

Robbie, Fanny and Chester

March 2024

Part 1

Tom Brady is a friend of mine. I know, I know, what a shameless name drop! But it's true. And a funny thing happened last week to do with that.

You've seen the presidents' races at sporting events, haven't you? People will run or skate while wearing oversized heads of past American presidents. I understand they have them in Canada where leaders are for some reason called Prime Ministers. Either way, they are big and unwieldy and funny for those reasons. Occasionally you will see one of these big heads that looks like a movie star, or famous athlete. And that's exactly what I came across last week in the Quincy market, close to where I live in downtown Boston.

Tom Brady was walking down the main drag, enjoying the warm spring day, watching the crowds, stopping to see a busker perform. Except it wasn't the real Tom Brady. It was some guy wearing a big head that looked like Tom Brady and his trademark grin and good looks.

He was noticed of course, and kids would run around him and ask for a high-five, but otherwise this silent character was not being bothered. I walked within a few feet to get a closer look and the guy in the big head costume turned to face me directly and spoke to me.

"Hey dude, you're friends with Tom Brady." He stated suddenly. Yes, I am, I thought, but how did this guy know that. I was too surprised to say anything out loud. I just looked at the window where the mouth of the big head was and where I knew the guy was looking out at me.

He spoke again. "Hey Chester."

"How do you know my name?" I said back, now really wondering who this was. Then he laughed and I know that laugh.

"Tommy!"

He laughed even harder.

I peered into the mouth more closely but really couldn't distinguish his face. "What the hell are you doing in that thing?"

"It's a great day out and I wanted to walk around the market but I didn't want to be hassled by everybody."

"So you dressed up as yourself!"

"Great idea, isn't it?" he said with pride.

It was working. Sure, everyone noticed him but no one was asking for autographs, or who he was dating, or what was he thinking on the 3rd and 14 play when he threw a post even though the corner route was

open or anything like that. He was free to walk around and see what was happening on the downtown streets.

“Where did you get it?”

Even under the huge head I could see Tommy shrug his shoulders. “It was on E-bay. Right in there with my jerseys and rookie cards! The only problem is that I can’t eat or drink in this thing. There are some sweet looking mojitos and tacos back there at the cantina.”

I gave a playful tug on his big head ear. “You’ll have to take this off to have some.”

He said, “wait a minute Chester, you know I’m a famous man. I can’t take it off here.”

“That’s okay, Tom, I’ll go back and get some and I’ll feed you when I can.”

And that’s what I did. Tommy wandered from the market to the North Side for a few hours, and I had the tacos waiting at his place when he got back. I could see him coming up the hill and about half a block from his gate he took his head off and carried it under his arm the rest of the way. A very strange sight to be sure.

When Chester and I were dating I lived with my parents on Nerula and my father did not like Chester at all. So when I wanted to hurt him I would say if you don’t love Nerula then you don’t love me or your gun is smaller than the guns on Nerula. I could be so cruel.

Chester lived on Vetrigaha, alone except for many brothers and sisters, but no one spoke to him there and I only spoke to him to demand attention or to be cruel with my words. Vetrigaha was the same as Nerula for the many reasons that it was different and that was what may have drawn us close together and permitted me to be cruel. Chester had many cargo loads of cargo to take from Nerula to Vetrigaha and my father paid him many promises to transport the cargo loads of cargo.

I soon realized that I could manipulate Chester and that one day he might naquish my father for me. I liked my father but manipulating Chester more pleasurable. Chester suspected my motives. He threatened to return to the solitude of his brothers and sisters on Vetrigaha. I said “wait a minute Chester, you know I’ve a perfect plan. He said “that’s okay babe, won’t you vanquish him when you can.” But I didn’t. I didn’t want to. I wanted Chester to. His gun was at least as big as the guns on Nerula and probably larger than the ones on the dark side of the orb. But my cruel words had manipulated him to think he was small and unloving and he departed from me.

He left with the cargo load of cargo and no payment of promises. I thought this was very unusual and was surprised for many days that he would take a cargo load of cargo for no promises. His last words to me were “I’ll take a load for free.”

Good evening. The Cook County Comic Council have sent me here with their regards for everyone, and to say a word about a funnymen duo remembered as possibly the best there ever was.

The year that the two of them got together and started the act was 1844, which as everyone will immediately recognize, was one of the best comedy years ever. With the possible exception of 1093, 1844 could be argued to be the best year comedy has ever seen. That is why it is so startling to hear what happened next. I don't like to use the word startling, I hate to be in this position of having to startle the audience, but it is surely necessary if we are to be true to the history of comedy, as we should.

Theodore Dickenson and Lester O'Day had moved to vaudeville before the town was founded. Their joke about the chicken and the carriage path will be remembered as the best that century offered. Fearless. Groundbreaking.

Maybe that they both contracted a disease the same day, maybe from the same woman, surely enthralled with all manner of word and jest. Maybe her name was Shirley (their diaries suggest as much, and can be viewed at the Cook County Comic Council archives for a modest fee). Maybe their discomfort and change in disposition was why both tried to be the straight man. But when Theodore broke script and held his mighty hand high, high in the air and shouted "wait a minute Lester!", you knew he was a peeved off man. Turning his back on Lester, he picked up his bag and left with a mumble to the crowd of "I gotta go but my friend can stick around."

Perfectly timed as you would expect, perfect pitch and his trademark regal tilt of his chin.

Lester surely went crazy.

Comedy has been on a slide since then, a slow slide to be sure except 1975 to 1977 during which we all note with dismay the slide almost doubled in velocity. Is there hope? The comic and prophet Willie P. Nostradamush has foreseen the year 2031 being the next calendar-turning period of unparalleled levity and unfathomable chuckle-snorts. The Cook County Comic Council, when sober, disagrees, though they inexplicably thought 1975 wasn't half-bad. We shall see.

And now I bid you good evening. The Cook County Comic Council thank you for laughing at the appropriate moments and ask that you not forget the genius of Crazy Lester and Theodore, surely the best since 1093.

Part 2

"Go down Miss Moses, it's time for you to pray," Reverend Chester said quietly to Harriet Moses' daughter Anna Lee. And so she did, taking the elevator from her mother's 5th floor hospital room to the chapel on the ground floor. Her friend Luke stayed, he was waiting on what the doctor would say.

We don't wish for parents to die; not ours, not anyone else's. Sometimes they have just overstayed the limits of their body, or mind, and it's time for them to leave the room.

Life is for living, for finding our moments, our joy. How much fun can it be when you don't recognize your children, when your adult diaper is soiled, when your body is always in pain? How much fun is it to be the one not recognized, the one changing the diaper, the one witnessing the pain?

Is this how we want to remember our parents? Like this? Will this be the memory we have until we start the slide toward less and less of ourselves as well?

Anna Lee didn't think so. She hoped the joy would return. The thoughts of her Mom will slowly be replaced with more distant and happier memories. But not until there is death. Not until her mother dies.

She sat in the chapel with her head in her hands, ashamed of these feelings, for thinking these things, and that's where Reverend Chester found her and quietly sat beside her. He assumed her head was lowered in prayer.

"May I pray with you?" he asked. "We will pray for God to help your mother get better."

She said, "Wait a minute Reverend Chester, I know you're a praying man. But that's okay ... pray for her to die instead if you can."

Reverend Chester was careful not to show his surprise or anything else. "I don't think I can do that."

"Of course not, Reverend," Anna Lee patted his hand. "I'll do it myself, I don't mind." And she prayed with every will and intention and hope and desperation that her mind could possibly have in that moment for her mother on the 5th floor to not be able to take another breath. Not heartlessly. Lovingly. But immediately. Die mother, oh please die.

Reverend Chester rose to leave. There was a sense in the chapel, a fervency, undoubtedly from the intensity of Anna Lee's prayer, and he didn't want his prayers for Harriet's recovery to get in the way. When he got to the door he met Luke who was peering in.

"How is she?" Luke asked.

"Pretty upset."

"What can I do? I'll do whatever she needs."

Reverend Chester pointed into the chapel. He said, "Do me a favor, son, won'tcha just stay and keep Anna Lee company?"

Hester turned her canned vegetables over on her plate, looking for just one appetizing enough to eat. They were warm but not warm enough to eat and not cold enough to complain about. The chicken was almost tasteless but not so much that she hadn't ticked it on her food card for the umpteenth time in a row. And the mashed potatoes were from a box, she was sure, but for boxed mashed potatoes they weren't as bad as they might have been and when there was some pepper left in the shaker on the table, they livened it up just enough. Such was the dining experience at Rideau Ridge, "retirement living you can be proud to send your parents to". Hester would tell her three children that it was retirement living just barely good enough to send her to, when she had the chance, which wasn't often as they didn't seem interested in visiting. "Just wait until your health declines more" says son Jason, "we'll visit you more then."

Tablemate Margaret seemed oblivious to the entire world outside of the same array of food on her plate which she was moving plate to mouth far more quickly than one would expect for someone almost 90 years of age, and she said nothing and noticed nothing until their third table mate arrived, the last to arrive as usual.

"Take a load off Fanny," Margaret said, spraying warm peas, corn and chicken back in the general direction of her plate.

Fanny sat down. Hester did not give her a look. Her eyes remained fixed on the vegetables as she moved them one by one from the left side of the sad slab of chicken to the right. Fanny noticed the action and knew what it meant. Arthur from the third floor must have done something to upset her. Arthur from the third floor was single and only 82. Arthur from the third floor was the romantic target of half the women in the home and he knew it. Arthur from the third floor was an asshole.

Staff set Fanny's meal in front of her. It was fish instead of chicken, rice instead of mashed potatoes, and salad rather than mixed vegetables. When the server walked away Fanny produced shakers of seasoned salt and chili flakes from her pocket and liberally shook both over everything on her plate. Then she set her attention on Hester.

"Is something troubling you?"

Hester didn't acknowledge her in any way.

Fanny tried again. "Is it trouble with Arthur?"

Hester exhaled slowly, loudly, and took another long pause before finally turning in Fanny's direction. "He gave me a vague."

"A vague what"

"I dunno, it was vague wasn't it."

"Well then, why did he do it?"

Hester raised her hands up above her shoulders in a frustrated gesture. "I dunno! Vague thing, vague words, vague intention. It was just a vague he threw at me and I can't shake it off."

Fanny was having nothing of Hester's silliness. She said, "wait a minute Hester, you know I'm a patient friend. Won't you explain this to me if you can."

Hester's hands had returned to the table but now they were back up again. "I can't."

"Just tell me what he said to you."

"I can't," Hester cried, emotion in her voice. "I don't remember what he said. But it was a vague, I'm sure of that."

"Asshole," Fanny mumbled and Margaret's head turned sharply, her Christian upbringing caused her to react to any words forbidden in the Christian homes she had lived in and she would have said something, she wasn't sure what, but the bite of chicken she was trying to manage was too large to get anything out, possibly even the chicken if she had happened to choke.

Hester's hands had returned to the table. Her gaze had returned to her plate. Her voice returned to quiet and sad. "I don't even remember what I asked him. I don't remember anything now. I just remember that as soon as he walked away that vamp Dolores was all over him."

Dolores had been at Rideau Ridge less than three months and staff had already caught her late at night in several men's apartments and had to shoo her back to her own room. She wore lipstick every day and monopolized the hairdresser appointments, often booking for several days in a row prior to the Saturday afternoon movie in the party room.

"You remember Dolores?"

"Yes, I don't know why but I remember that. I saw her slip him a Werther's."

The ladies ate in silence for a while. No one could think of anything else to add, or, in the case of Hester, remember any additional details. There were days when recent moments in Hester's life just refused to imprint on her mind. Try as she would, she couldn't catch a whiff of them. She might as well have tried to catch a cannonball.

As they finished as much of their meals as they wanted (Hester barely half, Fanny most, Margaret every morsel) and began shifting their focus more widely around the busy dining room, Dolores came through the main doors and walked in their direction. Hester and Fanny watched her and were surprised to realize that she was also looking at them and walking right toward them. She pulled out the empty fourth chair from the table, that one that poor Vida Vajda occupied before her death last month.

Dolores had been crying, her makeup was running, and her perfect lipstick wasn't perfect. She met Hester's eyes and sobbed dramatically. "Arthur died this morning. Or last night. He was dead in his bed this morning. Oh it's awful."

"You were with him?" Fanny asked, a tinge of nasty in her voice.

Dolores looked horrified. "I certainly was not." She stood up with an indignant look. "I just thought Hester should know after what he said yesterday."

Fanny was quick to apologize. "I'm sorry Dolores, I'm very sorry. Tell me, what did Arthur say?"

"When Hester asked him to the movie on Saturday, he joked that of course he would go with her if he didn't die before the week was out. Oh, it's so ironic, like he knew something. Poor Hester. Poor Hester." And with that Dolores took her running mascara and imperfect lipstick and went somewhere else to grieve.

The table returned to silence. It was broken after a half minute or so by Hester. “Oh,” she said.

Fanny patted her arm. “Did you ask for the apple crisp for dessert? I did, it really isn’t that bad,” she soothed while in her sweater pocket she readied the seasoned salt and chili flakes.

You know it’s a long road trip when a single finger on the wheel seems reasonable. The two hands at nine and three were abandoned hundreds of miles ago.

He left home in Las Vegas (the tiny one in New Mexico, not the big one a few hours further west) two days ago. He had a few rest stop naps but otherwise drove a steady pace, focused, unrushed but determined. He only hoped that he would arrive on time. Everything in his existence depended upon it.

Las Vegas was a long way away. He went lookin’ for a place to hide.

He passed the highway exit for Nazereth, Pennsylvania, home of guitar manufacturer C.F Martin and Company, and he was feeling half past dead. It wasn’t far to go now. Then he would know, if he got there before it was too late.

You know she’s the only one.

For the very first time he turned on the radio. Until now, there had been no noise in the car aside from the hum of the car on the highway. And the screaming in his thoughts. The terror. The knowledge of what he might find.

“if you’ll take Jack my dog,” sung the tune, catching it mid-sentence. “I said wait a minute Chester, you know I’m a peaceful man. He said that’s okay—” he turned it off again mid-sentence. That was enough. He couldn’t really hear it above the noise inside his mind. It was an unnecessary distraction when he was this close.

Not long after he came up on the exit sign he knew well. His hands went back to nine and three. He leaned the car slightly to the ramp. Please get there on time. Please don’t be too late.

Thank you for your words, Robbie.

If you’re out there, can you reach me? And lay a flower in the snow.