

THE COMIC



ESSENTIAL PROSE SERIES 178



Canada Council
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ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Canada¹

Guernica Editions Inc. acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. The Ontario Arts Council is an agency of the Government of Ontario.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada.

THE COMIC



Stan Rogal



GUERNICA
EDITIONS

TORONTO • CHICAGO • BUFFALO • LANCASTER (U.K.)
2020

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Distributors:
Independent Publishers Group (IPG)
600 North Pulaski Road, Chicago IL 60624
University of Toronto Press Distribution,
5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8
Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills
High Town, Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

First edition.
Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit—First Quarter
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2019947080
Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication
Title: The comic / Stan Rogal.
Names: Rogal, Stan, 1950- author.
Series: Essential prose series ; 178.
Description: Series statement: Essential prose series ; 178
Identifiers: Canadiana 20190156872 | ISBN 9781771834827 (softcover)
Classification: LCC PS8585.O391 C66 2020 | DDC C813/.54—dc23

*To Jacquie,
who shares my humour.*

THE COMIC REJECTIONS



“Many thanks for your submission of an excerpt from *The Comic*. Your style is refined, with trim sentences moving one to the next with a strong rhythm—a rhythm that carries the riffs well and shows great technical control. The prose moves, there is a real propulsion to it. The voicing is unwavering, and as a reader of manuscripts I truly appreciate how well edited this is. In short, there is much I like about the writing. However, we have decided we cannot use the manuscript (there are always a lot of considerations for choosing or not choosing a novel.) I hope that you find a good publisher for it.”

— ***

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“I’m SO sorry it’s taken me so long to get to this. We’ve been short-staffed for much of the year, and I just haven’t had any time to read manuscripts ...

Thanks for giving me a chance to consider *The Comic*. It’s a great story—I love a smart, sadsack-y protagonist, especially

a funny one! And his story is really compelling. It's hard to do justice to an art form like stand-up on the page, but you've done it! It's a fine novel.

I'm really sad to have to say, however, that we can't offer to take it on for ****. We don't publish many fiction titles per year—just four or five—and we have an embarrassment of riches in the submissions pile. There's just not enough space for all the worthy manuscripts.”

— ****

Humour is not resigned, it is rebellious.

—Sigmund Freud

*The audience is in the theatre, the performer is on stage:
this is a reality of the theatre. The actor, as performer,
entertains the audience by doing routines.*

—Joseph Chaikin

I'm not a comedian. I'm Lenny Bruce.

—Lenny Bruce



HE HAULED HIMSELF shakily up the stairs using the handrail as support. He'd been on the toilet for the third time in the past two hours and was down to the runs. He'd also been nauseous and vomited once. Nice. That accounted for breakfast and lunch. His stomach, though, still rumbled and growled, as if not done with him yet. What remained beyond liquids, beyond bile? he wondered. Dinner was skipped due to continued butterflies in the stomach. Instead, a half-litre of Dutch courage at the Black Horse. Nerves, he supposed. Opening night jitters. Not unusual, according to the stories. What stories? Athletes. Public speakers. Actors. That French movie with Catherine Deneuve where she played a stage actress who pukes before every live performance. Nazi occupation in Paris and so on. The title being ... what? He can't remember. Depardieu, as well, he seemed to recall. In the movie, not puking. Stellar company, at any rate. Still. Would he make it through his routine the way Catherine Deneuve made it through hers (the play) without suffering some sort of on-stage accident? Big shoes to fill. Enormous shoes.

The Last Metro. That was it. The name of the movie.

He'd splashed his face with tap water and popped a few Tums while he was downstairs, waiting his turn in what was commonly known as the green room. He'd performed deep breathing exercises. Had attempted mind-over-body tactics: imagined himself situated in a safe, comforting place, a secluded warm sandy beach with lapping water or a quiet café somewhere doing a crossword puzzle, sipping a glass of wine or some such other escapist ploy. It seemed to help somewhat, though no guarantees.

He stopped at the three-quarters' mark of the stairwell and leaned his shoulder into the wall. His knees felt weak and he was a bit light-headed. Fuck, he thought. What did he think he was doing? What was he trying to prove? Who was he trying to impress? What grand notion had spurred him to this particular circumstance where he was prepared (or not) to put himself to the test? Had there even been such a thing as a 'grand notion'? He couldn't remember. It was all a muddle now, whereas, earlier, it'd seemed the most natural thing. He gave his head a shake and pinched the bridge of his nose with a thumb and forefinger. He took a deep breath, held it. No retreat at this point. Might as well be shot for a goat as a lamb.

Was that the way the saying went? Or otherwise? He breathed out. And what the hell did it mean, really, anyway? Where did it come from? The origin? The etymology? Greek, perhaps. The land of roasted goat, skewered lamb, feta cheese, satyrs.

He pushed forward and staggered into the compacted, draped wing area as the previous comic was wrapping up her act. He peered through a narrow gap in the curtain and surveyed the shadowy scene.

It was an intimate space, seating sixty patrons comfortably and maxing out at eighty by regulation. The place wasn't full, though the audience was decent sized, he guessed, for a Tuesday night, with folks scattered throughout, huddled around tables or perched on bar stools, kicked back enjoying a favourite beverage, sharing a few laughs, raucously conversing and generally soaking up the scene. The multi-taskers yakked and fingered their electronic devices. The tiny screens glowed and danced like restless fireflies, spooking faces with a cold blue aura that flickered the half-dark a short time, then disappeared, as the devices returned flat on the tabletops.

Audience members leaned in, poked and slapped each other as the female comic completed her routine. The comic herself was a pear-shaped gal with thin arms, wide hips and a solid set of pegs under her. Tattoos of what appeared to be Japanese calligraphy ran up one calf while a snake curled around the other. She wore a black miniskirt and low-cut red boots with pink socks peeking out the tops. Her dyed-raven hair was chopped short and spiky beneath a fuschia-coloured rolled brim bowler hat. Her fingernails and lips were also painted fuschia. Very punk/Goth girly-girly if that was even considered a fashion category. Silver bracelets rattled her wrists as she wrestled the microphone back into its stand.

The audience hooted, clapped and whistled. She was an obvious crowd pleaser. The woman bowed and grinned. She threw her hands into the air and made with the pinkie/thumb salute. Thank you, thank you, she said. Yeah! She tugged at her pink tank top and thrust out her chest. Across squashed smallish breasts was a yin/yang symbol comprised

of two red boxing gloves with the words: Orgasm Can Be Beaten! written underneath. She drew further attention by slashing a thumb under the slogan. The audience cheered wildly as she exited the stage pumping her hands, waving and throwing kisses. The emcee bounded from the wings. He was dressed casual in jeans, sneakers and a Bob Marley T-shirt. Bob was toking on a fat reefer. A quote accompanied the image: “When you smoke the herb it reveals you to yourself.”

The emcee clapped loudly, snatched and twisted the stand, and raised the mic to his lips.

“Terrific! Fantastic! Terrific! That was Brenda Sweet everyone, and wasn’t she? Bitter sweet and terribly funny. She’s become a real regular on this stage. Give it up again for Brenda!”

The applause built and settled. The emcee leaned into the mic and grinned.

“And now, we present our next discovery night comic. He tells me this is his very first performance in front of a live audience—guess he was working the graveyard shift before, right? Ha-ha-ha! He’s a bit nervous, so I want you to be gentle with him, okay? Okay, let’s have a big warm Comedy Pit welcome for Mr. Bruce Leonard!”

He punched the air rapidly with his fists to whip up the audience. There were courteous handclaps along with hoots and hollers from the patrons, who were obviously well-versed in proper audience etiquette.

Brenda flew past the comic, nearly knocking him over. There was barely time for a good old-fashioned polite Canadian exchange of: Sorry, sorry, from either party, though the words were formed on the man’s lips in anticipation.

Too late. The woman's red boots pounded down the stairs and she was out of sight. No sign of nerves there, he ventured. Unless she'd made a beeline for the bathroom in order to talk into the big, white telephone. Unlikely, given she was a regular. That pleasantness was reserved for newbies, like himself. At least, he hoped that was the case and with experience he'd develop a sense of self-assurance and calmness, yes? Or at the very least, a cast-iron gut. Something to shoot for if he managed to survive his premiere. Which he began to seriously doubt at the present moment, judging by the flip-flops his stomach was making.

He slouched slowly onto the stage toward the microphone.

He had a bit of a Pillsbury dough boy figure, not fat, though softly fleshed and roundish, perhaps appearing more so due to his choice of costume. He sported baggy brownish-beige cotton pants, black high-top loose-laced Converse sneakers, an over-sized ratty trench coat, a wrinkled white shirt and thin black tie worn loose at the neck, and a floppy fedora. He bore no slight resemblance to TV's detective Columbo. He stood at the mic taking in the audience. Or the *sounds* of the audience as the lights were so bright he couldn't see much past the first row except as a coagulated shadowy mass. The applause died and people mumbled and murmured amongst themselves as they waited for him to begin his banter.

"Thank you," he said, smiling. "Thank you." At a hair under six feet tall he was shorter than the emcee by a few inches, so he tilted the mic slightly downward and wrapped his fingers tightly around the boom and cord. "It's very nice to be here ... with you ... tonight. Thank you very much.

Um ... y' know, I was thinking, it's not easy being a comic these days." He bobbed his head slightly and allowed time for his words to sink in. He wanted to be sure he had the audience's full attention, if that was even possible, given the nature of the venue. "Not easy. You have to be so careful all the time; people are so sensitive these days, have you noticed? And you never know what's going to piss someone off, right?" He paused again and shifted his weight from one foot to the other. "Maybe even by accident."

He unlocked his hands from the boom, reached slowly out with his right arm and pinched his fingers together to a point.

"Take the word 'piss,' for instance. I may have pissed someone off here immediately just by using that single small word: piss." He emphasized with his pinched fingers then flashed both palms in front of him and put on a prissy voice. "Oh, he said piss. I don't like the word piss. Piss is dirty. Why did he have to say piss?" He paused. "What can I do? How was I supposed to know? I couldn't know! You can't please everyone, right? Shouldn't even try. And to be honest, if it was just *one* person pissed at me for using the word piss, I'd be cool, I'd say: Okay, you're pissed at me for using the word piss. Fine by me. I don't give a piss. Piss off. Go piss up a rope. If I want to use the word piss, I'll use the word piss and no one can stop me. Piss, piss, piss, piss, piss. It's a free country, right?"

He pushed back his hat and rubbed his forehead. He raised his voice slightly, otherwise keeping his delivery calm and straight, his movements limited and controlled. There were certainly more than a few chuckles emanating from

the crowd and he figured enough people were generally engaged, which was encouraging.

“Right?” He nodded yes, then no. “No, wrong! Why? Because thanks to the latest technological advances there is no such thing as *one* person anymore. Or an isolated incident. Or a private space. Everything is immediately accessible to the public and therefore subject to attack by the world at large. Meaning that this *one* piss-sensitive person can get on his or her electronic device—maybe snaps a picture or shoots a short video clip—then hook up with who knows how many other piss-sensitive people on Facebook or Twitter or whatever other social network bullshit, who each hook up with who knows how many other piss-sensitive people who each hook up with ... well, you see where I’m going with this. The thing goes viral until there’s, like, a million plus people pissed at me for using the word piss in a comedy routine, yeah? And I don’t even know. Haven’t got a clue.”

He lifted an arm, bent his eyes toward the ceiling and wiped a hand back and forth above his head.

“It’s all out there in the ether swirling around like a giant dried cat turd waiting to drop on my head. Suddenly people are staring at me on the street, nudging each other, whispering: Look! That’s him. That’s Bruce Leonard. The piss comic.” He fretted his eyebrows. More laughter. He plunged forward. “The PISS comic? What tha ...? My career—pardon the pun—is down the toilet before it’s even started because of one word: piss, and some overly sensitive shit for brains with a plastic cell phone and free access to the Internet. Present company excepted, right? Right? Sure.”

He grinned. "I mean, it's not as if I tweeted a shot of my wiener to a twenty-one-year-old Co-ed in Seattle Washington, yeah? No, you have to be a US Congressman to get away with that kind of funny business."

This comment drew a bigger laugh from the crowd. He wasn't sure if it was because they caught the reference to the actual news item or if it was the play on words or if it was merely the word 'wiener' that had them going. Fine by him, either way. He was feeling the vibe, and he liked it.

"Y'see what I'm saying? It's a tough job. Being funny without pissing someone off. It's a fine line."

He shifted gears and clenched his fists in front of him as if expecting someone to respond in some way. No one did. He cocked his arms and pointed two fingers at the audience.

"Okay, okay, I know there are certain basic things you can't say or talk about on stage. I mean, I can think of two jokes off the top of my head that I absolutely cannot tell. Not only on stage, but anywhere; to anyone. Why? Because they're politically incorrect. Or should I say: culturally insensitive, huh?"

He gave a knowing look to the audience and rolled his shoulders. He picked up the pace, feeling slightly more relaxed now that he was over the initial hump of opening night jitters, though remaining low-key.

"Y'see, you have to keep up with the latest jargon; the latest trends. Culturally sensitive is the new politically correct. Sixty is the new forty. Orange is the new black. Eyes and ears open, back to the wall, ass covered at all times. Don't be racist, don't be sexist, don't be ageist, don't be ... whatever. Fine by me. I understand the reasoning. I do. Yet,

for the life of me, I can't shake these two jokes out of my brain. Truth be told, they're the ones I remember best. What's worse is that whenever I think of them, they still crack me up, they do, and there's this fear—yes, real and absolute fear—that they'll slip out of my mouth at the wrong moment and fuck me up big time. You know what I'm talking about, right? Right?"

He nodded into the crowd and felt that his words somehow resonated with at least a few kindred spirits, perhaps more, as there was—or what appeared to be—scattered murmurs of approval. Not overwhelming, perhaps, but close enough.

Close enough for horseshoes and hand grenades, he said to himself.

"Of course you do. We all have them. Fess up! We all have our own naughty, nasty jokes rattling around the grey matter that we can only share with our closest friends. In a darkened room. After plenty of alcohol. We know deep down in our heart of hearts we shouldn't find them funny, shouldn't even remember them, but we do. We do." He waited. "It's a bit like jerking off, yeah? No one talks about it but everyone does it, yeah?"

Bruce shaded the light from his eyes with a flat hand and pointed to random people in the audience.

"You do it, right? Jerk off? And you? And you?" He chuckled. "You do for sure. Am I right? Of course you do. We all do. Fine by me. What did Woody Allen say? Nothing wrong with masturbation, it's sex with someone I love. There's probably one or two people in the audience doing it now. Jerking off. And why not? It feels good; no one gets hurt, there's no awkward conversation before or during,

you don't have to apologize later, you don't have to promise to call or text, and yet, there's that annoying little voice in the back of the head, going: If you keep that up, you'll go blind! Hey, ma, I'll only do it until I need glasses, I swear."

He raised the volume a tad, shifted tone, then relaxed.

"Yeah." He smiled and juggled his head. "So, is it the actual act that's the problem, or the language itself that's the issue? Jerking off. Beating your meat. Spanking the monkey. Choking the chicken. Greasing the gash. Paddling the pink canoe. Punishing Percy. Bruising Betty. Wanking. Diddling. Whacking off. Right? You can't use these terms in polite conversation. They're considered too rude; too violent, even. So what do you do? Incorporate the New Age lingo: self-pleasuring! I was self-pleasuring myself. In the bathroom, at the office, in the front seat of the car, in back of the theatre. Nice. Could be washing your hair or cutting your toenails, yeah? If you can't change the behaviour, simply change the terminology. You're still beating the bishop but in a kinder, gentler manner that makes it socially acceptable. It's okay."

He took a breath, grinned, and rubbed his forehead with the fingers of one hand. The gesture was very Columbo-like.

"Yeah. I saw a magazine headline recently that read: FEAR OF THE 'M' WORD." He made a sweeping motion with his arm across his body. "My initial response was, they made a spelling mistake." He stopped and considered. "Should've said the 'N' word, yeah? But no. It was the 'M' word. So, okay, the obvious word that popped into my head was: masturbation, right? What else? What else?" He twisted his lips and knit his brow. "Hmm. Turned out the word

was marriage. Uh-huh, marriage.” He chuckled. “Makes some sense. I mean, when I told my wife I was going to take a shot at doing a comedy routine, the first thing she said was: absolutely no wife jokes. That stopped me in my tracks. I asked her why and she said it could only end up bad for the wife. I thought about it and had to agree.”

He leaned back, turned his hands palms up at his sides and performed a slightly Jewish, slightly Henny Youngman, impersonation. “*Take my wife, please!* Right? And it goes downhill after that. Next thing you know you’re saying shit like: So, I said to my one-legged wife Margaret: Peg, I said ... Or: Why do husbands die before their wives? Because they want to! Or: At the kitchen table during breakfast I thought I said pass the cornflakes, instead I said: You ruined my life you fucking bitch! Y’see? Bad news all around.” He shrugged and pulled a face. “So, strike that topic off the list. Don’t wanna rock that boat, fer sure.”

There were some knowing nods from the seats as well as infected applause and ripples of low laughter. He gave the crowd a moment to react in whatever way.

“And yet ... guilty pleasures! Whacking off. Nasty naughty insensitive sexist rude racist jokes. Cheap shots at the wife. Foul language. It’s hard not to slip up and you gotta know there are special interest groups out there for everything these days, yeah? Just waiting to jump on a mistake and nail your ass to the floor. And the tricky part is that these special interest groups cover both sides of the fence and everything down the middle. For every group like RASP—Residents Against Street Prostitution—there’s JACGUAR—Johns And Call Girls United Against Repression. For every ARCC—Abortion Rights Coalition of

Canada, there's TRUTH—Teens Rescuing Unborn Tiny Humans. For every HOME—Heterosexuals Organized for a Moral Environment, there's SQUASH—Super Queens Against Savage Heterosexuals. Then there's a group like PEACE—People Expressing A Concern for Everyone. What do you do with that? What does it even mean?"

He stood with a quizzical look on his face.

"I don't know. I'm not sure. What I do know is that even the tried and true, age-old line: Two BLANKS walk into a bar ... takes some reconfiguring. I recall a joke that's been around since Christ was a Boy Scout that I was going to tell to a group of friends in a restaurant. It begins: Two blondes walk into a bar, right? And it's very funny, but I can't tell it. For one thing, the joke is considered sexist in general. Worse, it's now listed as blonde-a-phobic. That's right: Blonde-a-phobic. That's a real term invented by a special interest group called BAMBI: B-A-M-B-I, and it stands for Blondes Are More Intellectually Better."

He paused. "I know, it's grammatically incorrect and the acronym is misspelled, but you get the idea. Blondes are protected from negative attitudes and sexual stereotyping. Fine by me, but it's still a funny joke and I wondered—was there anything else I could use to replace 'two blondes'? Two Indians? No, there'd be an immediate riot. That is racist, my friend! We can't allow that, no, no. Two priests? No, that's sacrilege! Not two priests! Two dwarves? No, that's an attack on the vertically challenged! No dwarf jokes! Two Newfies? No, no, not the Newfies again! Haven't they suffered enough at the hands of comics? Two bankers? Naw, too boring. Then I thought, I know—two

giraffes. Who could be upset? So I'm standing there and I start in with: Two giraffes walk into a bar ... when I hear this, psst. I look across at the next table and see this guy sitting there staring straight at me. He's got this long skinny neck, big bulging eyes, a brown and orange polka-dot bow tie and he sports a big-ass button on his jacket that reads: COUGH—Citizens Outraged by Unfriendly Giraffe Harassment. Yeah! He's chewing something very methodically, like salad. There's parsley sprigs hanging out the side of his blubbery lips and lettuce leaves stuck between his teeth. He stops chewing for a second, shakes his head and says to me in this quivery quavery voice: No giraffe jokes. It fucking freaked me out, so I shut up and sat down."

He sighed. "Just as well, since, in the end, the joke wouldn't have worked using giraffes anyway, 'cause the waiter says to one of the blondes: That's not heartburn lady, your tit is in the candle."

The audience laughed and applauded and he returned the laughter and thanked them and prepared to wrap up.

"Okay, you've been a great audience and I realize that I can't, in all good conscience, leave you wondering what the two jokes are that I said you can't tell in public—especially after I've teased you with a punch line of another joke you can't repeat—even if only for your own edification and protection. Just remember, these jokes cannot be told under any circumstances. First joke: A black woman gets on the bus and the white bus driver says to her: black people, back of the bus, white people only in front. The black woman says: This is a free country and I can sit where I want, why should I have to sit at the back just because my skin is black?"

The white bus driver nods and says: Lady you're right. In this day and age, it's ridiculous. It's a free country. Let's say that from here on, there are no black and white people, everyone is green skinned, okay? Okay, says the woman, that's more like it. Great, says the driver, all you dark green people, haul ass to the back of the bus. Can't tell that. No way. Second joke: What's the first thing a woman should do when she returns home from the women's shelter? The dishes if she knows what's good for her. All right, who laughed out there? You? You're sick. You're a sick puppy. You're all a bunch of sick puppies. Thank you! Thanks!"

He shaped his hand into a revolver, pointed it to his head, pulled the trigger, *pow*, and recoiled as if shot. He repeated this action several times. The audience went nuts at each blast. They loved it. He waved as he cleared the stage. The emcee rushed on.

"Give it up for mister Bruce Leonard! Bruce Leonard everyone. You heard him here first."

The applause built quickly, politely, and, as quickly, died.

➤ He stepped from backstage with his trench coat folded over one arm, hat and a light-weight khaki knapsack in hand. He shuffled through the crowd, caught sight of something or someone, and wound his way to a high, round bar table where a woman sat cross-legged on a stool. He still wore the baggy pants and sneakers, which suggested these were his normal attire. He also had on a blue denim shirt. Beneath that could be seen the collar of a white T-shirt. His hair was a shaggy brown mop with some early grey in the mix, loosely curled and in need of a trim.

“Rebecca.”

“Mark.”

Mark draped the coat and dropped the hat and knapsack onto the seat of an unoccupied stool, then leaned in and kissed Rebecca awkwardly on the cheek. Music played softly over the speakers. It was an instrumental version of *Manha de Carnaval*.

“You made it,” he said.

“Surprised?” Rebecca half-smiled.

“A little, yeah. Maybe a lot.” He remained standing and rested his forearm on the terry cloth table cover.

“You didn’t think I would.”

“You didn’t seem too pleased about the whole thing.”

Rebecca shrugged, her eyebrows raised. Eric walked over balancing three glasses of red wine.

“There he is, man of the hour. Congrats!” Eric distributed the drinks.

“Eric? What brings you here?” Mark had a habit of running a hand through his hair and tugging at curls as he spoke.

“Bec mentioned you were doing a stand-up comic routine.” Eric spoke mainly to Rebecca. “I said are you kidding? Mark? Your Mark? I don’t believe it.”

“No?” Mark took a shot of wine and licked his lips.

“No. I mean, anytime I’ve seen you at a party or whatever, you’re off in a corner somewhere, by yourself, generally holding up the wall, knocking back the vino. You don’t say ‘boo’ to anyone. Yeah?”

“Sounds about right.”

“Bec tells me you don’t even like stand-up comedy. True?”

“She told you that?” Mark glanced at Rebecca and Eric nodded. “Yeah, she’s right, I guess. I do find most of it pretty lame. You know, sort of juvenile and self-centred.”

“Mark figures he can do better.” Rebecca stretched her mouth into a thin brusque smile. “Maybe show the professionals a thing or two. Right, Mark?”

“Nothing so grand. Just wanted to try my hand, that’s all. See what happens.”

“Sure,” Eric said. “Anyway, I thought you did pretty good up there, considering. Handled yourself pretty well. Some funny stuff, too. I liked the bit about the giraffe. Other parts I didn’t quite get. Not my type of humour, maybe. The crowd seemed into it, though, for the most part, I mean.”

Eric was very animated when he spoke. He grinned, bobbed his head, waved his arms, deked and feinted like a guy shadow-boxing.

“Went on a bit long in spots, I thought,” Rebecca said.

“Maybe, yeah. Could use some cutting, fer sure. Here and there.” Eric snipped at the air with two fingers. “Still ...”

“Well, thanks Eric. I appreciate your showing up and letting me know.”

“No problem. Hey, cheers!” Eric raised his glass and they all clinked.

“Yes. Congratulations.” Rebecca pointed to the stool. “What made you decide on the Columbo outfit?”

“Columbo outfit? Oh, you mean the hat and coat? I don’t know. A few things I guess. Since I tried to make my routine a bit, I don’t know, provocative or challenging, I wanted to create a persona that would come across as sort of naïve and un-self-assuming.”

“But also smart. Smarter than the audience. Besides, you didn’t really create the persona, it’s Columbo. Everyone knows Columbo.”

“It’s not Columbo. Not really.”

“Bec’s right. It’s Columbo.” Eric said. “The whole hat and wrinkled trench coat thing. Definitely Columbo.”

“It’s not Columbo’s hat and trench coat. I mean, Columbo wasn’t even a real person, he was a character from a TV show. If anything, it’s Peter Falk’s hat and trench coat. He’s the one who pulled them out of his closet to use for his character.”

“Okay, so you stole the idea from Peter Falk,” Rebecca said.

“I didn’t *steal* the idea. It’s just a hat and trench coat. Many people wear them. In fact, I was also thinking about that poster that reads: Expose Yourself To Art. You know the one. Shows a man from the back wearing a hat and overcoat and flashing his private parts to the public?” Mark grinned and stared at the two. “Yeah?”

Eric scratched his chin. He had no idea. “Yeah, I think,” he said. “Sort of. But, it’s still Columbo who made it famous. Sitting in the audience, everyone was going: Look! It’s Columbo. You can’t escape that.”

“Eric’s right. You can’t escape it.”

“I don’t want to escape it,” Mark said. “I was just hoping I could maybe expand on it, that’s all.” He took another large swig of wine. “I guess, maybe, I didn’t.”

“Oh.” Eric drummed the table with his fingers. “Well, that’s okay. Like I said, I thought you handled yourself pretty well for the most part, all things considered.” There

was a silence as the three gazed uncomfortably in separate directions. “Hey, what’s with the Bruce Leonard bit—where’d you dig that name up?”

“It’s the reverse of Leonard Bruce,” Rebecca said, deadpan.

“Yeah?” Eric gave her a quizzical look.

“Lenny Bruce?” She tried the more familiar usage. Eric shook his head. The name meant nothing to him. “He was a comedian in the sixties. Shocked a lot of people by using profanity in his act. And lewd gestures. He was arrested numerous times on obscenity charges.” She turned to Mark. “Correct?”

“Right. He was very anti-establishment. His material contained a lot of social commentary.”

“Oh, yeah!” Rebecca said. “Like the bit where he has sexual relations with a chicken. Or the one where Tonto sodomizes the Lone Ranger. Very high-brow, funny, hilarious stuff.” She rolled her eyes in Eric’s direction and the two shared another laugh.

Mark stared at Rebecca and feigned a smile. “There was more to it than that.”

“Uh-huh? Such as?”

“It’s complicated. Anyway, a movie came out in the seventies with Dustin Hoffman as Lenny Bruce. Called *Lenny*. Directed by Bob Fosse. Pretty good.”

“Uh-huh. I’ll have to check it out. You think it’s on Netflix?”

“Ha! We don’t have Netflix. I think I must’ve told you, if I didn’t insist, we wouldn’t have cable. Mark is sort of anti-technology.”

“More anti-television.”

“Fifty-seven channels and nothing on—Bruce Springsteen.” Eric grinned broadly and pumped twin forefingers at Mark.

“Yeah, except now, it’s like, what? Over five hundred channels and growing. Like some insidious plague.”

“Can’t say I disagree with you, buddy. But, like the poor farm kid said at Christmas: given all this shit, must be a pony down there somewhere, just have to dig deep enough.” Eric and Rebecca locked eyes and chuckled. “Hey, I got one for you.” Eric put on a heavy Australian accent. “A giraffe and a monkey walk into a bar. The giraffe says, I’m beat, I’m gonna take a nap, and he drops to the floor. The monkey goes to the bar and the bartender says: Hey! What’s that lyin’ on the floor? And the monkey says: That’s not a lion, that’s a giraffe.” He and Rebecca laughed so hard, they almost split a gut. Mark drank his wine. “Pretty good, eh?” Eric bounced and rocked his shoulders back and forth between Rebecca and Mark.

“Yeah, yeah, pretty good.” Mark managed a feeble grin.

“Maybe you can use it.” Eric checked his cell phone. “Hey, getting late, gotta make like a tire and hit the road, Jack. Mark, nice job, buddy, see you again soon. Bec, see you at the bank tomorrow.”

Eric threw back the remainder of his wine and split. Mark sat down beside Rebecca. The two didn’t speak.

“So, have you got it out of your system now, or what?” Rebecca toyed with her glass.

“Don’t know. Not sure. As it turns out, the manager said he liked my act.”

“He said that?”

“Not exactly. He said it went well. He wants me to come back again Friday as an added short feature.” Mark brightened and said as a joke: “Pays fifty bucks.” Rebecca didn’t crack a smile.

“Friday? That’s the office party. You said you’d come.”

“You know I’m no good at those things. It’s like Eric said, I stand in a corner and hold up the wall. I have nothing in common with those people.”

“*Those* people?” She glared at him. “Uh-huh. I see.” She drank some wine. “You going to do the same routine?”

“Yeah, I guess. That’s something I never thought about before, that comics can do the same routine, since the crowd changes. I always thought you had to keep coming up with something new. Don’t know why.”

Rebecca nodded her head like she didn’t really care. “You know, I didn’t fail to pick up on the little shot at bankers. Same with Eric.”

“What shot?”

“Two bankers? Too boring.”

“Oh?” Mark had to recall. “Oh, yeah. That wasn’t on purpose. It was an accident. Really. It could’ve been anything. I’ll change it. Doesn’t matter. Two accountants.” Rebecca winced. “Sorry. Two dentists? Two carpet salesmen?” Rebecca remained silent. “What?” Mark tugged at his hair.

“What about that business with the wife?” Rebecca clenched her teeth. “I never said anything to you about what jokes you could or couldn’t tell. In fact, I don’t give two shits. You want to hang out our dirty laundry, feel free.”

“C’mon Becky, it’s not about you, personally ...”

“You said: ‘My wife.’ How can it not be about me personally? I’m your wife. Do you have another wife? What’s anyone with half a brain supposed to think except that I’m a controlling, ball-busting bitch, huh?”

“I guess I was just trying to ...”

“Forget it. It’s too late. It’s done. I’m tired. I’m ready to go home.”

“Uh-huh. That’s it? Nothing else?”

“What do you want me to say? That I loved it? I didn’t. It seemed to me you were playing the smart ass, rubbing the audience’s nose in it.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah. I mean, did you have to tell those two jokes at the end? Wasn’t it enough to get the audience imagining what the jokes might be?”

“I thought it was necessary. Otherwise it’s like another crappy Hollywood film where two people are in bed having sex and they still have their underwear on when it’s over. Suspension of disbelief aside, it makes absolutely no sense.”

“Fine, except the jokes weren’t even funny. In fact, I found them racist and sexist.” She twisted her face and glared straight at him.

“I could explain the socio-cultural significance and ramifications of the jokes, if anyone was interested.” He meant the line to be taken as light and humorous. Instead, it fell like a lead balloon between them.

“You might want to save that for your class.” She clicked her tongue. “Anyway, I think you don’t trust people to have any imagination.”

“They have it, they just don’t use it.”

“That’s what I mean. You’re impossible. And what’s with that thing at the end where you pretend to shoot yourself in the head? You don’t think that wasn’t a little over the top?”

“To be honest, that was something that just happened, I didn’t plan it. Nerves, I guess.”

“Nerves. That’s great. That’s just great. You can’t control yourself, how do you expect to control what happens to an audience when you deliberately try to antagonize them?”

“C’mon Becky, you’re overreacting. In the end, I’m not trying to antagonize anyone. I’m just trying to get a reaction, get people to think, maybe provide a few laughs. I didn’t see any beer bottles flying at the stage when I was up there.”

“Whatever.” She grabbed her things. “You coming?”

She didn’t wait for an answer, simply turned and marched away. Mark tossed back his drink, plus the remains of hers, collected his gear, and made to follow.

2



MARK FELT SLIGHTLY better tonight. His bowels were behaving, the wine from the Black Horse sat comfortably in his stomach and his knees were not quite so shaky. Still nervous, sure, and he accepted this as part and parcel with the endeavour, as: What's the point in doing it if there's no fear involved? Where's the thrill? Where's the adrenalin rush when you hit the stage, perform your act, and manage to come out the other side with your ego still reasonably intact? Mark recalled those old war movies where the battle-worn haggard vet says: It's okay to be scared, kid. It proves you're alive. Definitely.

He pulled the curtain a crack from the wall and scanned the club. The place was packed to the gills and standing room only. He didn't know if this was normal for a Friday night or not, having never attended The Pit other than a couple of Tuesdays, and this strictly to finagle his way onto the discovery night billing.

The comic ahead of him was nearing the end. He was a young gay black dude who'd stripped out of his clothing to reveal himself in a superhero costume. His humour revolved around portraying your typically white superheroes as

young gay black men and how difficult it would be for them to fight crime due to racial profiling and so on. ‘Okay, pull over, let’s see some ID. And what’s with the fairy costumes? You on your way to a Halloween party, or what? Batman, eh? And this is your sidekick Robin? Uh-huh, I bet. Otherwise known as Bruce and Dick.’ The comic spoke the names in an overtly effeminate manner with a lisp. ‘Haul your black asses out of the Batmobile and get into the squad car. No crime fighting for you boys tonight.’

The audience laughed and applauded. Mark tried to locate any black audience members and managed to spot a couple, though not many. He tried to check out the bar rail patrons and noticed two police officers drift out of the darkness and park themselves conspicuously at the end of the bar, near the beer taps. Mark wondered if the two were counting heads or looking to make a drug bust or if this was simply a regular neighbourhood courtesy call to make their presence known to the community at large and ‘keep your noses clean.’ One officer was a white female and the other an Asian male. A further example of steps taken to provide an all-inclusive human face to an otherwise anonymous authoritarian entity, Mark presumed.

The emcee hustled on stage, called for another round of applause and quickly shifted to his introduction of Bruce Leonard. Mark took a deep breath, blew out through his lips and gave his body a good healthy shake. When he heard his name he pulled the curtain aside, ambled forward, waved his hat to the crowd, smiled and went into his act, which was pretty much a carbon copy of Tuesday’s, except he substituted two police officers for two bankers —No, you’d be arrested!—thinking the pair of cops might

appreciate the attention. When he finished, he performed the bit with the gun to his head again and the audience clapped similarly to the other night, seeming neither any more nor any less impressed by the routine or to Mark, outside the fact there was a larger number in attendance tonight. In other words, it was business as usual so far as he was concerned. He backed off stage with a final bow and saw that the cops were no longer posted at the bar. He gave a quick boo over the crowd and guessed the uniforms had performed their function, found everything in order and had vacated the premises.

Backstage, Mark was met by an older shortish stoutly built muscular fellow wearing black denim pants, a black T-shirt with an image of Einstein's shaggy head and his tongue sticking out of his mouth, black Doc Marten high cut boots, a black ball cap with an Oakland Raiders' logo and a cigarette nailed behind one ear. There were bright tattoos up and down both arms. A mix and match of mythical figures, flowers, animals, reptiles. The obligatory heart. A dragon. A row of what Mark guessed to be Sanskrit lettering that may or may not translate to anything meaningful and perhaps there strictly as decoration. At any rate, no recognizable pattern to the images, as if accumulated over years and choices made dependent on available space rather than any real commitment to the fetish object itself. Tat for tat's sake.

The man handed Mark a number ten sized white envelope.

"Here's your fifty," the man said. "I'm told there's another fifty if you want to come back next Friday. Send an email to confirm."

The man chewed on a toothpick. Mark watched it slide side to side between the man's lips.

"Sure," he said. "Thanks."

The man never introduced himself and Mark had no concept of who the man was or might be. He didn't recognize him, had never noticed him. The man could've been a bouncer, could've been a bartender, could've been the owner of the club, so far as he knew. Didn't matter.

The man had a habit of punching the palm of one hand with a fist, and grinding it. Having completed his task, he turned, tromped across the floor and headed outside via the emergency exit, presumably for a smoke. Mark opened the envelope and counted two twenties and a ten. He decided to slip out the back as well so as to escape winding his way through the crowd. The man was there, propped against a pole, smoking and checking his cell, his round face lit up in the glow.

Mark walked down the alley, around the corner and decided to have another glass of wine and maybe some chili Nachos at the Black Horse. Rebecca would likely still be partying with the bank crowd so no reason to head home yet. He could relax and consider his performance, what he felt worked and what he felt needed improvement. Maybe give more thought to a new routine. After all, if he wanted to be invited back further down the line, he'd soon be required to provide something new, it only made sense. Anyway, if Rebecca were home, they'd have nothing to talk about. He wasn't interested in her bank associates and she sure as hell wasn't interested in his comedy night. Better to arrive after she's crashed in bed. Save each other a lot of time, effort and other basic bullshit.

THE COMIC

Mark sat in a booth, ordered a half-litre of house red and a plate of Nachos. He pulled a uni-glide gel pen and a small notepad from his shirt pocket. He removed the top from the pen and began to write.

Coda (*caveat emptor*)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Thanks to Melanie, Mercy and Kurt for their (in)valuable input during the developmental stages of this project. Thanks (and much gratitude), as well, to Michael Mirolla, for accepting the novel for publication.

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