"A Funny Thing Happened"

by Mike Murphy

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1 INT. "THE CHUCKLE HUT" COMEDY CLUB - EVENING

A run-down comedy club. A dozen or so small, circular tables, several of them unoccupied, are scattered about. Cigarette smoke is visible rising in the harsh lighting. A peeling sign reading "The Chuckle Hut" (with the U's in the style of laughing mouths) hangs over the worn hardwood stage. The MASTER OF CEREMONIES, an older man in a worse-for-wear tuxedo, takes the stage to polite applause and removes the mike from the stand. It squeals a little as he starts talking.

M.C.

Thank you! Thank you! You're too kind, but I *love* it. (beat)

Ladies and gents, The Chuckle Hut takes great pleasure in presenting this next act, a ventriloquist I saw bring down the house in Beantown. This guy is going places and, fortunately for us, he's making a pit stop here tonight.

(beat;

enthusiastically)

Here's Joey Gordon and his little wooden pal, Mikey!

There is a prolonged drumroll and a smattering of applause as the M.C. puts the mike back in the stand, and JOEY and MIKEY take the stage. Joey, a young man in his late 20s, holds his dummy, Mikey — who is dressed in a cowboy outfit — in one hand. The drumroll and applause fade out.

A DRUNK yells out from one of the back tables.

DRUNK

Hey, which one's the dummy?

Some audience members chuckle.

FADE OUT.

2

2 INT. HERB CONROY'S OFFICE - THE NEXT MORNING

HERB CONROY, an older man wearing a loud sports jacket, sits idle at his desk. He spins a quarter a few times and watches it settle on his blotter.

The intercom buzzes. We hear BEV, his secretary, through the speaker.

2 CONTINUED:

BEV

Mr. Conroy?

Herb stops the quarter in mid-spin and presses a button on the intercom to respond.

CONROY

What's up, Bev? I'm a busy man. Makin' deals, makin' bookings!

BEV

Joseph Gordon is here to see you, sir.

Conroy presses the reply button again.

CONROY

My favorite client! Why didn't you say so?

BEV

I just did. Get the wax out of your ears, big shot.

He presses the reply button one last time.

CONROY

(clears his throat) Send him in please. We don't want

to keep Mr. Gordon waiting.

Herb rises and crosses his office to meet Gordon at the door. As the door is opened, we see that a sign on it reads "Herb Conroy - Talent Agent."

Joey, looking a bit distressed, enters the office. Herb greets him with a big slap on the back.

CONROY

Joey, good to see you! And here I thought my day was gonna bite the big one.

JOEY

You want the door closed, Herb?

CONROY

Don't you worry yourself about that. The Herb Conroy Talent Agency, Inc. can't have a big star like you closing doors! (beat; calling) Bev, close the door, will ya?

(CONTINUED)

In the far office, Bev angrily rises from her desk and slams the door between the offices shut.

CONROY

You can't find help like Bev any more. . . Thank God.

(beat)

Can I get you something? Coffee,

tea. . .

(sotto voce)

. . . maybe a shot of the hard stuff?

JOEY

Booze? It's ten in the morning.

CONROY

Too early?

JOEY

Nothing for me, thanks.

CONROY

Kid, I saw your act last night at The Chuckle Hut.

JOEY

You did? I didn't see you.

CONROY

Anyway, it was brilliant. Funny, funny stuff!

JOEY

Thanks.

CONROY

I had a guest with me: Mario Suarez. Does that name ring a bell?

JOEY

Can't say it does. Should it?

CONROY

He's a big-shot talent agent from L.A. He *loved* the bit you did in Spanish. He practically fell off his bar stool laughing.

JOEY

Herb, I -

CONROY

I didn't understand any of it myself. Two years of French One in high school. Who knew, huh?

JOEY

Herb -

CONROY

Mario thinks he can get you some high-profile bookings: Conan, Fallon, Kimmel -

JOEY

Herb please!

CONROY

(beat)

What... What is it, Joey? Is there a problem?

JOEY

Oh yeah.

CONROY

What?

JOEY

(beat)

I don't. . . I don't speak Spanish.

CONROY

No?

JOEY

Not a syllable.

CONROY

Then. . how. . .

JOEY

I have no idea. . . and I'm worried.

FADE OUT.

CONROY

(chuckles)

You're pulling my chain. Always joking!

JOEY

I'm serious.

CONROY

You're telling me that your dummy, Mikey, took over the act?

JOEY

Of course not! That went out with The Twilight Zone.

CONROY

Then what?

JOEY

I wish I knew.

(beat)

I started doing my bit on supermarkets. Suddenly there was this. . . this *other* voice in the room.

(beat)

I didn't know what was happening, but I figured. . . well. . . you know: The show must go on.

(beat)

I tried moving Mikey's mouth so it would *look* like he was speaking Spanish.

CONROY

That bit went on for five, six minutes!

JOEY

I was winging it all along.

CONROY

Mario almost passed beer through his nose!

JOEY

That was real Spanish?

CONROY

Yeah.

CONTINUED:

JOEY

What was Mikey saying?

CONROY

Mario told me it was a mother-daughter thing - you know: The long-suffering mom and the thirteen-going-on-twenty-one daughter.

JOEY

Then it just. . . stopped. I got off the stage as fast as I could. Well, you saw me!

CONROY

To big applause I might add.

JOEY

Herb, what the hell happened?

CONROY

It sounds like somebody hijacked your act - another ventriloquist.

JOEY

There aren't many of us around. I could count 'em all on the fingers of one hand. . . OK, maybe two. It's not a crowded field, like stand-up.

CONROY

Where are the other ventriloquists this week?

JOEY

They're out touring too. That's why you decided early on to book me solely for New England gigs. You didn't want me running into another act in Des Moines. A little ventriloquism goes a long way! It can get kinda thin if there's too much of it available.

CONROY

Any clue who might have done this? Did the other voice sound familiar?

JOEY

No.

CONROY

You didn't. . . uhm. . . screw anyone over who'd want to get back at you?

JOEY

Herb! You know I don't work like that. I'm as honest as the day is long.

(beat)

Ask any club owner about Joey Gordon. Any one of them! What will he say?

CONROY

Nice guy, straight shooter, etc., etc.

JOEY

That's right! I got to where I am today because of talent, hard work, and lost sleep - not by stepping on people's toes. I may not have much, but I've earned it all fair and square.

CONROY

Well, if this mystery man was trying to torpedo your act, he messed up and did you a favor.

(beat)

With Mario on board, this could be the break we've been waiting for.

JOEY

But the bit he liked so much - the one in Spanish - I can't do that.

CONROY

You don't have to do it.

JOEY

Huh?

CONROY

O'Brien, Fallon, they're not gonna allow five minutes of nothing but Spanish on their shows.

(beat)

Do you have any new bits ready?

JOEY

A few. I've been writing.

CONROY

Good!

(beat)

Help me out, kid: After two more nights at The Chuckle Hut, your next gig is in New Hampshire, right?

JOEY

Yeah - on the 22nd.

CONROY

Finish writing your new stuff, and try it out there. Just because the Spanish bit got you some attention, that doesn't mean you married to it.

JOEY

But, Herb, I -

CONROY

You write. I'll talk to Mario about those TV bookings.

JOEY

But the guy who took over my act

CONROY

Screw him! Some punk getting his jollies. It'll probably never happen again.

JOEY

I hope not.

CONROY

You want me to talk with Jack Leslie, the Hut's manager?

JOEY

Why would you do that?

CONROY

Last night was a great set, Joey - don't get me wrong! - but it wasn't exactly a standing-room-only crowd.

JOEY

There were more seats than people.

3

CONROY

With Jack's help, it probably wouldn't be too hard to pick your mystery man out of the crowd.

JOEY

(beat)

No. Don't bother.

CONROY

The guy's probably a *local* jerk. He's not gonna follow you cross country.

JOEY

(beat)

I suppose you're right.

CONROY

Of course I am! Has Herb Conroy ever steered you wrong?

JOEY

Well. . .

CONROY

Don't answer that!

(beat)

See: You said *one* word and already my belly hurts from laughing!

(beat)

You're gonna be a big star, kid. I can feel it!

JOEY

You really think so?

CONROY

I know it! At first, you might just get to do your five minutes, and then Fallon will break for a commercial. These aren't the old days, where Carson would give you the high sign and tell you to come sit on the couch beside Ed.

(beat)

That might take a little while
. . . but we'll get there, Joey.
We'll get there!

FADE OUT.

4 INT. THE CHUCKLE HUT COMEDY CLUB - NIGHT

Joey and Mikey are on stage in front of a small but appreciative crowd. The laughter is light, but audible.

Joey has his hand in the dummy's back, working the controls. Mikey, dressed in jeans, sneakers, and a T shirt, rests on a little podium, his legs hanging over the front.

JOEY

Mikey, it's time to pack things up now.

MIKEY

Why?

JOEY

The show's over.

MIKEY

"Pack things up?"

JOEY

That's right.

MIKEY

That means. . . me!

Some people laugh.

MIKEY

Don't do it, Joey! What did I ever do to you?

JOEY

What are you talking about?

MIKEY

I don't want to go back in the box.

JOEY

C'mon, Mikey. It's a very nice box. Very restful.

MIKEY

So's a coffin.

Some polite laughs are heard.

4 CONTINUED:

MIKEY

How do you know that it's a nice box?

JOEY

I built it for you.

MIKEY

What did you build it out of?

JOEY

A tree, of course.

MIKEY

What. . . kind of tree?

JOEY

An oak, I think. Why?

MIKEY

My brother! You built a coffin for me out of my brother!

Some people chuckle.

JOEY

Ladies and gentleman, Mikey and I hope you've enjoyed yourselves tonight.

MIKEY

Get out while you still can!

A few chuckles are heard.

JOEY

I'm Joey Gordon.

MIKEY

And I'm the brotherless Mikey.

JOEY

We thank you and wish all of you a good night.

The drumroll sounds. There is a smattering of applause as Joey and Mikey take their bows and walk offstage.

FADE OUT.

Pooped, Joey enters. He carefully puts Mikey down on a table and then, with a sigh, flops into an overstuffed chair.

Conroy walks in behind him, still in the loud jacket.

CONROY

Good show, kid.

JOEY

Thanks, Herb.

CONROY

Was that new material I heard?

JOEY

Yeah. I figured I'd try some of it out before New Hampshire.

CONROY

It was funny. The crowd liked it.

JOEY

You call that a "crowd?"

CONROY

It was better than last night, and tomorrow night will be even better. You'll see.

JOEY

Fortunately, one guy wasn't there.

CONROY

That made me happy too.

JOEY

I hope he never shows up again.

CONROY

(chuckles)

As my grandmother used to say, "From your mouth to God's ears."

JACK LESLIE, the club's owner, enters the dressing room. He is an amiable guy with a fringe of gray hair and powerful glasses.

JACK

Good show, Joey.

5 CONTINUED:

5

JOEY

Thanks, Mr. Leslie.

JACK

You gave my customers their money's worth.

CONROY

What did I tell ya, Jack: The kid's going places.

JACK

Why'd you leave out the bit from last night?

JOEY

(beat)

Which. . . Which one was that?

JACK

The one in Spanish. It killed.

CONROY

Joey's trying out some new material.

JOEY

I can't do that Spanish bit every night. I'll wear it out.

JACK

Can you do it tomorrow night?

JOEY

Well. . .

CONROY

He'll try.

JACK

Good. Good.

(beat)

Herb, stop by my office on your way out, will ya? I'd like to talk about Joey making a return engagement soon.

CONROY

Sure thing, Jack. I'll be there in five.

Jack walks out of the room. Joey calls after him.

JOEY

Thank you, Mr. Leslie.

After a beat, he turns to Herb.

JOEY

Herb, what the hell?

CONROY

What did I do?

JOEY

You know I can't do that Spanish routine. Why'd you tell Mr. Leslie I would?

CONROY

I didn't say you would. I said you'd try.

JOEY

I don't -

CONROY

If Jack asks about it after tomorrow's show, you say, "Oh, I'm sorry, sir. I plum forgot."

JOEY

"Plum?"

CONROY

OK. Leave that word out, but use the excuse. I know him. He'll buy it.

JOEY

Can you be here tomorrow night?

CONROY

I'm afraid not, kid. I'm working.

JOEY

For who?

CONROY

For you. I'm going out to dinner with Mario Suarez. He wants to talk about your TV bookings.

JOEY

(beat)

Oh.

5 CONTINUED: (3)

CONROY

You'll do fine, Joey. You can tell me all about it the next morning.
(beat)

Knock 'em dead!

FADE OUT.

6 INT. HERB CONROY'S OFFICE - THE NEXT NIGHT

6

5

Herb is just leaving his office when his phone rings. He answers it.

CONROY

Herb Conroy.

On a split screen, we see who's calling him - a nervous Jack Leslie, the club emptying out behind him.

JACK

Herb, it's Jack.

CONROY

Hiya. Can you make it quick? I'm off to a business dinner.

JACK

We've got problems.

CONROY

Whaddya mean "we?"

JACK

I mean you, me, and Joey.

CONROY

Is he bombing?

JACK

I wish. It's. . . It's much worse than that.

CONROY

What, Jack?

JACK

He collapsed on stage. The paramedics are taking him to Mercy Hospital.

(beat)

(MORE)

7

CONTINUED:

JACK (CONT'D)

I'm going with him in the ambulance, but you'd. . . you'd

better come.

FADE OUT.

7 INT. MERCY HOSPITAL E.R. - LATER

> A bustle of activity. Doctors are milling about each curtained-off cubicle. Patients and family members can be heard moaning, chatting, and crying. We hear the occasional doctor page over the intercom.

Rushing inside, a winded Herb sees Leslie and, approaching, calls out to him.

CONROY

Jack!

JACK

(relieved)

There you are. I was getting worried.

CONROY

Traffic was murder. I think I blew every light between my office and here.

(beat)

How's Joey?

JACK

He's gonna be OK.

CONROY

What happened?

JACK

He had a heart attack.

CONROY

Joey? He's not even 30.

(beat)

What happened at the Hut?

JACK

His time was nearly up. Then he started that Spanish bit from the other night.

CONROY

He did?

7 CONTINUED:

JACK

Before I knew it, he was yelling at the audience at the top of his lungs. Stuff like: "You won't do it to me again" and "Show yourself, you coward!" Then he grabbed at his chest and collapsed. I called 9-1-1.

CONROY

Can I see him?

JACK

I don't. . . There's his doctor.

(calling)

DR. HOVERSON!

The doctor, 40-ish and wearing a white lab coat, turns. The two men walk to him.

HOVERSON

May I help you?

JACK

Doc, this is Herb Conroy, Joey's agent.

HOVERSON

A pleasure to meet you.

CONROY

Yeah, you too.

(beat)

How's. . . How's Joey doing?

HOVERSON

He'll be alright. Fortunately, Mr. Leslie's club is very close to the hospital. Mr. Gordon should suffer no lasting effects.

CONROY

(incredulously)

Jack said Joey. . . had a heart attack?

HOVERSON

That's right.

CONROY

How does that happen to a young guy like him?

7

HOVERSON

Part of the explanation includes his heart murmur.

CONROY

My mom had that.

(beat)

Joey has it too?

HOVERSON

He never told you?

CONROY

Not a word.

HOVERSON

By itself, a murmur isn't necessarily dangerous. However, as in Mr. Gordon's case, when you add stress, high blood pressure, and overwork to the mix, things get complicated.

CONROY

What do you want him to do?

HOVERSON

I'm going to keep him here at least overnight for observation. After he's released, he'll need to change his diet, get more exercise, and start taking some meds that I'll prescribe.

(beat)

I also want him to take a month or so off to rest and regain his strength.

CONROY

I'll cancel any gigs he has coming up.

HOVERSON

That would be wise.

CONROY

May I see him?

7 CONTINUED: (3)

HOVERSON

He's being moved into a room on the fifth floor now. Let me find out the room number for you.

FADE OUT.

8 INT. JOEY'S HOSPITAL ROOM - LATER

Joey lies wide awake in bed, propped up on pillows. Beside him, a heart monitor beeps at a steady rate. Conroy enters the room and approaches him. Joey sees him and smiles.

JOEY

Hey! How's it goin', Herb?

CONROY

That's what I should be asking you.

(beat)

Jack told me what happened.

JOEY

Good. That saves me the trouble.

CONROY

The Spanish bit again?

JOEY

Yeah. My pal was back.

(beat)

I just couldn't play along this time, Herb. I. . . I blew up.

CONROY

Why didn't you tell me you had a heart murmur?

JOEY

Because it's no big deal. Both of my sisters have one. It's never bothered them.

CONROY

They don't have the stress and workload you do.

(beat)

The doctor wants you on mandatory R & R for a while.

(CONTINUED)

8

7

8 CONTINUED: 8

JOEY

How long?

CONROY

A month.

JOEY

But my gigs -

CONROY

Will be canceled tomorrow morning. We're not taking any chances with your health.

JOEY

(beat)

Oh damn.

CONROY

What?

JOEY

I just remembered about your dinner with that agent tonight. Did you have to. . .

CONROY

Yeah.

JOEY

Geez. I'm sorry.

CONROY

Don't worry about it. Mario sends his best. . . and he promises that we can work on booking those TV gigs as soon as you're up for it.

FADE OUT.

9

9 EXT. JOEY'S HOUSE - DAYS LATER

It is a beautiful afternoon outside of Joey's suburban home. A young man - TRISTAN SMITH - parks his car in Joey's driveway and gets out. He is thin, dark haired, and looks to be in his early 20s. He reaches into the car through the open window and pulls out a large bouquet of flowers. He turns, walks up to the front door, and rings the doorbell.

After a beat, Joey, looking tired, opens the door.

9 CONTINUED:

JOEY

Yes?

SMITH

I have a delivery here for Mr. Joseph Gordon.

JOEY

More flowers?

SMITH

Yes, sir.

(beat)

Where would you like them?

Joey gestures inside the house and opens the door up wide so Smith can enter.

JOEY

How about on that table, with the rest of the forest?

SMITH

(chuckles)

Sure thing.

Smith enters the house, and Joey closes the door behind him. In the living room, we see a very large collection of flowers from well-wishers. Smith walks into the living room, and Joey follows him. He puts the bouquet down on a table with the rest of the flowers.

SMITH

There ya are: Part of the forest.

Joey pulls some dollar bills from his wallet and begins to pass them to Smith.

JOEY

Here you go.

Smith waves him off.

SMITH

Oh, no thanks. I couldn't.

JOEY

(confused)

If you insist.

(beat)

I've never known a delivery guy to turn down a tip.

9 CONTINUED: (2)

SMITH

Just meeting you is tip enough.

JOEY

You're a fan of mine?

SMITH

A big fan.

Joey picks up the bouquet and turns it over a few times.

JOEY

Who are these from? I don't see a card.

SMITH

They're from me.

Joey is understandably confused. He puts the bouquet back down.

SMITH

I'm not *really* a delivery guy, sir. I came here to. . . to apologize.

JOEY

For what?

SMITH

(beat)

I'm the guy from The Chuckle Hut.

JOEY

(beat)

The one with the Spanish. . .

SMITH

Right. Tristan Smith.

Smith holds out his hand, which Joey ignores.

JOEY

You hijacked my act!

SMITH

I can explain.

JOEY

You gave me a heart attack!

SMITH

That wasn't my plan.

JOEY

What was your plan?

SMITH

I only wanted to introduce myself. But, when you took the stage, the temptation to join in the act was too great.

JOEY

You're a ventriloquist?

SMITH

I'm trying to be.

JOEY

You're not Spanish.

SMITH

I can do *lots* of accents: British, German, Spanish - you name it.

(beat)

I was hoping you'd introduce me to your agent.

JOEY

You could have called him.

SMITH

I couldn't find the time! I'm working all kinds of jobs and just getting by. I wanted to attend all three of your shows, but I could only afford tickets for two.

Joey is trying to keep his anger in check.

JOEY

Mr. Smith, I think you can understand why I'm not interested in helping you.

SMITH

I'm sorry for what happened. Really.

Joey starts walking to the door.

JOEY

Get out of my house.

SMITH

But, Mr. Gordon -

9 CONTINUED: (4)

Joey can hold his anger no longer.

JOEY

Out! I want you out right n-

He moans in great pain and grabs at his heart, frightening Smith.

SMITH

Mr. Gordon?

Joey collapses on the floor.

SMITH

Mr. Gordon!

Smith kneels beside Joey and feels for a pulse. After a few seconds, he nervously stands.

SMTTF

Holy. . . I'd better get out of here!

Mikey calls from the other room.

MIKEY

Stop!

Smith looks about.

SMITH

Who. . . Who said that?

MIKEY

(still calling)

A witness.

Mikey approaches Smith from the other room, walking eerily under his own power. His wooden limbs clack together as he moves. He stands in front of Smith, who rubs his eyes.

SMITH

I. . . I'm seeing things.

MIKEY

All you're seeing is me, murderer.

SMITH

But you're a. . .

MIKEY

Say it.

SMITH

A. . . dummy.

MIKEY

You're not too smart yourself.

SMITH

You can talk?

MIKEY

Yeah. Walk, talk, all kinds of stuff.

SMITH

(chuckles uneasily)

It's a gag. Mr. Gordon's pulling my leg to get back at me.

(beat)

Good one!

MIKEY

A dead guy can't throw his voice.

(beat)

Go ahead. Check for a pulse again.

Smith kneels and does as instructed.

MIKEY

Anything?

Smith rises.

SMITH

No.

MIKEY

That's because he's dead. This heart attack was a fatal one.

SMITH

Did you ever talk to him?

MIKEY

I didn't need to. Joey was good to me. He oiled my hinges and touched up my paint job. My traveling trunk was padded and comfortable. I had no complaints.

SMITH

(beat)

You can't be alive.

MIKEY

What am I made out of?

SMITH

Wood.

MIKEY

And where does wood come from?

SMITH

A tree.

MIKEY

Trees are alive. I'm alive.

SMITH

(beat)

This can't. . .

MIKEY

You've ruined everything!

SMITH

It was an accident.

MIKEY

Try explaining that to the police.

SMITH

You wouldn't?

MIKEY

I might. . . unless. . .

SMITH

Unless what?

MIKEY

With Joey dead, I'm. . . unemployed. There aren't many job opportunities for an out-of-work ventriloquist dummy, and I don't want to end up at the city dump.

(beat)

You're gonna take over the act.

SMITH

Me?

MIKEY

I'm all yours now -24/7.

(beat)

Herb's a real shill. (MORE)

9 CONTINUED: (7)

MIKEY (CONT'D)

He'll take you on as a client. Some of the places where Joey and I were booked will want replacement talent.

SMITH

I can't appear on the stage with you! Everyone will know you're Mikey. They'll ask questions about. . .

Smith looks down at Joey's body.

SMITH

. . . him.

MIKEY

Give me a new paint job. Slap a moustache on me. I can be. . . "Miguel." That will work for your Spanish routine.

SMITH

I. . I can't.

MIKEY

Did I mention that Joey had a gun?

SMITH

No, you. . . didn't.

MIKEY

I know right where it is.

(beat)

Look at these fingers.

Mikey holds out his right hand, moving the fingers rapidly.

MIKEY

There's just enough life in them to pull the trigger.

(beat)

Do we have a deal?

SMITH

(exasperated)

I don't see any other way out.

MIKEY

That's because there isn't one.

(beat)

Let's go work on the act.

SMITH

But Mr. Gordon -

MIKEY

He's fine where he is. No trouble. We'll call the cops later - right before we hightail it out of here.

SMITH

(beat)

OK. . I guess.

MIKEY

One last thing.

SMITH

What?

MIKEY

During our tour together, if you ever get the idea to run off and leave me alone in some podunk town. . .

SMITH

Yeah?

MIKEY

Remember: I don't need to sleep. You do.

(beat)

Let's get busy.

Mikey walks back into the room he came from. With one last look at Joey's body, Smith follows him.

FADE TO BLACK.