



# WITH TIME OFF FOR BAD BEHAVIOR

By Marc Sotkin



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*For Adam, Michael, and Nina. You are my joy.*

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## ONE

*The Beginning*

The enormous buffet was so tempting even anorexic starlets couldn't keep from nibbling. Colossal mountains of jumbo shrimp, oysters on the half shell, an open bar for five hundred people — it was an elaborate spread even by show business standards. In addition to the fabulous food, to celebrate the end of the third and most successful season of the show, Paragon Studios had spent about a hundred and fifty grand to decorate the commissary to look like a bait shop. Worth every penny. It was kind of party only Hollywood can throw. More than giant spotlights crisscrossing the sky or long lines of limos, this shindig had real excess.

To keep the crowd of actors, writers, technicians, and network and studio execs musically amused, the Doobie Brothers had been brought in from a world tour, where most nights they played to stadiums filled with screaming fans. Evidently, for the right

price, they were willing to come off the road to sit on a fake lifeguard tower entertaining the fortunate few who work on our show. It was incredibly cool. The Doobies were our party band. Only in show biz.

The highlight of the party, though, was the waitresses. Fifty gorgeous girls in bikinis serving champagne and caviar to the guests, who, in keeping with the nautical theme, had become a school of fish in the middle of a feeding frenzy. I assume the waitresses were gorgeous—it was hard to tell because their faces were hidden by papier-mâché helmets crafted to look like fish heads. If they weren't gorgeous, they definitely had great bodies. Pike and carp and walleyes with big bazangas and tight tushies.

Bazangas. God, I hate that word. But one of the occupational hazards of writing sitcoms in 1979 is having some network censor excise certain words from your vocabulary. We can't say "tits" on TV. We can't even call them breasts and that's what they are, for Christ's sake. So we call them bazangas or bazoobies or labambas. We have to call them something. After all, *In the Swim* is a show about two girls, Connie and Patti, who leave their homes in Chicago to become lifeguards in L.A. The network wants to see girls in bathing suits. Lots of girls. But none of them has breasts. Well, these fish waitresses, made to parade around in the skimpiest of bikinis, had some of the loveliest bazangas you've ever seen. It's the kind of thing I'm sure all the women in attendance found offensive and the men found . . . the men wanted to spawn.

"More caviar, Barry?"

I had eaten enough caviar to choke a sea horse. On toast points, on potato skins, by the spoonful. One more bite and I would forever smell like Eau d' Fish Egg was my cologne of choice.

“I’d love some.” How could I say no to the loveliest of rainbow trout? You’d have to be crazy to throw this one back. “How did you know my name?” I asked, hoping against hope I didn’t have a black bead of beluga stuck between my front teeth making me look like Alfalfa in an Armani suit.

“I’m a big fan of the show.” She said the magic words. If she liked the show, she liked my sense of humor, and that’s my main weapon. God, in His wisdom, has given all creatures the tools they need to get laid. Peacocks have their feathers. Pine Island chameleons have a face so ugly, other chameleons can’t look at them. They also have these bright red appendages on their tongue, shaped like flowers to attract insects. Well, lady Pine Islanders like these flowers, too. One look at the tongue and it’s your place or mine on Pine Island.

Barry Klein hasn’t been given any extraordinary appendages, much to my dismay. But I do have the ability to make girls laugh and, as I’ve learned on my journey from boyhood to manhood, sometimes while they’re laughing, I can get them to take off their panties. Not consistently. Or even very often. But the Pavlovian result of my limited success is that I always try to be funny to see what happens. If I can get a laugh, I’ve at least been accepted. Without it . . . without it, who am I? Like the salivating dog who’s heard the dinner bell, I had to see if I could make this girl laugh.

Taking another cracker, I point to the caviar and ask the fish-woman, “Are these your kids? You must be very proud.” I pop the cracker in my mouth and wait for results that are impossible to detect because of the damn fish head. Did she laugh? Did she smile? I need to know. Before I can figure it out, she swims away.

So, who are you, Barry, that you need this much acceptance? Oh, shit, don't start this again. Lately I've been often asking myself these "Who am I?" questions. I hate them. Introspection brings up all these feelings of inadequacy. I don't need to find out who I really am. Not tonight. Not at this great party.

"Barry, can I see you for a moment?"

I welcomed the interruption until I turned and saw Bobby Mitchell. Bobby's my boss, the executive producer and creator of *In the Swim*. He's also, at forty-four, the hottest guy in all of TV. Bobby has five shows on the air, and four of them are in the top ten. Besides *In the Swim*, which is number one, he has the number two show, *Doing It Our Way*, the story of two girls who leave their homes in Phoenix to be models in New York. *Just Us*, the story of two girls from Milwaukee living together in Chicago and working at a meatpacking plant, is currently the number six show in the country. *All Aboard*, an innovative show about two girls from Miami who work for Amtrak, because they actually want to, comes in at number eight on the Nielsen ratings. And Bobby's latest creation, *We Want It All*, is mired at number sixty-six and is in danger of being canceled. *We Want It All* is the story of eight girls from all over the place who live together and want to be dancers in Vegas. The industry is wondering if Bobby has strayed too far from his creative roots, trying this eight-girls thing, but they're giving him a lot of credit for wanting to grow as an artist.

There's always somebody hot in TV. Norman Lear. Garry Marshall. But right now it's Bobby Mitchell who's on the cover of *Time*, *TV Guide* and *Guns and Ammo*, in an article on skeet shooting that proclaims him to be, "The hottest gun in the West." Bobby's gotten a lot from television: money, power, and a pinched colon that scares him

to death. He's scared because he has no idea what will happen to him if his colon stays pinched. And he can only imagine what will happen if, during a meeting, it becomes unpinched, turning him into some kind of human balloon flying around the room as all his gas escapes. He tries, as hard as he can, to stay on the special bland diet that will keep the colon pinched just so, but can never remember exactly what's on it. The doctors have made it easy for him by allowing Bobby to eat anything white.

So here is Bobby with his cream cheese sandwich on white bread with a glass of milk, making sure everybody is having a good time at the party that's as much a celebration of his success as it is the climax of the *In the Swim* season. Dressed all in white, figuring anything that might help keep his colon stay put is worth a shot, Bobby, in a fit of fashion daring do, has added a bright red bow tie for a splash of color. At five foot three with a forty-seven-inch waist, Bobby looks more like a duckpin than a television mogul.

"Where's Tommy?" he asked.

"Gee, Bobby, I haven't seen him." I hadn't seen Tommy Cross, but I knew where I could probably find him. Either at the bar chugging a bottle of scotch or in his office doing a couple of lines of cocaine.

Tommy's my partner, sort of. We were discovered by Bobby Mitchell three and a half years ago when we were performing together in an improvisational comedy show. He hired us as writers. We had never written together, but Bobby made us a team so he could pay each of us half as much money. Sometimes we write together and sometimes we write alone, but usually people think of Tommy and me as a team. It's a union that doesn't appear to make much sense.

Tommy and I are very different people. My comedy is fueled by what I consider to be fairly normal Jewish neurosis. Tommy is driven by devils. Devils that cause the kind of pain that can only be quieted with massive amounts of alcohol and drugs. These devils also have a hell of a sense of humor. Tommy can write jokes. Biggies. He writes the kind of jokes that get an audience laughing hard. Too hard. Laughing so much, they miss the next three. Oh, some of them must hear the lines because they keep the laughing going. Rolling. Laughing women reaching into their purses for tissues to wipe away the tears of joy. Smokers, laughing so much, they start to cough that deep, raspy cough—wanting to get more air but the laughing won't let up. An entire audience laughing and coughing and spitting up phlegm. Is Tommy funny? Yeah, he's funny.

“Find him. I don't want him getting into it with Ben,” Bobby says as he runs a finger around the inside of his mouth, unsuccessfully trying to get the sticky balls of white bread out from between his cheeks and gums.

Ben Fisher plays Connie's crusty Uncle Sal on *In the Swim*. Sal owns the bait shop on the show, above which Connie and Patti live, and right next door to Willy and Billy, two wacky morons who cut up chum for a living. Ben's one of those comics who's been around since they invented show business. To hear Ben tell it, *he* invented it—at Kutcher's Hotel in the Catskills. It was after an all-dairy dinner. Everyone at Ben's table was bored, so he stuck his cigar up his nose. Everybody doubled over with laughter.

“Show business!” Benny cried.

It's true. He swears it. I'll never understand how Ben Fisher became a celebrity. His material was mediocre before he stole it from some other hack comic. He's the type of comedian who does “These kids today, with the hair and the beads” material. It's all

stale and unimaginative. All except the burping routine. Yes, God has given Benjamin his gift, too. He can talk and burp at the same time. Not just a word or two. Sentences.

Paragraphs. Ben can recite “The Charge of the Light Brigade” while burping. It’s not exactly Noel Coward. It’s not even Noel Coward burping. To my mind it’s down-right disgusting. But enough people have found it amusing that Ben has built an entire career around this odd talent.

At first the burping routine was just like the rest of his act. Bad. He pretended he was a radio announcer doing a football game after eating too many hot dogs. Ben thought people would die laughing when he said “Bronko Nagurski” while he burped. A few did. Most wondered if they wouldn’t have been happier sweltering in the New York City heat rather than driving upstate to have this man with bushy eyebrows burp in their face. Ben was not killing with the burping. Not until he met the only other person in the world who can talk and burp.

In 1956 he met a young comedy writer named Bobby Mitchell. Talk about meant to be. Ever since he was a child, Bobby would entertain friends at birthday parties by talking and burping. Bobby suggested that Ben drop the football bit and do the burping routine about a guy who’s eaten too much stuffed cabbage and now he’s trying to fuck his wife. Bingo. The material was so strong that even people who hated the burping had to laugh.

Bobby had his first paying job and Ben had five minutes that would get him from the Borscht Belt to the high-paying jobs in Vegas. For some reason, the same people who hated football and Nagurski loved cabbage and fucking. Suddenly Ben Fisher was bright and hip. Audiences would sit for fifty-five minutes listening and wonder what all the fuss

was about. This guy was dull. Then he'd get to his last five minutes. The part about stuffing the cabbage and stuffing his wife, and all the time he's burping. Encore! Encore! And for a while he was smart. He wouldn't do an encore. He'd come out. Take a bow. One more burp. Screams. "Good night, ladies and gentlemen, bbbwwaaap." This was the king of comedy. Then he made the mistake of believing the audience. He would come back out and do five more minutes about his mother-in-law's cooking. "And her mashed potatoes are like rocks. The hard ones." Brilliant, Benny. Get off the stage.

Like a sky rocket. He came down like a sky rocket. Suddenly his own agent wouldn't return his calls. Nobody cared about Ben Fisher. And in 1975 when Bobby was casting *In the Swim*, Ben was working at a hunting lodge in Minnesota as sort of a combination entertainment director–night manager kind of guy. Fortunately for Ben, he was still able to afford a subscription to *Variety*. He read that Bobby was casting *In the Swim* and he called. And he begged. The one thing you can say about Bobby Mitchell is he's loyal. Do right by Bobby and he'll do right by you. So when the man who gave him his first paying job called . . . what could he do? Even though Jack Carter was practically set to play Uncle Sal, Bobby went to the network and fought for Ben. Now, three years later, Bobby's fighting for Ben again. Sending me as his emissary to protect Ben from the rapier-like wit of my partner, Tommy Cross.

"Hey, if Ben doesn't say anything about the writing staff, Tommy won't say anything about Ben," I say, trying to reassure Bobby who is now eating his sandwich and Roloids at the same time. At most wrap parties, this conversation wouldn't take place. Wrap parties are usually festive, marking the culmination of a long hard season of work and the beginning of the hiatus. The hiatus between seasons is one of the really great

things about working on a sitcom. When a season is over, you're given about four months to heal. You're given time to grow new brain cells. Cells with new jokes and new ideas. It's a much needed break. I always feel that producing a season of situation comedy is like being in a championship fight with each episode being a round. A typical twenty-two-episode season is like a very long fight. The trick is not to get knocked out. Just be standing at the end of twenty-two. Some episodes will be good, some will be bad. Most will be just okay. If you have more goods than bads, you win. The wrap party is when everybody congratulates each other on not getting knocked out. That's on most shows. Not on *In the Swim*, which is probably the most emotionally taxing show being produced on network television. It's a show where you can easily get knocked out.

There is an underlying turmoil that drives this show. It starts with its stars, Lorraine LaBarbara and Mimi Simms. Like many of the other great comedy teams—Laurel and Hardy, Abbot and Costello, Mutt and Jeff—Lorraine and Mimi are physical opposites. Lorraine is a big, lusty blonde. Not technically pretty, but with an earthy beauty that suggests a joy of life not that different from everyone's favorite waitress at the local diner. Mimi is much smaller, petite really, with the manic energy of a frightened rodent. Besides the difference in appearances, they have one other similarity that too many of the great comedy teams throughout history had: they hate each other. It could be because Lorraine, who plays Connie on the show, is so close to Bobby Mitchell. She's known him all her life.

While growing up, Bobby used to put on shows for the neighborhood. During one production, he needed a little girl to play Hitler's daughter when Da Führer took her to nursery school. He found three-year-old Lorraine LaBarbara. She was a natural. She stole

that show and every Bobby Mitchell show that followed. Lorraine's like a little sister to Bobby. That drives Mimi crazy. She's convinced that Bobby gives Lorraine preferential treatment. Now, why would anybody treat their little sister better than some whiny annoyance who is so paranoid she actually counts the words in the scripts to make sure that Lorraine doesn't get more words than she? I guess it's not fair to call her paranoid because Lorraine does get more jokes than Mimi and, to tell the truth, it's because Bobby tells the writers to do it. On some level he just likes to piss Mimi off.

"Barry, you've done it again. She has fifty-two more words than I do," Mimi will scream, after reading a particularly Lorraine-laden script.

"Mimi, half those words are conjunctions. It's not like she has more jokes. In fact, this week you have more jokes than Lorraine," I say, hoping the truth will keep me from spending hours trying to squeeze fifty-two more words into Mimi's mouth.

"Fifty-two! And stop smiling!" It's hard not to smile when Mimi talks. Her voice sounds exactly like the queen of the Munchkins.

I remember when I was a kid, to entertain my friends, I would inhale helium from a balloon to make my voice sound like Chip 'n' Dale, the Disney chipmunks. The helium does something to your vocal chords, and my twelve-year-old buddies would roll on the ground howling as I would have Chip try to convince Dale to ask Daisy Duck for a blow job. It was great material for twelve-year-olds. My mother would warn me that if I inhaled the helium too often, my voice would remain in that ridiculously high register. I believed my mother and went on to Popeye and Bluto, trying to get hand jobs from Olive Oyl. Much better for the voice but, in reality, the Chip 'n' Dale material was stronger.

Maybe Mimi did too much helium. Her voice is right up there all the time. It's a mixed blessing. When she's doing comedy it makes her funny, but it has the same effect when she's trying to be dramatic. We can write a scene about Patti's dog getting hit by a truck and when Mimi says, "I'll miss you, Lucky," the audience will roar with glee. It's the voice.

So, Mimi hates Lorraine. Lorraine hates Mimi. For no apparent reason, they both hate the writers. Everybody hates Ben. And nobody particularly likes Willy and Billy, the actual names of the actors who play Willy and Billy. When we get to one of our wrap parties, the venom oozes out. Instead of publicly commending each other on a job well done, on this show the wrap party is a chance to humiliate each other in public. The insults thrown are always disguised as jokes. But, as with all humor, it only works if it has an element of truth.

"Just make sure Tommy goes easy on Ben," Bobby says, giving me one last warning.

"I'll do what I can," I say to Bobby as he waddles off to try some of the white rice pudding the network has sent over special for him.

Okay, time to find Tommy. I hope he's still lucid. Sometimes if I catch him before he goes into his walking coma, I can plant an idea in his head like, "Don't pick on Ben," and it will stick.

It's hard to make much progress through the crowd. Everyone seems to want to stop and wish me well. I hear, "Great season, Barry. I don't know how you guys keep coming up with those terrific scripts."

“Hey, how ya doin’?” I reply to someone whose name I haven’t really forgotten. I’m not sure I’ve ever known it. I may have. About a hundred and fifty people work on the show, and although I’ve tried to learn all their names, I can’t be sure I have. Last week, at the end of a rehearsal, a birthday cake was brought out for one of the stagehands. We all sang “Happy Birthday” to him. A good time was had by all . . . except me. When we got to the part where I loudly sang “Happy Birthday, dear Jack,” everyone else sang, “Happy Birthday, dear Clyde.” Clyde? For the past three years I’d been calling him Jack. I mean right to his face. “Hey, Jack, what’s happening?” “Looking good, Jack.” “My man, Jack.” Why didn’t he correct me? Could everyone else be wrong? Could all the “Clyde” people have all their heads up all their collective asses? Doubtful. Should I suddenly start calling him Clyde or could I make this Jack thing just a little joke between us with “Jack” being my special term of endearment for him? From that moment on he became the anonymous “Hey, how ya doin.” It wasn’t just him. Everyone became “Hey, how ya doin.” It was safer than guessing. Safer, but not satisfying. Saying, “Hey, how ya doin’” feels just like asking myself, “Who am I?” It’s unsettling. It’s just another reminder that lately I’ve been off my game. Planet Barry Klein has been hit by an asteroid and knocked out of orbit. Forget “Who am I?” How do you get your orbit back?

The Hey, how ya doin’ in front of me is a carpenter who builds sets for a living. An older man, in his fifties, who, if he lived in Iowa, would build barns. Just an ordinary Joe. But this is Hollywood and he’s in show business, so once a year he and the little wife get to dress up in their Sunday best and rub elbows with the stars of the show at the wrap party. And why not? He builds the sets on the number one show on television. He’s part of the team.

“You remember my wife, Arlene?” Hey, how ya doin’ asks.

“Of course. Great to see you.” I can’t remember his name from yesterday and he wants me to remember Arlene.

“Jerry just doesn’t stop raving about the scripts you write,” Arlene coos. I hear nothing after she says, “Jerry.” I just pray that the Jerry she’s talking about is the guy who’s standing next to her because I’m about to call the man Jerry.

“Well, we did it, Jerry.” I say with as much confidence as I can muster. He, too, has made it through the twenty-two-round fight, and now he wants to share the feeling of accomplishment. Let’s raise our glasses together, we’ve made it old chum.

“Everybody did a great job, Jerry.” It’s a gratuitous, extraneous “Jerry” but what the hell? If I don’t get my life back together soon, I may never get to call him Jerry again. Now I get ready for the most important part of this conversation. I turn to Arlene, put my arm around Jerry’s shoulder and in my most sincere of sincerest I say to Arlene, “This guy’s the best.”

Curtain. End of play. Arlene beams. She’s proud of her man. He beams. The warrior victorious. Now they can drink plenty of free champagne, go home and have each other.

It’s a conversation I’ll have to repeat any number of times tonight. But right now, this one is over. As I move away I hear Mason Green shout, “Hey, Barry!” Mason Green is the network representative on the show. He’s middle-management, sent to keep an eye on us. The network doesn’t want surprises so Mason Green’s mission is to know everything that’s going on at *In The Swim*. What he doesn’t know, right now, is that I don’t have time to chat.

“Hey, how ya doin’?” I yell to Mason as I keep moving. Got to find Tommy. Got to keep going. Searching. Okay, maybe one more bite of caviar. No . . . keep looking.

Getting through the crowd is almost impossible. I stop after I feel someone grab my ass and hear, “You want to dance, Sweetie?”

I turn to find Marcia Heilger, my secretary. Actually, she’s more than my secretary. For the past three months we’ve been seeing each other. Naked. We’ve been seeing each other naked at her place after work. We’ve all heard that lofty warning against diddling the help: “Don’t shit where you eat.” Well, I was shitting and eating and if Marcia had her way, now I’d be dancing.

“I’ve got to find Tommy,” I told her. I don’t care so much about finding him. I care about not dancing with Marcia. Not here. Not in front of everybody. I still like to believe that nobody knows I’m seeing her. Naked. I’m seeing her naked. Idiot. How did I let this happen?

“Well, then let’s go outside and fool around,” she purrs as she starts to move closer.

Leaving the party with Marcia would be too dangerous. Yet it still sounds tempting. Marcia looks great and there’s a sexual energy about her that drives me crazy. That’s how the seeing her naked thing got started.

Before I can decide, Marcia and I are interrupted by Harvey Lipshitz, the dialogue coach on the show. “Excuse me, Barry,” Harvey says sheepishly.

I’m sure Harvey doesn’t want to interrupt. But he’s been sent on a mission, and Harvey’s the kind of guy who, when given a job, does it and does it well. Don’t believe me? Ask Harvey.

“What is it, Harvey?” I ask as I move ever so slightly away from Marcia.

“Your wife is looking for you.”

It’s not an asteroid or meteor that has me off course. It’s the truth that’s knocking me around. I have a wife, Linda, and she’s here. A wife who I love or think I love or want to love. But instead I’m sleeping with this girl standing next me.

“Thanks, Harvey,” I say almost absentmindedly, as a thousand thoughts race through my mind. I’ve never been with Linda and Marcia in the same room before. Earlier in the evening, while getting dressed, I pictured the scene; the three of us chatting gaily, bon vivants unflustered by Marcia and my improprieties. Instead, I fell slightly nauseous.

Harvey stands for a moment as if he’s expecting a tip, then realizes he should disappear. As he slips into the crowd I explain to Marcia, “I gotta go.”

“Barry, I hate this,” Marcia says, under her breath. At least she’s not making a scene.

“I hate it, too. Listen, I—” I give Marcia’s arm a tender squeeze and throw her the tiniest kiss that can be thrown as I turn to leave. It could be a kiss or maybe my lips just twitched. It’s hardly enough to make her happy, but it’s going to have to do for now.

It feels like my life is just a series of encounters where I provide barely enough to keep someone happy. Bobby wants me to keep the show running smoothly. Mimi wants more words in the script. Marcia wants more time. Linda wants to know why I seem so distant. Hey, how ya doin’ wants me to move to North Hollywood and play poker on Wednesdays with him and Arlene. Everybody wants something.

There used to be an act on *The Ed Sullivan Show* where some guy would spin plates on the end of a stick, then balance the stick on a table. He would wind up with about ten plates, each on its own stick, spinning like crazy. To keep them going, he'd have to run from one stick to the next, give each plate a little spin, then move on. By the end of the act, none of the plates were spinning as fast as they could. They were all going just fast enough to stay up. That's what my life has become. I keep hoping everybody's just happy enough to think they're getting what they want. But what do I want? What would make Barry happy? If I stop now to figure out what would make me happy, one of the other plates will fall. Forget it. Grab a glass of champagne and find Linda. What about Tommy? Forget Tommy. I've got to find Linda. I left her twenty minutes ago just to get a Perrier. Linda and I haven't been agreeing about much lately, but my being a louse is one we could get together on.

Toward the rear of the commissary, there are tables set up for people who want to sit while they eat. That's why Linda and I sat there before I went a wandering. She's still there. As I approach her I can't believe I sat her at a very large round table that could easily seat twelve people. She is alone and, of course being at the biggest table available, looks even more alone than if she were at one of the tiny tables for two. I've made her a wallflower. It's a rotten thing to do. If the plates are going to stay on the stick, you have to spin them once in a while and I haven't been spinning Linda at all.

"Sorry I took so long," I say, almost out of breath as if I rushed back as soon as I could. "Bobby wanted to talk. You having a good time?" Oh, man, what are you doing? You leave her for twenty minutes and then ask if she's having a good time?

Fortunately, the question is too dumb to answer verbally so Linda gets it done with a look. A look designed to kill, and if I was smart I would die or at least pretend to be dead.

“Can we go soon?” she asks, having served her penance at what amounts to no more than a very fancy office party.

“Right after the speeches. Bobby’s worried that Tommy’s going to do a job on Ben.”

“Do you want to dance or something?” she asks. There is no malice or sarcasm couched in her question. Linda has the amazing ability of doing these great one hundred and eighty degree turns—and they’re always to the positive. She’s been left for twenty minutes and instead of being cranky, she’s asking me to dance with a smile. And a pretty smile at that.

“Sounds great,” I say, taking her hand and leading her to the dance floor. Dancing, holding each other as the Doobies sing “You Keep Me Running,” seems like a chance to connect. A chance to be a couple. A chance to focus on Linda. Instead, I’m only aware of Marcia Heilger who, standing on the side of the dance floor, has her eyes riveted to me. I can’t escape the intrusion. I’m the one who made the simple twosome a complicated threesome. What have I done? Where is my life going? What do I really want? I want to be with Tommy, consuming what ever he’s consuming to shut this brain down so I don’t have to hear these questions.

My introspection is interrupted by the realization that Linda has stopped dancing. She’s just looking at me.

“What?” I ask, in an innocent tone, knowing I’ve been caught.

“You’re a million miles away. It’s like we’re on a totally different wavelength. I don’t know if it’s you . . . or me?” Linda was searching for the truth.

“It’s not you. I don’t know what’s wrong with me. It’s like I’ve been nuts lately. I don’t know what to do.” I can’t believe I’m going for pity. Poor Barry. He’s been nuts lately. Can you forgive him?

Tears began to well in Linda’s eyes, but they do not fall. She’s in control. “Barry, I’ve been thinking about this . . . a lot. I can’t take it any more. I think we need some time alone.”

“No, we don’t,” I say firmly, as if I have another solution. “I just need to . . .” I don’t know what I need to do. Not fucking my secretary would help.

“It isn’t working for me. Can we go?” Linda headed for the table to get her purse. Before she got there, the lights went out except for the spotlight that hit Bobby Mitchell who was standing in front of the fake lifeguard tower. I took Linda’s hand, guided her back to her seat and settled in next to her.

“Hi, everybody. I hope you’re all having a nice time,” Bobby says loudly into the microphone in order to get everyone’s attention. It’s one sentence but it seems to take Bobby an hour to say it. Bobby’s got a Northern drawl. He comes from Brooklyn where most people talk a mile a minute. Bobby talks slowly, in kind of a whine that makes a word like “nice” seem like it’s got about fifty-seven syllables. “Nnnnniiiiicccce.” He says “nice” a lot. Bobby believes in nice. He wants all his shows to be nice. “That’s a good story, Barry, but make the end nice,” he’ll say to me after I tell him the storyline for each episode of *In the Swim*. His drawl is hypnotic. If you talk to Bobby for two minutes, you come away sounding exactly like him. You don’t want to. It’s not like it’s a great sound.

You just can't help it. I fight it as much as possible. If Bobby makes too long a speech tonight the whole room will be saying, "That's nnnnniiiiiccce." Fortunately, the wrap party is one of the times of the year Bobby doesn't worry about nice. He gets right to the jokes.

"We had a great year. Even though *The Enquirer* said we had a lot of emotional strife on the show, we had a lot of good times, too. We want to congratulate Mimi Simms. Besides having a great year on the show, Mimi got married."

This is not a joke. This is a setup. A surprise one at that. No one expects Bobby, or anyone else for that matter, to make fun of Mimi's marriage. Just before the season began, she had suddenly married Larry Brogan. Although only thirty-two years old, Larry is now on his fourth marriage. A drunk and a womanizer, Larry's a lousy catch. But Mimi's convinced she can keep him from straying. It's doubtful. The fact is, she's a plain girl, without much sex appeal, who is happy to have someone with Larry's sexual reputation show interest in her. Popular opinion is that he's probably more interested in the seventy-five-thousand dollars an episode she gets.

Bobby looks around the room, knowing that everybody is waiting for the kill. "Mimi's wedding was beautiful, though she did stop the ceremony twice to complain to the minister that Larry had more words to say."

Big laugh from the audience. Mimi's word counting is public knowledge.

"But I guess the worst part was after Larry promised to honor and cherish her and be faithful. Mimi will sometimes put up with more words, but now he had more jokes."

Screams. Even Mimi had to laugh at the idea of her keeping Larry's animal instincts under control. Maybe with a whip and a chair, but not with her body. Bobby had the party rolling but he knew we were getting to the dangerous part.

“We've decided that this year we'll have just one representative of the cast and one member of the writing staff say a few words. So, here is one of your favorites—the man who because of his acting ability was supposed to be on the series *My Mother the Car* as the car. Here's Uncle Sal . . . Ben Fisher.”

As Ben makes his way to the microphone doing a little Chaplinesque walk, occasionally pretending to trip over his own feet, all I can think of is Linda's words, “We need some time alone.” Time alone? How can she want time alone? I'm the producer of the number one show on television. God, that sounds shallow. Is this what I've become? Is this who I am? One of those schmucks who cares more about what he is than who he is?

Ben Fisher takes the microphone from Bobby as the partygoers give him a big hand. It's not that he's well liked. People in show business have this respect for longevity. Bobby hands Benny the mic and gives him a hug. For the life of me, I can't figure out why Bobby actually loves this man. It can't be just because of the three bucks a joke Ben gave him back in the old days.

Ben opens with his strength, a big wet burp that probably tastes more like caviar than he would have liked. The burp gets a laugh. Benny thinks he's got them. Like an old racehorse that's heard the bell, Ben is tempted to go right to the stuffed cabbage routine. He should have. Instead, after one more burp for good measure, he goes after the writers.

“Good evening, Ladies and Germs.”

That Ben. Always keeping it fresh.

“We’ve had a great season, with some great acting.”

Applause from the crowd.

“I just wish I knew what was going on with the writing. The writing sucks. I mean really sucks. These people don’t know what funny is. I don’t know why Bobby keeps these writers.”

There are a few giggles from people too uncomfortable to sit quietly during this affront. Even Ben senses he might have gone too far. He tries another burp. Nothing. He puffs his cigar as he wonders if he should try the Bronko Nagurski material. I can tell by the angry look on his face that later, when he tells his friends at Nate ’n’ Al’s delicatessen about the wrap party, he’ll say that the audience was bad. It would never dawn on him that it could be his hateful performance. Bobby Mitchell rushes to take the microphone to save his old friend from any more embarrassment.

“Thank you, Ben. How about a big hand for Ben Fisher?” Bobby implores the crowd as he steers Ben toward his seat with a slight push. As Ben walks, Bobby adds, “I’m sure he’d like to say more but the U.N. wants him right away to try and settle the problems in the Middle East.” It’s hardly a joke, but it gets a big laugh as everyone is so relieved to get Ben off the stage. Bobby wants to get this party over before it gets any uglier. “Okay, moving right along, here’s one of our great writers and producers—Barry Klein.”

How can I do this now? My wife is leaving me. That’s what “time alone” means. Every divorce starts with time alone. It’s just a stall. “I’ve got to do this,” I say, turning to Linda.

“You want to do this.” She knows me too well.

I can’t let her leave me. I should fight for her. But what could I do to make her stay? There’s no time to figure it out. There’s a microphone in my hand.

“Thank you, Bobby,” I say, walking into the bright spotlight. “There are so many people to thank for doing a great job this year. Our director, Michael Zylik,” I say as I point out Zylik to the crowd.

There is polite applause as Zylik, a truly handsome man with a slight English accent, stands to take a bow. It’s hard to tell if the accent is real or not, but it, along with his good looks, is how Zylik has lasted a full season on the show. Lorraine and Mimi fawn all over him, following his every direction, good or bad. And he’s smart enough to let “The Ladies”—our polite name for Lorraine and Mimi—do whatever they want.

After Zylik’s bow, I add, “I guess the best thing you can say about Michael Zylik is that his name is worth forty points in Scrabble.” It gets a decent laugh. Enough to let me forget that my life is falling apart and go on. I reach in my pocket and take out an envelope to go into my Johnny Carson “Carnack” routine. I hold the envelope to my forehead. “Cecil B. DeMille. David Merrick. Bobby Mitchell.” I rip the end of the envelope off and open it with Carson’s distinctive blow. I take out the card and read, “Name two great producers and a short man.” Big laugh. I’m rolling. As soon as they settle down, I’ll get to my jokes about Willy and Billy.

Unfortunately, before I get going again, I see a figure coming toward me through the glare of the spotlight. It’s Tommy. Jesus, how can Linda leave me? Focus. As Tommy gets close enough for me to see his face, I’m relieved. He looks in control. All

too often, when Tommy does coke, the right side of his face sort of collapses into a mini stroke. It's all he can do to keep the drool in his mouth when he speaks.

“Give me the mic,” he says in a clear, firm voice.

“You've got it, Buddy.” I give him the mic along with a pat on the back and head to my seat.

Tommy's words are slow and measured. “You know, there's a lot of talk about how the people on this show don't get along. How we don't respect each other. How sometimes we say things about each other, things that aren't appropriate. What people don't realize is that it's just our creative process. A process that sometimes is painful. But look at the work. This is the funniest show on television. The work is great. And sometimes we do get along. Just last week I was walking down the street with Ben Fisher, Uncle Sal, and . . . you know, part of the fun of being on a hit show is getting recognized. Well, some people saw us and they knew right away . . . they saw Ben with that big brown cigar in his mouth and those big bushy eye brows and they said, “ ‘Look, there's Lassie taking a shit.’”

Tommy gets a big laugh and a standing ovation from the writers scattered around the room. He puts down the microphone and heads for the bar.

I'm stunned. What happens now? Linda gets up and starts walking to the car. I have to leave. I have to deal with my marriage. On the way out I spy Tommy who is now surrounded by appreciative writers. He gives me a wave. I absentmindedly wave back as I follow Linda, wondering if I can keep us together. I also see Marcia. She blows me a kiss and gives the sexiest “Come hither” look I've ever seen in my life – her rebuttal to any sane thoughts I might have on the way home.

## TWO

*What's a Nice Boy Like You Doing in a Place Like This?*

Linda and I both kept quiet on the drive home from the wrap party. I slipped in my *Allman Brothers Live at the Fillmore* tape. I wanted to escape into the sounds of “Whipping Post”—nineteen minutes and twenty seconds of the best blues-rock ever. It didn’t help. The music couldn’t keep me from thinking back to how much our lives had changed in the three and half years we’d been in California.

\* \* \*

I met Linda in 1968 while attending the University of Kentucky. I’m not sure how I wound up matriculating to the Blue Grass State. But since ten of the 200 students in my high school graduating class wound up at U.K., my guess is that our guidance counselor, Mr. Schroeder, was getting kickbacks. It’s the only explanation I can come up with for me ending up in Dixie or a gym teacher/guidance counselor being able to afford a Corvette.

Living in Lexington required certain adjustments from a nice Jewish boy from New Jersey. Corned beef or pastrami sandwiches, if you could find them, were served on white bread with mayonnaise, a sacrilege for anyone with carnal knowledge of rye bread

and mustard. Also, an inordinate number of locals seemed to still be fighting the Civil War. They flew the Confederate flag with pride and hated anyone from north of the Mason Dixon line. But if you could get past the idea that this was 1968 and white people were still singing that “the darkies were gay,” when obviously the darkies weren’t even amused let alone gay, Kentucky wasn’t such a bad place to be. It had some great things going for it: smooth bourbon, fast horses, and shiksas. Boy, did they have shiksas. Row after row of beautiful blonde gentile girls who had their nose jobs done by God centuries earlier in places like Sweden and, dare I say it, Germany. They were friendly, clean, and a few were even rebellious enough to date the descendants of Abraham and Isaac. Some of the girls, like Linda Harrington, were willing commit the ultimate act of treason and marry a Yankee Jew.

We were practically babies when we met. She had just turned eighteen and I was twenty. Blind dates were not something I often went on, but a good friend swore that if I took this girl out I wouldn’t be sorry. He wasn’t wrong. When I picked up Linda, I got lucky. I mean really lucky. This was a great-looking girl. Shoulder-length blonde hair, gorgeous blue eyes, and a miniskirt that showed off a terrific pair of legs. She smelled good, too. Like lilies of the valley. Not like getting hit over the head by an entire basket of lilies. Just a hint. I wondered if she was going to mind having my nose near her neck all night.

The fraternity party we attended was a rush party where the brothers of ZBT tried to convince freshmen they could be happy being part of our group. For rush parties we were on good behavior. We wore jackets and ties and the rule was: if you got so drunk

that you threw up on a prospective member, you'd have to clean him up. That kind of thing will get even a college kid to think twice about alcohol abuse.

Linda and I danced a little. Drank a little. And, to my surprise, talked a lot. I was supposed to be talking to the rushees, seventeen-year-old boys who thought twenty-year-olds were men, but I was having too good a time being with this freshest of flowers. We were relaxed. I didn't have to be "on" with this girl.

After the party, parked in my car in front of her dorm, Linda and I said good night and, for the first time, kissed. It was one of those terrific kisses where lips seem to know exactly where to go and how hard to press to achieve just the right temperature and humidity. A great kiss. Longer than either of us expected. So good we kept on kissing, knowing we were both in for some puffy lips. We kissed and kissed for about fifteen minutes. It was really nice. We were both practically purring. I'm a guy, however, and nice isn't good enough. It was time to make my move.

This was quite early in the sexual revolution and "Hey, you wanna do it?" was not yet in vogue. In its place, I had gotten into the habit of using the phrase "I love you" as a tool to convince girls that sex was a great idea. The theory was, you don't say no to someone who says I love you. It had been working pretty well on fourth and fifth dates. Lately, I had gotten sloppy and was using it on second and third dates with much less success. Now, on a first date, out of desperation, I whispered the magic words as I gently placed my hand over her breast.

Linda immediately sat up straight, opened her eyes, and said, "No, you don't." I was about to crash and burn. There was no graceful way out of this. Then she said, "You don't love me. Not yet, anyway."

She was wrong. Right at that moment she had me. She said those words so sweetly. So sincerely. She was right. All I could do was smile and say, “Yeah.” We went back to kissing. Great kissing. We kissed and kissed and kissed. We kissed for two years, taking time out only for food, water, and an occasional movie. After the two years of kissing, I graduated from college. There was only one way to keep the kissing going; we got married.

The first few years of married life were uneventful. We moved to New Jersey, loved each other, and had dinner at my parent’s every Sunday. I wasn’t the only Klein completely in love with my new bride. Both my mother and father immediately embraced Linda as the daughter they never had. My mother plied her with her artery clogging Jewish cooking. In my mother’s house, chicken fat was considered a green vegetable. My father jokingly chided Linda for her lack of good judgment in marrying a “nogoodnick” like me. He would then assure her, as he had me while growing up, that the Klein Clan was very special and that I would indeed succeed at whatever I put my mind to. It was a shpiel I had heard and doubted many times as I looked around and saw our anything but special, middle class, existence. I warned Linda that this was coming from a man who also thought my mother’s collection of miniature ceramic dogs was special. Linda, however, was touched by my father’s sincerity and his belief in my abilities. To insure his prediction for my success, my father offered me the opportunity to become the boss’s son; working for him in the decorator mini blinds business. He enticed me by making the job sound creative.

“You know, it’s wonderful, you can make the slats of the blinds any color you want. You can be a Michael Angelo.” That’s the way he said it. Like it was two names.

Like if Michelangelo had known about mini blinds, he wouldn't have given church ceilings a second look.

The pay was generous and from day one I would be the prince of mini blinds. How could I say no? Besides, my father was so excited about us working together. He couldn't wait to introduce me to our suppliers. And when we'd go to lunch, he'd proudly announce to the waitresses, "This is Mr. Klein, vice president of Windows by Klein." I was sure in their minds they heard, "Mr. Mushroom Barley Soup" as they tried to keep our order straight.

I learned all there was to know about mini blinds. How to install them and fix them and ship them. I learned that even though you could get the slats in any color, we only carried five of those colors. That's because ninety-five percent of the time you can convince people that they want one of those five colors. The other five percent, they really want drapes, anyway. I learned everything but how to sell mini blinds—actually, I knew how to sell them, I just hated doing it. I hated dealing with the people who didn't want their slats in white, black, navy, gray, or almond. I completely avoided the mauve people. I stopped calling on them. I'd leave the office to go call on customers and wind up just driving around. Sometimes I'd take my briefcase and go to the movies. Then, I'd make up some lame excuse when I returned for why I hadn't sold just a whole bunch of mini blinds. It was a bad situation. Linda knew I was miserable, and it was hard on her. I had become very withdrawn and had taken to watching an inordinate amount of *Sesame Street* each morning before I left for work. Like most twenty-five-year-olds, I already knew how to count to ten. So, why was I spending up to two hours a day watching Burt and Ernie sing the rubber ducky song?

Linda tried to help me out of my funk. She'd ask how my day went, and I'd sing, "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten." She'd nod with great understanding and ask if I thought a change of jobs might be wise. I'd answer, "Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one." I could count forward and backward and she wasn't impressed. Did that mean the magic was gone? I was still crazy about her, wanting to kiss her every two seconds but didn't only because it made it impossible to drive.

Linda had every right to expect more of me. She had taken a job as a receptionist at a large textile company in New York City. Each day she'd spend three hours on a bus to go to a job she loathed just to help make ends meet. She didn't complain that she was too bright to be answering phones for unappreciative executives. She didn't complain about having to get coffee for the boss. And she didn't complain because she didn't get to stay home and sing "It Isn't Easy Being Green," like I did. Eventually, though, Linda had enough.

"Barry, when we were in college and we'd talk about what you wanted to be, you'd always say you were going to be a star. For some reason that didn't sound crazy—it made sense. You know you want to be in show business. Why don't you give it a shot? There are ads in the *New York Times* for employment agencies that specialize in jobs in television. Maybe you could check them out."

"It'll kill my father if I leave the business," I reasoned.

"It won't kill him. He just wants what I want. He wants you to be happy."

Linda was right. I couldn't spend the rest of my life doing something I hated. I would give my father the tragic news. The prince of mini blinds was abdicating.

The news of my departure from the mini blinds business didn't kill my father. His jumping up and down for joy gave him chest pains, but he did not die. I wasn't selling any mini blinds and had become the most expensive shipping clerk in the world. The prospect of having to support only one family thrilled my father. He even promised to help out financially if things got tough. Anything to get me out of the business.

Early the next morning I put on my best "Don't I look like I'm in show business?" suit and headed for New York to get a jump on everybody else who wanted to get into show business that day. I took the seven-thirty bus, the same bus Linda took to her job. It was nice having her next to me on such a momentous trip. As I excitedly anticipated our arrival in New York, Linda slept. She looked so sweet. We had spent the previous weekend in the sun and now her freckles were coming out. I adored them. I couldn't believe how much I loved her.

From the Port Authority, we walked together, holding hands, down Fortieth Street. When we got to Broadway it was time for me to head off on my own. I had to go four blocks uptown and Linda was headed to her job on Thirty-Eighth. She kissed me, wished me luck, straightened my tie, and headed off into the throng. As I watched her go, I felt great.

I walked along avoiding any eye contact. I had learned early in life that if you make eye contact in New York City, it means you're looking at a nut. You look somebody in the eye and immediately they start screaming how you killed their brother or you're the devil's accountant or, if you're lucky, they give you a simple, "What the fuck are you looking at?" No matter what they say, they're nuts. I walked looking at

stores. New York has lots of stores conveniently placed right next to each other so you don't have to make eye contact with nuts.

While window-shopping, I stopped to look at a watch that could show you the time in three time zones simultaneously. I was sure I'd need one of these once I got my new job in show business. After all, I'd want to know the time in New York and Hollywood and . . . somewhere else where they have show business. Okay, maybe I didn't need the watch. I needed to get to the employment agency. Before I could move, though, I sensed that there was someone starring at me. Don't look up, Barry. Walk on casually. Don't make the dreaded eye contact. I wanted to go but my feet wouldn't move. I felt there was something special about this person I had to see. As I slowly looked up, or actually down, I made eye contact with a black midget transvestite hooker complete with a bad blonde wig and facial hair.

"Want to party with Denise, honey?" she asked.

Now, I don't have anything against black women. In fact, I find them quite exotic. Midgets, I don't have particular feelings about midgets one way or the other. I don't like midget Republicans, but that's more of a political thing. I don't even mind talking to a transvestite if they're well read. But you put all three of these things together and dress it in a metallic red mini skirt and you get a pretty scary little person.

Denise was waiting for an answer. I didn't want to reject her outright. Yet I didn't really want to say yes, either. Besides the obvious turn-offs, Denise also had too much hair on her chest and arms to be wearing an electric yellow tube top.

“Sorry. I’m late for a job interview,” I said, figuring the truth would be better than some lame excuse like, “I’m sorry, but I don’t really want my family to be shamed for eternity because I was found dead in some Times Square hotel after being robbed and beaten by a black midget transvestite hooker.”

“Then what the fuck are you looking at?” Denise shouted.

I should have known. On top of it all, Denise was a nut. As she waddled off, I felt sorry for her. I think it was more than the fact that even though her purple platform shoes gave her an extra few inches, they did nothing for her tiny bowed legs.

Walking the final block to the employment agency, I was plagued by thoughts of Denise. Why had she chosen me out of all the guys on Broadway that morning? Was it because I looked good? Or was it because I looked like a guy who would say yes to a black midget transvestite hooker? I was guessing the latter and doubting whether they’d let that sort of guy into show biz at all. Damn you, nutty Denise. I don’t need this grief this morning.

I finally reached 19 West Forty-Fourth. It looked much too dingy to be the home of Top Talent Employment Agency. Yet there on the door, in worn letters, was a sign indicating that this was indeed the place and all I’d have to do was climb up three flights of stairs to get there. Three flights and I’d be in the posh world of show biz.

Four walls, one desk, two chairs. That’s what the Top Talent agency was. No receptionist. No water cooler. Nothing. Seated behind the desk and a cheap nameplate was Sylvia Berman. Sylvia was in her mid-fifties with the same bleached-blond bouffant hairdo she’d had since Jackie O had been in the White House. She wore much too much make-up with lipstick straying way past her already large lips. Her tons of cheap jewelry

jangled as she talked on the phone. She indicated I should sit down in the chair conveniently located next to the desk. I sat down and began to wonder not what I was doing here, but rather if I would be able to get enough oxygen to stay alive. Sylvia was wearing a lot of perfume. Bad perfume. I believe it's called Pavlovia. It's got a heavy syrupy smell that won't go away. It's got a half-life of about a hundred and fifty years.

I sat there waiting for Sylvia, wanting to breathe and keeping my mind off the smell by concentrating on the cigarette dangling from her lip. She had no trouble talking without disturbing the ash that had to be at least an inch and a half long.

Sylvia had a live one on the phone. A job to be filled! "And the starting salary?" she asked. "Beautiful. Very generous. You know, I think I have just the young man for this job. I mean it. It's just a coincidence but he's right here." As she said it, she smiled at me and winked. I'm not sure which but either the smile or the wink knocked the ash from the cigarette and on to her desk. She ignored it.

"I'll send him over in fifteen minutes. Great. I'm sure you'll love him as much as I do. Okay. Thank you, Doll. Bye." She hung up without taking her eyes off me.

"And what can I do for you today, Doll?" Sylvia asked while batting her mascara-laden lashes. Sylvia evidently called everybody, Doll. It was an affectation that actually worked with her thick New York accent.

"Hi. Barry Klein. I'm looking for a job in show business."

Sylvia took a moment. She was either thinking or had slipped into a Pavlovia-induced coma. "Doll, I can get you a job in show business but it would be in sales. You'd sell TV or radio time. The truth is, you can make a lot more money selling something else."

“No, not sales . . .” I said, or actually whined. “I want to be in show business.”

“Who doesn’t, Doll. I, myself, thought about a career as an actress at one time. I was quite a beauty, you know.” Sylvia was waiting for me to react to this beauty thing, so I went with the very diplomatic “And you still are.”

Sylvia asked me what I’d been doing and I told her of my experience as vice president of Windows by Klein.

“You know, Barry, you’ve made quite an impression on me. You’re a very special young man.” Sylvia said this while she gave herself an extra little squirt of Pavlovia behind her right ear. Somehow I kept conscious as she continued.

“You could make great money in sales, Barry. I just got a call from a top-notch company. They’re looking for somebody just like you. Why not go over and meet them?”

“What’s the company?” I asked, figuring an interview wouldn’t hurt and at least it would get me into some fresh air.

“BVD underwear,” she said, with a smirk on her face. I waited for some indication that she was joking, but she just kept looking at me.

“You want me to sell men’s underwear? An underwear salesman? Excuse me—I don’t think I can do that.”

“Just meet them, Barry. Look, you’ve got to have a job while you’re waiting for your break in show business. These are nice people,” she assured me.

If I said no, Sylvia would just keep looking through her files until she found me a job. I had to get out and breathe. As Sylvia gave herself a spritz of Pavlovia behind her left ear, and then one in the mouth, I said I would go meet the folks at BVD.

Sylvia was right. They were nice people. Mel Curtis, the vice president of marketing, couldn't tell me enough how much he liked me and how much he wanted me on the BVD team. Mel was one of these very positive, up people who at forty-five was doing his best to relate to the younger generation by wearing a Beatle wig to cover his bald head instead of a toupee. Mel was also a great salesman because somehow he convinced me to say yes when he offered me a job as the BVD salesman in Texas. They would train me, move me to Houston, and have me selling those BVDs starting the very next Monday.

As I left the BVD office, Mel said to me, "Barry, you're going to be a great underwear salesman. If you work hard, you can figure on pulling down five big ones a week." Mel and his three assistants fell to the floor laughing. Each of them saying over and over, "Pull down five big ones a week." Underwear humor. I should have just run away right then.

On the way home, I felt somewhat like Jack of beanstalk fame. Linda had sent me out to find a job in show business and I was returning, not with magic beans, but with a job as an underwear salesman. What in the world was wrong with me?

To my surprise, Linda thought moving to Texas was a great idea. Although she loved my parents, the idea of not eating with them *every* Sunday was quite appealing. Houston would give us a chance to be on our own. She made it sound like a great adventure. She was happy and excited, and after I told her we made love on the living room floor. We spent the rest of the night tending to each other's rug burns and wondering what Texas would be like.

Texas was actually fine. Selling men's underwear was the problem. I hated it. It was worse than mini blinds. At least when I was selling mini blinds I was the boss's son making more money than I deserved. There were good reasons for me doing something I didn't respect. But, when you sell men's underwear, respect is hard to come by.

There's something about selling men's underwear that most people find funny. As soon as you tell them what you do for a living, they give you the smirk. It's the same smirk Sylvia Berman gave me when she first told me about the job. I think these people are under the impression that if you sell men's underwear, you must be some kind of pervert. It's like they figure if you sell them, you must be putting them over your head and sniffing them. Once. I did it once. It's no big deal.

For two years I drove around Texas convincing every Billy Joe Bob owner of a men's clothing store that BVD was the way to go underwear-wise. I was actually pretty good at it. The early seventies were a boom time in Texas, and storeowners were willing to take my advice and put in a ten-foot rack of BVDs and watch the money roll in. After two years, Linda and I had saved enough to buy a small townhouse on the outskirts of Houston.

As we drove to the realtor's office for the closing, Linda snuggled up to me and giggled. She said she couldn't wait to make love in every room of the new house. I said I was sorry we couldn't afford a house with more rooms.

"Just put your John Hancock right here, Barry, and she's all yours." Big Jim Barnett, the realtor, handed me a pen with a picture of a cowgirl that, when turned upside down, made the young woman's dress go over her head and the words "Yah-hoo" appear

across her panties. I was ready to sign but couldn't. As I stared at the pen, I'm sure the realtor thought I was trying to see what was behind the "Yah-hoo." I wasn't.

"Is something wrong, Bar?" Big Jim drawled.

"What is it, Barry?" Linda asked.

"I can't do this, Honey. If we buy this house, it means I really am a men's underwear salesman. Up until now I've been doing this because I didn't know what else to do. But I've never thought of myself as a men's underwear salesman."

Out of the corner of my eye I could see Big Jim smirking each time I said "underwear salesman."

"If I sign these papers, that's it. I'm stuck," I said, continuing my tale of woe.

"What are you talking about?" Linda asked, totally confused.

"Look, I can always get a job I hate as much as this one. I blew one chance to get into show business when I took this job. I don't want to blow another. I want to go to Hollywood," I said, feeling more centered than I had ever felt before.

"Are you serious?" Linda asked with a touch of excitement in her voice.

"I know if we go to Hollywood and I put my mind to it, I'll be successful," I said, suddenly quoting my father's cockamamie pep talk as if it were gospel. I'm not really an underwear salesman and you shouldn't be married to one."

"Thank God." Linda breathed a huge sigh of relief. Evidently the wife of a men's underwear salesman gets to see more than her fair share of the smirk herself.

After a quick kiss for me and an "Adios, Partner," for Big Jim Barnett, Linda practically ran to the car. As soon as we got home, I called Mel Curtis to give my two-weeks' notice and a strange thing happened. I expected him to tell me I was crazy to

leave the security of the underwear business for the uncertainties of show business. Instead, he wished me luck and told me he respected my decision. Respect. It was something I hadn't really felt for two years. For the next few weeks almost everybody I told about my plans reacted just like Mel Curtis. People like the idea of somebody actually trying to make their dreams come true. When I told my parents, my father sounded happier than the day I said I would go to work for him. Even happier than the day I said I would stop working for him. He was genuinely proud that I had the courage to give it a shot. Either way, the Klein Clan was special. The next two weeks flew by. Everyday I'd bring home apple boxes from Safeway so Linda could pack more stuff for our trip to Hollywood. We only had about two thousand dollars in the bank and a couple of Visa cards but we weren't worried. We were finally on our way to meet our destiny. When the big day arrived, I forced everything we owned into a U-Haul trailer. Then realized I should have hooked it up to the trusty Ford *before* I loaded it. Unloaded it. Hooked it up to the trusty Ford. Re-loaded it and headed off to tinsel town.

## THREE

*Getting Into Those Pearly Gates of Show Business*

There were so many questions to answer when we first got to Hollywood. Questions you wouldn't have to ask yourself in other cities. Is the weather going to be this good every day? What do you do first to get into show business? Do you really get to wrestle a nude woman at the Wrestle a Nude Woman place? That's right, Toto, we were no longer in Kansas or Texas or any place else that resembled America. We were in Hollywood.

Linda and I spent the first couple of days driving around the L.A. basin, deciding where to live. A tiny apartment in Santa Monica about ten blocks from the beach seemed perfect. It was small, but it had good cross ventilation, a nice group of palm trees right outside our door, and it had Dave Larson.

Dave Larson was a twenty-five-year-old aspiring comedy writer. He had arrived in Los Angeles from Minneapolis with his Midwestern good looks and innocence about six months before us. To make ends meet, while he waited for his big break, he sold a little pot to friends and acquaintances. Nothing sinister. Nothing to call the cops over. In fact, in the mid-seventies, it was convenient having a pot dealer right next door.

Dave was a sweet guy who knew, ever since he was in high school, that he wanted to be a comedy writer. In his teens, he would write jokes for Johnny Carson and Dick Cavett. He didn't actually sell any of these jokes to Carson or Cavett, but he would send the jokes and be encouraged by the friendly rejection letters. Now, he had the rejection letters hung in the hall leading from his living room to his bedroom and used them as a lure for the girls who were so far down the Hollywood food chain of fame, they would go to bed with someone who even had a piece of Mr. Carson's stationery. Instead of jokes, Dave should have sent Carson and Cavett a couple of the joints he sold. His grass was really good. His jokes were not. They weren't really bad—just ironic, clever little jokes that didn't make you laugh. They made you say, "Oh, yeah."

"Hey, Barry, why did Agnew cross the road?" Dave would ask. To annoy him, I would sit there trying to figure out the punch line. Then, fearing the timing of his comedy gem was being completely put off, he would blurt out, "To steal something from the moron."

Even after Dave had gotten me completely blotto with his wacky tobacco, it was tough laughing at that caliber of joke. After listening to Dave's jokes for about two weeks, I decided, with Linda's encouragement, to try writing. I was funnier than Dave. If he could be a writer, I could be a writer.

Dave loved the idea of having another writer next door. He was six months ahead of me in his career, so that made him feel like an old pro. He already had knowledge and was willing to share it. To get started in television, he explained, I first needed to pick a show I liked and write a script for it. This was called a spec script, and I would need one to show people my work. He also told me that we should smoke a number and go see a

new improvisational comedy show that was opening that night in a small theater on Fairfax Avenue. It would be good fun and maybe we could steal a couple of funny ideas. Dave was so far ahead of me, he already knew about stealing ideas. Unfortunately, he just wasn't funny enough to know who to steal from. As it turned out, both pieces of advice were important.

The next day I would start writing my spec *Rhoda*. It was a show I liked, and I thought I could hear the characters in my head. In addition, Dave sold dope to somebody who worked on the show and thought he could get the script read by one of the producers. The second piece of advice, the one about going to the improvisational comedy show, turned out to be the stroke of genius.

*Funny Bones* was the name of the show—as well as the name of the troop of actors who would get up and perform any scene an audience wanted to see. If the audience wanted to see a woman having a baby in an elevator or ex-lovers sharing a cab on a rainy day, whatever, the six members of the *Funny Bones* cast would bound up on stage and improvise the scene. Most times they were very funny, and the audience loved them. It was a revelation to me. Here were people talking to each other in jokes as if it were another language. The cast had no time to prepare—they just got up and did it. Even if a scene wasn't that funny because someone in the audience had given a bad idea, you still had to love Dem Bones for having the courage to wing it and hope for the best. One member of the cast, however, particularly stood out. Six feet tall with jet black hair, piercing indigo eyes, and a pirate's swagger as he moved around the stage, you couldn't help but be impressed by the lightning-fast lines delivered by twenty-two-year-old Tommy Cross.

The show was one of the most exciting things I'd ever seen, and when I found out that Wendy Marks, the show's director, had an improv class every Sunday where anybody could try to do what the troop did so well, I jumped at the chance. Although terrified at first, I found I could easily make the other people in the class laugh. When the regular cast of *Funny Bones* hung around class, I made them laugh, too. So, after just six weeks, when one of the guys in the cast decided to give up show business and become a priest (he wasn't really giving up show business, he was going into a branch of show business that paid better), I was asked to join the show. For the next ten months, every Friday and Saturday night, I would perform with the *Funny Bones* actors. I loved it.

Being on stage with *Funny Bones* was a time to forge my comedic metal. You can't learn to be funny. It's a gift. I don't know where the jokes come from. I'm just privy to them first. But you can learn to be funnier. You can get better at what you do. Playing in an atmosphere where you have to be funny in an instant is great exercise for whatever muscle it is that pushes the jokes out. Setting up the other actors - leading a scene down a road that you know will allow all of you to soar turns comedy into a team sport. You learn what works and what doesn't. You trust one another and so you take chances, knowing that if you bomb, your partners will do their best to save you.

From our earliest moments on stage together, Tommy and I were smooth in our comic dance. During my first show, an audience member asked to see a TV cooking show being scrutinized by an uptight censor. Tommy immediately headed for the stage, stopping only to grab a wig, a wine glass and an apron from the nearby prop table. In an instant he was a hilarious half bombed Julia Child. I followed him, taking the role of the anal retentive censor. Tommy, in a drunken slur, told the imaginary TV audience that he

was going to prepare a fabulous stuffed chicken breast. I immediately interrupted explaining that he wasn't allowed to say "breast" on television. Not unless he was reciting Joyce Kilmer's famous poem, *Trees*. "You can say, 'Pressed against the Earth's sweet flowing breast,' on TV," I explained. "But that's because the Earth has no nipples." It was a complex notion that seemed to form in slow motion. While I was saying it, I was both aware and surprised that Kilmer's poem, something I had not heard or referred to since elementary school had popped into my mind? And once there, where would I go with it? Yes, it was a clever reference, but where was the joke? Then "nipple", a word that for some reason almost always amuses people, thankfully showed up. The process and the awareness of it only took a millisecond. More importantly, it got a big laugh from our audience.

Tommy almost cracked up too. But he quickly regained his composure and shot back with a challenging, "A chicken has no nipples." Another big laugh.

In character, completely confused, I asked, "Then how do they nurse?" Joke. Joke. Joke. Tommy and I were off and running.

Linda didn't seem to mind coming to the show week after week either. Because they were made up on the spot, each show was different. So she knew she'd be in for a few laughs. She also helped out by selling coffee and cake to the audience during the intermission. There was a sense that we were both doing what we had to do to make my career happen.

It was a wonderful time for us. I'd work on my spec script in the mornings. Afternoons were spent with Linda, going to the beach or exploring the city. We spent lots

of happy time together buoyed by the faith that something good would happen before the money ran out.

After a few months, *Funny Bones* really started to click. Word was getting around that the show was good. The *L.A. Times* gave us a great review. Comics showed up to steal material. Bobby Mitchell showed up to see if there were funny people he could use. There were. That's when Bobby asked Tommy Cross and me if we wanted to come write on his new show, *In the Swim*. He didn't even ask to read my spec script. What he saw on stage sold him.

When I joined *Funny Bones* it was just something to do until my writing career took off. But now, enjoying some success, I thought being a performer might be the way to go. But Bobby said we'd be making an incredible five hundred dollars a week. From nothing to five hundred a week. Easy decision. I was a writer.

The first day at work was like the first day of school. I got beat up. Not physically. Emotionally. In kindergarten it had been Roy Van Horn who had my number from day one. On my first day of real paying show business, it was Scotty O'Rourke who was giving me a hard time. Scotty was the guard at the main gate of Paragon Studios. It was a job he'd had since he was nineteen years old. Now, at age one hundred and thirty-five, Scotty was coming to the end of a career that should have ended during the last ice age. He was a permanent fixture and a studio legend, making any suggestion of removing him from his post a show business sacrilege.

As he checked his list for the fourth time to see if he could find my name and let me pass through the pearly gates of show business, I felt these incredible pangs of fear and loathing. This old man with a badge but no gun was going to keep me out of show

business because of some clerical error. Even if my name had been on the list, there was no way he could see it looking through glasses that were too thick to be real. I was sure they had been given to him by Jerry Lewis after filming *The Nutty Professor*. He was wearing them only to honor Jerry.

“Nope, I don’t see it,” he said as he put his hand where the gun would be if they had let him have one. Was he expecting trouble from me?

“Maybe I could take a look,” I suggested in a helpful tone.

“I said, I don’t see it,” he said a little firmer.

“I’m sure it’s there. Just give me a peek. I’ve got strong eyes. I eat a lot of carrots,” I said using a little laugh, hoping he’d think we were both in on this little joke.

He didn’t laugh. He didn’t smile. He just said, “You’ll have to turn around. I don’t see your name.”

“You couldn’t see the top row on an eye chart, you old fart!” I said a bit louder than intended. I was losing it.

Now Scotty really started reaching for the gun. It was becoming obvious why they wouldn’t let him have one. Paragon Studios didn’t want a pile of dead, snotty kids whose names weren’t on the guest list messing up their studio gate. Just then, as Scotty was about to pee in his pants in anticipation of what he’d have to do to stop this intruder, he took one more look at his list and said, “I’ve got a *Larry Klein* . . .”

“Yes. That’s me. Larry Klein,” I of coursed.

“I thought you said Barry?” he asked cautiously. He was still unsure whether I would pull a tire iron from under the seat and smash his skull.

“Well, I’m nervous—this is my first day of show business . . . oops, there I go again. Sometimes when I’m nervous I mix up my b’s and my l’s.” All Scotty needed was a little logic.

“Okay, Larry. You park in spot 53. If you’re over the line I’ll have you towed,” Scotty said in a cocky tone meant to indicate that the cantankerous old man was back in control. It was a tone I’m sure he learned in gate guard school along with the credo: *Minimus Populus Es Fortus*—Let Minimum Wage Rule.

“Thank you, sir,” I said, having no idea I’d have to repeat the same scene every morning for the next two weeks until the name Larry on the list was changed to Barry. I also had no idea I would spend my entire morning shower, for the rest of my life, plotting the murder of Scotty O’Rourke.

I quickly found “K” building, an old barracks of a thing that housed all of Bobby Mitchell’s shows. Each show had a group of offices for the writers, producers, and secretaries. A handwritten sign claiming that *In the Swim* would be on the second floor was taped to the door. I wasn’t sure if the sign was for real because beside the announcement, there was a cartoon drawing of Bobby Mitchell with blood spurting out of his butt and a pained Bobby proclaiming, “Comedy is a pain in the ass.” Here it was, first day of school for all the kids, and already some wise guys were looking for trouble.

The second floor could only be reached by a long climb up an incredibly steep flight of stairs. When anybody reached the top of the K building steps, they sounded old. No matter what kind of shape you were in, the last few steps leading to the second floor were punctuated with an out-of-breath “God . . . who designed these damned things?”

When I finally reached the top, I wanted to plant a flag or something. Instead, I gave a wheezy “Hey, how ya doin’?” to the pudgy boy waiting for me.

Howie Clark, the fellow writer who greeted me at the top of the stairs, looked exactly like the Pillsbury doughboy. Or at least how he’d look on his day off when he’d be wearing slacks and a golf shirt instead of his usual doughboy nakedness. Looking like the Pillsbury doughboy might be cute if you were a little kid, but for a guy in his twenties it was kind of odd. I didn’t know whether I should shake Howie’s hand or poke him gently in the side and see if he’d giggle. I decided to go for the handshake. At least I thought I did . . . I don’t know . . . maybe I did give him a little poke. I’m not sure, because as soon as I made contact with Howie, either through shaking or poking, he slipped and began falling down the long flight of stairs leading to the base of K building.

It was worse than horrible. He didn’t just fall down those steps—he bounced in slow motion so you could feel each bounce as he hit step after step after step. His screams of pain stopped about two-thirds of the way down. The rest of the way was just silent bouncing. Finally, he came to rest at the bottom. Lifeless.

What had I done? I stood at the top of the stairs frozen with fear. Poor Howie! And poor Barry. I was so close to show business and now I’d be out. Well, not out completely. I’d probably be writing the annual prison talent show, but that was little consolation.

“Oh, my God—somebody call an ambulance!” I wailed.

As I turned to go find a phone, there along with Tommy Cross was the rest of the *In the Swim* writing staff. All of them grinning from ear to ear. I’d been had. At the bottom of the stairs, Howie Clark was getting up. He wore a grin of his own as he waved

to me before checking for broken bones. There were none, of course. Besides being a fine writer, this was Howie's talent. He could throw himself down a flight of stairs and land unharmed. He would repeat this process ten times today as he greeted each new writer with a long fall. Those who had worked with Howie before weren't scared, but they still enjoyed the show. Some, fearing Howie might give up his suicidal stair dives, offered cash contributions to start a "Howie Clark Chiropractic Care Fund."

There's lots more. You can order the rest of the book, either a hard copy or e-book by visiting [www.marcsootkin.com](http://www.marcsootkin.com). And if you write a review, and email me the link to it, I'll send you a discount code for \$5.00 off my first novel, *The Comatose Adventures of Lenny Rose*. You can get the first fifty pages of that book for free too by visiting my website. I love hearing from readers so let me know what you think.

Marc



Marc Sotkin began his writing career in 1976 and has been a staff writer and producer on more than 350 episodes of various situation comedies for every television network. His credits include head writer and executive producer of *Laverne & Shirley*, *The Golden Girls*, as well as co-writing two Garry Shandling specials for Showtime.

He has been honored with multiple Emmy, Golden Globe and Cable Ace award nominations and has won a prestigious Writers Guild Award. In 2008 he began writing, producing and performing *Boomer Alley*, a weekly online video that is syndicated to various websites ([www.boomeralley.com](http://www.boomeralley.com)). In 2009 he published his first novel, *The Comatose Adventures of Lenny Rose*. In 2010 he began hosting *Boomer Alley Radio* airing weekly on KFWB, the CBS affiliate in Los Angeles, as well as on stations across Colorado. The show is available world-wide via podcast. He continues to write and develop projects for TV and the web.