

## **Praise for *The Material***

‘Camille Bordas’s novel is wryly funny and painfully awkward, populated by an irresistible cast of overthinkers and second-guessers. It’s a deep and illuminating pleasure, full of insights about stand-up comedy, group dynamics and the inner lives of artists’  
Tom Perrotta, author of *Tracy Flick Can’t Win*

‘Like the most brilliant comedy, *The Material* is not only very funny but also incisive and insightful. Reading it, I understood more acutely the thin line between the plausible and the absurd. Come for the laughs, stay for the observations so deadpan and accurate that you may be blinded by your own reflection’  
Ling Ma, author of *Bliss Montage* and *Severance*

‘Camille Bordas has an overabundance of charm, and knows how to land a punchline’  
Nicole Flattery, author of *Nothing Special*

# The Material

CAMILLE BORDAS



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For Adam Levin

# The Enemy of Comedy

ON WEDNESDAYS, THREE OF THEM had to perform, in turn, a four-to-six-minute routine that the whole class then proceeded to rip apart, joke by joke, beat by beat, until there wasn't anything left and the budding comedians went home to consider other possible career paths. After searching the internet for what other jobs existed, though, after twenty minutes of this, they already had a joke about it begging to come out, a joke they thought would kill next time they went up for critique, one that played on how unfunny they'd been that last time, how they'd considered retraining, going into plumbing or whatever, counselling, but then realised how bad they would be at that, too (joke-joke-joke), and it would all be so meta, so self-deprecating, no one would have a choice but to laugh and laugh, and just like that, they were at it again – writing.

Except, of course, next workshop, they realised everyone else had gone for it as well, the modest bit, the apology, and their own critique of it was merciless: 'It's been a bit over-done,' they said, 'this "I'm only good at telling jokes" stuff.'

School was supposed to widen your horizons, leave you with the feeling that everything was yet to be invented, or reinvented, but after a semester in the comedy programme

most of the students felt the opposite, that jokes were in limited supply, and that they weren't finding the ones that were left fast enough.

Their teachers could sympathise. Or at least Dorothy could. She remembered her fear at their age, whenever she wrote a joke, that somebody else was writing the exact same one (or the same one but better, or the same one but worse – all options equally bad) and would tell it to an audience before hers was stage-ready. She had pictured a race back then: comedians, scribbled-on napkins and Xerox-warm paper sheets in hand, rushing to deliver their lines to a faceless man who collected all jokes and would soon whistle the end of the hunt. On good days, that fear of the whistle had kept Dorothy up and writing. On bad ones, it had turned into fantasy – if only that whistle existed, she'd thought, if only someone could blow it now, what a relief it would be, to hear that it was all over, that she could stop trying.

'Were they funny in their application tapes?' Ben Kruger asked her, about their current students.

Kruger had only started teaching in the Stand-Up MFA three months earlier. He wasn't buying the students' despair. He believed they were hazing him, that they were being deliberately unfunny to test his commitment as a mentor. It was an egotistical view – no young comedian would ever risk looking bad in front of another, especially one as famous as Kruger – but Kruger had spent more time talking to Hollywood people than comedians lately, and his paranoia was reaching new levels.

'Of course they were funny,' Dorothy said, trying to ignore the question's subtext, Kruger's implication that perhaps she and Ashbee were unable to recognise a good bit, raw

talent, promising young people.

‘So, what,’ Kruger said, ‘they just start sucking when we admit them? They just come here and suck for a year?’

‘They don’t suck. Dan is good. Olivia.’

‘They don’t suck for *a year*,’ Ashbee said. He’d just joined them in the conference room.

‘When do they become good again?’

‘End of their first semester,’ Ashbee explained, like it was science. ‘Right around now, in fact. Soon they’ll start doing their impressions of us, and that will be rock bottom for them. You’ll see. They get good again after that.’

‘Impressions?’

‘It’s pretty embarrassing.’

‘But you have to laugh a little,’ Dorothy said. ‘Even when it’s not funny, you have to laugh at at least *one* thing when someone does an impression of you.’

‘I don’t laugh,’ Ashbee said. ‘You can’t start laughing when it’s not funny. That’s the worst thing you can do to a young comedian.’

The job of teaching comedy, Ashbee often said, consisted almost exclusively in sitting there, not laughing, while your students tried something. It could be painful, for all parties involved, but that was how they learned – it was in your silence that they eventually heard something click.

‘Well, I always laugh a little when they do me,’ Dorothy said. ‘Maybe it’s a woman thing.’

The room was filling up, a particularly well-attended faculty meeting, Ashbee noted. He remembered that pre-winter-break meetings tended to be, because of the cookies. The Victorianists always made cookies before Christmas.

The Stand-Up MFA was attached to the English Depart-



ment, which many English professors resented (comedians belonged in Performing Arts, if they belonged anywhere at all in academia, was the thought), but the resentment was civil. Ashbee liked that about academics, that it never went beyond whispers in the hallways, or petitions no one read.

‘Should we make an announcement about the show tonight?’ Kruger asked.

Their students were performing that evening in a traditional end-of-year battle against the Second City improv troupe.

‘No one wants to go to that,’ Dorothy said.

Theodore Sword, the current English Department chair, took his seat at the conference table and thanked everyone for coming.

‘I know we’re all tired,’ he said, ‘and some of you have class in an hour, so I will keep this brief.’

Kruger, on his notepad, jotted down the words ‘I’ll be brief: Part One, Section A, Subsection 1.’ He was toying with the idea of a bit about academics, how convoluted they could make the simplest proposition. He crossed out the whole thing. ‘I’ll be brief,’ he wrote on the next line. ‘I’ll be brief for three reasons—’ and felt more satisfied with that structure.

‘I have news to share,’ Sword said, for real this time, not under Kruger’s pen.

No one had expected news. It was the last week of the semester. Last-week meetings were for self-congratulation and snacks.

‘I have news to share regarding Manny Reinhardt.’

Kruger stopped doodling. He looked at Dorothy, who looked at Ashbee. They hadn’t been warned that the meeting

would be about Manny. For weeks, Manny had been scheduled to be their visiting professor of comedy in the spring, but a student association had raised concerns about the hire, and last Ashbee had heard from Sword, it was time to find a replacement.

‘What about him?’ someone asked, from Rhetoric. ‘Did he break anyone else’s nose?’

‘There’s borderline behaviour with women now, too,’ said someone from Theory. ‘I read about it last night.’

The distinguished professor of medieval studies said she wasn’t at all surprised.

‘You could always hear it in his jokes,’ she said. ‘The guy hates women.’

The comedians remained silent. It bothered Dorothy, though, that ‘just listen to his jokes’ comment. As if Manny had only ever written about women. To reduce Manny’s all-encompassing misanthropy to simple misogyny was dishonest, Dorothy thought, or proof that even an overeducated English scholar could fall victim to partial readings, scanning someone’s work for the lines that fed their theory while ignoring those that questioned it. And how had the papers come to discuss Manny’s treatment of women? It had all started with Manny punching a guy at the Comic Strip, Thanksgiving weekend. The guy – an up-and-coming comedian – hadn’t pressed charges, but he’d posted photos online of his broken nose and swollen eye, gaining tens of thousands of followers in the process. He’d been honest, too, about having looked for it (he’d called Manny many names), and for a few days, it had seemed like the internet would sort it out, dividing itself between ‘boys will be boys’ and ‘nothing ever justifies violence’ factions until everyone

got tired. But in the last week, bizarre stories had started to emerge. Three women had come forward with accusations of emotional misconduct. It appeared that Manny had slept with each of them at some point, once and only once, proposed marriage that same night, and never called again.

‘I’m glad he won’t be coming here,’ the person from Theory said. ‘My kids come do their homework in the teachers’ lounge sometimes.’

‘Wait, what? Reinhardt’s a pedophile now?’ Vivian Reeve said, from Creative Writing.

Though Ashbee and Dorothy were relieved to hear someone speak up for Manny, they wished it hadn’t come from Creative Writing. Everyone on the Fiction faculty was trying a little too hard to befriend them, probably hoping for some TV connections. Vivian Reeve had cornered Kruger at his first department party back in September, to flatter him, to share with him her idea that comedians were to the twenty-first century what novelists had been to the twentieth, the artists that the public turned to for enlightenment, for comfort and understanding. They were the new social critics. More Americans had streamed Kruger’s special the week it had come out on Netflix than would read a novel that year, she’d told him, numbers that Kruger had been flattered by, but unable to verify.

‘The man is fifty-four,’ the distinguished professor said. ‘All these women he slept with were, like, twenty-five. Sound like children to me.’

‘He’s not on trial for being *gross*,’ Vivian Reeve said.

‘He’s not on trial at all,’ Sword reminded everyone. ‘So let’s go back to the question of his hire.’

‘What hire?’ one of the Victorianists asked. ‘There’s no hire. We can’t hire a visiting creep.’

Sword informed her and everyone else in attendance that in spite of undergraduate agitation, in spite of the Comedy Strip altercation and the . . . persistent marriage proposals, the university had confirmed Manny Reinhardt’s hire.

‘The paperwork is in. Mr. Reinhardt signed it this morning.’

Kruger glanced at Ashbee and Dorothy. They were beaming. He tried to force a smile. Kruger hadn’t shared this with them, but he’d been pleased with Manny’s fall from grace. Not that he disliked the guy (the guy was hilarious), but the idea of Reinhardt’s forced retirement didn’t sound half-bad. More room for Kruger, Kruger thought. He believed it worked that way, that getting the status and respect you deserved was only a matter of room being made for them by people who’d recently lost both. Also, maybe he *did* dislike Manny a little. He was pretty sure Manny disliked *him*. Years ago, when asked in an interview who the most interesting young comedians were, Manny hadn’t named Kruger, an omission Kruger had interpreted as intentional, a direct insult.

Sword wasn’t able to say anything for a while. Whose decision was this? his colleagues asked. What kind of PR nightmare was the administration devising for itself? Hiring a man with a history of violence? Of emotional misconduct? Even just for a semester? This would be national news, the professors said, and they seemed to understand what that meant as they said it, their names possibly printed in *The New York Times*, potential email invitations to write an op-ed, and not just for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*.

‘Look, I don’t like this any more than you do,’ Sword managed to say once the room had started recycling arguments (except he did, he did like it, he was a big fan of Manny Reinhardt’s and couldn’t wait to meet him). ‘But my hands are tied. The decision is coming from way up.’

‘Whose decision is it exactly?’

‘It’s coming from way up,’ Sword repeated. ‘And the dean signed on it already. It’s a done deal.’

These were thuggish methods, half of the room agreed. Unacceptable. What next? What next if the department gave in to upper administration thugs? Should they simply let them decide whom to hire from now on? Let them handle the curricula, the committees? Place their own friends in teaching positions to give them honourable front jobs? This notion of a professor mafia gave Ashbee the ghost of an idea for a bit: wise guys given front jobs in academia rather than on construction sites, what that would look like. The cast of *The Sopranos* teaching linguistics. Paulie Walnuts misunderstanding Virginia Woolf. Or better yet, actually, funnier, Paulie Walnuts *relating* to Virginia Woolf, feeling her struggles deeply. Ashbee waved away the image as quickly as it came. He’d vowed never to let his teaching life encroach upon his comedian life, to not turn into one of those people in Creative Writing who could only write campus novels once they became teachers. It wasn’t easy, but he’d held himself to it. As the founder of Stand-Up as an academic discipline (the Chicago MFA had been the first of its kind), Ashbee could’ve been first on many jokes to be made about the job, but he’d refrained. Now that comedy programmes had opened all over the country, teaching comedians went for it, used their students as material, and used their

colleagues, too – the campus setting in general. They made fun of the concept onstage, the concept of teaching comedy, teaching people how to be funny. They all presented it as an impossible task and threw their own students under the bus as proof, quoting their worst jokes, all the while cashing the university's biweekly cheques. Ashbee believed that using your students as comedy fodder was an abuse of power, but he'd come to understand that the kids actually sought it, the onstage nod. Better to be made fun of by a famous comedian than never mentioned at all. He looked forward to retirement.

Sword glanced at his watch and then through the window, down all nine floors to the L train platform he would later stand on himself, when it was time to go home. Everything was grey, the platform, the rails, the buildings and the air around them, everything appeared crusted in salt post-blizzard, as if salt itself had fallen from the clouds, and not snow. This was Chicago to him, this texture. He was relieved whenever the city went back to it. First signs of winter made Lydia melancholy, though, more than usual, and he felt like a bad husband for finding beauty in the sky's colour, that finger-blended pencil. He'd just taught his last class of the semester. After weeks of sad stories and black-and-white films, he'd wanted to end his Epiphany seminar on a light note, discuss romantic comedies, make fun of all the running involved in romantic epiphanies. The students hadn't gotten it. When they realised they loved someone, they'd said (and they'd said this as if it happened to them once a month), they could just text them.

Sword heard a colleague say the word 'unbearable' and remembered at once where he was – not on the L platform

yet, not yet home, not only in a department meeting but running it. He made accidental eye contact with Dorothy as he turned his gaze back to the room, and wondered if he should hold it (at the risk of coming off as predatory) or break it immediately (at the risk of coming off as the scared-of-women type). Dorothy broke it first to look down at her nails. She'd been thinking about painting them lately. Something she'd never done before. Would it be weird to start in her late forties? she wondered. Would it look desperate? She hadn't been onstage in years, but she had a new special in preproduction, and she wondered about presentation, how she should present herself now, whether to stick to what she'd done her whole career (her appearance and her sex an afterthought, things that, in an ideal world, would go unnoticed, so focused would the audience be on the strength of her writing) or to change it up to better fit the times, hop onstage all made up and bare legged. She hated her legs. Not that there was anything wrong with them, really, but who needed to see them?

The meeting ended and she stayed behind in the conference room with Kruger and Ashbee. One of them should contact Manny, they decided, make him feel welcome.

'When's the last time you heard from him?' Dorothy asked Ashbee.

Ashbee had been the one to send Manny the invitation to teach with them for a semester. He hadn't expected him to agree – this was an invitation Manny had declined every fall since the programme had started. Ashbee usually dealt with Manny's agent, but Manny had responded directly this time. He'd just taped a new special, and he wouldn't be touring during the months Ashbee mentioned: the stars were

aligning, for once, and he'd be delighted to give teaching a try. 'These kids are my son's age,' Manny had also written. 'Maybe this will help me understand his generation better.' He'd written to Ashbee as if Ashbee had been part of his life the last thirty years. Ashbee barely even knew Manny had a son. Hadn't really spent any time with Manny since the nineties, and even then, it had been somewhat forced, circumstantial, only brought about by the sudden shrinking of New York's comedy scene, all those clubs closing one after the other, Ashbee and Manny two of a handful of guys to hold on for dear life, to fight for time on the remaining stages. They were often the last ones to leave a club back then – Manny because he loved drinking, Ashbee because he needed to tell himself he'd squeezed out the night's every possibility, met everyone there was to meet. They hadn't liked each other much.

'We exchanged a few emails back in September,' Ashbee told Dorothy. 'Practical stuff about the programme.'

'And since the . . . accusations?' Dorothy said.

She wasn't sure what to call what was happening to Manny. She thought punching someone was worse than asking women to marry you, but no one seemed to care about the punching anymore. What people seemed to find important was whether Manny had offered marriage before or after he'd had sex with the women. Dorothy couldn't quite see what difference that made.

'Since the accusations, we haven't spoken,' Ashbee said.

Dorothy looked at Kruger.

'You?' she said. 'You talked to him lately?'

Kruger had vastly exaggerated his connection to Manny. They shared an agent, and had done a charity event in Los



Angeles together the previous year, but that was about it. The only words they'd exchanged that night had concerned the food in the greenroom. Three months ago, he'd heard Manny on a podcast poking fun at comedians who tried to make it as serious actors, and because the movie Kruger had shot with Meryl Streep was about to come out, he'd taken it as another jab at him specifically.

'We haven't been in touch,' Kruger said. 'I don't think I should be the one to call him anyway.'

'Why not?'

Kruger thought of his father then, who hadn't answered or returned his calls the last couple of days. He was probably just tired, Kruger thought. The nursing home would've told him by now if something had happened.

'I don't think he likes me very much,' he said, about Manny. 'Plus, I'm new to the programme. It's probably better if one of you walks him through everything.'

It was enough of an excuse, but Kruger added more, for extra protection. He was teaching in just a bit. He had a phone call scheduled with his agent after that, and then the battle against Second City tonight.

'Nothing says we have to call him *today*,' Ashbee said.

'Really, I think it's better if Dorothy calls him,' Kruger said.

'Why's that?' Dorothy asked.

Kruger wondered which she would be least offended by: if he called her a woman, or if he called her a girl.

'Because you're a girl,' he said.

Dorothy raised an eyebrow. She knew what he meant, of course.

'Ben's right,' Ashbee said. 'It's stronger if it comes from

you. He'll know you're not one of the crazy ones, always siding with the women no matter what. And you can reassure him that our female students aren't either.'

'I don't know what our female students think,' Dorothy said.

She'd heard Olivia talking about it with Artie, though, before their improv class on Monday. How the accusations against Manny were counterproductive because they made women look weak, and calculating, and whiny. Who cared whether Manny proposed or not? Olivia had asked Artie. What did it matter whether he'd talked about marriage before or after sex? People said that if he'd mentioned it *before*, then he'd purposely misled the girl. But then what did it say about the girl? That she'd only fucked a celebrity she wasn't attracted to because she pictured financial security on the other side of it? Was *that* a good reason to sleep with someone? This hadn't been Dorothy's conversation to step into, and so she hadn't, but she'd thought that Olivia was forgetting to consider the small possibility that all these women had been in love with Manny (people did that sometimes, fall in love instantly), that they'd believed it was mutual and had been hurt when they'd realised Manny would never call. Not that being heartbroken gave you any right to talk to the press, but it did make Dorothy feel for the women. When Manny had told her, almost thirty years earlier (*after* they'd had sex), that maybe they should get married, she'd known to laugh in his face, but still. There'd been a part of her that hoped he wasn't kidding.

'I guess I'll give him a call,' she told Kruger and Ashbee, not looking at either.

ARTIE WAS UP FOR WORKSHOP today, and class was in an hour. He rehearsed his bit one more time in front of the mirror, something his roommates made fun of him for. Rehearsing in front of the mirror was for actors, according to them, not comedians. It was for vain people. A good comedian was the opposite of vain, they said (though none of them seemed to know what the word for that was). Artie argued that the best comedians were those who had total control over their slightest expressions, complete self-awareness, and how did one get to complete self-awareness without observing oneself a little bit too closely for a while, without a touch of vanity?

‘That’s the whole trick,’ his roommates had said. ‘To have one and not the other.’

‘I know what you’re thinking,’ Artie said to his own face in the mirror. He thought it was a great way to open, acknowledging the audience’s doubts. ‘You’re thinking, *This guy is too good-looking to be funny.*’

Which was something he’d heard countless times.

‘It wasn’t always like this.’

Part of Artie’s four minutes today involved showing his classmates a blown-up photo of his teenage face (not the

worst photo of him that existed, but a close contender) and pointing at different ‘problematic’ areas with a laser pen. The problematic areas were zits and crooked teeth, that kind of thing. Nothing crazy, nothing out of the ordinary. An unfortunate haircut. He’d been a bit fat, too, at the time, which wasn’t something anyone could believe when they saw him today, at twenty-four years old. He thought it would be funny, adopting a cold professor persona, presenting on his own face as if it were the map of an old battlefield, going over the forces at work, the opposing factions.

One of his roommates knocked on the bathroom door.

‘Your mom’s on the phone,’ he said.

‘I’m busy.’

‘She says it’s important.’

He pushed the door open and handed Artie the phone. Why did they even have a landline? Who was paying for this? On his way out, his roommate glanced at Artie’s teenage photo, the blown-up face printed on cardboard, and didn’t even smile at it.

‘Mom,’ Artie said into the phone. ‘It’s Wednesday. I’m rehearsing.’

‘I know, sweetheart, but Mickey’s missing.’

‘He’s not missing. He’s probably at Ethel’s.’

‘Have you heard from him?’

Wouldn’t he have told her first thing if he’d heard from his brother? Was there a joke to be made about this? Either to his mom, right now, or in general, later and for an audience, about how people didn’t think before they spoke?

‘Mickey’s a grown man,’ Artie said. ‘He’ll show up in a couple of days.’

‘That’s not the definition of a grown man,’ his mother said. “Shows up eventually.”

Wasn’t it, though? As opposed to ‘runs away from responsibility and severs all ties to start over elsewhere, never to be heard from again’? Didn’t being an adult mean pushing away that fantasy eighty times a day and judging those who gave in to it?

‘How’s Dad doing?’ Artie said.

‘Why are you asking about Dad now?’

Artie heard his father clear his throat in the background. You always thought he was going to say something, he cleared his throat so much, but Artie couldn’t remember him speaking the last few times he’d visited.

‘Well, his son is missing,’ Artie said. ‘I thought I’d ask how he’s taking it.’

‘Your father is fine. And even if he wasn’t, you think I would know? You think he would *tell* me? Have you met the man? You think that today, at fifty-six years old, your father is going to start expressing complex emotions?’

‘Not everything needs to be said,’ Artie said. ‘You can get a sense of how people are doing by just looking at them.’

‘He looks the same as always.’

Artie heard his father clear his throat again.

‘Is he wearing the black suit or the grey?’

‘Exactly,’ his mother said, but then caught herself right away. ‘You’re one to make fun. You always wear the same hoodie yourself. And pants, and shoes. I bet your underwear is all the same, too.’

‘Mom.’

‘You and your father, from the same cloth. A single outfit for all occasions, and incapable of expressing your feelings.’

‘I’m in the *trade* of expressing my feelings,’ Artie said.

‘You only tell jokes.’

‘I tell stories.’

‘You *interrupt* stories, is what you do. You stop when you get to the good punch line.’

‘That’s the concept,’ Artie said. ‘That’s the concept of comedy.’

‘I know, sweetheart. I like it. I like laughing. I’m just saying, the things you say onstage, they’re not stories. They’re the funny bits from larger stories. You cut your stories in a way that you never go into what’s moving about them, so I’d argue you actually do the *opposite* of expressing your feelings. You *run away* from feelings.’

‘That’s very insightful, Mom. Thank you for your critique.’

‘It’s not a critique. If you dove into your feelings onstage, you wouldn’t be funny. Feelings aren’t funny.’

‘Okay. I need to get ready now.’

‘Offstage, of course, you can tell me anything.’

‘I know.’

Artie also knew that he couldn’t end the conversation on an *I know*, how dismissive *I knows* were.

‘Mickey’s fine, Mom,’ he said. ‘Probably at Ethel’s.’

‘I don’t like that he still sees her. She’s too old for him.’

‘That’s a very retrograde thing to say.’

‘Do you think it’s my fault?’

‘What? That Mickey’s attracted to older women?’

‘That he’s an addict? I drank so much when I was pregnant with him. I was still bleeding like usual, I didn’t know I was pregnant before month four.’

Artie’d heard the whole guilt shtick before, its various

built-in excuses. It wasn't the first time Mickey had gone missing. Their mother using the word 'addict,' however, was a recent development. He didn't like it. Maybe it was the word itself, though, not her saying it. 'Addict' made his brother sound weak, or like he was in a perfume commercial – eyes half-closed in some supermodel's wake, unable to resist the smell coming off her dramatic neck. That's what the word was for now. Ads. The world of commerce wanted you addicted to snacks, to apps, to some new show on TV. 'Your New Addiction Is Here!' – that's how commercials went now. People in high places wanted you addicted at all times, addicted and obsessed – another word they'd managed to make the public believe had positive connotations. The product didn't matter – in fact, the need for it disappeared the minute there was no supply left, proof that no one had ever been addicted to it in the first place. What had to be kept constant was the flow of trash to be passively ingested. But Mickey needed heroin. Not just any substance. When heroin was gone, heroin had to be found. It could not be replaced by a spin-off, or the new fragrance by Yves Saint Laurent.

Artie thought it was like rape – the word 'rape.' How 'rape' used to mean someone being dragged into an alley by a stranger, gagged, beaten up, savagely penetrated, and left for dead behind a trash can. How 'rape' had now come to encompass any sexual act performed without obtaining verbal consent. He was okay with that, in principle: words taking on larger meanings, larger responsibilities over time – language was a living entity, it adapted to its speakers. But then it seemed to him that when that happened, other words had to step in to fill the vacuum left by the bigger

word's promotion. He felt there should be a word for what 'rape' used to mean. He wondered how women who had been left for dead in alleys felt about it. The new meaning.

'Hello? Am I boring you?'

'No, Mom, of course not. I was just thinking.'

'Thinking about what?'

'Thinking about rape.'

'Jesus, what is wrong with you?'

'About the *word* "rape."'

'Don't even think about using that word onstage. You can't make fun of rape.'

'Who said I wanted to?'

'You don't think about anything unless it's for a bit.'

'I think about Mickey pretty often, and I've never mentioned him onstage.'

Artie's mother thought about it for a second.

'That's because addiction isn't funny,' she said. 'It isn't funny at all.'

'Neither is rape,' Artie said.

'Forget about it. Just don't ever say the word. Only women comedians can use it onstage. Women comedians who have been raped themselves.'

'Make me a list, okay?' Artie said. 'A list of what I can and cannot talk about onstage. That way we don't have to keep having these conversations.'

'That's a great idea. I'll put it in an email.'

About three more minutes were devoted to saying goodbye. Artie promised his mother he'd call Ethel, see if she'd heard from Mickey, and after hanging up with her, he took his cellphone out of his pocket, thinking he would do so right away. Olivia had tried to call him, though, while



his phone was on silent, and his priorities were instantly rearranged.

ARTIE COULDN'T HAVE KNOWN IT, but there was nothing personal there: Olivia had tried to call everybody. Everybody she knew in the area who owned a car. Her own car was in the shop, and she needed someone to take her to O'Hare later to pick up her sister. Her sister (her twin) didn't get into cabs or on subway trains. She'd had bad experiences in both. Olivia had told her that Chicago was different, because the trains there were mostly above ground, but Sally had asked how much time she'd have to be underground, total, between O'Hare and Jackson, where Olivia could meet her after workshop, and the truth was, more than half the trip. Sally wouldn't do it. She would just wait at the airport for an extra hour for Olivia to be done with workshop and come pick her up.

'Your sister sounds complicated,' Johanna said. 'What's her favourite movie?'

'You'll ask her yourself. She's coming to the show tonight.'

'I can't wait to meet her. Are you, like, *identical* identical?'

'She's a bit taller and fatter,' Olivia said. 'Never took up smoking is why.'

'Same voice?'

'Similar. We laugh the same.'

‘Same taste in men?’

‘We laugh at the same ones.’

‘First period on the same day?’

‘Quit it, Jo. I just want to have a nice old coffee time with my friend before workshop. You think you can do that?’

‘What else am I doing? Aren’t I drinking coffee across from you? In this beautiful diner we patronise every Wednesday?’

‘You’re digging for jokes. I don’t want to be funny right now. I’m exhausted. Making arrangements for Sally is exhausting.’

‘Do you think she feels the same about you?’

Jo never quit. The more frustrated you got with her, the longer she went. Her role model was Andy Kaufman – who she was convinced was still alive. In the diner, between loud sips of her coffee, she asked Olivia all the questions about twins that came to mind. She asked some of them twice. Olivia humoured her in the end, because Jo was up for workshop in an hour, and you had to respect the way performers warmed up. Neither of them was a huge fan of Kruger’s work, but they respected his opinion, how he never sugarcoated anything in class. They wanted their act to be undeniable, sure, but perhaps more important than that was being told when it wasn’t. They could tell that Kruger wasn’t impressed with their group overall. He’d smiled a few times so far, but mostly he winced during workshop, and the goal had almost become not to make him laugh so much as to get him, as you told your jokes, to a relaxed and neutral position, face-wise. ‘If he could just look bored and not *in pain*,’ Artie had said a few weeks back. ‘If he could only yawn.’

‘I hope Artie goes up before me,’ Jo said when she ran out of questions to ask about twins.