

The Beginning and End of Comedy

by Stephen Stark

No, Ellen Gregory had not always wanted to be a comic. Yes, she wanted to perform. Yes, she had an insane and insatiable hunger for attention. But there was also a fanatical need to get things precisely and purely right, a willingness to go over the slightest detail again and again, wording, timing, voicing, so that you did not just kill, but massacre, annihilate. Which was necessary if you were a five-five blond who wanted to take control of a roomful of potentially very drunk and hostile individuals, people with their own weary, dreary lives, who just wanted to laugh, goddamnit.

But no, that came later. The nuances.

What she wanted, way back when, at sixteen, then seventeen, was out. But the concept of 'out' was about a lot more than just departure. Not that she plumbed that in any depth.

What she wanted, in such a desperate way it felt like psychosis, was to leave the small town in Iowa where she had grown up, escape or perhaps prove correct the feeling that she was not from this planet, and certainly not from that woman in the kitchen, curlers in her hair and too-red lipstick for that early in the morning, in the housecoat that always was updated but never actually seemed to change.

Yes, it was all about her. Ellen. *Ellen!* Serious delusions of grandeur that were not delusions if they actually came true. Which they did, in spades, which was perhaps even weirder than having them in the first place.

Her decision now, half her life later, at 32, was about as well reasoned—she wanted out.

If it would not be career suicide to leave not only the very funny and very popular sitcom that had made her a household name, but also the place that spawned it, then it was a kind of suicide—killing

off a persona that dogged her in doppelgänger fashion. Dissociative dysphoria. Or maybe associative dysphoria. Some people may have liked seeing themselves on television. She was not one of them. The woman on the screen had stolen her soul. Or had pulled it far enough away from her as to create a tug-of-war.

It came to her the plane on the way back from New York. She had been there for a couple of weeks, doing some media, while the workmen finished repairing her house. Erasing all but psychic traces of the place where Wayne Townsend had used his baseball bat to bash through a wall and drag her out of hiding, where she had fumbled with the pistol safety and then fired it while he stood above her, ready to stove her skull in with said bat. She was not sure that the expression on his face—bland and banal—would ever be erased.

Or at least later, when she tried to figure out when the moment came that she knew she had to escape, it seemed that it was then.

New York had been good. She had almost felt herself, but still there was a kind of loneliness, the sense of being divorced from herself, that she'd had in LA for the last couple of years. At a party in SoHo the night before she went back, she saw people she hadn't seen in years, but she felt almost as though she were her own doppelgänger, speaking a role that had been written for her in advance, the words suddenly just appearing in her head.

On the plane, she tried to think of where she had come from and how she had got to this point, and there was no real way of rationalizing it. This happened, that happened. Chance, coincidence, life. How did the song go? Life is what happens when you're making other plans.

This thinking had been sparked by the sight of a man she had known—yes, in the biblical sense—back then. Joshua. On the street, after a party, there he was. Or someone who very much could have been him. He was older of course. But the vision of him shivered her.

How often did it happen, the whole fact of having nearly all of your life-long dreams come true? Dreams you didn't even know were possible came true. And it sort of made you freak, dreams—that

ethereal fabric—suddenly turning to gold, which was heavy as hell and hurt like hell when it all fell down, as it tended to do. The Midas problem.

She had no real recollection of what she had been like when she left home, full of a boiling, unvarnished anger at her mother, full of certainty that there was no future whatsoever in her small Iowa town. And then there was the ambition, that I'm gonna show you, motherfuckers kind of truly truly truly insane ambition of the alienated, ignored, the desperate to not to be the perennially second, third or lower tier in high school. Oh, yeah, she had friends in the old days, the others on gymnastics team and in marching band, and even a boyfriend named Lars who was heartbroken at her leaving (about which she did not inform him) because he really had featured her cutting his corn off the cob into eternity.

She had no brothers or sisters, but it wasn't until roughly the time she hit puberty that she began to feel the crushing sensation of parental scrutiny, which came mostly from her mother. It had, of course, the perverse effect of making her want to be secretive, and, eventually, to do things that would require greater and greater secrecy.

And so the hijinks began, and of course began with the usual high school shenanigans—sneaking out late at night and drinking—which she soon discovered she was not particularly fond of—the drinking part, not the sneaking out part. And but so since she was funny, sometimes scurrilously so, people invited her to parties, and while they got wasted, she got funny. She—literally—made girls pee in their pants. This was a particular delight.

But of course the parties got dull, and too easy, and so she started looking for edgier thrills. Did she really, actively, look? Or did it all just sort of evolve?

Such edgier thrills were to be found a few miles down the road in Iowa City, where the parties were bigger, more raucous, and entirely more intellectual (sometimes). She went with her friend Emily, who was six inches taller, looked like she was twenty, read constantly,

looked like a movie star (to Ellen, anyway) and attracted 'college men' (in addition to men in general) as she put it like shit attracts flies. And since Ellen didn't like to drink, she made a great designated driver.

It was in Iowa City that she met Joshua.

Later, if she'd had the kind of mind that tackled its unconscious like a philosopher, she might have wondered if the fling-thing with Joshua was really love, or some other, more sort of self-destructive behavior. It was Joshua on whom she based the character of the minister in her act. He played the guitar, wrote earnest songs and earnest stories, wore John Lennon glasses and his hair long, and was distinctly retro.

She had started to make a name for herself—at least at the parties where she went with Emily, because after studying them in silence for what seemed ages, she started making people laugh again. She was just sixteen, could have passed for twelve at the movies, and told jokes that were as sharp as nails.

She couldn't remember the name of the girl now—a sorority type—but at the time, she was Ellen's imaginary nemesis, with brown hair, a perfectly proportioned body, and that entire air of wholesome Iowa goodness. (Exactly on whom Ellen modeled her persona later. Shame she couldn't remember her name.) The night she met Joshua was the night she made Sorority Girl pee her pants. And it wasn't even that good of a joke—about how syphilis got started in Iowa, and she told it like it was true, and, for authenticity, she did it with a kind of earnest, know-it-all schoolgirl air that was just a little shy. It had to do with a particular sheep, a farmer, the farmer's wife, a business man, and a cast of thousands. It was a sort of a shaggy dog story, like a Bob Dylan song, that accumulated wild and sometimes irrelevant details and she was gasping and yapping and really just getting into it, and finally she came back around and smashed the punch line, just knocked it out of the park. And for a moment there was silence, because it had started out with just a few people listening, and others gathering, frowning, wondering, Is this girl serious?, and ended with a crowd, Sorority Girl at the center, in

short shorts, her hair tied in ribbons (seriously), and the silence was like the moment between lightning and thunder, when Ellen wasn't sure if the joke was going to work, and just stood there tapping her foot, waiting, and then beer started coming out of people's noses, Sorority Girl looked like she was having an epileptic fit, and it was the first time being funny actually scared Ellen. She got a sly look and went, *He, he, he*, and people laughed even harder, and Sorority Girl peed her pants, and screamed it, You made me pee my pants, and Ellen thought, Damn straight I did. And the thing was that Sorority Girl wasn't pissed. She was thrilled. Which was the weirdest part. Nobody has ever made me laugh that hard, she gasped, still laughing, and actually fucking grateful, which may have just been the beer.

And then, later, sitting around waiting for Emily to get her fill of older male attention, not to mention beer, and people coming over and giving her, like, high fives and pats on the back (but distinctly not hitting on her), this slim, blondish man with longish hair and John Lennon glasses sat down next to her and said, You ought to do stand up. you are a very, very funny young woman.

She didn't very often get hit on, had actually and frankly never been hit on—if that was what was happening—by an older man (mostly she was ignored because of Emily, and because, after all, she was Runt) and had next to no idea what to do. By that time, she and Lars were dating, but it amounted to not much more than holding hands in the hallways, some low-key petting, movies. Dinner at his parents.

And she had never been called a woman by anyone.

He introduced himself as Josh. She asked what his major was, which is what one tended to do, and he laughed jovially. Turned out that he was a teacher. Something called an adjunct professor of English. He had graduated from the writing program (which she had never heard of but he assured her that it was number one) and he was teaching a couple of sections of composition and lit in order to make enough time to finish his novel. It was the first time she'd met someone with some kind of ambition that extended beyond

graduating from high school, much less beyond state lines, and by the end of the night—which was very very late—she had her head on his shoulder. No one, not even Emily, was sober enough to notice. He was from New York, and determinedly old school, he said. She had no idea what he was talking about. He asked for her phone number. She said, I've got some really up-tight roommates. Maybe you ought to give me yours.

Joshua wasn't that far away, and in a matter of (probably) days, she fell in love with him—though she kept Lars as a cover. She fell in love with his bones, his knees and elbows, and the mercury that ran through his soul (like hers).

He was the alien being, astonishingly and thoroughly dim at times, and at others, slashingly incisive and with (what seemed to her then) incredibly penetrating wisdom. He knew everything there was to know about storytelling, or so she imagined, and she read his manuscript (excitingly opaque—she had no way of knowing, really, if it was any good; she didn't read the sorts of things he aspired to).

Perhaps a week into the affair, she drove over to his house—an upstairs apartment on Fairchild, and stripped. He was (bizarrely, it seemed to her) stunned that she was a virgin—or had been until that afternoon—and dismayed at the blood. Don't pull a Sylvia Plath on me, he said, and she had to look it up later, after assuring him that she wouldn't, that Plath almost bled to death when she lost her virginity.

What she was in love with, she discovered later, was his ambition, his secret identity.

It was, in actual fact, upon Josh's own ambition, his own fired and annealed in the shadow of an older, practically-perfect-in-every-way brother, upon which her own had been modeled. Then, she felt as though he was the most exquisite man alive. Later, she would come to think that he was himself almost irrelevant. His ambition gave her a framework, an armature, for her own. She fed on it—because her own ambition had heretofore been just some kind of weird mental illness.

She stole hours from school, from gymnastics practice, from anything she could steal time from to spend with him. She learned from him. The world is big. Iowa is small. Iowa is not your oyster.

He had a personal ferocity and foolishness about being a writer—the one thing his mystical brother was not—always carrying a paperback that just fit in the back pocket of his jeans—Kerouac or Hemingway or Faulkner or something Russian. That and a narrow reporter's notebook that he was jotting in all the time. The way that some men's jeans pockets have the scars of a wallet or a can of snuff, his bore the scars of books.

The sex part was just a thing to get to his soul, and so she plotted and plotted to have sex with him. She was smart enough to use birth control, but when he found out that she was only sixteen, he stopped everything cold.

Cold.

Line's gone dead.

You didn't guess? I look like I'm thirteen!, she screamed in her head. How could you not know?!?!

She had told no one, though Emily and some of her other friends had guessed about Ellen's secret boyfriend. But guessed wrong. And there was no one to share it with. You can't keep that big of a secret and then let it out. A professor. Not just an older boy, but a full-grown, actual man. It would have been like admitting to fucking your father's friends.

Not possible.

He was a nice guy, the minister, really sweet and sincere. An ex-hippie who had found God when he was on LSD. Literally. He had those John Lennon glasses. The wispy little beard. And oh, man, was he great in bed. Do you know that you can get closer to God by fucking a minister? It's true. He told me.

The grief of it—the loss of Joshua, not only the contact but the mental detachment that came in the pure unalloyed hope of seeing him, a hope that was, in many ways a hope of hope, and but also stealing bits of his soul to feed her own—Joshua who represented possibility in life, Joshua who gave her a vision of the outside of this

very small little world that increasingly was defined by her mother's sometimes idiotic ideas—in which every noun seemed to be preceded by the pathetically weak and old-womanly adjective nice. Nice cup of tea. Nice boy. Nice time. Nice girl. The kind of thing that made you want to run screaming in the opposite direction.

Joshua had gone on to publish a couple or three books. She read the first when she was starting out in New York—she found herself in bookstores searching for his name, and then one day, there it was, and she was appalled to see way more than just a hijacked shaggy dog story, but the sixteen-year-old, joke-telling kid who fools the hero into having a baby, forcing him into a marriage he does not want. It made her jaw drop and her fists clench.

It was the kind of thing that made you want to spit. Made you want to call the guy up and tell him what an asshole he was for stealing your jokes and your life.

But.

Once she got over the initial shock of it, she found that it was instructive, the merciless theft of someone else's narrative. The maleness of it, the alien notion that you could steal like that. Why she had never thought of it. This was news she could use. She had not seen him since he found out how young she was and kicked her out.

I thought about it, being a minister's wife. But t I just felt like I was too young to take on those kinds of responsibilities, which was a lot of responsibility for a thirteen-year-old. I am kidding. Really. No, stop. Really. I was fourteen.

And I really didn't get along with his wife.

And then that night, her last in New York, there he was. Not at the party, just on the street. It had been so long and so much had changed, she had no way of being sure. But when she turned and saw him, the considered dishevelment of his hair (now much shorter), the John Lennon glasses rejected for expensive designer frames, a weird electric thrill of recognition went through her.

Which was also not so much a thrill, because it shot her through with recognition of another kind.

She did not pay him the gratuity of acknowledging him. But still the idea that it might have been him—if indeed it was—made her feel the gap in time. The distance. The self-reinvention. The self-loathing that kept nagging at her, but didn't call itself by that name.

And so in the olden days at home, after he had cut her loose, she got a little looser, went looking for the same kind of thrill, but found nothing similar. And then, to compound matters, one dawn she came home, walking up the street after a party (where there was no Joshua) and finding her mother sitting on the front step. Her mother in her housecoat who had not slept and had been on the step who-the-fuck-knew-how-long, probably cold.

There ensued a battle, or escalation of the battle that had gone one between them, that had lasted until she left, months later, under cover of darkness.

Her mother shook her head in disgust and dismay, in shame. Real, genuine, unalloyed shame. Her beloved one and only daughter sneaking out in the middle of the night. Walking up the street like a streetwalker. Which of course meant she entirely misunderstood. And oh, boy, did Ellen in the pre-dawn light of this late spring morning lay into her.

How dare you, Mother.

Then the accusatory confessional. (A thing, later in life, she would relive in a kind of post-traumatic stress flashback of horror.)

You want the truth. You can't handle the truth. (No, she actually did not say that.)

Ellen hissed details. (Many of them made up and shockingly embellished—which, bizarrely, seemed like a good idea at the time.) Each one hit her mother like a purely physical blow. Ellen, later, much later, regretted this, but at the time, it felt like a kind of freedom, even though she was grounded until she went to college.

In the perverse way of teenagers, she enjoyed the odd freedom of the scarlet S (for slut, slattern, skank) which she got to (pretend to)

wear around the house for the last months she was there. She'd say things to her mother like, I cunt find it, muhtherf, or, Ma? Did you ever go to Las Vegas? Play the one-armed babies—I mean bandits?—just for the gag factor.

Her father took it harder, but more distantly, and she took him on less directly, and even—empowered by her own effervescently foolish reading of *Our Bodies Ourselves*—tried to sit him down and explain to him sexual desire from a female point of view, the Santa Claus-in-reverse explanation of women's sexual desire, from the chimney's point of view—Like, I mean, just because you can't necessarily see it doesn't mean it's not there, you know?—which, truth be told, was humiliating for the both of them, and she couldn't joke her way around his sorrow. She was a sexual being and she had chosen to express it. He got it; he was an adult. He just didn't want her to ruin her life. Evidence of his sorrow lasted. All he said was, I just wish you and your mother could find a way to get along.

Which was at that point asking the impossible.

And then there was the unbearable teenaged itch to leave. Worse than cutting a tooth. The worst kind of inchoate craving. Yes, she had put in applications to college; yes, she had been accepted. But even as she went through the motions of getting excited about acceptance letters, she also knew that she was not going. That even if she did go, it would be a waste of her time and their money.

And but so on the plane, this came back, likely jogged from her memory by the vision of Joshua, real or not. And with it came her loathing of herself. Or the self that had come to occupy the territory that her own self had once owned.

It was later that day that she bought the hair dye. The compact scissors. Both of which she kept at the bottom of her purse, her escape hatch.

