

REGURGITATIONS

GARY D. RHODES

“AND FROM NEW YORK, AMERICA. That’s our show.”

As Robert ended the program, he gripped some papers in his hands. Nothing was written on them. They were just a prop. He liked to hold them up vertically and tap them on top of the table, straightening them into a stack as if they were a big deck of cards.

When a summer intern nervously approached him, Robert prepared to deal one of the blank pages in front of her, something he could autograph. Interns were always too broke to buy his books.

She looked quizzically at the pen in his hand before speaking.

“Tab said he needs to see you.”

“Tab?”

“Yes. I mean, yes sir. In his office.”

“In *his* office?”

“His office. Yes. I mean, yes sir.”

Then it was Robert’s turn to look quizzical. He marched off the set, down the corridor, up the elevator, down another corridor, down another corridor, and then down another corridor. His slippers shuffled the whole way, which hardly helped his bunions.

By the time he reached Tab’s office, Robert was incensed. They were supposed to meet in Robert’s office or the coffee shop. That was the deal.

Robert took a deep breath and kicked the door open. Not that hard, but hard enough to open it, and hard enough to let Tab know his displeasure had arrived. In the process, his right slipper flew off his foot.

Tab’s lights were off and the curtains were drawn. The room’s only illumination came from a group of candles sitting on a table between two sofas in the corner of the room. Robert was still angry, but had to transfer most of his energy into squinting.

"What the fuck are all these candles?"

"I've used them for months," Tab said. "You just never come to my office anymore."

"Anymore?" Robert asked with the arrogance of a spoiled brat.

"They're therapeutic."

"The candles? Sounds gay to me."

"Well, they put off a nice scent."

"They're covering up a bad smell, you mean."

"So?"

"Yeah."

"Well, I talked to the big man."

"The big man?"

"You know who I am mean, Robert."

"Mr. Nance, I presume?"

"Bigger."

"Bentley?"

"Yeah."

"Well, what did you talk to him about?"

"He owns the fucking place, Robert. He talked to me."

"And?"

"Well, he put it all in this memo."

Robert grabbed the single page out of Tab's hand. Without reading it, he noticed the initials TB. Tom Bentley, WNB's owner. Normally station manager Carter Nance relayed important news, but this time Bentley directly spoke from on high, even if from his office in Scotland, where he kept a tight grip on his united media kingdom.

Without reading it, Robert wadded the memo into a ball and held it over one of the candles. As it started to burn, he looked in vain for an ashtray.

"No one smokes around here anymore, Robert."

Robert puffed out some air to extinguish the small flame and then held the charred paper between his thumb and index finger. He stared at the glowing red edges turning ashen gray when he spoke again.

"So what did he want?"

"This whole Free Pandro campaign. Bentley wants it to stop. Now."

"Why?"

"He says the thing with *The Artist* worked, but it was a one-of-a-kind thing, and now it's time to move on. Lots of folks are unhappy."

“Our ratings are up.”

“No, they’re fine, but they aren’t up. Not anymore.”

“Well, they shot up after I first discovered The Artist.”

“They sure did, but that’s in the past. You’re just kicking him for a few minutes here and there, but it is over, right?”

“What’s this got to do with Pandro?”

“Look, Robert. Bentley was very clear. All this assassination stuff was fine while it lasted, but there’s a chance that WNB is starting to look like it’s a little out of the mainstream.”

“But that’s me. That’s my thing. I’m edgy.”

“It’s over, Robert. Just drop the Pandro garbage and go back to beating up on the President. That’s perfect for you. The election is only eleven months away. You can really make a difference.”

“Mullins is finishing his second term, which means he’s already finished.”

“But the bad press will rub off on their nominee.”

“Fuck this. Lots of networks would die to get me,” Robert said half-heartedly, knowing it wasn’t true.

“Yeah, well.”

“I’ll start my own fucking station. Oprah did it.”

“You don’t have Oprah’s numbers.”

“Close.”

“Oprah didn’t even have Oprah’s numbers. But . . .”

“But I’m not going softly into that dark night.” Robert started to point to the outside world, but with the lights off he could hardly make out where the windows were.

“No one’s asking you to go. Just tone it down. And get back on the President. Back on message. That’s where the money is.”

“I could start my own website.”

“You have a website.”

“I mean with webcasts and shit.”

“Your site is regularly updated with unique footage.”

“No, no, I’m saying that that would be it. We could run our own show and put it online and charge for subscriptions and stuff.”

“Robert, please. Just take it easy. You know, since the rehab you’ve been really, you know... Just take it easy. Get a good night’s rest, and we’ll have coffee in the morning.”

“Don’t ask me to come to your office again. Ever.”

Robert didn't say anything else. He silently got on all fours, moving his hands across the carpet until he discovered the missing slipper. Then he left the room and made the winding journey back to his own office. He needed to grab his suit jacket, he reminded himself. The sweat on the armpits of his white shirt had dried, but it left ugly dark spots.

When he reached his destination, Robert closed the door quietly behind him and practically leapt for the filing cabinet. Therein was a new bottle of Jack Daniels, and the cap made a great sound as each of its little umbilical cords tore off the plastic ring.

Robert held the bottle with both hands and lifted it to his lips, pouring it down his throat as fast as he could. Some of it escaped out of his bottom lip, running down his chin and onto his shirt but, what the fuck. It was already discolored. He didn't care about his clothes, or about the blank pages on his desk that were soaking up the spillover. He held his two hands higher and higher to suck down as much of the booze as he could.

Some of the whiskey backed into his nose, which caused him to slam the bottle down onto his desk. He could hear that it knocked something over, and when he opened his eyes he saw that it was a picture frame. Not the one of his kids or the one of his parents. It was the photo of Roger Mudd.

Robert had never met Mudd, but he had always admired him, particularly as a kid. Mudd was totally old school. A great TV journalist and anchor at CBS and NBC. One of the all-time champs. Robert had always told everyone that Mudd was the reason he got into the whole news game. And it was true.

Picking up the frame, Robert noticed it was really dusty. Some secretary or maid or somebody should have cleaned this, he thought to himself as he tried to stare through the dirt. He hadn't even realized he was crying until a couple of the teardrops fell quietly onto the glass, mixing with the grime rather than cleaning it.

Robert carefully sat the frame back onto his desk and rubbed his eyes. He spotted his jacket hanging on the back of his office door and walked towards it. When he did, he stumbled and hit one of his knees on something. Too much booze. After a few seconds, he stood up and made it to the door.

Time to go, he thought, staggering towards the elevator. He pushed the down button over and over again. The pain he felt in his knee seemed to be getting worse. He'd really messed it up. And he'd forgotten to replace his slippers with shoes.

Once Robert was inside, the two metal doors shut and the elevator jerked downwards. He saw the digital numbers go from ten to nine to eight to seven. It was like the countdown before a rocket launch.

But then everything stopped. Takeoff had been aborted. Robert fumbled at the buttons, but nothing happened. The fucking elevator was stuck. He grabbed for his phone, but it wasn't in his pocket. He'd left it in his office with his shoes. So he pushed the emergency button.

His knee throbbed and his head started to heat up. That was when he got that green feeling in his tummy. Breakfast, lunch, coffee, booze. All of it spewed violently onto the elevator floor.

Robert had to rest. It was like the whole world was sitting on top of his drunken shoulders, so he squatted down to the side of his vomit. The rancid smell caused him to throw up again. Sweat poured off his brow and armpits. He felt green again, but the third time unleashed little more than a succession of dry heaves and an amazingly horrible taste in his mouth.

He untucked his shirt and unbuttoned every button, hoping to cool down. And then he sat and he sat and he sat.

After ten or fifteen minutes, more or less, he grabbed onto the railing and stood up just long enough to hit the emergency button again. This time it made a buzzing sound. Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuckety fucking fuck. The first time he must not have actually pushed it hard enough.

Once again Robert slumped onto the floor, still feeling hot and wildly out of breath. But more than anything else, he was hungry, like his body was completely empty. It came over him like a tidal wave. A crazy appetite, as if he was starving. He hadn't eaten dinner, and he'd lost breakfast and lunch. In fact, to be perfectly honest, he hadn't eaten any breakfast and lunch had been fairly small. And now he was so fucking hungry, hungrier than he had ever been in his entire life.

It took another five or ten or fifteen minutes before the elevator finally started moving. By that time, all of the vomit was gone. And even though Robert had just eaten, he was still hungry.