

ARNIE'S GYM

The gym was full of customers all day. There were some on running machines, others on exercise bikes. Several groups were weight-lifting and there were two men shadow boxing in a ring in the far corner just as the day was ending. The smell of body odour was strong as all were working hard at their pieces of equipment. Michelle was busy at the reception desk tidying up and had just put her mobile phone down. Her husband Harry was wiping the counter top behind the small bar in another corner. Arnie Sutton, the gym owner, who was in the office to one side of the gym busily sorting through cash and till receipts and counting money from the day's takings, oblivious of the emptying gym.

Harry walked over to Michelle and gave her a peck kiss on her cheek, "I'm gonna tell Arnie!" he said.

"What? Tell him what?" she asked.

"About us," said Harry.

"No you mustn't, if we get caught we'll both end up in prison."

"No it's alright, we can trust Arnie. He won't let us down." He said, and hurried back to his bar before she could speak again.

Arnie looked up and noticed a woman walk into the gym. She seemed a little lost at first, then walked over to the reception desk and began speaking to Michelle. "Hello, I'd like to join the gym, I need to tone up a little" she said.

Michelle smiled and said, "But of course, I'll need you to fill in this form. Just your name, address, phone and email address and so on, you'll see." The woman took the form and a pen from Michelle and started writing. Arnie left his office and walked across to them and introduced himself to the new member. "Hello I'm Sophie," she added.

"Ah good, once the form is completed the fee is payable in advance. Price info is on the back of the form, see," Arnie said and points to the back of the form.

"We've recently had to put up our prices I'm afraid, inflation catches up with all of us in the end. Just haven't had a chance to fix all the ads yet," he said apologetically. Sophie smiled at him and continued writing. "So what do you do for a living?" he asks.

"Well at the moment I'm between jobs," She had to think quickly, "I used to be a dancer and singer. I did a couple of shows on the West End, just in the chorus. I was never good enough to be out front on a stage. I still do a little when I can but to pay the rent I do just a few hours each week in a call centre. Coming here will help keep me supple, I'm hoping."

Arnie smiles at her, and says "Ok if you need any help ask me or Harry over there." He turns and walks to the bar and whispers to Harry, "Wheelin' and dealin' but never stealing!" and Harry replies "Yea! And kidding yourself ain't good for your health!" Arnie chuckles loudly and says "Just tryin' to make a buck, I like to call it a well earned service charge, so I can add to the coffers so to speak."

A moment passes and Harry says "Arnie, I need to have a word with you later, privately, can we meet up just before we close?"

"Yea, sure, is everything alright?" asked Arnie.

"Not really, but I'll give you the lowdown later, is that OK?"

“Yea OK, catch me at nine o’clock in my office. It will be much quieter then.”

“Great.” Says Harry.

Arnie turns to look back at the reception and waves to the woman as she leaves, “See you in the morning?” he shouts, but she just smiles and walks out of the door.

As the last customer leaves, two male cleaners walked in carrying mops and buckets and other cleaning items. They busy themselves with vacuums. Cleaning, spraying and wiping sweat from the apparatus. Soon the room is full of the smell of disinfectant and the cleaners leave. Arnie looked up and sees that the gym is now empty. Harry walked into his office.

“Thanks for this, Arnie.”

“So, what is the problem Harry? It’s late, so make it quick if you can”

“I think you’re being watched.” Said Harry

“What do you mean, watched?”

“I’ve got a feeling that certain people are watching you,” replied Harry.

“Watching me? Who?” asks Arnie.

“I don’t know, but I wanted to warn you to be careful. Thing is, I think they maybe watching me as well.”

“You’ve got a wild imagination, you or me? Which is it? Why would they be watching you?”

“I have a secret and I think I’ve been found out, but I can’t tell you.” He hesitated and it was obvious that he really did want to tell Arnie. Suddenly his mouth opened and words burst out.

“Michelle is my wife, but,…”

He hesitated again, “I was already married.”

“What!” says Arnie and starts laughing, “You dirty old man, how did you manage that, and does Michelle know?”

“Oh yes, but that means,” He looked around to see if anyone else was listening, and then continued. “I’m a bigamist, I could get locked up, you won’t tell anyone, will you?”

Again Arnie laughs and says “OK, OK you can trust me, it’s our little secret, I won’t tell a soul.”

“Thanks Arnie, fine! Michelle and I will push off home now, see you in the morning.”

“Cheers Harry,” says Arnie. Once Harry had gone he said to himself “Well who would have believed that? Not me, it’s a funny old world.”

The gym was now very quiet and Arnie began to lock up and leave. “Ah well, that’s another day over, and what a day it was, I never saw that coming!”

The following day was busy from the morning opening at eight o’clock until just before closing. Arnie was again sorting out money and dealing with a little paperwork. The gym door opened and in walked two men. Arnie looked up and suddenly froze to the spot. He seemed to recognise one of them. He got to his feet, left the office and approached them. “Can I help you gentlemen?” he said.

They were both very well built and as he got closer he saw that one had a large scar down his cheek and the other was wearing a white fedora hat and looking over to Michelle. He was just about to start chatting her up, but then he turned back.

“Hello Arnie, you are Arnie aren’t you? It’s more a question of can we help you. You see it’s like this, we are here to check the place out, before the boss arrives,” said the man with the scar.

“What do you mean, are you not wanting to join the gym then?” asked Arnie.

The two men laughed at him. “No, I told you,” said the scarred heavy getting annoyed, “The boss is on his way here to see you. Wants to have a quiet little word in your shell like, and you better listen very carefully.”

Both of the heavies started chuckling. At that moment the door opens again and in walks a very well dress dark skinned tall man.

At first Arnie didn't realise what was going on. Then the smart mans face finally registered on Arnie.

He stiffened and a cold shiver shot down his back and around his body several times. He now recognised this man.

Arnie gasped and took a sharp intake of breath. “Oh it's you, Leonardo!” said Arnie.

“Hello Arnie, yes it's me, your old pal Leo! So glad you remember me, and you remember my boys? Jimmy and Scar face too?” said the smart man pointing to his heavies, “It's good to see you again. Arnie? Now that's an interesting name, Arnie's Gym, isn't that what you call this place? And who is Arnie anyway? You know, I always knew you as Cyril!”

Harry and Michelle pushed by them on their way to the door and home. “Is everything OK Arnie?” asked Harry.

“Yes everything's fine, you get off home now and I'll see you in the morning OK, take care, on your way now!”

They left and the three men moved closer to Arnie.

“I'm Arnie now, Arnie Sutton, OK?” he said.

“Oh but Arnie, I mean Cyril, weren't you once called Cyril Sidebottom in your younger days?” said Leo.

“No it's Arnie now. That was a long time ago, in a previous life! Arnie Sutton now” he said strongly.

Leo smiled at him and started circling Arnie.

“Now there's a stupid name, Sidebottom. What woman would want to go to bed with a man called Sidebottom?” he sniggered.

Arnie cast his eyes down to the floor, he suddenly felt very small.

“So tell me, why did you choose the name Arnie, and why the name Sutton? Do tell,” said Leo. Arnie looked up, very wistful and reluctant to answer at first.

“I always admired Arnold Schwarzenegger, came from Austria, went to the States and then he got himself a great body, won Mr Universe way back, then he became a film star. He must have made his money there and then did politics. You've just got to admire a man like that.” he said.

“Someone who goes from one lifestyle to something completely different. That's very praiseworthy. Knowing I was moving into the fitness business, which was a bit by accident, it seemed the obvious choice.”

“Yes, that sounds a bit like you. Why did you get this place? And where did the Sutton name come from?”

“I did manage to get some money together and bought this place from a guy who was emigrating to Australia, Don't ask me why, It wasn't a plan, I just needed to get a legit life for a change.” He thought for a moment, looked at all three of them and continued.

“Oh, and as for a last name, we just stuck a pin in a page of the phone book. Sutton sounded OK, so Sutton it is,” said Arnie.

So you did have a previous life didn't you? What was it now? Drug running and supplying, and then stealing a few cars, than you even tried to knock over an all night laundromat. How stupid was that? How long were you in the Scrubs? Three years wasn't it?” said Leo with a sickly grin on his face.

“That's all in the past now, I try to forget it, I've moved on.”

“You mean that no one here knows of your youthful misdemeanours? Wouldn't that be a shame if they found out? Hmmm?”

“OK! OK! So what do you want from me?” questioned Arnie getting more irritated as they spoke.

“Well it's a more a case of what you want to give me. You have a nice little earner here don't you? That's a very regular income from your clientele. I'm always happy to see someone getting on so well, and making a good living. Wouldn't you like to share some of all that money you're making?”

“Oh, its protection money that you want is it?”

“No, No,” replied Leo, “Let's call it insurance. Everybody needs insurance don't they? And you wouldn't want any pins stuck in you, would you, especially any very large pins. That would be terribly painful, molto doloroso, capire? That's very unpleasant.”

Arnie's head was spinning. He was desperately wondering how he was going to get out of yet another tight corner. Something he had not had to do for many years.

Scar face took a knife from inside his coat and started pretending to clean under his fingernails with the tip of it, looking menacingly at Arnie as he did.

“OK,” said Arnie finally deciding to take the bait, so tell me what you want, what's on your mind? How much do you want?”

“That's a good boy Arnie, Che bravo ragazzo, now you are seeing sense, a little two way co-operation and it will all be over quite painlessly, for you.”

“So come on, name your game, what's your price.”

“Now that's an interesting thought, name my game. Or better still, you name your game Arnie,” said Leo.

“What? What are you on about?” Arnie was now getting flustered and feeling very surrounded.

“Remind me if you will, didn't you have another profession, a few years back? Didn't you do a drag act?”

“Oh that was way back, I packed that in yonks ago,” Arnie stated firmly.

“Yes, now what was it you were called? Lucy, that's what it was, wasn't it? Lucy Lastic, what a silly name.” Leo turned to his heavies and they all laughed.

“So how did you get into the drag scene?” Leo asked.

“Oh that's a long story,” said Arnie, “It all happened when I was in stir. When you're locked up you meet some very nasty types. Several want to be the boss, and the rest do as they are told, if they know what's good for them. Me, I didn't want any of that. Luckily, our vicar in the slammer wanted us to do a pantomime as it was near to Christmas. Of course, we needed some men to play women. Cinderella was renamed SINDERella and needed two ugly sisters and that's

where I stepped in. I wrote a few lewd and suggestive parodies to some pop songs and the cons loved it. Songs like, 'Secret Love' changed to 'Once I had a secret shove!' And 'Step inside love' to 'Get inside love,' and so on. I always had great fun singing My Ding a Ling!"

"So you wasn't a pretty boy then was you?" added Leo with a laugh.

"No, that's not a good thing when you're inside. The pretty ones have a hard, I mean, a very difficult time. Somehow I easily slipped into the part, and I thought if Johnny Cash can do it at San Quinton then why not me at the Scrubs? I couldn't do anything wrong after that and life in the Scrubs was sweet from then on. I got respect. When I first got out, I needed money and that seemed the best and easiest way to get some."

"You know I never did see your drag act, that's such a shame. I always thought that drag acts were a bit weird, but I have heard you were good at it!"

"No, I packed all that in and I said I wouldn't do it ever again. Where did you find all this out anyway?"

"Oh I have my contacts and that's a shame, why did you stop, when you had such a good reputation"

"That was the trouble, I was getting a reputation, at some of those clubs and pubs you were lucky to get out with your clothes on!"

"So you did the circuit, did you? Did you ever perform at the Vauxhall Tavern?"

"Oh yea, several times, that's the one place I liked and I went down well. They were good old days and bad old days too."

I went there a few times but never saw you," said Leo.

"Oh really?" said a surprised Arnie, "Did you like to watch drag acts?"

"I thought they were strange, but at the same time very clever. I think you should start again, there was good money in it wasn't there?" persuaded Leo.

"No, I said I would never do it again, and I am not going to!"

Leo started stroking his chin in thought. "I'd like to see your act, will you do a show for me? And my boys?" he points to the heavies.

"No way, all my dresses were dumped and I have forgotten most of the music and songs I did."

Leo was still in thought, and then said, "I've got it. We came here tonight to offer you some help, you know, make sure no harm came to your business. It would be a great shame if this place suddenly and mysteriously caught fire during the night. A heavy JCB digger just might accidentally drive into the side of the building and cause so much damage that your poor gym club business would come to such a sudden and bitter end. Now that would be terrible, wouldn't it?"

Arnie felt as though he had been backed into a corner. His brain was racing, trying to figure out how he was going to deal with this, with or without his clothes on.

"If you were to reignite your old career, you know Lucy lives again, dig her up from her grave as it were. I just might leave you be."

"You what?" asked Arnie.

"Yes, treat me nice, and I'll be nice to you."

"But it just wouldn't be possible, no dresses, make up, and I have forgotten all the old routines and songs. I just couldn't do it," he said in desperation. "And I'm not as trim as I used to be. I

was 11 stone at most in those days. I'm 14 or 15 stone now. I'd never get into a dress of any kind." Despite his words, he could see that Leo was not backing down.

"You could do it here, move some of this equipment and these machines out of the way and there would be plenty of room."

Arnie was slightly amused at the thought of doing his old show here in his gym. "No, not a chance." He chuckled aloud, but it was a hollow chuckle.

"No!" he repeated. "And what's more we'd need lights, and microphones, amplifiers and some kind of decent staging."

"That can all be arranged," said Leo confidently.

Arnie could see he was losing the argument.

For a moment nothing was said as Arnie thought over the suggestion and dragging up for one more time.

"OK Arnie, I still can't get used to calling you that, but OK, here's a little idea of mine, think over my suggestion, give it some serious thought, a great deal of very serious thought, and we'll be back in a few days just to check you're still in good health, know what I mean? Ciao for now Arnie" said Leo. He nodded to his heavies and they turned and tramped out of the gym and Leo followed them.

This left Arnie silent and glued to the spot with his head still spinning.

The two cleaners walked in and started work. In a short while the odour of sweat and assorted bodies was replaced by the sweet smell of disinfectant and cleanliness.

Slowly he regained his senses, did a final check all round, then locked up and left the building.

It was a little after 8am the next morning and Arnie was already in his office trying to get his head round some outstanding paperwork. Several people were in for an early work out. Both Harry and Michele were busy at their work. Harry was restocking shelves and Michelle was working on her computer.

Arnie looked up as Sophie walked into the gym and waved to him. She went straight into the changing room and soon stepped out suitably dressed for a work out. She did some gentle stretching and moving exercises and then stepped on a running machine and did a slow jog.

Arnie emerged from his office to check on her, "All OK?" he questioned.

"Yep, fine with me," replied Sophie with a smile without stopping her jog.

Arnie turned and walked over to some other people.

There was a buzzing sound. Arnie looked round to Sophie. She took an item from her belt, and turned to Arnie. "Phone call" she said and turned off her machine. Arnie nodded and turned away. "Yes, I'm in," she said into her phone. "All OK here at the moment, in fact maybe a little too quiet. He's been and gone, but he's coming back again, so stand by Chief. I'll brief Arnie shortly." She slipped her phone back into her belt.

Sophie made her way to his office door. "Can I have a word?" she asked.

"Yea, sure come on in and sit yourself down." He looked at her closely for a time. In her forties he decided, and noticed no ring on her wedding finger.

"You've had a visitor lately haven't you?" she said

"Oh yes we get lots of people in here business is good at this time."

“No, I mean a particular visitor?”

Arnie was confused briefly, “What do you mean? Are you looking for someone?”

“No, it’s more about someone looking for you, by the name of Dagastino.”

The mention of his name sent a cold icicle down Arnie’s back. He tried to sound un-moved but Sophie saw an immediate flushing in his face.

She continued, “Yes I can see you know that name. Has he been in here recently?” she questioned.

It seemed to him that he’d been backed into this same corner just a short while ago. He had to admit it. “Yes, he was here last night.”

“Yes we do know that.”

We? Whos ‘we’?”

She pulled a mobile phone from her belt. Inside the cover was her warrant card and she showed it to Arnie. “I’m DS Sophie McAllister, We’ve been watching Daggers for days.”

“Who?” Arnie interrupts.

“Dagastino, oh that’s what we call him. He’s wrapped up in so many bent dealings we have to take him out!”

“Take him out? You mean kill him?” asked Arnie in disbelief!

“Oh no, I mean take him off the scene, lock him up for a very long time.”

“Oh I see,” he said, but he was still unsure of what was happening.

“DS, that’s Detective Sergeant isn’t it? So it must be serious!”

“Yes, he has some nasty habits and we need to put him away.”

“So what’s that got to do with me?” asked Arnie.

“What was he here for? Did he want money? Or offer protection? Did he have his muscle boys with him?” she quizzed.

“Yes those gorillas were with him. At first he wanted money but then changed his mind.” Arnie told her what had been said and the ultimatum he’d been given.”

Sophie was silent for a few minuets. “We need to grab him when he’s a not expecting it, when he’s off guard. If he was here we would have the building surrounded and we’ll have some of our guys in the audience too. At a given time, others will swoop in and take him out. If some of his other low life friends were here, we’d grab them too, that would be the perfect arrangement and a very big bonus.”

Arnie interrupted her, “No, I said I wouldn’t do it. He tried to persuade me but I said no.”

“Oh that’s a shame. That would be a very nice big worm on a hook to get him here. Are you sure you won’t do it?”

Again Arnie was deflated. “If truth were told,” he began, “I quite fancy the idea, but I got rid of all my clobber and everything I would need, so, no it’s not on,”

“We can see to that,” she added.

“Oh, really?” Arnie sat there in thought. “It would be fun to dig her up again.”

“What?” asked Sophie, “Dig up who?”

“No,” Arnie laughed, “No, I mean dig up the old character I used to be, she was called Lucy.”

“Lucy?”

“Yea, Lucy Lastic.”

They both giggled at the name.

“Of course, we know about your past including the problems you had, its all well documented. That was when you were much younger, but that’s all history now, this is something we need to deal with now, and you are our best hope.” He looked at her and smiled.

“OK, you mull it over,” she said, “And let me know, I’ll be here most days early for some loosening up, In fact I’m looking forward to it. Do remember if we can put him away, that will take him off your back!”

Arnie nodded in agreement, and somehow felt slightly relieved that his problem was being overseen by the Met.

Several days later Sophie made her way from the changing room into the gym. She started her normal stretching exercises and looked over to the office expecting to see Arnie. He was a not there. She walked to the office door and then noticed Arnie lying forward on his desk. Was he asleep or was it more serious?

“Arnie!” she grabbed his shoulder and he moved and groaned, and gradually woke up.

“Oh, sorry about that, I must have just nodded off. I’ll be OK in a minute, must get some coffee.”

“Having some late nights?” she asked.

“Well to be honest I haven’t been sleeping too well. I’ve had lots on my mind.” He stood up and they both walked back into the gym.

“Have you had anymore thoughts about my suggestion?” she asked.

“Yes that’s why I have been up most of the night. I can’t get this whole business off my mind. I expect Leo will be back here again any day now, twisting my arm. I think I’m going to have to do as he asks.”

“Good,” she said, “Keep me informed of what he says and we’ll back you up, no problem! OK?”

Arnie looked doubtful, “Yes, I suppose so.”

It was three weeks later that Leo and his heavies re-emerged into the gym. They stood inside the door looking very menacing. Everyone in the gym stopped what exercise they were doing and looked round at them in silence. Arnie emerged from his office and went to them saying, “It’s OK everyone. Just carry on with your training, there’s no problem here.”

“So then, tell me Arnie, have you given my idea any thought, come to any kind of decision yet?” asks Leo.

“Yes, OK I’ll do it.” Says Arnie reluctantly.

“Oh good, now that’s the sensible answer isn’t it lads?” he turned to his heavies for agreement. They all smiled and chuckled to themselves in return.

“So this is what we will do,” says Leo, “I will arrange all the technical side, you know lights, a public address system and some kind of staging. I have a few contacts and I’m sure that won’t be any problem, and then, I’ll send you the bill for it all.”

“What?” shouts Arnie.

Leo ignores him and continues, “What you will have to do is get your act together and just be ready on the night. OK mio amico, my friend?”

“Oh no, you are certainly not my friend!” states Arnie. Leo smiles at him and adds,

“Tell all your customers to spread the word amongst their friends and family. I will bring in a few coach loads of willing punters along to fill the place. We will charge them all £25 each!”

“What? No you can’t do that, that’s ridiculous,” says Arnie.

“We can say the money is needed for work on this building, your refurbishment and modernisation.”

“Oh, really? OK that doesn’t sound too bad.” Says Arnie

“But all that money comes to me at the end of the night, yes? You know, call it insurance! It won’t be a big sum but it will buy me a few tasty dinners at the Ritz. So now all we have to do is pick a date.”

“I’m going to need time to get back into that old persona, the old routine. Where did I put my cassettes? Now that’s another thing. Cassettes, that’s old technology. Assuming I can find them, where can you get a cassette player these days?”

“You give me the cassettes and I’ll get them transferred into a modern system, you’ll have no worries, and the date?” asks Leo.

“How about February the 31st?” said Arnie.

Leo thought for a moment, “February was last month. Oh now I see, did you hear that lads? Arnie’s having a little joke with us. Now that’s not very funny is it? So I suggest,..” he pauses and then adds, “ the 1st of next month.”

“But that’s only three weeks away. Some hopes,” says Arnie.

Leo gives Arnie a sickly smile and says, “Ciao for now Arnie.” He and his heavies turn and leave the gym.

Sophie had overheard all that was said. “Right, that’s it all lined up then. So it’s April the 1st! The prefect date for the set up.”

“Let’s hope we’re not all April fools then!” adds Arnie.

The following morning Sophie was in the gym early and half way through her now daily routine. She had warmed up, after a stretching session she did a spell on the tread mill machine and was just about to move to the multi gym work station, when Arnie rushed up to her, He was bubbling with excitement. “I have found them,” he said loudly to her.

She looked up “What? What have you found?” she asked.

“I have found all my old scores and tapes and everything. I was sure they were all thrown away, but they were here all the time in a filing cabinet in my office. I would never have thought of looking there. I had my flat upside down several times looking for the damn things. They were here all the time.”

He showed her a cardboard box which contained a stack of papers and half a dozen cassettes in plastic cases. “Now where can I get a cassette player?” He wondered aloud.

A voice from behind him said’ “I’ve got one of those, I think it still works,” Arnie turned around to see Michelle looking at him.

“I could pop home now and get it if you want?” she said.

“Yes please, that would be great, go now and do hurry back, it’s urgent.” Arnie was now even more hyper. Sophie smiled to herself and said “You’re acting as though all your Christmases have come at once.”

Arnie stayed late in the gym. The cassette player did work and he was happy playing through the old songs and remembering some fantastic nights from almost 25 years earlier. It was beginning to feel like he now wanted to do the show that Leo had demanded, but at the same time he was remembering that not all those old days and nights were good and worth remembering.

It was almost midnight when Arnie did eventually lock up and make his way home. It was another night when he found it difficult to sleep, as his mind was bubbling with the whole process of remembering and performing again.

In the following days, word had spread of his proposed performance night. Michelle said she could supply him with some make-up. Arnie had made some phone calls and found a company in London where he could hire dresses and high heels for the night. All was going to plan until the day Leo returned to the gym.

“It’s all organised,” said Leo, “The equipment will arrive on the morning of your show and be set up for you, and then you have the afternoon to rehearse and the show will start about 9pm.”

“Oh,” said Arnie, “You seem to have it all sorted out?”

“Yes, well it’s not rocket science, it’s just a question of getting things organised. Of course, you’ll have to close the gym down on that day.”

“Yes, I had thought about that. Did you manage to get those cassettes transferred to digital?”

“Yes, that’s all sorted and I have a sound man coming in on the day just to make sure things go smoothly.”

Arnie was speechless for a while. “Right then.” added Leo, “See you on the night. You’d better be on form. Mess up and it could get very uncomfortable for you.” Leo grinned and nodded at Arnie, “Ciao for now Arnie” he said and then left the gym.

Sophie saw him leave and quickly followed Arnie into his office. “Is it all OK with him?” she asked,

“Oh yes, he’s got it all organised.” He hesitated and then asked, “I was wondering if I could ask a favour? My old act would last about 30 minutes, not sure if I can last that long these days.

Could you help out? It would be great if you would be able to sing a couple of songs before me on the night, as a warm up sort of thing.” He begged.

“I suppose I could, yes I think I could manage that.” She replied.

“What we have in mind,” she continued, “is that when you have finished your last number, we will rush him and his heavies before he can realise what’s happening and have them away very quickly.”

“That sounds good, hopefully no one will get hurt?” he sounded unsure.

“This is what is going to happen. The moment you finish your last song, there will be whistles, sirens, squads of police will swarm in, some with dogs and grab a handful of villains but in particular Leo Dagastino. He is the one we want. It will all go like clockwork, believe me, you can trust the Met.” She sounded very convincing. “You’ve no need to worry, we’ve got it all under control” she tried to reassure him and then went back to her training.

Arnie sat alone for a while and the day passed quickly and just as he was tidying up and about to leave, Sophie returned to the gym.

“Oh hello,” said Arnie, “This is a bit late for you, isn’t it?”

“Yes, I was just a bit concerned about you. This whole thing seems to be getting to you, are you going to be able to cope with it?”

“Yea I’m fine really, although I’ll be glad when it’s all over!” he said

“I’ll tell you what, I’m just going for a meal, care to join me?” she asked.

“Well yes, I am a bit hungry,” He thought for a few seconds, “Yea, why not, and we’ll have a drink and get plastered too. You are off duty aren’t you?”

“Oh yes,” she replied and Arnie finally turned the key in the gym door lock and they found the nearest curry house. It was early morning when Arnie eventually got back to his flat.

The show day came very quickly. By late morning all the equipment had arrived and was tested and working well. During the afternoon, Arnie went through his routine a couple of times. He missed a couple of cues but in the end was sure he could get through his set without any major mistakes. He had decided that if there were any accidents, being the old pro that he was, he could bluff his way through with ad-libs and a few comic remarks to cover up any boops.” Then he suddenly remembered, “Boops, yes I must get a pair of charlies sorted out before the day. I can’t work without charlies, I’m a professional,” he said with pride, and then added, “Well, I used to be.” Instantly he felt deflated and frightened, walked back into his office, that was now his dressing room, and sat in silence for a while. He began to feel hungry, but couldn’t bring himself to eat anything. The afternoon slipped by and the skies outside grew darker. After a while he was sat in semi-darkness. “Oh hell, why on earth did I agree to this? If I’ve said it once, I’ve said it a million times. I said I wasn’t going to do this anymore, but here I am, two hours from curtain call and I really don’t want to do it.” Tears began to stream from his eyes, but then something clicked. It was as though someone had whispered in his ear, “You’ll be fine.” Arnie looked up, and he heard that same voice repeat the same words. “You’ll be fine, they will love you.” He quickly regained his senses and dried his eyes. He switched the desk lamp light on and saw spread around him make up and an assortment of under garments. Several dresses were on hangers over the office door. On the desk in front of him were three wigs together with a pair of knee length silver sparkling high heel boots. He had already decided on the blond wig. He looked around but there was no one, he was alone. “I can do it.” He said, and then he said it again much louder, “I can do it. Time to drag you out and tart you up once again Lucy, here goes.” Arnie set to work reincarnating Lucy, just one more time. He had covered his face with foundation and then started dressing until he was almost done. He was pleased that the girdle that came with the dresses fitted and seemed to take pounds off of his spreading waist line. Next, he slowly started applying facial make up, blusher, eyeliner and then lipstick. All of which were just a little over the top and unreal. He removed two of the largest pair of eye lashes from a shrink wrapped pack, and carefully glued them in place. He stood and slipped into the bright blue sequined dress with ease.

“And finally,” he said reaching for two large pieces of hard foam rubber. “Mustn’t forget my charlies,” and he slipped them down inside his bra. With the palms of his hands he adjusted them in the front of the dress. He positioned the blond wig on his head and smiled to himself. He felt complete again, just like the old days. Arnie gazed into a full length mirror. In a deep south of American accent and trying to sound like Clarke Gable in ‘Gone With the Wind,’ he

said, "Well bless my soul, Miss Lucy, you are a fine lookin' woman. I could almost fancy you myself."

The gym had been cleared of all of the apparatus and chairs and tables filled the spaces. By 8pm there were already many people sat at tables and stood at the bar. Some complained that there was no alcohol, and were told the gym only had a soft drink bar. Harry had to step in to cool things down when several of Leo's gang started grappling briefly, but a calm order was regained.

There was a hum of excitement in the crowd as they waited for the start of the show. Suddenly, the gym door opened and in walked Scarface and Jimmy, Leo's two henchmen. They looked around, checking, and decided all was good. Scarface opened the door again and in walked Leo who stood there looking at the crowd staring back at him in silence. They walked slowly and majestically to the front of the stage and pushed people out of seats, and then made themselves comfortable. Slowly the hum became louder again.

Unexpectedly, Harry walked into the office, "Opps! Sorry miss I didn't think there was....." and then he realised "Arnie? Is that you?" Arnie smiled at him, "Yes it's me, although really it's Lucy right now."

"Wow you do look good, I mean, you do look the part," he struggled to find the right words, "You look very err..... female, that's it, yes female, excellent. We're just about to start the show. Sophie is ready in the changing room so if you're up for it?"

"Is Leo here yet?" asked Arnie.

"Oh yes," confirmed Harry, "He very definitely is here with a whole load of his family and friends and a few enemies I'm sure. They all look as though they are ready for a fight. Rough looking lot they are too!"

"OK thanks. I'm ready now," said Arnie, "Sophie's doing three songs and then I'm on!"

"Yes that's it, fine," said Harry feeling very awkward and he left and walked straight up onto the stage. He grabbed the microphone. "Ladies and Gentlemen, please take your seats and make yourselves very comfortable. It's now time to start our show. Please give a big round of applause for one of our club members. So-phie Mc-Al-is-ter."

Sophie took the stage and started with a song called 'On a wonderful day like today' Arnie looked up, listened and then said "Let's hope it is." She got just a warm reception at first, but gradually, the audience seemed to enjoy her performance. By the time she had sung her last song, she had won the crowd over and got a good loud round of applause as she left the stage.

She was singing her last song. Arnie stood quietly ready for his entrance and said to himself. "OK, one more time to resurrect Lucy, but this time definitely for the very last time. Are you ready Lucy?" He heard no voices, "Right then, here we go," he said aloud.

The applause for Sophie's performance eventually died down and Harry once again took the stage.

And now Ladies and Gentlemen, the star of our show this evening, and the star you are all here to see, please put your hands together and welcome onto this excuse for a stage, The lovely, the delicious, the very sexy Lu-cy Las-tic" The music started and applause and cheers filled the

room. "OK folks," said Arnie to his office walls "It's Showtime, just let me get at 'em." He emerged from the office and majestically climbed up onto the stage. His body was full of butterflies. He went straight into his opening number and the butterflies disappeared. Being already very expectant the crowd loved every minute. Each song, parody, and very near the knuckle gag went down with a remembered skill that had simply fitted back into his frame with ease. Arnie did his full 30 minute routine, just like the old days, and went down a storm. They laughed and cheered and shouted and enjoyed it all. Everything went well or as near as how Arnie had remembered. There was just one sticky moment when Lucy's high heel got stuck in the gap between the segments that made up the stage. Arnie, being an old trouper, made fun of it but in truth he nearly fell from the stage. He was struggling for breath as he took his final bow several times. People shouted for an encore, but that was one thing he hadn't bargained for. He had nothing prepared. He just stood there centre stage and bowed, then bowed again, but the applause didn't stop.

He was expecting to hear whistles and sirens and everything that he had been promised, but there was nothing. He looked all around and waited as the applause continued. There was still nothing, so he held up his hands and then grabbed the microphone. "Ladies and Gentlemen, Thank you," He said.

Just as he uttered the last word, the noise was unbearable, people rushed in and there was uproar. Females screamed. Whistles blew and dogs barked. Men started getting to their feet only to be knocked down again and hand-cuffed. "Sophie joined Arnie on stage, and took the microphone.

"Everyone sit down just where you are, and stay calm," she instructed a number of times. Two uniformed policeman had hand-cuffed Leo and as they were taking him out he turned to Arnie and said, "Ciao for now Arnie," and then added in a gravel voice "I'll be back!" Order was eventually restored and more people were escorted by plain clothed and uniformed police out of the gym. Gradually, the audience got to their feet and slowly left the building.

Unnoticed during the melee and total uproar, Arnie had managed to get back into his dressing room office. Quickly and happily he wiped most of the make-up from his face, slipped off his dress and put on a dressing gown. He then re-emerged into the gym. There were still a few scuffles and officers led others away. Harry turned to Arnie, "That was amazing, well done boss." Michelle nodded in agreement. "Yes, and well done from me too, it all worked perfectly," said Sophie. Arnie sat on a chair, breathing deeply and trying to grasp the whole situation. Leo had been taken away and was now being locked up. Tomorrow, the gym would soon be back in business as usual. He was beginning to see that life would soon be returning to normal, whatever that was. "I think you deserve a big drink," said Sophie, "And so do you," said Arnie. "Your songs were brilliant, so well done to you and all your Met guys."

At that moment, the two cleaners re-emerged into the room to start their work, "Hi you guys, not tonight, leave it until tomorrow, OK?" said Arnie. The cleaners looked at each other, shrugged their shoulders, turned and left.

Arnie and Sophie hugged and Harry hugged and kissed Michelle, and then all four had a group hug. "I think its time to boogie the night away," said Arnie and he kissed Sophie. "Come on then, let's go and get a drink, it's my round," he said.

13/11/2020 Copyright Mick Cooper cooper_m6@sky.com.