

*A 39 year-old standup comedian faces a decision: continue performing comedy or change his career. He's given a possible shot at success, but will he make it? Set in 1992, this is life seen through the eyes of a standup comic.*

## **Middle Act**

By Paddy Morrissey

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# MIDDLE ACT



A NOVEL

PADDY MORRISSEY

Middle Act

a novel

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# WEDNESDAY

Once again, here I am. Sitting at my usual spot at the far end of the bar, staring a hole in my drink. *Blink!* Looking up, I can see across the crowded room where Jordan is pacing side to side, agitated for no more apparent reason than his manic need to be in perpetual motion. While talking, well, it's not actually talking, it like he's on some kind of a mock tirade, lurching forward and rocking backward, wiping sweat from his forehead and rubbing it over his unbuttoned blue plaid work shirt flashing a "Nine Inch Nails" logo on his faded t-shirt underneath. Riding about half-mast down his hips, his belt-less jeans sport self-inflicted holes in the knees and the frayed pants legs end atop a severely scuffed pair of iron-toed work boots, putting an emphatic finishing touch on his early 90's counter-culture uniform. Hearing him is another matter. But the end of the bar isn't the place to be if you want to listen.

Joey and the other bartender whose name escapes me are snatching glasses, pouring drinks and taking orders from the mostly young and good-looking waitresses in a sort of controlled manic panic, spinning around on black rubber mats with drainage holes. Cigarette smoke is suspended over the bar in a cartoony bubble. *Another Diet Coke?* Not yet. I lean both elbows on the bar and cross my arms to give the impression I'm focusing my attention, or listening intently, or engaged in, whatever. Looking down into the ashtray at

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my elbow, my cigarette has gone out. Again. Two seats away, a young woman in a black, tight-fitting short dress turns her blunt-cropped-bleached-blonde hairdo-d head, revealing a pale, round, flat face which looks a lot like a dessert plate and says, "Excuse me? Do you, like, do you know him?"

"What?"

"That guy. Over there! Uh, you know him?"

"Yeah."

"Really? You really know him?"

"Yeah, I really know him."

"So, like, what's his name?"

"His name's Jordan."

"Really? Great."

Her eyelids and lips are painted with colors you only find on tropical fish. Looking at me as if she means to ask another question, I see her mind working behind her eyes, but *flip-switch!* her expression deadens and her gaze drifts back toward Jordan. I reach into my suit jacket pocket for a matchbook, (Dave's Quality Inn, "*The Best Rest in Chico*") then fish out my half-dead cigarette from the ashtray and light it, turning my head sideways so I won't burn the end of my nose.

*Winston tastes good, like a cig-a-rette should,*

*Winston tastes good, like a (clap, clap!) cigarette should!*

Ms. Plate face turns back to me and sucks her upper incisors with her tongue. "Oh! Can I get a cigarette from you?"

I hand her my green plastic "Three Castles Tobacco" pouch. "-Sure, would you like to roll one?"

She reacts as if I've handed her a dead weasel.

"What? No, like, I meant a real cigarette."

"It's real tobacco. You can roll one."

"Oh, Uh..."

Leaning back she picks her drink up and swipes her index finger under her nose. It lands briefly on a round, silver post jutting through the side of her nostril. Sniffing twice, she glances towards the stage, then turns back, "Uh, no thanks." She takes a drink and turns away.

I roll my eyes, for the benefit of me, I guess. I started rolling cigarettes to enjoy the ritual and to slow me from smoking more. *Like I don't have a problem...* Scanning the crowd, I do a quick mental inventory of age, type, and ratio of men to women. My bad ratio is more young than old, more men than women, more mouth-breathing imbeciles than literates. I'm hitting somewhere around 40% tonight.

Now Jordan is clutching at his throat and shaking his head. The crowd is reacting with a mixture of shock and ironic amusement as if witnessing the public disintegration of a television evangelist. His hands mime a steering wheel, but it isn't miming because he's explaining everything he's doing—which is a good idea based on his ability to mime. Instead of giving the impression of turning a steering wheel, it looks as if he's shaking an Etch-a-Sketch. He's talking louder now and I can hear him. He's going to end soon. It never varies; when he mime-talks the steering wheel, he's just about done.

From the stage, Jordan: "...so I've passed the cop, the old lady and even my girlfriend, and that wouldn't be so bad, but now the dog is sitting in the front seat," *Laughs*. "wearing the thong bikini," *Laughs again*. (in a barely passable Jack Nicholson impression) "Well pal, I'd bite you with my teeth, but you can't handle the tooth!" *Laughter*. "Thank youou!"

Cocking his head to one side, he bows slightly, cuing the audience to applaud. *Oh please!* Attempting to stanch his hemorrhaging sweat, he swipes his narrow forehead with the back of his hand and rubs it along the sides of his Hitler youth haircut. He smirks mightily. Without looking, he swings his right arm behind him and grabs the microphone stand and drags it to center stage, planting the mic in its holder saying: "Okay! Are you ready for your headliner?" *Applause*. He grabs the mic with both hands and leans toward the audience. "Oh, come on, are you READY FOR THE HEADLINER?!" *Louder applause*. "Well, you'll have to wait, because we have the featured act first." *Slight laughter*. "The next guy coming up here at plays colleges and comedy clubs all over the country. You might have seen him on the Letterman show, did you? If you did, you're on drugs, because he's never been on Letterman. He's a good friend of mine and a regis-

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tered sex offender. I'm just kidding, he's not really my friend. Let's hear it for Terry Flaherty!"

Beginning at his intro, I walked to the stage, trying to time it so I would step on the stage right as he announced my name, but the main floor is packed and impossible to move through quickly. Forcing my way between the tightly spaced cocktail tables, I pull out the same line I use in these situations, "Excuse me, excuse me please, excuse me, I'm a doctor, please let me through, I'm a DOCTOR!"

Jordan has finished my intro, but I'm still weaving toward the stage through the practically non-existent center aisle. Holding his hand up to his forehead, shielding his eyes from the spotlight, he tries to spot me in the crowd. I reach the front of the raised, three-foot stage, looking left and see that the tiny aisle leading to the stage steps is blocked by a party of eight. So instead of trying to wedge my way through, I step on the seat of the one empty chair in front of me and leap up onto the stage, twirl around, strike a swashbuckling pose, head back, laughing à la Errol Flynn in "Captain Blood." *Absolute favorite pirate movie.*

As I land, Jordan rocks backward, grabbing the mic stand, and for a split second as I turn around to him, he's staring at me like an eighteenth-century English peasant encountering a French fop for the first time. His dumbfounded expression quickly morphs into a sneering grin as he hands me the microphone, thrusting his head forward, whispering loudly in my ear, "This crowd sucks."

I turn my head saying off-mic, "Jordan! You impetuous boy!"

Jordan shoots me another one of his smirk variations and walks from the stage down the steps. Raising the mic to my lips, "Thank you, let's hear it for Jordan Bowman!" *Applause.* "Ladies and gentlemen, if you were bemused by the subtlety of Jordan's act, you can catch him next week at the Catholic Orphan's Family Retreat and Tractor Pull Marathon." *Laughs.*

Jordan is fully fifteen years younger than me, and probably sees me as some kind of over-aged pachyderm who refuses to go to the elephant's graveyard. Okay, maybe his thought, not in those words. Age...25? Or younger. With his lingering, post-adolescent *like-I-give-a-fuck* attitude. Not such a bad guy and I

like him in a comradely way, but not his lame material. Obvious and pandering. I'm sure he doesn't care for mine either, though we never bring up the subject. We'll just gab and wish each other well and say something like "Good set!" after the other returns from the stage. I was about to say this, but he beat me to the punch with his "state of the audience" factoid. That compliment is a comedian's game. How many ways can you say something seemingly positive to a comic without any real meaning?

"Hey, they loved you!"

"You really had the crowd going!"

"Nice socks!"

And there's the ever-popular, thinly veiled barb, "It sounded like you had a great set!" Of course the subtext is you didn't watch or hear any of the comedian's act—on purpose of course—but as if you simply strolled in off the street and sauntered up to the stage after the exact end of the comedian's set. All right, this kind of exchange doesn't happen between most standups, because even with the comics who deserve it, we usually treat each other with a respect that comes from spending so much collective time in the bunkers.

Watching Jordan squeeze through the crowd, moving side to side, it looks as if he's surfing through the crowd.

*Joke to come: What would it be like if God parted the Red Sea for Moses and the Israelites with only a one foot wide twisting gap? Sort of a conga line through the raging waters maze...funny? Maybe not.*

Scanning the audience, I realize I was slightly off in my earlier calculation about this crowd. It's probably not too bad, although you can never tell this soon.

As the audience's lukewarm applause dies down, "Good evening ladies and gentlemen. I just got back from Idaho and it's nice to be among upright, opposable-thumbed bipeds again. I am Terry Flaherty—" From the back of the room, the crashing sound of dropped cocktail glasses on the floor. Before the audience has time to react I shout, "Job opening!" The standup reflex. Acknowledge interruptions. *Pronto! Audience laughs.* "Anyhoo, like I said, I am Terry Flaherty, I come from a large family...mammals. Anyone else? One, two, three, there's a few of you out there among the other inver-



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tebrates. I'm the middle child in a family of six. Currently I live in the People's Republic of Berkeley. *Applause*. Thank you. A few Marxist-Socialist-Feminists-Post-Pubescent-Atheists in the audience. Berkeley is a very unique place. It's the only place where on the back of police cars, the bumper stickers read, 'Question Authority.' But I digress..."

My mind wanders as I continue. I watch the faces of the audience react to my usual opening. I haven't varied it much in about three months now, acquiescing to the adage, "If it ain't broke..." It is truly amazing how little a comedian's act actually changes, or needs to change. Although every show is made up of an almost entirely new audience, a lot of repeaters don't mind hearing this stuff again. Some comics have been doing the same act, or parts of the same act for years. *Me!* Mostly, everyone else works harder—at least on this aspect of their act.

I go into the one thing that always changes, my *New Word Bit*. My act is a collection of characters, ideas and general goofiness, but it requires the audience to pay attention. I've always loved dictionaries and discovering new words, so I always look up a new word for each show. "In an effort to create more Logophiles, that is, *Logos*, meaning words and *philes*, meaning loving, Logophiles are lovers of words, and I know many of you are enamored of the words you choose when you are oh, for example, climaxing. So for all you language buffs: tonight's *Word of the Evening*, is '*parapraxis*.' It's a kind of Freudian slip, *parapraxis* means 'a slip of the tongue that reveals unconscious wishes or desires.' For example, a married couple are eating breakfast and the wife means to ask her husband to pass her the cream for her coffee, but instead says, 'Why in the hell did I marry you?!' *Parapraxis*, use caution when employing this noun..."

In the first minutes, I can almost predict how the audience will react to my act. The audience decides whether they're going to climb aboard my comedy bus and laugh. It's not a question of liking me, because even bitter, unlikable comics can be hilarious and get great laughs. Just a split-second decision of going along for the ride. Although sometimes it varies. An audience can love me at the beginning, but then suddenly—as if their minds channel surfed—they're

gone; or conversely, the crowd that seems so cold can constitute a major victory for me when I can elevate them from a motley, disinterested crew to the pinnacle of a cheering mob.

“My Irish grandfather always says, ‘An Irishman becomes more Irish in direct proportion to the distance he is away from Ireland.’” This line of my act is for the portion of the audience who can identify with this adage. Of course, being of Irish extraction helps. It’s a kind of an in-joke, *I-don’t-care-if-you-like-this-or-not-this-is-just-for-me* thing. Sometimes I like to veer the audience off onto a non-funny direction just to see if I can pull them back safely into Jokesville.

Looking past the back of the crowd, I see that they’ve hung a “*Fresh Margarita’s, Our Way!*” sign over the Sal’s sign on the back wall. Actually, it says “Salamander’s Comedy Club”, the name of this Pleasanton club here in the East Bay. But nobody calls it Salamander’s, at least the staff and the comedians who play here don’t. Rich Foster, the owner, once dated a woman who had two webbed toes. After she dumped Rich, she finally had them surgically separated. Salamander’s is sort of his tribute to her. Rich tells this story to every comic who’s worked here at least three times—but he’s never divulged her name. Not even to me.

Scanning the back wall murals of comics and sports figures—W.C. Fields, Groucho Marx, Jose Canseco *as an Oakland A!*, Joe Montana—anyone can tell Sal’s has been around since the early-to-mid-80’s when comedy was booming. There were nine full-time comedy clubs all over the San Francisco Bay area along with numerous one-nighters. If you were even moderately successful, your phone would be ringing with club bookers and entertainment agencies needing stand-ups for all kinds of shows, ranging from the “A” comedy clubs and big corporate events to bachelor parties and comedy nights at salad bar restaurants. And I played them all. Many times.

I momentarily pause my out-of-body reverie. Noticing what looks like my old grade school buddy, Dennis Moran. *What?!* Or what Dennis would look like with thirty years and a bald head added to his elfin features. I’m staring. The guy, not Dennis, upon closer inspection, looks puzzled and I blurt out, “Ladies and gentlemen, excuse me, but we have a celebrity in our audience tonight, Hollywood

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Director Mister Ron Howard! Ron, stand up and take a bow!" After some audience applause and goading by his friends at the table, the guy, who resembles Ron Howard, smiles, stands up, turns around to the crowd and waves. "You know, ladies and gentlemen, Ron is not only a great director, but he's also president of the Men's Hair Club." *Audience laughs.* I'm off the hook.

I continue my set, a combination of jokes, characters, one of which is my religion of money preacher, "Minister Buck Fuller from the Church of Economic Salvation," and go into my last bit, an improv routine where I take a lot of suggestions from the audience and make up a Shakespearean play on the spot.

I began this bit about seven years ago. Playing one of those typical hard-ass one-nighters in a suburban sports bar, the crowd was particularly tough and in frustration, I blurted, "Okay, since you're not going for my act, what would you like to see?" The assortment of backward-cap-wearing mouth breathers yelled:

"Condoms!"

"Sex!"

"Bud!"

"Jose Cuervo!"

"Vibrators!"

"Cher!"

"Weed!"

And from the bar in the back, a guy yelled, "Shakespeare!"

"Okay. Let's use all of your suggestions and put them all into a Shakespearean play."

A guy sitting right in front of the stage looked at me and said, "Oh, fuck."

I thought, *You're right, oh fuck! What am I going to do now?* But I repeated the suggestions and just took off. To my and the audience's surprise, it actually worked. I threw in thees, thous, and m'lords, with other Shakespeare-ish-sounding words and inverted my sentences in a bogus iambic pentameter style. Afterwards at the bar, I thought about putting some form to the improv, taking in other suggestions as I go along in the scene. I did it every night and finally had to put it

at the end of my act as a closer because it was so strong and I couldn't do anything else to top it. And still can't.

Tonight one suggestion was "magic mushrooms" so I called it, "The Taming of the 'Shrooms." This is one bit where I have to stay focused, because it's so demanding. I select a person from one of the suggestions and use them as the central character, and think of some other person as an adversary or maybe some obstacle they have to overcome and tell a story. Along the way, the new suggestions will pop up as if they are markers along the road of my story, using them to propel the plot to the next suggestion. When I've used the initial eight to ten suggestions, I take more suggestions and try to find a logical end for the bit. At that point, I repeat all of the suggestions, in order, in rhyming couplets.

Tonight it ends,

*"And thus to prove time's passing law,  
Cher hast flashed her sequined bra.  
So if thou feels thy mind is dyin',  
Perhaps 'tis just the psilocybin."*

I take a slight bow and say, "Thanks, I'm outta here! And AWAAAAAY we go!" *Jackie Gleason's line, my tribute.*

*Loud applause.* I take another bow, turn to see Jordan who has just walked onto the stage, hand him the microphone and say off-mic, "I thought you said this crowd sucks."

He says in my ear, "I said, 'This crowd will laugh at anything.'"

Laughing as I look out to the audience, I spot the still-empty chair I used to hop up on stage. Impulsively, I jump down and land on the chair, which tips over as I tumble a full forward roll onto the stained carpet—almost taking out two customers and a cocktail table. The audience stops clapping. But I jump up shouting, "One small step for man, one giant leap for Mankind!" Somehow pulled that one out of the reference locker. *Laughter and applause.*

Jordan, "That was Terry Flaherty everybody, let's hear it!" The audience claps louder and I snake my way back through the crowded room, while people are saying to me, "Great show!" "Way to go." And what sounds like "Really good, I'll be back." I thank them one and all, especially the last comment, which might have actually been,

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"Pretty good for an old hack." But it doesn't matter what they are saying, because I'm in my comedy endorphin zone—there's nothing else outside of performing that remotely feels like this.

After winding my way through the audience, an older man and his wife stop me and tell me how much they enjoyed my act. "...and it's nice that you don't have to resort to foul language like that other comedian." I thank them, but actually, I have nothing against a dirty act as long as it's thought-provoking or just funny. George Carlin and Richard Pryor for instance. It's just not me.

As I approach the bar, I hear Jordan, "...the headliner. He's been on *The Tonight Show* with Jay Leno, let's hear it for Wayne Docker!" Loud applause fills the room. Lucy, one of the young waitresses holding a tray full of empty glasses, passes by quickly in front of me, her long blonde braid hanging down past her shoulder blades. She stops and squeezes my arm, "That was great Terry."

"Thanks Lucy." and return the squeeze.

I continue to my end-of-the-bar seat and Plate Face is still sitting there, staring intently at me. She now has two empty glasses in front of her and gives me a toothy smile as I sit down.

"Like that was awesome!"

"Thank you."

"No, like I mean it. How did you do that last thing?"

"It's all scripted. I pay those people to shout out those suggestions."

"Really, I'm all like, 'How did he do it?'"

"Thanks."

"No, seriously! Like, can I ask you a question?"

"Go ahead"

"Do you know Wayne?"

It could be worse. She could be interested in me. "Sorry, I don't really know him." It's true, I haven't met him before and as this is the first night of the comedy week, he hadn't come in before I was on stage. I turn away to the bartender, "Joey, I hear you got something for me."

"Coming up boss."

Joey sets me up with my usual, an Irish whiskey, Bushmill's—I'll take Jameson's in a pinch—and a dark draft beer. My reward for a show, whether or not I deserve it. I hand him a tip. Drinks are always free for the comics.

I look down at my beige seer sucker suit. My stage fall tore the pocket and added an unidentifiable stain that I'm-not-sure-I-want-to-know-about's origins. *Dammit*. I had to be Circus Boy. Oh well, it's about \$7.95 in cleaning and a \$10 mending charge. Looking down at my tie, a 1940s silk embossed tie with printed darts, circles and obtuse lines—no damage. Checking my pants, Christ, there's a hair-line tear at the knee. This suit is Salvation-Army bound.

I sip the whiskey. The cold burn spreads across my tongue, down the back of my throat. My holy water. Knowing the rampant alcoholism that leafs through my family tree, I try to limit my number of Bushmill's. *Really?* Somebody taps my shoulder. It's Rich Foster, the owner, looking concerned. "Good lord Bud, what happened?"

"Sorry Rich, I guess I kinda blew the set."

"Kinda?! Man, you're losing it big time."

"What can I say?"

"What can you say? I say you weren't even in there."

"I guess it wasn't my night."

"Not your night? Not your night!? You had that crowd right where you wanted them and you took a fall. A one-way ticket to Palooka-ville! You coulda been a contender!"

"When are you going to work on your Marlon Brando impression?" Rich, a big barrel-chested guy with a bowl haircut, grins broadly, hugs and lifts me me out of my bar stool. "Hey, don't handle the merchandise unless you intend to buy it!" We've been doing this exchange for a few years. Unlike some club owners, Rich is a good guy.

He laughs and sets me down.

Me, "By the way Richie, Moe called, he wants his haircut back."

"You rocked 'em again Terry, me boy."

"Oh, it was a nice crowd."

"Bullshit. You killed. By the way, nice landing."

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Rich likes my act—maybe more than it deserves to be liked. We do our usual how's everything and I tell him mostly the truth. Everything's good, except for everything else.

Jordan joins us. "Nice set Terry."

Plate face turns away and walks unsteadily from the bar to the bathroom. We turn to watch and she's swinging her butt back and forth in an effort to somehow impress us, but it comes off looking like two cats fighting in a burlap bag.

Me, "Jordan, you didn't tell us your Mom was coming here."

"You're drooling Terry, but forget it. You're married."

Julie, the long-time waitress, joins us, "Rich, Mary's in the office and she needs you."

Jordan, "He'll be there right after he checks the plumbing in the ladies room."

Rich, "That's really funny. Why don't you open with that?" and turns to go with Julie, then turns back, "Oh, Terry, I got a call from Dan from the Chamber of Commerce gig you did here last week."

"Does he want me to join?"

"No, he just thanked me again and wanted to pass it on to you."

"Well, tell him thanks and I'm ready to do it again, whenever."

Jordan leans in, "Yeah, unless he's busy trying to nail the babe in the black dress."

"Ow! Zinged me!"

Rich leans back, "Terry, you're my boy." Pointing to me, he waves to Joey, turns and walks away.

Jordan sits down next to me. "Hey, listen, maybe you can tell me how I can get into doing some of that corporate stuff."

"I'm not sure how the dog in the thong bikini will go over with the fiscal elders of the community."

"I'm just asking."

"I know, but they want clean comedy."

"Come on, if it's funny enough, anybody laughs."

"Yeah, but you'd be surprised how funny business people are about what's funny."

I reach for my tobacco and roll a cigarette. This is part of my ritual; Diet Coke and cigarette before the set and whiskey, beer and

cigarette *cigarettes!* after. Jordan reaches over to the bar for his beer. We turn to watch Wayne. He's mildly cynical, cool, smooth and sure of himself with an economy of language. He's good. Pulling the stool to the center of the stage, he sits and engages the audience easily.

"In life, you'll never have any regrets... if your memory is bad enough."

"My friend and I were playing chess, when he said, 'Lets make this interesting.' I agreed, so we played something else."

I laugh and light my cigarette

*Smoke Pall Mall famous cigarettes, outstanding—And! You can light either end!*

I turn to Jordan, "He's funny."

"Yeah, but no edge."

"What, you think you have to have an edge to be funny?"

"Yeah, I mean if you're really good."

"Why?"

"The best comics have it."

"Who?"

"Like Sam Kinnison."

"But he's dead."

"At least he had something to say."

I turn to argue, but reach for my whiskey instead. "Well, maybe."

I'm not interested in getting into a comic discussion now. Especially one that will ultimately involve argumentative, unresolved conclusions. My set's done, I'm finished for the night. I want to unwind and get mindless. Forty minutes of work for my pay. God, it's a tough life. I tip the glass to my lips and the ice cubes have bonded together, so the whiskey and ice slides down the glass, touching my nose and splashing the whiskey in my mouth. So much for sipping.

Joey, "Looks like you need another."

"Sure. Thanks."

Somebody taps me on the arm, "Gee whiz mister, that was great!"

I turn and see a grinning, heavy-set guy in a bulky sweater.

Me, "Hey!"

"It's me, Lou."



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I shake his hand. "Of course, I know that. How ya doin' Lou?"  
*Lou? Oh yeah!* Lou! Lou Harrison. One of the comics from the mid-80s. He had an odd-ball act. Did a lot of physical comedy that made me laugh. Out loud.

"Check out the physique, still ripped. But I got out of comedy."

"Oh yeah? What are you doing?"

"I'm an insurance salesman."

*Acck!* "That's great. You know, a lot of the guys aren't doing comedy anymore."

"That's what I hear. I'm with Allstate."

"Then you're in good hands. Ed Reimers."

"Bingo." Ed Reimers, the actor from the old *You're in good hands with Allstate* television commercial. We're definitely dating ourselves.

"I live in Ohio now. I'm here at a marketing convention. Saw your name in the paper and decided to come out. Your Shakespeare thing is still great. You look good."

I nod, and Lou runs his hand back through his thinning hair.

*Pause.* "Yeah, you look good too, Lou." He doesn't look that great. We're both knocking on forty, yeah he's a little older, but there's something other than just the age. Heavier, maybe a little, but that isn't it.

*Joke to come: Remember shopping for clothes as a kid and they had the "husky" section for boys? Codeword: fat. Nobody uses "husky" anymore. Great word! You know who was husky? Buddha! Could work...*

You go from your teen years to thirty with little physical change. Okay, weight gain, hair loss not included. Then the aging fairy smacks her wand across your face. Lou doesn't look that different, then I finally get it. The eyes. Tiredness, darkness around the eyes? It's dark in here, but it's definitely the eyes.

Lou turns and watches Wayne for a few seconds until the audience laughs and turns back. "Hey, how come you're not headlining? I thought by now you'd be headlining all over."

"Well, I've co-headlined here a couple of times, but Richie had an opening this week and I took it." Not in the mood to talk about my lack of upward movement in the comedy world. I'm tempted to tell

him about my upcoming callback for a Fox comedy series, but realistically it's an incredibly long shot and I don't want to jinx it, so I say, "Why'd you quit comedy?"

"It's a weird story. I used to do a stupid bit in my act. The frog. I don't know if you remember it."

"Sure." *I don't*. He did a lot of odd stuff, but I don't remember a frog.

"Remember how I'd start coughing and build it up until I was hacking? Then I'd bend down and reach in my pocket and put a small frog in my mouth, look up at the audience, spit it out into my hand, show it to the crowd and say, 'Sorry, frog in my throat.' It was pretty dopey, but it always got a good laugh."

"It was a real frog?" *What? You said you remembered the frog.*

"Yeah, you know, one of those little frogs you buy in a pet shop. I'd wash it off and put it in my pocket just before I got on stage. Well one night, I start the fake coughing, bend over, put the frog in my mouth. But when I looked up at the audience, the frog was moving way back into my mouth, almost down my throat. It was stuck and I gagged for real. Just before it got loose, I gagged and bit down. I bit it in two, and as I raised my head up, the legs were dangling from my lips. I lost it. I spit out the rest of the frog and thought I was going to throw up, right on stage."

"Oh, man!"

"Yeah, I bent over and almost vomited. It was horrible."

"Ack!"

"But here's the weird part. When the audience saw me gagging with the legs dangling out of my mouth, they laughed for almost a whole minute. The longest laugh break I ever had. I finished my set, just barely. Last time I was on stage."

"Last time?"

"Yeah, it was too weird."

"Right, how you going to top the 'sawing the frog in half' bit?"

Lou laughs, "Might as well stop after I've reached the pinnacle." I'm laughing too.

"Well, anyway, Terry listen, I should get back to my friends. I just wanted to say hi. This guy is good."

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"Isn't he? Wayne's from L.A."

"Anyway, if you're ever in Toledo, look me up. I'm in the book, or call Allstate."

"Sure, I'll do it. Great to see you Lou."

"You too, take it easy Terry."

I move to hug him and he awkwardly embraces me. He's thoroughly Toledo now. But to be fair, there's not a lot of hugging among comedians, but I grew up in Santa Cruz. As he turns, I notice his funny side-to-side walk. The North American Indians had a tradition of identifying a totem animal to help give them special powers. I brand people with a totem animal based on their physicality. Lou's totem: a panda, with the rolling walk and dark eyes.

Sitting down at the bar, as I re-light my cigarette...

*You can take Salem out of the country, but!*

*You can't take the country out of Salem.*

...it hits me. *Right!* I was working with Lou about ten years ago, playing a little room in Eureka, California, called "Groovers," or something equally stupid. It was a rock and roll club, but somebody probably said, "Hey! We could do comedy here on Friday nights, right before the late night rock and roll with a deejay. We wouldn't even have to mop up the stale beer smell."

The show was just Lou and me, no emcee, doing a tag team. He opens, intros me and I close. Lou didn't do all that well. His whacked-out comedy was an acquired taste, and always funniest in San Francisco, where his strange humor was more appreciated compared to the usual bevy of look-alike, observational comedians. After his set, he intro'ed me, handed me the mic and as I outro'ed him from the stage, I watched him walking away with that rolling gait. Then he stopped, turned around and called out, "Terry, I think these folks are in the mood for a little opera!"

I agreed and we sang an on-the-spot opera about the paper mills of Eureka. Totally winging it, throwing in local references, we went off for a couple of minutes. Lou redeemed himself and the audience was in a great mood for my set. That was it with Lou. He could be naturally funny. I bet he sells a lot of insurance.

That comedy boom was great. Maybe we took it for granted or it could have been naiveté on our part, but it seemed as if it would never end. The whole country was being saturated with comedy. Cable networks were discovering an incredibly cheap and easy way to program entertainment; simply fill a room with an audience and trot out a few comics who were dying to get on any kind of television and *poof!* You had a comedy show. The dream was, and still is, to grab a comedy special, or for a lot of us, a sitcom. But the difference was, in those days, it could actually happen from here. Agents, talent scouts and network people were zipping up to the Bay Area to see if they could find the next Robin Williams. Not anymore. Since the late 70s, comics who want to get into TV or movies have already moved or will eventually move to L.A.

I finish my beer, drink my whiskey and stub out what's left of my cigarette and slide off my chair. Wayne is getting the two hundredth laugh of the night and he isn't even half-way done. "The brain is amazing. It starts working the instant you are born and never stops until you open your mouth."

"Hey Joey, I'm taking off. Tell Ritchie and Wayne I said bye."

"Yeah. You don't need another one?"

*Beat.*

"Just a shot." He pours, I down it. "Thanks, tomorrow dude."

"Okay Terry."

As I leave, Mike, the big red-headed doorman/deejay grabs me from behind in a full-bear hug. "Where do you think you're going?"

"Hey, you're wrinkling the payroll I just stole."

"See ya tomorrow Terry."

"Good night, sweet prince and flights of angels sing thee to thy rest."

It's early October here in Pleasanton, about an hour from San Francisco in the East Bay. Nestled in one of a series of Contra Costa County's canyons—Crow Canyon—it's your typical malled-out, Cal-burb. Unlike the immediate Bay Area, this place can get hot during the day. But it's 10:45 p.m. and that familiar dry coolness fills the air. Walking down the steps of Sal's, I sort of half-ass dance down to the main level of the mini-mall, and continue down another flight

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into the lower level garage. Fishing out my keys, I do a shuffle toward my green '86 VW Jetta. I aim my keys at my car and make a high-pitched whooping sound, as if I had remote-control entry. I'm in full-blown alcohol-buzzed dopey mode.

Taking off my freshly torn suit jacket, I reach inside and hang it on the back seat ceiling grip. Realizing I may junk the whole suit, I wonder why I bothered to hang my jacket in the first place, which leads me into thinking I also wasted time doing the hanging, which leads me into thinking I'm wasting time thinking about wasting time and *Enough!* stick the keys into the ignition. Ignition! I keep repeating the word until it loses its meaning and sounds as if it's some kind of a disease. "Not tonight honey, my ignition is flaring up."

Reaching under the seat, I push aside a towel and grab my pull-out radio/tape player—my fourth, three stolen—and slide it into the dash socket. These radio pilferings are due to working in thief-rich San Francisco coupled with my inability to remember to remove them—mostly due to the latter—providing the lucky highwayman with an easy filch. Checking my "Sheriff's Association of Sonoma County" coffee mug, I notice it still has about a half-inch of cold, four-hour old coffee. I notice the cream has risen to the top forming a cumulus cloud pattern. I drink it.

I pat my pockets, feeling for my keys and look around the car. I've stocked this vehicle well. From the driver's seat, I have immediate access to four kinds of gum, breath mints, Fisherman's Friend throat lozenges (my true addiction), toothpicks, pens, pencils, matches, two or three notepads, eleven or twelve road maps covering various western states, two disposable razors *When you're in the car and you notice you haven't shaved, it's time for a dry shave!*, a bottle of Windex, an unstacked stack of napkins, and my afore-mentioned towel that doubles as 1.) a huge lap napkin when I drink coffee or eat meals on the road and 2.) a *hide-the-pull-out-radio-when-it's-under-the-front-seat* cloaking device. The glove box is small and can barely hold a bottle of Safeway aspirin and a ridiculously large Swiss Army knife that hasn't been opened in about ten years. These are just the standard forward cabin items. Collectively, they constitute my security blanket. In the aft, there's coloring books, markers, toys in various states of disinte-

gration, and 30 crayons, none of them in a box. Add to this various sheets of paper with directions, contracts and contact people and you have a fully loaded Daddy-o Gig-mobile.

Where did I put the keys? Ignition! The keys are in the disease! How much did I drink, anyway?

As I turn the ignition key, the radio automatically turns on blaring "...MEANWHILE MISTER FENWICK WICKHAM IS ENJOYING THE FRUITS OF A WELL-MANICURED GARDEN!!!" This happens frequently. I accidentally turn the volume dial up when I grab the radio. The station is tuned to NPR which is now broadcasting the BBC World News Service, programming I find particularly annoying and turn it off, thinking, "*Why did I bother to put the radio in when I knew it was time for the BBC and would end up just turning it off?*" Which leads me to thinking, "*Shut up!*" I pull out of my basement parking place and at every slightest turn, my tires are squealing on the polished concrete parking floor as if I'm in the Indy 500. I straighten my arms and do the whole Mario Andretti race fantasy at 5 m.p.h.

I exit the parking lot and turn onto the street. Light traffic. I consider lighting up another cigarette but demure. Grabbing a Fisherman's Friend lozenge. Lozenge! Oh no, here I go again, repeating lozenge until it sounds like a body part next to the pancreas. I decide to take two. Boy, do I love these, even though they are mighty strong. Tonight's match: my breath and a eucalyptus forest. Rolling onto the freeway ramp, I head south on 680 amid the mostly foreign cars, Camrys, Civics, Accords and Volvos with a sprinkling of Ford Taurus' and Escorts. I turn on the radio and switch to a talk show.

"...yeah, and that's what bugs me, where's the respect? There's a reason why they called 'em the 'Good Old Days.'"

"I couldn't agree more, thanks for the call. Now we go to Tom on a car phone, welcome to 'Night Beat.'"

"Ted? First time caller, I'm a little nervous."

"Go ahead Tom, we're listening."

"Okay, Clinton thinks we can spend our way out of our prob--"

*Click.*

"...and now for an uninterrupted hour of Reggae music--"

*Middle Act*

*Click.*

"...of course, it all depends on your no-load mutual fund investment-"

*Click.*

"...you know, the A's are out of here, there's no fan base-"

*Click.*

Nothing.

I reach in the console and see if there's a cassette tape. I find two. "Raffi's Christmas tape" and a blank tape. "*I think I'm going for the blank tape, Bob!*" I pop it into the player and push play.

"...so that's all for now. Kathleen and little Holly say hi, say hi Holly. 'Hi Poppa Sean'. Love you Poppa." It's a tape for my grandfather, Poppa Sean. I try to write and call every month, and visit every other one, but thought it would be nice to give him a tape to play at his convenience. I meant to send this four months ago. *Oops.*

"Poppa" Sean Michael Flaherty is 95 and lives in a home in Monterey, about two plus hours away from my house in Berkeley. He's my last living grandparent. His birthday's coming up on Christmas. "Me 'n Jesus, it's our day." Kathleen and I were planning to bring him up a few days before Christmas and have him stay for a week. It will be a lot of work, but I'm not sure how much longer he's going to be around.

Sean had come from Bearna, a small fishing village near Galway on the west coast of Ireland. In 1916, his two older brothers, Tim and Liam, emigrated to Wicklow, Nebraska, an Irish-American farming town and worked on a farm they would eventually own. Six years later, they invited Sean. In 1921, Sean and his fiancée, Maire Kinsella, married in Bearna and honeymooned in Omaha, Nebraska. *Ah, romance.* After a 3-day holiday, they moved to Wicklow, too.

Irish laborers founded the town after working on the transcontinental railroad from the east. Chinese workers built it from the west and once they connected the rails, many of the now jobless workers created these small ethnic towns all along the route. If you were Protestant, you had to go to the next town over for services, because there was just one church in Wicklow, St. Aidan's, and it was Catholic. Sean

and Maire lived there until Nana Maire died. It was a small town then, and it's even smaller now.

When I was 13, we went to a family vacation at Poppa Sean and Nana Maire's home. My dad's sister, Mary Frances, and her husband Uncle Jack Connelly and their kids were there and all of us cousins were sleeping in the basement. Around midnight, I woke up, couldn't get back to sleep and went upstairs to get a glass of water. Walking into the dimly-lit kitchen, Sean was sitting at the green Formica kitchen table by himself, smoking a Lucky Strike cigarette.

*There's never a rough puff in a Lucky!*

I didn't expect to see him there and stopped at the kitchen doorway. Poppa Sean wasn't your cuddly old grandfather. Short-tempered with kids, his oft repeated line was, "I only like children when t'ey're old enough ta drink beer and argue politics." In his right hand, he was holding a short, half-full 7-up bottle.

"What 'tissit Terry?"

"I don't know, Poppa. I can't sleep."

"Well t'en, what ya want?"

"I don't know."

"Ya don't know?"

"Well, uh, maybe I'll have a 7-up. Like you."

He leaned forward. "Ya wanna a 7-up like me? Just like t'is one?"

"Sure, if you don't mind, uh, please."

Opening the refrigerator, Poppa pulled out a 7-up bottle, grabbed the church key hanging on a string from the freezer door handle and popped off the cap. Stepping to the sink, he looked at me while pouring out some of the 7-up in the sink. He reached over the sink and took out a bottle of Bushmill's Irish Whiskey and filled up the 7-up bottle, then put his thumb over the mouth of the bottle. With a quick turn of his wrist, he tipped the bottle down and then up. He sat back down in his chair and handed me the 7-up. "Okay."

"Thank you Poppa." Lifting the bottle to my lips, the acrid, whiskey odor nearly made me sick. But I couldn't stop now, so I took a long swallow, closing off my nasal passages to ward off the taste and fought back the strongest gag reflex I'd ever experienced.



*Middle Act*

"Well? How ya like it?"

"Not bad, I mean, it's good."

He narrowed his eyes and leaned on his elbows. "So?"

Though the whiskey burned, I managed to keep it down—barely—and mostly listened to a discussion that included baseball, farming, John Kennedy and Harry Truman. Sean was in his usual mode, not drunk enough to slur his words or pass out, but just drunk enough to draw out words to make his point while staring intensely at his conversation partner. In this forum, he held the last word on all the subjects, "You gotta liiike t'em Cardinals... t'ey're tryin' ta buuuuy us all up...he's just one of t'em laaace-curtains Irish...maybe tha best daaaamn president you Americans ever had..."

He went into great detail about the shortcomings of the Irish along with a rambling history of his youth in Bearna and his journey to America, including what sounded like a convincing argument on why he never became an American citizen, although I couldn't follow his logic. This was due in part to the Bushmill's and also because of Poppa Sean's train of thought, which sometimes jumped the rails.

We stayed up until two in the morning. That's what Poppa told me anyway, because I had passed out and he carried me to the blue living room couch, covered with a beige brocaded blanket. The next morning, he repeated his ritual. Empty the top of a 7-up, pour in the whiskey and keep refilling it the rest of the day. I had a splitting headache, and felt a mixture of medium nausea and grandfatherly camaraderie. I crossed the Rubicon, the first grandchild to get bombed. In Sean's eyes, he fulfilled his generational responsibility for passing along his love of the drink. Lucky me.

*Joke to come: this getting drunk thing with Sean could be fodder for a new bit. A rite of passage that results in, what, barfing? With the club crowd, anything revolving around alcohol would make them happy. Funny.*

Grabbing for a notebook in the car's console, a toothpick wedges under my fingernail. "Oooo, Bob, that's gotta hurt!" I have seriously got to clean up this car, those toothpicks escaped the box a year ago. Pulling the toothpick out, I can't quite tell how deep it went in due to the car's darkness and also because I don't actually want to know.

Connecting on 80 north, I remember I was reaching for the notebook to write something down. What? Okay, *humma humma, humma, hmm... Can't get it. Poppa Sean and ???* Bring the notebook to bed—it'll come to me sometime in the night, wrecking my sleep.

Exiting the freeway, I wind my way through the little town of Albany, and pull into our house. I cut off the lights as I roll in so they won't shine down the driveway into our bedroom window. I always do this. *Indian brave make no sound passing through forest.*

Grabbing my suit coat, pulling out the radio, reaching down for the coffee mug and exiting the car, I realize I've forgotten to remove the keys. How many times has that happened? *Let me see... just about every night?* I close the door and lock it, the best feature of the Jetta, you can only lock the driver's door with a key—the only reason I haven't locked my keys in the car. The air is tinged with skunk odor. Skunks, raccoons and deer rule the nights here in this urban wilderness.

Walking up to the front door, I shift my coat, radio and mug to my left arm, I open up the door quietly and lock it behind me. In our small foyer, I put the pull-out on the closet shelf when the coffee mug slips in my hand and I spill the last bit of coffee on my rapidly devaluing suit jacket. I consider hanging it up on the closet door but opt for a careless fling on the floor, which ends up as a full spread display on the entryway. This is a unique opportunity so I remove my pants as well and drop them on the floor too. The total effect leaves the impression of an abduction by aliens who have an aversion to seersucker suits.

Sniffing the armpit of my shirt, I decide I can get another night of wear out of it and hang it up in the small computer room where all of my clothes live. Pulling a t-shirt over my head, I notice the coffee mug on my dresser, remembering I forgot to put it in the sink and briefly consider taking it to the kitchen, but only briefly. I'll do it in the morning. Floss. Brush. Pee. I then wash my hands and face, trying to get the cigarette smell off my fingers and face. Shutting off the light, I walk into Holly's room.

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A small baseball night light shines its orange glow around her bed. Holly is five. She's completely flipped around in her bed, her left foot hanging into the heart-shaped cutout hole in the headboard. Wrapped partially in twisted sheets, her arms and other leg flare outward. She resembles an angel crashed into a cloud. I reach up, extract her foot and gently turn her around and tuck her in, although this is only a momentary rearrangement. She'll be upended again before morning. She's a nocturnal thrasher. After a night of sleeping next to her with her flailing arms and legs thumping against my body, I nicknamed her "Kung fu Master."

I smooth her long, curly honey-colored hair away from her eyes. I am suddenly overcome with the desire to trace the lines of her face from freckle to freckle like a connect-the-dots puzzle. Years from now, no doubt she will grow to hate her freckles and try to hide them with makeup, but for me, once I see freckles, I'm a goner. It was Kathleen's spray of freckles across her nose and cheeks that made her stand out in a room full of pretty women and eventually become my wife. As I'm bending down, just about to kiss her on her freckled forehead, she opens her eyes and scowls.

"No."

"No? "

"No more."

"No more what, honey?"

"No more doin' dat."

She turns sideways and turns her face away from me. *Doin' dat?* What? It's probably nothing, because she's a sleep talker and walker. In the middle of the night, I'll often wake up hearing Holly talking in whole conversations. Sometimes she will suddenly appear at my side of the bed, perhaps with one of her shoes in her hand saying, "Daddy, you put dese on, okay?"

She's already fallen back asleep. I stand by her bed. She's just like her Daddy. I was a somnambulist. My father once found me sleeping inside the laundry basket when I was four.

We lived in a neighborhood of post-World War II ranch houses, most of them identical from the outside, but with different floor plans

inside. Once I was sleeping over at my down-the-block-buddy Jerry Whelan's house. Around midnight, I opened the door to Mr. and Mrs. Whelan's bedroom. Dick Whelan was reading.

"What is it Terry?"

I walked into their room, pulled down my pajama bottoms, and peed on their rug. In our house, this spot was where our bathroom toilet was located. Dick didn't appreciate the watering of his carpet, but it ended up as an excellent razzing topic whenever he was drinking with my father.

Bending down, I kiss the back of Holly's head then enter our bedroom. Kathleen is lying on her side, facing the wall. She's pulled the covers halfway across the bed, with the sheet up to the top of her head. The bedroom window is open, letting in a slight breeze of jasmine, eucalyptus and skunk. Moving quietly, I sit down on my bedside, wondering how tired I am. Maybe I'll grab a book and go into the living room. As I rub my eyes, something grabs my neck.

"Boo!"

"Jesus! You scared me!"

Laughing, she puts her arms around my shoulders from behind.

"I thought you weren't coming to bed."

"I was watching Holly. She was turned around and had her foot through the heart."

"The heart?"

"You know, the heart hole in her headboard."

I push open the curtain about a foot, letting in some light from the moonlit backyard. Laying down and extending my left arm out on the pillow, she puts her head in the crook of my shoulder. She pushes her wavy black hair from her face and looks up to me with one of her green eyes closed.

"We had a hard night. Holly had a major breakdown after supper, and then it got worse. We both ended up crying. She lost her tape and night goodie treat. We finally cuddled up on her bed and read books."

*Middle Act*

I think about the two of them crying together. The thought of them sharing this moment makes me envious. Well, almost. Kathleen pats my chest, "How was the show?"

"Pretty good, the usual. Oh, I fell off the stage."

"What?"

"Actually, I jumped off the stage onto a chair, fell down and rolled into the audience."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, but I ripped my suit pocket and tore a hole in the knee."

"Good, you need a new suit anyway."

"But I liked that one. How will I find another seersucker suit?"

"It doesn't have to be seersucker."

"Yeah, but c'mon, that's my look. Plus the vintage tie. Seersucker. Seersucker? Do you think someone from an ad agency said, 'You can see it doesn't wrinkle, because it sucks, we call it Seersucker!'"

"Are you even tired?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe we should get romantic."

Kathleen lifts up her chin and grabs my nose with the thumb and finger of her left hand, pulling my face to her. "Too tired. Goodnight."

Kissing me on the lips, she turns back over on her side and pulls the covers up to her chin. I reach over and pull the covers back over to my side. She turns her head towards me with a slight frown. I kiss her on her nose.

"Goodnight Leeny, love you."

She turns away and wiggles her rear end toward me. She is callipygian, one of my favorite words, "well-shaped buttocks." I lay on my side and we do spoons. I smell the back of her hair, its scent of some unrecognizable floral shampoo. I look back and my side table clock shines a tiny green 12:37 through the darkness of the room.

My mind wanders. Of course, the bad thing is, it always comes back. This coming June, we celebrate our ten-year wedding anniversary. About two years before that, I was doing an all-girls birthday party for Judy Rothberg, one of Kathleen's friends from college. The party was held in a back room at Carpaccio's, one of those typical touristy North Beach Italian restaurants. Judy's friend, Shelly Daniels, who had just landed a copywriting job at an ad agency, took me to

lunch beforehand, filling me in on personal information about Judy to use in this show. Shelly met me at the door of the back room and was giggling, pulling at her pearls, obviously a little drunk. Telling me to wait, she entered the little room and announced, "Okay, okay, Judy? Judy! Okay, we wanted to give you something for your 25th birthday you would, like, never forget, so here he is!"

Shelly was waving me into the room and I immediately heard loud whooping from the ladies. Usually I'm confident going into any show, but these gals were expecting a stripper. Turning to Shelly and giving her a *Hey, you gonna help me out here?* look, she buried her face into her napkin, convulsing with laughter. Sitting next to her, a woman whose face was obscured by a crown of wavy black hair flowing down to her leopard print v-neck top, was whispering something in Shelly's ear. As she looked up, her green eyes were staring directly at me, and I got my first look at the constellation of freckles across her face. It hit me like a stun gun. She shot me a *Hey, this wasn't my idea* face, but then broke out into loud laughter, snapping me out of my stupor. Moving to the front of the room, I flashed a sideways smile.

"Hey, I know what your girls are expecting, so I guess I'm going to have to give it to you,

I grabbed a spoon and croon, "*Feeeeeeeelings, nothing more than, Feeeeeeeelings...*" while walking around the women. Taking their napkins, I wiped imaginary sweat from my brow and handed them back. "Okay! Hey, it's time for a medley, *See me! Feeeeeeeeeeel me! Touch me...* You heard me, touch me! C'mon now! Okay! *Said the shepherd to the mighty queen, do you feel what I feeeeeel?!"*

I was in full nightclub throttle and the birthday revelers were buying the act and playing along. Singing directly to each of the women, I was playing it glib and schmaltzy, but when I came to Freckles, I could feel my throat tightening. I was staring a little too intently into her pale, green eyes, but luckily, she was laughing and oblivious to my laser ray. Although there were only eighteen people, they were laughing hard and the act took on a heightened life of its own. It was an "on a roll" moment. You deliver a line or a joke and the audience's laughter fuels the next line, which fuels the next laugh

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and it keeps ongoing in this circular spin of energy. In this moment, I can say just about anything because the audience expects whatever I'm about to say will be funny. And even if it isn't, it feels that way because I'm saying it in a funny rhythm.

I broke into a shortened version of my act, ending with my Shakespeare improv. Afterwards, there was a lot of, "God, you're so funny" "That was great" "Thanks" and other complimentary comments. I sidled over to Freckles.

Freckles, "Oh, you were so good."

"Thank you, my name's Terry."

"I know, you said that in your show."

"And your name is?"

"Oh, yeah, okay! Sorry, my name is Kathleen."

"Great, great. So you've uh..." I was nervous, in a real *asking-a-girl-to-dance-at-the-sock-hop* mode.

Looking down to my feet, she said, "Hey, I love your shoes!"

Okay, I could talk about my shoes. I picked up a pair of green and white two-toned wing tip golf shoes at a garage sale and pulled out the spikes with pliers, thinking they would go with my light green suit. I'm not sure they did, but they were close enough for comedy and my sense of fashion, anyway.

"Thanks, they're golf shoes."

"Do you golf?"

"No, but I found them at an archaeological dig in a sand trap."

Kathleen broke out into a high-pitched, staccato *Sss-sss-sss-sss!* laugh sounding like an intermittent lawn sprinkler. This was encouraging: she laughs at the archaeological dig reference.

Me, "So, perhaps I'll extend you an invitation on the next archaeological dig. I'm taking volunteers."

She wrinkled her nose and smiled. I wasn't sure what this meant, if I had blown it, gone too far, or something. Glancing over at her friends, she looked down at the floor, back to me, then back to her friends and said, "Shelly, are we going somewhere for a drink?" They definitely didn't need any more drinks, but maybe I could tag along.

Shelly says, "Sure, let's go to The Green Grotto."

Judy came up and gave me a hug.

"Thanks, that was a great birthday present."

Shelly opened her purse and pulled out an envelope.

"Terry, that was so, so... great, thanks." She put the envelope with the check into my suit jacket as she hugged me. I looked at Kathleen, and was just about to hug her when she extended her hand saying, "Well, we're going, it was fun talking to you."

"Yeah, glad to meet you Kathleen."

Extending my hand, I shook hers a little longer than usual. They turned and walked out. *Damn.*

Then Kathleen turned, "I'm sorry, we didn't invite you."

"Is this an invitation?"

"Sure, if you want."

"Since you insist, I accept."

The night went on for another three hours. Sitting next to Kathleen all night, I found out we both came from large families, survived Catholic upbringing, native Californians, but unlike me had graduated from Cal Berkeley with a bachelors in Sociology. "The most useless of the majors." Her words.

Around one o'clock, Shelly, Judy, Kathleen and I were the only surviving birthday revelers. Convincing them they shouldn't drive home, I hailed them a taxi. Of course I drove home, I good to go... *right.* I got a goodnight kiss from all of them, choreographing the order so that Kathleen was the last one to be deposited in the taxi.

It was hard to think of anything else but Kathleen for a long time since we dove right into a relationship.

I look over at Kathleen then lift and separate the window curtain for a final look. Wait a minute, "*Lift and Separate?*" *The Playtex Living Bra!* Living Bra?! Oh man, how did they get away with that commercial? THE LIVING BRA. Should've been a horror movie. I close the curtains and lay back on the pillow.

My eyes are fully activated, no, actuated? No. Oh come on, what is it? *Adjusted*, right! Adjusted to the darkness. I imagine my eyes, white orbs with solid pupils, my green-rimmed blue irises fully dilated out of sight. Everything is in dim, soft, violet outlines. I lift my head and notice Kathleen is breathing shallowly and evenly, out like a light. Looking out the window the moon is just a thin slice, haloed



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through the light fog. I say goodbye to Wednesday, beginning of the club week, ends Sunday, with two shows Friday and Saturday.

Late shows have almost made me quit comedy. Especially Friday. End of the work week, young crowd, drinking all night long. I always bat lousy with that crowd. Tomorrow, what? October? *No!* My November is so far from being full. Call the bookers, rattle the bushes. A commercial would even it all out. Call Sally, see if the agency is casting. I should probably write this down. December, I've got, almost two grand in bookings, that could still be good. *But it's December, the best money month anyway.* Damn November! What am I going to do? I'm just not making enough these last months. Kathleen will bring it up and my stomach will be in knots. But, maybe that Fox comedy series will come through and will fix all of this, but, come on...what are the chances? I'm about to hit 40 and maybe I'm just too old for that shit. Maybe even comedy.

Plan of attack: 1) look over calendar, 2) call Sally, 3) call agencies, bookers, any damn body, 4) What? What's four? Four! Fore! Poppa Sean! Okay, how will we pay the mortgage? We have the money...*do we?* Push all of this down or wake up with the night sweats again.

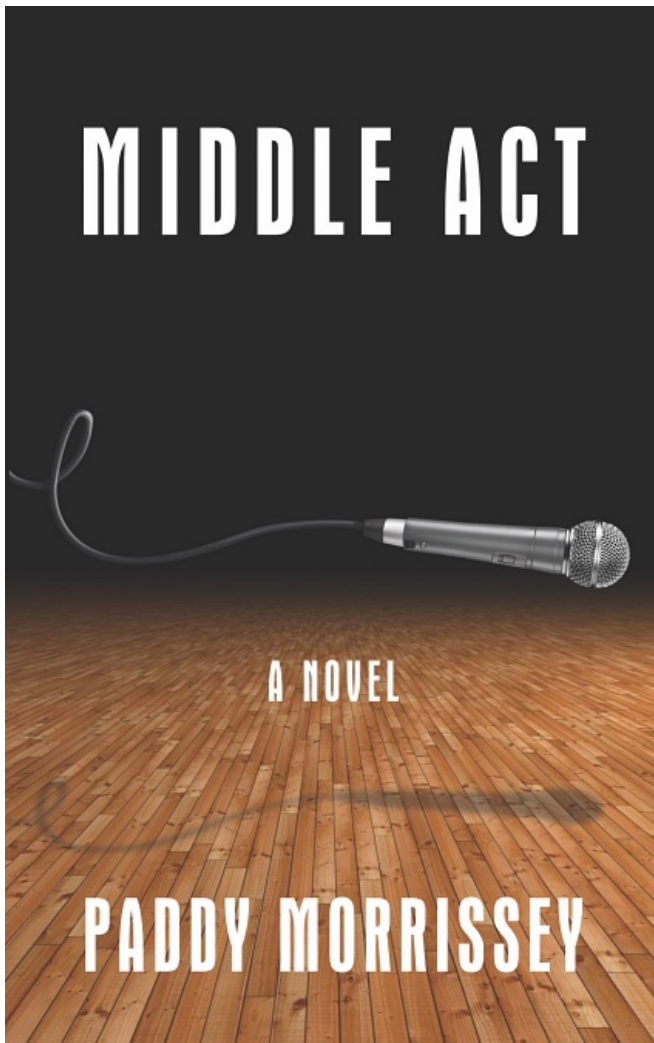
Remember what Nana Maire always said, "Don't worry, everything always works out in the end."

But she's dead.

## About the Author

Paddy Morrissey, originally from Louisville, KY, moved to the Bay Area in 1975 after a brief and non-illustrious stint as a drafted soldier in the Army. In Santa Cruz, California, from 1976 to 1982 he co-founded a comedy troupe, the Screaming Memes, that featured comic skits, acapella singing and improvisation. From 1982 to 1985, he was one-half of the standup comedy duo, Marks to Morrissey, together with his Screaming Meme alumnus Mark Taylor. Throughout 1986, he starred as Ronald Reagan in Garry Trudeau's musical comedy, *Rap Master Ronnie* in San Francisco. In 1987, he became a solo standup comedian and performed in all of the major comedy clubs and colleges in the Bay Area, also toured across the United States as well as appearing in many television comedy venues. From 1993, he began winding down his standup career and was hired as a copywriter in a series of advertising agencies, slowly teaching himself design and layout as he started his own graphic design business.

Married for thirty-five years, he and his wife Lisa produced two daughters, Caitlin and Molly Rose, who both reside in San Francisco. Lisa and Paddy have lived in Berkeley since 1991.



*A 39 year-old standup comedian faces a decision: continue performing comedy or change his career. He's given a possible shot at success, but will he make it? Set in 1992, this is life seen through the eyes of a standup comic.*

## **Middle Act**

By Paddy Morrissey

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