



FUNNYMAN

Ellie watched Hubert pace and tug at his shirt collar. He'd stick two fingers in at the throat, pull, and then straighten his necktie. It was an old habit, one she'd forgotten about. She'd also forgotten that he muttered while he paced. He would talk to himself and then every once in a while stop and ask Ellie's opinion about a joke. It was part of the process he always went through to get ready for a set.

Another comic was doing his routine at the moment. Ellie could see him from where she sat on her stool. She and Hubert were behind a curtain to the side of the stage, and the comic was at a microphone stand in the center. From her angle Ellie could see past him to one of the tables out front. It was occupied by two people—a man in a dress and a woman with long dark whiskers.

"I'm sorry," the comic said. He was a cringing little guy whose voice was barely audible even with the amplification of the PA system. He hadn't gotten a laugh yet. His act seemed to consist of whining and apologizing, and Ellie wondered what made him think he was funny. Funny was something you were either born with or developed with lots of careful honing. Hubert was naturally funny. He made people smile when he bounced into a room, and laugh when he opened his mouth. Or he used to. But times had changed.

Ellie watched him pace and thought how he was so much skinnier now. Skinnier and of course much older. He'd just awakened from a forty-seven year coma. His hair was gone and he had wrinkles, but surprisingly few of those. Nurses must have

rubbed an ocean of lotion into his skin over the decades.

Nearly five decades. Such a long time, Ellie thought. She'd stopped going to visit him a little over three years after they placed him in the nursing home. The court granted her a divorce and she moved on with her life. She buried a second and third husband and raised four children, but Hubert didn't know any of that. He woke up early that morning and asked to see his wife. To his way of thinking nothing had changed since 1976.

It surprised Ellie that the nursing home was able to locate her. She'd gone back to using her maiden name, but they did a bit of detective work on the internet and found her phone number. After they called she packed a bag and made the four-hour drive across the state. She found Hubert pacing the halls of the home in some old clothes that the staff had given him.

He signed himself out and then as she drove them around town looking for a motel he asked her to line up a gig for that night. He said he needed to get back to work while his jokes were still fresh in his head. She didn't know how to tell him that the number of things you could joke about had dwindled to almost nothing, but she agreed to try to book him somewhere.

She found a motel, checked them in, and then while he took a shower she went out to buy him some nicer clothes. He wanted a black suit, "Something in the thirty-forty dollar range. Off the rack but with a hand-tailored look." She found one that cost four hundred at a discount clothing store. With shoes, shirt and the rest the total was more than six.

As he got dressed at the motel, she used her phone to search for local comedy clubs. She couldn't find any. Laffland, Billy's Belly Laff and all the other places she remembered from the old

days were gone. The only thing she could turn up was a listing at a local liberal arts college. An events calendar for the student union said they had an open mike that night for “politically informed” music and stand-up comedy. She called and signed Hubert up for a fifteen-minute set, and she made sure to use his stage name of Jokes McFadden. She also asked them to mark him down as a “funnyman” rather than a comic. He’d always thought of himself as a funnyman, even called himself one on official forms and documents. That was probably why the IRS looked into their taxes one year—they didn’t know what kind of work a funnyman did. Hubert put on part of his act for the man who came to audit them, and he told a joke that equated taxes with rape. The auditor issued a finding that did the same.

Hubert paused his pacing at Ellie’s stool and tugged at his collar. “They didn’t have rayon?” he asked but didn’t wait for an answer. He rubbed his stomach and said he was hungry. “If we have ten bucks to spare we should go to a steakhouse after the show. Get a couple of sirloins with all the trimmings.” Ellie just smiled and nodded. She’d talk to him later about inflation.

He went back to pacing, then stopped again and said, “I think I’ll open with a fag joke. But I’ll need to give it a little intro, a thing where I apologize to the fags in the audience. Not an apology apology, but I have a, what do you call it, an interior motive. See, there’s nothing an audience hates more than to miss the setup to a good fag joke, so the intro will let them know that one’s coming up.”

“Yes, dear,” Ellie said, reminding herself not to censor him. She’d wanted to tell him all day long that the world was less tolerant now, nearly humorless. People had been trained to be so overly sensitive that you couldn’t joke about anything for

fear of offending someone. You could even be sued for hurting a person's feelings. She would have warned him about all that but she knew he'd think she was exaggerating. So she kept quiet. He'd have to learn on his own.

As if to illustrate her thought about humorlessness, she heard a woman in the audience interrupt the man onstage and spout some figures about global warming. The comic listened politely, then apologized and went on to his next whiny joke.

Hubert didn't notice the interaction. He was lost in his pacing and muttering. Ellie wondered how he would have dealt with the woman. Probably by saying, "We got ourselves a real philosopher here, folks. That's philosopher with a capital F." People always laughed at that one.

Some light reflected off the silvery X on Hubert's temple. Ellie remembered how he got the scar at his last appearance. He was performing at Morty's Laff Palace on the Fourth of July, 1976. The Bicentennial. Two hundred years to the day since the signing of the Declaration of Independence. The country was crazy with patriotic fever in '76. American flags were everywhere. Schools, businesses and churches were draped in patriotic bunting, and TV sets beamed red, white and blue.

The crowd at Morty's got into the festive spirit on July 4 by mixing red and white wines with Pabst Blue Ribbon beer. They called the resulting drink an Old Gory. Everybody was choking them down, then someone downed one too many and lit a Roman candle inside the club. Hubert was onstage in his Uncle Sam suit at the time, and the rocket hit him in his top hat. The doctors said the hat saved his life. It slowed the candle and held it to two inches of cranial penetration. Hubert spun around spewing sparks and blood. Fortunately the candle didn't explode, but sparks set the Uncle Sam

suit on fire. The bar's patrons put out the flames with Old Gories and vomit. It took a surgeon more than an hour to remove the melted suit. He said that cutting away the polyester made him feel like he was opening a red, white and blue cocoon.

"What do you think, Ellie?"

"Huh?"

Hubert was standing in front of her.

"My first joke, after the fag warning. I think I'll do the one about the mailman. You know, where I say he tells me he thinks old man Spungin down the road is a fag. He humped his leg when he was delivering a letter. And I say, 'Spungin's not a fag, but he's going blind. He must've humped you by mistake.' And the mailman says, 'So he didn't see me wink?'"

Ellie smiled. "Yes, dear. Open with that one."

Hubert gave her a thumbs-up and went back to pacing.

Ellie looked at the table she could see from backstage, the one with the bearded woman and the man in a dress, and she wondered how America could have changed so much since 1976. Back then men were men and women were women, and the country was drenched in red, white and blue. Now there were dozens of listed genders and everywhere you looked you saw rainbows celebrating Gay Pride.

And transgenderism. Mustn't forget to celebrate that. Just recently Ellie heard a man on a podcast say that it was destined to become a religion. He compared it to Buddhism because neither has a god; they're both just collections of beliefs. And someday, since Buddhism has been recognized as a religion by the American legal system, the transgenderists will demand the same recognition. They'll get it too, and the new religion will spread like wildfire. Most churches set aside just two or three hours a week for reflection and

education, but the public school system bombards students with transgenderist propaganda all week long.

“Hey, what do you think?”

Hubert was holding his open hands to the sides of his head. He flapped them and bugged his eyes.

“Your fish jokes,” Ellie smiled.

“Yeah. I’ll do this one.” Hubert crouched and tilted his head so he was looking up. “Hey, Cedric, have you seen those new fishing lures that look like dog turds?” He straightened up and faced the other way, looking down. “I’ve seen them. Fishermen must have a pretty low opinion of us. They think we’re dumb enough to go for phony gourmet food.”

Ellie smiled and Hubert resumed his pacing. She remembered when he came up with the fishing lure joke. The turd was originally a used tampon, but he thought that was too racy and asked her what he should change it to. He said it needed to be the grossest thing she could think of, so she suggested the dog turd. But would she do the same today, or would she suggest tumor meat?

She’d gagged when she first learned that she may have eaten the meat without knowing. A magazine article she read described how climate alarmists developed a way to grow beef and pork in laboratories. They wanted to reduce the amount of methane released into the atmosphere by livestock. Investment groups looked at the lab process but decided against putting money into it. They said that mass production wouldn’t be profitable. So somebody suggested using tumor cells, which grow fast and don’t need many nutrients. Cheap and fast got the moneymen onboard, and they began building meat farms. At last count more than a hundred million tons of tumor meat had been dumped into the world’s food supply.

The article would have been disturbing enough if it had ended there, but the writer went on to ask where the tumor cells came from. No one knew. Were they malignant or benign? And could they be human? In its closing paragraph the article asked if the people who run the world were secretly forcing cancer and cannibalism on the public.

“Hey,” Hubert said, “What about this one?” He adopted a casual stage stance and said, “A buddy of mine smokes that wacky tobacky. You know, that ‘tard in a stick. And the last time I saw him he said, ‘Wow, I’m a bird. Wow, I’m a galaxy.’ So I told him to give up the drugs. They’ll only lead to a life of shame and degradation. And he said, ‘Wow, I’m going to be a Democrat.’”

Hubert watched for Ellie’s reaction, and she almost said he should change Democrat to Republican, to play to the audience, but no, she’d stick to her plan about not censoring. Let him learn the hard way how the so-called progressives in America were trying to shut down free speech. Let the people he was about to face give him a taste of the angry new world he’d awakened into. Once his shock passed she’d start explaining to him how society had changed.

Maybe the update would be less traumatic over their sirloins. While he was onstage she’d do a phone search and try to find a restaurant where they could get a couple of steak dinners for under a hundred dollars. Hubert’s ten-dollar memory might pay for the tip. With luck she’d find a place that wouldn’t have a bunch of testosterone-injected vegan women blocking the entrance. They liked to show their concern for people by assaulting the ones who disagreed with them.

The comic had left the stage without any applause. Ellie didn’t know he was gone until she heard a different voice come over the PA. She looked at the mike stand and saw a lanky young

guy standing at it. He had shaggy hair, three inches of underwear showing above a rainbow belt, and he held a clipboard.

“And now,” he said, studying the board, “we have . . . Says here we have a funnyman named Jokes McFadden.” He looked in Ellie and Hubert’s direction. “You ready?”

Hubert had stopped pacing and stood quiet, head bowed. He was preparing himself the way he always did before he made an entrance. Ellie gave him a couple of seconds and then she said, “Make ‘em laugh, Jokes.”

Just like old times he popped to life and jogged out onto the stage. He beamed a smile and waved with both hands as he approached the mike. When he reached it he said, “Thank you! Thank you!” even though no one had applauded. He tugged at his shirt collar and launched into his act. “First of all, I want to apologize to any faggots out there.”