To the Lions, Funnyman

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Abstract

THE GAUDY sign at the bottom of the filthy stairway flashed its message on and off on and off. “Tonight unload your troubles on America’s newest funnyman. The critics’ choice for clown of the year—Blind John’s presents the irresistible Bruce Kaplan.”
THE GAUDY sign at the bottom of the filthy stairway flashed its message on and off . . . on and off. "Tonight unload your troubles on America's newest funnyman. The critics' choice for clown of the year—Blind John's presents the irresistible Bruce Kaplan." Every now and then laughter would seep out from the scarred door, but it soon gave way to the driving dirt and trash.

Laughter could not compete with the bedlam in the clogged bowels of the city. Smiles were zoned to basements, like Blind John's, to be forced out of pie-eyed patrons soaked in booze so that their tongues would loosen. Things were too bad for a sober laugh. One needed a good stiff belt and the laxative humor of Bruce Kaplan. And Blind John's packed 'em in night after night . . . night after night.

Dull laughter rippled through the smoke and darkness. Engulfed in a blue spotlight, the young man sat on a spindly-legged stool. He smoked cigarettes and told jokes into the leering darkness.

"... but really our family was so bad that this guy once had a blind date with my sister and he came over to me after-
wards and he says, 'Hey, your sister sure is spoiled, isn't she?' And I said, 'No, of course not. It's just that new perfume she's wearing.'” His sharply featured rubbery face contorted into a stupid grin. All night long it had been this way . . . bad jokes, funny faces, good laughs, more booze . . . success. Big Max, the owner, liked to see his patrons happy. He liked to see full tables and glasses. If he liked what he saw, he paid for it and he gave good references. From Blind John's it was the big time, and Bruce Kaplan was sitting big.

A few more jokes, a few more laughs, and that was it. He ground out his last cigarette and stood up to take his bows. Just listen to 'em; they're wild about me. Just listen to the slobs, Jeannie. Two more weeks of this and we're home free. He thought about his ambitions and his wife and their dreams together. Just two more weeks of this lousy crowd and this lousy club and Big Max, then rest on his laurels . . . a vacation with Jeannie . . . time to pick up the pieces.

He turned his back on the hazy spotlight and stepped through the curtains at the rear of the stage into a dingy hallway leading to his dingier dressing room. Several representatives of Blind John's bare-breasted "Exotic Review" jiggled past him with a "Hiya, Brucie."

He shouldered his way through them. "To the lions, girls. Your turn." He saluted them with a low bow and kicked open the door to the closet Big Max called a dressing room. What a tight bastard. Couldn't he have afforded even cheap green for the room instead of battleship gray? Three light bulbs were burnt out in Bruce's make-up mirror. His ash trays were always full. The joint had no class, just like most of the others he'd worked in on the way up. Dirt, booze, bad money—but it was the only way. Now he was out from under; he'd make his pile and get out.

Kaplan loosened his tie. He shrugged off his soggy dinner jacket and tossed it limply on the hook sticking out from the back of the door. The half-empty bottle of bourbon beckoned him from the dressing table. At least there were a couple of the metallic-tasting ice cubes left in the bucket. He dropped them into a dirty glass and poured himself a double.

The young comic sank despondently into a large over-
stuffed chair—his only luxury article of furniture. The amber liquid in his glass burned his throat. He looked at himself in the mirror.

"Mirror, mirror on the wall, what's fair, baby? Well, it ain't you, baby, that's for sure. You look like you got runned over by a big nasty dump truck. Bang. You're dead." He clowned in front of the mirror. His finger left his holster faster than the eye could see.

His dialogue ended and a haggard face stared back from the mirror, a face creased with lines of premature age and broken up with dull blue eyes that had lost their shine. Too much booze . . . too little sleep . . . he had paid the price of ambition . . . the dues to make it big. Now he could take some time to live again and come back when he was ready. The summer's tan had gone from his face. Only a few freckles remained under the sandy brown hair . . . like his humor . . . short and overextending in a few places.

He had promised Jeannie that once he'd played Blind John's, once he'd made it with Big Max, then they'd see; then he could buy his own ticket; then they'd make up for lost time and lost marriage; then they'd be out from . . .

A loud rapping on his door killed further digression.

"Come in. It ain't locked."

The door swung open. Big Max walked in and closed it behind him.

Bruce took a stiff swallow of bourbon. He was suddenly aware that the gnawing in his stomach that had bugged him all evening was worsening. He dreaded this kind of confrontation. He hoped the Jew couldn't see the muscles in his neck twitching in disgust.

"What you say, Blusy?" Big Max was sucking on his usual unusually obscene cigar. The smoke squirted out of him, drifting up past his bushy eyebrows and balding forehead, further polluting the air in the room. It seemed to close in on Kaplan. He downed another rancid swallow of bourbon.

"Hey, boy, you know you're doin' the nice job here. All the people comin' in they say dat Blusy he's O.K. They all wanna' come back, you know that, boy?"

"Yeah. Thanks, Max."
“You ain’t perfect yet though, boy. You still gotta’ grow a little, you know.” The fat man leered at Kaplan. The gnawing became cold and more immediate.

“What’s the pitch, Max?”

“Well, boy, I think you oughta stay with us about two more weeks. A couple of big conventions comin’ to town then. We’d pack ’em in. You get lots of experience with all them new faces. Be good for the business, too. Yeah, you gonna’ make it big when your name gets around. You’ll do this little favor for Max, huh, boy? Then Max, he gonna’ help you later on. Max, he gonna handle you real good.”

The significance of what the owner said tore Kaplan apart. He was being used and there wasn’t a door left open. The air got fouler as he stared at Max trying to think, trying to focus on a comeback.

“Max, I’d like to help but I told my wife that for sure after this gig. I’d take a week off. See, it’s her birthday and I thought . . . .”

“That’s O.K., boy. I already called your wife. She said it’s all right. She don’t care. She wants you to get ahead, too, boy, just like me.”

“But, Max, my contract says a week. I gotta’ rest, man. I promised Jeannie I’d rest.”

“Yeah, boy, you rest too long and old Max he can’t help you no more. But you work hard for Max, then he work hard for you, Blusy. You make it real big, boy—records, T.V., the Copa. Yeah, then you make it real big.”

Kaplan drained his bourbon glass as the Jew put his hand on the doorknob.

“You think about things, boy. You think about what you really want from old Max.” The door slammed shut and he was gone. Cigar smoke hung in the room like a nauseous curtain.

A dull face stared back at him from the mirror. “Pinch your pennies till they bleed, God damn you, Max.” He picked up the empty drink glass and smashed it against the opposite wall of battleship gray.

“Jeannie, I’m so sorry. Maybe next year.” But he knew there wouldn’t be a next year. His stomach erupted in cold
emptiness. His eyes were wet. He'd made it big. Life was a pile. Somewhere in the bowels of the city, Bruce Kaplan, America's fastest rising comedian put his face in the crook of his arm and broke into uncontrollable sobs.

The Princess and the Toad

by Bob Johns

Journalism, Jr.

ONCE long ago in a land far away, there was a magic forest. Few people ever ventured into the forest, and even fewer returned to tell about the wonders it contained. There was much speculation as to whether those who never returned had met with foul play at the hands of demons or had found a paradise so much better than their homes that they did not want to leave.

In that same land there was a beautiful princess. She should have been happy, for her father the king ruled kindly and was loved and admired by all his subjects. But her heart was heavy with despair, for though she had many suitors, none were worthy of her beauty and grace.

She waited hopefully for a valiant knight who was de-