

Good People tells the story of Rex Black and the circle of his friends and employees who chase his dream of transforming his Upper East Side comedy club into a global brand. Fast and funny, incisive and heartfelt, Good People sums up, in the tradition of Theodore Dreiser, an entire American era of greed and unreal ambition.

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GOOD PEOPLE

A NOVEL

Steven K. Meyers

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Second Edition

1.

A nor'easter was lashing Manhattan the October night Rex Black raided Poor Richard's Cabaret. Wind and rain sliced at the city from an unaccustomed angle, doing damage as storms from no other point of the compass can do. Trees fell in Central Park, cars were set afloat in underground parking garages, pedestrians slogged across streets awash with what seemed a rising tide, and throughout the island loathsome slime began creeping up through basement drains.

Inside the club, at the piano, Dooley started *Baby, It's Cold Outside*. Margo the waitress put down her tray and stepped up to the mic and they sang it together cheerfully and suggestively. They segued to *Stormy Weather* and *I'm Always Chasing Rainbows*.

In 46th Street blurry yellow taxis and black cars stood nose to tail, not moving, but somehow a white stretch limousine pulled up to claim the width of the club. It sat for a time as wild winds rocked it and sheets of rain thrummed furiously on the roof and cascaded off in side curtains. Finally the driver ventured out to open the back door. As his umbrella flared in flame-shaped collapse, two figures tumbled out and ran under the canopy and indoors.

Platinum locks flying behind eager lighted eyes, Joey burst in first. He moved with vehement angularity, throwing off speed lines like a Haring, never moving with less than total commitment, never not moving.

"Mike!" he said to the tall, sandy-haired man watching morosely from beside the door. "Never see *you* here."

“Stepped in for one beer,” Michael replied. “And, lo, the rains came.”

Joey’s companion meanwhile entered and stood against the door. This man seemed ill-paired with him—well-dressed and self-contained, with slick features that gave nothing away, a good haircut and excellent Italian sportcoat. At perhaps thirty-five he was a few years older than Joey or Michael. He gleamed as with a coat of gloss, but his slightly skinned-looking eyes (there was a small flat triangle of flesh beneath each one) were dry and watchful.

“Rex,” said Joey, tugging at Italian wool. “This is Mike, the manager’s friend.”

Rex marshaled his features agreeably and showed strong white teeth as he extended a hand.

“No kidding?” he said. “Rex Black.”

“Rex is my boss,” Joey told Michael. “He’s good people, you’ve heard me.”

“Sure,” Michael said. Usually litanies of complaint, occasionally litanies of adoration, broadcast wherever Joey happened to be downing his margaritas. Rex owned a comedy club uptown called the Gag Reflex. “Mike Roberts. A pleasure.”

He led them to the near end of the bar, by the cellar steps. Their passage introduced an alien current, left a wake of hair being smoothed, collars tugged, itches solved—something of the anxiety a shark passing near a school of fish inspires. Dooley hit a harsh chord and grimaced.

The storm had only blown in at curtain time, so the club was not as empty as it might have been, except that it was Friday, when it should have been full. Everybody was making the best of it, and for once the space—a high-tech takeoff on Art Deco, not warm but very chic—seemed cozy. People drank and chatted, flirting across the room as Dooley embroidered show tunes and Justin the bartender served up drinks. Rose-colored gels washed years off every face, making it an assembly of juveniles. His fans watched Conor, the manager, helping behind the bar. The bravest leaned across to give his beautiful brow a smooch. He would shy away laughing, then look back in his cool,

assessing way from a face drawn in clean Irish design—cheekbones that cast shadows, tight black curls, blue eyes of painful sensitivity.

Meanwhile Joey and Rex put their heads together, Joey whispering, Rex's eyes moving across the room.

Conor saw Michael peeling the label off his Molson's and asked, his accent pure Queens, "Ready for another, Dolls?"

Joey spoke up.

"Hey Conor, who do you have to fuck around here to get a drink?"

Rex flinched.

"Don't look at *me*, I'm a married man," said Conor. With an access of golden light across his face he put pursed lips across the bar. "Where did *you* come from? In this *weather*?"

"From my boss's stretch limo," said Joey. "Hope you appreciate the sacrifice."

Margo screamed. They saw her twist her tray around and bop a seated man on the head as his hands vanished into her skirt. Conor vaulted the bar. Joey dove into the uproar. Moments later a chunk of it moved for the door, Conor, Joey and three or four regulars carrying the man by kicking, twisting legs and arms that had them staggering into each other. Rex and Michael brought up the rear. The man was saying "fucking faggots, can say no, she wants, suck my dick." They lofted him out to the sidewalk, into the shocking rain. The limo driver looked askance.

"Next door," said Conor.

"Hey, lemme go, getting *wet*!" the man said with new clarity. "Said lemme go, cocksuckers!"

They carried him into the mid-block parking lot. A couple passing beneath an umbrella appeared not to notice.

"Drop him."

They dropped him. The man grabbed for Conor's ankle. Conor kicked him in the side.

"*One*," he told him. "Hands off the waitresses, you horrifying asshole." He kicked again. "*Two*: Stay the fuck out of my bar. *Three*—"

The man flinched but Conor didn't kick. Instead he squatted by his head.

"Or are we clear?"

The man sat up and screamed curses. Conor pushed his face at him and screamed louder: “So you’re crazy? NOT AS CRAZY AS ME!”

The man launched himself. Conor caught his chin with a knee, and he rolled back and lay quiet.

“Thanks, guys. We’re getting wet.”

They were soaked. Inside Conor rewarded his helpers with a round of drinks and handed out paper towels with a lavish hand. Margo threw her arms around his neck and kissed him while he rubbed her back in brotherly fashion. He looked more upset than she did. Strength protects weakness: old-fashioned but primal. He seemed easier after a minute. Margo felt for the pen in her ear and went back to work, and Conor asked Rex what he wanted to drink and gave it to him.

“Don’t believe we were introduced before the brouhaha,” said Rex, extending his hand. “Rex Black.”

“Um, um, um,” said Conor, snatching back his hand. “Heard about you.”

“Like the way you dealt with that guy. Who was he, anyway?”

“Some skeezy jerk,” said Conor. “Who knows?”

“Unbelievable night, but I see you’re doing business.”

“You doing any?”

“Called from the stretch: Sold out, almost. Hundred sixty seats, two shows.”

“Yikes. We seat fifty and sell out, like, *never*. Hey guys, want to catch the late show?”

“Who is it?” Rex asked.

“Rosetta Stone? The comedian?”

“She’s a riot,” Joey advised Rex.

“Gag Reflex material?”

“You might not think so,” Joey said carefully.

“How about it, Conor? Gag Reflex material?”

“Couldn’t say,” said Conor. “Never been up there.”

“Never been to the *Gag Reflex*?” asked Rex. “*Amazed*. Here I thought I owned the hottest club in New York!”

The early show ended. A waitress anchored the showroom door open, and men and women (mostly men) trailed out, claiming their

coats and jamming beneath the hammering canopy to watch the unmoving file of cars. Honks from Ninth Avenue advanced by relays past the club to Eighth. Brake lights went dark and the line eased ahead, then red splashed urgently and only the din of horns moved forward.

Before the door closed and smothered horns and rain, someone new slipped inside, and Dooley broke into Hall and Oates' old hit *Man-Eater*.

"Thanks, Dooley," the woman called, "and fuck *you*."

"Rosetta!" shouted men across the room.

She checked her red slicker and came around the corner with her face wet and shining. She nodded at Conor, Joey, Michael; when she saw Rex the shine went incandescent. She knew by sight every club owner in town.

"How's it hanging, Joey? Conor, give me a drink and I'll blow you."

"Keep your lips off me, bitch."

Justin handed Conor a Scotch and he handed it to her. She sipped daintily, ignoring Rex, who meanwhile showed his teeth again as he asked Michael, "What do *you* do?"

"I proofread at *Time Magazine*, Saturday nights."

Rex's smile expired. Rosetta drilled into Michael from the other side.

"There must be more to you," she said. "You're a *writer*, aren't you?"

He admitted it.

"I *thought* so."

She waited. Her dark eyes, limpid and sexy, had an unsettling quality, perhaps owing to her half-Asian ancestry. It was as if the East in them transfixed you while the West knocked you out.

"Working on a play," Michael told her. "Adapting Daniel Defoe's book *A Journal of the Plague Year*? I call it *Foe*."

"Great title," Rosetta said dryly. "Love to read it."

"Really?"

"Conor's isn't far from me, I'll come by."

"Rosetta," Joey said, "know my boss, Rex Black?"

She looked affable but blank.

“How nice to meet you. Believe this weather?” She turned from one to the other like a cat rubbing its face, marking its territory. Then she squeezed Joey’s ass. “So glad you came for my show. But now I must dress.”

Gravely she went downstairs.

Rex asked Joey, “What do we do now?”

Joey hooked a thumb: “*Amscray?*”

But first Rex approached Conor’s ear, gingerly, as though it were an already-licked ice cream cone. Joey leaned in close.

“Conor, know *why* the Gag Reflex is SRO tonight? In the middle of a fucking *hurricane?*”

Conor shook his damp head.

But Joey was bursting: “Because ‘*Comedy is the rock and roll of the Eighties!*’”

“Fucking *Rolling Stone* said that,” Rex snapped. “Got plans up there. Drop by, be my guest.”

“Thanks,” said Conor.

“Seriously, making some changes. Hope Joey hasn’t breathed a word—top secret—but someone knows how to run a room like you do, find it worth checking out.”

“Conor, you’ve *got* to,” said Joey.

“Hey, I’m there.”

Rex had what he came for, so when Dooley announced Rosetta’s show, causing a flow into the showroom, he and Joey said goodbye and beat it. Rosetta, ready for the stage, passed through the bar gracious as a queen. She paused at the showroom door to allow her audience’s applause to engulf her. Then she went in and the closing door muffled the clapping, made it sound far away, like the rain.

4.

Conor and Joey flagged a cab out front. It turned at Broadway, 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 contract and her records started selling, he brought Rex in to squeeze the label—renegotiate the deal. 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 exaggeratedly poufy lips, a knuckle poked through them, and on the finger 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. The bartender was already grinding ice for Joey's 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, and with a back bar joined of mismatched mirrors. The hanging lights had plastic shades.

"Meet Sly," said Joey. "My friend Conor."

The bartender nodded at Conor. "What'll it be?"

"How about – Kahlúa?"

"Really? Coming right up."

Conor's tactic—it amused Michael—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 logo in wood, more clearly a rip-off of the Rolling Stones trademark, against a plaster wall soiled with flop sweat. A man holding a microphone 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. Joey gripped Conor's shoulder and 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 more 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's on the phone for you," she said.

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

"Watch your head," she cautioned.

Conor had a fleeting impression of a junk-filled cellar before Coral installed him in a broken chair 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, and 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 greasy telephone.

“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. Then 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 seventeen 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 could see the door in back open and Coral and Joey hilariously emerge. Coral went upstairs. Joey, fussing with his nose, 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 and hold it out the window, 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 a light on the phone flashed.

"Rex, hold on a sec?" Conor tapped the *Hold* button and the flashing one. A clamor of voices and a cry, "Coral's passed out!"

"Be right up," said Conor, 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.

"Yo?" he said, punching a button.

"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," said Conor, "I know I can't ever, *ever* put you on hold, 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 us 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 that *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? The junk cleared out of the cellar, that carpeting upstairs *out*, the 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.

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