

OFF THE GRID

A Ten-Minute Duet

by
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The lights rise on the entrance to and exit from a metro stop in Washington, D.C. MADDIE is seated against the wall in the USL corner; SHE is almost completely obscured by the watch cap pulled low over her forehead and the rough blanket pulled around her. SHE holds a large throwaway paper cup in her right hand for collecting change. In her left hand is an unlit cigarette. WILLIAM appears from depths below on the escalator. HE is dressed "business- casual," and carries a briefcase. HE doesn't see MADDIE. SHE shakes her cup of change at him as HE walks away. HE suddenly stops and opens his briefcase and goes through it in a rush, unzipping and looking in every space and pocket for something without luck. MADDIE shakes her cup at him again, but HE doesn't react to her. WILLIAM sets the briefcase down between his feet and starts to go through all of his pants pockets and the pockets of his jacket one at a time searching for something without success. With each empty pocket, his search becomes more frantic. During his searching, MADDIE tries out different rhythms of shaking her cup at him; shaking it once, then twice – then in a variety of patterns, each without getting WILLIAM's attention. WILLIAM unzips his jacket and starts to search through his jacket's inside pockets without success. MADDIE's cup shaking becomes a game; as each pocket is searched, MADDIE shakes her cup of change in a loud, sustained rattle of coins like a snare drum ending with a bang as each pocket comes up empty. This finally gets his attention.

WILLIAM: Do you have to do that?

(SHE shakes the cup at him once.)

Is that really necessary?

(SHE shakes the cup at him twice.)

All right, fine.

MADDIE: *(SHE drops the blanket down to expose her face)* So, you can see me.

WILLIAM: Of course I can see you ...

MADDIE: You've never looked at me before.

WILLIAM: You never bothered me before – making all that noise ...

MADDIE: Ah – as long as I'm quiet, I'm invisible. I'm a ghost rattling chains. Like Jacob Marley.

WILLIAM: Jacob Marley?

MADDIE: Yeah, you know – Charles Dickens? *A Christmas Carol*?

WILLIAM: I know who Jacob Marley is.

MADDIE: Good. Glad I could share that allusion with you.

WILLIAM: *Allusion?*

MADDIE: Just 'because I'm on the street it doesn't mean I'm ignorant or stupid.

WILLIAM: You wouldn't be invisible if you weren't covered up in the corner like that.

MADDIE: I'd be freezing if I weren't covered up in the corner like this.

WILLIAM: Well, I see you sitting there every morning. I just don't pay any attention.

MADDIE: That's because you're scared.

WILLIAM: I'm not scared of you ...

MADDIE: You're scared you could be me.

WILLIAM: I'm nothing like you.

MADDIE: That's what I used to think! I used to think I couldn't be like me. But look where I am today!

WILLIAM: That's you.

MADDIE: Get sick. Lose your job. Run out of money ...

WILLIAM: I won't let that happen.

MADDIE: I had a job, a house, a car, a cat ...

WILLIAM: Sorry.

MADDIE: Hey – you know it happens. You just don't think it can happen to you.

WILLIAM: That's right.

MADDIE: Maybe not. Maybe you can run home to Mom and Dad if things go bad.

WILLIAM: My parents are both dead.

MADDIE: Well, then.

WILLIAM: I take care of myself.

MADDIE: Okay. So. What'd you lose?

WILLIAM: My ... *(HE looks at her)* Never mind.

MADDIE: Your wallet? Must be important to be spazzin' out like that.

WILLIAM: Don't worry about it.

MADDIE: I'm not worried. I'm entertained. You do a nice little spastic dance.

WILLIAM: Glad I can amuse you. It's got to be boring sitting there all day.

MADDIE: I don't sit here all day. Sometimes I go across the street and sit in the park. Get a little sun, you know? But I hate to lose a prime spot like this one. Out of the weather, lots of traffic ...

(HE finds what he's been looking for. It's his wallet.)

WILLIAM: Here's my wallet! If it was a snake ...

MADDIE: You're not awake yet.

WILLIAM: It's too early for this ...

MADDIE: Get yourself some coffee from the Starbucks next door.

WILLIAM: I don't have time ...

MADDIE: And get me a cup while you're at it.

(Pause as HE regards her as if for the first time.)

WILLIAM: Why should I buy you a cup of coffee?

MADDIE: Because you can.

WILLIAM: I work ...

MADDIE: And I accept donations. The relationship works out, don't you think?

WILLIAM: We have no relationship.

MADDIE: Then keep walking like everyone else.

(Beat. HE starts to exit.)

Hey! You dropped something!

(HE stops and looks at her.)

Piece of paper or something. It fell out of your pocket.

WILLIAM: *(scans the ground for it)* Where?

MADDIE: Where you were standing. *(rattles her change cup)*

WILLIAM: *(crosses back, scanning the ground)* I do not have time for this.

MADDIE: *(stops rattling her change cup with a bang)* Then go. It's probably not important.

WILLIAM: How would you know?

MADDIE: Just a piece of paper.

WILLIAM: I write things down to remember. *(Beat. HE looks at her.)* I didn't drop anything, did I?

MADDIE: *(smiles widely)* Nope.

WILLIAM: Then why ... Never mind.

MADDIE: Made you stop.

WILLIAM: Excuse me?

MADDIE: Made you stop and come back.

WILLIAM: What is wrong with you?

MADDIE: Lots of things. You want a list?

(end of free preview)