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The lights in the upscale grocery stores dotting this part of the city had a blue quality that put them closer to sunshine than fluorescence. In the brightness, a forest cathedral seemed to arc over the organic foods, fibrous cereals, and covers of check-out periodicals where news of the car crash had begun its slow bleed from the dailies to the weeklies. The vehicle was German, paid for in US dollars, but the talent was Canadian and so the story could lay claim to once-sober publications normally trading in cabinet ministers and transfer payments. Ty Bergen approached the magazine rack, glanced at the nearly pornographic images of a car, folded neatly in half around a street lamp, his eye drawn to a hole in the windshield, shaped roughly like an émigré comedy hero.

Al Sampson – an Edmonton boy who had skated poorly before giving up hockey; who had made his friends' Ukrainian mothers giggle because he preferred to eat perogies cold, from the fridge, as he perfectly mimicked their husbands' accents – had moved to Chicago in his early

twenties to be an improv star, later pushing even further south to California. The old men at home, the ones who had never forgotten how bad he'd been at hockey, couldn't contain their pride or amazement: "And he just makes it up! He makes it all up right there on the spot, and they just love it!"

Ty Bergen pushed past the magazines, his grocery cart moving steadily forward, all four wheels ploughing straight ahead, in unison, and thereby belying a routine that he'd been doing for years: *These grocery carts, you seen these things? I can't be the only guy that's noticed this. The wheels on these things are going every which way but back in time, honestly. Where're they putting these things together, Sarajevo? Am I right? Where's this factory? I figure these things must be put together in Bosnia, since the wheels on mine are getting along about as good as the Serbs and the Muslims.* For years, Ty had considered the Grocery Cart Bit to be one of his best political jokes. It had been written when Sarajevo was a name that came to mind before Fallujah or Kabul. The shopping cart premise was a familiar one, worn by other comics before him, but he had found a new angle for himself and taken it.

Ty drew a sense of well-being from the grocery's lighting, though its effect was subliminal. He assumed that his sense of satisfaction came from recent financial news, perhaps heightened by the healthful, brightly coloured, and expensive foods surrounding him. Fairly Urban was a supermarket geared towards the young and upwardly mobile community that inhabited the condominiums spreading up from the marina and out towards Vancouver's downtown core, a territory that had itself been staked out by gay men, exchange students, and the homeless. The latter, Ty had

been told, were known to lift the store's expensive cheeses. Urban legend held that, to meet the furtive requests of the owners of dingy pizzerias, the homeless would slip the blocks of imported cheese into the folds of their pungent vestments where no security guards would frisk. Ty smirked as he pushed his cart past the deli section, watching several young couples poring over cheeses, and he wondered which of them, if any, were secret shoppers. He stopped and took out his notepad. His pen left only blank indentations at first. He scratched violently at the crème-coloured paper, leaving a series of erratic lines on an otherwise blank sheet. Then he wrote:

Premise: Bums stealing cheese. Panhandling. Cheese grater. Mice. Three blind mice.

In the early eighties, Al had begun performing stand-up in Los Angeles, focusing — as Ty would, years later — on the wide range of impressions that were to land Sampson regular voice-acting work in children's cartoons. He met his wife Lynn, a writer, while working on a show called *Danny's Friends*, in which an anthropomorphized coterie of adolescent zoo animals attend classes with the zookeeper's son, Danny. Al and Lynn married in the summer of 1987, in Edmonton. It was her first time in Canada, and she met Al's childhood friends, then working construction on the third phase of what was, at the time, the world's largest mall. She had noticed how they would grip his shoulders tightly, innocently, with broad smiles. She watched them loving him and trying not to be forgotten, hoping to get within sight of his new immortality. They wanted to know everything about Los Angeles, what the food was like and how often Al saw celebrities, what it was like to start a car with-

out effort in mid-December. Their happy curiosity about the city would last only another year, until Gretzky made the same trip as Al had and the place became an enemy.

In the years when Sampson was voicing a zookeeper and a rhinoceros for Saturday morning audiences, an Oakland playwright and cartoonist named Phil Zavarise had put himself quixotically to the task of creating an adult-oriented animated series for prime time. *Army Brats* would be a wry satire, following the exploits of a Sergeant Brats and his military family, constantly uprooted and drifting from base to base like crewcut Bedouin, touring what Zavarise took to be America's pathologies. The titular patriarch would be imbecilic but sympathetic, paradoxically fey, trying manically, unsuccessfully, to keep his deracinated family together.

When Sampson landed the role of Brats, he had argued strenuously against his wife's suggestion that they move out of their ground-floor apartment and put a down payment on a house. *Army Brats* would be lucky to run for a full season, he had said; there was no adult audience for cartoons; in Reagan's America, no one was much interested in the Bay Area's drug-marbled and leftish political humour.

The program had earned and maintained a small following for two seasons on a young network, just barely achieving renewal with each year. But as the decade turned over, Zavarise's half-liberal nihilism found a place in the national conversation, when a compounded post-Watergate, post-Contra cynicism mixed alchemically with the international uncertainty wrought by the collapse of the Eastern Bloc. The dashed-hope fear that came with privatized markets and once-Soviet secessionists washed over an America without a foil to lean its goodness against, and *Army Brats*

surged in the Nielsen ratings, becoming the anchor for its fledgling network. At the centre of the show were Sampson's myriad voices, voices no one could believe all came from one person, with infinite cadences and inflections and rhythms. They were voices rooted in a charismatic and almost-handsome performer who might even be dispatched to the big screen. The Canadian public had thrilled to the rise of a shining homegrown talent, making it big in the American markets, just as some now likely thrilled to the idea of such a profoundly American tragedy striking at one of their own. The success, the accident — all of it moved at speeds recorded in miles, not kilometres.

Ty stopped to weigh the relative nutritional merits of the bag of organic pretzels in one hand and, in the other, a sack of vegetable shoestring chips. He put them both into the cart next to his fresh-pressed apple juice and free-range eggs. His tiny yearly retainer was about to turn into regular, six-figure work. Maybe more, depending on what happened to Sampson. The time for choosing between groceries was past.

Ty had done his best to keep up with the accident: there had been a lot of trauma to his head, they'd reported, lacerations on his face, and spinal shock; Sampson was out and they had no way of knowing how long the coma would last or whether he would walk again. From what Ty had gleaned from a few hours trolling the Internet, searching Google and Wikipedia and various health sites, it would be impossible for Sampson to return to work without a fairly long convalescence, therapy, and even with all that, he might never make it back onto the show.

Ty moved towards the cash register, eyeing the items in

his cart, swerving at the last minute towards the frozen foods one last time. It had been so long since he'd bought ice cream. He picked up a four-litre container, not looking at the price, and made his way, again, towards the check-out.

"Sad, isn't it," said the cashier, a small, white girl with wide eyes, soft pink acne on her chin, and a crooked name tag on her apron. *Tanya*.

"What's that?" Ty asked.

Tanya nodded towards the magazine rack. "Al Sampson," she said. "He's Canadian, you know? It's really sad."

"Yeah," said Ty, producing his wallet. "I guess it is pretty sad."

Hours later, his groceries shelved at home and with night fallen outside the Brew Meadows restaurant and lounge, Ty surveyed the crowd at the tables: good-looking, affluent. West side people. He made his way towards the show's host, Shane Proudfoot, and nodded with his chin. Proudfoot had been the host of the comedy night at Brew Meadows for more than five years, through renovations, changes in ownership, and changed liquor laws. His stage had been in nearly every corner of the room, before settling on the wall opposite the bar. One particular set-up, which had placed the performers at the threshold of the women's washroom, had proven particularly deleterious for the relationship between the comics and their audience.

"Shane."

"Hey Tyler."

"Any spots open tonight?"

"I'm still waiting on Timmy Deacon, fucking cokehead flake. Fuck'im. You want his spot?"

“Sweet,” answered Ty, raising his hand through a new haircut.

“Ty,” Shane said, smiling with a degree of cruelty generally accepted among the fraternity of stand-ups, “are you wearing a ring?”

Ty curled his hand into a fist and smiled at his pinky.

“I am wearing a ring, Shane.”

“Not just a ring — a *pinky* ring.”

“That’s right,” he chuckled.

“You just find out you’re part Italian or something?”

“No, no. Nothing like that. Not exactly.”

Shane lost interest, turning back towards the bar to edit his set list, making room for Ty who always went past his allotted seven minutes, ignoring the flashlight shone from the back of the room as a warning.

“No, I’m not Italian or anything. The ring is just ... I’m coming into a few nice paycheques soon,” called Ty. “Been letting my credit card out of the gate. Got some TV work.”

“Nice. For who?”

“You know, the Sampson thing. The sound-alike gig.”

“Jesus, that’s right,” said Shane, half-solemn. “Holy fuck.”

“Yup,” said Ty.

For four years, a deal worked out between Ty’s LA representation and Bratspack Productions — the company responsible for *Army Brats* — had paid him a soundalike retainer, keeping his flawless impression of each of Sampson’s voices as insurance in case *Army Brats* ever had to go ahead without its star. Now, mid-season, with Sampson in a coma, Ty’s agent had been in touch with the studio to set up a recording schedule. Maybe even a move to LA.

“You’re a jackal, guy.”

“Yeah,” said Ty, giggling nervously.

“Jesus, guy goes into the hospital...”

“Silver lining I guess, man.”

“Yeah,” said Shane, raising his eyebrows. “Silver lining. No shit.”

“Yeah. They’ve got him in what’s called a halo cast.”

“Bodes well for you – makes it sound like he’s already an angel.”

“I don’t – ” Ty trailed off.

He leaned against one of the Meadows’s load-bearing pillars, nodding at some of the other comics with his jaw, following the waitresses’ asses with his eyes, scanning the room for shades of colour that might make a sampling of his accents forbidden for reasons of taste as well as the avoidance of altercations. *Fuck*, he mumbled, editing out his Corner Store Clerk when he spotted a massive, turbaned Sikh seated towards the rear of the crowd. The Sikh ran thick fingers through his chest-length beard and laughed along with his white tablemate at the comic onstage, Chris Mariner. The Sikh and his white friend were the only two laughing at Mariner’s impossibly cerebral act. Ty had never seen Mariner do well in Kitsilano, though he’d killed a few times on Commercial Drive.

“A lot of people say that the seventies was the golden age of the movies,” said Mariner into the microphone with an affected stutter, mic still fixed to the stand. “I don’t, you know, think that that’s true. There was no suspense in those movies. Like, *The Killing of a Chinese Bookie*. Right in the title, you know, they tell you how it ends.”

Fucking kid thinks he’s Steven Wright, thought Ty.

“Tough crowd. Or maybe, you know, just fans of the seventies? You guys — if you guys are fans of the seventies, you might like this new restaurant that just opened on the East side — you guys don’t ever go to the East side, do you?” A few shouts of “No!” from the irritated audience. “But this place, it’s neat; it’s a seventies-themed diner. A seventies theme. You know, they got tired of all the fifties-themed diners, so, you know, they got this — it’s a seventies-themed diner. Very authentic. It’s an hour-long wait for anything cooked with oil.

“That was off the cuff, man, come on! That was straight off the top of my head, man. I used to do improv, you know. I was in an improv troupe that used the Kafka method. You’d be onstage acting, but no one would tell you the premise.” Silence.

“You’re up next,” poked Shane over Ty’s shoulder, already moving back to the bar.

“You don’t have something later in the show?”

“You want a spot or not?”

“Fuck it,” he said, though he’d always felt that seniority afforded veteran comics the dignity of a slot further along in the show. “Put me on, I’ll clean up this fucking mess.”

“I think this is going very well,” said Mariner, and that got weak laughs. He took a long draw from a glass of water — *What the fuck comic drinks water?* thought Ty. *Take a beer up, fucking faggot* — and moved into his closing.

“You guys have been great. You love me. You love me like Paco loved Cupcakes in *Short Eyes*. But I am about to move into your collective subconscious. Speaking of which — have you guys heard that Naomi Klein is working on the definitive rebuttal of Carl Jung? She’s calling it *No Logos*.”

Nothing, just shaking shoulders from the Punjabi. “Come on, guys! Timothy Findley would have loved that joke — I mean *Carl Jung*? That motherfucker invented stand-up comedy! The differences between men and women? That was him! Men never want to ask for directions, am I right? Anyhow, this has been great; I always like to end big. Good night, everybody!”

Mariner left the small stage with a tepid sprinkling of applause from the diners, and Shane Proudfoot told two or three jokes to warm the crowd back up. As he did, Chris nodded hello to Ty, who sent the greeting back.

“Fucking university course lecture up there tonight,” he said.

“What?”

“Big words.”

“Yeah,” smiled Chris, embarrassedly. “Thanks.”

Wasn't a fucking compliment, cunt.

“You guys ready for your next comic?” Shane continued onstage, his gaze briefly following an attractive waitress across the front of the crowd. “This guy tours all over the place, he’s done Just For Laughs, Aspen, he’s done a Comedy Now special, what else? He’s a scavenger. Just kidding. Please welcome, Mister Tyler Bergen, everybody.”

Ty moved up onto the stage, smiling at Shane and whispering something nasty, sexual, and faux-spiteful in his ear. The crowd was hot. They were ready for him.

“Hey guys, hey everybody. Don’t worry, you can put away your *Encyclopaedia Britannicas* now.” Huge laughter, applause, and Ty grew in the spotlight, phototropic. Nearly six feet, he was handsome as the eyes took him in, though some women found that once they turned their heads, it was easy

to forget what he looked like. “I keep telling Chris he ought to hand out maps to his references when he’s up here. It’s like reading the *Da Vinci Code*! Seriously — hey, I use the Da Vinci code for my PIN number; you think that’s a mistake? I don’t know. It’s like,” he says, shifting in to an ersatz-Middle Eastern accent, a vaudevillian arabesque, while the crowd hollers, rolls, and laughs, girls leaning forward to giggle and in so doing, exposing abstract tattoos painted on their spines. “‘In the name of Allah, give us your debit code!’ And I’m like, ‘What the fuck do terrorists need seven bucks for?’” In the wake of this joke, Ty took a moment to savour the irony, letting the audience laugh as he paused to consider that soon any jokes about dwindling savings accounts would be pure performance. *I’m going to be Sergeant Brats, you fuckers.*

“You guys been hearing in the news about this lesbian children’s book?” Collectively, the audience responded in the affirmative, some with applause, one of the fraternity boys in front shouting “Oh, no!” in anticipation and ducking his head into his girlfriend’s chest, laughing. “This is, you know, there’s this children’s book, and it’s by a lesbian, and they don’t want it in the schools in Surrey, you know? And first of all, I’m like, ‘They read books in Surrey?’” Big laughs at this. Any shots at the suburban bumpkins balms the Kits crowd’s urbanity, flatters their sense of being rooted in a cosmopolitan echo of New York or Los Angeles.

“But yeah, this lesbian book, it’s all about these two female turtles who fall in love. And I’m not making that up. And I know what you’re thinking; we had lesbian children’s books when we were kids, too, right, the little boy who saved Holland by sticking his finger in a dike. Honestly. It was

like, ‘Huh!?!’ But, so, yeah, this lesbian children’s book, it’s about these two dyke turtles. And my question is, you know, you’re lesbian and you’re a turtle – how much must you love the smell of fish?”

At first, the sound of the yelling was muted by the laughter and applause running electrically through the crowd, even the waitresses leaning back at their stations, covering their noses with fingers as though preventing a sneeze. And then simultaneously, in an action marked by the same unanimity with which they had laughed, the crowd turned its heads towards the back of the room, where a dissident had risen from his seat, yelling. It was the Sikh’s white companion.

“Fucking shithead,” he spat, and took his jacket from the back of his seat, his massive Punjabi friend rising as well, emptying bills from his wallet to pay the tab, taller than his friend even whilst hunched over reading their debt from the cheque. “Takes a lot of fucking courage, huh, shoulder to shoulder with the religious fucking – fucking *theocracy* out in Surrey, man. Way to pick your target, asshole,” he said, growing nearly apoplectic, the Sikh now resting his meaty hand on his friend’s shoulder. “You think this is what fucking Lenny Bruce would have done? Fight between a lesbian artist and religious fucking bigots and you’re going to side with the bigots?” And with that, he shook off his friend’s embrace, walking briskly towards the exit and pushing out. Ty stared at the Sikh, who stared back for a moment before leaving himself, but not before saying, “The last guy was funnier.”

“Yikes,” said Ty, deflating the awkward silence hanging above the room, and the remaining audience members

melted into laughs of relief. “Um – you guys like impressions?”

The crowd cheered.