



John, ousted as an adviser to the United Nations security-council for suggesting the destruction of the great wall of China in order to put up hedges, has spent his last several years searching for his unrequited soul mate. He originally started his descent into helplessness as a standup comic before turning to writing because he needed another way to express his depression. He wrote for comedians such as Rodney Dangerfield, Johnny Carson, Joan Rivers, David Letterman, Gabe Kaplan, Elaine Boozler, Billy Crystal, Joe Piscopo, and Jenny Jones, then joined the writing staffs of “Saturday Night Live,” “The Tonight Show,” “Politically Incorrect” and sitcoms so bad that a prison record would look better on his resume. John recently wrote and directed “The Last Request” a feature film starring Danny Aiello and T.R. Knight, due in the theaters sometime before his next reincarnation. Though not a religious man, John hopes there’s an after life, he needs the time to find a real job. (Being an unemployed writer is in his genes, his ancient ancestor was the critic who gave the bible a bad review because he didn’t think the lead character was believable.) John believes that if we were all made in God’s image, in his case, it must have been shortly after He had a stroke.

# “MEMOIRS OF A GAGSTER”

## Part 2 — Late Night Comic

When I became a regular, my semi regular spot was anywhere from 2 to 4 AM where if you’re lucky you got a drunken insomniac that would pay attention between gulps, or a cocaine addict whose snorts could be mistaken for laughs. The shows ran much later, for some reason New Yorkers needed less sleep, or maybe it was because the streets were so unsafe that they waited for the muggers to go to bed before they left the club. Working that hellish time with me was my brother in bombing, Larry David.

My first Improv spot was the 3:30 AM. I remember standing in the back of the room, watching an audience member periodically laugh and doze off, telling the M.C. when you bring me on stage, bump into the drunk and wake him up. The M.C. called my name, and true to my DeBellis instincts, I immediately recognized it (when I talk to myself I usually have to be reintroduced) and then proceeded to the stage the wrong way, which meant climbing over a few chairs and scaring an extended family of dozing rodents (possibly at a reunion). My audience was one or two tables with four people in various degrees of consciousness, sobriety, and disinterest, and another loner who looked like the plug was just pulled out of his life support system as punishment for being rude and nasty while in a coma.

Now my strength had been my writing

(even though I had only been writing for a month and had no idea what a premise, segue, or topper was). My performance was my weakness, one, because I had never been on stage before, two, I had no acting training, and three, I stunk. I squeezed the mike tighter than a desperate man trying to end his impotence. My hand shook like I was on death row trying to use a fork to eat my last meal (which would upset my stomach because I ate too fast). Then to top it all off, I spoke my opening line with less emotion than a cadaver of a catatonic hit man, to an audience who by then had probably not only forgotten how to speak English, but because of my coffee breath, green shirt and pants thought they were at an AA meeting in Ireland. I went to an AA meeting in Ireland once – there was a two drink minimum. Sorry, I couldn’t resist. I think my opening joke was only slightly worse than that line, thus it deserved the silence it got.

My next joke evoked a response, a yawn. During the rest of my five or ten minute spot, I heard the screech of chair legs against the floor, the tinkle of ice in a dirty glass, and a word in English that might have sounded like “boring.” I finished my set and walked off the stage to six hands clapping like they were shot up with novacaine – and one latent clap that sounded more like the snap of a wet towel. I walked through the room dissatisfied and feeling

sorry for myself, wondering if I could find another profession where I could use suicidal thoughts as inspiration, but my comic comrades guided me to the bar making up all kinds of positive rationalizations that really displayed their creativity. They explained to me when a late night comic dies on stage he’s dying of natural causes. It was a horrible first set, but that was neutralized by the feeling of being one with my late night comic peers. I bombed night after night but they kept putting me up on stage, insensitive to the audience’s feelings, pocket books, and alcohol limitations and especially to the comics who had to follow me.

A few months later I was working a 3 AM crowd of three or four and I ad-libbed, “At least the attendance here is higher than my sperm count.” I got a big laugh, which enabled me to get a few more laughs before I bombed. But you have to crawl before you can crawl faster.

When being a stand-up comic was just a fantasy I used to pass the time away in church, the thing that I was afraid of most was the “hecklers.” Those evil people (most of them terrorists, or heaven forbid, neo-conservatives) who lurk in the audience, like a pack of inebriated *Jack The Rippers* just waiting to pounce on a young comic, tear his gas laden guts out, line by line by line, and then start a feeding frenzy of shouting, “You stink,” “next,” or worst of all, “Gong” that eventually ends with the dreaded *get off the stage light* and, heaven forbid — no cab fare!

Whenever Rodney Dangerfield came in to do a set he always made one of us stand

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in the back of the room and yell out. “What do you do for a living?” and he’d reply. “Get guys for your sister.” I hadn’t written any saver lines like that, so how was I going to deal with these beings from another profession, who got their jollies laughing at a comic who can’t get any laughs. As great as my fear, my need to live by my own wits (which in itself is kind of witless), prevented me from using any stock lines to escape the carnage. So how was I, the man whose comic believability at that time was the equivalent of a blow up doll faking an orgasm, going to handle hecklers. Simple manipulation, turn the audience against the heckler. I ignored the loud mouth, except for his breath which could have come from a burping corpse, let him spit out a few more gaseous comments, then I stopped looked around the room, then back at him, and said, “Sir, there are people trying to watch the show, your ruining it for them.” I wasn’t trying to be funny (which was consistent with my act). I just wanted to survive. The audience was dumber than I thought and took my side and I was able to bomb on my own.

It was a Wednesday night, and for some reason I had gotten on substantially earlier than my normal 3 AM slot at the Improv. The room was half full with people who were only half drunk, so I actually had half a chance to have a halfway decent set, if I remembered my lines better than what they were, and performed up to some futuristic capability. And I was actually doing well, getting laughs that weren’t forced out of embarrassment, when I heard this scratchy voice from the back of the room saying, “Why do you just talk about yourself?” How can anyone who’s ever heard the words *stand-up comic* think that comedians talking about themselves is even a tiny bit unusual, unless they stop for a few seconds to let you talk about them. Comics on their deathbeds say, “I should have spent more time taking about myself.”

I tried to ignore the ignoramus who made the ignorant comment, but the voice persisted, “So, how come you just talk about yourself?” Now, I was dumbfounded, which is about my intellectual peak. The voice continued, “Why don’t you talk about politics or the world, something besides yourself.” The last comment brought up thoughts of old girlfriends, but his voice was too masculine, or maybe not masculine enough. I didn’t know what to say, which is how I usually communicated with women, but this was probably a guy, an older man from what I could assess from

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his coarse voice.

I moved forward on stage, ducked under the spot lights, so I could see who my adversary was. Standing in the back of the room was a fellow comic! One who’d been on “The Tonight Show,” “The Ed Sullivan Show,” even on “The Merv Griffirin Show”! A comic who I thought was very funny... Professor Irwin Corey. His wild almost white cannibalistic hair, a thousand reptilian tongues sprung out in every direction, while he used his real slice and dice tongue to destroy any seeds of confidence that this young comic might possess sometime in the decades to come. I started to fight back saying clever things like, “Talking about myself is funny,” which wasn’t funny at all, or “A lot of comedians talk about themselves” worse yet, or “I don’t think I talk too much about myself,” which was scraping the bottom of a barrel marked desperation. And then out of nowhere, which was where I was stuck at the moment, this unintentional stroke of brilliance emerged from my quivering lips, “Rodney Dangerfield talks about himself.” The mere mention of Rodney, a fellow comic whose talent made him justifiably a household name — a mega talent provoked a noise not meant for sound, that abruptly transformed into words, shouted so loud I couldn’t hear my heart stop. “You got me!” And he was gone.

Rodney was not only hysterical. He was also very kind to young comics. Rodney would always ask me, “John do you need any money?” which I would lie and say, “No.” How do I take money (without anybody seeing it, including my conscience) from a man whose comedy has given me so much already! And continued to give even more and not just to me, but to every loser who’ll never be worth his own salt.

Rodney was a very shy man. If a fan walked up to him and said he looked good, he’d nervously pump his shoulders, twist his head while fingering his shirt collar and say, “Pressure, pressure.” So what Rodney did for my mother a few years later really touched my heart. (No he didn’t offer to have me

deported or neutered or both). She had gone to Vegas with her senior citizen girlfriends, probably to escape the rumors about my horrible stand-up sets and noticed that Rodney was playing at one of the hotels. She called him and without a hint of embarrassment, shame, or being under duress or even tortured, said she was my mother. He told her to bring her five girlfriends to the show and to order whatever they wanted and that he was paying for it.

He sat them at a table up front and then in the middle of his act did a few jokes I’d written for him. I think one off them might have been, “I have such bad luck, the other day, I went to the race track and when they shot off the opening gun, they killed my horse.” If just doing the jokes wasn’t enough, he stopped his set, and pointed out my mother and told the audience that her son, John DeBellis, had written those jokes for him. What a moment that must have been for my mother! Finally she could be proud of something besides my successful friends. Then after the show he made it even better when he sat at her table and had a lengthy conversation with the six female seniors (most of it probably revolved around bingo). Rodney deserved all the acclaim and admiration he received and even more because that night he made my mother the star.

I’d lost the audience but I’d gotten to Professor Irwin Corey with logic, a man who mixed, matched, crushed and then welded together the English language till he had the audience laughing hysterically at punch lines that made as much sense as a cubist painting of a cubist painting. I spent some time with him last week, he’s 92, his eyes flashed like the shine of a new microphone in the hand of a nervous comic, his mind still finding punch lines quick enough to get laughs, and with a topper of a smile that said, “I’m a long way from getting off the stage, kid.” I never spoke about that night, nor do I need to, he made me a fan all over again.

In most cases if you do anything long enough (except maybe breathing), you get better at it. For me it was just a matter of being on stage and even bombing enough times so that I built an inner toughness (okay, I deluded myself into thinking I was funnier than everyone in the world thought), which allowed me to relax when being unmercifully heckled. A few years later I worked a gig in Chicago where, (not only did my paycheck not bounce), I put a

heckler down so bad that he charged the stage, flinging chairs, and scattering tables (bad tips and all), and was carried off threatening to kill me. They wisely ended the show, and I wisely stayed in my room the whole weekend — and never relaxed except on stage. Years later I met that heckler and he asked me for a picture which he unfortunately gave to a hit man that turned out to be my uncle. Okay, I’m lying, but it would have made a nice ending to the story.

The funniest retort ever was from a former comic (the man who brought Woody Allen to his managers, Jack Rollins and Charlie Joffe, and of far lesser importance taught me more about comedy than anyone), Lenny Maxwell. He was working a club, I think it was in Texas, and someone from the back of the room called him a prick. Lightening fast Lenny replied, “Sir, someday you’re going to eat those words.”

In an unrelated story, that somehow relates, my friend Bobby “King” Kelton was working a roast for Mickey Mantle, when one of the great ad-libs of all time occurred. Mickey was getting back at all the guys who had roasted him and turned to Kyle Rote (all time great Giant receiver) and called him “a cock sucker.” To which Kyle immediately replied, “Just a lucky guess on your part.”

Of course Larry David had more than his share of hecklers, one time throwing gum at an audience member, in another instance calling five girls outside for a fight (Had it happened I would have bet my cab fare on the girls). There was a time when he (during one of his many desperate sexual periods) told a woman who was cruelly and relentlessly heckling him, “If you had bigger tits, I’d probably still go out with you.” My favorite of his took place at the Improv. A drunken heckler yelled to Larry, “Your mother screwed (not the exact phrase) my dog,” and Larry turned it around in a way only LD could, and replied, “And you’re dog probably didn’t like it either.”

I did have an ad-lib that became a standard. A waitress dropped a tray of glasses, and I quickly said, “Some Polish guy just dropped his contact lens.” Yes, I’m the guy who first ad-libbed the Polish contact lens joke. An impressive legacy, huh!

Unlike today, the club only booked the weekend shows. At the Improv they

booked the entire early show and the first five spots or so on the late show, while at Catch they slotted the entire weekend which was great because if you had a date you could bring her to watch you perform, or you at least had a built-in excuse for not having a date (because you were working). But if a heavy-weight act showed up, booked or not you got bumped!

I remember waiting for my first really good spot, nervously pacing in all directions like a confused pigeon praying to any God, or guru, or goat I could think of, asking that the M.C. bring me quickly while the audience is still playfully drunk. Every additional word he said added another poppy snorting heavy metal drummer to my heart beat and hatred to the M.C.’s past and future bloodlines, that is, until he finally started my introduction — an introduction that ended with “Please welcome, Robin Williams.” I turned around and looked back and there was Robin running out from under the light by the service bar, Chris (Albrecht) — pointing to him. Even though we were inside I hoped Robin would get hit by a car (not seriously), or tripped over a rat, or run into a drunken mobster, or spontaneously combust (but not seriously). None of that happened, instead, Chris Albrecht walked over to me and said “You’re up next.” I thought, “Oh, great Robin will do his usual hour and I’ll be left with a room that resembles the aftermath of a necrophilliac’s orgy.” My only hope was that I kept getting bumped till the show was over (or my career which ever came first). Being bumped only makes you angrier, which makes you work harder, and makes you get better, so you can be the best comic you can be... Bullshit. It’s so you can eventually walk into the club and bump anyone!

A few years later, on New Year’s Eve I followed Robin Williams, who did his patented hour, and this time leaving the room looking like a microscopic view of a PERFECT 10 page drizzled with spent sperm cells. I told the M.C. to bring me up while the audience was still applauding, before they had time to come down from the high to notice the *never-will-be-a-name* whining into the mike. I had a great set. The point being, that all the bombing, bumping and getting pounded into feeling that I was worse than my parents, my shrink, my future ex-wife, or my

guidance counselor ever predicted — only worked to make me stronger. I, yes me, a comic, with ears trained only to listen to myself, actually learned.

It was a Saturday night at the Improv and, due to a cancellation, I had just finished the first show and despite having a good set and not mumbling too many lines, I was sitting by myself at the bar, behind a circular booth, pretending to look at my notes, so I wouldn’t look so pathetically lonely, when I first met Ronnie Shakes. He walked towards me, bent over and timidly like he was the host of a nature show trying to approach a skittish species, which certainly applies to me and most comics (who are only one padded cell away from the amoeba). After doing the comedian’s equivalent of a stare down, seeing who could avoid the other’s eyes the longest, Ronnie broke the ice and told me he was thinking about being a stand-up comic and asked me for advice.

I hadn’t been doing stand-up that long, so asking advice from me made as much sense as thin sliced Sicilian pizza, or an eraser on chisel, or a silencer on a starter’s pistol, or giving mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to someone with a tracheotomy, or worse yet, a necrophilliac worrying about his girlfriend’s feelings (or doing so many stupid metaphors), but I didn’t tell Ronnie that I was a treasureless trove of information, because his naiveté and his questions made me feel like a real comic.

A month or two later, despite my advice, or there lack of, Ronnie became a regular at the Improv and then at Catch and, eventually to his discredit, one of my best friends. Ronnie and I had similar styles, both one-liner guys from the Rodney Dangerfield and Woody Allen school of comedy. And like them he was brilliant (unlike me who was expelled). One of the many lines of his that I loved was, and I’m paraphrasing, “I signed up for a course in reincarnation, it was very expensive, but I figured what the hell... you only live once.” He talked about how hot hell was and said, “It’s not the heat it’s the humidity.” Shaky did four great “Tonight Show” shots and on his last one Johnny asked him why he shaved his moustache and Shaky ad-libbed, “Tax purposes.” Shortly after that “Tonight Show,” Shaky died. On his tombstone it’s written, “It’s not the heat, it’s the humidity.”

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