

Get a Job

His throat was dry and tight as a bowstring. He could hear his eyelids squeaking. He scanned his 3X5 card every thirty seconds, until he could no longer tell if the words were correctly spelled. But he knew the set was good. Even Jana laughed a little when he made her sit down long enough to run it for her.

"Jerry," she said, "Too bad you can't get paid for this, you big goof."

He looked up when he saw Abe Gleason, the emcee of Last Laugh, Comedia's Open Mic night, slip between the curtains and shamble toward him.

"Dude," he said, "I'm really sorry, man, but Craig sucked so bad he emptied the place out. Randolph is pissed and he killed the rest of the show." Randolph was the late shift manager.

Jerry slumped in his chair and massaged his temples. "This will play right into Jana's hands. She wanted us to go out to celebrate our fifth anniversary of hooking up and I said I had to be here."

When he got back to their two-room apartment, she was asleep. He climbed in next to her and she edged away from him as far as she could without going over the edge.

When he got up at noon there was a text: "Jerry, we have to talk. This isn't working." He texted back an emoticon that looked like the screaming man in that Edvard Munch painting.

He spent the day re-working the set. When she got home, he waited

while she showered and changed into her flannel pajamas and rumpled robe. When they sat down in the little dining nook, she sipped the wine he'd poured for her and stared out the window.

"What isn't working?" he blurted. "I've been half-crazed trying to figure it out."

She put her wine glass down and looked at him.

"Jerry," she said, "I was ready to text you that I wanted us to take a break, but something kind of interesting happened today."

"Take a break?" he asked. "What kind of a break?"

"I had lunch with an old friend, Todd Ranstead - don't panic, he's gay - and he said his dad's insurance company is looking for professionals who are willing to make a career move. They get a salary, instead of commission, at first. If they work out, they go on commission like the rest of the agents, but, for three months, they have some security while they make the transition. You worked for ten years as an accountant for Hilders Hardware before you bailed to try this comedy thing. You'd be a perfect fit."

"But, Jana," he said, "I'm just starting to break out. Abe is putting together a group of regulars for a paying gig, a roadtrip thing: Seattle, Tacoma, Chehalis, Vancouver, Portland. It's not a lot of money, but it's better than open mic night and a tip jar."

"Jerry, it's time to grow up," she said. "Todd says Breton Insurance will pay four-grand a month if you qualify. Last month I had to dip into savings to make the rent. I can't do that again. It scares me. I'm starting to go off the rails."

Two days later he was in a conference room, sitting at a computer screen taking an online test clearly designed for high school sophomores. When it was over, he went back to Todd Ranstead's office to check in before leaving.

"Jerry," Todd said, "your score was the second best we've had here. You want this gig, it's yours. What do you say? Are you ready to start pitching in the big leagues?"

"Todd," he said, "can I have a couple days to think this through? It's a big change."

"No problem, Jerry," Todd said, "you're worth the wait. But a word to the wise: your lady is getting impatient. I've known Jana since we were in grade school. If she makes up her mind to cut you loose, you've got more chance of hooking up with Scarlett Johansson than getting her back. Call me before noon, Wednesday."

That night he was at Last Laugh again, feeling it. He killed. He'd

forgotten it was the finals of LafFest, and the audience favorite got a cut of the cover charges. He took home four-hundred bucks and that night he and Jana made love like a pair of horny freshmen.

He spent the money on clothes and a late car payment. Jana was furious. "Are you fucking kidding me, Jerry? You bought TWO leather jackets?"

He took the job at Breton Insurance. The first week he sold more corporate group policies than anyone in the agency. He was a natural. The same cool diffidence and comic timing that got him standing ovations at Comedia helped him joke his way past the skeptical questions of CFOs and HR managers. They ended up buying more than they needed, wanting to be his buddies. Some of them wanted to take photos with him.

He hadn't been there a month when Raquel Amargosa, his boss's niece and a hotshot seller in her own right, stopped by his cubicle.

"You do standup at Comedia," she said.

"Yeah, when my girlfriend lets me out of the house on Friday nights," he said.

"She doesn't come with you?" she asked.

"Not her cup of java," he said. "To be fair, she's heard my set a million times when I practice at home."

"I'd go with my guy if he was doing open mic," she said, "whether it was the first time or the millionth time. That's what you do. Not that I have a guy. The reason I ask is my brother works over at Greenies and they want in on the comedy action. They're looking for somebody who knows the ropes to produce for them. You'd run open mic night and do your own set at the top. I told him about you."

"How do you know about my standup?" he asked.

""I was at Comedia the night you won," she said. "I've told everybody here about that night."

"Let me think about it," he said. "Plus, I have to ask Jana."

"Really Jerry, you have to think about it?" she asked. "I like your style, dude, but sometimes you think too much."

She leaned across his desk and put both her hands on his. Her perfume made him think of olive skin under silk undergarments.

"You tell Jana she better start coming to your gigs or I'll be the one waiting to buy you a drink," she said.

Later, when he met Jana at Comedia for early dinner, before she went out with her pal, Leanne, to watch *Beauty and the Beast*, he told her about Raquel's offer.

"Jerry, you still don't get it," she said. "Open mic nights are for losers who don't have real jobs to get up for in the morning. That's why I don't go with you. Everybody needs a hobby, I guess, maybe this is yours. But a regular thing, every week, for nickels and dimes? Really, Jerry, you need to move on. If you focus on your real job you'll be running the place in a year. Todd says they really like you."

After Jana left, he ordered another beer and pulled out his cellphone. "I'm in," he texted Raquel. "When can we get together with your brother?"

His phone chimed before he finished the beer.

"Can you come to my place now? He's coming over." she texted.

"I'm on my way," he replied. "Can we go somewhere and celebrate after?"

"I thought you'd never ask," she replied back. He forgave her the dumb smiley face.