[Snap Judgment]

**Glynn:** Snappers, I want to tell you about a podcast I dig. It's called Live Wire. It's a lot like late night but it's for your ears. It features host Luke Burbank, and the conversations are intimate, funny, truly thought-provoking. Live Wire, it's a perfect place to discover new writers, filmmakers, comedians, musicians, you also catch on your faves like Kamau Bell, and Pink Martini just to name a couple. And Live Wire's Best New Segment, featuring new stories that will actually brighten your day. Listen to Live Wire on Apple Podcast, Spotify, or wherever you listen.

Okay, so Kyoto, Japan, Friday night. I'm fresh dressed like a million bucks, I've got on my blazer and white T and some brand-new Chucks. There's a spring in my step, but I move real slow. Meet up with my crew because my crew say so. We stepped up to the line but then the bouncers come and get us. First, I get kind of scared, but they don't try to hit us. Instead, they take us to the back like I'm some kind of Mac, pour us Coke and Jack, figure must be because I'm black. We got the VIP. We're looking down at the crowd and then they start up the music and they kick it real loud.

A man takes the stage and they stop the beat. He's like, "There's a celebrity in the house that y'all need to meet." He points up at my crew. We start looking around. Then, he shouts out, "There goes Bobby Brown."

[upbeat music]

[applause and cheers]

Yeah. Up in the club in front of hundreds of people, and the spotlight comes on, the dude says, "I'm Bobby Brown." What would you do? What would you do? I'm going to tell you what I did. The drinks, the crowd, the spotlight, the music. I danced every little breath you take, I give the people what they want. You're welcome, Bobby Brown. Wherever you may be, you're welcome. That's what I did.

Today, on Snap Judgment, other folk, they make other choices. We proudly present The League of Impersonators.

My name is Glynn Washington. It's my prerogative [unintelligible [00:02:28]. That girl is poison. I don't know about that last one, but you're listening to Snap Judgment.

[upbeat music]

We begin when Umid Isabaev is trapped behind enemy lines, he gets help from two of the world's most dangerous men.

Snap Judgment.

[pensive music]

**Anne:** In 2019, Umid Isabaev was living in Moscow. Every day, he took the Metro.

**Umid [via translator]:** I was working at a pretty good garage. While I was going to work, a guy who was sitting right in front of me took my picture. After a week or so, my sister sent me this picture. Apparently, they showed it on YouTube saying I looked like the president of some country.

**Anne:** The stranger on the train had taken a photo of Umid and posted it online. In it, Umid is sitting facing the camera wedged between two other commuters, holding a plastic bag on his lap. His eyes are closed. He looks tired. But as the guy who posted it pointed out, what Umid really looks like is Ukrainian president Volodymyr Zelenskyy.

[National Anthem of Ukraine playing]

**Anne:** The photo attracted comments like, "It's him," and, "The real Zelenskyy doesn't have a stomach like that." Meanwhile, Umid barely knew who Zelenskyy was.

**Umid:** I didn't know that he was a president. I didn't understand politics. I was not involved in politics at all.

**Anne:** But pretty soon, politics wanted to be involved with him.

**Umid:** All of a sudden, I became famous. They started inviting me to different studios, to different programs. A producer wanted to make some movie.

**Anne:** Umid is from Uzbekistan. He moved to Moscow in 2006 to work in his friend's auto shop, where he painted cars all day long. It was hard work. So, after the photo went viral, when people started tracking him down and asking him to be on their talk shows or news programs, he went with it. He didn't even have to imitate Zelenskyy's voice or do any acting, just put on a suit and stand in front of the cameras.

**Umid:** I came home from painting cars, slept, woke up, and when I woke up, I woke up famous.

**Anne:** But as he fielded requests from Russian TV producers, there was something Umid hadn't realized.

**Umid:** I didn't even know that Ukraine and Russia were not getting along. I thought they all were the same people.

**Anne:** The Russian invasion of Ukraine was still two years away but the two countries had been at war since 2014. And here was Umid living in Russia, while looking like a dead ringer of the enemy nation's president.

[applause]

**Anne:** This is a clip from a 2020 Russian TV special. Umid as Zelenskyy is standing on a stage while four men wearing the traditional shirt of Ukraine, a white blouse with red embroidery, link arms and whirl around him. The men sing to him, "Where is the money?" Umid lip-syncs back, "There isn't." They sing, "If you are trying to get into NATO, it would be better if you raise salaries. Is there any hope for that?" Umid lip-syncs back, "There isn't."

[applause]

**Umid:** They said it was not making fun of Zelenskyy. Also, those singers, they said they were from Ukraine too. They said I should not worry about it. And so, I agreed.

**Anne:** But when TV producers approached him about making a Russian version of the show, *Servant of the People*, the one that Zelenskyy had starred in before becoming President of Ukraine, Umid started getting uneasy about the way he was being asked to portray Zelenskyy.

**Umid:** It was a meaningless ugly role. I didn't want to play that role. He is not a clown, he is a president. I was afraid to unwittingly participate in a show that would make fun of Zelenskyy or make him ashamed.

**Anne:** So, in February 2021, Umid gave up the whole thing, not just impersonating Zelenskyy, but his entire life in Moscow. He quit his job, said goodbye to his friends, and moved back to his hometown in Uzbekistan where he thought about starting a farm. But soon, his old agent in Moscow got back in touch with an idea. What if Umid move to Kyiv instead and worked as a Zelenskyy impersonator there? In Ukraine, he was free to make money from his face without being used for Russian propaganda. So, Umid did.

He found another job in Kyiv painting cars and for extra money, he took on Zelenskyy gigs. He appeared in a TV program about political lookalikes, alongside a big boisterous guy from Australia who played Kim Jong-un. Then, in February 2022, the Russians invaded. Umid thought--

**Umid:** They are all Slavic people, they are relatives, they will get along with each other tomorrow. The war will end one day. It is not forever.

**Anne:** Then, the bombs started falling.

[explosions]

**Umid:** There was nobody on the streets. You couldn't even turn on the lights in your house. You couldn't go out on the balcony. Very few of my neighbors were left. I could hear the rockets landing at the airport. Grenades and bombs were exploding all around. The war felt like it was coming closer and closer. Maybe rockets and bombs could fall on top of me.

**Anne:** It occurred to Umid that looking like a president is one thing, looking like the president of an invaded country is another. At this point, people he knew back in Russia started reaching out to him saying--

**Umid:** "Where are you? It is better if you tell us your address and let us bring you to Moscow."

**Anne:** This was all happening about the time that the real Zelenskyy refused to be evacuated from Kyiv saying, "The fight is here. I need ammunition, not a ride." What would happen if someone saw Umid fleeing the country and mistook him for the real thing?

**Umid:** I didn't want to leave. I respected Zelenskyy like my own brother. His heart is strong and large. I didn't want fake information to spread the Zelenskyy had fled the country.

**Howard:** That's when I thought, "Damn, I better give Umid a call because I didn't want him to be used as Russian propaganda."

**Anne:** This is the supreme leader of North Korea.

**Howard:** [laughs]

**Anne:** Actually, it's Howard X.

**Howard:** By the way, when I when I swear, do you cut that off or does that go in?

**Anne:** He's the guy from Australia who had appeared with Umid in that TV program about political lookalikes. Howard has been the world's foremost impersonator of Kim Jong-un since 2011 when he first saw him on TV.

**Howard:** Yeah, that was the first time I looked at the TV and I thought, "Wow, this guy really looks like me." He's the only fat person in the whole North Korea. And I thought, "Damn, I can make some money off this."

**Anne:** He's been in TV commercials, videogames, flown all over the world to attend private parties and restaurant openings. And yeah, he's on Cameo.

**Howard (on Cameo):** "Hello, this is Kim Jong-un. This message is for Eli. And I'm here to wish you happy bar mitzvah. Dearth to America."

**Anne:** Howard could talk about his adventures as Kim Jong-un for days.

**Howard:** It's done wonders to my sex life. I had a Tinder profile as Kim Jong-un and then it was just--[crosstalk]

**Anne:** But he does use his resemblance for a higher purpose. He argues that by impersonating a dictator, he's undermining the power of authoritarians everywhere.

**Howard:** Communist countries with dictatorships, they can't stand satire. They can't stand people laughing at them. Somebody told me that, "You know what? You're more powerful than a nuclear weapon."

**Anne:** When the Russian invasion begins--

**News Anchor:** Breaking news, Russia has now begun invading Ukraine.

**Anne:** Howard is watching the bombs fall on TV from the other side of the world, remembering Umid and thinking--

**Howard:** I want to take that chess piece out of Putin's hand. It's only a small chess piece, but I believe it is an important one. And also, he's one of my tribe.

**Anne:** On March 1st, 2022, six days after the invasion began, he reached out.

**Howard:** I told him, "You need to get the hell out of there." And I offered my help.

**Umid:** He said, "I just want to do some good for you. You're in danger and I want to save you. This war is not going to end tomorrow or the day after, and there is no reason for you to stay there. It's better if we get you out of Kyiv." So, I told him, "First, let me meet you and talk to you so I can know if you are who you say you are."

**Anne:** To Umid, Howard was a stranger. So, they got on a video call.

**Howard:** That's one of the advantages of being a lookalike, when they see you through the video on Skype, they know that dealing with someone who's trustworthy.

**Umid:** He said, "I'm not forcing you to trust me. It is your choice."

**Howard:** And I said, "Do you want to get out?" He said, "Yes, I do want to get out."

**Umid:** He knew politics and politicians. He was able to explain them to me and that's why I believed him. He told the truth. I thought maybe Allah has given me a chance to leave this place.

**Howard:** So, I contact the next person who was the closest to him which was the Putin impersonator who lives in Warsaw, Poland.

**Steve [via a translator]:** We don't choose our faces. We are born with our faces.

**Howard:** Steve Poland, that's his stage name.

**Steve:** Nature didn't bless me with the full head of hair. Putin's situation is similar to mine. So, when I go to photography sessions with all the other impersonators, I just walk in and I don't have to do anything. The other people have to sit and get their hair done.

**Anne:** Howard and Steve had played Kim and Putin a bunch before. They were big names on the fake dictators' circuit.

**Steve:** Just the fact that I look like Putin does not mean I can change the world. It doesn't mean that I can meet face to face with the President of Russia and explain things to him so maybe he could change and not cause so much evil and pain. I don't have that power. So, I do what I can. I try to use my looks in a positive way.

**Anne:** Howard explained Umid's situation to Steve.

**Howard:** "We need to get this guy out. He is in real danger. He's one of us. We have an obligation."

**Steve:** Umid could have been used in Russian propaganda, possibly one day in the form of fake news with the President of Russia falsely announcing the war's end. And Umid was afraid of playing that role. It might have been the last role of his life.

**Anne:** Within days, Steve and Howard hatched a plan and shared it with Umid. Steve reached out to people he knew in Ukraine, members of the National Guard who could move around the country freely. They would send a driver to meet Umid and take him to a safehouse about 100 kilometers from Kyiv. There, he could lay low a few days before continuing across the border to Poland, where Steve would be waiting for him. But when the rescue car showed, Umid wasn't there.

**Howard:** I thought, "Oh, maybe he was killed."

[suspenseful music]

**Glynn:** Don't go anywhere, Snappers. When we return, the rescue plan is in place but where's Umid? Stay tuned.

[suspenseful music]

Welcome back to Snap Judgment, The League of Impersonators episode. When last we left, the car to take Umid to safety had just shown up. But now, he's gone AWOL. Is Howard's plan falling apart?

Snap Judgment.

**Howard:** I thought, "Oh, maybe he was killed." But apparently, he wasn't killed.

**Umid:** I had this big hesitation. I didn't know who to trust. I don't trust anybody else in this world except my father. I had some people close to me in Kyiv who took me under their protection. They said, "Let us check the vehicle that comes to pick you up." They didn't want some strange driver to give me to Russian soldiers. They said they would check the vehicle and the driver first, and I should tell them I wasn't home.

**Howard:** So, we had to talk to him, say, "What the fuck, man? The car was waiting there for you, man. We had to pull a lot of strings to get this guy."

**Anne:** Here's Steve Poland again, the Putin guy.

**Steve:** We talked to him that night telling him that our purpose is to help him, asking him to trust us and giving him choices, either accepting our help in getting him out or staying behind and taking care of himself without our help.

**Anne:** Four days go by. Meanwhile, the Russian Armed Forces are trying to encircle Kyiv. Tanks are advancing, missiles are flying. One strikes the city's TV tower cutting off all transmissions. Umid's life hangs on how quickly Howard and Steve can convince him to leave.

**Howard:** "Get on the video phone. Get on the WhatsApp. We need to do a video call so that he can see you."

**Anne:** So, Howard arranges a video call between me and Steve Poland.

**Howard:** Who looks exactly like Putin. He knew that we weren't working for anyone. We convinced him. We are people that he can trust. We're just impersonators trying to help you out. We're not working for the Ukrainians. We're not working for the Russians.

**Umid:** Allah all made me trust him.

**Anne:** Howard and Steve find another driver, another car and Umid agrees to get in it.

**Steve:** Just in the nick of time. The whole area was heavily shelled the next day. I honestly don't know what would have happened if we hadn't picked him up that day.

**Anne:** The car is actually a minibus. It's full of other escaping Ukrainians, all wearing COVID facemasks. Umid climbs in and tries to get comfortable. He's wearing a facemask too, plus sunglasses, but there's a problem.

**Umid:** The driver recognized me first and then all the women in the car recognized me. They said, "You are Zelenskyy and that's why you don't want to take off your mask. You want to know how regular people are being evacuated."

**Anne:** Umid tells them that he isn't. But they keep talking to him like he's Zelenskyy.

**Umid:** They said, "When are you planning to end the war? Your people are with you."

**Anne:** "I'm not Zelenskyy," Umid insists.

**Umid:** Finally, I showed them my passport and then they believed me. We were passing by streets where I had good times, good memories. Now, there were soldiers and tanks everywhere. The roads were trafficky and there were cars that were broken upside down. Many, many things were going through my mind. "Where am I going? Are these people trustworthy? Are the Russians going to kidnap me? What if there is a rocket explosion right next to me?" I was afraid. At that time, I understood what Zelenskyy might feel as a person, as a president.

**Anne:** Night falls. Ahead, soldiers appear. It's a Ukrainian checkpoint. The driver tells everyone in the minibus, "Don't answer any questions. Just show your documents."

**Umid:** The soldier who was checking my documents, he asked me to take off my glasses and my mask. He was standing there with a rifle. And he got scared seeing me. He didn't know if I was the president or just somebody who looked like him.

**Anne:** Umid doesn't know what to do. The soldier is jumpy. He's holding a gun. But the driver calms him down. Tells him, "Umid is just a lookalike, nothing to see here." The minibus drives on. Sometime later, men in uniform force the bus to stop again. This time, it's Ukrainian police. They're looking for anyone who might be in touch with Russian agents. They want to check everyone's phone for anything suspicious. And when they get to Umid, they notice all the calls from his friends in Moscow.

**Umid:** They took my documents and my bag for some inspection.

**Anne:** The police keep him for hours. Then finally, one of them bothers to take a good look at him.

**Umid:** They realized that I looked like Zelenskyy and then after that, they started helping me.

**Howard:** He showed them the pictures of me and the Putin impersonator. And then the cops go, "Okay, okay, cool. We believe you."

**Umid:** They apologized. They wished me happiness. They wished me luck. They said they saw their President with their own eyes and they hugged me.

**Howard:** And then, even the cop at the end said, "Hey, tell Kim Jong-un to send us some missiles."

**Anne:** Finally, six days later, Umid crosses the border into Poland. Steve is waiting in Vratislav.

**Steve:** He went directly to the hotel we had reserved for him and slept. He was exhausted. After that, he came to the reception area to meet me. I knew what he looked like. But when he came out, I have to say that he looked more like Zelenskyy in person. We shook hands and then we hugged each other. There were some people in the reception area and they looked at us. They looked very surprised.

**Anne:** It's not every day you see Putin and Zelenskyy holding each other in a hotel lobby.

Do you feel like you saved his life?

**Howard:** I guess I've taken him out of immediate danger. The rest is up to him.

**Umid:** Howard took me out of the war. He gave me the rest of my life.

**Anne:** The two talk regularly. Howard keeps urging Umid to bulk up to look more like Zelenskyy, although that doesn't seem to be a problem.

**Umid:** They all call me Zelenskyy.

**Anne:** After his escape, Umid went live in a refugee camp in Germany along with hundreds of others.

**Umid:** The cooks called me Zelenskyy. The guards called me Zelenskyy. Everybody called me Zelenskyy.

**Glynn:** Thank you, Umid, for sharing your story to Snap. The three fake heads of state recently reunited in Poland for a magazine photoshoot. We're going to have a link to that shot at *snapjudgment.org.* Umid is still waiting for his papers. He's hoping to be back into the Zelenskyy game soon.

**Umid:** My plan is to stay in Europe. If they invite me, of course, I will participate in some movie or show. My only other wish is to go to America.

**Glynn:** You're listening to Umid and Steve. Howard represents impersonators of Barack Obama, Rodrigo Duterte, Elon Musk, and Bruce Lee. And Howard is currently running for public office in the Australian state of Victoria.

**Howard:** If the CIA is listening, take out the real Kim Jong-un and put me in his place, okay? I'll open up the country and I'll free all the political prisoners and I'll be a good, good benevolent dictator.

**Glynn:** Big thanks to Ethan Herschenfeld who voiced Umid’s words, and to Mars Lipowski, who was the voice of Steve Poland. And thanks to our translators for this piece, Muhitdin Ahunhodjaev and Magdalena Balz. The original score was by Renzo Gorrio. It was produced by John Fecile and Anne Ford.

[upbeat music]

Did you like the journey? The places? The sounds? Where else could you get all of this but Snap Judgment? A port in the storm. And know this, there's plenty more where that came from. Hours of amazing journeys from the Snap Judgment podcast available right now for free.

Snap is brought to you by a team that never wears a clown nose and a multicolored wig when they go about their everyday business. Never, ever. Except, of course, for the uber producer, Mr. Mark Ristich. There's Nancy López, Pat Mesiti-Miller, Regina Bediako, David Exumé, Anna Sussman, Renzo Gorrio, Shaina Shealy, Teo Ducot, Flo Wiley, John Fecile, Marisa Dodge, Bo Walsh, Annie Nguyen, and Zahra Noorbakhsh.

And please know that this is not the news. No way is this the news. In fact, you could do what I do. Introduce yourself as the uber producer, Mark Ristich, and watch how you get amazing service in restaurants. See how beautiful women flock around, asking for your phone number, and random men want to compare their six-pack abs. And even as you marvel at the difference a name makes, you would still not be as far away from the news as this is. But this is PRX.

[upbeat music]

*[Transcript provided by SpeechDocs Podcast Transcription]*