

## The Assistant by John Loonam (2022)

Crouched in the bottom of the disappearing phone booth, listening to Mr. Stamp tell the audience that the silver rings he was banging together were perfectly solid, Raquel could smell the stale sweat and deodorant in the fabric of her leotard. There was a spot of rusty brown on the knee pressed close to her face—blood from the slice the trap door had cut in her thumb in Sloatsburg two nights earlier, at the junior high. She still wore a Band-Aid, but knew she could not put off the laundry another night.

Mr. Stamp had bandaged the cut and given her aspirin after the show.

"Salicylic acid enhances blood flow," he'd said in the same serious, matter-of-fact tone he used when registering for motel rooms or explaining trinomials.

She had lifted the bloody toilet paper away from the slice in the pink ball of her thumb. "I'm not sure blood flow is the problem," she said, smiling in a way she hoped looked witty.

Mr. Stamp had put the Band-Aid on very tight—this was in the front seat of his station wagon, its faux wood sides barely visible in the dark lot behind Kill Van Kull Junior High School, all the props and equipment stashed in the back. Mr. Stamp was still in his tuxedo, Raquel in the pale blue leotard with pink beads sewn along the neckline, the little offset navy-blue skirt hitched up under her on the bench seat. He let his own large thumb press down on the plastic of the Band-Aid until Raquel winced slightly, his voice tense with patience. "Nothing happens if the blood doesn't flow," he'd said, and he took the tissue from her hand and stuffed it into the litter bag hanging from the cigarette lighter. Mr. Stamp did not smoke. Then he turned back behind the steering wheel and asked her to fasten her seatbelt. "That's why we're careful," he said.

At the hotel, before disappearing into his room, he had gestured at her door as if he could see behind it. "Phone home tonight," he'd said. "Tell your mother about the injury. I promised: no surprises."

That had been in Sloatsburg. Tonight, they were in Paramus and she had to get back to washing his shirts and her leotard. For two nights he had only insisted that

she reload the trick bouquets, taking care not to tangle the petals in the spring loader as she pushed the silk flowers firmly back into their tubes. She had kept the sound low on the TV bolted to the dresser in her room so he wouldn't know she was watching and come in to make that speech about distractions and a job well done. She wondered what he did in his room. Whenever she went to say goodnight, knocking on his adjoining door and then standing in the passageway between their rooms, he had his itinerary binder with all the shows and hotels for the whole tour sitting on his lap.

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When Mr. Stamp and his wife had first moved around the corner from Raquel on Tuthill Road, everyone knew they were planning on having children. They brought it up at cookouts and when the mothers got together on the sidewalk they included Mrs. Stamp. But, after a long time, Raquel noticed the mothers shaking their heads whenever Mrs. Stamp went back to her kitchen. "What a shame," her mother whispered to Raquel's father, and told Raquel to always be nice to Mrs. Stamp. "Let her give cookies to the twins. Make sure they say thank you." But when Mrs. Stamp came out with a tray, the cookies turned out to be the healthy kind—sugar-free with carob chips instead of chocolate—and Raquel had to hide the half-eaten remnants in the pocket of her jean jacket.

Mr. Stamp walked to work at the high school every morning during the school year, carrying a briefcase and striding stiffly, as if someone were watching. Once Raquel's father, at a parent-teacher conference, joked to him something about being jealous of his commute, then said to Raquel's mother on the way home that he would rather ride the Long Island Rail Road a thousand miles than be stuck in a classroom with all those shitty teenagers.

Mr. Stamp was a good teacher, clear and well-organized. The other girls crushed on Mr. Freeman with his blonde hair and the quaver in his voice as he read *Our Town* aloud in class, but Raquel was a math girl and she thought Mr. Stamp's explanations of oblique triangles and cosine functions could be invitations to a world of beauty and enchantment.

When Raquel's mother sent her around the corner for extra help before the Regents exam—Better safe than sorry, she'd said—Raquel had seen that Mr. Stamp's study was divided in two. One side was math, with a row of textbooks along the back of the desk and a poster of Albert Einstein above the filing cabinet, while the other side was magic, an image of Houdini partly blocked by the disappearing phone

booth. While Mr. Stamp explained the derivation of polar coordinates, Raquel kept looking over at the magic side, at the props and equipment, at the flyers with his stage name—*Dr. Wonder!*—advertising old shows in places like Pittsfield and Hartford. His tuxedo hung from a hook on the wall next to the sequined leotard Mrs. Stamp wore as his assistant; the hangers in their shoulders held the clothing stiff and still, suspended over an old suitcase. When Mr. Stamp was satisfied with her trigonometry, he showed her how the disappearing phone booth worked, letting her fold herself into the hidden compartment and smiling as Raquel, imagining a spotlight, made a special effort to unfold gracefully and take a bow.

A week before Raquel was to graduate, Mrs. Stamp tripped over the shovel while planting zucchini and broke her ankle. She used crutches to come all the way around the corner with Mr. Stamp to meet with Raquel's parents. They sent Raquel to the basement to watch the twins while they discussed whether she could be Mr. Stamp's assistant that summer.

The basement was always a little cooler than the rest of the world, and, after the spring rain, it felt damp and clammy. The twins were at the bottom of the stairs, spread out on the yellow shag remnant that covered the patch of the cement floor Mom had denoted the play area—across from the washer/drier. A game board was spread out between them, a third pile of money Raquel was ignoring spilled out from one edge.

"All expenses paid, of course," Mr. Stamp had said. "Motel rooms, meals, everything."

"And five dollars a show?" her father asked. Mr. Stamp nodded. "That's good money."

"Hotels?" her mother said. "Hartford? Rensselaer? She's only seventeen."

Raquel was at the top of the basement stairs, leaning into the crack in the door she held open, one hand on the doorknob and one flat on the wooden surface next to her ear, her face pressed into the opening. She strained to hear what they were saying, to understand what direction the conversation was taking.

"You know where I was at seventeen?" her father asked.

"It's different," her mother whined. "For a girl."

"We were in Kaesong, Pusan. Korea, right Stamp?" He slapped Mr. Stamp on the shoulder.

"Well, I was nineteen. Draft age," Mr. Stamp said, and even Raquel could hear that he was put off by her father's boyishness. "But yes, I get your point."

Raquel thought of seeing new places, checking into fancy hotels, ordering room service. She imagined Mr. Stamp, handsome in his tuxedo and, remembering Mrs. Stamp's beautiful leotard back in the office, imagined something even more beautiful for herself—baby blue, maybe rhinestones. This was adulthood, she thought, as she listened to Mr. Stamp's voice explaining how stage work taught poise and responsibility. She wished that he was more persuasive, exciting, wished he sounded more like magic, less like math.

Mrs. Stamp leaned forward and put a hand over Raquel's mother's hand. "I know what you're thinking," she said. "My husband is a good man. There's no cause for worry."

When her father called her into the room, there was a moment of silence after his booming voice as Raquel, pausing to get her happiness under control, took a deep breath, ran her hands down to smooth the skirt over her hips, then pushed through the door to join the grownups.

Mr. Stamp did a tour of the tri-state area every summer, magic being his serious hobby. Starting in Port Jeff, where they lived, they crossed on the ferry to Bridgeport and did their first show at the junior high school, then went on to a PTA benefit in Waterbury and the Granby Senior Center. Then Millerton, Cossackie, Herkimer, almost as far as Syracuse before turning back toward home. Some days they did two shows—VFW and Knights of Columbus, birthday parties, that one legit theater on Olde Vaudeville Night in Ellenville. By August, it was all familiar to Raquel. They had turned around after the Oneida Volunteer Fire Department and now every stop brought them a little closer to home.

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The lighting at the Rocky Marciano Sons of Italy Lodge in Paramus was spotty and Raquel knocked over the magic rings when she spun into the disappearing phone booth—a plywood crate painted red to look like it was from London. Spinning and letting the little skirt around her hips flare out to show her legs had been her idea, and she knew Mr. Stamp only put up with it reluctantly. As the rings rattled around on the floor of the little stage, the three boys in the back row laughed and slapped

each other's hands. Raquel stiffened her smile and waited for Mr. Stamp to close the door.

It was pitch dark in the booth. Raquel let her fingertips graze along the wooden sides as she folded herself into the crouch and pulled the lid down over her head, careful to keep her thumb out of the way this time. She slid the false front into place so that, when the door was opened, it would look like she was gone. There were slats for air but she began to sweat and noticed the smell of herself and the dirty leotard. She rubbed a finger over the Band-Aid. There was a thin slice of light above the hinge and through that tiny crack she could see Mr. Stamp moving about the stage, gathering the fallen rings and doing the patter that accompanied turning them into a chain, a trick that usually came after the disappearing phone booth. That meant Mr. Stamp would keep her in that tight, silent crouch a little longer than usual, but it was her own fault. She could hear those boys hooting at the trick.

Back in June, Raquel had thought she would like being on stage, but the truth was she simply handed Mr. Stamp his props and posed in silly positions that signaled the audience should applaud. Mr. Stamp had let her design her own leotard and she had used her mother's old Singer to sew on all the spangles. She knew she was prettier than Mrs. Stamp, who had stiff, straw hair, but Mr. Stamp paid little attention to her and it unnerved her. She noticed some men in the audience watched her when they should have been watching Mr. Stamp pull an endless rope of handkerchiefs from some woman's purse.

She especially disliked it when there were teenagers in the audience. These three boys, slouching in the back, the one curly-haired kid with his legs draped over the chair in front of him, laughed at every trick and called out theories of how they were faked—"It's up his sleeve," he yelled when Mr. Stamp made the woman's bracelet disappear. Raquel fought the urge to stick her tongue out when Mr. Stamp pushed up his sleeves and found the bracelet on the husband's wrist.

The movement of the door as Mr. Stamp opened it the first time to show she was not there pushed a gust of hot air down into the hidden compartment and she heard that curly-haired boy call out, his voice dripping in sarcasm "Oh no! Where'd she go?" Raquel pressed her face closer to the crack of light, searching for cooler air and a view of that boy, his sloppy hair and Twisted Sister t-shirt. She wished there was a trick that would win them over, that Mr. Stamp could rise to the challenge of their heckling, but when he finally opened the door and she stepped out, her arms wide despite the dark rings of sweat under her armpits, a practiced surprise on her

face, one of the boys whistled. She did a graceful half turn so that her torso was between Mr. Stamp and the middle finger she stuck up at the back row.

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When Mr. Stamp and Raquel came out to the parking lot, each of them carrying one end of the phone booth and a bag of other props over one shoulder, one of the boys was waiting for them. He stepped out from between two cars, and Raquel started slightly, causing the canvas bag to slide off her shoulder and down her arm to where her hand was lugging the booth. It was not the curly-haired boy, but the quieter one with the hint of mustache who had sat next to him, laughed at his jokes.

"I liked your show, Dr. Wonder," he said, using the stage name without irony. He looked at Raquel as he spoke. He was not cute—skinny with no chin—but he had nice eyes. His voice was polite now, maybe a little eager. "Can I help you with that?"

Raquel was wrestling a little bit with her end, holding the booth with one hand, raising the other above her head until the straps of the canvas bag slid back down her arm, shrugging them onto her shoulders and grabbing the booth with both hands again. The boy took a step closer to help, but Mr. Stamp made a noise in his throat, something between a cough and a word, and the boy stopped. Mr. Stamp rested his end of the booth on the bumper of the station wagon and nodded at Raquel as he fetched the car keys from his pocket. She lowered her end to the pavement, same as every night, and hurried to take the keys from Mr. Stamp, who raised that end of the wooden booth high enough for her to lower the tailgate. Mr. Stamp rested his end of the booth on the tailgate and both of them went to the back end to shove the length of the crate into the wagon.

The boy stood watching, a tuft of brown hair covering one eye. Mr. Stamp brushed his two hands together as if they were dusty.

"You'd better get home now, son," he said.

The boy looked at Raquel once more, then turned and left. Raquel watched the boy walk away, shoulders stooped, hands in the pockets of his Member's Only jacket, while Mr. Stamp closed the tailgate. On the drive to the motel, a Holiday Inn outside Parsippany, the two were silent until Mr. Stamp parked and, just before going into the office, said, "We have to be careful about knocking things over on these small stages. Maybe cut the twirling."

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The desk clerk, some girl around Raquel's age, or maybe twenty, with stringy hair and a Huckapoo shirt with the New York City skyline tight across her chest and stomach, was studying from a giant economics textbook that she had to move so Mr. Stamp could sign the register. Desk clerks usually started at them when they signed in, even though Mr. Stamp made a show of getting two rooms and always referred to her as Miss Adelman, his assistant, and made her carry her own luggage. This girl barely looked up from her book. Raquel shook her head slightly because, after all, she was checking in to a motel with an older man in a tuxedo. And she was wearing a leotard. Mr. Stamp turned away from the desk and handed her a key and repeated the room numbers, 216 and 218, before going back out to find the staircase. Raquel paused a moment, thinking this girl would look up and smirk, or say something, or even just notice she was there, but the girl stayed focused on her textbook and, after a beat, Raquel followed Mr. Stamp out.

They had gotten Burger King take-out for dinner because it was her turn to pick, and she ate her Whopper and fries in front of the TV. This one was bolted to the desk, the faces on *Hollywood Squares* all a little too green. As she was finishing the shake, she heard Mr. Stamp knocking on the adjoining door.

Raquel jumped up and crossed to open her side, wishing she had turned the TV off, that she had been watching *Nova* or the news. She stood in front of him. She was still in her leotard. He had removed his shirt and tie, wore just the black tuxedo slacks and a white t-shirt. He seemed, as usual, to avoid looking at her, his eyes on perhaps her hairline, or a spot on the wall behind her. "Excellent balance during the levitation tonight," he said. "You stayed perfectly still." Raquel knew he was making up for criticizing the twirling, but she smiled and said she liked levitating best and there was an awkward silence, the two of them standing on either side of the adjoining doors, until finally he coughed and said, "That boy? In the parking lot?" Raquel nodded, afraid to say anything. After a moment, Mr. Stamp said, "I know his type," and handed her his two tuxedo shirts—the one he had worn that night and the one she had not washed after Sloatsburg. Then he stepped backward into his room and closed the adjoining door on his side. Raquel heard him turn the lock.

His voice, she thought, was always so clear and, she searched for a word from the SAT lists she had studied. Forthright? He always sounded like he was teaching, even when he was on stage. He was good at the tricks, Raquel understood, but not very entertaining. And yet, that patient, direct description of what he wanted the

audience to believe seemed to fit the rooms they appeared in, with their fluorescent lights and institutional colors.

She let the sink fill with hot water and sprinkled soap flakes over the surface. She pushed each shirt, one at a time, into the soapy water, pressing the bubbles of fabric that floated to the top, squeezing out the air trapped underneath. She drained the sink and refilled it twice again, rinsing the shirts with water as hot as she could stand it, then wringing the shirts out and putting them on their wire hangers, suspending them from the shower curtain rod. She thought of what her mother always said, a cigarette hanging from her mouth—Thank God for permanent press.

Later, after she had washed the leotard, hung it up to dry beside the two shirts and taken her shower, Raquel sat on the bed in her pajamas with *The Love Boat* on TV. She kept the sound low so that Mr. Stamp would not know what she was watching, and held the catalog for fall semester at the community college on her lap, open to the nursing courses her mother had marked in blue highlighter. When the show ended, she closed the catalogue, tossed it onto the pile spilling from her open suitcase, and crossed to the room door leading out to the parking lot, the night. Mr. Stamp had given strict instructions that first night in Bridgeport, back in July, to always lock the door, to slide the chain into place. She did that now, standing close to the door's edge. Then she opened it a crack, pulling the chain taut and pressing her face into the tiny slice of darkness coming past the edge, but she could not hear or see anything.

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