

Postcards from the Ledge

(c) 2016 by Jeffrey Scharf

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CAST

Announcer, offstage only, can be double cast with part of Frank or John

Cynthia Stevenson, a radio journalist

Millicent Brady, her producer

Betty Sue Tomlinson, a Southern belle

Frank Giles, Betty Sue's erstwhile fiancé

John Brown, a singing telegram messenger

TIME AND PLACE

SCENE ONE

An office in the RCA building, New York City, 1932

SCENE TWO

The same, five days later

ACT I

SCENE 1

ANNOUNCER

(offstage, stentorian a la
James Earl Jones)

Reality television. It did not begin with "Jersey Shore." It did not begin with "Real Housewives." It did not even begin with television. It began with radio. Reality radio. The time: 1932. The place: the 65th Floor of the RCA Building. And you are there.

(Lights up on an office unfurnished except for a table and chair. A candlestick telephone, old-fashioned microphone and broadcasting set sit on the table. A packing box is on the floor. MILLICENT BRADY packs. CYNTHIA STEVENSON paces. The extreme downstage serves as a window ledge. One or more "windows" from the office open onto the ledge.)

CYNTHIA

I don't care if David Sarnoff does own the network. He can't cancel my program.

MILLICENT

He can and he did.

CYNTHIA

I'm Cynthia Stevenson. I put NBC Radio on the map.

MILLICENT

That was years ago.

CYNTHIA

I've got a contract.

MILLICENT

It expires next week.

CYNTHIA

With an option.

MILLICENT

That's not being picked up. Well, that's it for packing.

(MILLICENT closes the box. CYNTHIA walks to the window. SHE stares into the distance.)

CYNTHIA

I'm sure gonna miss this view.

(MILLICENT joins her. SHE takes a paper bag from her pocket.)

MILLICENT

Me, too. The whole New York City skyline.
(leans out scattering seeds)
And my poor pigeons! Coming every day to the ledge for food.
What will you do without me?

CYNTHIA

There's got to be a way to stay on the air. I know. I'll barricade the studio.

(CYNTHIA pushes the table toward the door.
MILLICENT resists.)

MILLICENT

No, no, no. You need to get out of the studio, not lock yourself in. Live in the present instead of the past.

CYNTHIA

What's that supposed to mean?

MILLICENT

You used to be the bee's knees. The Roaring Twenties. Conducting hoity toity interviews with princes and majarajahs. But this is 1932. There's a Depression out there. Listeners want nitty gritty, not nabobs. Real stories about real people.

CYNTHIA

People like marathon dancers or the hobos in Hooverville? I won't do it.

MILLICENT

It's your funeral.

(CYNTHIA stops pushing.)

CYNTHIA

That's it. Funeral. Call Sarnoff and tell him I'm going to jump.

(puts a foot out the window)

I'd rather die a star than live as a has-been.

MILLICENT

Ix-nay. Ix-nay. You tried that when he cut your show from fifteen minutes a day to five.

CYNTHIA

(returns inside)

And he said, "I'll hold your coat." Oooh. I won't give him the satisfaction of jumping.

MILLICENT

Come on. Let's go out and find some human interest. There's a breadline around the corner.

CYNTHIA

I'm not interested in breadlines.

MILLICENT

You will be when you're out of work.

CYNTHIA

I'll starve first.

(snaps her fingers)

That's the ticket. I'll starve. Gimme that phone.

(MILLICENT hands CYNTHIA the phone. During the ensuing conversation, BETTY SUE TOMLINSON sidles along the perimeter upstage to downstage. SHE turns the corner at the front of the stage and starts to cross. All the while, SHE moves as if her back and arms are pressed against a wall and frequently shudders as SHE looks down. SHE is dressed in a neat but unfashionable manner befitting an arrival from boondocks. BETTY SUE stops centerstage. SHE sits cautiously and dangles her legs.)

CYNTHIA

(into the phone)

Operator, get me Johansson at the Tribune. [beat] Swede, it's Cynthia. [beat] Cynthia Stevenson. [beat] Do I sound like I'm dead? Listen, I've got a scoop for you. I'm starting a hunger strike to protest the cancellation of my show. It's going to be on the ledge outside my window. [beat] Yep. You won't be able to see me from the street. You'll have to get your pictures from inside. Uh-huh. Uh-huh. It will only make a splash if I jump. Real funny, Swede. [beat] Give you five minutes notice. Yeah, yeah, I'll remember that.

(SHE hangs up the phone.)

MILLICENT

Remember what?

CYNTHIA

"A tree that falls in an empty forest makes no sound."

(as MILLICENT snickers)

Laugh all you want. I got the dope on hunger strikes straight from the Mahatma's mouth. How long 'til airtime?

MILLICENT

Two minutes.

CYNTHIA

Okay. Set me up with the mike.

(CYNTHIA takes the mike and climbs onto the ledge, her back to BETTY SUE. CYNTHIA turns and sees BETTY SUE.)

CYNTHIA

Hey, you, get out of here. This is my ledge.

BETTY SUE

I don't see your name on it.

CYNTHIA

It's underneath my window.

BETTY SUE

So is Sixth Avenue but that doesn't make it yours.

CYNTHIA

I'm Cynthia Stevenson.

BETTY SUE

The Cynthia Stevenson? Sweet Betsey from Pike! When I was little, we listened to your program all the time. But I thought you were deh - I'm Betty Sue Tomlinson. Pleased to make your acquaintance.

(BETTY SUE reaches out to shake Cynthia's hand. SHE loses her balance and nearly slips off the ledge. CYNTHIA grabs hold and keeps BETTY SUE from falling.)

Ooo-weee.

CYNTHIA

Are you trying to kill yourself?

BETTY SUE

No, ma'am. I'm trying to see get in to Mr. Sarnoff.

MILLICENT

(leans out)

Most people go through his door. One minute to air.

BETTY SUE

You don't understand. I met a boy at the Georgia Peach beauty contest. Frank. Frank Giles from New York. Maybe you know him?

CYNTHIA

I'm afraid not.

BETTY SUE

He promised we'd get married right after I won and he'd get me a screen test with Mr. Sarnoff. But I didn't even make the semi-finals and Frank disappeared. I spent my last dime getting here. I figured if Frank knows Mr. Sarnoff, Mr. Sarnoff knows Frank.

CYNTHIA

And?

BETTY SUE

Mr. Sarnoff won't see me. So I told his secretary I'm gonna set here hell or high water until he does.

MILLICENT

But, honey, Mr. Sarnoff is in the radio business, not the -

CYNTHIA

Miss Brady, may I have a word?

MILLICENT

(out of BETTY SUE'S hearing)

Are you going to tell her that anybody who really knows Sarnoff knows he doesn't make movies or am I?

CYNTHIA

I'll tell her later.

(crosses her heart and
holds up her fingers)

Scout's honor. In the meantime, I'm taking your advice.

(exudes sympathy as SHE
sits next to BETTY SUE)

You know, Mr. Sarnoff's awfully stubborn. I tell you what. You set still - sit still - and give me a week to find Frank. If I don't find him, I'll introduce you to Mr. Sarnoff personally.

(takes a pencil and index
cards from her pocket)

All you have to do is read the cards I hand to you. You *can* read?

BETTY SUE

'Course I can.

MILLICENT

Ten seconds.

CYNTHIA

Deal?

BETTY SUE

Deal.

MILLICENT

(gives BETTY SUE a signal
to hush and counts down
with her fingers)

Shhh. In three. In two. In one.

CYNTHIA

(whispering as if covering
a golf tournament)

This is Cynthia Stevenson live from high atop the RCA building.
I'm crouched ten feet from the flagpole where beauty queen
Betty Sue Tomlinson sits suspended between life and death.
Despite the heroic efforts of the New York Police Department
to talk her down -

(CYNTHIA hands BETTY SUE a card.)

BETTY SUE

(mechanically)

Back off, Copper, or I'll jump.

CYNTHIA

- this forsaken flower of American maidenhood clings to her
perilous perch. I'm going closer to see if I can get Miss
Tomlinson to say a few words.

MILLICENT

And we're out to commercial. Back in thirty seconds.

BETTY SUE

I don't see a flagpole. Or the police.

CYNTHIA

But the audience does. I could tell them Martians were
attacking and they'd believe it.

(CYNTHIA scribbles on the index cards. The
telephone rings. MILLICENT answers.)

MILLICENT

Cynthia Stevenson's office.

(holds the phone out to

CYNTHIA)

Johansson's been listening. He wants to send some boys over.

CYNTHIA

Now he wants to send some boys over.

(into the mouthpiece)

Fuggedaboutit!

MILLICENT

(hangs up the phone)

Back in ten.

CYNTHIA

(to BETTY SUE)

Give it some feeling, will you? You wanna be in movies? Start acting.

(MILLICENT counts down on her fingers and cues.)

CYNTHIA

As Betty Sue Tomlinson clings to life seven-hundred and fifty feet above Sixth Avenue, the sordid details emerge. This sweetheart of the South was wooed and won by New York movie producer Frank Giles who promised her marriage and stardom. Mr. Giles absconded but true love lives. Penniless and friendless in the big city, Miss Tomlinson cries out for her man.

(SHE hands BETTY SUE another index card.)

BETTY SUE

(histrionically)

Where is Frank? Can someone please find Frank?

CYNTHIA

If you are Frank Giles, or if you know Frank Giles, you can save a young woman's life by calling Empire 9581. I'm Cynthia Stevenson and you have been listening to the first episode of, of - "Postcards from the Ledge."

MILLICENT

And we're out.

(The phone rings. MILLICENT answers.)

Cynthia Stevenson's office. Yes, sir.

(hangs up)

Sarnoff. He loves it. Junior, sit tight. Cynthia, his office. Pronto.

(Lights down.)

SCENE 2

THE SAME LOCATION. BETTY SUE SPRAWLS ON THE LEDGE FILING HER FINGERNAILS. MILLICENT SITS INSIDE WITH THE EQUIPMENT. CYNTHIA WALKS THE LEDGE BALANCING GRACEFULLY WITH ARMS OUTSTRETCHED.

ANNOUNCER

Five days later -

CYNTHIA

It's been almost a week. You'd think we'd have a lead on Frank by now.

BETTY SUE

When do I see Mr. Sarnoff? I'm bored.

MILLICENT

So is the audience. We need a wow finish or we're kaput.

CYNTHIA

You know, it's kinda nice out here once you get used to it. You ought to try it.

MILLICENT

Not on your life. We're back on air in thirty.

CYNTHIA

If only Frank and Sarnoff really knew each other.

BETTY SUE

They don't know each other!?! You lied to me! I've been waiting out here for days for no reason! You don't care about me. You only care about -

(FRANK, a handsome pizza delivery boy knocks on the open doorway.)

FRANK

Who ordered pepperoni?

BETTY SUE

(near tears)

Frank?

FRANK

Betty Sue?

MILLICENT

Quiet! Five seconds.

(MILLICENT desperately gives the throat-cutting signal and counts down. FRANK and BETTY SUE embrace. CYNTHIA follows with the microphone.)

FRANK

(right on cue)

Betty Sue? Is it really you?

BETTY SUE

Frank. Frank. I thought I'd never see you again. You wanted a beauty queen and I'm not even a beauty princess.

FRANK

That's not it, darling. I ran away because I'm not a producer. I figured a beautiful girl like you would never go for the real me.

BETTY SUE

My poor, sweet Frank. Don't you know the screen test was frosting? You're the cake. I love you, Frank Giles. Do you still have the marriage license?

FRANK

Do I!

BETTY SUE

Then what are we waiting for? Miss Stevenson, how can we thank you? If it wasn't for you, none of this would have happened.

(FRANK and BETTY SUE kiss. THEY exit.)

CYNTHIA

(with a catch in her throat)

Tears stream down the faces of the policemen and psychologists gathered here to keep Betty Sue Tomlinson alive. To think that she and her beloved will enjoy the rich, full life that once hung by a thread brings a lump to this reporter's throat. For Postcards on the Ledge, this is Cynthia Stevenson.

MILLICENT

And we're out. What a load of hooey. I feel dirty.

CYNTHIA

You're the one who wanted real people.

MILLICENT

And *real* stories.

CYNTHIA

Real stories. The real story would have put that kid on the first bus back to Georgia.

(nobly)

Sometimes we have to strive for a higher truth.

MILLICENT

Or higher ratings.

CYNTHIA

"A tree that falls in an empty forest makes no sound." We can only do good for others by doing well for ourselves. Don't you want to do good?

MILLICENT

Ye-es. But it's not like a Betty Sue is going to drop in every day.

(JOHN BROWN enters.)

JOHN
Western Union. Telegram for Cynthia -
(recognizes her)
Hello, Miss Stevenson. What you did for that poor girl -

(HE chokes up, then returns to business and
sings.)

FOR SHE'S A JOLLY GOOD FELLOW,
FOR SHE'S A JOLLY GOOD FELLOW,
FOR SHE'S A JOLLY GOOD FELLOW
WHO'S CONTRACT IS RENEWED.

Signed David Sarnoff.

CYNTHIA
You have a beautiful voice. What's your name?

JOHN
John Brown.

CYNTHIA
Too ordinary. We need something better.
(contemplates the
possibilities)
John, John. Giovanni. Giovanni Bruno. Yes!
(back to him)
From around here?

JOHN
Brooklyn. I'm supposed to be at Julliard but had to leave on
account of my Dad lost his job and I have to support the family.
I tried the Met but they ain't hiring. So here I am.

CYNTHIA
How would you like to make twenty-five bucks?

JOHN
Sure. Yeah. Who wouldn't? You want me to sing?

(CYNTHIA takes the index cards and pencil out
of her pocket. SHE points to the ledge.)

CYNTHIA
Just take a seat and follow my directions.

MILLICENT
(aside, imitating Boris
Karloff)
I think I've created a monster.