

Make ‘Em Laugh

by

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Milo Delaney had been a funny man all his life. To him it was an art form. It was his vocation – to make people laugh. He had rebelled against his Catholic church going Jamaican background to become a clown.

‘You gonna waste your life away,’ Auntie Shirley had said, ‘And fo’ what? To be a fool? Well Milo I think you the biggest fool I ever met’.

The whole family had been like that, completely dismissive. They hadn’t understood that for him making people laugh wasn’t a choice. It was a need.

He had been bored at school, lessons had seemed interminably dull, practical jokes seemed the only way to make the time pass. He had never towed the line with his jokes, no stink bombs or water balloons for Milo. Milo invented his own gags. He would often trip himself up in the corridor and do a huge pratfall that made his fellow classmates cry with laughter. Milo just wanted to make people laugh. He didn’t run away with the circus, he studied drama, trained in physical theatre, watched films and studied hard.

And now at the age of sixty five, he could look back on a career of avant-garde theatrical events, cabaret and mayhem. He was proud of his work but it was an indefinable achievement. He had nothing but experience to show for it. It didn’t pay much, so he wasn’t a wealthy man. He didn’t have a home to call his own. His work was all over the country so he hadn’t managed to hold down a relationship. He hadn’t really tried truth be known. It hadn’t seemed important.

It was a wet and miserable day when Milo stepped out onto the street. He had just been to see the specialist. ‘You’ve got to slow down Mr Delaney. You can’t afford to break another bone,’ he had said. ‘At your age, a broken bone is a serious thing. You need to do something else?’

‘At sixty five?’ bellowed Milo, ‘you think anyone’s going to hire an old man like me. ‘It was just a suggestion,’ said the doctor, ‘Really you need to sort this out.’

Milo thought of his act, the songs, and the moves, the carefully choreographed clowning. He walked slowly to the theatre, a song circulating annoyingly round his head.

‘Will you still need me,

Will you still feed me?

When I’m 64?’

That night at The Busman’s Arms where Milo had been doing his act for a couple of weeks, there was an air of glumness about him. He painted his face as carefully as ever, yellow base, big cow like eyes and a deep furrowed brow with a downward sloping mouth. Normally he appeared on stage and people would laugh, because they could see he was twinkling away under the façade of the paint. But tonight his act felt very leaden indeed.

‘Good evening ladies and gents,’ he said as he stood on the stage looking into the darkened smoke filled room. Out of a pocket hidden in his big overcoat he brought out a large bottle of vodka, filled with water of course, but it looked like it was full of

Russia's finest. Milo caressed it. He hugged it. He even kissed it. A few titters arose in the audience. His sad painted face loving the bottle was a funny sight. Then quietly he began to croon

**'You made me love you,
I didn't want to do it,
I didn't want to do it,
You made me want you,
And all the time you knew it,
I guess you always knew it.'**

Milo slid to the floor in a pretend alcoholic haze and he could feel the bruise on his ribs from his fall the night before. He knew in his heart of hearts that he'd have to stop the act. Retire. Go travelling. His heart was heavy as he continued to sing. The audience's laughter became louder and louder. There's something tragically funny about a truly sad clown.

**'You made me happy sometimes
You made me glad
But there were times dear,
You made me feel so bad.
You made me sigh for
I didn't want to tell you,
I didn't want to tell you,
I want some love that's true,
Yes I do,
'Deed I do,
you know I do.'**

Milo opened the bottle tentatively and sniffed the contents greedily. He sang,

**'Give me, give me what I cry for,
You know you got the brand of kisses that I die for
You know you made me love you.'**

He threw his head back took a deep swig of the water and fell back onto the floor with a bang. The lights went out and the room filled with applause.

After a couple of real drinks, Milo packed his bag, said goodbye to the staff at the theatre and left. It was his last night. He had wiped the paint off his face and seen the sadness in his own eyes. It had made him laugh. He had spent so much of his life pretending to be sad and being paid for it that now there seemed to be a bizarre poetic justice about being really sad with nowhere to go. As he left the building he didn't see a woman waiting in the shadows. He walked right past her in fact.

'Excuse me?' said a soft voice. 'Mr Delaney'

'Yes', said Milo, trying to focus.

'I'm Deirdre Kelly. I wanted to tell you how much I loved your show.' She had a sweet smile and an American accent.

'Why thank you young lady, that's very kind.' He started to walk away.

‘I...I...wondered if you were performing again? Sometime soon?’ she asked.

‘No, sorry. At last I get to disappoint my public. I never had a public before.’

She laughed.

‘You’re funny,’ she offered, ‘real funny.’

‘That’s a relief,’ he said. He looked at the young woman and smiled, his eyes full of regret. ‘That was officially my last performance. I’m retiring. Doctor’s orders.’

‘Oh!’ said Deirdre. ‘I....I.....D’you remember Bonny Kelly?’

‘Course I do!’ said Milo. ‘Fine woman. The only one I’d have married if she’d had me and stayed in the country.’

‘She’s my mum,’ said Deirdre.

‘Lord!’ said Milo looking at this grown woman before him. ‘How time flies. Is she well?’

‘Very well but.....’

‘There’s more?’ asked Milo as it started to spit with rain.

‘Fraid so,’ said Deirdre. ‘You....are...my dad.’

Milo froze. The rain became heavier. Deirdre was holding an umbrella but was just staring at him, waiting for him to speak, getting wet.

‘You sure about that?’ asked Milo.

Deirdre nodded.

Milo looked at Deirdre and an unfamiliar feeling was rising in him. He felt very warm, bursting with heat. He realised he was crying so very hard and trying to smile at the same time. Deirdre was unsure what to do. She had one hand outstretched, the other in her pocket.

‘What a beautiful thing you are,’ said Milo as he stepped forward and clutched this stranger to his chest.

The rain started to ease but Milo and Deirdre hung onto each other for an age. He sang so quietly that Deirdre could only just hear him.

**‘My bonny is over the ocean,
My bonnie is over the sea
My bonnie is over the ocean,
O bring back my bonnie to me.’**