

MASQUERADE AT WELL COUNTRY CAMP

Ann Pino

I lie on my cot, staring at the pine rafters. They treat us like children here, keeping us to a schedule, always requiring an afternoon nap.

A few cots over, Olive is coughing. Anyone would, with every window open and the dust blowing in. I wonder how much the doctors really know about our ailment. Dust makes us cough more, but still the windows must be kept open.

The bell rings and Genevieve walks in. She moves with quick steps, urging us to get up. She says it's good for us to move, but as I note the gaunt faces and skeletal limbs around me I'm not so sure.

Genevieve asks what I'm wearing to the party. Her face is round, her breasts and rump full and soft underneath her starched white dress. I'm embarrassed by my bony wrists when she's around. My flat chest and jutting shoulder blades make me feel like a carnival freak. But Genevieve is kind and helps me with my satin and feathers.

"You look fine," she says. "Roll down those stockings like a Ziegfeld girl."

I struggle not to laugh because I don't want to cough. "If it weren't for the garters, they'd fall off my skinny legs."

"Well, you look jake, regardless."

Genevieve is a treasure.

I walk with my friend Doreen across the scrubby grounds to the dining hall. Her brother sent her a Yale sweater and she made a footballer outfit. She's covered up warm, her thin body padded to fit the costume. I'm freezing in my showgirl attire, although I'd probably be cold even if it were the middle of summer.

We're about to step over the threshold when Doreen grabs my arm and doubles over in a series of racking coughs that leave her leaning against me, clutching her handkerchief to her mouth. When she can breathe again, the kerchief is red with blood.

"Better?" I ask.

"Ducky."

She's lying. But so is everyone here, so we go inside.

The dining hall has been transformed with paper decorations, and in the corner a few men in ill-fitting costumes huddle around the new radio set, playing with the dials. Only the clown appears healthy, and that's because his face is made up and his flapping blue and yellow suit is filled out with pads.

We wander over to the radio, where the faint strains of what sounds like "Baby Face" are barely audible beneath the saw of static. A cowboy looks up from the dial, his eyes fever-bright. "Well, now, if you ain't the cutest little filly this side of Albuquerque—"

He dissolves into a coughing fit.

Another man, dressed like the Little Tramp, twirls his cane and hooks me with it. While Doreen and the clown laugh, he pulls me toward the food table, asking if I want to see him make the bread rolls dance. He doesn't fool me. There are blue shadows under his eyes, and when we get to the table he leans on the cane, leaving me to fill my plate myself.

The Tramp swears he's not hungry, but I'm skeptical. We find a place to sit with a bathing beauty, an Indian chief, and Neptune.

"So who got letters today?" Neptune asks. "My son got the bicycle I mail-ordered for him. Mabel says he's got scabby knees and elbows already."

The bathing beauty smiles sadly. "Didn't you say he's seven? A lovely age." She sighs and sips her tea. "My Rose is fifteen and I can't understand where the time went. Matthew sent a photo." She fumbles in a fringed bag and passes a paper photograph around.

"She writes often?" I ask. The way the woman's eyes cut away gives me my answer and I change the subject.

“I received some fudge from my sister at Vassar. She says they have midnight spreads and she wanted me not to feel left out.”

“So when’s the spread?” the Indian says. “Me sneakum out for fudge!”

The bathing beauty nudges him and rolls her eyes. “Fudge parties are for girls, Geronimo. Go play tommyhawk with your friends.”

“Better watch out,” Neptune adds. “Here comes Tom Mix, gonna send you to the reservation.”

The cowboy from earlier walks up to me, touches the brim of his hat, and smiles. “You got away before we could talk,” he says. “Don’t make me have to lasso you.”

This brings a chorus of teasing and more coughing. I laugh (and cough), but I can’t escape the pull of the cowboy’s eyes, luminous with fever in their dark sockets. He’s one of the ones who won’t make it. I look at my giggling,

hacking company and wonder how they can laugh on their way to the grave.

The pretense is too much for me. I hand my empty plate to the Tramp and stand up. “I’m sorry. I thought I was up for this but I really must lie down.”

They don’t protest like normal people would. Instead they nod in sympathy and hope to see me at breakfast.

Back in my cabin, with the damnable wind blowing through the always-open windows, I lie on my cot. Still shivering in my feathers and sequins, I stare at the rafters, pondering the shadows they make in this great pine box of a room.

After a long time, I hear the click of Genevieve’s heels. “Are you okay?” She touches my forehead. “You don’t feel warm.”

Of course I don’t. It’s too damned cold in here for that.

“Are you okay?” Genevieve asks again.

“Yes,” I say, “Just tired. Very tired.”



ANN PINO



Ann Pino lives in Houston, Texas, with her husband, cat and rabbit. She writes mostly speculative fiction, but enjoys dabbling in different genres and literary styles as a mental escape from her job as a university administrator. Her idea of a good time is a twenty mile run through the city while plotting dystopian futures and wondering about the types of people who would inhabit them. This is usually followed up by lunch at an Indian restaurant and a nice long nap.

One of Ann’s many online homes is here: <http://www.ampino.com>. She has others, but they’re under her alter-ego and you must ask for the links nicely.

This is her first sale.

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