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The Immortal Laugh Track: 20th Century Technology and Media Monoculture

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Departmental Honors Thesis

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

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Family Fumble

Michael sat at the kitchen table and waited for the lights. His favorite part of the show was right before it all began. Before everything was flooded with light, before the waves of laughter, before he had to remember what they told him to say—before it all began, he was sitting in the kitchen, wearing a suit, drinking coffee, and waiting for his son to open the door.

He sat up in his chair when it happened. For thirty seconds, the audience roared. The stage lights made Kevin Snyder's pale skin glow. He was wearing his jersey, implying he had just gotten back from football practice, but there wasn't a drop of sweat on his body. He was wearing a backpack, implying he had also been to school, but there wasn't any sign of tiredness on his face after such a long day. He was full of energy. Everyone loved him. Kevin Snyder was perfect, and for thirty minutes, he was Michael's son.

"Look what the cat dragged in," Michael said, after the audience finally stopped.

"What's up, pops?" Kevin said, sliding his backpack off his shoulders. "Coach Mason said I threw the longest touchdown pass in the history of our high school at practice tonight. I think I'm gonna go reward myself with some Nin-ten-do."

"Not so fast. Don't you have some homework to do?"

"Don't *you* have a toupee to put on? Your bald spot is making me barf, dude."

The audience erupted with laughter. Michael held back a smile. His son was so funny.

"I'm serious, Kevin. Your mother told me you had lots to do tonight."

"It's just three essays, 50 math problems, and a biology experiment. I think a star quarterback like myself can get that done in, hmm, 10 minutes?" Kevin winked at the audience.

"Kevin, really, how do you plan to get all that done in one night?"

“To be honest, pops, I’m not sure. It’s hard to finish all this schoolwork while I’m so busy with football,” Kevin said. “I wish there was some way to do homework faster. Like how Super Mario eats a mushroom and gets stronger!”

Michael got up from the kitchen table and walked over to Kevin, putting his arm around him.

“Well, Kev, Super Mario is just a video game,” he said. “Though sometimes I’d like to eat his fire flower so I could shoot fireballs at your mother when she complains about me drinking a beer after dinner!”

“Dad.”

“My point is that there’s no magic shortcut to doing your homework. You just have to buckle down and do it, son.”

“I’ll try, Dad. But *you* have to *buckle* your pants,” Kevin said, looking down. “They’re falling down, and I can see your plumber’s crack.”

The audience roared again, the lights dimmed, and the music played. Michael and Kevin went backstage.

Family Fumble was the third-most popular sitcom on ABC. It had been number one a few seasons before, but the kids were getting less cute and everyone had already heard all the catchphrases. Michael’s least favorite parts of *Family Fumble* were the commercial breaks. One moment, everything was perfect, and he was the proud father of a beloved, handsome young football star; the next, everything was dark, and he was Michael Mulligan.

In his dreams, he still had a real son. He still had Diane. His house had four walls. There was no audience looking into his kitchen. When he watched his son come home through the front door, he could say whatever he wanted to him, and he didn’t know what his son would say back.

After his son came back from school, he could take him out of the house. He could drive him to his favorite ice cream place. He could play the *Hunky Dory* cassette on the way and watch his son sing along in the rear view mirror. But if he dreamt about driving with his son, the car would always stop in the middle of the road, and the sun would disappear behind a giant cloud, and all the doors would open, and hundreds of people would appear all around them, laughing, pointing, climbing into the car, and he would reach into the backseat for his son but find that the boy sitting there was someone else.

Michael stopped Kevin outside his dressing room. It was dark backstage. Everything was fuzzy.

“You were so funny out there, Kevin,” he said, wrapping his arms around his back.

“What are you doing? There’s people around,” Eric pushed Michael off of him. “Are you high?”

“No.”

“I know you’re high because you called me Kevin, you fuck,” Eric said. “And you couldn’t keep a straight face for my jokes during that scene. You know this is why you aren’t getting parts anymore, right? You have no self-control.”

“Maybe I couldn’t keep a straight face during your jokes because you’re funny,” Michael said.

“Whatever.”

“You were hilarious on *SNL*. You’re a natural Conehead. I’m proud of you, Eric. You’re only 21 and you were funnier than anyone on there.”

“I don’t need you to be *proud* of me. Stop saying shit like that in here,” Eric said. “You need to get help. You can’t keep showing up like this.”

“Are you still coming over tonight?” Michael said.

Eric looked around.

“Yes,” he said. “Don’t talk to me anymore today unless it’s in the show.”

As much as he hated spending commercial breaks backstage, Michael wished all the producers and makeup artists and set designers rushing around behind the set had been there in his life when he lost it all. He wished that, during his 2 a.m. screaming matches with Diane in the living room, he could’ve stopped for a moment and walked into a place behind the house where there were people telling him what to do next. He wanted someone to give him a touch up, give him the right clothes to wear, and give him the right words to say. There was a combination of cliches waiting to be sorted into an end-of-episode speech, with piano playing in the background and a disarming joke at the end, that would magically make everyone happy again for the next episode. But in Michael and Diane’s house, there was no writers’ room behind the walls. No one gave Michael the magic speech. Michael and Diane would scream at each other until they couldn’t anymore, until the sun came up, and Michael would wake up on the couch to the sound of clattering dishes, and he would look at Diane in the kitchen, and he wouldn’t say anything because he knew that she wouldn’t say anything back. In the last few weeks before she left, during the silence and screaming and silence and screaming, Michael kept his eyes on the front door and waited for Kevin Snyder to come home to start the scene. He never did.

Michael wandered around backstage aimlessly as if he were just passing through. When *Family Fumble* first started, he would often get stopped by members of the crew or the cast who were overjoyed to meet Michael Mulligan in real life. He was in movies then. It wasn’t clear if he was going to be able to be on *Family Fumble* for too long, because he might have had to film

the *Space Conquest* sequel soon. Then everything happened, the movie offers stopped, and Michael started wandering around backstage without worrying about anyone talking to him.

No one talked to him less than Beth, his wife, Cynthia Snyder. When he kissed her under the stage lights every couple episodes, Michael looked at her and saw Diane writhing around under her skin trying to take off her Cynthia costume. Then, when the lights went out, it turned out it wasn't Diane under Cynthia's skin but Beth instead. When the lights went out, Cynthia's loving smile shifted into Beth's blank stare faster than the room turned dark.

Michael wandered around backstage until he found Beth arguing with a writer holding a script. When they saw him coming closer, they looked away.

"What's going on here?" he asked.

"She doesn't want to hug you in this next scene," the writer said, flipping his papers back and forth over and over to avoid eye contact.

"Why not?"

"She says it's unnecessary to the plot of the episode."

"I disagree," Michael said. "Beth, come on. We don't kiss anymore. Just like you requested. It's only a hug."

"You *smell*, Michael," Beth said, finally looking at him. "You reek. Your breath is *poison*. I don't want to be near you."

"I'm sorry, Beth, but it would really make sense for the scene if you hug him," the writer said. "Just for a second."

Michael gave his armpit a sniff.

"Good luck getting me on another season of this terrible fucking show," Beth said, storming away.

“Where’s Cynthia going?” Michael asked the writer.

“On set. You should probably join her,” the writer said. “You’re both on in a minute.”

Michael stood on set and tried to remember what the B-plot of this episode was while the audience cheered. The cast had moved from the fake kitchen to the fake backyard. He noticed that Kevin wasn’t in this scene. Michael stood next to Cynthia Snyder and watched as the Snyder twins pranced onstage.

Aaron and Amy Snyder were Kevin’s younger siblings, a cute little pair (though they were nearing puberty now) with an entrepreneurial spirit and a fair bit of sarcasm picked up from their older brother. They were fan favorites when the show started, but it seemed that people were starting to get tired of their predictable antics. It was funny in season one when two children were dreaming up complicated business ideas, but there were only so many businesses they could run before it started to get old. Still, the twins got a fair amount of applause upon entering the scene—much less than Kevin got, to Michael’s relief.

He remembered now. In this episode, Aaron and Amy notice that the neighbors’ kid started a lemonade stand, and, jealous of her success, they start their own. Their ruthless business tactics give them a monopoly on lemonade stands in the neighborhood.

“Did you see her face when she saw our awesome lemonade stand?” Aaron said. “She wanted to go cry to Mommy!”

“I would too if I had that poor excuse for a lemonade stand. No AC, no restrooms, no neon sign out front—what’s the point?” Amy said, giving the audience a big laugh.

“Are you two terrorizing the little girl next door?” Cynthia said. “She was so proud of that cardboard lemonade stand. Did you have to make her feel bad?”

“Uh, duh!” Aaron said.

“You could’ve gone over there and helped her instead of making your own sand,”

Michael said. “Stand, I mean. Stand.”

Beth’s smile faded for a second before quickly returning to her face.

“Whatever, hippie! It’s a free market,” Amy said.

“Don’t worry, Dad. Poor people like that little girl and her terrible stand will be OK when we’re rich,” Aaron said. “Ever heard of Reaganomics?”

“The lemonade will trickle down, bozo,” Amy added.

Michael didn’t like the twins as much as Kevin. He didn’t remember having twins. He had a son. He had a great son.

“That’s no way to treat other kids, you two,” Cynthia said. “I’m afraid we’ll have to confiscate all the money you made in your lemonade stand today.”

“*What?*” the twins replied in unison.

“Let this be a lesson, you two. Help others sometimes instead of always thinking of yourselves,” Michael said. His heart started beating faster because he knew what was coming next.

“It works out great for me and your dad,” Cynthia said. “Now we have some money for a fancy dinner date away from you kids.”

Cynthia stopped for a moment. The audience waited in silence. Michael looked at her and wondered if she was going to do it. The grass in their fake backyard was perfectly green. The fence was sparkly white. Years ago, Michael had someone who would touch him without needing to be convinced by a scriptwriter.

Eventually Cynthia hugged his side. For some reason, she smelled like *Family Fumble* and not Diane's shampoo. Michael felt her pull away after just a second and grabbed her waist. He wanted to check again. Something was wrong. She smelled like *Family Fumble*.

Cynthia dug her fingernails into his back and he let go. Michael looked at the audience to see if anyone noticed. He wanted to tear up the script and announce to them, if they had seen what Cynthia did, that everything was OK, that he didn't know what had gotten into his wife, that he had a happy family. He wanted Kevin to come out and prove it. They always loved Kevin.

“Look what the cat dragged in,” Michael said after the applause died down.

Yet again, Kevin Snyder was perfect and smiling. There wasn't any sign on his face that something had happened last night. Michael really was proud of Kevin, even if he didn't want him to be. His son was a great actor.

“What's up, pops?” Kevin said, sliding his backpack off his shoulders. “I'm pretty sure I aced that geometry test. Coach Mason is spending so much time telling me about my amazing football stats that it's starting to rub off in class!”

The audience laughed, but Michael did not. The joke didn't make any sense. Maybe it would've if it were worded better. He understood that the idea was that Kevin was looking at a lot of numbers during football practice, and that somehow made him do better on his geometry test, but how would simply hearing numbers over and over cause Kevin to be able to perform mathematical equations? Also, geometry was shapes, if he remembered correctly.

“*You* aced a math test? Pinch me! I must be dreaming.”

“It's true, Daddy-o,” he said. “If I didn't get an A on that test, I'll throw my Nintendo out the window.”

Daddy-o? Was that really in the script?

“That's a serious bet. Kev, how'd you get an A on a test you didn't study for at all?”

“Didn't study? What are you talking about?”

“I heard you playing that Legend of Zeldor game on your Nintendo all night for the last three nights!”

“First of all, that game has educational value. I have to do a math equation to find the perfect angle to swing my sword so I can kill the dragons!” Kevin said. “And second, Dad, it’s *Zelda*, not *Zeldor*.”

The writing was terrible this week. Was it the writers strike? Michael couldn’t get into the scene. Nintendo had to be paying them millions for how many times they had mentioned the company this season. But it didn’t matter what Michael thought. The audience laughed as hard they always did at Kevin’s remarks. Michael felt trapped. No matter what he thought, no matter how bad the lines coming out of Kevin’s mouth were, everything went on as usual—the audience laughed, the next line was read, the next character came onto the set, the music turned on, the lights turned off. While the *Family Fumble* cameras were rolling, Michael had a family and a beloved son, but the cameras would always turn off, and everything would always be the same. He wanted to talk to Kevin Snyder, really, without the “Daddy-o”s and the Nintendos and the dragging cats, but he never could. *Family Fumble* was a torture device, an experience so close to one of actually having a loving family, made even closer by the morphine rushing through his body, but never close enough.

Michael hadn’t realized it, but his train of thought had caused him to not read his next line in time. The studio was dead quiet. He didn’t know how long he’d kept them waiting. Kevin was still smiling at him, but his eyes had widened, and he was moving his head slightly forward over and over again. He could see Eric’s frustration growing behind Kevin’s eyes. Michael felt superhuman. He liked making everyone wait. Kevin, the audience, the producers, the cameramen—everyone was waiting on him. No matter how many lines he was fed by the writers, no matter how much Eric and Beth bullied him backstage, no matter how much the

producers warned him about his addiction, he was in control. He was the star. This was his family.

“I know it’s Zelda,” he finally said. “I misspoke before.”

The audience stayed quiet. That wasn’t his line. Kevin’s smile flickered.

“Yeah, right. Dad knows about video games? Next you’ll tell me the neighbor’s dog knows about politics.”

That wasn’t his line either. Michael smiled. Kevin was quick. He was having a real conversation with Kevin Snyder. Both he and his son had abandoned the script. Through a crack in the corner of their fake living room, he thought he saw a pack of producers rushing around backstage in a panic.

“Listen, Kevin, enough with the jokes,” Michael said, looking straight at the audience. “Why don’t you tell us how you really did so well on that geometry test?”

Kevin froze. The audience seemed to know that Michael wasn’t saying the right things. Michael loved it. He looked out at the crowd, and he could barely see their faces in the dark, and the morphine was making all of them bleed together, and they became a blurry monster with hundreds of eyes and mouths, and the monster was finally stumped after years of keeping him in a cage and laughing at him.

It seemed that the producers decided to send out Cynthia and the twins despite Michael not reading the line that would’ve been their cue. Michael watched as the characters around him played out their scene at a more rapid pace than usual, trying to ignore him as if he had been cut from the script for getting too many lines wrong.

“Kevin, what’s this on your hand?” Cynthia asked, going up to Kevin and inspecting his wrist. “What are all these numbers?”

“Oh, those? Just my new tattoos,” he said. “Do you like them?”

“Kevin, these are geometry equations! Your teacher said you were supposed to memorize these! You cheated on the test!”

“C’mon, how was I supposed to memorize all these numbers? The only numbers I need to know are ‘6’ and ‘5.’” Kevin turned around to show the audience the number 65 on the back of his jersey. They cheered and whistled. Everyone was back into it.

“Cheating is never the answer, Kevin. You should’ve studied instead of staying up all night playing that Zolda game!” Cynthia said.

“I think you should ground him,” Aaron said.

“Yeah. You should give us all of his allowance for the next two weeks, too,” Amy said. “We like money.”

“As *if*, you little brats,” Kevin said. “And, for the last time, you geezers, it’s *Zelda!*”

“How about we all shut the fuck up about *Zelda*?” Michael said, walking right in the middle of his TV family. There were scattered gasps across the audience. He saw mothers covering their childrens’ ears in the dark. Everything was still in place. The Snyder family was standing in their fake living room, all the furniture was shiny and untouched, and the cameras were rolling. But the set might as well have vanished. Michael had killed *Family Fumble*.

Eric didn’t have any witty line ready to go. Beth turned around and looked backstage for some kind of answer. The twins whispered something to each other.

“How about we all just relax,” Michael said. “Look at me, Kevin.”

Eric looked away, but Michael quickly grabbed him.

“Look at me.”

Eric was visibly furious. It was taking a lot of willpower for him to not hit Michael in the face, especially after what happened the night before. Michael stared into Eric's eyes and wished he would calm down. For a moment, he was talking to the real Kevin Snyder, despite the real Kevin Snyder not existing. There was too much Eric on Kevin's face. He wished Kevin would come back. He wished his son would come back.

Michael leaned in and kissed Eric on the mouth. The audience gasped much louder than before. Some people screamed. Everything happened faster than normal, as if the episode before that point had been a climb up a roller coaster and the kiss had been waiting at the top to send it rocketing downward. Eric tried to push Michael off of him, but he wouldn't let go. Beth screamed and struck Michael in the back of the head. Michael let go of Eric and looked back at Beth. Neither of his wives were behind her eyes. He punched her back.

Michael sat in the backseat looking out at Burbank. There might've been a song playing on the radio, but he wasn't listening. His agent was next to him trying to convince him that this was a good idea, but he wasn't listening. The window was down. All he could hear was the hissing wind and the occasional guitar note from nearby radios leaking into the car. He looked into the windows of the buildings outside and tried to make out what was going on inside each one. He saw distant silhouettes of secretaries on the phone, men in suits typing on keyboards, and bosses gathered around big, long tables. He wanted to be them.

"It's gonna be a softball interview," his agent said. "This could save your career, Michael."

"We'll be there in about 15 minutes," his driver said. "We're lucky. There's not much traffic right now."

Michael continued to stare out the window. They passed an apartment building. There was a couple sitting on their balcony, drinking coffee and watering their plants. He wanted to be them.

"Could you roll up your window, Michael? I'm trying to speak to you."

The clouds were thin and flat and covered most of the sky, but the sun was peeking out of a cloudless pocket and warming up the interior of the car. An airplane flew into one of the clouds and came out of the pocket basking in the sunlight. Michael flew a lot for his job. He used to hate it, but he started taking pills to calm him down, and that mostly took care of the issue. He wanted to be on the airplane, squished in the middle seat between a giant snoring man and a mother holding a crying baby. He wanted there to be turbulence. He wanted to be scared. He wanted to

go somewhere else where no one knew what he did or who he was. He followed the airplane closely until it flew behind another cloud.

Suddenly, the window closed. Michael's agent had asked the driver to roll it up.

"Michael. Can you talk to me?"

He stared at the glass for a few more seconds before slowly turning to face his agent. His useless agent. His talentless, useless agent, a short, chubby man wearing a big suit and giant glasses. Michael never wanted to talk to him, but he was one of the only people who was still on his side.

"I understand."

"You understand what?"

"That it's a softball interview."

"Yes, exactly. But you still have to put in some work," his agent said. "Johnny's gonna ask you easy questions, but you can't ignore them and stare off into space like you've been doing this whole car ride."

"I'm not going to ignore Johnny Carson."

"I trust you. But you understand we're in this situation because you messed up on TV, right? I don't want you to do it again."

"Doesn't sound like you trust me."

"I *do*, Michael. I do," his agent said. "I'm the only one who still does."

Michael listened from behind the curtain. The crowd was clapping and cheering louder than they ever did on *Family Fumble*. Or maybe it just seemed that way because he hadn't heard an audience clap in a while. Not since it happened. Eventually, the applause died down, as it

always did. Michael wished that, just once, it could go on for much longer. 15 minutes. Hours. Forever.

Then he heard Johnny speak. Michael couldn't quite make out what he was saying. His agent told him that Johnny was going to go on easy on him. He was going to introduce him as a great actor who had made a mistake and give him plenty of opportunity to apologize and make himself look good, even though he wasn't a great actor, and he didn't want to apologize, and he didn't look good, and he was wrong. Michael had been ignoring the interview until the moment he stepped behind the curtain and prepared himself to go out. Suddenly he wanted to do it all over again. He never told his agent how much he liked when the audience members gasped and covered their children's eyes. He never told his agent how much he would like to do it again, especially on a program like this. The late-night talk show was even more fake than the outlandish plots that happened every week on *Family Fumble*. People in the *Family Fumble* audience weren't lying to themselves. They knew what they were watching was just entertainment. They knew that Kevin Snyder had a life beyond the fake living room in which he fired off his sarcastic quips. People in the *Tonight Show* audience were lying to themselves. They truly believed, at least somewhat, that they were watching organic conversations between Johnny Carson and his guests, because the guests were introduced with the names on their birth certificates instead of the names of fictional characters, and they told stories that they claimed really happened to them in the same world that the audience members lived in instead of in a sitcom world with characters and scripts and jokes and perfection. Of course, Johnny already knew most of the words of the stories they were going to tell, and the guests knew most of the words that he was going to say to them, and when the show would cut to commercial and Johnny and the guest would whisper to each other with their mics off, they weren't really saying

anything. *The Tonight Show* was a fantasy program that pretended to depict reality. Johnny had already spoken extensively about the content of the interview to Michael's agent, who had already spoken extensively about the content of the interview to Michael on the car ride here. No matter how much he tried to drown his words out with the hiss of the wind leaking into the car from the rolled-down window, Michael was unable to completely ignore him. He needed this interview. He needed to pretend again. He needed to pretend that he was Michael Mulligan, and that everything was alright, because he was Michael Mulligan.

Then Johnny Carson said his name, and the curtains swung open in one quick motion, and Michael was exposed to the crowd and the lights once again. For a moment, he was happy. The audience clapped for him, but it wasn't nearly as enthusiastic as it had been on his previous late-night talk shows. The audience members had to clap, because that was their role, but they were hesitant about it. Michael wondered what he could do that would make them drop their roles entirely and stop clapping. He wondered what he could've done that day on set to make everyone in the crowd boo instead of clap. He was already widely hated by the press, and the headlines that tabloids were running about him were enough to scare anyone off from talking to him ever again, yet the audience still clapped for him. Maybe it was the allure of Johnny Carson that kept them clapping. Maybe if Johnny wanted to talk to somebody, they weren't so bad after all. But they were acting. They didn't have to clap. Michael wondered what he could've done. If he had hurt Cynthia Snyder more, would they be clapping? If he had killed her, would they still be clapping? He wanted them to drop it. He wanted them to clap and he didn't want them to clap. He loved being under the lights and having hundreds of eyes on him cheering his name, but he knew it wasn't real. He wanted the lights and the attention and he wanted it all to be real. He wanted them to clap for Michael, not for fake late-night talk show answers, not for Michael

Mulligan, not for Johnny Carson, not for anyone or anything else. He wanted them to watch as he took pills and stumbled around and he wanted them to love him for it.

The *Tonight Show* band played a rendition of the *Space Conquest* theme as Michael walked over to his seat by Johnny's desk. He understood why they didn't play the *Family Fumble* theme. The fact that they played music from one of his movies made him feel like his career was reignited. Before the incident, he would've certainly walked out to the *Family Fumble* theme song, but now, despite him being less popular than ever, he was walking out to the soundtrack of a film from when he was at his most popular. It was as if his outburst on set had freed him from his little sitcom role and catapulted him back into his status as a movie star. But he wasn't a movie star. He was never going to star in a movie ever again. The *Space Conquest* theme was played simply because it was a softball interview, and the *Tonight Show* wanted everyone to remember the young, handsome, mentally sound Michael Mulligan instead of the one that punched his wife on TV. It was condescending. It was as if he was an old man, wrinkled and limping up to his rocker while a crowd gathered around him laughing at how silly it was that he used to be handsome and loved and playing the oldies from back in his day. The outburst made Michael Mulligan into a broken old man. The outburst made it seem like *Space Conquest* was shot 50 years ago, because no one could believe that they had loved him only a few years ago. It had to have been longer ago.

Michael finally sat down in the chair next to Johnny's desk. The audience stopped their weak, quiet clapping immediately. Michael knew that the best applause takes a while to die down, because each audience member is truly enamored by what they are seeing. The applause that he got before sitting down was filler applause. Each audience member was just following what everyone else was doing, so when a couple of them stopped, everyone else followed

immediately after, happy to not have to clap for the strange man who had a drug problem and freaked out on the set of his show.

“How’re you doing, Michael? You look great,” Johnny said.

“Thank you,” Michael said, trying desperately to act natural despite how much the studio was shaking as a result of the pills he had taken in the bathroom before he got his makeup done. He didn’t want to do this. He needed to.

“Really, you look terrific. I thought there’d be a bruise or two on your fingers after that lesson you taught Mrs. Snyder, but your fists look perfect.”

The drummer of the band played the sting: ba-dum tsh. The audience laughed. Michael looked down at his hand. It was supposed to be a softball interview. It was supposed to be a softball interview. He looked back up at Johnny and thought about what to say.

“There’s definitely gonna be some bruises on your face if you bring that up again, Johnny,” he said, smiling. The audience was quiet. The band was quiet. Johnny stared at him blankly.

“I’m joking, of course,” Michael said.

“Oh,” Johnny said. “I couldn’t tell. Do you think Kevin sucked all the wit out of you with that kiss?”

The audience lit back up. The bassist played a different sting. Michael clenched his teeth. The lights wobbled. His vision in his left eye was going in and out and Johnny’s face was swirling around so that his lips were crawling up his cheeks and his eyes were drooping down to his chin. It was supposed to be a softball interview.

“I don’t know,” Michael said, outclassed. “Maybe.”

“On a serious note, Michael, it pained me to see you do that on set,” Johnny said, “We’ve had you on this show a few times, and I’ve always thought you were a good man. And you were so great in that *Space Conquest* movie.”

“Thank you.” Michael started to smile. This was more like it.

“Maybe you were too committed to your role, though. Did you think Mrs. Snyder was an evil Glorbon? I bet you wish you had your Super Blaster.”

Michael was visibly uncomfortable. He squirmed and squirmed in his seat. There was a mug of water in front of him with Johnny’s face and *The Tonight Show* logo in bright letters printed on it. He took a swig of the water while listening to the audience laugh. Michael decided he was going to punch his agent in the face as soon as this interview was over. He was going to punch him much harder than he had punched Beth. He wanted to leave. Everything was going wrong.

“No, I didn’t, Johnny,” Michael said, thinking fast. “No Glorbon is as ugly as her.”

The audience was quiet again. Someone booed, and then a couple other people booed.

“Oh, come on, Michael. Beth Baker is a beautiful woman. We just had her on here last week. She didn’t have great things to say about you, I’ll tell you that.”

“I’m kidding, Johnny,” Michael said. “Maybe Kevin really did suck out all my wit.”

Repeating Johnny’s jokes wasn’t helping him. The audience had yet to react positively to anything he had said. They had barely reacted at all. There was an extended lull, and then Johnny finally reached for a pile of blue cue cards sitting on his desk.

“So, Michael, have you spoken to the *Family Fumble* cast since that taping?” Johnny asked.

“No. Well, just Er—no.”

“Do you have anything you’d like to say to them if they’re listening?”

“Yes,” Michael said. He sat up in his seat. “I’d just like to apologize for all the harm I’ve caused them. I was only trying to give the audience something to remember at the live taping. I thought it could just be a memorable blooper, but it really hurt people and interrupted the show, so I apologize for that.”

“A blooper?” Johnny asked. “You punched a woman. You kissed a man. Is that your idea of a blooper? Sounds more like a mental breakdown to me.”

The audience started clapping. They were fully against Michael. It was supposed to be a softball interview. They played *Space Conquest*. They played *Space Conquest*. He was Michael Mulligan. The room shook and flickered and his left eye went out for three seconds and Johnny’s mouth was on top of his head.

“I know. When you’ve been an actor as long as I have, you want to take risks. I was getting tired of the same old routine on set. I wanted to try something new.”

“Well, based on the show’s ratings lately, the audience seems to agree with you,” Johnny said. “But I don’t think what they wanted was to watch Mr. Snyder plant a wet kiss on his son and beat up his wife.”

“It was a mistake. I’m sorry to everyone on set who was affected by it, especially Eric and Beth.”

Johnny stared at him blankly then grabbed another cue card.

“What have you learned from all of this, Michael?”

“I’ve learned to never use my desire to experiment with my acting get in the way of doing my job ever again,” Michael said. His agent had told him to stick with the angle that he was just trying to do something new. The taping itself was never shown to the general public.

Only the people in the audience that afternoon saw it happen. There were stories in magazines, and there were terrible tabloid headlines about his divorce and his drug use, but there were no airings of the event itself. Michael could change the way everyone thought about it with one talk show appearance. He could change the way everyone felt with the right series of words. It was acting. He was playing himself, but it was acting. His agent gave him the lines to say, and he hoped that they would make the audience feel a certain way.

But it wasn't working. No one was buying his story. No one was clapping or reacting to anything he was saying at all beyond a few scattered boos.

"Michael, I think you're a good man, as I said. But there's no way you can tell the people here tonight that what you did on that show was some sort of acting experiment. You hurt people in a violent outburst. You have to admit that to everyone."

The audience cheered again. Michael looked into Johnny's eyes. *The Tonight Show* had a lot of people working backstage, just like *Family Fumble*. There were producers, writers, and makeup artists running around to make sure everything was going to plan. But none of it really mattered. *The Tonight Show* was about Johnny Carson. Whatever Johnny Carson said, the audience believed. There was an outline for each interview, and Johnny generally knew what was going to be said, but there was no script with strict lines on paper. Johnny could say whatever he wanted, and he wasn't playing a character. He could change anyone's mind using his own words, not the words of some anonymous writer behind the scenes. The audience loved him. They loved Johnny Carson, the man, a real man with a real name and a real life. Michael looked into his eyes during the audience's applause. They were wild. They were hypnotizing. He was a god. His voice poured into millions of living rooms every night. His real voice. His real

thoughts. Everything he said was always right. He made regular people into celebrities. He made celebrities into regular people.

He made people. His eyes were wild. He was God.

Michael got out of the car and walked toward the entrance. He was wearing sunglasses and a baseball cap, but he wasn't sure anyone would want to talk to him even if they knew who he was.

There was a man sitting on the pavement a few feet away from the entrance asking people for change. He wore dirty clothes and had a dirty beard with spots of gray hairs and dust scattered up and down it. Michael watched him ask a family for money from afar as he approached the entrance, and he saw the father make a face as if what was being asked was really strange. It didn't seem so strange to Michael. He'd been asked for money a thousand times while walking around the city.

When Michael finally got to the entrance, the man turned toward him and smiled.

"Hey, man, do you have any quarters?" he said. "I just want to play some games at the arcade."

"You want to play some games at the arcade," Michael repeated.

"Yeah, man. You should see me play Pac-Man. You wouldn't believe it," he said. "800 thousand points is my high score. One of the best in the world."

Michael wasn't familiar with the Pac-Man scoring system, but that sounded pretty good. Still, Michael knew that the man didn't really just want to play games at the arcade. Or maybe he did.

"Tell you what," Michael said. "I'll give you some quarters, but I want to see you go in there and play Pac-Man."

"Oh, you think I'm lying?"

"You're telling me you can get 800 thousand points in Pac-Man. I wanna see it."

“Shit, alright. You can watch. Are you good at Pac-Man too?”

“Oh, yeah,” Michael said. “I got up to, uh, 740 thousand one time.”

“That’s pretty damn good.”

Michael gave the man his quarters and followed him into the bowling alley. The bright purple lights and the loud music playing were hard for Michael to adjust to at first. He hadn’t been here in a while. There were kids running around on both sides of him, yelling after missing a pin in one of the lanes, and crying while holding the hand of their mothers, who told them they couldn’t play any more games at the arcade because it was a school night. The arcade *was* about to close, but Michael wanted to go just to see how it was doing. He wanted to go and imagine that he was bringing his son with him, just like he always did on Thursday nights after his tee ball games.

The man who Michael gave the quarters to was headed straight for the arcade, so Michael followed him, as he said he would. Michael had given him three dollars in quarters, so he was sure the man was going to go straight to the bar and order a drink, or something, but he went right over to the Pac-Man machine and put in one of the quarters. The familiar jingle started playing, and the maze, the ghosts, and Pac-Man himself loaded onto the screen all at once. Suddenly, the man was playing.

And he kept playing for half an hour. Just when Michael thought the ghosts were going to catch him, he found a way to evade them and lived to see the next stage. The man stood at the machine guiding Pac-Man through the maze and toward more pellets for far longer than Michael had ever been able to do, and he seemed to be having a blast while doing it. Whenever he’d have a close encounter with a ghost, turning a corner just as he was about to be eaten, the man would laugh uproariously, drawing attention from all the kids in the arcade. Whenever he beat a stage,

he would jump up with excitement, even though he beat dozens of stages in the half an hour that he played the game. For the entire duration of the man's playthrough, Michael watched him in awe. He *was* good. And the score displayed in the top right of the screen was quickly reaching 800 thousand.

Eventually, the man ran out of extra lives, and Pac-Man vanished from the screen for the last time. His total score was 755 thousand.

"Aw, man," he said. "I always get so close. Still better than your high score, though."

Michael opened his mouth to reply, but stopped when the man put in another quarter right after he lost.

"You're gonna play again?" Michael said.

"Sure! I like to get a couple rounds in," he said, "whenever I have the chance."

It was then that Michael realized the man wasn't lying. He truly did just want to go into the arcade and play Pac-Man. That was all he wanted to do with the money. Michael thought for sure he would go buy a drink or just keep sitting outside after he handed him the money, but he went into the arcade and seemed completely committing to breaking his high score on Pac-Man with the money he got. Michael was amazed. He had always viewed panhandling as acting. The panhandler tells creative stories to people who know that the stories are probably made-up but choose to give in anyway if the panhandler is persistent or persuasive enough. Panhandling is just like acting. The actor tells stories to people who know that the stories are fake, but the actor can still make them feel grief or joy from the stories anyway if they persist enough.

But the man who Michael gave the quarters to wasn't acting. He was being genuine. He just wanted to play Pac-Man. As the man started playing again, Michael looked at him with a rare sense of respect.

“What’s your name?” Michael asked.

“Jimmy,” the man said. “How about yourself?”

“Daniel,” Michael said.

“Nice to meet you, Daniel. Thanks for the quarters.”

Jimmy didn’t do as well the second time, only reaching 480 thousand points, but it still took a considerable amount of time. He was about to put another quarter into the machine, but Michael stopped him by grabbing his wrist before the motion could be completed.

“Are you good at any of the other games in here?” he said.

“Well, Pac-Man’s my best one by far, but I’m alright at Centipede, I guess.”

Michael remembered Centipede well. It was his favorite. The trackball that its machine had was more fun to pilot than the control sticks and buttons of the other games. It was his son’s favorite, too. It was the always first one the two of them went to after they finished bowling and went over to the arcade.

“Let’s play Centipede.”

Michael and Jimmy walked over to the Centipede machine. It looked just as he had remembered it: the white trackball in the middle was surrounded by two sets of three buttons on either side, and artwork of the titular centipede was displayed at the top of the machine and on the side.

“Can I have one of those quarters back?” Michael said. “Just one. I’d like to play.”

“Sure,” Jimmy said, handing him a quarter.

Michael did not do well at Centipede. He never did. He wasn’t ever good at any of the arcade games. His best game was Galaga – maybe it reminded him of his time on the *Galaxy*

Conquest set – but he wasn't too good at that one, either. His son, on the other hand, was excellent at every one of the games he tried. It was like the next generation had something in their brains, some kind of new chemical that older generations didn't have, that made them good at video games. Michael always struggled to get a handle of the arcade machines' controls, and he'd die to a ghost or a space monster within a few seconds of playing because he couldn't figure out how to move properly. It was like he was a baby who barely knew how to walk but still couldn't help but fall down after taking a few steps. His son didn't have any difficulty with the controls. It was automatic to him, like breathing. His son was smart. There were so many things that he couldn't do that his son could do, and he was only a boy. He was only a boy.

“You're not very good at this one, huh?” Jimmy said, after Michael's spaceship exploded within a couple seconds of him loading in the quarter. “More of a Pac-Man guy?”

“I lied to you about the 740 thousand points,” Michael said. “I'm terrible at video games.”

“That's alright. I can teach you how to play 'em,” Jimmy said, walking up to the machine and lightly shoving Michael out of the way. “This one's fun. I like the trackball.”

Jimmy was doing great at Centipede, better than Michael's son had ever done. Michael had never seen the levels that Jimmy was getting to. Soon enough, it had been 20 minutes, and Jimmy was still going.

“How'd you get so good at these?” Michael said.

“Couple years ago I had a job,” he said, “if you can believe it. I worked at an arcade. That was the last job I ever had. Anyway, I played the machines on my lunch breaks.”

“Really?”

“Yup. I love these things. The next big thing is these home consoles, you know? Nintendo?”

Michael’s son never got to play a Nintendo. If they were around when he was around, Michael would’ve bought him a Nintendo and all the best games. The only son of Michael’s who got to play Nintendo was Kevin Snyder, but it wasn’t real. It was just some form of advertising. Every episode, it seemed, Kevin would go on and on about how he needed to exit the situation to go up to his room and play “Nin-ten-do.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Thing is, I don’t have a *home* to play these *home* consoles in,” Jimmy said, laughing loudly and stomping his foot. The kids in the arcade were already looking at him before he had made any noise because of how dirty he was, but now they were staring at him. Some of them had even gathered from a safe distance to watch him play Centipede, because, if Michael remembered the intro screen correctly, he was getting ready to beat the machine’s high score.

“Yeah.”

“Tell me,” Jimmy said, “you a celebrity? Walking around L.A. wearing a baseball cap and sunglasses. You’re a celebrity, aren’t you? Actor? Rock star?”

“What’s it matter to you?”

“Nothing, nothing. Don’t get angry at me. I’m just curious.”

“Whatever.”

“Celebrities give me the most money, actually. I think they’re dickheads – not necessarily you, man, but most of ‘em – but, yeah, they give me the most money. I guess they want to maintain their image.”

“I was just curious if you really were gonna come in here and play Pac-Man. You weren’t lying.”

“Yeah. Why would you think I’d lie to you?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m just messing with you. I know why you’d think that. I don’t blame you, man.”

While he was talking, Jimmy was soaring through the stages of Centipede, hitting every shot perfectly and moving the trackball around like it was an extension of his own body. The group of kids gathered around him were starting to close in, getting closer and closer to Jimmy and the arcade machine with each shot that Jimmy hit. Eventually, the kids weren’t watching from a safe distance anymore, starting to cram up in a circle around both Michael and Jimmy and not leaving either of them any room to breathe.

Finally, Jimmy lost, and all the kids let out brief sighs of disappointment before the questions started: they asked him how he did that, where he learned to play like that, who he was, and where he came from. He was a legend to them. Jimmy smiled and didn’t say much back to them. It was as if the homeless man sitting outside the arcade had turned into a Hollywood star caught by the paparazzi on his way into the limousine or cornered by interviewers on his walk down the red carpet. Jimmy looked at Michael and got the quarters out of his pocket, handing them out one by one to the kids in the front of the crowd. Then he slowly found a path through them, an escape route, and walked past the crowd, who were still gathered in the same formation and now looking in wonder at all the quarters that they had been given. Michael followed Jimmy through the escape path and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Why don’t I buy you dinner, Jimmy?”

“What?”

“You got a place you’d like to eat? I’ll buy you dinner.”

“Come on, man, don’t act like the kids over there. Why is everyone treating me like I’m royalty right now? I’m just good at arcade games.”

“Let me buy you dinner,” Michael said.

“Well, if you’re sure,” Jimmy said, “there *is* a diner I like not too far from this place.”

Michael would’ve bought Jimmy dinner anywhere, but he insisted on the two of them going to a sketchy diner on a road that Michael had always driven right past. They sat down at a booth and the waitress seemed to recognize Jimmy, telling him that she’d get his order ready right away and giving Michael a coffee. She was nice. Meeting Jimmy made Michael question some things. He wondered if it was possible that not everyone was acting, like he was. He felt like he was acting even the whole time he was hanging out with Jimmy in the arcade. He was acting like a secretive celebrity, hiding behind a hat and sunglasses, when, in reality, he was just Michael Mulligan. At first, he had even acted like he was good at Pac-Man. Everything he said was acting, but Jimmy seemed to be acting like nothing but himself. He was nice. He gave the kids money. Maybe the waitress was really nice, too. Maybe she wasn’t hiding some horrible secret or some hatred behind her kindness. Maybe.

“Thanks for the dinner, Mike,” Jimmy said. “Can I call you that?”

“I guess,” Michael said.

“Mike it is.”

“So you’re homeless.”

Jimmy chuckled. “Yeah.”

“How do you eat? When most homeless people ask me for money, they’re trying to buy something to eat or drink. What do you do about that? Why do you spend money on the arcade?”

“I don’t always sit outside the arcade. Just some days. I think I’m kind of addicted to Pac-Man. I know it’s not the wisest way to spend my money, because I barely get any, anyway, but I can’t stop. I think I could be one of the best in the world, though. That’s what keeps me going. You see all the kids gather around me when I played Centipede? I’m good, I think. Don’t know how I got so good. Usually the good ones are the kids.”

“Yeah, believe me, I know.”

“You got a kid?”

Michael folded the corners of his napkin. “Yeah.”

“Aw, that’s great, man. How old is he?”

Michael looked up and stared at Jimmy. Now that he was in a booth with him, he really saw just how dirty the man was. He looked like he hadn’t showered in weeks, because, of course, he hadn’t. His teeth were absolutely vile, with some important ones missing and some other important ones holding on for dear life in a rotted, yellow state. Jimmy was someone Michael would walk right by most days, but there was something about his desire to play games in the arcade that made him interesting, and resulted in Michael actually giving him money. Here he was sitting across the booth from a man most people would walk right by and try to ignore. A year ago he sat across the booth from powerful television executives and famous actors. Even that was a step down from years before that, when he sat across the booth from Diane and his son. He wasn’t upset about it, though. There was something about Jimmy.

Michael and Jimmy decided to go to a play that night. They bought suits from Goodwill that didn't fit and shoplifted deodorant from Walmart that didn't work, and they walked down the city streets all dressed up, and they felt good about themselves. It was a lovely city. Michael thought it might be Indianapolis, but it was possible that it wasn't. Jimmy thought it was St. Louis, but Michael reminded him that St. Louis has a giant arch that they definitely would have seen.

“What kinda arch?” Jimmy said.

“What do you mean? An arch. A big arch.”

“I don't know what that means.”

“You've never been to St. Louis? Haven't you seen it in a movie or something?”

“I've never been out of California till I met you,” Jimmy said.

Michael liked whatever city they were in now much more than Los Angeles. In Los Angeles, even after it happened, he always had to wear sunglasses and duck behind bushes to avoid paparazzi. There were no paparazzi in Maybe Indianapolis. Or maybe there were, and they just lost interest in Michael after all this time. It had been months. Maybe a year. Maybe more.

The line stretched across several blocks outside of the theater. Michael and Jimmy entered the line right behind a couple wearing much nicer clothes than them. The boyfriend was complaining about crime in the city. The girlfriend was nodding and looking away from him. Michael wanted to say something, because he didn't trust people with nice clothes and a superior attitude anymore, but he wasn't informed on the topic. He didn't even really know where they were. The boyfriend's tirade about crime was intermittently interrupted by him glancing back at Michael and Jimmy, looking them up and down, smelling them, squinting at them. He whispered

something to his girlfriend and she took a half-step forward. He thought maybe they recognized him from *Family Fumble*, but he didn't look much like Michael Mulligan anymore. His hair was scraggly and long, he had an unkempt beard, and he had a huge scar on his cheek from the incident with Baby Hand. Michael didn't think they recognized him; instead, he had been cast in the boyfriend's crime narrative against his will. No matter what he said, no matter who he used to be, he was scary and strange now, and that was his role. The boyfriend was a network executive who thought his story needed a new character, and he hired Michael to take on the part.

Jimmy fidgeted with his new tie. He looked even more out of place than Michael. He was visibly drunk, and the way he was playing with his tie made it look like he had never worn a tie before.

"I've never worn a tie before," Jimmy said.

"I can believe that," Michael said.

"Thanks for paying for our tickets, man. I know most of that *Familiar Fundle* money is gone, so it means a lot."

"Mm-hmm."

"I've really been wanting to get cultured lately," Jimmy said. "Wear a suit, go see some fine art, that kinda shit. Hey, we should go to a museum next."

"Maybe."

It was getting darker out. Cars were turning their headlights on and neon signs across the street were lighting up. The line was moving slowly, but Michael didn't care. He didn't care about the line or about Jimmy or museums or Maybe Indianapolis.

"How good of an actor were you?"

“I don’t know,” Michael said. “I don’t think I was very good.”

“Yeah, you didn’t seem very good in the episodes I saw,” Jimmy said. “Did you have to say ‘look what the cat dragged in’ every time?”

“Yeah.”

“Why would you do that? That’s not that good of a line.”

“I didn’t choose my lines. I was just reading off the script.”

“Oh. Guess it’s the script’s fault, then. Sorry,” Jimmy said. “But your acting still kinda stunk.”

“Yeah. I know.”

“I hope the actors in this play are better. I’ve never seen a play.”

Eventually the line moved all the way up to the entrance of the theater. Michael paid for their tickets with a dirty, folded-up \$100 bill from the pocket of his suit jacket. The ticket seller inspected it under the street lights. She flipped it over again and again and eventually decided to accept it.

Michael and Jimmy walked into the theater. It was giant. The sounds of doors opening and people murmuring bounced back and forth against the walls. The stage was huge and commanding and the curtains were the perfect shade of red. Michael was glad Jimmy was getting the full theater experience. Soon, he was going to leave Jimmy behind. He didn’t know exactly when, but soon, he was going to give Jimmy some booze, allow him to fall asleep on the sidewalk, and walk away for good. He had spent long enough traveling with him. Jimmy made him look worse, dingier and dirtier. Michael needed to give off a better impression and clean himself up if he was going to go through with the plan. Unfortunately, Jimmy didn’t fit into the plan.

“Those curtains are gonna open, huh?” Jimmy said, pointing at the stage and tripping over a man’s foot extending out of the aisle. As usual, he was drunkenly stumbling around, but it looked much more out of place in a nice theater than it did at a gas station or at a motel.

“They are,” Michael said. “I might get you some water. You need to sober up.”

“I’m not drunk,” Jimmy said, spitting on the ground. A woman gasped at the sight of his spit landing a couple inches away from her seat.

“You are. You’re making a scene. When you go to a theater, when you go to a place where people are performing, you are part of the performance whether you’re on the stage or not.”

“I’m not an actor.”

“You are. You have to clap when you’re supposed to. You have to stay quiet while the actors are playing their roles. You have to follow rules in a theater. You’re as much of an actor as the people on stage.”

“Whoa, hey. I didn’t sign up for that.”

“Yes you did,” Michael said. “Everyone did.”

It was hard for Michael to understand the plot of the play. He was distracted thinking about the plan. Every couple minutes, he tried to give the play his full attention for a few moments, but found each time that a new character or plot point had been introduced without his knowledge, so he continued to zone out and think about the plan. Jimmy, on the other hand, was having an incredible time. When the audience laughed, he laughed the hardest, spewing spit all over the shoulders of the man sitting in front of him. When there was a tender moment between two characters, Jimmy was fully invested, at one point getting out of his seat and sitting on the

floor so he could be closer to the stage. It was as if he took Michael's words too literally and was truly committing to his role as a devoted audience member. Ultimately, Jimmy was just drunk, but Michael found some amount of enjoyment in watching his exaggerated reactions to the play. He wasn't throwing up or running around in circles or trying to fight anyone, so Michael was satisfied.

During one of the fleeting moments in which Michael was paying attention to the play, he watched an actress give a monologue wearing a wedding dress and staring out into the audience. He knew the audience was going to break out into applause as soon as she finished. He was fairly sure her monologue was the last part of the play before the intermission, not because he was in any way invested in the play but because he had been to many plays before. Michael watched the actress summon fake tears and fall to the ground, reacting to some betrayal that had happened while he hadn't been watching, and felt nothing. He was already angry at the audience for clapping, and they hadn't even done it yet. With enough training and rehab, Michael knew he could give just as good of a monologue as the actress in the wedding dress. With Diane and his son, he could've been the star on stage talking out into the darkness, gliding on each sentence and anxiously anticipating the moment when the lines would stop and the audience would clap. He always wanted to be in a play. There weren't any commercial breaks. There weren't any cameras. But there weren't many plays about a family like his, and plays were the same every time, and they only lasted a couple weeks before they ended forever. *Family Fumble* could have gone on forever. He could've been a Snyder forever.

He had been lost in his thoughts and missed the end of the actress's monologue. He wasn't too upset about it. As predicted, the audience burst into applause, with many of the people in the crowd standing up, including Jimmy. Jimmy clapped and clapped and cheered and

whistled. He had never seen anything like it in his whole life. In a few days, Michael was going to get him drunk and leave him on the side of the street.

“Wasn’t that something?” Jimmy said once the applause died down and people started shuffling out of the theater for intermission.

“It really was,” Michael said.

“Do you think Maria’s gonna get back at her father for what he said to Nicholas?” Jimmy said. “Or do you think she’s gonna keep bottling up her feelings inside?”

Michael studied Jimmy’s face and tried to see past the cloud of alcohol coming out of his mouth every time he spoke and the layer of dirt crusting all over his face. He was legitimately enjoying the play. Michael was somewhat surprised. Jimmy was not a good man. He had a criminal record that he never went into detail about. He stole from grocery stores and gas stations every day. He hinted to Michael many times that, back when he had a home and a wife, he’d routinely hit her. Here he was, though, invisible to the actors on the stage, just another part of the dark sea of applause and laughter, enjoying it as much as anyone else. The theater was a powerful place. Michael thought nothing of Jimmy, but he was able to watch the full play and understand it and even genuinely enjoy it, which was far more than Michael, scowling through the play, judging the actors, thinking about other things, did.

“The latter,” he said.

“The what?” Jimmy said.

“Do you want anything from the concession stand?”

“I could go for some popcorn, yeah. Do they have that?”

“Probably.”

Michael and Jimmy left the theater and headed over to the concession stand. The popcorn cost a lot of money but Michael had some change left over and was able to cover it. The man at the concession stand handed the bucket of popcorn over to Michael, who handed it right over to Jimmy. It was a giant bucket of popcorn. Jimmy's facial expression upon receiving it would've been more suitable if he had been a miner finally striking gold. He dug his hand deep into the popcorn, grabbing a fistful and dumping out several kernels onto the ground in the process. Michael pulled him away from the concession stand and toward the corner of the room. He saw someone.

Standing in the opposite corner of the hall was John Beckwith. He wore a nice suit and was talking to several other older, balding men in nice suits.

"Who are you looking at?" Jimmy said between fistfuls of popcorn.

"That's the *Family Fumble* showrunner," Michael said. "He's the guy who fired me."

"Oh. Shit," Jimmy said. "Want some popcorn?"

"John Beckwith."

"That's his name? Hey, man, I wouldn't worry about him. I would've fired you too after you did what you did."

"Eat your popcorn."

"Anyone would've fired you for that, Mike."

"Eat your popcorn."

Michael watched John Beckwith closely. Years ago, they had been friends in the entertainment business. John wrote the show with Michael Mulligan in mind. He thought Michael's history of movie roles featuring him as a younger, handsome, sarcastic hero would make him a more interesting father to the show's sarcastic star, Kevin Snyder. Once, John took

him and Diane out to dinner, and they had a couple drinks at a nice restaurant, and Diane laughed a bit too hard at some of his jokes, and when Michael and Diane got home they fought about it until the sun came up. After Diane left, John became colder toward Michael. They stopped communicating after work. They never went out for dinner again. Michael swore John and Diane would get together because of that dinner, and he spent hours walking down the streets of Los Angeles in sunglasses and a baseball cap looking for them, but he never found them. He didn't know why John became cold toward him. Then he fired him.

“We're gonna figure out where John Beckwith is sitting and we're going to make sure we follow him outside of the theater.”

“Why?”

“I need a word with him.”

“Right. You two are Hollywood buddies. You'll have a lot to say to each other about acting and videography and shit like that.”

“Right.”

Michael paid even less attention to the second half of the play. He wasn't able to find where John Beckwith was sitting, because he vanished behind the other well-dressed men in his party and got out of Michael's sight. Michael just wanted to have a word with him after the show. Just a word.

It was harder to ignore the second half of the play, however, because the music was much louder and the actors were yelling all their lines and there were distractingly huge props behind used. Even Michael had to admit that some of the props were impressive. There was a prop car that moved across the stage with wires while some of the actors were sitting in it, singing a song

about marriage or betrayal or whatever it was all about. Sound effects played over the speakers when the car turned on and honked its horn at imaginary cars passing by. The actor in the driver's seat wasn't doing a great job portraying a driver, since he was wildly flipping the wheel back and forth, but Jimmy was still immersed in the action. There was a layer of popcorn on the floor below them. It was as if Jimmy had never operated a full bag of popcorn before, not understanding that, when he stuck his hand deep into the bag, popcorn would come out on top as a reaction.

Michael tried to ignore Jimmy and the play and think about John Buckwith instead. He was informed that he was being fired from the show while sitting across from John in his office. There were three paintings of what looked like 1800s American presidents on his office walls along with several different maps of the world. John Buckwith was a serious man. He made jokes around women, but he was a serious man around men. John Buckwith stared into Michael's eyes and fired him without remorse. When it happened, all Michael wanted was for someone backstage to understand the brilliance of what he did. He thought maybe it could even be worked into the show. *Family Fumble* had gone on for so many seasons, and all the episodes had identical formats. The audience was getting bored, and Michael's idea to break character and tear up the script could've been the ratings boost the show needed. Yet he knew the audience was terrified by what he did and the studio executives were not happy about it whatsoever.

The play became so overpowering and loud that he was forced to pay attention to it. The final few scenes involved a battle between two armies whose affiliations were unknown to Michael. He didn't understand how the play had gone from what was seemingly a romance plot to what was seemingly a war plot, but he didn't understand anything, so he accepted it. There were dozens of actors on screen simulating a battle. Michael had acted on films where there were

battles, but he had never done it in front of a live studio audience. There wasn't much action going on in *Family Fumble*. Michael wondered how he would've done if he had to act out battles with Diane and fights on the street with Jimmy instead of a happy family. Maybe he would've been good at it. He only ever simulated a normal family life, but part of him wanted to simulate the rest of his life, what had taken place since his real family had fallen apart. He wanted to stand on a set with dirty furniture and beer bottles scattered all around the floor and dirty dishes piling up in the sink. He wanted to act out fights with Diane instead of happy moments with Cynthia. The pain of his family falling apart was real. The Snyder family was not, no matter how much he still wanted it to be.

The war happening on stage was starting to drag. The gunfire sound effects blasting over the theater speakers had played too many times for them to still be effective. Jimmy was still into it, ducking down and covering his head with his hands as if he were a part of the war, but Michael was losing interest. His mind wandered back to John Buckwith. He wondered what John Buckwith thought of the scene. He wondered if he could convince John to let him back on the show. Just for a guest appearance. Just a cameo. Just a line or two. Michael missed the applause and the laughter, and he missed seeing Kevin Snyder walk into the door. Surely the fans wouldn't mind if Kevin's old man came back for just one episode. Surely John Buckwith would agree with him, even if it took some pushing.

The play finally ended, and everyone in the theater clapped one last time. Jimmy stood and jumped up and down, screaming far louder than anyone else in the crowd. Michael gave the play a courtesy clap, because he was in the crowd, and he was supposed to clap, and everyone, even if they aren't on stage, has a role to play. The audience bowed, and Jimmy kept clapping.

Michael had never seen him happier. In a few days, he was going to get him drunk and leave him on the side of the street.

“Thanks for the ticket, man.” Jimmy said, turning to Michael. “This was something else.”

“Sure,” Michael said. “Let’s go find John Buckwith now.”

“Can we go see another play first?”

Michael pushed Jimmy out of the theater before the bowing ended so they could be outside waiting when John and everyone else in the audience exited the theater. It was much colder outside than it had been while they were waiting in line. There were many more lights.

“St. Louis is a beautiful town,” Jimmy said.

“We’re not in St. Louis, remember?” Michael said. “No arch.”

“You still haven’t explained to me what that means.”

People started pouring out of the theater soon enough. Michael scanned their faces looking for the one he would recognize.

“You’re not gonna be able to find him,” Jimmy said.

“Yes I am.”

“He’s just some bald guy in a suit. That fits the description of just about everybody here.”

“I know his face.”

“I can’t tell any of these people apart,” Jimmy said. “We should go find the best bar in St. Louis and drink instead of talking to Jim Duckworth or whatever.”

While Jimmy drunkenly rambled on, Michael saw John Buckwith exit the building with his group. His face kept getting momentarily swept away in the sea of the crowd, but Michael got enough glimpses to know for sure that it was his old showrunner.

“I found him.”

“No way.”

“Let’s go talk to him.”

“What am I gonna say to him? I’m not a Hollywood dude.” Jimmy said. “I guess I could talk to him about the play.”

Michael and Jimmy walked up to John Buckwith and his group and stood in front of them, preventing them from moving forward on the sidewalk. They all looked at the duo with a combination of fear and amusement. They were all serious and distinguished and they didn’t have time for whatever it was Michael and Jimmy wanted.

“Can I help you?” one of them, not John Buckwith, said.

“I’d like to talk to one of you,” Michael said.

“Which one?”

“I’d like to talk to one of you and ask you some questions.”

“What?”

“Why did you have to fire me? Why couldn’t you have trusted me with the complexities of the role? Why couldn’t you have seen what I did as groundbreaking and tell all the producers and writers and cast members that they were wrong and that I should stay on even if they feel ‘uncomfortable’ around me? Why can’t I come back on just for one episode? Why can’t I come back on just for one scene? Why did you take everything away from me?”

The men in suits stared at Michael blankly for a few seconds after he stopped talking. Then one of them said, “You took everything away from yourself,” and the group walked away.

“And one more question, guys,” Jimmy said, turning around to yell back at them. “What did you think of Maria’s character transformation from helpless damsel to fearless warrior?”

The men walked into the windy night, disappearing under the fourth street lamp on the sidewalk. None of them were John Buckwith. Michael knew it and Jimmy knew it too.

Michael and Jimmy sat at a diner once again. Jimmy was still shaking with excitement from the play. He ordered a lot of food and scarfed it down impressively fast. Michael didn't have an appetite. He slowly drank a cup of coffee and looked around at all the other patrons of the diner, watching their lips move as they talked to one another, studying their body language, seeing the light enter and exit their eyes as they thought of something funny to say or felt passionately about something someone across the booth said. He wondered how he got to be the way he was. He wondered when it happened.

“What was your favorite scene of the play, Mike?” Jimmy asked, shoving a bite of waffles and a bite of mac and cheese into his mouth simultaneously.

“I don't know.”

“You gotta have a favorite scene,” Jimmy said. “Mine is when Maria realized what Isaac and Lucas were plotting before the battle and finally understood her role in the resistance.”

“To be honest, Jimmy, I didn't pay much attention.”

“What? How could you have not paid attention? That was the greatest few hours of my life, man.”

“Because I should be up there,” Michael said. “And I should've been more articulate when I talked to John Buckwith. And I should've stopped him before he walked away.”

“You gotta get over all that,” Jimmy said. “You're not an actor anymore. You're just Mike. And I'm starting to think this Buckword guy isn't even real.”

“He is. He fired me.”

“It’s all in the past now, Mike.”

“I never told you you could call me that.”

“What’s got you all fired up tonight? That play was amazing. Cheer up, man,” Jimmy said, slicing off a piece of his waffle and putting it on a napkin in front of Michael. “Have a bite.”

Jimmy meant well. Michael knew that. But Michael deserved to live in a house with a family that loved him and star in a TV house with a family that seemed to love him. So, despite Jimmy’s waffle offering, in a few days, Michael was going to get him drunk and leave him on the side of the street.

Michael woke up in his car in the middle of the day. He was in a Stop & Shop parking lot. He propped himself up and got a better look at his surroundings. Deep blue water flooded the windshield. It was the ocean. This was a beach town.

He staggered into the Stop & Shop to buy some sunscreen and a towel and maybe a book. He was going to make a day of it. The sound of the waves and distant stereos calmed him down. The beach was predictable. There were always children building sandcastles, teenagers playing volleyball, adults reading books—there were roles that everyone agreed to play every time they stepped onto the sand. The waves crashing linearly onto the shore were their studio audience, reminding them where they were at all times, forcing them to stay in character. The beach was predictable.

Michael stumbled through the Stop & Shop aisles looking desperately for sunscreen. The products on the shelves had unrecognizable names. If he looked at something long enough, he could almost tell what it was, but everything was mostly just boxes, bottles, and bags. He wasn't sure if he could read anymore. His foot hurt and he didn't know why. All he could remember of the last few days was a series of headlights passing him on the left. There was no daytime in his recent memory. Just endless nights on the interstate, endless headlights, an endless pounding in his head that wouldn't go away unless he banged it on the steering wheel and scared all the thoughts and feelings of the last decade away like cockroaches scattering in the light. He banged and banged his head on the steering wheel until his brain cooperated and showed him what he wanted to see. His son going down the slide. Diane putting creamer in her coffee in a diner booth. Just for a few seconds. The cockroaches got used to the light quickly.

Eventually, Michael found what was probably sunscreen in an aisle with a big cardboard cut-out of a smiling sun. There was a young couple at the other end of the aisle wearing bathing suits and touching each other. “Kokomo” was playing through a quiet, tinny speaker overhead. Michael wished there was a role for him to play.

When he left the store, Michael realized that he had forgotten to get a towel and a book, but he shook it off and continued toward the beach.

It wasn't very crowded when he got there. Maybe it was a holiday. Maybe it was a school day. He didn't know what day it was or what time it was. He rubbed the sunscreen on his arms and legs and watched the waves crash onto the shore. The water was beautiful and never-ending. He must've been looking at the ocean.

He never took Diane and his son to the beach. The only way he was able to tolerate reality at this point in his journey was by comparing it to memories he had from back then. When he stopped in a city and ate in a diner, he could imagine Diane and his son sitting across from him in the booth; when he slammed pills down his throat speeding down the highway night after night, he couldn't imagine them there, so he had to slam his head on the steering wheel to summon them.

But then, out of the corner of his eye, he saw her. She was sitting on a beach towel reading a big textbook, probably one of the ones on her students' syllabus that semester. She was wearing sunglasses, so he couldn't be sure, but he was sure. Diane had a pair that looked just like them.

Michael watched Diane from across the beach without worrying about seeming rude for staring. Her hair was different. It was shorter and a bit curlier. She was much tanner. She was in better shape. Maybe he was wrong. But who else would come to the beach to read a textbook?

Diane always read everything on her students' syllabus months in advance, even textbooks with a thousand pages, hundreds of which she wasn't even going to assign. When it started, when they'd first bought the house, she would read the textbooks on the living room couch, and he would distract her by flipping through the TV or asking her stupid questions, and she wouldn't care. When it got worse, when they didn't talk to each other in the morning, she started reading the textbooks behind a locked bedroom door.

Diane was distracted by something Michael couldn't see. A beach umbrella down the shore was blocking it. Every minute or so, Diane looked up from her textbook and smiled at it, sometimes even waving or calling out to it. Michael wanted to know what it was, but he was stuck to the sand, paralyzed, covered from head to toe in sunscreen that he had forgotten to rub in.

Eventually it came walking out from the cover of the beach umbrella. It was a man, younger than he was, taller, with more hair, holding a little boy's hand. The boy was holding a bucket. They had been making a sandcastle behind the beach umbrella, and Diane was cheering them on from a few yards away. Michael stood in the sand and listened to the seagulls and felt the sunscreen drip down his back. He wanted to see the sandcastle.

The only thing that made sense to Michael to do for the rest of the day was follow Diane and the man and the boy around. He watched them on the beach for several hours before following them onto the pier when the sun started to go down. They were a happy family. The man bought the boy a snow cone after they all shared a large pizza at a quaint restaurant that no one else was visiting that day. If Michael listened close enough, he could hear them tell jokes to each other. They were inside jokes that he wouldn't understand even if he were standing right next to them and able to perfectly hear them, but he knew they were funny anyway. Michael

followed Diane and her new family around the pier all night, until it was dark and they went back to the parking lot and loaded into a Volvo and started to drive away.

Before the Volvo could leave the parking lot, it had to stop. Michael was blocking the exit. He walked up to the passenger side window, where Diane was sitting, sunglasses on top of her head and fear all over her face, and knocked on it rapidly.

“Diane,” he said. “Roll the window down.”

The man said something to Diane, but it was too muffled for him to hear it.

“Roll the window down, Diane.” He looked into the backseat. Their son was holding a Game Boy. He was too young to know what was going on. He looked nothing like his son. He was nothing.

While he was looking in the backseat, the car accelerated and sped off. Michael ran after it as best he could on his bad foot. He was slow.

“Roll the window down, Diane!” he yelled. The car was gone. The woman in the passenger seat was not Diane. She looked nothing like her.

“Check it out!” Michael said, taking the blindfold off of Eric’s face.

There were 126 television sets in the storage unit. They were all over the walls, and Michael had somehow rigged some of them up to the ceiling. The floor was the only place that didn’t have any TVs, but once Michael turned the sound on, there was no escaping from what they were playing.

Eric looked around. He was shivering. It was cold, and he was scared. He thought he’d never see Michael again, and now he was tied to a chair in the middle of a storage unit, and Michael was standing in front of him, smiling after taking off the blindfold as if this was something they had both been looking forward to, as if he had bought him a new car or something.

“Where are we?” Eric said. He wanted to tell Michael to untie him—he wanted to say so many things—but he knew there was no point. He knew how Michael’s eyes looked when he was high. They were sunken in and empty, even though they were probably more active than usual, working hard to show him not only his actual surroundings but the hallucinated cracks in the walls and waves in the ceiling that were on top of them.

“We’re in, uh... I don’t know, actually,” Michael said. “I haven’t thought of a name for it.”

“You know, I can hardly recognize you,” Eric said. “You look like you crawled out of a graveyard.”

“Wanna help me come up with a name for this place?”

“No.”

“Well, that’s OK. It doesn’t need a name,” Michael said. “This is where I’ve been living for the past few months. As you can see, I’ve gotten into collecting TVs.”

“Do you have any idea what’s really going on? Do you have any idea who I am? Who you are?”

“They’re not just for cosmetic purposes, though. It takes a whole lot of power to run all these things, but they can all turn on at once, and it’s quite a spectacle when they do.”

“You *kidnapped* me,” Eric said. “People are already going to be looking for me. You are going to go to jail.”

“Until then,” Michael said, “we’re going to have some fun here.”

Michael walked over to the replica *Tonight Show* set and opened the desk drawer. Then, with a precision that told Eric that he had done this many times before, he took out dozens of remotes one-by-one and set them on the table in an orderly fashion. Once he was done getting out the remotes, he started another routine: he looked down at the desk and tapped the power button at the top right corner of every remote in quick succession like a factory worker at a conveyer belt. Slowly, the TVs lining the walls and ceiling of the storage unit started to turn on, and they were all playing what looked like the same episode of *Family Fumble*. Eric didn’t know which one it was, but every incarnation of Kevin Snyder that he saw on the screen was wearing the same outfit, and all the Kevins were moving their mouths the same way and pointing at the same wall on the high school set a couple seconds apart. There was something unsettling about seeing so many instances of his face all around him, and knowing that Michael had been living here, setting up all the TVs to watch the display and surround himself with Kevin Snyder and Kevin Snyder and Kevin Snyder.

Eric remembered the time Michael took him into his bedroom and showed him a bunch of TVs before, and how loud it had been, and how he had ran out of the house covering his ears and vowed to never see Michael again. Luckily, for now, the TVs in the storage space were muted, so the waves of sound were not an issue. Eric could only imagine how loud it would be if Michael unmuted all of them; there were probably 10 times as many TVs in the storage space as there had been in the bedroom.

“What’s the point of all this?”

“Well, at first, it just made me feel good,” Michael said. “But then I got an idea.”

“What?”

“You and me are going to do some acting, just like the good old days.”

Michael was still standing at the *Tonight Show* desk. He opened up another drawer and pulled out a giant stack of papers that were hastily stapled together, then carried them over to Eric and set them down in his lap.

“What are these?”

“Scripts,” Michael said. “I couldn’t find the originals anywhere, so I had to transcribe them all myself.”

“You’re kidding,” Eric said.

“No, I’m not. That’s every episode in the show’s run right there. I got pretty good at typing. My friend Jimmy stole me a typewriter and a little typing manual. The home row. They never taught me that in school.”

Eric stared at the stack of papers on his lap. His hands were tied, but he was able to kick his feet forward enough to send the stack flying onto the ground. There were a lot of papers

being connected with one flimsy staple, so the action made the staple loosen and sent all the papers flying all over the floor.

“Aw, come on! Why’d you do that?” Michael said, bending down and gathering up all the papers.

“Michael, you have to try to listen to me,” Eric said. “I am a real person. I am not your son. You have kidnapped me and taken me to a fucking creepy warehouse. You are going to be put in jail for this.”

“I know you’re a real person,” Michael said. “and I know all of that’s gonna happen. It’s OK, Eric. Let me have some fun.”

Eric was a bit surprised that Michael referred to him by his real name and not Kevin, like he usually did. It made this all seem more real, which was even more unsettling. Michael was doing this. Not Michael Mulligan, and not Daniel Snyder. Michael really wanted to do this.

“Alright,” Michael said, standing up after gathering all the pages. “I know these scripts front and back, so I think I got them all in order. We’re gonna start from the first episode and go through them all.”

“*What?*” Eric said. “Are you gonna keep me tied up that whole time? You know how long that would take, right?”

“It’ll fly by. And as for you being tied up the whole time, I’ve given that dilemma a lot of thought. I know that if I untied you, you’d leave, which would not be ideal, but if I keep you tied up, you won’t be able to fully follow the stage directions. I was going to make you promise to not leave if I untied you, but I doubt you’d stick to that. I think we’re going to start out with you tied up, and if I’m impressed by your performance, I’ll untie you.”

“We’re not acting out all of these episodes.”

“We are, actually. I’ve already watched them all so many times. I want to act them out again. It’ll be fun,” Michael said. “It’ll bring back memories. There’s some lines in here that’ll remind us of a funny blooper or a funny moment during a table read. Think about how much *Family Fumble* fans would want to see this footage! I should’ve got a camera to record us doing it.”

“There are no *Family Fumble* fans, Michael. The show is over,” Eric said. “You are a crazy man who lives in a warehouse. No one wants to see you. No one likes you.”

“Oh, come on, you’re not even a little happy to see me after all this time?” Michael said.

“I want you to untie me and let me go,” Eric said. “I know you’re high. I know you’re probably not listening to anything I’m saying. Please. Let me go.”

“How are you going to hold the script if you’re all tied up, though?” Michael said, looking up and down at all of the TVs. “How could I not have thought of that? Whatever. I’ll turn the pages for you and set the script back on your lap each time. Maybe you’ll find that you’ll remember the episode without having to look back at the script. The first episode is pretty iconic, after all.”

“Michael.”

“All the TVs have a tape of season one loaded up. I’m not sure what episode they’re on right now, so I’ll need to go back over to the remotes and rewind to the beginning.”

“You’re going to play the episodes while we’re acting them out?”

“Of course.”

“Is the sound going to be on?”

“Of course! We need the audience laughter. Otherwise there would be odd silent gaps in between each line. The writers for sitcoms write lines with laughter in mind. Don’t you know anything about TV, Eric? Have you forgotten now that you’re a big movie star?”

Eric had never seen Michael behave like this. He was acting. He was trying to be funny. He was trying to say the perfect line at every moment. It was as if there were cameras on him. The most unsettling thing was how excited he seemed. Eric knew that Michael was a sad man. He had lost everything early in *Family Fumble*’s run, and he would often come to work and not say anything except what was written on the pages of that week’s script. The only times he would say anything were when he was certainly high, so they were nonsense words or words that hurt other cast members or crossed lines. But even when he would show up to work high, he was never so excited. Michael was acting like Daniel Snyder on *Family Fumble* if he had just gotten a promotion, or if he was in the stands at one of his son’s football games cheering. He was joyful. He had clearly been waiting a long time to do this, and it seemed like everything he was saying had been carefully rehearsed. Eric would not have been surprised if some of the pages that had fallen all over the floor contained lines for that moment right then in the storage unit. Michael was acting, and he refused to break character. Michael was acting, and Eric didn’t have his own lines to respond to Michael’s with. He didn’t know exactly what character he was talking to.

“Try not to get lost in the sound when it comes on. It’s gonna be pretty loud, but you still need to say your lines, even if you can’t hear your own voice,” Michael said. “It’s important. Don’t try to get away with not saying them just because I might not be able to hear them.”

“Don’t turn on the sound, Michael,” Eric said. “Please don’t.”

“You gotta have the sound, Kev.”

Michael walked over to his desk and stood in front of the TV remotes again, looking proudly at the rows of them on the table and then up at all the TVs that they controlled and then back down at the remotes and then back up at the TVs over and over and over. His face gave the impression that he thought he had done something impressive, as if people had been waiting for the day that a man would hook up 126 TVs all playing *Family Fumble* at the same time and Michael had finally cracked the code and done it.

Michael stopped looking up and down and finally focused on the remotes. He hesitated, as if he was considering Eric's pleas to not turn on the volume, but he started his new routine, again a factory worker in front of a conveyer belt, anyway.

Michael intentionally waited a half second between each new unmute button so that the effect of all of them turning on would be exaggerated. At first, it wasn't so bad. In the distance, a TV on the ceiling was quietly playing out dialogue between Kevin and the twins. It was inaudible, but they were arguing about something trivial, and the audience was eating it up. Then a couple more TVs turned on their audio, and the subject of their argument became clear. Kevin and the twins were arguing about their allowances, and the twins were arguing that, despite being younger and having less responsibilities, they should get paid more because of their entrepreneurial spirit. Despite their age (which was quite young in this episode, since it belonged to the first season), they used big businessy words, and some of the phrases they used wouldn't have been out of place if they had been said on Wall Street. Every time the twins threw out another business term, the audience laughed even harder than they had at the last one. Or maybe they were just getting louder. It was becoming hard to understand the argument. At first, it had been hard to understand because it was too quiet, but now it was hard to understand because it was too loud, and there were already a dozen arguments playing over one another. The words

were starting to jumble together, and the audience was starting to laugh at inappropriate times. 15 Kevin Snyders would be trying to make a point, and the audience would suddenly laugh at something the twins said in response before the twins ever spoke and while all the Kevins were still finishing their argument. Then 15 more Kevins would interrupt the twins while they were trying to give their own rebuttal, and suddenly it wasn't clear if the audience was laughing at something the twins said or something Kevin said.

Before long, the sound of all the TVs had evolved into the loudest thing Eric had ever heard. There was no longer any telling what the audience was laughing at, or who was talking to who; all the sound was layered on top of itself, playing all at once, and though there were distinct visuals on the screen, the sheer power of the sound was making their images irrelevant. As more and more TVs turned on, Eric couldn't even hear the laugh track, his dialogue, or the twins' dialogue separately at all anymore. It was all one big noise, a sound like nothing he had ever heard before, the sounds of human joy and expression turned into an alien torture device. He tried to move his hands to his ears to cover them up, but they were tightly tied.

"This is what it sounds like every night!" Michael yelled to Eric from the desk. "Millions of people tune into CBS and watch their favorite show every night. Think about how loud that would be!"

Eric couldn't hear him. He watched Michael move his mouth, but no words seemed to be coming out of his mouth. It was as if he was making the horrible sound rather than the speakers of the TVs.

"Now I have to rewind!" Michael said.

The speed at which Michael handled all the remotes continued to amaze Eric. One by one, Michael pressed stop on all the remotes, and the sound faded away, gradually ending the

same way it gradually started. The last TV that played audio was playing a clip of audience laughter, but Michael cut them off mid-laugh. It was silent again in the warehouse. Eric's ears rang.

"Don't do that again," Eric said. He could barely hear himself speak. He felt as if he had taken some of Michael's pills. He didn't feel connected with reality. The sound was still playing in ears even while it was silent. The laughs of the audience and the sarcastic quips of the twins were stuck in his head, twisting around each other into the horrible noise and quieting down for a second just to get loud again over and over.

"You'll get used to it," Michael said, going down each remote one by one and hitting rewind. "I'm surprised I haven't gone deaf yet. I've definitely given myself some kind of hearing damage."

The sound of the TVs rewinding was also loud, but not nearly as loud as the audio of the actual episodes had been.

While the TVs rewinded, Michael ran over to Eric with a smaller stack of papers in hand, turned their pages until he found the right one, and plopped them down in his lap.

"Season one, episode one," Michael said. "I'm sure you'll remember it as we go along, but here's the script just in case."

Eric hopelessly looked for some way out of the warehouse. He couldn't see any doors or exits past all the TVs. Eventually, while he was still looking around for a way to escape, the sound of the tapes rewinding all around them died down. All the TVs were synced up at the beginning of the tape, ready to play the first episode of *Family Fumble*.

Michael was giddy with excitement. He walked back over to the desk with a skip in his step. Eric had never seen him so happy. He was fully detached from reality. It looked like he

thought there was a real studio audience ready to watch an exciting *Family Fumble* reunion with Michael Mulligan and Eric Oakes, reading off the script of the first episode years and years later. It was quiet in the warehouse for a few moments. Michael arrived at the desk and looked down at the remotes, ready to start the episode.

“You can talk to me, Michael,” Eric said, racking his brain for the right thing to say, trying to find the words to a magic speech like his TV dad did at the end of every *Family Fumble* episode to fix the situation. “You can untie me and I won’t leave. You can just talk to me. I won’t be able to listen to you if you play all the episodes again.”

Michael waited a while before hitting play as if he was really thinking about Eric’s proposal. Then he looked around at all the TVs and smiled.

“We can talk after the series finale,” he said, and started pressing play on all the remotes.

Gradually, but not slowly enough, the terrible sound came on again. This time, though, it was even louder, because it was playing the *Family Fumble* theme song over and over on top of each other. The charming, classic saxophone of the theme song went out of tune and became an alien scream. It would play the same note over and over again on top of dozens of other notes from earlier and later in the song, until the entire theme song became the same note. Eric was going to be deaf.

Michael ran over to Eric and cleared his throat, though the sound he made was inaudible under the deafening, dissonant squeaks of the saxophone playing every note in the theme song at the same time. Eventually, the theme song ended, and the images on the TVs switched over to a shot of the Snyder family’s living room. Just as it was in every episode of the show, Kevin Snyder entered the room, and the swing and bang of him opening and closing the front door echoed across the warehouse like an atomic bomb had gone off. Luckily, the audience hadn’t

been acquainted with Kevin yet, so they weren't cheering for him yet. Eric could only imagine how loud it was going to be when they got to the episodes in which the audience cheered for Kevin.

Then the camera switched to a shot of Michael sitting at the table, and Michael looked around at all the TVs displaying his image with pride, despite the fact that he looked nothing like the clean-cut, handsome young father on the screens. Michael was surrounded by 126 mirrors displaying a version of himself that would never exist again, a version that had never taken painkillers, a version that had a promising acting career ahead of him, a version that had a real wife and a son away from the cameras. The Michael in the warehouse smiled, but Eric was disgusted. Still, it was clear (though only upon a thorough inspection) that the smile of the Michael in the warehouse and the smile of the Michaels on the TVs belonged to the same man.

"Did you have a good day at school?" the Michaels said, though only the word "did" was audible, because by the time they got to the word "you," the sound of all the other Michaels who were still getting started saying "did" was playing on top of them. The line sounded more like "Did did did did did did did" than anything.

"Not really," the Kevins said. "A little too much reading and doing math and not enough throwing footballs and flirting with cheerleaders."

Eric didn't say their line with them. He did remember it, and he had the script, but he didn't say the Kevins' line. The Michael in the warehouse looked at him and raised an eyebrow, pointing at the script.

"Read your lines!" he yelled. Eric could tell what he was saying by reading his lips, but he couldn't hear him at all. The audience was laughing, and it took a while for their laughter to flow in and out of all 126 speakers.

“Come on, Kev. I know you’re a star quarterback, but school is always the first priority.”

“Are you sure? Coach saw me skipping class yesterday and told me to keep up the good work,” the Kevins, but not Eric, said.

“Eric!” Michael yelled again. “Read your lines!”

Eric wasn’t sure that he could’ve read his lines even if he had wanted to, because the sound of the audience laughing was paralyzing him. He wasn’t only being tied up physically. He couldn’t move or think about anything because of how loud the sound was. Every time the audience laughed, it was like a giant wave crashing onto the beach. Eric could hear the first few speakers playing the laughter before the majority came in, before the impact of the wave, and so he knew it was coming, but he still was unprepared every time for the sheer volume of the peak of the laughter, the sound of hundreds of people making noise multiplied by the TVs into the sound of hundreds of thousands of people making noise. It was louder than a stadium of people at the Super Bowl. Nothing was louder. Nothing could be louder. The wave crashed onto the beach. Then it slowly swept back into the ocean, and the volume died down a bit, and the last TVs that Michael pressed play on got their laughs in, and then it finally stopped.

“You’re lucky your mother isn’t here to hear you talk like that,” the Michaels said, all of them standing up. The squeak of their chairs pulling out was like a million nails on a million chalkboards. Then they started walking toward Kevin, and their steps sounded like the advancing of a massive army on a battlefield. They finally stopped at the Kevins, looking down on their sons and crossing their arms. Even the crinkling of the fabric of their clothes was deafeningly loud.

“Yeah. Luckily it’s just my dumb old dad,” the Kevins said.

Eric still wasn't saying his lines. The Michael in the warehouse walked up to him and held the script up to his face. Then he bent over and said as loud as he could into Eric's ear, "Talk to me, Eric. Talk to me. Be Kevin, just for today. I want you to be Kevin. I want you to be my son."

Then Michael stood back up and took a few steps back, standing in front of Eric once again.

"Come on," he said. "You love your dumb old dad."

It was a sunny morning in Burlington, Vermont. Clyde Cooley had a cold brew in his left hand and a camera in his right. He was shooting B-roll.

He was making a documentary, and he was making it by himself. It was a different time. His videos had gone viral on the internet several times before. He didn't need a crew. People liked how he did it.

He didn't have a crew, but he did bring his girlfriend, Alyssa, along. She pointed at certain street corners and funny-looking people and colorful windows that she thought Clyde might want to use for a shot. They walked around Burlington for hours and filmed and talked and filmed and talked. Alyssa took her jacket off and tied it around her waist. Clyde rolled his sleeves up. The sun wouldn't leave them alone. It was October. They were told it was cold in Vermont.

"I think I got enough," Clyde said, putting the camera back into his bag.

"More than enough," Alyssa said. "You're meeting with him soon, right? 3:00?"

"Yeah."

They sat down on a bench. There was a woman at a table clacking away on a typewriter with a sign that said, "GIVE ME ANY TOPIC AND I'LL WRITE A POEM." There was a man a couple yards away from her going to town on an accordion. It was busy on Church Street. Clyde tried to watch the man playing accordion, but every second a crowd of giggling teenage girls or a family of tourists or a pair of couples holding hands would move in front of him. Clyde could only watch the accordion player in quick, split second intervals, as if he were watching a video on his phone that was being constantly interrupted by ad breaks or a spotty internet connection.

“I can’t believe this is where he’s from,” Alyssa said. “It’s nice here. Quiet.”

“I don’t like it,” Clyde said.

“Come on, aren’t you excited? This is, like, the biggest interview you’ve ever done. I can’t believe you got permission to see him.”

“I don’t know. I guess I’m nervous.”

“You’ll be *fine*. We practiced those questions a million times.”

All the people walking down Church Street were nauseating Clyde. He looked down at his feet. He listened to the typewriter clacking and the accordion playing and the people laughing and drew lines in his mind between the bricks under his feet. It was the biggest interview he had ever done. He hadn’t told Alyssa how nervous he was. All he ever had done was make videos on his computer in his bedroom. He wasn’t ready for this.

“Hey, I have another question you should ask him,” she said.

“What?”

“Season 3, episode 8. He totally grabs Kevin’s ass,” Alyssa said. “You can’t tell for sure, because they’re both in the background of the scene, but I saw a video that zooms in on them and it’s pretty obvious.”

“I’ve seen that video.”

“Crazy, right? Ask him what was up with that.”

Clyde pulled into the parking lot of the hospital. He turned off the car and pulled out his phone, scrolling through the list of questions again. Then he looked at his page and reminded himself how many people were following him and how many people wanted to see this. The trailer he posted for the *Family Fumble* documentary had just hit 3 million views. There was an

audience. It was hard for him to remember sometimes, because they were all just pixels on his phone, but they were there, and they were waiting.

At first, Clyde was convinced he'd walked into the wrong room. Michael Mulligan looked nothing like Kevin Snyder's father, or the hero from *Galaxy Conquest*, at all. He didn't even look like those mugshots that came out after they found him and Eric in the warehouse. He was old, obviously. Clyde knew that. But it almost seemed as if his face belonged to someone new. His eyes were in the wrong place. They were farther apart, or maybe closer together. Clyde thought there was no way his nose had been that big before. The sharp, defined jawline that he had had as the star of *Galaxy Conquest* was gone. His entire face was more wrinkly, obviously, but Clyde thought it looked like the face itself had changed. Certain features, like his jawline, were gone entirely. Nothing was in the right place or in the right shape.

It was a barren room. There was nothing on the walls, and the only pieces of furniture were a small chair in the corner and the bed that Michael was lying in. Everything was painted white. The only color in the room came from a bit of red and orange hiding in the window. Clyde walked up to the window and looked outside. Michael had a lovely view of the New England autumn.

Suddenly, the door opened back up. It was Michael's nurse.

"I forgot to mention that I'll be right out here if you need anything," she said, as if Clyde was definitely going to be needing something.

"Thank you," Clyde said. The nurse nodded and shut the door. It was just Michael again.

Clyde sat down in the chair facing Michael's bed and cleared his throat. Though Michael's face looked entirely different, and though he was covered in wrinkles, he seemed

pretty lively. He was quite old now, Clyde knew, and he almost expected him to be on the verge of death when he arrived, because he was old and because he was rotten and crazy and in the psych ward. Before going into the room, Clyde thought he knew everything about Michael through the countless videos and articles he had read online about the *Family Fumble* fiasco. Now that he was in the room, Clyde knew nothing.

“You here to interview me?” Michael asked. His voice sounded nothing like it did on TV.

“Yeah, I am.”

“Just you?”

“Yeah.”

“Where’s the camera? Where’s your crew? Where are the lights?”

“It’s just me,” Clyde said. He pulled out his phone and held it up to Michael. “I’m just gonna film on here.”

“Some production this is.”

“I do have some lav mics, though, and I think we should film outside. There’s a spot in the courtyard that one of the nurses recommended we use. What do you think?”

“Fine by me,” Michael said, coughing. “I’m not young anymore. It’ll take me a little while to get out there.”

Clyde waited patiently for Michael to get out of bed, then walked with him and his nurse to the courtyard. It was pleasant. There were some other patients walking around outside, talking to each other, reading books under trees, throwing a ball around—nothing about Clyde’s visit to the psych ward so far was as going as he expected. He had seen plenty of sketchy mental hospitals in movies, and he had heard all the stories about Michael and what he did to Eric in that warehouse and what he did in the years after he was fired from the show and before he was

arrested. Now he was here, visiting Michael at the hospital in which he lived, and it was a pleasant day, and the nurses were nice, and he was talking to Michael like he was a normal person, like he wasn't Michael Mulligan at all.

Clyde took his phone out and looked for a good shot. He found one, and directed Michael to sit down on a wooden bench that was framed in the background by two giant trees with red leaves flying off each other's branches and twirling through the sky. Michael's nurse gave them water bottles and sat on a bench far enough away to not be able to hear anything the two of them were saying but close enough to see them. Everything was pleasant, but the nurse's actions worried Clyde. It seemed as if, any second, Michael was going to snap, and his nurse needed to be right there to sterilize him.

Clyde didn't get that impression from Michael himself, though. Michael seemed put together and energetic—as much as he could be at his age, anyway. Clyde had expected to be interviewing a man on the brink of death. He had expected to be interviewing a psychopath. A criminal. It was throwing him off his game. He didn't know whether to be more nervous because of it or to lower his defenses.

“I like doing it this way,” Michael said, settling back in the bench.

“What way?”

“No crew, no lights. Just me and you. It's like I'm really talking to somebody.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Clyde said. Then he sat up, clearly having forgotten something, and extended his hand. “I'm Clyde, by the way. Sorry I didn't formally introduce myself. I was a little nervous.”

“Nice to meet you,” Michael said, shaking his hand. It was a limp shake.

“I’m a documentary filmmaker from Los Angeles. I flew out here to talk to you about *Family Fumble*.”

“OK,” Michael said.

“It shouldn’t be too long of an interview.”

“I don’t have much going on around here. Make it as long as you want.”

“Alright. I’m gonna start recording.”

“Go for it.”

Clyde pulled up the list of questions one more time. He cleared his throat and hit record.

“So, I wanted to start by asking you a pretty basic question. What was it like on *Family Fumble*?”

Michael squinted his eyes for a few seconds before talking. “I don’t know. Fine. Like any sitcom, I guess. We had to film a new episode every week in front of a live studio audience. The day after we filmed an episode, the writers sat us down with a new script and had us read it together at a table. Then we practiced all week, and a day or two after we read the new script for the first time we’d start practicing on the set, and we’d do it over and over and over again. Sometimes the writers would make changes based on—”

“What was it like for *you*?”

“For me?”

“Yeah. I know I’m pretty young, but I know a lot about ‘80s TV, actually. I made a video about the shooting that happened backstage on *The Schneiders* in 1986.”

“Huh.”

“So I wanna know more about what it was like for *you*.”

“Well, I got good pay. I was the second-most paid actor in the show after Eric. I started out being the most paid, but then Eric’s career really took off.”

“I’m glad you brought up Eric.”

“I’m sure you are.”

“People who are interested in the whole *Family Fumble* thing have noticed several little moments in the episodes, especially later on in your time on the show, where you touch Eric in inappropriate places in the background. Then there’s the famous video that’s up on YouTube with camcorder footage from some lady who brought her camera to one of the tapings and zoomed in on you whispering something into Eric’s ear and walking off stage really close to him when the show went to commercial. How long did you and Eric have that kind of relationship? Did you keep up with him for all those years after the show ended and before you were arrested?”

Michael stared back at Clyde for several seconds without blinking. Clyde began to feel scared. It was a menacing look. It reminded him of the headlines. Michael had been well-mannered and energetic throughout their time together thus far, but he had slowed down now. He was slow and scary.

“You already know the answers to all those questions,” he said.

“Uh,” Clyde said, “I don’t.”

“Yes you do. Everyone does. Everyone wants to know what happened with me and Eric, and why I took him to that warehouse, and what we did behind the scenes, and if I kept in touch with him after I got fired. Well, I’m never going to tell anyone the complete answers to all those questions, because it’s about my personal life, but you can read all about it in the papers, and I’m sure you can read about it on the internet, and you can watch the dozens of other documentaries

people have already made about it to hear what they have to say. Michael and Eric. Michael and Eric. Are you really just going to ask me about Eric? You're sitting here with Michael Mulligan, Clyde. Why don't you ask me something you don't know? Why don't you ask me something new?"

"It's—it's just a fascinating story, that's all. I didn't know there were so many other documentaries about it. I'm just excited to be sitting here with you, and I want to know about it."

"As a matter of fact, I don't think you even could ask me something new. I've been asked everything. Really, why are you excited to be sitting here with me, anyway? I'm an old man in a mental hospital. My show was on TV 40 years ago. Every newspaper writer, every talk show host, everyone with a mouth gave their input on what happened with me and Eric and what I did on *Family Fumble* 40 years ago. It was a hot topic then. It was interesting, of course. I don't deny that. But at some point you have to move on."

Michael was talking loud now. A couple of the other patients in the courtyard were looking at him. Clyde heard the nurse get up from her bench behind them. He heard her walk quickly across the grass to get over to them, but he never looked away from Michael. He was intimidating, and he was giving Clyde a murderous look, but he was fascinating. It was like he was giving a monologue on a theater stage. He was acting. It was nothing like the acting he did on *Family Fumble*, but he was acting.

"You came here without a crew, without cameras, without lights. I expected something new. All you have is a phone!" Michael said. He leaped out of his seat on the bench and charged toward Clyde, snatching his phone out of his hands. "This is all you have. A little rectangle. It took a whole lot more to make movies 40 years ago. All you need is this little rectangle."

"Michael," the nurse said, suddenly appearing right behind Clyde. "Try to calm down."

“All you need is this little rectangle! You could make anything. You could do anything! Why do you insist upon coming back here, getting me out of bed, and asking me the same goddamn questions?”

“Michael!” the nurse said.

Michael paused, took a deep breath, and handed Clyde back his phone. Then he walked back to his spot on the bench and scratched his head. Dead skin flakes fell onto the grass.

“Clyde,” Michael said. “Clyde, there are people who—is it still rolling?”

“Yes,” Clyde said. He was shaking.

“There are people who I saw while working on *Family Fumble* that I never talk about. I saw them doing terrible things. I saw men in suits acting like wild animals. There are things that happened behind the scenes that I have never shared in an interview.”

“Would, uh, would you feel comfortable sharing them with me?”

“I’m never going to tell anyone about what I saw. I don’t want to say anything that would get people even more interested. And they would be a lot more interested if I talked. It would start everything back up again.”

“Who were the people you saw? Who were the men in suits?”

Michael paused again. “They won. You asking that question, you sitting here with me asking me questions about a show that ended 40 years ago—they won.”

“I don’t understand,” Clyde said.

“People like them... they made *Family Fumble* happen. They made all the other shows happen, too. And all the movies. And what they did—the, the twins, the—”

“The twins? The twins on *Family Fumble*?”

“So many movies and TV shows you love watching are because of them. I can’t watch *Family Fumble* anymore, or any show from back then, because every line a character reads, every prop on set, every laugh from the audience member is a result of what they did. TV screens are made of pixels. They’re not showing you something real. They’re tricking your brain into thinking that you’re watching human beings like yourself. That’s the first trick. Then they trick your brain into caring about the characters those human beings are playing. I can’t fall for those tricks anymore. When I look at a TV screen, the pixels show me something else. They don’t show me the same things you see. They show me everything those men did.”

“I’m not really understanding you. What men?”

“It’s still happening, Clyde. What those men did is still happening. But it can be different for you. You don’t need a crew or equipment to make a documentary that millions of people are gonna see. Millions are gonna see this, right? Are you famous?”

“I don’t know, exactly,” Clyde said. “It’s safe to say a couple million people are going to see this.”

“Millions are gonna see this, and all you’ve got is a couple tiny microphones and a little rectangle. You can make a movie about anything. You don’t need a studio to approve it. You don’t have to hire those men. It’s all you. You can tell whatever story you want to tell. Don’t come back here and film me. My story’s already been told. It’s been told a million times. Don’t come back here and film me and ask me the same questions I’ve heard over and over and over again for the past 40 years. You can do anything. Why do you still rely on stuff that happened 40 years ago? Why do people still rely on me?”

“Why did you agree to do this interview, then?”

“Huh?”

“Why am I here if you’ve already heard all these questions before? Why am I here if you don’t want anyone to film you anymore?”

Michael smiled. It was the first time he had smiled all afternoon. The resulting movement of his cheekbones reorganized his face, and for a second, he looked just like he did on *Galaxy Conquest* again. His jaw was back.

“Because it makes me feel good.”

“It makes you feel good?”

“Is there a show that you watch when you’re feeling down that makes you feel better? A show, maybe a movie that makes you feel that way?”

“Sure.”

“It makes me feel better to be on the other end of that. I like a camera in my face.”

“But you’ve been telling me you’re sick of it. You’ve had too many cameras in your face, right?”

“Aren’t *you* sick of it? Aren’t you sick of asking me questions you already know the answers to? Aren’t you sick of *Family Fumble*? Your parents watched it. Your grandparents watched it. You look young, man. Maybe your great-grandparents watched it, too. Don’t you want to watch something new? Don’t you want to make something new?”

“As I said, it’s a fascinating—”

“You’re not sick of it. You don’t want to watch something new. Everybody’s got a camera in their pocket just like you. Everybody could make a movie right now. And nobody does, because they’d rather watch *Family Fumble* again. They’d rather be comfortable. Who knows? Maybe that phone you’re holding isn’t as powerful as the cameras we used back then. Maybe there’s some kind of magic in the cameras that were pointed at me when I was a big shot.

Some magic your phone doesn't have. Why else would you care so much about something that happened 40 years ago? Maybe what I did is *better* than anything you can do. Maybe that's why you can't get over it."

"Well, um," Clyde said, trying not to break eye contact, "I don't think *Family Fumble* was a particularly 'good' show. Most of the episodes had pretty cheesy writing. It never won any awards. I'm interested in *Family Fumble* primarily because of what *you* did, not because the cameras were magic and able to produce some kind of, like, otherworldly works of art that phone cameras are not capable of producing."

"What I did is impossible to do now. What I did is—"

"What you did is assault your fellow cast members during a taping of the show and beat Eric Oakes until he nearly died."

Michael paused, but only for a second. "You already know all the answers."

"I wanted to hear your perspective."

"You want to hear my perspective?"

"I'm interviewing you."

"There isn't any magic in the cameras that filmed me. I know that. I'm sure cameras are a lot better now than they were back then. But because of what I did in that warehouse, and because of what I did on set, people are going to be watching *Family Fumble* for years and years and years, no matter how cheesy it is. People are going to want to talk to me after you. People are going to want to know about my life years after I am dead. Cameras themselves are not magic, but the people operating them and the people that they film are going to live much, much longer than they ever would have if not for them. Within *Family Fumble* is a part of my soul. My youth is gone. Diane is gone. My son is gone. They're all going to live forever, though, in fake

living rooms and football stadium bleachers. In *Family Fumble*. I know what I did was sick. I know I was wrong. It makes me even sicker to think about the men in suits, because what they did was far worse, and they were involved with the show in some capacity, I know it—whether they were producers or editors or whatever, I don't know, but they were involved, and now what they did is going to live forever on those sets.”

Michael stared directly into the camera. He had been looking at Clyde before, but now he was staring down the lens.

“Whoever you are, whatever lies inside your soul, is going to live forever if you point a camera at it. You seem like a good kid. Make something new. Don't point the camera at me anymore. Make something without those men behind the scenes. Make something without a deranged lunatic who kidnapped his TV son and attacked him in a warehouse. Make something new. It's the only hope you have of making terrible things go away. If you keep coming here and getting me out of my bed, what I did will never go away. What those men did will never go away. I was in movies a long time ago. I was in a TV show a long time ago. Let *Family Fumble* die. Don't let the rotting souls hiding within it live any longer.”

On his way back to the hospital parking lot, someone complimented Clyde's outfit and called it “very '90s.” After he got back to the hotel, Alyssa wanted to go back out to Burlington for drinks. They went to a bar and found a list of cocktails on the menu named after *Seinfeld* characters. Alyssa scrolled through her phone while Clyde was in the bathroom and told him, upon his return, that they were making another *Star Wars* movie.

Clyde thought about his interview with Michael for a long time before he could fall asleep. The lights were off, and the hotel's AC unit was blowing loud. He got out of bed, slowly

as not to wake Alyssa, and opened his laptop. His phone was plugged in, and the recording of the interview was open. Clyde stared at Michael's wrinkled face on his screen for a minute. He deleted the recording.

20th-Century Media Monoculture Paper

The movies, music, and TV shows of the late 20th century have far more staying power than the media that came before and after them. In the 21st century, we consume more media than ever, but we do not gather around the same small group of movies and TV shows in the way that people did decades ago. The *M*A*S*H* finale in 1983 was viewed by 121.6 million people, over half the population of the United States at that time; the finale of *Game of Thrones*, one of the most popular shows of the past decade, received around 15 million viewers. The rise of the internet has split viewers up between dozens of different streaming services, and the algorithms of apps like TikTok show viewers content that is specifically tailored to their interests. The huge variety of content available through streaming services and algorithms prevent any form of 21st century media from connecting with as many people as something like the *M*A*S*H* finale did, and the media from before the 20th century had no technological means of reaching that many people at all.

Thus, the media of the late 20th century was released during the perfect technological era between radio and the internet, a time when media could reach mass audiences and mass audiences didn't yet have the option to watch the specialized content of internet algorithms. In some ways, people had no choice but to watch the *M*A*S*H* finale—there were only two or three other channels on TV anyway. The result of those 40 or 50 years of uncontested media monoculture is a 21st-century media landscape that is haunted by the movies, TV shows, culture, and ideas of the past, in which every box-office hit is a sequel to a movie that came out in the '90s and chart-topping songs like The Weeknd's "Blinding Lights" sound like they could've come right out of the '80s. (Writing about "Blinding Lights," which has an intentionally retro-looking music video, *Stereogum* editor Chris DeVille said that "The '80s truly will never die."¹)

¹ Chris DeVille, "Best Pop Songs 2019," *Stereogum*, December 12, 2019, <https://www.stereogum.com/2067368/the-top-40-pop-songs-of-2019/columns/the-week-in-pop/>.

While new technology like the smartphone allows us to engage with more media than ever before, the stories, characters, and references that make up that media will always be grounded in late 20th-century monoculture, because its media was part of a fleeting technological era in which mass audiences could be reached more effectively than at any other time in history.

20th-century media monoculture is defined by its ability to generate shared cultural experiences. In the 21st century, streaming services allow audiences to watch or listen to any media whenever and wherever they want, but, only a few decades ago, audiences had to be in a certain place at a certain time. Streaming services like Netflix release entire seasons of TV at once, ending a decades-long tradition of episodes releasing weekly at a certain time. To catch new episodes of *Cheers*, you had to be in front of your TV on Thursday nights at 9:00 pm. Then, the next morning at work, you could discuss what happened with your coworkers at the water cooler, because they were also in front of their TVs at 9:00 pm the previous night. And you would certainly have to go see the movie everyone was talking about during its theatrical run—there was no chance of it releasing concurrently on streaming services, and there was no YouTube to watch clips of it or Wikipedia to read a plot summary of it on. The mass media of the late 20th century, though more technologically limited than its 21st-century counterparts, put everyone in the same place at the same time, giving people a communal experience that was impossible for the media that came before or after it.

Despite the 20th-century media monoculture including other forms of media like film and music, television is the focus of this paper. The evolution of film and music from the last century to the current one looks slightly different than the evolution that television took, which was a more direct shift from weekly communal experiences to decentralized streaming service binge-

watching. Movie theaters are still around, and there are still movies, like *Top Gun: Maverick* and *Avatar 2*, that send people to theaters in droves—an inherently communal experience. However, the pandemic may have permanently changed the moviegoing experience, as more and more people may opt to stay home and watch movies when they come to streaming services. Also, 21st-century music still has communal elements, because there are plenty of public places, like bars and clubs, that play popular music that everyone knows. The rise of TikTok, though, has disrupted decades-long institutions like radio as a new way of discovering music, which will inevitably lead to a more decentralized listenership, since TikTok uses an extremely specific algorithm to show you videos that it thinks you would enjoy in particular versus the radio's lack of algorithm.

Tuning into long-standing television institutions like *The Tonight Show* is a good introduction to the fall of the media monoculture. While the modern-day *Tonight Show* is little more than an opportunity for Jimmy Fallon to learn TikTok dances from guests who have already independently become popular before coming on the show, Johnny Carson's *Tonight Show* single-handedly gave up-and-coming actors and comedians the push they needed to become mainstream acts. When comedians performed on the show, they “knew by heart a catalog of gestures and sounds that signaled how their performance had rated with Johnny,” including the “much-sought-after O.K. sign (which [Richard] Belzer called ‘a gesture from God’).”² In the internet age, aspiring comedians or actors can test their material on any number of social media sites and find their own success; in the 20th-century media monoculture, they

² Joe Rhodes, “Carson’s Code,” *The New York Times*, January 30, 2005, <https://www.nytimes.com/2005/01/30/arts/television/carsons-code.html>.

had to rely on one man's body language to find success, because everyone was watching that one man.

The media monoculture cycling through the same images of the same people day after day had negative global effects. In her article "The March of the Monoculture," Helena Norberg-Hodge writes about the effect of westernization, including the introductions of tourism and satellite TV, on developing countries:

The one-dimensional, fantasy view of modern life promoted by the Western media, television and business becomes a slap in the face for young people in the 'Third World'. Teenagers, in particular, come to feel stupid and ashamed of their traditions and their origins. The people they learn to admire and respect on television are all 'sophisticated' city dwellers with fast cars, designer clothes, spotlessly clean hands and shiny white teeth.³

When you present audiences with media that only depicts people who look and act a certain way, it seems inevitable that there would be some kind of psychological effect on the people in the audience who do not resemble the people on their TV screens. The internet and social media have given people in other countries the chance to engage with media that better represents them: in 2023, India makes up the largest share of YouTube's audience by far, and Indonesia and Brazil are closely behind the United States for the largest share of TikTok's audience.^{4 5} However, before the internet (but after television), non-Americans were largely watching Americans in their media, which had a permanent effect on the culture of their home countries.

Media monoculture also had an effect the other way around. Westerners visiting foreign countries in the 18th or 19th centuries would have found almost completely different worlds,

³ Helena Norberg-Hodge and Local Futures, "The March of the Monoculture," Local Futures, February 28, 2023, <https://www.localfutures.org/the-march-of-the-monoculture/>.

⁴ "YouTube Users by Country 2023 | Statista," Statista, February 6, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/280685/number-of-monthly-unique-youtube-users/>.

⁵ "TikTok Users by Country 2023 | Statista," Statista, March 24, 2023, <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1299807/number-of-monthly-unique-tiktok-users/>.

with ideas, traditions, and values far different than the ones in their home countries. The media of the 20th century changed that experience permanently not only by making the foreign countries more “western” but also by preventing westerners from being able to truly “travel,” because they have already seen depictions of the countries they are traveling to in movies and TV, and the countries themselves are not much different than their home countries because of the effects of westernization. French anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss’s book *A World on the Wane* discusses the phenomenon caused at least in part by late 20th-century media monoculture of the world seemingly to physically shrink because of westernization and mass media. Levi-Strauss goes all the way to Lahore but finds “a little square” along the avenue “such as one finds in a French market-town...Where could it be, the old, the authentic Lahore? To get to it...one had to cross a lengthy bazaar-area, in which were to be found cosmetics, medicines, imported plastic materials...made by the operation of a mechanical saw on gold.”⁶ He later describes himself as a “traveler...hastening in search of a vanished reality.”

Even within the United States, the 20th-century media monoculture had negative effects on certain groups. In her book *Critiquing the Sitcom*, media critic Joanne Morreale compares portrayals of middle-class lifestyles with portrayals of working-class lifestyles in ‘50s and ‘60s sitcoms: “In *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver*, middle-class assimilation is displayed through deep-focus photography exhibiting tasteful furnishings, tidy rooms...unlike the cramped and unpleasant space of the Kramdens’ New York City apartment [in *The Honeymooners*].”⁷ When there are fewer options for TV shows to watch, everyone must tune into the same shows, which, especially in the ‘50s and ‘60s, typically only painted certain people—middle-class white families—in a positive light. Other groups were either used for comedy or not represented at all.

⁶ C. Levi-Strauss, *A World on the Wane*, 1961.

⁷ Joanne Morreale, *Critiquing the Sitcom: A Reader* (Syracuse University Press, 2002).

Even women, who were part of the middle-class white family that was a staple of the early media monoculture, were misrepresented, shown by “media effects research” that “[link] the totality of television with more traditional sex-role stereotypes and conservative gender ideology.”⁸

The 20th-century media monoculture had positive and negative elements: it had the potential to bring people together for communal experiences and water-cooler chats, but it often showed viewers narrow depictions of reality, giving people who didn’t look like the characters on popular TV shows unrealistic expectations for how they should look or act. The internet had the potential to erase the negative effects of the monoculture, and, in some ways, it did, giving people many more opportunities to engage with media that represents them. However, despite the way audiences interact with media having changed significantly, the movies and TV shows of the 20th-century monoculture still reign supreme in the current media monoculture. 21st-century media is less a rejection of monoculture and more an evolution of it. It may be valuable to examine the history of media over the last few decades through the lens of Hegelian dialectics to understand the current media landscape. Dialectics is “a method of philosophical argument that involves some sort of contradictory process between opposing sides”⁹—in this case, 20th-century media monoculture and the internet. Plato believed that the process of opposing sides, the fight between Something and Nothing, resulted in nothingness, but Hegel believed the fight “leads to a positive result, namely, to the introduction of a new concept—the synthesis—which unifies the two, earlier, opposed concepts.”¹⁰ The nostalgia of 21st century media is the

⁸ R. Lance Holbert, Dhavan V. Shah, and Nojin Kwak, “Political Implications of Prime-Time Drama and Sitcom Use: Genres of Representation and Opinions Concerning Women’s Rights,” *Journal of Communication* 53, no. 1 (March 1, 2003): 45–60, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1460-2466.2003.tb03004.x>.

⁹ “Hegel’s Dialectics (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy),” October 2, 2020, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/hegel-dialectics/>.

¹⁰ “Hegel’s Dialectics (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).”

synthesis of the thesis (20th-century media monoculture) and the antithesis (internet, algorithms, and streaming services).

The internet, a platform that allows unrestricted, on-demand access to information, is directly opposed to the rigid structure of the 20th-century media monoculture, particularly before the VCR and DVR, when audiences were forced to watch new episodes of their favorite shows at a specific time on a specific day. Also, the internet is opposed to the 20th-century monoculture because anyone can post content onto it. In the 20th century, you'd need a TV production team and a deal with a network to make a show, but if you want to make a show on the internet, all you need is a YouTube account. At the turn of the 21st century, media was undergoing a rapid transformation from being locked behind a relatively small number of TV channels and executives to being freely spread across the internet. Internet media, though, lacks the communal experience of 20th-century television. There are endless videos to watch and endless songs to listen to, but it is a personalized process, especially as the internet evolved to track user activity in order to develop specialized algorithms. You can watch a YouTube documentary about your favorite extremely esoteric topic, but you can't talk about it at the water cooler with your coworkers the next day.

The synthesis between TV and internet, then, is nostalgia for those few decades in which everyone was watching the same things. Since there are no longer movies or shows that can be broadly referenced for everyone to understand, popular movies and shows must reference media of the past that came out in a time when everyone was tuned into the same channels. Even if a popular 21st-century show is a new IP, it is likely to make some kind of reference to the media of the monoculture: *Stranger Things*, for example, aims to emulate '80s movies (and was responsible for Kate Bush's "Running Up That Hill," a song from 1985, reaching #1 on the

charts in 2022). *Modern Family* is another example of a 21st-century TV show being grounded in the 20th-century media monoculture. The characters are new, and the show is shot in a different way (no laugh track, multi-camera) than most stereotypical monoculture sitcoms, but the idea behind it is the same as the one behind 20th-century sitcoms—the life of an “everyday” family is depicted through half-hour episodes of its members getting into various humorous situations, usually including an A-plot, B-plot, and C-plot. Also, the show includes Ed O’Neill, famous for his leading role in ‘80s and ‘90s sitcom *Married with Children*.

What is interesting about 21st-century sitcoms like *Modern Family* is their tendency to be binge-watched, a key component of the synthesis between TV and internet. The presence of TV shows on streaming services not only allows them to stay popular longer, since they can be easily accessed over the course of several years instead of being locked behind TV channel schedules, but also allows them to be watched much faster, changing the relationship audiences have with media. The communal experience of 20th-century media monoculture was found in water-cooler discussions with coworkers, playground conversations with classmates, and other real-life interactions; the communal experience of 21st-century media is found in the shows themselves, since audiences are spending much more time with the characters than they were when they only watched one episode per week. The characters of 21st-century binge-worthy shows feel much closer than the characters of 20th-century television, because they aren’t stuck in the living room TV—they can come with you on your phone into the bedroom and the bathroom, and you can watch them whenever you want. 21st-century audiences get the communal experience of 20th-century monoculture through increased media consumption.

But the synthesis between TV and internet is new, and may change as time goes on. Shows like *The Office* and *Parks and Recreation* exist firmly outside of the form of 20th-century

television, but they have become deeply ingrained in culture due to their presence on streaming services. It is possible that new ideas will take the place of the iconic characters of 20th-century media, and the top shows and movies of each year will stop being reboots and sequels of media from back then. What is certain is that the media of the late 20th century has a unique kind of staying power, permanently popular because of the technological era it was a part of.

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