

GETTING THE JOKE

Written by

Adrian Tullberg

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[adrian.tullberg@gmail.com](mailto:adrian.tullberg@gmail.com)

EXT. CITY - AFTERNOON

In an alleyway, a nondescript man in a white overall is closing the rear door of a nondescript white van, and gets into the driver's seat.

GAIL (O.S.)  
Stop me if you've heard this one.

Inside the van, the driver peels off a fake mustache, latex, lays them next to a Batman uniform. Starts the engine, drives off.

GAIL (O.S.) (CONT'D)  
A magician walks down the street  
and turns into a grocery store.

INT. HOME OFFICE

KEVIN, perfectly average tax attorney, holds his phone to his ear, rolls his eyes.

KEVIN  
Nice one. Is that a subtle hint you  
want me to get dinner for tonight?

Kevin covers up the mouthpiece when some teenage irritant skateboards way too close outside.

GAIL (O.S.)  
Mmm-hmm. Equally subtle; I want you  
to go to Josh and take the offer.  
It's an extra twenty thousand a  
year for the same job you do at  
home.

KEVIN  
Is twenty thousand enough for  
working in the city? There's a  
reason we paid so much for the  
house.

GAIL (O.S.)  
Gotham isn't that bad anymore.

KEVIN  
I didn't know they let you get high  
where you worked.

GAIL (O.S.)  
We're going to need that office  
once we get around to having kids.  
(MORE)

GAIL (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Phone Josh before he thinks about  
some other guy he did acting  
classes with in college.

Kevin pulls out a nearby scrapbook, wets his finger, opens it  
to a picture of a younger Kevin in theatre garb.

KEVIN

We met because of my truly  
legendary acting in college.

The teenager is trying to do tricks, only being annoying,  
especially his sole audience, Kevin.

GAIL (O.S.)

We met because I said you were the  
best thing in a mid-semester  
performance of Hamlet in my review.  
Considering your competition, you  
didn't have to work that hard.

KEVIN

I'm brilliant, you're easy. Got it.

GAIL (O.S.)

And you're getting dinner. No  
vegetarian for me.

KEVIN

It won't kill you.

GAIL (O.S.)

Let's not risk it. Bye.

Kevin sets the phone down, tries to get work done, but is  
distracted by the skateboarder. Annoyed, he opens the window.

KEVIN

HEY!

Distracted the skateboarder turns - hits a crack, falls face  
forward, lands headfirst on the pavement. The sickening crack  
is evident of the kid's fatality.

The comical look on the kid's face, turned directly at Kevin,  
sets him off. Repressing his laughter, he quickly closes the  
window, ducks out of sight, trying to suppress. It's  
terrible, but still; funny.

Kevin looks outside; no witnesses.

EXT. HOUSE

Kevin drives off, past the kid, out of the street.

EXT. ROADS

The white van is out of the city, heading near a mountainous, more prosperous neighborhood.

The van goes off road, seemingly into a rock wall; the wall briefly opens and closes.

COMPUTER

Recognizing covert vehicle 7-J.  
Welcome home.

BATMAN (O.S.)

Open auxiliary garage.

INT. GARAGE

The van parks alongside other perfectly average-looking cars.

THE BATMAN emerges from the drivers side, approaching the back.

BATMAN

Open Sub-Level 7

Batman opens the rear, and hauls out the distinctive shape of a body bag. Heaving it over his shoulder, he heads towards the open doors of an elevator -

- oblivious to an astonished ROBIN, tools spread around revealing he was engaged in maintenance.

Batman enters the elevator, the doors close on his back - but the exterior doors are still slightly open. The baterang longed inbetween the doors might be responsible.

As the elevator starts to descend, Robin squeezes through the doors, and into the shaft.

INT. ELEVATOR SHAFT

Robin is riding the top of the elevator, face betraying confused rage.

EXT. ROADS - DAY

Kevin is driving around, still guiltily grinning over the incident. He's also a little lost.

Searching for a landmark, he suddenly stops -

- an old, boarded up theatre. Kevin looks around, checks his watch. There's time.

INT. THEATRE

A chink of sunlight precedes Kevin's entrance. Old, dusty but still in excellent condition. He marvels at the large area before running up and vaulting onto the stage. You can tell he's dreamed of being up someplace like here.

Kevin notices something just offstage. An old boater hat. A cane. Juggling apparatus.

Grabbing the hat and cane, he starts making a few moves.

Applause. Kevin looks out - there's someone in the audience. Someones. They like what they're seeing.

Encouraged, Kevin keeps going. Starts juggling. He's good and getting better by the second.

The crowd is mysteriously growing in the stalls, loving what they see.

Kevin looks out at his growing crowd - and sees something in the darkness. A tall cloaked figure in the box seats.

Kevin looks around, keeping on with the show, but now nervous - the same shadowy figure with pointed ears is now high up the balcony.

The figure jumps, flying directly towards Kevin.

Kevin drops everything, backs away, turns to run -

- and falls down an open trapdoor. To the biggest applause and cheers of the night.

INT. MORGUE

Batman exits the elevator with his burden, to a miniature morgue; examination table, apparatus, and several mortuary fridge doors lining one wall.

Batman sets down the body bag, stands upright.

BATMAN  
You've improved.

Robin is standing just outside the elevator door.

ROBIN  
You were distracted. I guess  
breaking your one rule would do it.  
Are you covering up your murder?

BATMAN  
Concealing an ongoing crime.

Batman stands aside, inviting Robin to look. Robin goes over,  
opens the bag; it's THE JOKER, still grinning in death.

ROBIN  
You? (no) Gordon? (don't be stupid)  
Barbara?

BATMAN  
Ran into traffic trying to escape.  
Internal hemorrhaging after being  
hit by a Chrysler.

ROBIN  
Their stock's going up.

BATMAN  
I got rid of the body before the  
driver knew what she hit.

ROBIN  
Wh ... you think Harley's going to  
after-

BATMAN  
(Indicating the other lockers) Open  
the others.

Robin crosses over, opens the door, looks - and can't believe  
what he's seeing. He opens, looks at another, and another,  
and another -

- they're all The Joker. Variations in height, mass, face,  
but unmistakably the bodies of the Crown Prince of Crime.

INT. UNDERSTAGE

A figure, lying in a pile of dust and rags, stirs. It's  
Kevin, clothing irreparably torn, covered in a fine sheen of  
off-white dust. He stands, tries to dust himself off, looking  
around.

Repurposed into a dressing room area, the understage is also dotted with cupboards and boxes. Kevin finds caches of knives. Guns. Marvels at a massive pile of money. He looks at a carefully packaged chemistry set, and several jars of a glowing green liquid with a smiling skull and crossbones symbol-

STAGEHAND (O.S.)

Welcome back!

Kevin looks around; there's a woman, blonde, setting up a framed photograph next to a row of similar photographs. There's smears of the same white power that's covering him, on her face.

KEVIN

Sorry; I've never been-

STAGEHAND

*(Pronounced New Yawk accent)* Don't be silly! Now sit down and rest a bit before your next number, okay?

Stagehand sits him down on a dressing room table, sets down something in front of him; a scrapbook.

STAGEHAND (CONT'D)

Looking through this always cheers you up.

She leaves, Kevin wets his finger, starts leafing through; it's reviews, reviews about him. Praising him. Confused, he looks at the first entry, on yellowed, decaying newspaper, dated 1940. Continuing leafing through the book, Kevin notices that there's red staining on the pages, transferring to his lips via his finger.

Kevin looks up; blood tripping from above. A growling, shuffling makes him look through the stage floorboards, the creature that made him fall is snarling, through the gaps.

Kevin stands on the table, peering through the gaps; something is attached to the creature's head, a metal mask, obviously driven into flesh and bone.

STAGEHAND (O.S.) (CONT'D)

You were the one who noticed first.

Kevin jumps down.

KEVIN

Who did this to him?

Stagehand looks aside, Kevin follows her gaze to another gap in the wall -

- looking out at the audience. Laughing, cheering, jeering.

KEVIN (CONT'D)  
Which one of them?

Something flies off stage, lands in the chest of one of the audience members in a visceral spray. Gasps of shock turn into cheers as ushers remove the body and replace it with an identical audience member.

STAGEHAND  
Does it matter?

KEVIN  
How do I get up, out-

STAGEHAND  
Exit's over there.

Kevin looks at an old fire exit, sunlight illuminating it. A thud from the stage is proceeded by a drop of blood.

KEVIN  
I meant on stage.

The stagehand smiles, kisses him.

STAGEHAND  
I know a way up.

Stagehand leads him past the photos she was at earlier; the last one she was hanging up was a headshot of him, smiling -

INT. MORGUE

- like the corpse Batman and Robin are standing over.

BATMAN  
A failed comedian turned stooge for the Red Hood gang. Stabbed by a patient suffering a psychotic break in Arkham. (next) Napier, a mob gunman. Fatally annoyed someone during a supervillian team-up. (next) A former underboss for the emerging Russian syndicate. Caught shrapnel when one of his deathtraps exploded too early. (next) An anarchist with a penchant for self-mutilation.  
(MORE)



BATMAN (CONT'D)

His gang opened fire on him when he publicly burned the loot from their biggest heist. (*next*) An accountant. Ms. Rebecca Brown is still waiting for him.

Batman stands back, mask off, while Robin examines the bodies.

BATMAN (CONT'D)

These bodies are what I could find. Hid them here. Fingerprints, bloodwork, DNA, tissue samples, even some deep scarring, all identical.

ROBIN

This one ... that heist with the Riddler? I just thought Arkham had too many carbs in their meatloaf that time.

Batman is seated, looking exhausted.

BATMAN

When he first died, it was a relief. Then ... when he returned, he became more dangerous. More ...

ROBIN

More.

BATMAN

Yes. Each one; similar, but subtle differences in knowledge, skillsets, M.O. Sometimes they know who I am. Or forget they ever knew. Or cared. There are times I doubt he's even aware of the process.

ROBIN

So, how is he doing this? Telepathy? Body hijacking? A ghost?

BATMAN

Something more subtle. The transference of an idea. A concept. A meme-

ROBIN

You don't know.

BATMAN

I don't know. I've run every available test and investigation. I keep the bodies to run more. I even arranged for Zatanna and Fate to investigate. They found nothing.

ROBIN

You have a theory.

BATMAN

Fate and Zatanna; their abilities are dedicated to the study of what is essentially very old. What the Joker has become; is very new.

INT. BACKSTAGE

Stagehand is nervously keeping a lookout outside a dressing room door with a dented, broken star. It opens; Kevin emerges in an old, dusty top and tails, hair slicked back, but still off white from the dust.

KEVIN

You're amazing, finding something here that fit.

STAGEHAND

Of course it fits; it's yours.

KEVIN

Okay, we go out, get him outside, away from these crazy-

STAGEHAND

He won't. He won't leave the stage. I've seen it before.

KEVIN

I'll try to talk to him. On stage.

STAGEHAND

He hates you. They made sure of that.

KEVIN

He's scary. He's also suffering.

MANAGER (O.S.)

You're early.

They turn to see a man in glasses, mustache and smoking a pipe, not pleased to see them.

MANAGER (CONT'D)

You're meant to stay below. And  
you. I don't care for prima donnas.

Kevin looks behind the manager - huddling around an old coin-operated coffee machine, waiting in the wings are several characters; A man with half applied makeup flipping a coin. A redhead with a green body stocking. A small man in a top hat. And a man in an old diving suit, frosty mist escaping from the helmet. All are nervously studying scripts. And past them, an old man waving a sword in a vaguely swashbuckler fashion is trying to manoeuver around the wings of the creature.

MANAGER (O.S.) (CONT'D)

He's out there, he's the star.

The Manager hands Kevin a rolled-up script.

MANAGER (CONT'D)

You wait your turn, say your lines,  
and go back below.

Kevin looks at the script, then the manager.

KEVIN

I've always been better at improv.

Kevin takes the pipe, jams the mouthpiece into the Manager's eye.

As the Manager goes down, Kevin walks up to the man with the coin, takes the coin, and puts it in the coffee machine, presses the button. As the owner desperately scrabbles where his coin went, Kevin walks up to the redhead, produces a rose from his hat. AS she reaches out for it, Kevin throws it aside, she goes after it, Kevin helps by kicking her in the backside, sending her sprawling. Kevin then pushes tophat's headwear down over his ears. Diving suit approaches menacingly - by now the coffee has finished. Kevin takes the coffee and pours it into the helmet, shutting the aperture. Kevin walks out onto the stage past this bevy of pretenders.

INT. STAGE

The old man is staggering around with his sword, trying to look dignified. Kevin doesn't help when he walks up and shoves the old man into the orchestra pit to rousing applause.

KEVIN

Ladies and Gentlemen, your star is  
here!

Kevin bows, pratfalls, lands in a somersault. His stage smile covers his nervousness when the creature stalks behind him.

Kevin turns, trying to look at the creature; difficult when it stays primarily in the shadows.

Mugging for the audience, he moves closer, grabbing it's arms, mock dancing with the creature, while examining the metal mask.

KEVIN (CONT'D)

I'm trying to help you.

The creature tries to shake him off, but he continues his examination.

KEVIN (CONT'D)

I can't get it off your face. The inside's cracked (realising) Move your face, okay? Smile. Grin.  
Laugh. If you laugh, your pain will stop.

Jeers and booing distract Kevin long enough for the creature to shake him loose. The efforts send the old man's sword flying into two audience members, who are quickly replaced.

Kevin gets up, dodges a blow from the creature with incredible comic timing.

KEVIN (CONT'D)

Ladies and Germs! We are the greatest double act in the history of this theatre. And I promise you, you will love what I do, and love what I do to you. I will make you weep, I will make you cry, but most of all, I will make you laugh! And no matter how long it takes, I will make him laugh, no matter how many of you I have to go through! Because that's what every great duo on stage does; the funny guy must always try, every night, to make his straight man laugh!

Kevin dodges the creature with increasing skill and timing.

In the wings, the other performers are watching, smiling, and laughing.

The audience are laughing, harder and harder. Some have distinctive green hair and eyes.

Just like the performers; all of them now have green hair, pale skin, and laughing hysterically.

Kevin smiles, matches their laughter. The only ones not laughing now are the creature and the Stagehand.

KEVIN (CONT'D)

And I promise you all, once I work out what makes him laugh? I will leave this fleapit! And the whole world will laugh with me!

Kevin reaches offstage; produces two revving chainsaws. His laugh now a warcry, Kevin charges, and stage dives the audience, chainsaws akimbo.

INT. MORGUE

Batman is slumped in his chair, Robin leaning on the wall.

BATMAN

He's obsessed with me. That's good. It means he's limited to Gotham. Until-

ROBIN

Who else knows?

BATMAN

You. Me. Alfred. Gordon.

ROBIN

Barbara?

BATMAN

No.

ROBIN

No? Why? Actually, why hide this?

BATMAN

Whenever he escapes, the suicide rates spike. What do you think will happen if it gets out that the Joker is practically immortal?

The penny drops.

BATMAN (CONT'D)

You can only contain him. If he dies, by accident or design, someone else dies, by accident or design. Someone else ...

(MORE)

BATMAN (CONT'D)  
taken over. Someone else gets  
possessed. Someone else ...

ROBIN  
-Gets the Joke?

BATMAN  
(*devoid of humour*) Ha. Ha. Ha.

EXT. HOUSE - NIGHT

A woman pulls up at Kevin's home; GAIL. She notices the  
police car and ambulances, winding up from the accident.

INT. HOME OFFICE

Gail enters, tries the lights, not working

GAIL  
Kevin?

A figure emerges from the darkness.

A sound makes her turn; a carving knife being sharpened.

She looks up, and is terrified-

- by Kevin. Face bone white, Hair green, purple suit, eyes  
green, and a terrifying smile. The Joker.

JOKER  
Stop me if you've heard this one.

END