Larger Than Life

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Gabe Drucker’s stomach began to pinch almost as soon as the daily rushes began rolling. By the time the reel ended he had full-blown abdominal cramps, and his mouth tasted like an old gym sock.

It sucked.

There just wasn’t any better way to say it; everything that had been shot so far sucked.

In the good old days, he’d have just thrown it all out and sacked the director and hired someone new with orders to reshoot it from scratch, but he couldn’t do that now. He couldn’t do any of it. The studio lawyers and accountants were watching him constantly, ready to pounce if he showed the slightest flicker of initiative, the faintest hint of going over the incredibly miserly, penny-pinching, impossible budget he’d been given, the first sign of violating the ghastly contracts he had reluctantly put his name on.

If only Yes Miss Maizie hadn’t flopped, he wouldn’t have agreed to any of it.

But Yes Miss Maizie had flopped. So had Scarlett III, and Way Down Yonder, and Into the Swamps, and Gabe Drucker knew that after four bombs in a row he was lucky to be working at all, that there were plenty of producers who were sweeping floors or flipping burgers at the commissary after fewer than four full-blown disasters.

So he couldn’t fire that loon of a director, or recast the film, or reshoot any of it. He had to somehow salvage this mess as it was. With five bombs in a row, he’d never work in films again. He had to save this flick.

Maybe it wasn’t really as bad as it looked, he told himself; maybe he was just seeing the worst. With that thought in mind, he turned to his assistant and asked, “What’d you think?”

Joan wrinkled her nose and waved a hand. “Stinks,” she said.

Gabe grimaced, as his stomach twisted again. “Care to be a bit more specific?” he asked.

Joan peered sideways at him. “You have to ask?”

“I have to ask,” Gabe confirmed. “So tell me, what’s good, what’s bad, why does it stink.”

Joan considered this. “The dialogue is crap,” she said. “Luke has it lit like a goddamn museum display, and nobody moved. Even your precious Angela Denham is stiff as a board—when you said she’d dried out, I figured you meant she’d stopped boozing, I didn’t realize she was petrified.”

“All right, that’s the bad news,” Gabe acknowledged. “What was good about it?”

Joan had to think much longer this time, but finally admitted, “Denham looks good, anyway. She’s still got the face—hell, maybe it’s the hard times, but she’s got more character up there than ever. The camera loves her—if she’d just show some signs of life.”

Gabe nodded, staring at the blank screen. Her assessment matched his own. If anything was going to save this picture—and his career—it was Angela Denham.

He hoped to God she really was off the booze and the drugs. After three years in the gutter she needed this film as much as he did—but was that lifeless expression she wore just because she was worn out, or was she up to her eyelids on ’ludes?

Of course, if he tried to find out, she’d probably get pissed and quit—she’d done that on Roses for Mary four or five years ago, when she first started to slip; she’d just walked off the set when the director told her he wanted her sober next time. And she hadn’t come back, either.

He got out of his seat and stood up, joints creaking.

Maybe they could rewrite some of the dialogue, Joan and himself and some of the brighter crew members, and tell the writers that the actors had ad-libbed. And he could tell Luke he wanted more movement on screen, and to stop screwing up Bill’s lighting; if Luke didn’t like it, maybe he’d walk out, quit the film—Gabe hoped he would walk.

Just for Love was never going to be a cinematic masterpiece, Gabe knew that, but maybe, just maybe, it would earn out, maybe Denham still had enough fans out there to put it in the black, and when it was over he could land another film, work his way back up.

Without Angela Denham, he’d be painting curbstones, or maybe taking his crazy brother up on that research job in Haiti...

“Mr. Drucker?”

He looked up; one of the gofers was standing in the door, looking very nervous. “What is it?” Gabe asked.

“It’s Ms. Denham, sir...”

If his joints creaked as he ran to the ladies’ room, Gabe Drucker didn’t notice it. He didn’t notice anything between the time the gofer began explaining and the moment he saw Angela Denham, flat on her back on the bathroom floor, eyes wide open and staring blankly at the ceiling. Dr. Lee and a script girl were kneeling over her; Gabe didn’t notice.

“She isn’t breathing,” he said.

The doctor looked up.

“Somebody give her mouth-to-mouth. And she’s so pale, why’s she so pale? Somebody call make-up...” Gabe caught himself.

“Mr. Drucker,” the doctor said, “I’m afraid it’s too late for resuscitation; Miss Denham is dead.”

“No, she isn’t,” Gabe answered. “She can’t be.”

“I’m afraid she...”

Gabe’s mind had shifted into overdrive the instant he heard the word “dead.” His first response had slipped out before the gears really caught, but now he was thinking clearly. “Who knows about this?” he demanded, cutting the doctor off.

Dr. Lee blinked, then looked around. “As far as I know, just the four of us here,” he said. “Ms. Martin here found her, and fetched me, and I sent Jamie here for you. But Mr. Drucker, we can’t...”

“Yes, we can,” Gabe told him. “You wait and see. What did she die of?”

“Well, I... I can’t be sure yet, but it looks like a drug overdose...”

Gabe nodded. “Figures. Look, doctor, for now, as far as you’re concerned, as far as anybody here is concerned, she’s ill, maybe even comatose if you want, but she’s not dead. Understand?”

“Mr. Drucker, I really must protest...” Dr. Lee began unhappily.

“No, you mustn’t,” Gabe replied. “Look, it’s not like we’re concealing evidence of a crime or anything, right? Or like she had anything contagious?”

“Well, no...”

“And if word gets out, then the film will be scrapped, and we’ll all be out of a job. You want that, Dr. Lee?”

“Well, no, but how... I mean, if you’re just going to keep us on payroll another few days, that’s dishonest. You can’t finish shooting...”

“Oh, yes, I can,” Gabe said. “You leave that to me.” He groped in his pocket and came up with a slip of paper; he turned and waved the gofer forward.

“Take this,” he said. “Call the number on it, and ask for Professor Daniel Drucker—tell them it’s urgent. If he’s not there, then he should call back as soon as possible. If he is there, you tell him to get his ass out here as fast as he can, I’ll pay all bills. And bring his black bag.”

The gofer looked at the paper, and asked, “Why is the number all funny?”

“It’s overseas—that’s the country code there. Go!”

The gofer went, as Dr. Lee began another protest.

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Dr. Daniel Drucker emerged from the ladies’ room wiping ash and paint and sweat from his face with a large white handkerchief. The tall top hat fell from his head as he dabbed his forehead, and he caught it in his free hand.

“Well?” his brother demanded.

“Well,” he answered, “I never said I was an expert at this, you know. I’m an anthropologist, not a houngan voudoun.”

Gabe was not interested in explanations. “Yeah, yeah,” he said, “but did it work? Did you raise her as a zombie?”

Dr. Drucker frowned, then shrugged. “She’s upright, anyway.”

“And she can move?”

“After a fashion,” Dr. Drucker admitted. “But Gabe, she can’t act.”

“Dan, not to shock you or anything, but she never could,” Gabe replied.

“She can’t talk...”

“We’ll dub all her dialogue.”

Dan Drucker sighed. “There’s another thing,” he said. “You just left her lying there the whole time, right?”

Gabe nodded.

“Well, maybe you should have done something else.”

“Like what?”

“I don’t know, exactly. But rigor set in, and then passed off, the way it does, and now you’ve got some pretty spectacular cadaveric lividities...”

“Some what?”

Dan sighed. “I mean all her blood has settled down to her back, since that’s how she was lying; her front’s all pale, and her backside’s bright purple, like the biggest damn bruise in the world.”

“I saw she was pale,” Gabe agreed.

“Well, she’ll stay pale. She’ll stay goddamned bone-white. A zombie’s blood doesn’t circulate. No heartbeat. I suppose it’ll all settle into her legs if you keep her upright. She isn’t going to look like she’s alive, Gabe; she’s a corpse, and she’s going to look like a corpse.”

“That’s what make-up is for,” Gabe replied.

Dan sighed. “And what about the smell?”

Gabe didn’t ask what smell. He asked, “How bad is it?”

“Not bad at all, yet,” Dan said, “but it will be. And under those hot lights... well, I’m not going to hang around.”

“Oh, yes, you are,” Gabe told him. “We may need you, if the magic wears off, or something. We can get dry ice from special effects, use that to keep her from... to keep the smell down.”

“Even with dry ice it won’t last long...”

“It doesn’t have to. We’ll shoot all her scenes first—I’ve already reworked the schedule. Double shifts.”

Dan looked him in the eye. “You’re crazy, you know.”

Gabe grimaced. “I know. Believe me, I know.”

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“Mr. Drucker,” the make-up woman asked nervously, “are you sure I should be doing this?”

“Of course, Elsie,” Gabe replied. “Why? Is there a problem?”

Elsie fluttered her hands. “Well, I mean, I’m not exactly an undertaker or anything...”

“And she’s not exactly dead—she’s undead. What’s the matter, won’t she hold still?” He grinned horribly at his own joke.

“Well, of course she holds still,” Elsie said, offended. “Except that her jaw sort of sags open sometimes, and I get powder on her tongue. And I have to tell her when to close her eyes.”

“So what’s the problem?”

Elsie blinked at him. “Mr. Drucker, she’s dead!”

“I know that, you know that...You haven’t told anyone, have you?”

“No, sir, you told me not to, and I haven’t, and I’ve done my best with her, but I don’t see how you think you can get away with it.”

“I don’t, either,” Gabe admitted. “But I have to try.”

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“She’s got a throat infection, can’t say a word,” Gabe explained, “but the budget says we shoot anyway, and she’s agreed. Right, Miss Denham?”

At a signal from Dan, the zombie nodded, slowly and stiffly.

“We’ll dub in her lines later; for now, Joan will be reading them off-camera, to give you the timing.”

“Wait a minute, Mr. Drucker,” objected Bentley McGraw, the leading man. “I’m supposed to kiss her—is this throat thing contagious?”

Gabe Drucker laughed hollowly, and resisted the temptation to say that everyone got it eventually. “No,” he said. “Ask Dr. Lee, he’ll tell you—you can’t catch it from kissing her.”

McGraw looked at the corpse uncertainly; her dead eyes stared back.

“All right, everybody, places!” called Luke Hartley, the director. He glanced at Gabe.

They had had to tell Luke, of course, and show him how to give the zombie orders. He had been shaken, but had gone along. “At least she’ll take direction now,” he had muttered.

“And make sure everyone else moves, so it won’t be so obvious she doesn’t,” Gabe had told him. “Make her a figure of mystery, don’t over-light her—otherwise it’ll never work.”

He didn’t mention that that’s what he’d have wanted even if Angela Denham were still alive. And miracle of miracles, Luke had just nodded, without arguing.

The scene started well enough, all things considered; McGraw muffed the opening twice, thrown by having Angela’s lines delivered by someone behind him, but on the third take he got the hang of it and made it halfway through the scene without a hitch.

But only halfway.

“...oh, please, Audrey,” he said, snatching up her hand—and immediately dropping it.

The released arm fell limply to the zombie’s side and hung there, swinging gently back and forth.

“My God, Angie,” McGraw said, “are you all right? Your hand’s like ice!”

“Cut!” Luke bellowed, as, at a signal from Dan, the zombie nodded again.

“It’s the infection,” Gabe called. “She’s a bit chilled. All the blood’s in her throat, you know.”

“In her legs, you mean,” Dan muttered.

The fourth take made it to the actual kiss; the expression on McGraw’s face when he embraced the zombie and planted his lips on hers was absolutely amazing, and captured on film forever.

It wouldn’t be in the final print, Gabe was sure, but he knew he’d want to keep that film for his own collection.

“Keep going,” he whispered to Luke. “We can edit it later.”

Unfortunately, McGraw didn’t keep going. There were six takes in all.

When McGraw came off the set he pulled Gabe aside. “That woman belongs in a hospital,” he said. “And are you sure it’s not contagious?”

“Absolutely certain,” Gabe insisted. “Really, it’s okay. You think I’d do anything the insurance companies wouldn’t like?”

Mollified, McGraw let go of the producer’s sleeve. “I suppose,” he said. “But my God, Mr. Drucker, it’s like kissing a corpse!”

Gabe clenched his teeth to stifle hysterical laughter.

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The studio rep watched the action with interest; then he noticed Angela on the sidelines, utterly motionless.

“Why is she sitting so still, staring like that?” he whispered.

“She’s meditating,” Gabe explained quickly. “Part of how she kicked the drugs, I think. Come on, let’s let them work; I’ll show you the accounts...”

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By the ninth day of shooting, the secret was out—but still, so far, confined to the cast and crew of Just for Love. Bentley McGraw had sworn to kill Gabe Drucker, and had refused to touch Angela Denham’s ambulatory corpse again, but that was fine with Gabe; they had all McGraw’s essential scenes in the can, and over the years Gabe had survived death threats from any number of actors.

And after a long talk, McGraw had even agreed to come back to the set, once the zombie was gone, to shoot scenes that didn’t include Angela. Gabe knew McGraw needed money as badly as anyone else working on this low-budget fiasco.

They were almost finished with Angela, in fact—after some careful reworking, Gabe and Joan and Luke had cut her part down some, and only two more scenes remained to be shot.

That was about all anyone could stand; despite keeping her stored in dry ice when not shooting (and standing on her head, to get the blood out of her bloated legs), Angela Denham had developed a very noticeable aroma. They hadn’t dared to actually freeze her at night, which might have helped; freezing made her already-stiff movements even stiffer, and noticeably jerky.

The movie still stank, Gabe knew it was going to be lousy, but he had some vague hopes that the romantic, neurasthenic look Elsie and Bill had managed to give Angela’s corpse might be intriguing enough to keep it from being a total disaster. If it was just good enough to be released, maybe he could get by somehow.

That was where matters stood when Angela’s mother arrived.

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“What do you mean, I can’t see her? Young man, Angela Denham, as she calls herself, is my daughter...”

“I know that, Mrs. Dumbrowski,” Gabe said desperately. “But she hasn’t been feeling well, and she’s resting. The doctor’s with her right now.”

Mrs. Dumbrowski squinted at him. “The doctor?”

Gabe nodded. “Dr. Lee. He’s excellent.”

“What’s wrong with her?”

“Oh, nothing serious, she’s just tired...”

“She been taking those pills again? What kind of doctor is this Dr. Lee of yours, is he feeding her that stuff?” She tried to push past Gabe.

“No, no, it’s nothing like that!” He managed an unconvincing laugh.

“Then let me see her!”

She was really amazingly strong for her size, Gabe thought as he picked himself up and followed her into the dressing room.

Drs. Lee and Drucker had stopped in the midst of lifting Angela out of her ice-pack, and turned to stare as Mrs. Dumbrowski came charging in, head high, purse swinging.

“What are you perverts doing to my baby?” she demanded.

“Stand,” Dan told the corpse. It obeyed. Then he said to Dr. Lee, “I’ll get Gabe.” He slipped past Mrs. Dumbrowski.

“We aren’t doing anything to her,” Dr. Lee said. “Who are you, anyway, ma’am? Who let you in here?”

“I’m her mother,” Mrs. Dumbrowski replied. “Angie, what are these people doing? What’s that smoke? And look at you, that dress looks like you slept in it, and what’s wrong with your face? You’ve been taking those pills again, haven’t you? I can see it in your eyes.” She leaned forward, and peered at Angela’s face. “You look terrible! Worse than when I took you to the clinic!” She turned to Dr. Lee and demanded, “What did you give her?”

“I didn’t give her anything, ma’am,” Dr. Lee replied haughtily. “I am a respectable physician!”

“Well, somebody sure gave her something!” Mrs. Dumbrowski snapped. She reached out and grabbed Angela’s wrist. “And I’m taking her out of here and back to the clinic! We’re going to get my little girl cleaned up and dried out!”

She turned, and found the Drucker brothers blocking the dressing room door. “Out of my way!” she demanded.

“Angela,” Dan ordered, “don’t leave this room until I tell you to!”

“Mrs. Dumbrowski,” Gabe said, “really, everything’s under control...”

“It is now that I’m here!” she agreed, tugging at Angela’s wrist.

The zombie didn’t move.

Mrs. Dumbrowski pulled harder. Angela still refused to move.

Mrs. Dumbrowski yanked with all her considerable strength, and Angela fell forward, face hitting the floor with an ugly snapping sound.

Mrs. Dumbrowski stared.

“Elsie’s going to hate this,” Gabe said with a sigh. “Sounds like her nose broke.”

Mrs. Dumbrowski started screaming.

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They had to explain it all to her, of course.

“My Angie is dead?” she wailed, when they were through. “My Angie’s dead, and you bastards have been playing games with her body?”

“Not playing games,” Gabe insisted. “Just trying to get the movie finished. One last thing you could be proud of, Mrs. D. Something to remember her by.”

“Something to remember!” Something clicked in Mrs. Dumbrowski’s memory. “She left me something better than any stupid movie; she had insurance, you know! One million dollars! And I’m going to collect that! You people were trying to cheat me out of it!”

“No, we weren’t,” Gabe protested. “We didn’t even know about it, and of course we’d....I mean, as soon as the movie is done, we’ll report her death, and you’ll have the insurance money. If you could just wait a few more days...”

“Why should I wait?” she demanded.

“So we can finish the film, Mrs. D. We’ll pay you Angela’s full salary, of course; after all, she doesn’t need it any more, and it’s in the budget. And then you can get the insurance when we’re done.”

Mrs. Dumbrowski considered that, very carefully.

They started the day’s shooting a few hours late.

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The film wrapped a day ahead of schedule, and very slightly over-budget—the sound crew put in incredible amounts of overtime, airfare from Haiti and huge quantities of dry ice were hidden under “Miscellaneous,” the make-up budget was higher than expected, but for the most part it looked good.

Angela’s remains were packed up in one last batch of dry ice and turned over to Mrs. Dumbrowski; Gabe supposed that obituaries would appear shortly, and wondered if that would help ticket sales.

Then came the job of editing the mess, and delivering a finished product to the studio; Gabe worked closely with the editor, overseeing the whole thing.

The result was very peculiar, not at all the sentimental little romance that had originally been planned, and Gabe began to wonder what the job market was like out there in the real world.

The studio was doubtful, but decided to at least give it a shot at limited release.

And then the reviews started to come in.

“The ironically-titled Just for Love is a strange little piece in the tradition of David Lynch and Tim Burton. Angela Denham stars as Audrey White, a young woman who comes across alternately as a figure of ominous mystery and as a blank-faced innocent...”

“...Angela Denham’s performance is startling in its subtlety and power. She has the terrifying stillness of a snake preparing to strike...”

“An actress previously known as just another pretty face, Angela Denham demonstrates that she can be more. She stands out as an island of calm amid the frenzied performances of the rest of the cast...”

They weren’t all positive; Siskel and Ebert called it “stiff and lifeless “ and gave it thumbs down. The box office was weak in first run.

But the art houses wanted it, and it didn’t just vanish after a few weeks. Gabe was pleasantly surprised.

And finally, as the trickle of income began to approach the film’s negative cost, he got up the nerve to approach the studio heads. He got as far as Felix Arbender’s office.

“Gabe, I like you,” Felix said, leaning across his desk, “but Just for Love was a turkey. You know it, I know it.”

“Well, but Felix, look what I had to work with...”

Felix held up his hands. “No excuses, Gabe.”

His heart sank, and his stomach twisted. “So there’s no way, Felix? That what you’re telling me?” He stared at the thick, royal blue carpet.

“Now, Gabe, I didn’t say that.”

Gabe looked up, startled.

“The best thing about Just for Love was Angela Denham. If you can get her to sign on, maybe we can talk.” Felix leaned back in his chair.

Gabe blinked. “Angela? But she’s...I mean, didn’t the papers...”

“I’ll be frank, Gabe; we tried to sign her up, but we couldn’t get hold of her. She wouldn’t talk to us. Now, if she’ll talk to you, then—well, we’ll see.”

Gabe stared.

He hadn’t seen any obituaries, he realized. He had been concentrating on the movie reviews so much that he hadn’t noticed anything else, but he hadn’t seen any obituaries. None of the reviews called her the late Angela Denham, and surely they would have mentioned her passing.

Hadn’t Mrs. Dumbrowski told anyone? What about her million-dollar insurance policy?

“Um... let me get back to you on that, Felix,” he said.

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“They wouldn’t pay,” Mrs. Dumbrowski explained, her voice trembling with righteous fury. “They said it was suicide! Said nobody could take that much Seconal by accident.”

“Oh,” Gabe replied, understanding bursting upon him. The insurance people might even be right; Angela hadn’t exactly been cheerful. “So no million dollars, right? But then, why didn’t you...”

“I didn’t want to explain where she’d been all this time, either,” Mrs. Dumbrowski said. “So I figured maybe she could...well, anyway, I tried giving her orders, like you did, but she wouldn’t move.”

Gabe nodded. “Dan took the spell off,” he explained. “We figured it would be better that way.”

“Can he put it back?” Mrs. Dumbrowski demanded.

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Gabe leaned back comfortably and shifted the phone to his other ear.

“Hi, Felix?” he said. “Listen, I’ve got Angela Denham interested, but there are a couple of conditions.”

He smiled at Arbender’s reply; when the protests and quibbles had run down, he held up fingers and ticked off the demands.

“First, I produce, solo, and we get back as many of the people from Just for Love as we possibly can.

“Second, we have a real budget this time, and we don’t have your people looking over our shoulders about how we spend every penny.

“Third, a closed set—no outsiders.

“Fourth, Angela does no interviews, no talk shows, no public appearances at all—she wants to really play up the mystery woman angle. In fact, she won’t even be signing the papers—her mother’ll do that, as next of...I mean, as her agent.

“Fifth, we hire my brother Dan as technical advisor, pay all expenses and union scale.

“And finally, Felix ol’ pal, Angela and I are tired of these romance pictures. This next one’s gotta be horror—I’ve optioned a script called Queen of the Zombies...”