



JUSTICE

VIRIL

Regal

Brooks

# High-Wire Act

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**W**hen NBC dared to air a live performance of *The Sound of Music* last December, 18 million people watched and wondered: How will this work?

But there was a time when all television was live. Until the late 1950s, every drama, comedy and commercial was watched in homes across America at the same instant it was being created.

Such is the world of *Justice Girl*, the new novel set in the days before videotape, when innovation and creativity ruled — but the threat of blacklisting hung over the industry.

When we meet our hero, writer Jonny Dirby, he has lost his job on *Hermie's Henhouse* by taking a stand against McCarthyism. On his way out the door, he takes his revenge by altering a script. But his creation, *Justice Girl*, a Superman knockoff, is a hit — and suddenly he's running his own show. Now, the clock is counting down to the first broadcast and nothing is going right....

The light fixture hit the concrete floor and shattered into a hundred small pieces. Jonny quickly sidestepped it and hurried on.

On any other day, this would have brought the studio to a dead stop, but this was show day, and a knocked-over light barely raised an eyebrow. Nor was it really noticed over the loud din of sets being finished, equipment being moved into place, and orders being shouted, along with the rest of the chaotic preparations, as actors and crew, like too many rats packed into one maze, scurried in every direction of the small, cramped studio.

Stepping over several snaking camera cords and ducking under a passing mic boom, Jonny caught a glimpse of one of the many studio clocks. It was persecuting him, taunting him, its sadistic hands telling him it was 7:17 p.m., and they were on the air, live, in fewer than fifteen minutes.

And there was no way in hell they were going

to be ready in time.

Jonny walked between a pair of hurrying lighting technicians — one with a broom and dustpan, the other with a replacement fixture — and then cut around a makeup artist, just as floor director Arnold Lamasagne stepped in front of him.

"We're still long," Arnold said, showing him the script inside his open binder. "You have to give me the cuts now!" But as Arnold stuck the script under Jonny's nose, the three silver rings popped open, and the pages poured out and onto the floor. "Shit!" Arnold exclaimed.

"I'll get back to you on that one," Jonny answered, rushing off as Arnold struggled to bend his enormous girth and pick up the scattered script pages.

Hoping to save time, Jonny cut through a small side set that was dressed to look like a shoe store. Immediately, a young assistant set dresser, who he kind of remembered as Neil, ac-

costed him. Neil thrust two shoes in Jonny's face. "The people at Remington Shoes sent over a pair of shoes for us to use for their commercial, both left-footed!" Neil said in a panic.

Jonny knew it would take more time to tell Neil to find someone else to deal with the crisis than to just give him a solution.

"Instead of having both shoes on the actor," he began, "have one on his left foot and the other about to be fitted on his right foot. But tell the actor playing the shoe clerk to never actually fit the shoe. No one will ever notice." And with that, Jonny hurried off, leaving behind a nodding Neil.

Passing behind a wall of flats, another clock caught his eye, tormenting him that they were now just ten minutes to being on air. Normally, on *Hermie's Henhouse*, by this time he would be across the street in a bar with some of the other writers, drinking away the stress of having gotten the final writing done. Or maybe, if he had a sketch on that night he was particularly proud of, he'd have found a quiet corner of the control booth or, if he could get away with it, an empty seat in the cushy viewing area set up for *Hermie's* sponsors.

Sponsors. Even with all that was going on around him, the word danced in his head. Remington Shoes was the sponsor of *Justice Girl*. They'd sponsored the entire half hour, covering the budget in return for a mention at the top of the show, and a big, fat, two-minute commercial in the middle, between the first and second acts, neatly dividing the additional twenty-eight minutes into two fourteen-minute segments.

This would be good, Jonny guessed, if I cared about such things. It seemed to make Hogart Daniels happy, which was certainly good for Jonny, as it meant Hogart — the new president of the Regal Television Network — would leave him alone. Or at least there was a better chance Hogart would leave him alone.

**F**or the first time in his career, Jonny was a producer, so everything — from something as important as the current crisis he was in to something as trivial as mismatched shoes — was his problem. The buck stopped here, as one of his heroes had famously said.

Technically, Charles Fox was his coproducer, but Jonny had worked it so that Charles was out of his hair and safely stuck inside the control booth, going over the shots with the show's director, Sal Reece. Sal was an almost ten-year-veteran of television, having been around since just after the war. His veteran status in this infant medium, inhabited almost exclusively by the young and new, made him decidedly cranky and stubborn, so Jonny knew whatever Charles suggested, Sal would ignore, which was just fine with Jonny.

Jonny slipped around a pair of stagehands who were hammering as fast as they could, desperately trying to replace a section of wall to one of the sets that a camera had crashed through during the dress rehearsal. He leaped over a production assistant who was down on his hands and knees, hurriedly collecting the props that had scattered across the floor moments before, when a harried costumer, passing with a rack of costumes, had knocked over the prop table.

Finally he arrived at his destination.

Standing at the entrance to the studio, next to the door that led to the dressing rooms, were the four lead actors of the show. They were, much to Jonny's relief, dressed in the costumes for their first scene, along with tissue paper ringing their necks to keep makeup from smearing on their collars.

"You wanted to see me?" Jonny asked. In the back of his mind, he was expecting trouble with the cast. This process had been so fast, so unusual, so haphazard when compared to the usual production of a live show, and the brunt of it had fallen on the cast. He was sure there would be some eventual pushback.

His eyes landed on Felicity — she must be the source of this last-minute issue, whatever it was. Since hooking her up with coach Alexis du Champ, Jonny had noticed an improvement in her acting — slight but definitely noticeable. If nothing else, she seemed more focused. Most important, it had been enough to get Hogart off his back and stay his insistence to replace her, if only for the one show.

Felicity and two of the actors looked at each other, confused. The fourth and youngest, Thomas Hughes, turned to Jonny. "Actually, it was me, Jonny. I was the one who wanted to see you." Thomas's voice cracked as he looked away, not wanting to make eye contact with anyone.

"Okay," Jonny answered, masking his surprise. He was sure Denise would be in full panic right about now and threatening to quit the show,

but she wasn't. Instead, it was Thomas, and maybe it did make sense. At barely twenty-three, he had the least experience, with the exception of Denise.

Thomas was a ridiculously handsome young man, over six feet tall, with pronounced features and thick, dark hair. He had spent his high school and college years as a star athlete before a particularly ferocious tackle put an end to it all. His athletic career over, he slid pretty easily into show business. And quite amazingly, for someone seemingly a bit shallow and pampered, he was a darn good actor. Up until now, he'd had a succession of small roles — ironically, often playing athletes — but this was his first major role.

Now, Thomas began searching for his words. "I... uh... I... uh..."

Jonny could see just how much trouble they were all in. Thomas's usual swagger, the kind women had swooned over since he was quite young and the reason he was cast to play the editor's playboy son, was gone. Also missing was the confident posture that was a product of the world always being his for the taking. Instead, he was hunched over, his shoulders bunched up and pushed against his neck.

"I... uh... don't know if I can do this," he finally finished, still unwilling to make eye contact with anyone.

This is bad, Jonny thought, his stomach sinking. Really bad. Thomas can't possibly go on. But what to do?

"Can't do this?" the older man next to Jonny mocked. "Well, you damn well better, my boy. Or we're all in a bit of a sort."

Reginald Milo was in his late sixties and a veteran of stage, screen, radio and most recently, television. His early career achievements could fill one side of a playing card with room to spare, but the last twenty years had been a very different story.

In his forties, when his prematurely gray hair had quickly turned to white, he suddenly found himself cast in a series of screwball comedies as a stuffy, upper-crust husband-father-boss. Realizing that was his meal ticket, and despite being from a decidedly working-class neighborhood in Detroit, he had transformed his whole persona to that of an English blue blood — on screen and off — complete with tails, cane and bowler.

"Surely you can find the courage. After all," he added as a hopeful punctuation, "it's only television."

Now there's seasoned confidence, Jonny thought, looking up at Reginald. But how to instill just a dash of that in Thomas? Then he lightly sniffed the air, and Jonny's face wrinkled.

"Give it to me," he said flatly to Reginald.

Reginald raised a single bemused eyebrow, a move that was almost his signature. "Whatever could you mean?"

"You know."

"I most certainly do not."

Jonny pointed away from them, across the studio. "Look! Ava Gardner!" The four actors all swiftly turned in the direction of his pointing finger. As Reginald spun around, the jacket of his Savile Row double-breasted suit fell open, and Jonny reached between Reginald's lapels and pulled out a small bottle of whiskey.

Jonny held it out for all to see.

"I'm sure I have no idea how that got there," Reginald insisted, without even a hint of how ridiculous that sounded.

"Good, then you won't mind if I take it," Jonny said.

"Oh, come now. Be a sport, Jonny," Reginald said. "This whole show has been a bit of a whirlwind."

"I'd like some, too," Thomas said, reaching out desperately.

Jonny took a step back from both of them and slipped the bottle into his pants. One lightly sauced actor, he thought, is a whole lot better than two completely drunk ones. Realizing

half his cast was struggling, he quickly checked in with the other two, first turning to the woman next to Reginald.

Veronica Sanders was in her early fifties; her hair was a stylish gray highlighted by the first wisps of white. She had a striking face, smooth skin and pronounced cheekbones that made it hard to look away from her. Her dramatic features had arrived early, so she always had acted older than she was. At fourteen, she easily passed for eighteen, getting her first job as

a chorus girl on stage. By her early twenties, she was working steadily in silents, often wearing a bathing suit or other sexy outfit.

Her voice had an enticing purr, so she easily made the transition to talkies, playing the bad girl or wild friend of the lead. She never had a lull in her career, smoothly making the transition from starlet to ingénue to established actress to character actress to sought-after veteran.

"How are you doing?" Jonny asked her, hopeful she wasn't as stressed as the men.

"Oh, I'm just fine," Veronica answered. "Old hat."

Indeed, it was, Jonny knew. Live was nothing new for her. Veronica worked a lot on television, and when she wasn't on the tube, she always found work in one Broadway show or another. She clearly had her nerves under control.

"Been here dozens of times," she continued,



smiling at Jonny. "Nothing to worry about, nothing at all." She then turned away and, barely missing Felicity, threw up in a nearby garbage can.

Felicity jumped back, almost bumping into Jonny.

Nervously, he looked into her face. Despite the start from Veronica's sudden attack of nerves, Felicity seemed oddly composed.

"Mind and body relaxed," she offered before he could inquire.

"Good. Good," he responded, greatly relieved. Alexis really was a miracle worker.

"Mind and body relaxed," Felicity said again.

Wow, Jonny thought, Alexis really drums the stuff into her students. As long as it works.

"Mind and body relaxed. Mind and body relaxed. Mind and body relaxed." The rapid pace of Felicity's words revealed that she was anything but.

Uh-oh, Jonny thought. What he had interpreted as calm was actually abject terror. Seven minutes to air, and all four of his leads were a mess. Unfortunately, Jonny knew it could get worse. And it did.

**F**rom the other side of the studio, Arnold began to shout, "Five minutes! Five minutes! First positions!" Suddenly, standing before Jonny were four ghosts, as all of them went white with fear. "Five minutes! First positions!" Arnold continued shouting.

Something had to be done. Something fast. What he wanted to do was grab them all by the neck and squeeze. How dare they threaten all his — all their — brilliant work!

The script had come out fantastic, better than he could have dreamed. The writers' room had been a pure joy, a swirling, creative cauldron with him, Annie, Shel and Burton working together, pounding through draft after draft in only six days. And now, a bunch of scared actors threatened to screw up the whole thing.

He thought of yelling at them, but other than making himself feel good, it wouldn't help — it would only force them to retreat further inside themselves. Desperate, his mind drifted back to one of his first days working at Hermie's Henhouse. As the new man on the writing staff, he'd had the unenviable task of being the one who had to stick with Hermie during the live broadcast. He'd follow him as he went from set to set and slipped in and out of costumes, in case Hermie wanted to punch up any scenes at the last minute or needed to write material based on something that had happened on the show — like the time Jane Russell almost popped out of her dress during a sketch about the Old West.

On that day, Montgomery Clift was the guest — a wonderful actor who had little theater experience and no live television experience. Mont-

gomery was dropped into a recurring sketch of Hermie's, where he played an American Indian who always had some sort of comic interaction with the white man.

As he was about to go on, dressed in his cavalry outfit, Montgomery lost it. "I can't do! I can't do it!" he shouted over and over.

They were less than one minute from going on the air. Hermie grabbed him, looked straight into his eyes, and began to talk. It worked. Two minutes later, as Montgomery scurried off to his first position for the sketch, Hermie turned to Jonny and said, "Back in vaudeville, that's what we called 'the big distraction.'"

Yes, that's what needs to be done, Jonny thought. If it worked on Montgomery Clift, it sure as hell ought to work on these four.

"Okay, listen up, all four of you," Jonny said sternly, moving his gaze from face to face to face. "Fall in." They all looked at him blankly. "I said, fall in!" He punctuated his words by pointing dramatically at the floor in front of him. They quickly surrounded him in a tight huddle.

Jonny turned to Thomas. "In your first scene, I want you to cut the last four lines of your monologue about your night out on the town. Got it?"

Thomas's eyes rolled back in his head as he thought for a second. "Got it," he said, suddenly focused.

Jonny turned to Veronica and Reginald. "In the second scene you guys have in Margaret's office, end the scene after the phone call. Okay?"

Veronica and Reginald squinted their eyes for a second, thinking, "Okay," they said in unison.

Finally, Jonny turned to Felicity. "After you untie Chance in the final scene, cut your entire page of dialogue except for 'Justice is served!' then leave. Sound good?"

Felicity nodded quickly, taking in his words. "Sounds good."

Arnold approached them. "Five minutes! First positions!" All four actors nodded to Arnold, gave a reassuring nod to Jonny, and then turned to head off to their first positions. Jonny reached out and stopped Felicity. When she turned back, Jonny snatched the ring of tissue paper from around her neck.

"Thanks," Felicity said.

Jonny smiled. "No problem. Break a leg. Or should I say, break a jaw," he added, playfully rubbing his cheek where Felicity had slapped him almost exactly a week earlier.

Felicity spit out a short, hard laugh — clearly relieved that they had finally dealt with the incident — and then turned and ran off to her first position.

Pleased, Jonny watched her disappear but then realized the other three actors all still had tissue hanging around their necks. He started to go after them, but Arnold blocked his way. "I need the final cuts, now!" Arnold said, carefully holding forward his reconstructed script binder.

Jonny pulled a pen from his pocket and quickly rifled through the script, scratching out four lines here, a half a page there, and then, with a final flourish, he ripped out an entire page, curled it up in a ball, and threw it on the floor. "Done," he said with finality.

"Control booth, I got the final cuts. Here they come," Arnold said, walking away and relaying Jonny's work as he went.

**J**onny watched him go and then suddenly, unbelievably, he was alone. No one said a word to him. No one bothered him. No one came to him to solve a problem. Alone. This was it. It was about to happen. Ready or not, it was about to spill out into thirty million homes across the country. Warts and all.

He looked up at the clock — one minute left, and the second hand was making its final orbit around the clock face. Terrified, Jonny slowly wandered out onto the floor. Despite being mere moments from air, everyone was still rushing in every direction, futilely trying to get control. A shudder ran through Jonny's body. They weren't ready, and they weren't going to make it. They were driving over a cliff, with him at the wheel.

He turned to the row of sets lit by hot, angry lights and surrounded by vulturistic cameras that waited to absorb the whole chaotic disaster and spray it sadistically across the nation. He watched the second hand above his head clear the six and begin the sweep upward. Less than thirty seconds. Less than thirty seconds until the end of his career.

And then, as it always somehow did, everything suddenly worked out: the broken light was just done being fixed, the damaged wall was just finished being repaired, the prop table was just back to its original position, and the tissue was just removed from every one of the actors' necks. It was the only time Jonny was inclined to believe in the Divine.

Finally, with the second hand of the clock sweeping toward the twelve, Jonny collapsed against the studio wall. From his spot, looking through the spindly tentacles of the studio's permanent wiring, he could just see the glowing blue of the monitor at Arnold's floor director station. *I'll watch the show from here*, he thought.

The grip of the heavy black curtain covering the bare concrete wall helped keep him on his feet. The thick burlap was surprisingly soft and warm, and he allowed himself a long, relieved exhale. He fished Reginald's whiskey out of his pants and took a good-sized, satisfied gulp. Whether destined to be a huge success or a dismal failure, he knew he had worked as hard as humanly possible and had done all he could. Now it was time for his work to be judged. And he felt good. ☺