

Chapter 2

A FEW DAYS LATER, Mike put in his daily stint with a stingy muse. Every day's work saw another few lines excised from *Foe* as he carved his play to leanness. The lesson of its New York Theatre Workshop reading was that it was too long. The danger now was that it would vanish utterly.

When he was done for the day, he walked down Ninth Avenue from Hell's Kitchen to Conor's apartment in the Village. Conor lived on Bleecker Street near MacDougal, or rather they both lived there, while Mike used his own tiny place for writing; in New York, true love's no reason to give up your rent-stabilized apartment. He walked in the wash of a yellow-gray sunset over Jersey. The city was drying out after the storm, and the air was rich with evocative autumn scents of dying things.

Their friends—two distinct groups—thought Conor and Mike an unlikely match, however good they looked together, but Conor was intrigued that Mike found literature more vital than the hectic bar life that absorbed him, while Mike admired Conor's easy authority in that world, his ability to make things happen, where his own friends seemed to specialize in formulating anxious putdowns. They'd been lovers three years.

Mike found Conor sprawled beneath a quilt in his La-Z-Boy watching *Sam the Car Man* on public access.

Sam was 16 years old. His show—the only one that could halt Conor’s march up the channels, remote aimed accusingly at the screen—consisted of half an hour’s tight focus on his cute features as he excitedly answered callers’ questions on matters automotive. Half open like a boy’s, half guarded like a man’s, Sam’s face gushed personality through saucer-sized eyes. As usual Conor muted the sound so talk of fuel injectors or torque converters couldn’t distract him from concentrating on Sam an intensity of regard Mike wished he would bend on *him* sometimes. The effort dug fascinating declivities in Conor’s face.

Of course, Mike also found Sam mesmerizing. Every time he watched he glimpsed new qualities, as though they were lovers.

“Think he shoved his chair back again?” Conor asked.

Mike studied the screen. From time to time Sam broke off his gaze to look aside; there was something touching in his suddenly presenting his nose’s acute arc. Until a few weeks previous that movement had put his profile off-screen, whereas now blue framed his whole turned head.

“Maybe,” Mike answered. “Conor, hand me the phone. I’ve got a question for Sam.”

“About polishing your dipstick?”

“About where he got those big eyes.”

With a charming shy smile Sam made the peace sign and the show ended.

“Eaten?” Mike asked with a caress of Conor’s hair.

Conor wore what he slept in—football jersey over gym shorts—though he'd been up since noon dealing over the phone with sick waitresses and performers wanting to know Brat the booker's *exact words*. He ducked out from under Mike's hand and stood up.

"Yeah," he said. "Or later. Joey called, going up to check out the Gag Reflex with him."

"Is that what the other night was about?"

"Who knows?"

"You hit it off with Joey's boss."

"Seems like a nice guy," said Conor.

Stubbing out his cigarette, he went into the kitchen, started the shower and stripped. He peered into the mirror with his customary expression of surprise. Touching one lush eyebrow, he leaned closer.

Over time Conor had ingeniously transformed his ground-floor tenement flat into a very gay nest. He built a massive loft bed, complete with stairs, put the La-Z-Boy and a sectional sofa under it, replaced the original kitchen bathtub with a shower stall, and knocked out the wall between living room and kitchen (leaving the doorpost for support). The tiny bedroom he turned into a big closet. Filling every possible space and surface (but very tastefully) was his collection of found objects and *tchotchkes*.

Of course, the place was a cave, its only sunlight a steep slant that derisively gilded the curtains at noon. And the john was in the hall.

"Rosetta called, too," Conor said. "She's coming by."

"About my play?"

“Careful with that one, Dolls,” he said, stepping into the shower. “She’s weird.”

Mike found a copy of *Foe* and started crossing out lines he’d cut since its last Xeroxing.

After a meditative quarter hour being sluiced by hot water, Conor stepped out, dried himself and began to shave.

Mike put down his script and watched greedily. Conor’s nudity was somehow extra-naked, as if along with his clothes armor and weapons also were put aside. Going over and putting his chin on Conor’s shoulder, he ruffled the hair beneath his navel and scooped up his black-nested cock and balls and tried to engage his gaze in the mirror.

“Don’t, Dolls, make me cut myself.”

“Come, my love –”

“Do-on’t! Joey’s coming.”

Both spoke facetiously. Conor’s body responded – Mike’s hand briefly held more than it grabbed – but he twisted away and finished with a self-absolving cloud of baby powder shaken on so heartily it threatened to blot him out of existence. He walked into the closet – his buttocks two new potatoes pushing past each other – and pulled on his jeans.

Someone buzzed. Mike padded out to the street door and let in Joey and Rosetta. When they came in Conor had donned a retro striped shirt inherited from his father – his parents had both died the year before – and was working gel into his hair.

“Ran into each other,” said Joey.

“Hullo, Conor,” said Rosetta. “So this is where the man lives, is it?”

Though she couldn't be seen to stare, she took it all in.

"Coming with us?" Joey asked Mike.

"Can't, thanks."

"So what's the story, Joey?" Rosetta asked. "Your boss chasing Conor?"

"No idea," Joey said. Rosetta stared, amused. "I just know he's got big plans."

"As in?"

"As in, I really have no idea."

"Enjoy my show the other night?"

She knew they hadn't been in her audience.

"Sure."

"Rex say anything?"

"Not really."

"Let's get going," said Conor, rescuing him.
"Ta-ta."

Chapter 3

MIKE OFFERED TEA. They sat down on the sectional.

“Wow, look at the work he’s done on this place,” Rosetta said. “You and Conor interest me, you know. I mean as a couple. He’s working class, isn’t he?”

“In this country –”

“That’s right, I forgot: The classless society. Tell me, when you watch TV, who holds the remote?”

Mike laughed.

“But that tells me who wears the pants, you see.”

“We don’t watch much,” he lied. He handed her his script. “I’m flattered you want to read this.”

“I’m sure it’s good. Is it a metaphor for AIDS?”

Mike launched into why his adaptation of Defoe’s chronicle of London’s 1665 bubonic-plague epidemic was not a metaphor of any kind, concluding, “But if it helps people think about AIDS, so be it.”

“Mike, why would *you* want to write an AIDS play?”

“For any gay man AIDS is the topic of our time. We’re in the grip of something bigger than we are. London under plague? That’s New York 1986. But Defoe can relieve a little of the *specialness* of our epidemic—help all this death yield something to us, the living.”

“Think Death needs help, do you?” Rosetta asked absently.

She was studying a photo panel on the wall, souvenir of a trip to the Most Enervating Place On Earth. Conor and Mike were never closer than when, after a day at Disney World, they mutually confessed they wanted out, hang their three-day tickets. But at least they had half a dozen souvenir snapshots kindly taken by passing tourists that showed them with Mike’s arm around Conor, Conor brightly pointing to a sign next to him that read *Picture Point*.

“Cool,” she said. “Are you HIV positive?”

“Hope not.”

The HIV test was new and, ensconced in a relationship as he was, Mike felt no need to get it.

“I’d *want* to know,” said Rosetta.

“We’re faithful.”

Seeing that he believed it, she looked him up and down.

“Mmm, young American white bread. Know how *succulent* you’d be, roasted?” She smiled toothily.

She billed herself as *Rosetta Stone the Man-Eater* and in her act claimed she was raised by cannibals. She started every set by gnawing at the microphone: “Gnnnh . . . Gnnnh . . .” “I’m from the Philippines,” she might say. “Mama was a bar girl.” (Face lowered, she looked the soul of Asia.) “Daddy was a sailor – Seventh Fleet. Or so they tell me.” (Chin up, thrusting out her breasts, she was an Anglo pinup.)

She talked about how the man-eating ways of her mother’s people enabled her to survive in New York (not that cannibalism exists in the Philippines). Hinting at Chinatown sources, she described the taste

of different organs, how some are best raw, others better lightly sautéed, and proclaimed the world's tastiest flesh to be that of the young white American male, and wondered whether the reason is his predigested diet of fast food, or "possibly the hypocrisy you're steeped in from birth. Is *that* the special marinade? The secret sauce? Feels so good to skin one of you motherfuckers, chop you up, throw you in the pot, eat the whole mess and next day flush it down the toilet. Feels so *right*."

The laughs always stopped, though it was surprising how long keeping a smile on her face and a complicit light in her eyes could jolly an audience along. But the moment came when people, if nominally still snickering, began to turn their backs to the stage and commence to wait her out. Rosetta, 35, with ten years in the stand-up comedy game, had no idea why the break she was desperate for was so long in coming.

"Tell me," Mike asked, "how much of your act is true?"

"Artistically speaking, it's *all* true."

"You've *eaten* – ?"

"I say so, right?" she said. "Go on about it, even. But *you* try coming here, no father who wants to know you, not speaking the language except pidgin, after growing up in a *hut* with a *hole* in back, with people who hate you *because* your dad's American, and end up at Columbia, where no one will even *talk* to you –"

"OK, OK," Mike said. "I *see*."

"I know you do," Rosetta said equably. "I could stand up like everybody else, talk about how awful

my last date was or what a shit the President is, but I think performers—*all* artists—have a responsibility to tell the *truth*. You owe it to your own integrity to give people the truth, but also it's what they *need*. They may not know it until they hear it, or even then, but that's what comedians are *for*, Mike—to get the audience to see what it looks at every day in a more honest light. You don't have to compromise your work as an *artist*. Though I expect there are rewards for doing so.

"Truth hurts," she said. "I'm the first to say it. But comedy *comes* from pain, you know. We laugh at what hurts. Laughing's the same as crying. Fucked up, but it's human."

Mike tried to look at his play through her lens of truth.

"That's why the same words from someone HIV *positive*—someone condemned to die young—would have weight *your* words could *never* have, Mike.

"At the Dick," she went on, referring to Poor Richard's by its nickname, "I look at my audience and think how half of them will be dead of Rock Hudson's Disease in a few years (that's what we should call it: Give it a celebrity's name, it's not half so disgusting). And the better half, too. Let them go out with some dignity, I say—*truth* ringing in their ears. Not this Seinfeld shit. Wacky dates."

"He's funny," Mike noted. Jerry Seinfeld had recently broken out of the pack of new comedians to begin appearing regularly on *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*.

“So they tell me,” Rosetta said, picking up his script and standing up. “On that note. I’ll have to be honest with you when I’ve read it, OK?”

“Of course. Nothing less will do.”

At the door she turned around and saw, hanging over the restaurant booth Conor one day dragged all the way home from a dumpster on Broadway, a poster enlarged from a photo published in *Blueboy*: Conor, a beautiful love-struck boy in a tuxedo, waltzing a blow-up sex doll wearing a pink Halston through the Greenwich Village Halloween parade.

“Oh, that’s *great*,” she said. “That’s just *too cool*.”

Chapter 4

CONOR AND JOEY flagged a cab out front. It crossed to Broadway, turned, at 14th Street merged into Park Avenue South, later worked over to First Avenue.

“Maybe I should fill you in,” Joey said. “Rex took full ownership of the Gag Reflex last month?”

“Yeah?”

“See, before that he was partners with my old boss Frank Germano? Germano started the club, and that’s where he discovered Tintinella. She used to sing between comedians. After she got a record deal and her records started selling, he brought Rex in to squeeze the label—renegotiate the contract. She was the No. 3 seller in North America last year, but Rex and Germano weren’t getting along, so they split up: Germano kept Tintinella, and Rex took the club and the other personal-management clients.”

“Who are—?”

Joey laughed gloomily.

“No one you ever heard of,” he said. “*Yet*. But hey, great acts.”

At the 59th Street Bridge they sat through a change of lights. Headlights streamed off the iron overhead like rhinestones sliding off a bracelet.

“So you went with Rex?”

“Rex is *great*, Conor: Energy, ideas. Yeah, I’m with him all the way.

“Tonight we’ll just hang out. Freaks them out when I come in, staff thinks I’m spying. Keep your eyes open and talk about anything but the club.”

“Yessir.”

“Tuesday’s dismal. Hard to get people in during the week. Funny business, running a comedy club. Nickel-and-dime, like any bar.”

Joey was another bar person, having tended bar at Jaye’s in the Seventies. He still thrilled his friends with tales of each individual Beatle coming in and trashing the others.

At 76th Street the cab pulled up in front of the Gag Reflex. While Joey paid the fare Conor got out and faced the antic neon sign in the window. A tongue unrolled through poufy lips, a knuckle poked through them and letters flashed:

G
A
G
R
E
F
L
E
X

Everything blazed spasmodically, went dark, and started over.

“*Sheesh*,” said Conor. “That’s *gross*.”

“Germano. Classy, compared to before: Place was a strip joint?”

“Maybe add neon puke? Just an idea.”

Joey led him inside, where the bartender was already grinding ice for his margarita. Conor’s impression was of smoke, stink, disrepair and demoralization. Shabby carpeting covered the floor. The bar itself was clumsy, being of two heights, with a back bar joined of mismatched mirrors. The hanging lights had plastic shades.

“Meet Sly,” said Joey. “My friend Conor.”

The bartender nodded. “What’ll it be?”

“How about – Kahlúa?”

“Really? Coming right up.”

Conor’s tactic – it amused Mike – was to drink what he didn’t care for, lest he drink too much.

“This is The Wall,” called Joey from a stretch of nicotine-stained 8x10 photographs, some signed (to Germano) by the famous, the rest inscribed even more fulsomely by comedians whose eyes held the haunting knowledge of their own oblivion. “Our famous Wall.”

“Shit,” said Conor.

“Catch the show?”

“Whatever.”

They carried their drinks through leather curtains into the showroom. It smelled. To one side was a low platform. Above it lights illuminated the club’s logo carved in wood, more clearly a rip-off of the Rolling Stones trademark, against a plaster wall soiled with flop sweat. A man holding a mic eagerly caught at their entrance.

“Here they are now!” he said, and brayed with laughter.

Eight or ten demonstratively silent couples were scattered around the room. Gripping Conor’s shoulder, Joey steered him to a table.

“But as I was saying,” the comedian went on, “I’ve dated more than my share of dogs.”

After a few minutes of this Conor started laughing at its sheer desperation. Naturally his laugh triggered Joey’s infectious giggle. Others took it up with an ironic wheeze.

“What’d I say?” beamed the comedian. “What’d I say?”

A few sets later a woman whose tilted head fenced off her face with hair came up to their table.

“Are you Conor?”

“Hey, Coral!” said Joey. “Meet Conor Brennan. Coral’s general manager.”

“Charmed,” said Conor.

“Rex Black is on the phone for you,” she said.

They looked surprised. Coral took them downstairs through the Dutch door at the end of The Wall.

“Watch your head,” she cautioned.

Conor had a fleeting view of a junk-filled cellar before Coral installed him at a wobbly desk in the office. It was a tiny afterthought of a room wedged beneath the staircase, its five-foot ceiling covered in carpeting, with walls mirrored for that claustrophobic effect beloved of New York interior designers. She closed the door as she left. Conor pushed it back open and punched the blinking button on the phone.

“This is Conor.”

“Conor! So how you like my shithole?”

“Quite a place, Rex.”

He saw Coral leading Joey past three-legged chairs, an upended desk, cardboard cartons blooming with moisture and through a door. A light went on and he saw liquor bottles shelved against rock walls. The door closed.

“Look to you like it could make somebody *thirty million bucks*?” Conor was silent. “Serious, that’s what Tintinella’s done—*net*. No wonder Germano’s outa there, who needs a smelly hole on First Avenue when the money’s coming in too fast to count? Poor me, that toilet’s all I *got*. Meet Coral?”

“Yeah. Nice lady.”

“Oh good, so she’s not doing her coke right in front of your face?” Rex asked. “Germano put up with it, wouldn’t even care to guess why, doesn’t bother *him* that John Belushi used to score drugs there, or that it says so in a book 17 weeks on the New York *Times* bestseller list, but *me*? A, I hate that shit, B, I’m turning that place around. Joey tell you?”

“About—?”

“My plans?”

“Not a word, Rex.”

Conor saw the door in back open and Coral and Joey hilariously emerge. Coral went upstairs. Fussing with his nose, Joey came into the office and bumped his head.

“Big man still on?”

Conor covered the mouthpiece.

“Go away, Joey, we’re reviewing your salary.”

“Knew it! He hired you?”

“Nah. But he’s talking. And talking.”

Joey withdrew and Conor pulled the door to. It was like sitting in a packing case. He undid a shirt button. Rex was saying, “ –fill you in soon, has to be need-to-know for now, but look around, you’ll see what I’m up against. Breaks my fucking heart.

“Sit down with Mr. Clive, poke my fingers up his yappy little dog’s ass, hold it out the window and get three cents more on the dollar *and* songwriting credit? *That* I can do. Make clients Germano couldn’t do *squat* with into *stars*? Piece of *cake*! But the fucking *bar* business? Wouldn’t know how to get *started*, and with the jerk-offs I got working for me –”

A buzzer sounded and another light on the phone flashed.

“Rex, hold on a sec?” Conor tapped the *Hold* button and the flashing one, and heard a clamor of voices and a cry, “Coral’s passed out!”

“Be right there,” he said, and ran up the steps. Joey met him at the Dutch door.

“S’OK, man, she’s fine.”

“Where is she?” But he could see her, swaying atop a stool, laughing, red-faced, as Sly held her face in his hands and spoke into it. “She was out?”

“Conor, she’s *fine*. We’ll put her in a cab.”

He went downstairs and found Rex’s line dead. Another line flashed. The buzzer sounded.

Punching a button, he said, “Yo?”

“Rex Black on line two.”

He hit *Two*.

“Conor, never, *never* put me on hold.”

“Little crisis here, Rex, your manager passed out.”

“*Shit!* What I fucking tell you?”

Line one lighted up again, and the buzzer sounded, but Conor ignored it. Rex was going on when someone banged on the door. Joey came in and said tersely, “Conor: Joe D. on one.”

“Rex, I know I can’t ever, *ever* put you on hold,” Conor told Rex, “but some shmo named Joe D.’s on line one, and –”

“*Shit! Take it, for fuck’s sake!*”

Conor pushed buttons.

“Yeah, this is Conor?”

“Conor, Joe D. Would you please ask Miss Coral to remind Rex Black that the month ends next week, and he never got back to me *last* month, and this just *cannot* go on?” The voice, grainy and gaspy like Darth Vader’s, seemed to take pleasure in its own low tunefulness.

“Yessir, I’ll tell him.”

“Thank you, Conor.”

Back to Rex.

“Joe D. reminds you about the end of the month?”

“*Goddam fucking SHIT!* Didn’t tell him I was on the line, did you?”

“No.”

“Look, Conor – (Go back to sleep, Perri, it’s nothing) (Look what that goombah did, woke up my wife! Fucking *gorilla!*)

“What it is, I’m making changes up there, I really am, but I have to take it slow. Right now, City’s threatening to shut me down: Code violations up the *wazoo*. No choice, have to clear ’em before anything else. Need a point man on it. Joey says you do carpentry, all that shit. Be a way of getting in, seeing

what's what without anyone feeling threatened or hiding stuff. And then, you want, we talk.

"Don't know where you're going with your *piano* bar, what kind of fucking career path *that* is. Working your way up to running a *gay* bar? *Hmmm?* 'Cause what's coming down for the Gag Reflex is ten times – ten *thousand* times – more exciting!"

"Uh –"

"Don't give me that, Conor! How long you see yourself opening beer bottles in a freak show? *C'mon*, think of the future."

"What code violations?"

"City wants – What *don't* they want? Junk cleared out of the cellar, that carpeting upstairs *out*, sprinklers working. Endless! It's that fucking Coral, no idea how to do business in New York: You meet the inspector, find out what *his* problems are, do what you can, everything's copacetic. And cheaper, in the long run. I mean, that dildo you work at? Bet it doesn't have any violations hanging off it – over there you know the last word on *grease*, am I wrong?"

"Come by the office, that's all I ask. Will you at least the fuck do that?"

"Sure, Rex."

They hung up.

IN ONE RESPECT a cavalry charge is very like ordinary life. So long as you are all right, firmly in your saddle, your horse in hand, and well armed, lots of enemies will give you a wide berth.

But as soon as you have lost a stirrup, have a rein cut, have dropped your weapon, are wounded, or your horse is wounded, then is the moment when from all quarters enemies rush upon you.

– Winston Churchill
My Early Life

Good People

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