be marrying. When their lips parted, and she spoke to him, the unusual softness of her voice stunned him.



At the end of the day, as the sun set over the coast, Madrid sat next to Joe in the theatre.

“Will you go back?”

A balding man at the front of the theatre played the upright piano, turning pages through the scenes and chain smoking furiously as he did so.

Madrid shook his head and watched the couple seated in front of him, the woman giggling as the man spoke suggestively into her thick, red hair.

“They’re going to need people who can jump out of buildings, Madrid.”

Madrid nodded.

“They’re still going to need you. They need a man who isn’t afraid of anything.”

Madrid knew Joe was right. They would still need him. But he also knew that he had been afraid. He had always been afraid. He’d spent his whole life running. And now, as he faced the road ahead, he sat still in a dark theatre while a single piano played and the entire frame of a house fell around a man’s shoulders.

