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Bobby Goode's name on the marquee of the comedy club glared in sun-yellow sequenced bulbs against the deepening twilight. Other businesses posted less aggressive solicitations. His shows sold out within a minute of availability through the ticket outlets. Excited ticket holders stood beneath the marquee and looked for an opportunity to cut the line. Some would try the corridor between the comedy club and Copper Blues the nightclub next door.

Blue and white-collar workers, arriving from the downtown business suites and government complexes, shuffled in line alongside vacationers, convention attendees and locals. All of them were impatient to get the show started. The younger patrons wiggled and shifted as if standing on an exposed electrical wire. The elder generation tried to alleviate their back pains from standing on the thin red carpet covering the concrete.

A variety of local Phoenix comics gathered in a corner outside the club. Bobby had once been one of them, a member of a unique band of rebels, each chasing their dreams. Each came to learn from the master, to study his every nuance and intonation, and to dissect every punchline. They prayed to be as lucky as Bobby, and be discovered by an agent, or producer looking for the next face of comedy. Brian Stone had won the club's Open Mike competition a week earlier. Bobby asked him to open for him on Friday night, and the kid became an instant celebrity among his peers.

Phoenix loved comedy. It was a comedic oasis in the desert. The Valley lay open its arms to anyone who could make them howl. From their seats, they had watched A to Z list comics gnaw at their funny bones and solicit gut wrenching laughter.

Bobby had succeeded without inner demons driving him, unlike his peers who carried their personal psychosis and dependencies as crosses to the stage. Fallon saw that in Bobby. The only fear he had was losing it all, the fame and fortune. Bobby believed his Goode luck and timing would always see him through. He had just played San Francisco and was scheduled to do four sold out shows in Phoenix, before moving on to the Apple. Once there, it was a sold out Radio City Music Hall and a stop by the Fallon Show to say thanks to Jimmy for believing in him. It was also a special night for him because his career began in Phoenix. He was a hometown boy, Arizona born and raised. It was the place where he got his chops playing the small clubs.

Growing up there, in high school, he became infamous for time spent in detention halls and for antagonizing the system. An incessant wise guy, Bobby's teachers were frustrated by his constant disruption of classes with jokes and pranks. The dean of the school called his father and complained about his behavior. George Goode could only empathize with the dean. He knew what a handful Bobby could be. He knew the family's funny gene had been passed down to his son from a family tree full of jokers, who had survived life's hard times by using humor to alleviate their pain. He simply asked the dean if he thought his kid was funny. The dean said that Bobby was hysterical, but that he still needed relief from the problem for his own sanity. In the end, George negotiated a settlement. Bobby got the first five minutes of class to tell jokes. For the rest of the time, he promised his son would be respectful, and do his classwork. Bobby tried to comply, but failed. He was suspended, and eventually expelled. It was years later when the funny

kid finally earned his GED.

He worked odd jobs, meaningless dead-end jobs, during all hours of the day just to pay the rent. Bobby knew he wasn't made for regular work. He knew inside what he wanted more than anything in the world—a comedian. He wanted to get paid to be himself. It was all he thought about. He just needed to be dedicated enough to get there. He decided to dig in for a year, and eat, sleep, and breathe comedy. He wrote some jokes and worked up some courage. He started with every open mike night around Phoenix. He fumbled, fell down, and got back up again on stage. He worked strip clubs in between the flying tits, ass and legs. He got booed off stage, but kept coming back. He believed in himself and his *Goode* luck.

On his twenty-first birthday, Bobby opened for a headliner at the Comerica Theater. The owner of StandUp Live saw his act and invited Bobby to emcee at his club. A year later, Bobby filled in at the club for a cancelled act. A producer from NYC had been in the audience and approached him after the show. The man told Bobby he knew a great agent named Louie Steinberg. If Bobby were interested, the man said he would introduce him. The agent and Bobby met a short time later, and after seeing Bobby perform, Steinberg signed him for one year. He booked him on a small national tour. Louie closely monitored Bobby as he fine-tuned his routine. By the end of the contract, Louie got Bobby a steady gig as a writer for Jimmy Fallon.

It was a dream job for Bobby. He worked hard and put in twenty hours a day, while his talented co-writers filled bar stools until three in the morning discussing their personal woes. Bobby believed in himself. He believed he was destined to make it big. He was determined to prove to everyone, especially his parents, that he wasn't a failure.

A year passed before he felt secure enough to get an apartment in the city and stop sharing everything in the house with the other guys. He found an efficiency apartment and focused all of his energy on taking his bite out of the Big Apple.

A few more months passed. On a Tuesday afternoon, Jimmy walked into his writer's out-of-control conference room, and shouted for the horseplay to stop. With a serious look on his face, Jimmy looked at Bobby and asked him to step out into the hallway. Walking out through the door, Bobby's stomach ached. He knew it was bad news. He thought he was finished. Jimmy started slowly. He complimented Bobby's hard work and determination. He paused and looked Bobby in the eyes. He told him that he hated to do it.

“It's time, Bobby.”

“Time for what, Mr. Fallon?”

“For your dream to come true. To become a star, Bobby, I can't keep you from it any longer.”

Bobby froze. Jimmy threw an arm around him.

“Make me proud tonight.”

On the same stage, where extraordinary stars had visited the Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon, standing with the Roots on his left, and Jimmy and another guest to stage right Bobby stepped into the national spotlight. He killed. It changed Bobby's life forever. He swore he would never leave the stage. He was convinced it was his hard work, his dedication to the craft, his focus, and his *Goode* luck that got him there. He would do *anything* to stay in the spotlight.

The comedy stage became his entire life, his reason for being, everything he was. He

travelled the world and performed for kings, queens, and the common folks they ruled. He brushed shoulders with other successful comedians, movie stars, corporate suits, and even performed for the President at the White House Correspondents Dinner. He made them all laugh to tears.

Comedy Central adored him. Bobby ended up selling the same jokes and pranks of his youth to the television network as a sitcom about his life. The powers in the film industry signed him to do a feature film with options for more. The world rolled beneath Bobby's feet. He was a superstar.

There he stood, behind the curtain at StandUp Live waiting to perform, reminiscing about how far he had come in his life, how much the concert held special meaning for him. Most everyone waiting to get inside to see his show was familiar with his background. Every kid who had ever been incarcerated with him in detention had a story and a ticket, and so did every teacher, including the dean.

After he closed in Phoenix, he was headed to the Big Apple to perform beneath the Klieg lights, awash in the spotlight once again, in a sold-out, one-night stand in the Radio City Music Hall. It would bring his "Wurld Comedy Tur" to an end. He would follow the thunderous ovation by appearing on the Tonight Show to thank Jimmy for believing in him.

* * *

Donald and Betty O'Malley stood in the long line with the others, waiting patiently, while trying to cope with the bad news they had received earlier in the day. Betty did her best to nurture her brokenhearted husband. It was the first vacation they had taken after twenty-eight years of marriage. They had saved every penny and were determined to go first class. They booked a great hotel, an expensive rental car, and bought clothes just for the deserved adventure.

That morning, Donald had just finished his room service breakfast. Betty had sipped at her tea. She smiled as she watched Donald saunter inside the hotel suite in his boxers like Rocky Balboa taking quick jabs at the air. Watching Donald walk on the top of the world, feeling invincible was her dream come true.

She fell in love with him the first time he turned the corner into homeroom and knocked all of her books from her arms. After he had gathered them all off the floor, he looked into her deep blue eyes to apologize. Behind them, Donald saw the most beautiful girl in the world.

During Donald's Rocky moves, the telephone rang. He listened and spoke in a muted tone. Betty watched his face change, his festive mood disappear. He slowly hung up the phone and found a place on the edge of the king-size bed where he held his face in his hands. He had just received the worst news of his entire life from the VP of HR. They no longer had a position for him. A computer program that had no age limit, no retirement, no health care, and needed no vacation, had replaced him. The company hired a kid to program the computer, because Donald had never learned to use one, preferring instead to do his job the same way he had done it since he was hired thirty years earlier. He was a dinosaur that hadn't melted into oil. The VP's "I'm sorry" was no consolation, the severance package was meager.

Donald wiped away the tears, and told the love of his life what had happened. He was devastated. Betty was stunned by the news. She felt the ache in her stomach grow. Her fingertips touched her lips. Her eyes moistened. She took Donald in her arms to

comfort him.

“I don’t understand it. I’ve been with that company all these years. I never called out sick. I was never late. Why wait until I’m on vacation to tell me I’m finished? The guy they brought in to clean house was told get the old out, and make room for those young kids. Experience doesn’t mean a thing to an accountant. All those years I was patted on the back for a job well done, only to be thrown out with the trash.”

“Honey, it’s okay. We’ll get through this. We put our beautiful kids through college. They’re doing fine, and we’ll be fine, like always. Let’s make the best of the vacation we earned, you and I. It’ll be okay.”

Sullen didn’t begin to describe Donald. Still, he didn’t want to spoil the vacation for Betty. She had always been at his side since they first met, *inseparable* they said. He tried his best to hide his anger. Betty held him while his tears fell. The day dragged through the minutes and hours. They tried to soothe their pain as they watched kids leaping into the Sheraton’s pool. They studied the mountains in the distance. They talked about keeping on schedule. The Diamondbacks were playing a home game that afternoon, and Donald was a huge baseball fan. They made it inside Chase field in time to get a cold beer, hot dogs, a souvenir autographed baseball and a D-Back’s baseball bat before the first inning started.

During the walk back to the hotel after the game, they passed the sign on Jefferson Street announcing that Bobby Goode was appearing later that night at StandUp Live. Realizing that it was a struggle to get back in the vacation mood, Betty stopped Donald and held his arm tight.

“Let’s do something different! Let’s go off schedule tonight,” Betty said.

He looked at her with sad eyes. She pointed at the sign.

“You want to go to a comedy club?”

“Why not? It may be the perfect solution to our—”

“It’s a sold-out show, no tickets! I never heard of this guy. I don’t know, honey,” Donald said.

“Someone always has tickets to sell. We can go around the corner and find some. You know how to do that. Remember when we saw The Who back home? They sold out their show, but you came back with seats in the second row.”

“I don’t know anybody in Phoenix.”

“Come on, Donald, let’s do it, *please*. It’ll be good for us.”

He could never resist that look in her eyes. He was determined to salvage what he could of the vacation. At 7:30 p.m., Donald and Betty, with scalped tickets in hand, shuffled inside with the rest of the crowd. Betty grasped his arm and told him how much she loved him.

* * *

The double doors finally opened. Just inside the entrance, the DJ’s sound booth was bathed in LED lights. The club’s name was painted in large block white letters on a brick wall. Life-sized lithographs of headliners hung from the others. The loft ceiling was painted black. Small details revealed that the club was upscale. Even the tables and chairs had class. The freezer-locker air conditioning was a welcome relief from the microwave heat outside the doors.

Anxious husbands and wives, boyfriends and girlfriends, gays and straights, right and left wing politicians, religious and atheists, millennials to retired, rushed into the

venue. The surge forward felt like the Hoover Dam's floodgates had opened, or like a tsunami wave had hit. Staff escorts led couples, groups, and solo stragglers to open tables and reserved seating through aisles too close together to pass through without brushing shoulders. The club was filled to capacity with a healthy mix of ages, races, sizes and orientations.

The electrified guests found their nests and got settled in each waving at the staff with urgency. Once seated, Bobby's raucous fans guzzled pitchers of beer and specialty drinks to intensify the madness of the night. Four Peaks and Devil's Ale seemed appropriate. The staff knew how to work the crowd and made recommendations for food and beverages. They delivered the orders like parent birds to chicks, worms in the Tequila with a waterfall of alcohol. The kitchen went heavy on the salt for a reason.

The patrons were panting like dogs, straining against tethered leashes. They wanted Bobby to test their sensitivities and disrupt what they believed to be true in life. They wanted to be upended, convoluted and twisted. The world was too tense, and not like the joke about Apache Junction—a teepee and a wigwam, but sinister, dangerous, more threatening than ever before they believed. They wanted to be free for a few hours from the workplace, family dramas, financial troubles, and all the reported traumas in the world. They desperately needed to laugh until they cried tonight, or they would cry and never stop.

They had come to watch the best in the business do the comedy routine they could recite word-for-word. They couldn't do that with the American history they learned in high school. Laughter was the best medicine. They wanted Dr. Goode to medicate them. Bobby was good medicine for the tribe.

He would have them in the palms of his hands for ninety minutes. A comedy club was a free zone from prejudices of every kind, and Bobby's material had no boundaries. Ethnicity, gender, or religious beliefs weren't immune from his knife-edged wit, sarcasm and irreverence. He shunned political correctness. They *needed* his rants.

In spite of the chaos at its perimeter, the stage had the peacefulness of a cemetery. The island was a lonely, desolate place with a single microphone resting in the cradle of a mike stand with a snaking cord to a jack in the floor. A simple wooden stool stood to the side with two bottles of Fiji water standing on top like Emperor penguins surveying the crowd.

On the screen behind the stage, a rolling silent film of the man at work had some of his most famous punchlines overlaid, the same lines they expected to hear when the house lights dimmed. A comedian didn't need pyrotechnics, laser beams, and jacked-up Marshall amps to be funny.

Bobby Goode used his index finger to open the curtain ever so slightly to survey the audience. He was looking for victims for his razor-edged wit. He knew the feeling in his stomach well, still churning even after all of the thousands of performances. He knew the minute he crossed the boundary to the stage his fear would turn to bravado, and he would kill them with laughter.

The DJ's music came to an abrupt endnote. There was a timed pause. The pause was followed by the blast of *Ladies and Gentlemen*, by Saliva. The overhead strobe lights flashed. The spotlights criss-crossed the room and the emcee's voice cut in. He and reverberated the rules of the house and a gratuitous introduction for the opening act.

Bobby stood behind the curtain and nudged his opening act out onto the stage, and

then he continued to finger the curtain to watch the crowd. No one expected much from the wiry comedian taking the mike from the stand. No one came to see him. Some patrons found it the perfect time to relieve themselves in the nearby restrooms. Still he gave it his all and shouted out.

"Hello Phoenix! Are you ready for a great show tonight!"

Then he kicked some ass with incapacitating one-liners. The audience was taken by surprise. He worked the crowd until they rallied for him. He got them ready for the headliner. The comedian had seen it happen before, every time he opened for Bobby. He knew it was a matter of time before someone opened for him. The applause grew louder as he said goodnight and then disappeared behind the curtain where he high-fived Bobby. The management made note of the crowd's reaction.

The DJ cued up Red Rider's *Lunatic Fringe*, the star's anthem. Bobby got pumped as the music drove through the monster speakers. He wore black jeans, boots and a long-sleeve black shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbow revealing a fashionable black leather and sterling silver clasped bracelet. His face had a three-day stubble that was very Duchovney-esque. His spiky black hair was in disarray. Looking blue-collar and talking white trash was part of the act. The common man and woman related to the rebel image of "I don't take shit from the man!"

In reality, everyone knew they worked for the man, even famed comics. That was where the paychecks came from so everyone could play. In real estate, the rule was "location, location, location" but in comedy, the rule was "attitude, attitude, attitude."

The volume of the song dropped, while the DJ's voice rolled like thunder. His tone resembled an introduction to a WWF fight.

"Are you ready Phoenix? Are you ready for the bad ass of comedy?"

They screamed louder. The introduction listed Bobby's awards achievements, his Grammy's, Emmy's, and the royalty he had performed for.

"And after countless class-action lawsuits, multiple charges filed, and with a few outstanding warrants, please give a giant round of applause for our very own—*BOBBY GOODE!*"

The spotlight hit its mark on the curtains. Before he stepped onto the stage, they shot out of their seats, arms raised, hands slapping hands in cheerful applause. Showtime. There was a powerful connection between Bobby and his fans, part mystical, almost spiritual, and very near orgasmic.

"Hello Phoenix, Arizona! It's good to be home! Home *Sweet* Home!"

He pandered adding prayer palms and a slight respectful bow. They ate it up. He high-fived several attendees in the immediate front row, pointed at recognizable faces. He begged them to stop, but the screams, cheers and whistles only became more intense. He pumped a fist in the air.

"Thank you, thank you so much! Please, if I don't get started I don't get paid!" They roared and then managed to settle down.

"Thank you, so much. Save some of that for the rest of the show, please."

He shaded his eyes from the bright lights, and looked out toward the back of the club. He saw his mom and dad, sister and two brothers sitting in the VIP area.

Kelly, his mom, had her hands clasped together, fingertips against her lips as if she were in a moment of prayer. She was actually in a moment of pride. George Goode, his dad, beamed because he knew that one night, forty-five years ago, in three minutes, he

had produced a superstar. His parents did not expect to reach the level of excitement they did watching him receive the People's Choice Award, but they planned to have a great night anyway. His sister sipped at her third drink. She hadn't been out much since the newborn arrived. She finally got her lazy husband, who acted like he was her other child, to babysit. His younger brothers stopped flirting with the waitress while Bobby pointed them out.

"Sitting over there are some very special people—my parents, brothers and sister. They came tonight to make sure you're getting your money's worth from me."

The family received a respectful round of applause.

"Don't be too good to them. I'm still grounded from that thing I did when I was fifteen. My sister ratted me out so mom and dad wouldn't get mad at her for a D minus on her math test. She's the smart one in the family—normally a straight D student. My two brothers just got out of Tent City...one was an inmate, the other from shift change, one of the sheriff's Posse."

"Officer Goode, did you get me Big Joe's autograph?"

"No habla English!" his youngest brother shouted.

The audience hooted.

"I thought I'd try something different tonight. I thought I'd see if I could still improvise, be spontaneous. You remember Spontaneous. He was an old Roman emperor who had a comedy club in the Coliseum. His comics used to perform between gladiator events. I think it'll work. What do you think?"

The audience went wild. They felt special because they believed Bobby cared enough about them to try it. Alex, his best friend and manager, was caught totally by surprise. It wasn't planned, and definitely wasn't rehearsed earlier in the afternoon. Bobby hadn't said a word about it.

The staff dodged all of the raised arms that encouraged Bobby to let loose. He surveyed the front rows and zeroed in on his first victim.

"Sir, the older gentleman with the snow on top and excellent goatee. I have to say, the woman with you is a very beautiful, young, and sexy woman. Bravo, sir! Let me ask you if I may, how many Viagra does it take to keep her happy?"

The gentleman waved off the crack with one hand.

"I don't use Viagra."

Bobby looked around the room.

"Come on sir, we're all friends here. We promise that your answer will not leave the room. Please, tell us how many Viagra it takes to keep your stunning, super-model date coming back?"

"I don't use Viagra. I still use Rohipnol."

The gentlemen with a confident smirk on his face continued.

"Roofies have worked well for me for forty years. No one gets a headache, she can't testify, and we both get a good night's sleep."

There was a crescendo of moans and laughter. Catcalls echoed against the walls. The gentleman had one-upped him. Bobby bowed to him. He placed the microphone under his arm and applauded the gentleman who returned a gracious nod. He offered the mike encouraging him to come on stage but the gentleman declined. The young woman gave the gentleman a naughty smile as she slid her hand onto his inner thigh and squeezed tight.

“Even I didn’t see that coming. Bravo, sir.”

Bobby moved on and found another victim sitting in the second row.

“Okay, how about you sir, with the discount hairpiece and the ’50s bowling shirt. Yes, you sir. I have to ask, is that your *real* face?”

Donald wasn’t in the mood. He wasn’t smiling. He didn’t want to be in the club, or be part of the show. He only went there for Betty. He took serious offense at the remark, joke or not.

Bobby pressed him.

“What? You look offended. You do know you’re at a comedy venue. Is it the early stages of Alzheimer’s? I would have thought you heard the same question before tonight. The lady next to you, with the peroxide blond ratted hair, she ought to consider a makeover at one of Scottsdale’s exclusive *salons*.”

“Hey funny man, how about I rearrange *your* face?”

Donald didn’t like being a target, but ranking on the woman he loved was out of bounds as far as he was concerned. It had been a bad enough day. He didn’t need some wiseass cracking on them and making it worse.

“Is that how you got yours, someone rearranged it? I know, happened when you pulled your head out of your ass. Bet it’s dark in there!”

Donald looked at Betty. She pulled at his arm and gave him a reassuring look.

“He’s just joking. It doesn’t bother me, it’s just a joke, honey.”

He pulled his arm away hard. The audience wasn’t laughing with them. They were laughing at the couple with the unfortunate seats. Donald decided to try to be as funny with his retort, as the older gentleman was with Bobby.

“Hey, you may not like my face, but I’m sure no woman will suck your tiny dick!”

He drew a round of applause from the audience for his tenacity.

“How do you like it, pencil dick?” Donald said.

With a resurrected smile, he looked at Betty. She turned fifty shades of red.

Bobby snapped back with a line.

“Small as mine may be, at least I have one.”

The audience shouted. Humans found extreme pleasure in smack downs. They loved it when Neanderthals exchanged blows. The only thing missing was the Coliseum and lions. The wait staff could not refill drinks fast enough. Management was ecstatic.

“Hey wiseass, your momma never complained about the ride!”

“Ouch! Hey, you’re the guy who fucked her and never paid! She’s still looking for you!”

Bobby’s mom covered her face, embarrassed with the exchange. She thought everyone in the room turned to stare at her. Betty felt the same way.

Donald lost it. Inside, he became an enraged bull that saw Bobby waving a red flag. Bobby became Donald’s ex-boss. He exploded. His wife understood his anger. She tried to pull him back down as he rose from his seat.

“Honey, stop it, he’s just—”

Donald booted as loud as he could. The audience shouted at him to stop.

“Sir! Hey! Stick with the clever retorts, no one boos anymore.”

That was about all Donald could take. He started toward Bobby pushing seats and other customers aside to get to the stage to inflict a serious beat down.

“I’m going to kick your fucking ass!”

Bobby looked over at security. They intercepted Donald before he reached the edge of the stage, and escorted him out of the venue with an embarrassed Betty following close behind pleading with him. She didn't know a brawl would ruin the first night of their vacation.

"Well, so much for *spontaneous*! Bobby surveyed the audience.

"What do you say we go back to what you all know so well? Back to the script."

Alex and the management of the club breathed a sigh of relief. Bobby repeated the same stories and punch lines that had made him famous. The audience loved it, because they knew they could be part of the show.

"So, I went out on a blind date..."

The audience shouted back the punchline.

"She wanted to know what I looked like so she hit me twenty-eight times with her red and white cane!"

Bobby chuckled.

"I don't know why I even bother to show up at these shows. *I'm* supposed to do my act—so shut up already!"

They pressed him for more.

"The first time I slept with a mute..."

"Was the first time I saw my name in sign language!"

The crowd felt part of him.

"I went to a flea market and bought a can of fleas..."

They couldn't stop.

"I wanted to get my dog back for taking a dump on the carpet!"

It's what they came for, what they wanted. They couldn't get enough of Bobby, or enough of the alcohol. He was funnier with every swallow, like picking up a girl at two a.m. before the bar closed.

"When I use my credit card I tell them it's stolen."

"It's called felony pre-notification and my lawyer said we'd use it at my next trial!"

Laughter was coupled with applause. Fists raised into the air.

They finally let him tell the whole tale before finishing it.

"It was a dark night when the *Penisulans* penetrated the Falopians territory. Some charged through the Putangian Jungle. Dirty Sanchez swam from Astoria across the Red Sea. They climbed Mt. Clitoria until they reached GSpotia. They met stiff resistance. It took a high-concentration of the potion alchoholia to subdue the Falopians. The Penisulans charged and retreated until spent. In the end, all the Falopians wanted was to talk."

All the men in the comedy club shouted in unison.

"Penisulans! Penisulans!"

All the women yelled the refrain.

"Falopians! Falopians! Falopians!"

Bobby told the story of how Aruba was the new divorce vacation—a one-way ticket for her.

He said the Congresswoman from Arizona who was shot outside a mall, after her recovery, resigned from Congress. The most memorable statement from her farewell address to Congress was, 'I need this job like I need a hole in the head!'"

The entire audience groaned.

“Got it, I crossed hallowed ground,” Bobby said.

He looked over at Alex.

“Scratch that last one from the set.”

Another forty-five minutes and Bobby took his bows. The first ovation brought him out to do a few more jokes. After the second ovation, he said good night. He was back home and loved it.

Opening Night was over, the curtain closed. The house lights went bright and the audience got up to leave. They were satisfied Bobby had given them a memorable evening. It was time to stagger next door to Copper Blues and continue the party.

In the Green Room, Bobby towed off the sweat. Alex and he briefly discussed going off script. Bobby subconsciously placed the holster in the back of his jeans and covered it with his shirttail, a habit since he was old enough to carry a concealed weapon.

In walked the owner of the club.

“Jeez, Bobby, planning to shoot your way out? I didn't think it went *that* bad, although the off-script idea tanked.”

They laughed.

“I don't think I'll go *there* again.”

He reached behind his back.

“Oh, and this? I remember what happened to Lennon.”

In walked Bobby's parents, hugs and kisses followed. He hadn't seen them since he arrived in Phoenix. He got there in the morning and went straight to the hotel. He rehearsed all afternoon. Pleasantries were exchanged and the owner left.

“See you tomorrow night! Great set Bobby!”

Bobby put his arm around his mom.

“I'm sorry if I embarrassed you. I got into character and focused on the heckler.”

“I can take it. I'm Booby Goode's mother. He did make for one *interesting* opening night, that crazy man.”

She giggled from the martinis she consumed. She slurred a few words.

“Okay, I was embarrassed.”

George patted the middle of her back.

“Great show, son. I taught you everything you know, except the bad stuff.”

He laughed heartily from the margaritas he drank.

“We're on our way over to the VIP room now, son. The rest of this family horde will be there too, except your sister, who has to go home and change her husband's diapers, oops, did I say that?” George said.

His mom covered her mouth, but the words escaped.

“I don't doubt he dropped my grandson twice since we left.”

They didn't like the son-in-law.

His two brothers walked up arguing over who got the waitress's phone number. Bobby asked them if they had even seen the show. They said they had a great time. The youngest told Bobby the waitress left her number on the back of the check. They couldn't decide for which one of them it was intended. Bobby told them to wait outside on the patio. He said there were usually some young, wasted, giggling girl fans that would turn up and they wouldn't have to share one waitress.

“You did say the number was from a waitress, right, not a *waiter*?”

The brothers punched at one another. Bobby laughed. He told them he would see

them at the after party. Alex finished talking with George and walked over to Bobby.

“Outside of that a-hole and you're free-lancing, I'd have to say it was a great first night. Thank God for the security guys. If that guy clamped you we would have had a real mess.”

“Just a drunk, he wasn't close. The owner didn't say a word,” Bobby said.

“What could he say with a four-night sellout?”

“Great job as always, Alex, couldn't do it without you.”

The two friends for life bumped fists. Bobby and Alex mixed the clay. Together, they formed a shape on the wheel. Bobby made the fine carvings. Alex painted. When they were through, it was a masterpiece.

Inside, the staff hurriedly cleared the tables and headed for home. Some had to study for exams, others headed for a stop at another club. The management team discussed what they could do to better handle crowd control in the future. The owner walked up and spoke to his general manager.

“Find the guy and his wife and give them some complimentary passes for tomorrow night.”

“I heard him tell his wife they were going back to the Sheraton and start packing.”

The GM wasn't worried. He knew they'd never be back. The comedy club was one of the best in the U.S. and had no trouble selling out every night.

Outside of the club's double entry doors, there was a patio area where the comics could meet fans and sign autographs. Bobby stood patiently and talked with loyal fans that swarmed around him like bees. They bought his Comedy Central and HBO DVDs. They loved his stenciled T-shirts that read: “Be Goode—Bobby.” After the bees buzzed off, and he had signed the last autograph, he turned to Alex and told him what he said every night after a performance.

“I need a walk.”

Alex knew the routine. Bobby needed to decompress and review his performance. He had to see it in his head, in spite of having done the same show for years. For all of their free spiritedness, comics were solitary, pained individuals. They used their time on stage as a type of therapist's couch, to talk about their lives, failings and fears. For Bobby, applause with a check and a walk afterward were therapy.

Nobody broached the subject of Bobby being a solo act. He had been in love once, but came to realize the young starlet didn't love him, she loved the life. It took a few years for Bobby to get it, and get over it. He also became so involved in his sitcom and the Hollywood scene that he forgot what a real relationship was. He relied on one-night stands, something he knew about, to fill in the empty spaces. He walked off into the night alone. He would return later to the after party and enjoy the adulation of those who paid VIP rates to get close to him. He would have a chance to catch up on family issues with his parents. He would harass his brothers if they showed up without the waitress.

He stood at the corner of Central and Jefferson, looked in each direction, and decided to head west past the courthouse, City Hall and toward the Comerica Theater. Downtown had changed a lot. Some buildings looked familiar to him, but most had changed.

Before he crossed Central, he had to stop in the crosswalk when a black Cadillac with tinted windows nearly sideswiped him. He watched as the car sped away. He waited for an apology but none came. He gave the driver the finger, but realized the driver wouldn't get a good look at it through the windows. He looked in both directions again

and crossed the street.

Why waste a Goode finger anyway?

Phoenix, like other US cities, suffered when the economy collapsed, but it had risen from the ashes like the legend. Smaller comedy clubs Bobby performed at were gone. The free market, like evolution, had taken a toll on the weak.

At the Comercia Theater, he headed north past the government buildings. At the Orpheum Theater, he remembered opening for another comic for a charity. He pictured his name at the bottom of the poster in small font. It seemed like a lifetime ago. He walked past the Crescent Ballroom. An Indie act rocked the hall. The atmosphere wasn't upscale, more bohemian, with *real* folks.

He thought he saw the same car that came close to running him over earlier pacing a block behind where he was. He became concerned for a moment then decided to let it go. In his head, he heard the words to an old Buffalo Springfield song:

Paranoia runs deep. Into your life it will creep...

He kept walking and reviewed every line of the show in his head. He was so deep in his thoughts that he didn't realize how much the neighborhood had changed. Fewer streetlights were illuminated. He had wandered into unfamiliar territory. He heard a car's revving engine. It approached from behind him. He looked, but the halogen headlights temporarily blinded him. It raced past him a few car lengths and screeched to a stop with its red brake lights flaring. The car backed up fast and reckless. Bobby was certain it was the same black Cadillac—a CTS model.

The driver's side door flew open as if it had been blown by dynamite. A man ran toward him. He had a baseball bat clenched in his fists.

"You motherfucker!"

Bobby pivoted on his heels to the left to avoid the blow and extended his arm to block. The man swung hard and caught Bobby across the right shoulder. Bobby wrenched and fell to one knee. The pain in his shoulder was searing, nothing *funny* about it. He stumbled back and fell onto the sidewalk.

Bobby reacted on instinct and drew his Glock from the holster in the back of his belt. The decision was already made in his subconscious, not one open for debate. He was an Arizona native, grew up with firearms. He squeezed the trigger once. The orange and yellow flame exited the barrel. He heard the sound of the gunfire an instant later. The powerful recoil of the discharged weapon pushed him farther back.

Time and space slowed.

Bobby saw the single round penetrate the chest of his attacker, a enter shot. He had a phantom feeling of the round penetrating his own chest, felt the pain of the fire, as he watched a crimson flare erupt out of the man's shirt.

Later, during the autopsy, the ME would determine that it was a long-range shot, greater than sixteen inches, with no burn marks around the entry point, no residual powder and no stippling, or as forensics expert Dr. Di Maio called it—tattooing. The distinct odor of cordite and the copper smell of blood were strong.

Donald was lifted off his feet from the gunshot. He hit a replanted palm tree then crumpled to the ground. He rolled face-up and stared into the last night sky he would ever see.

Bobby watched the body drop to the concrete. Gravity pulled the man back toward the dirt. He saw the man's grip on the baseball bat release. He leaned over and saw the blood exiting from the wound. A trickle fell from the corner of the man's mouth. He heard the gasping and gurgling, the death rattle—the man's last breath. Bobby reached for a pulse, but saw the man's eyes roll back and dilate to an abnormal size. It was too late to revive him, no point to rush him to a hospital. The man was dead. Bobby felt spider lightning shoot through his spine.

“Oh shit, no!”

Bobby grabbed his cellphone and was about to dial 911.

After the blast of the gunshot, it was as eerily silent as the inside of a crypt. The leaves in the trees were still, no rustling breezes, completely stagnant. The full moon overhead aided the dim light from the streetlights. He looked at the man's shirt. It looked familiar. When Bobby got a good look at the face under the streetlights, he realized it was the heckler from his show. His mouth opened in disbelief. The Glock felt heavy in his hand, so he laid it down next to the body. His eyes moistened and he wiped them with his forearm. He fought to stay calm and rational.

He analyzed, debated, questioned. He knew it would be the end of everything, his fortune and fame, if anyone knew. He saw the faces of his parents and siblings. He had made the world laugh, donated millions to charities, performed benefit concerts for every cause, but killing the heckler was all they would remember. He never dialed 911.

Bobby's conscience unraveled. He thought about Heaven and that he would never see it. He thought about Hell and what it would be like to spend eternity in flames. Then the poised stage professional lost all sense of right and wrong.

What the fuck? Did anyone see what happened?

He scanned the city street looking for witnesses. He looked for the homeless hidden behind buildings and benches. He looked to see if window lights in the surrounding buildings illuminated to see what the crack of thunder was. In an area where gunfire was normal, they showed no interest. It was just dead Donald and shooter Bobby.

Bobby felt around outside the man's pants pockets for the shape of a set of keys until he remembered they were in the ignition. He ran to the driver's side door and pressed the trunk release. He ran to the rear and pushed the lid higher. He looked left, right, up and across the deserted street. He saw no one.

The man's skin turned pale and taut. His muscles relaxed releasing the contents of his bladder and bowel. Even in the bristling summer heat, the man's body dropped in temperature. With his adrenaline pumping, Bobby hefted the dead weight of the body into the trunk then slammed down the lid. He took a longer look around for security cameras and traffic cameras on the street corners. He saw none.

He got into the driver's side and put the shift into drive. He looked over his aching shoulder and pulled into the street. Phoenix was largely a ghost town at night and he was far enough away from the club. Convinced that no one saw anything, he drove away from the scene. The farther he went the more unsettled he became. He tried to control his breathing.

He got his bearings and found a few familiar street names, and generally knew where he was. What he didn't know was where and how to get rid of the body. Growing up, he heard that west of Tucson, on the Tohono O'odham Reservation, skeletal remains were found lying on the desert floor, but that was too far to drive. He remembered reading a

news story earlier that a body, a man killed by blunt force trauma to his head, had been dumped out on Black Canyon Highway in the desert and burned. A witness had come forward so he had to make certain that would not be the case. He knew he had to move fast. Everyone was awaiting his arrival in the VIP room.

The philosophical debates inside his head about right and wrong came to a halt. He decided nothing else mattered except for his survival. There were no rules. His mind raced. He ran through a gauntlet of possibilities. He had to dispose of the body so that it could not be identified. He had to leave nothing behind that would lead to him. He decided to make it look like the man wanted to party, got lost in the wrong neighborhood, and got robbed by the dealer. Some out-of-town freak buys some drugs from locals who recognized he wasn't from the area. They do the standard hustle, sell him some packets believed to be meth, give him some Haloperidol instead, and wait for the effects to cause loss of consciousness so they could take his cash and car down the road. The same sad story was repeated in the newspapers every day. Butonadiol was available on the Internet.

Unless some gangbanger drug dealer recognized him during the buy, in the brief instant of the transaction, and was willing to testify, Bobby was home free. He made his living being quick-witted under high-pressure scenarios. He knew he could do it. He just needed to steady his nerves. Lying was a way of life now. No one told the truth. Reality television was proof of that.

Still, Bobby knew, it would have to be the performance of his life. He believed he was too smart to get caught. He thought no one would ever suspect a superstar comic. No one would ever suspect *Bobby Goode*. He convinced himself he could do it.

After the buy, he'd find an empty lot, somewhere where he could park the CTS, stage the scene and then light off the gas tank to cover his tracks. He had seen the same plot on thousands of crime shows and movies. He couldn't be seen by anyone. He was too recognizable. What he needed most was for his *Goode* luck to hold out.

The plan made sense to a man not thinking right. What he didn't think of, and what no one ever thought of, was that good guys made bad criminals.

Then he panicked again.

Shit, he was with a woman. Where is she?

He did the math and concluded that the guy wouldn't have taken her with him.

Why, mister? Why?

He drove on searching for a dealer. It had been some time since he was back in Phoenix, but he still knew what direction to head to find the drugs. As he drove, he rehearsed the scene in his mind. It wasn't but a mile down Van Buren when he pulled up alongside a shadowy figure outside a boarded-up house. The neighborhood's wholesome values had disappeared along with the white flight to the safety of suburbia. Every window had bars across it. Though technically not considered a gated community, the yards were bordered by fence and razor wire.

The neighborhood was so dangerous the Phoenix PD refused to go in there. Bobby only had to worry about the bad guys. The watchful eyes of the gang had already scrutinized the vehicle as he drove in. One kid approached the Cadillac. He had a cocky, conspiratorial smirk on his face. He dared Bobby to make a wrong move. Another shadowy figure, near a corner of the building, held a Tech Nine pointed gangsta-style sideways at him. He gripped the Glock between his legs.

He cracked the tinted window enough to replace the cash with drugs. It took a

millisecond. Then he drove away. No one wrote down the license plate.

Another mile west, he pulled out his cellphone and pressed the rapid dial number for Alex. He had always been Bobby's most reliable co-conspirator. No one knew more of Bobby's secrets than he. Alex knew that Bobby had taken him along on a piggyback-ride on a meteor to stardom. Alex would take a bullet for Bobby, but only in the philosophical sense.

"Where are you?"

Alex's voice mimicked a dentist's drill. It had some physical connection to the size of his parrot nose, Bobby thought. The sound of it kept Alex as celibate as a priest through high school. It hadn't lowered much since he reached manhood.

"Everyone's waiting for your grand entrance."

"I ran into an old friend."

Bobby thought that was funny in a sick sort of way.

"I'm headed in your direction. Just tell everyone to keep eating and drinking."

"You got it, Bobby."

Alex thought he heard something different in Bobby's voice.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, why?"

"You sound out-of-breath."

"Too far...longer than...(garbled)"

Alex tried to make out what Bobby said from behind his hand covering the cellphone. He heard a few more unintelligible phrases.

"I can't hear you, man."

It was what Bobby wanted to hear.

"I just...good time..."

"What? I can't hear you."

"(Garbled) ...soon!"

Bobby shouted as if he hadn't heard the last question. The line went as dead as the heckler in the trunk.

At Roosevelt and Grand Avenue, a patrol car's lights flashed. Bobby froze for a moment not knowing that it was parked there every night because it was a high-crime area. He turned onto Grand Avenue, but kept his speed at the limit.

Grand Avenue, he knew, would take him to the industrial district. He could find a quiet vacant lot. The cop in the car glanced at the black CTS that passed, but went back to checking the computer screen in his patrol car. A mile down, Bobby pulled into the deserted, cracked concrete rear parking lot of the Church of the Light. It was right next to the interstate, the Black Canyon Freeway. Below the overpass was an industrial area. Gang tags and razor wire, colorful and definitive fashion statements, covered every wall of every building. He heard sirens in the distance.

A sign with a bright neon cactus was on the roof of a popular Mexican restaurant. It gave Bobby enough light to survey the surrounding area. He checked for security cameras before exiting the car.

He waited. His head swiveled in search of witnesses. There were no dumpsters for the homeless to hide in, no one strolling by pushing a shopping cart. When he felt satisfied the area was deserted, he exited the car, but continued his scan in every direction. He was startled when two Dobermans with hungry eyes and threatening snarls

stood up behind a Century fence. Their barking was enough to wake the dead, except for the one in the trunk.

The air was heavy with pollutants. The moon and stars had changed their azimuth farther toward the horizon in the black canopy of sky. The sound of the racing cars on the interstate became stronger and weaker as they passed.

After torching the CTS, he needed to find a way back. He figured he would have to walk for several blocks before he would find an all-night restaurant, or a rat-infested, sleazy hotel, somewhere where he could find a ride. He knew how to boost cars as a teenager. He was on high alert. His eyes were wide open. His heart rate climbed higher. He moved fast.

He wasn't a religious man, more of a contemporary non-believer. He had his personal dogma of spirituality inside his own personal church. He didn't attend church on Sundays and found it funny he was at one now. He wondered if God was watching him. He took one last hard look around to make sure he was alone, then reached down inside the driver's side door and released the trunk latch. He walked to the rear of the CTS and looked down at the dead guy.

Why did you come after me? It was a joke!

It had only been half an hour and already the man's skin was purple, waxy, the arms blue. His lips and nails were pale. Because of the violent exertion of the assault, *rigor mortis* had advanced. Lying at an angle, the man's blood had collected at the lowest point causing fixed lividity. It would later tell the ME the body had been moved. The guy's flattened eyes from the loss of fluid disgusted Bobby. He didn't want to touch him, but he knew he had no other choice.

The body began to stink as it decomposed. Bobby gagged. It was to the death scent that the insects were drawn. They were already at home in the victim's eyes, nose, mouth and ears laying their eggs.

In a normal death, their young would hatch within twelve hours. The maggots would start feeding on the dead tissue. When unable to consume more, they would depart and the beetles, spiders and millipedes would finish devouring the corpse. The forensic entomologists were going to be cheated this time. Bobby planned to kill everything in the fire.

Dead and decaying, Donald was barely flexible enough for Bobby to maneuver into the driver's seat. Moving the guy left stains on Bobby's arms and clothes. He rationalized that body position didn't matter, as it would contort because of the fire. He took anything he could see of value to make it look like a robbery.

He reached down and pulled the lever to open the gas tank door. He twisted the cap and took another hard look at the area. He took the newspaper he found in the car, opened to the Arts section with the comedy club's ad circled, rolled it up and shoved it into the gas tank. He lit it with the car lighter then took off as fast as he could to avoid the explosion.

He froze when the snarling and barking Dobermans lunged at the chain link fence. He regained his senses and took off fast.

The car took what seemed like an eternity to ignite, but when it did, the blast was impressive. The fireball could be seen a millisecond before the sound of the concussion could be heard. Razor-sharp shards of glass from the windows in the buildings blew out in every direction. One Doberman took a hit and was killed, the other Doberman ran for

cover. Bobby fell forward against the road from the blast. He regained his footing and ran harder.

Someone called 911. Emergency vehicles were dispatched. The Cadillac was engulfed in flames when the first police car arrived.

Bobby jacked a car a few blocks away. He found an alley near the hotel to abandon it in. He walked three blocks to the hotel staying out of view. He knew about the hotel security cameras in the lobby and that there were none in the stairwell to his floor. Without detection, he entered his hotel room through the second door to the suite.

His clothes reeked of gasoline, sweat and cordite. He tore them off and stuffed them in a plastic garbage bag. He didn't have any way to get rid of them, so he placed the bag above the drop ceiling in the bathroom. He planned to discard them the first chance he got. There was blood on his hands. As he scrubbed them clean, he realized his leather bracelet was gone. He panicked, started retracing his steps in his mind. He would have to wait until morning to search for it. He showered and tried to eliminate all evidence of the crime.

Bobby saw his reflection in the floor-to-ceiling closet mirrors. He couldn't look into his own eyes. He put on a white hotel bathrobe, grabbed a towel, and massaged his wet hair as he joined the party. Everyone was surprised to see him. Alex walked up and gave him a hug. He noticed the faint odor of gasoline.

"Why didn't you say you were back? We were about to close down and send everybody home."

"I got lost, crazy huh? But *here I am*—let's party!"

He continued to rub the towel over his head. Someone handed him a bottle of water. Everyone applauded as he toasted the audience.

"Thank you so much, let me throw some clean clothes on and we can get this party rocking!"

Alex knew something wasn't right. The music played louder while Bobby changed clothes. In spite of what had transpired—expired, Bobby thought things were going smoothly. He was in survival mode, a mode he would be in for the rest of his life.

His parents thought he was acting different, jittery. They hoped he wasn't doing drugs. They didn't want to bury their son because of *that* celebrity madness. Bobby flinched when his dad put a hand on his shoulder while talking about how proud he was of him.

A young female reporter from the *Arizona Republic* Arts section asked a pointed question.

"Bobby, does anything make you cry?"

"I don't get that luxury. It's my job to make all of you forget your troubles and laugh."

* * *

Donald had never disappeared before for any length of time. He was as reliable as a sunrise. He had told her that he needed some air to clear his head when he got back to their hotel room. At midnight, he still had not returned.

When she saw the faces on two detectives who knocked on her hotel door in the early morning hours, she knew she had lost her Donald. They made the formal notification of his death. They told her how he was found, and asked about Donald's use of drugs.

She grasped her face. Tears welled in her eyes. Her faced contorted in terror. She saw Donald's face. She watched him shadow box where she now stood.

She felt light-headed, she said. She had gone into shock. They gave her some water to hydrate and sat her down her sit down. Somehow, through the tears, she was able to tell them that neither she, nor Donald, had ever touched drugs in their lives. It had to be a mistake. The hotel doctor gave her a sedative.