

"Hello," LIED THE AGENT

And Other Bullshit You Hear as a Hollywood TV Writer

by IAN GURVITZ



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This book is dedicated to the memory of my parents: Robert Gurvitz and Elaine Gurvitz. And to my family (in order of appearance, so no one gets pissed off): Lisa, Marc, Arlene, Torrie, Rob, Elena, Hana, Lucas, Isabella, Jackson, and Kim.

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INTRODUCTION

According to a now-deceased uncle, the first word I spoke as a baby wasn't "mama" or "dada" but Ajax—not the Trojan war hero, but the popular household cleanser. Like most baby boomers, I was weaned on the box. We watched Kennedy get shot, Oswald get silenced, and the Beatles break through on *Ed Sullivan*; gawked at the *Wonderful World of Disney* (in color finally) and sat slack-jawed during the moon landing. If the TV is on, I can't not look at it. I've been hard-wired. Perhaps it was no accident that I ended up as a TV writer. (Though, just to be clear, I'm not a TV savant. I read newspapers, magazines and, if time allows, even the occasional book. I have a B.A. in Philosophy and most of a Masters in Buddhist studies from Colgate University. Despite the opinions of some critics, possessing more than half a brain and writing for television are not mutually exclusive categories.)

In my career, which is how I euphemistically refer to a long-running series of jobs, random assignments, and blown opportunities, I've been on staff for 11 years on two long-running shows—*Wings* and *Becker*—had three studio development deals¹, (including my most recent one at Paramount) written episodes for various shows, including *Frasier*, *The Wonder Years*, and *Get a Life*, and, in the course of it all, created and produced three pilots that made it on network schedules. All were cancelled within the first 13 episodes. In fact, after 9/11 I was afraid I wouldn't be allowed on the Paramount lot, as I'd already set off three bombs in Hollywood studios.

Yeah, I know. Poor, poor pitiful me. Here's the thing. I've made a great living for almost 20 years as a TV writer, or writer/producer, if you want to get technical about the hyphenate. In fact, most people who work in this business are paid criminal amounts of money. My friend and colleague David Isaacs jokes that when the revolution comes, we'll be the first to go. Second, actually—after the actors. In my weak defense, I'll offer this: I didn't get a break in the business until I was 35, and that was after years in New York of doing shit jobs. (On my first resume I put a heading that read: "My goal is to be a freelance writer," at which point my mother pointed out that I'd misspelled "freelance." My first lesson in proofreading.)

Among the jobs I've held in my life: factory worker, gardener, waiter, English teacher in Japan, bartender, cheese shop clerk, magazine editor (at a publishing company where the owner foamed at the mouth and carried a loaded .38 on his belt), associate editor for a porn magazine (the only job I ever had where you had to wear a tie), travel trade magazine editor, advertising copywriter, and freelance joke writer, all punctuated by seemingly interminable stretches on unemployment. But even then, I adhered to a strict, disciplined work ethic: Get up, take the train out to Long Island City², sign up for my check, take the train back, buy a cup of pre-Starbucks watery Greek diner coffee, some lottery tickets, a *New York Times*, *Daily News*, and a pack of cigarettes, then hole up in my studio apartment fighting back winter depression, while circling the Help Wanted ads in the *Times*, calling a few places, chain-smoking, writing spec scripts³ and praying for four o'clock when *The Odd Couple* came on, and I could bullshit myself into thinking that the day was over and I'd exhausted every opportunity to find employment.

OK, it wasn't a West Virginia coal mine, but I'm also not one of those smartass dilettante fucks who went straight from the *Harvard Lampoon* to *Letterman* to instant sitcom success in L.A. And why didn't I take that easier route? Because my high school grades and SAT scores weren't good enough to get me into Harvard because I didn't apply myself and work up to my potential. Shit, my parents were right.

At present, I live in L.A. in a four-bedroom house with 8 TVs and 3 TiVos. (Not a mansion by Hollywood standards, but a modest home behind gates where, at the moment, gophers are eating my bamboo and I can't get in touch with the guy who was supposed to be here three weeks ago to fix my Jacuzzi. Oh, the humanity!) But I don't have all the TVs because I need to see everything that's on for research purposes. OK, that's part of it. But the reality is I love TV. And I love working in it. So why write a book?

WHY WRITE A BOOK?

It seems odd that, as prevalent as TV is in our lives, most people have no concept of what goes into creating a show, getting it on the air, and keeping it on. Perhaps they assume that the people in charge simply decide what amuses them at the moment, make those shows, stick them on, and wait to see if the public responds. Or just throw darts at a board. The truth, as with most things in life, is more complicated. Each year hundreds, maybe thousands, of writers, either on their own or in partnership with studios, producers, actors, directors, or managers, pitch the networks their visions for shows. Half-hours ("sitcoms" to the world) both single-camera⁴ and multi-camera⁵; hour dramas; animated shows; reality; variety.... It's referred to as being "in development," and is an annual game of musical chairs in which the goal is to get a show on the air in one of the few coveted timeslots on a network schedule, turn that show into a hit, and have it, at least, reach that 100-episode syndication⁶ mark which allows the writer some measure of creative satisfaction while attaining the gold ring of working in TV—"Fuck you money."

"Fuck you money"⁷ is defined as an amount of money that can range from tens to hundreds of millions of dollars and can, depending on one's lifestyle, marital status, and spending habits, allow you the freedom to pursue projects on your own terms, or buy a villa in the south of France, drink a lot of wine and work on a novel. Or take your family and relocate to a spread in Wyoming and live like the actors on *Entertainment Tonight*, who plug their latest movie live from their ranch, where they live year-round and tell the visiting sycophantic reporter how they escaped Hollywood to raise their kids in a normal place amongst regular folk. This is a situation that allows actors to achieve that most rarified actor status: that of being known worldwide as a humble recluse. (It is an interesting Hollywood phenomenon that most people spend half their lives figuring out how to get into the business, and the other half figuring how to get the fuck out. Sorry for the digression, this shit just leaks out.)

Anyway, it occurred to me that keeping a journal while in development might illuminate a side of the business few people get to see, and give them a "behind the scenes" (God, I hate that insipid tabloid TV phrase) look at the day-to-day experience of being a writer in Hollywood. OK, that's part bullshit. I'm not that altruistic. The truth is, after all these years, I found myself bitching about aspects of the business and needed an outlet, which left either writing a book, doing standup, seeing my shrink more often or suffering in silence, but since I don't have the balls to try stand-up, there's no reason to waste a shrink visit bitching about the business when I've got more seriously fucked-up issues to deal with, and there's no money in suffering in silence—that left book.

Actually, the first time I thought of keeping a journal on the development experience was in 1997, as I was driving from Paramount to Sony to meet with the people running Tony Danza's production company to discuss writing a pilot for him. The show I'd been working on—*Wings*—was coming to the end of its 8-year run; Tony had a pilot deal at NBC; and I was about to begin a two-year deal with NBC Productions, their in-house company. It occurred to me, as I was stuck in traffic, that

might be interesting to keep a record detailing the day-to-day experience of creating a television show that might answer some of the legitimate, along with the occasionally inane, questions civilians pose about TV. (See “The Four Predictably Annoying Responses I Get When I Tell People I Write For TV.”)

But I told myself that it was way too much work, a waste of time, one of those fleeting notions you get while stuck in traffic and unless you’re in therapy, prison, on death row, marooned on a deserted island, or happen to be Gandhi, an ex-President, or some other historical figure, who really gives a shit about your experiences? Does the world really need another personal journal? Another “I’m Going to Beat This” cancer diary with a picture of some plucky, 50-something celebrity on the cover with a life-affirming smile and a schmatta⁸ on her head? (What is it with cancer and celebrities? A normal human gets cancer, they call an oncologist. A celebrity gets cancer, they call a publicist.) It’s not like I was going to come up with some new insight into the human condition that hasn’t been hit on for thousands of years of recorded history. Check out the library, does the world really need another book, and, if so, is that a book about working in television? Who gives a shit? Anyway, that’s what I told myself, so I bagged it and turned on the radio.

Little did I know at the time that I would meet with those people, go back and pitch an idea they liked, and get hired to write a script. I also didn’t know that while they were developing my script they were simultaneously developing another script for Tony with another writer, a fact conveniently left out of our early discussions. One of those lies by omission you grow to expect and eventually learn to sniff out. (“Hello,” lied the agent.) In the end my idea was picked, and after an excruciating and seemingly endless series of notes and revisions, we produced a pilot, which was tested, reviewed, promoted and finally premiered. In all, we shot 13 shows, and got cancelled after the fourth airing—which, as often happens, was during late December. “Merry Christmas, you’re cancelled.” At which point everyone hugged, cried, got drunk, railed at the unfairness of the business, and promised to stay in touch, while simultaneously reaching for their cell phones to call their agents to find them a job on an existing show.

Looking back, that experience might have made an interesting story about how a TV show comes into and goes out of existence, along with all the shit the writer goes through in between. Like one of those junior high filmstrips about the sperm’s journey to the egg. So, this time, as the show I was working on (*Becker*) was winding down, and I faced the prospect of starting a new development deal at Paramount, I decided to keep the journal. My reasons were two-fold: catharsis. I need to bitch. (It’s part of my cultural heritage, or perhaps just my own psychological makeup.) And frustration. Both as a writer and a viewer.

As I headed back into the development world, an experience I once described to a colleague as sticking your head out of a gopher hole so it can get whacked with a rake, I looked out at the landscape of shows and recoiled. It seemed that even over the past few years network television had gotten dumber by the minute, slowly becoming a venue for children, adults with children, and adults with the minds of children. Looking at some of the awful shows that were on the air, I got a pain in my head like a father who’s just seen his daughter in a porn video. Lots of hope and wasted potential.

This is thanks in great measure to the reality craze, with all the *Fear Factors*, *Apprentice*, *Amazing Races*, *Bachelors* and *Bachelorettes* and their nauseatingly phony drama and special lexicon of “immunity challenges,” “tribal councils,” “boardrooms,” and “rose ceremonies.” It has taken network TV from circus to carnival sideshow, its current nadir having been reached with a recent short-lived Fox show entitled *Who’s Your Daddy?*, where an adopted contestant had to guess which one of a group of three men was her biological father. It might as well have been called *Where’s My Sperm?*, and could only have sunk to lower depths if, once the real daddy was revealed, they made the contestant pick from either door number one or door number two. Behind the first door, a million

bucks and a dream vacation for the two of them. Behind the second, a hit man who'd give dad two the bonnet just as his daughter reaches out to hug him. And as the studio audience shouts out "One or "Two!" the home audience votes by calling 1-800-DADDIES, or text messaging DADDY1 or DADDY2 (at 99¢ per call) and we cut to commercial to await the outcome. Paddy Cheyefsky's worst nightmare about TV, *Network*, didn't even come close to this. Yet we're living it.

Of course these shows have their fans. They're all based around the things we worship America: sex, money, and contests. And, OK, I confess, sometimes I watch them and get suckered in and also gorge out on the occasional fast food burger. Tastes great going down but as *Supersize Me* proved, a steady diet will make you sick. Or in the case of TV—stupid. But the reason these shows are on is not because some network exec shot up in bed at 3 am in a eureka moment, shouting "People want to see real people!" It's because one network put one of these shows on the air (MTV's *The Real World* and CBS' *Survivor* being among the first) and they were well received; i.e. they got ratings. So they made more. And the other networks copied them. Why not? If there's gold on the low road, might as well go get it. Or, more to the point, you can't be the only one not getting it. What's unfortunate while, at one time, those who ran the networks seemed to have a taste/intelligence line they wouldn't cross, the obsession with ratings and being "number one" have gooshed that line like a bug on a windshield that gets eaten by a *Fear Factor* contestant. If a show gets numbers, it stays on.

Frankly, if a show about a masturbating monkey got a 20 share, the masturbating monkey would be on *ET*, the cover of *People*, McDonald's would have Masturbating Monkey Meals (some might argue that they already do, but in this case, they would actually call them that) and at Christmastime parents would flock to the stores to get their kids a "Tickle me, Masturbating Monkey" doll. (Actually, with a few modifications, you could take that wind-up cymbal-clapping monkey and make the prototype. He's already got the smile on his face.)

Meanwhile, the dumber network TV gets, the smarter and more interesting cable gets. Thank God for HBO, Showtime, F/X, Comedy Central, A&E, Discovery Channel, The History Channel, or any of the other niche cable channels which collectively have become the room in the house where the adults talk, while network TV is fast becoming the children's playroom. Oh yeah, and then there's PBS, which seems more like the sewing room in the house. Very often a place for reflection, though sometimes it seems like it's gotten a little musty. (Oh, and by the way, stop calling me for money. I gave 100 bucks one time to get the CDs of Bill Moyers' conversations with Joseph Campbell, and now I'm on the permanent suckers list and they're calling me every night at dinnertime to cough up more money. Cough up another interesting giveaway, and I'll think about it. Meanwhile, lose me a fucking number. And while we're on the subject, stop the telethons with the silky-voiced intellectual laddling on the guilt and bleating over how the world would melt without public TV. OK, I know! I'll write the damn check. Just put the Monty Python retrospective back on and get your tweedy ass on camera.)

Anyway, the aforementioned studio deal—and the subject for most of this account—was Paramount. My job: create shows—either alone or with other writers—and, in partnership with the studio, pitch and sell them to one of the networks, write the script, get it made and hopefully picked up on the fall schedule or for midseason. In the course of that deal, I sold and wrote two pilots. (Later on I sold and wrote two more.) What those experiences were like and how they eventually worked out will be detailed herein in all their gory detail.

Am I worried about offending people? "You'll never pitch in this town again?" Maybe. In writing this, I'm not only biting the hand that feeds me, I'm biting the hand that's fed me steaks. Well, steak I could eat if my cholesterol weren't so high. Still, if this doesn't get published, no one will know. And if it does, then I've published a book, so what the fuck do I care who's upset? (OK, so maybe I care a little. After this comes out, I may not be able to walk down certain network corridors without

brick being lobbed at my head. But what I wrote was exactly what I was feeling at the time and accurately reflected the experience—OK, *my* experience—of working in television, so I'm leaving the record intact. All I can say to those who may get a little bent out of shape is: it wasn't personal; it was strictly business.)

METHODOLOGY

There is no methodology. This isn't a doctoral dissertation. I hate writing papers, that's why I quit grad school. But just to be upfront—this is mostly a subjective account, coming from my own experiences in television, although I could get 100 writers in a room who would relate similar frustrations in trying to get shows through the studio and network development pipeline and occasional sausage factory. At times I've included newspaper or magazine articles, or pieces downloaded off the web, to illustrate a point or explain some aspect of the business, provide background information, or just because I found it relevant. As I said, this is mostly subjective, fueled by ambition, cynicism, envy, bile, greed, schaden-freude, anger, arrogance, and self-doubt. All the emotions you need to work in TV. Oh, yes, and hypocrisy. Because even though, thanks to the ratings race, network television is being systematically dumbed down, I'm still working in it.

Part of that is financial. I make a lot of money when I work. Part of it's emotional in that I enjoy it. I'm not only addicted to watching TV, I'm addicted to working in it. But although this account is mostly subjective, the occasional conclusions are not simply "my opinions." Somehow, in this country, intellectual relativism has taken hold, thanks to the First Amendment guarantee to freedom of speech, which simply guarantees us equal right to express our ideas; they don't give each idea equal intellectual weight. Some are just dumber or less informed than others, yet it doesn't seem to deflate those who, when they're all out of thoughts, put their hands on their hips and end the argument with a lame "Well, that's my opinion." Frankly (in my opinion), opinions are what stupid people end up with because they either don't know or can't understand all the facts.

The conclusions I arrive at are based on experience, observation, and reflection, and represent a fairly accurate—OK, so maybe a slightly cynical—depiction of this reality. Of course, and someone's going to say it so I might as well, that's just my opinion. Though I'm not alone, as most of this also reflects years of conversations with other writers sitting around bitching about TV, though frankly, anyone out here making the kind of money you can make has absolutely no right to complain. Pissing and moaning about the lack of creative freedom and constant network meddling into a creative product should be a crime, particularly considering how most people have to suffer and sweat to earn a living. Writing for TV is special. It's privileged. If you're lucky enough to create a show that gets on, or get staffed on someone else's show, your job entails getting paid a fortune to sit in a writers' room with funny people, make up stories, and laugh your ass off while people bring you food. It's been described as being very well-paid veal. Despite the erratic hours, and not knowing if you're going to get home to put your kid to sleep, no one in the position of being paid to write for TV has anything to bitch about. That said, I'm now going to bitch.

PART I

THE FOUR PREDICTABLY ANNOYING RESPONSES I GET WHEN I TELL PEOPLE I WRITE FOR TV

As I said: I love TV. Or, to be more precise, I'm addicted to it, as are most people, if they're honest enough to admit it. Which most people aren't. In fact, when I tell civilians what I do, I get one of four predictably annoying responses (which was also one of the catalysts for writing this book. I can now set some of this shit straight, while putting in print what I wish I'd been clever enough to say in the moment).

1. The first response comes from people who must immediately inform you that what you do is foreign to them; i.e. beneath them, and always comes out with the same rising intonation carrying an air of intellectual superiority as they say: "Oh...well, I (or "we" if it's a couple) don't really watch TV," as if this disclaimer carried with it proof of one's intelligence, breeding, and superior cultural taste. Then they feign ignorance of what shows might be on, almost to the point where you have to remind them what the TV is—you know, the box in the living room, with the lights and sound coming out of it. Once in a while one of them will confess to some occasional viewing—the news, PBS or Animal Planet documentary, or perhaps C-SPAN, when there's an important Congressional debate. And, of course, no one ever admits to letting their kids watch. Especially during the week. To do otherwise is looked on as an only slightly less despicable form of child abuse, or at least bad parenting, which most parents aren't above telling you. You get the disapproving stare, along with the head shake, and the tongue clack, as preface to "Do you now or have you ever let your child watch TV during the week?" OK, yes! I admit it! I let my daughter watch! But only after her homework is done. OK, sometimes before if she's had a rough day and a TiVo'd episode of *South Park*, *Family Guy*, or *The Simpsons* helps her cool out before Algebra. And I watch with her because those shows make me laugh and it's something we can share. So blow me.

Yes, no one watches TV. They all gather round the hearth after a wholesome, free-range, low-carb dinner, then the kids scamper downstairs in their flannel night smocks, homework done, hair combed, teeth brushed, as the family takes turns reading aloud from Dickens, 'til the wee ones drift off to sleep and are whisked off to bed on gossamer wings. Right. Then daddy sneaks off to the den to download Internet porn and pass out in his Sharper Image vibrating massage chair while mom slips away to rub one off in the bath.

According to a 2001 U.S. Census Bureau report, there were 248 million TV sets in U.S. households, meaning that 98.2% of all U.S. households had at least one TV, the average number of sets being 2.4. Somehow I don't think we're all sitting by the fire reading novels. Somebody's watching. Still, somehow, "Oh, we don't really watch TV" has become the mantra for people who are too insecure to admit they actually watch the thing for fear of being labeled "uncultured."

2. Then there is the second, almost equally irritating response, from those who have no ego problem admitting they watch TV but feel compelled to hit you with: "Why is TV so dumb?" Oddly enough, in moments like this I feel compelled to defend the medium, much in the same way I'll make jokes involving my own cultural heritage ("Two Jews walk into a bar, and they buy it,") but I reserve that for people outside the tribe doing it. And so I'll make the point that to fairly examine this question, you have to make the distinction between network and cable. Cable, both the premium channels and basic cable outlets such as Comedy Central and F/X, are setting programming standards, based on the premise that there is an adult audience out there that wants a funnier, more intelligent product than the

networks are offering. Even one-hour network drama shows mostly about doctors, cops, or lawyers play to a brighter audience. *House* and *24* are just two current examples of hour TV at its best. When people criticize TV for being dumb, they're usually referring to half-hour comedy (sitcoms), or the more lame reality shows. And in this respect, they're mostly right.

But the question is why? Are the people in charge of which shows get on pre-dumbing it, or are they simply responding to the nation's taste by offering more of the dumb shit they've already expressed a desire for? Ratings determine what's on the box, so, like water seeking its own level, the audience is going to get more of what it's said it wants. There's no taste police, no intelligence minimum. No standards and practices for what should be on TV, just one as a watchdog for what *can* be on—tits and profanity. There is no longer any pretense of content driving network TV. It's ratings and nothing but ratings, to the point that even the word "good" has been corrupted. Once upon a time "good" denoted quality. Now it denotes success. A good movie is one that does well at the box office. A good show is one that gets numbers but still may be crap. It's a simple syllogism; what's good sells; what sells; sometimes shit sells; therefore, sometimes shit is good. Good ratings=life. Bad ratings=cancellation and death. Bottom line: it's McTelevision. It's unfortunate, because over time this process limits the audience's choices and they become almost like convicts in the mess hall being served a diet of shit sandwiches and cold ketchup soup. Eventually you're going to start thinking "You know, the soup's not that bad." H.L. Mencken said it best: "No one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public."

3. The third response when I tell people I work in television comes from someone who absolutely must tell you, since you're in the "comedy field," that they've got a "great idea" for a show, usually based on either their personal lives or the madcap antics in their office, which is "just the funniest place. In fact there's a guy down in shipping, he does these impressions of the boss, I swear we're all in stitches in the lunchroom, so you should write a show about that." The presumption in this one is that TV writers couldn't possibly have ideas of their own and just sit around waiting for a friend or relative to call with an amusing true-life anecdote, for someone to lob a spec script over the transom, or for some innocent rube to get off the bus with a million-dollar idea they can steal.

HOLLYWOOD STOLE MY IDEA!

Let's put this one to rest right now: Hollywood doesn't steal. There have been an infinite number of lawsuits brought by people who pitched ideas or sent scripts to a studio and have had them rejected only to see that same studio produce a similar project. Most have probably been frivolous, others may have had some merit. But ultimately, unless someone rips the title page off your script and puts their name on it (which has happened), it's not really theft. Hollywood copies, imitates, panders and plagiarizes, rips off and robs, but Hollywood does not steal ideas for one reason and one reason only: it's not ethical. (Just kidding. Sorry, I couldn't resist that.) No, it's because, in Hollywood, IDEAS ARE SHIT. That's right. They're almost worthless. EVERYTHING IS EXECUTION—how a show or movie is written, cast, directed, edited, even marketed. And while there are an infinite number of examples from TV that illustrate this point, the one that always occurs to me is from the movie side. Between 1987 and 1988 four movies were released with virtually an identical premise: through some mysterious, other-worldly plot device, a younger person and an older person switch bodies and experience life from the other's point of view, usually followed by a shriek of surprise, lots of mistaken identity jokes, silly voices, farcical second act hijinks, and a resolution in which they switch back, but with a newfound respect for walking in the other's shoes. Three of them—*Like Father, Like Son*, *Twelve Monkeys*, and *Twelve Angry Men*.

Son starring Kirk Cameron and Dudley Moore, *Vice Versa* with Judge Reinhold, and *18 Again* with George Burns—aside from their individual faults or merits, came and went without much notice. Same premise, similar execution. Some amusing, all forgettable. And then there was *Big* in 1988. The only change in the premise was that there was no older person involved, just Tom Hanks living as a child in an adult's body. That was a hit, financially and, more importantly (to those who consider that more important), creatively, because only that script, that actor, and that director got to the heart of the experience and made you feel what the character was going through. The other three were just confections, lots of farce and variations on a theme. *Big* had intelligence and soul. It's not the idea; it's how you do it. Execution is everything. A show about a bunch of friends who hang out together is an idea. When it's well-written and produced, it's *Seinfeld*. When it's not, it's *The Single Guy*.

Putting aside reality shows for the moment, which don't seem written as much as concocted (although the Writers' Guild is beginning to contest that point), television shows come from writers who, either by love, choice, or virtue of the fact that their novel or screenplay didn't sell, have decided to work in this medium. Contrary to the popular notion, we're not all overpaid hacks who sit in delis cracking each other up with lame jokes. (OK, some are.) But most writers have actual ideas. Ideas that feel compelled to write in this form and try to sell. Because that is what drives them. Along with the fear that if you don't get a project set up somewhere, a few years down the road, you'll be the fat fuck in shipping who does a hilarious impression of the boss.

4. The fourth and most dreaded response of all is: "What's it like working in TV? I hear there's a lot of money in it, and most of those shows are so lame it couldn't be all that difficult to write so could you think I could get one of those jobs and cash in?" Answer: "No, you can't. Or maybe you can, it's just not easy." Want to hear the war stories? Visit any deli in town and look for a table of 30-to-50 year-old guys (and women) in jeans, sneakers, and baseball hats. Or check out Nate 'n' Al's in Beverly Hills and look for a bunch of 70-year-old Jews in jogging suits, or Members Only jackets and Green fisherman's caps. This is where show business goes to relax, bitch and/or die by gorging itself on corned beef. (Note to American men over 60: Lose the Members Only jackets already. It's a fucking windbreaker with epaulettes that looked idiotic 20 years ago. Wearing it now simply leaves other people with the impression that you're either too poor, too old or too fashion-retarded to have purchased a new coat in the last two decades. And, oh yeah, what's with the jaunty cap? Do you first get old and then decide you look good in it? Or do you put the cap on first, and it turns you old? I'm not just trying to be an asshole. I really need to know.)

Working in TV is great. What's a bitch is not working, either when you're trying to break in and get your first job, or when the show you've been on gets cancelled and you're trying to get your next one. And the money in TV is criminal. Salaries range from the hundreds of thousands a year to tens of millions. And beyond.

"Sounds great, but do I have to actually write something or can I just tell you my idea so you can write it and we'll split the money?" Answer: Fuck off. This is not how shows or careers in TV come about. Just ask any producer who's staffing a show about the hundreds of spec scripts lying in piles on the floor, each representing a writer or team looking for a job. And those are just the writers with agents who could get their material through.

"Yeah, but I don't know what a script looks like." Go online and search for copies of scripts from existing shows. Someone will be selling them somewhere. Or write the studio or production company requesting one. They might be nice enough to send you a copy or two, as someone did for me, years ago when I was in New York. Then watch those shows and try to come up with an idea for an episode.

"OK, I've written some scripts but I can't get them read by an agent. What do I do?" Everyone who ever broke into TV faced this same dilemma and somehow managed to get in, so figure it out for yourself; shit, I'm not your mother. For starters, move to L.A. and either meet or sleep with the right

people. And don't bother with sitcom writing classes or the "how to" section of the bookstore. The shelves are filled with "How to Sell Your Idea to TV" books. By and large, they're worthless. They might as well be titled: "How to Get a Sense of Humor." "Developing a Dyspeptic Personality." "Dystopian World View for Idiots." "You, Too, Can be Cynical." "Insecurity, Self-doubt, and Self-loathing—Your Ticket To Success." "The Art of Rejection." Or "The Complete Idiot's Guide to Dealing With Complete Idiots." You're either funny or you're not. You can either write or you can't. No book or class will ever give you talent. At best, some may give you the correct format in which to channel your ideas and maybe a rough idea of how the business works. (You think Larry David got that way by reading a book on sitcom writing?)

In terms of what it's really like to work in TV, read on, or buy one of the only books that got it right, both written by writers: *Artistic Differences* by Charlie Hauck and *Conversations With My Agent* by Rob Long. By the time you're done reading, you may not want to go near TV. It's a cold fuckin' business.

DEVELOPMENT IN THEORY "The Agony and the Entropy"

The reality of how television shows are created and developed involves an annual feeding frenzy that begins in early fall and lasts through mid-May, although at some networks development goes on all year long. In either case, it's a creative merry-go-round where everyone's grabbing for the precious few brass rings. You succeed, you're rich, and are greeted by agents and executives with a hug usually reserved for a reunion with a long-lost birth mother. You fail, you're shunned like an Amish whore. OK, you're not really shunned, but your phone will immediately stop ringing, and you will be harassing your agent to get you on staff on some show some other bastard was lucky enough to get picked up.

THE ODDS

Each year hundreds, maybe even thousands, of ideas are pitched. Maybe 500 are picked up "for script" (the network pays the writer to write it) and turned in either right before the Christmas/New Year break, or soon after. By the end of January or early February, most are winnowed out and a relatively select few, 120 or so, are picked up to be shot, which begins a casting, rewriting, and rehearsal process that goes through the next few months. Most pilots are shot and delivered by April when the networks screen and test them. Let's say maybe 35 make it to series, either on the fall schedule or midseason. Maybe 12 get cancelled quickly, 7 more get pulled for November sweeps⁹ and eventually cancelled, leaving 16 that stay on for all 13 shows. Of those, maybe 10 get a back nine order¹⁰, allowing them to stay in production, while 3 more get cancelled, and 3 get a somewhat less enthusiastic script order and eventually fade away. Of the remaining 10, maybe 6 get pulled for February sweeps, and end up getting cancelled. The final 4 shows stay on the air and are on the schedule the following fall, though there's always a chance that a couple of those won't make it through a second season. So, in the end, of those 500 pilot scripts written, let's say two shows end up going the distance. That's about 250-to-1 odds of ultimate success. Then it begins all over again.

Television is a business based on the presumption of failure. In fact, not long after the fall show

premiere, the networks open their doors for new pitches. And many of the cable channels are open year-round. But it's also a business maintained by people, many of whom, from a creative standpoint and with some notable exceptions, have no business running it; namely, the network comedy development executive.

THE NETWORK COMEDY DEVELOPMENT EXECUTIVE

In 1876, German-American archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann excavating at Mycenae uncovered a set of funeral masks and communicated his awe in a telegraph to the king of Greece, stating: "I have gazed upon the face of Agamemnon." I would feel equally awestruck if I ever found myself gazing upon the face of a network development executive who had ever created, written, or produced an episode of television. Not that these aren't intelligent people. They are. Most are extremely bright. You have to be to get these jobs. Some are even funny. Or know funny when they see it and try to nurture it. Others seem to attack it like white blood cells going after a lung infection. And a few I've encountered over the years wouldn't recognize an original idea if it got shot up their asses on the tip of a flaming arrow.

In the past, there have been network presidents who came from the producing ranks. Grant Tinker, who ran MTM and went on to run NBC, is one who comes to mind. As far as an executive writers respected, the person most often mentioned is the late Brandon Tartikoff. Both of them ran NBC during the eighties, when the relationship between writer and network seemed more collaborative. These days, it seems most development executives are business people and corporate climbers who have worked their way up the ladder to land these coveted jobs: MBAs, lawyer-publicity execs. Again, with some exceptions, few have actually worked as a writer or producer—broken a story, run a writers' room, noted an outline, written a script, done a rewrite, supervised the production week, sat in on an edit or mix, or performed any of the various jobs associated with producing television. Honestly, I'm not even sure some of them have ever told a joke, let alone written one. Yet their jobs entail passing judgment on what's funny or not and altering it along the way, with veto power over the person who actually had the idea in the first place along with the vision to guide it creatively. Somehow the ascension of the ranks of development executives carries with it the assumption of actual creative ability.

Though most development executives can't be held ultimately responsible for the content on TV as they are part of a corporate hierarchy that often dictates creative policy, influencing what they buy, how they alter what they buy, and how hands-on they are during the process. Their jobs have one requirement: deliver hit shows—meaning successful shows—no matter what form they come in. Bottom line: it's not about pushing a show to its creative limits. It's just about putting something on the air that gets ratings. A friend and colleague Dave Hackel cynically describes TV shows as "the train cars that bring us the commercials." Could be *The West Wing*. Could be *The Biggest Loser*. The people who make Cheerios ultimately don't give a shit. Nor do their ad agency media buyers. Cheerios ultimately don't give a shit. Nor do their ad agency media buyers, who look at a show in terms of its ratings, particularly the 18-49 demo and CPM (cost per thousand—how much it costs to reach 1000 people).

When you're pitching your show, these are the thoughts rattling around the mind of the network comedy development executive. Their job is to sift through all the pitches they hear, or spec scripts they read, and determine which ones to buy. In their defense, the pressure is on them to find a hit b

using their own judgment while simultaneously operating under mandates from above, ranging from:
~~More half hour, because one hour is dead or we need a comedy to launch behind an established~~
hit.

More one hour, because half hour is dead, or because we're getting killed in the 10 o'clock slot
by some other network's onehour drama.

No shows starring anyone over 20.

No shows starring anyone over 30.

No shows starring anyone over 40.

No kid shows, this isn't the fucking Disney Channel. (Unless it's the fucking Disney Channel.)

No workplace comedies. Family shows are succeeding on our network.

No family shows. Workplace comedies are succeeding on our network.

More edgy, non-traditional shows.

No edgy shows. Give us a nice, traditional, meat-and-potatoes sitcom.

No single camera. Too expensive.

More single camera. We just had one of them succeed.

And no shows about show business. They never work.

Whatever the edict of the day, or the moment, network executives know where the holes are in
their schedule and how their bosses wanted them filled, so any pitch they hear goes through that filter.
They also know how many producers have projects with on-air commitments¹¹ that often involve huge
penalties if they're not put on. Given those parameters, more often than not they know two minutes
into a pitch whether your project is something they're interested in, or something their bosses would
allow them to buy.

If their interest starts to wane, you immediately see it in their body language, the patronizing
smiles, the way their eyes drop, and their pencils slowly fall to their laps, while you have to continue
tap dancing, sensing inside that your idea just isn't going to fly. So while you're rambling on about
your amusing little show, they really just wish you'd shut up, stop wasting their time and leave, so that
the next person can come in, hopefully with something they can use. (If I were a network exec, I
have a gong to ring to signal I'd heard enough, or a button to push that opens the floor under the writer
so I could drop his ass out of the room and into the parking lot the moment I knew I was done with
him.) With those pressures, it's easy to see why some give you the feeling they're in the serious
business of comedy.

Then there are studio development executives. Similar types of people, different situation.
Studios are in the position of teaming up with writers to sell shows to the networks. As such, they are
salespeople. "Sell 'em, don't smell 'em" is something you hear occasionally. It's about hiring writers
and setting up as many projects as you can. (And while for some it's more about quality than quantity,
the "how many shows did you sell" mentality is still part of the game.)

Studio people tend to be more flexible. They ultimately don't know what the networks will buy,
so why not take a shot with any idea, however bizarre, although they will occasionally tell you not to
waste your time with something, either because networks aren't buying it, or they've bought too many
already. Their notes tend to be sharper. More strategic. With the eventual goal of shaping the show so
that it will sell. Studio people tend to laugh more. Though the pressure is on them to sell and you can
often feel it, even while they're making jokes in the network waiting room before a pitch.

And then there are the "current programming" executives, who are basically the liaisons between
a production and the studio or network. They tend to be the funniest, most easygoing, and light
hearted. Almost like they're part of the show. Writers tend to like them. Except the one or two who get
so puffed up with self-importance that they try to put their own stamp or impose their own tastes on

whatever you're doing. Those you want to strangle with their own entrails.

~~In TV, especially on a pilot, you are deluged with executives. One of the strangest sights you~~ see is an executive walking on stage for a shoot, carrying a script, sidling up to the quad¹² and staring at it quizzically—much like when my car stalls and I pop open the hood and stare at the engine because I know it's what I'm supposed to look at but I honestly have no clue what I'm looking for, what's broken, or how to fix it. The difference is, with my car, I take it to a mechanic, say: "It's broken," and give him the freedom to fix it and screw me. There is no scarier sight than a group of executives huddling after a table read or run-through, while you stand aside and wait for the judgment from on high. Experientially, as a writer, it's like waiting to get directions from a blind seeing-eye dog. Even though they have the power, few will accept that writers are more qualified to come up with ideas and produce better, funnier, more unique shows, rendering their role more advisory. These days executives don't advise. They dictate. They are the gatekeepers. The ones who filter the ideas that come in, guide them along the note process and ultimately decide which projects go through and in what way. Again, it's not that they're clueless. Or humorless. It's just that most often they don't have the insight or experience to know why something works or doesn't. Why it's funny or not. Some do. Others know it when they see it. And a few, well, perhaps as a result of being humor-adjacent for so many years, they get the notion that they might actually be funny, much like a cow pushed out of an airplane might momentarily think it can fly.

THE PITCH

If a camel is a horse built by a committee, a network pilot is a horse that's been gang-raped by a committee, then put back in the stable with the warning to shut its fucking mouth. And other than cases where a network buys a spec pilot, it all begins innocently enough with the pitch. Sometime in early fall, writers who can get in to pitch will visit a studio development VP, or production company development exec. (Some go directly in to the network, which means you could end up doing the show with their in-house production company, but for the sake of this example, let's go through the entire food chain.)

Question: "So you mean if I have an idea, all I have to do is call up a studio?" Answer: "No. If you haven't worked on a show, you won't even get on the lot, let alone in the door." Not even a few produced scripts and a WGA¹³ card gets you in. It's based on experience, relationships, and a track record. The less experienced you are, the more you need to have proven yourself in production on an existing show while developing a relationship with someone at the studio who would be open to hearing your idea. If you've never written a pilot or "run a show"¹⁴, you'll have to team up with an established writer who can godfather¹⁵ your script, making the studio and network feel that at least someone who knows how to do the job will be involved.

As to the usual lament of "That's why TV sucks, they keep relying on the same people," the answer is, in part: fuck off. A half-hour show costs over a million dollars to produce, an hour show over 2 million. Each involves hundreds of decisions that have to be made on a daily basis, from dealing with scenes that don't work, actors who are upset or confused because those scenes don't work, directors who are caught in the middle, wardrobe mismatches, ruined takes due to boom shadows or a hundred other personal, professional, or technical glitches. Only someone with years of experience in the trenches of TV production will be able to make those calls as quickly as they need to be made.

But if you've got the credentials to pitch your idea, you or your agent will make the call to studio development VP, saying "So-and-so has an idea they want to pitch." A meeting is set, and you prepare your little notion into an entertaining 20- or 30-minute presentation during which you tell them the arena, the characters, maybe an idea for a pilot story, a few potential future episodes, and maybe cite an example of similar shows that hit or actors from those shows who might work in yours. If you're lucky, you'll find it's right for someone a network has on a deal. If you've done your homework, you'll know that in advance. Just to fast-track this scenario, let's assume they like it and maybe have a few adjustments or suggestions you incorporate, and they begin scheduling network meetings for you to go pitch.

Finally, the day comes. The meeting is on. Or it's been cancelled at the last minute because, frankly, network people often have more important things to do than hear about your little skit. But let's say it's not cancelled. The meeting day arrives. You go to the guard gate, praying they haven't screwed up your drive-on¹⁶, you seek out visitor parking, passing rows of reserved spaces—the network's way of saying "Don't get too comfortable, you're only visiting." You find your way to the proper office, sit in the waiting room while they conduct more important business, go over last-minute stuff with your studio partners, then a door opens and you're ushered inside and greeted with a warm smile, handshake and/or hug, with cheek kiss or without, depending on whether you're already acquainted. Then you meet a few more junior execs and assistants with notepads.

You find a comfortable spot and after the obligatory beverage offering (water—it's free, so take it), followed by 5 minutes of general chit-chat in the guise of "Let's make believe we're actual human beings having an actual conversation." After the "Where do you live?" "Who do we know in common?" and "Do you have kids?" there will be the eventual dramatic pause, followed by the exec's "So, what have you got?"

Now you're on. The floor is yours. You remember the goal is to be funny and entertaining, then you get the hell out. You get out your notes and take a dramatic pause to collect your thoughts, the emotions running through you a schizophrenic mix of arrogance and insecurity. Arrogance, because you need to pitch with the certainty that they're assholes if they don't buy this. And insecurity because you know the odds are against them buying it and, deep down, you're just jerking off. Still, you pitch your heart out, hopefully getting some laughs along the way, until finally there's another pause and they say "Thanks, let us talk," which means "We're done with you. Take your shit and go."

So you gather your notes and leave, passing the next group waiting to get in. During pilot season, writers are queued up like guys at Dodger stadium waiting to pee. You see them on your way in, and on your way out. Occasionally it's someone you know. You stop, smile, make small talk and, as you leave, you secretly hope they fall miserably on their asses, just as they hope you've just fallen miserably on yours. Especially if they're good friends. It's been said that in Hollywood, friends don't want friends to fail; friends want friends to die. After all, their success is your failure. They're the ones keeping you from your goal of making millions, buying a Porsche, a house in the hills, and fucking a movie star. Oh, and creative satisfaction.

Now you're in "waiting to hear" mode, which is where show business spends most of its time. Bernie Brillstein once commented that "There are only ten people in show business," meaning only the heads of studios and networks have any real greenlight¹⁷ power. Everyone else waits by the phone. You pace your apartment or house. You play with your kids or work on your show if you're in production at the time. Or play golf if you don't. You try desperately not to read the trades¹⁸ for fear of seeing that a project just like yours got picked up somewhere else. Or worse, someone you hate just had some good fortune. A writer I once worked with, Jim Vallely, remarked, "Variety takes fifteen minutes to read and four hours to get over." You try to put the project out of your mind, which

impossible. Every phone ring gives you an adrenaline rush.

~~Eventually, the call will, most likely, go to your agent, who relays the news to you. Again, give the odds, most often it's "They passed." If you're experienced, you take it as fact of life, and move on to pitch it elsewhere, or to another project. If you're new, you take a moment to whine to your agent. "But why?????" sounding somewhat like a petulant child who's been told he can't have more ice cream. Even then, the explanation is sketchy, coming in the form of "It was too soft." "Too edgy." "They have ten like it in development," or "They hate you." It doesn't matter. You didn't sell it, so your agent will tell you any bit of encouraging bullshit to get you off the line so they can talk to the writer clients who did sell their shows.~~

For future reference, if you intend on working as a writer, you need to be aware that there are only two responses to any pitch, script, or show that you will ever hear in your entire professional life. The first is: "I loved it! I laughed! I cried! The characters are fresh! The dialogue sharp! The jokes hilarious! The touching, profound moments...profoundly touching! This is a work of genius, and the genius is you!" The other response...is everything else. It begins with a pause. Followed by "Uh, well, I only read it once in the can or in bed and it was late," backed up by a weak "I really liked that joke on page 3," or "Do you think it's a little dark?" and "Let's have breakfast and talk about it," all delivered with that rising intonation people use when they're trying to hide their true feelings to soften the blow. In other words, most of what you will hear in your show business career will be some form of bullshit.

BULLSHIT

Lies fuel show business. Along with the lie's country cousin—bullshit. Bullshit is Hollywood oxygen. It's necessary for survival. In fact, most everything you will be told in the course of your career will contain some degree of bullshit, either from people who care about you enough to spare your feelings, people who need you so they're blowing so much smoke up your ass that your eyes begin to cloud up, or people who don't give a shit about you but are looking for the most efficient way to reject you. Rarely will anyone tell you the absolute truth, unless you ask. Then they'll adopt a sincere voice and tell you a version of the absolute truth, only with a bit less bullshit. In time, you come to realize that people say more by what they don't say than by what they do and you learn to read the silences. (Along with the hesitations, the lilting quality in people's voices when they're offering faint praise, or a left-handed compliment. "I like this one so much more than your last script.") People lie to protect their own interests, occasionally to spare your feelings, or to keep you working until such time as you fail and they don't need you, or you succeed, in which case, the lie becomes irrelevant.

But it really doesn't matter. Anything less than "I loved it" means "I hated it. You suck. You'll never make a living as a writer. Go bag groceries." Also FYI, in the world of meals, agent dinners are reserved for true friends or clients who have had or are about to have a major success. Lunch is for clients who have had some success and have a solid chance of continued employment, or for poaching other agents' clients. (Note that there is a time limit on lunch, giving the agent a built-in excuse to cut off the conversation.) Breakfast is basically for clients who haven't worked in a while, and is set up with the agenda "Let's strategize," though the true meaning of it is "If you don't get work soon I'll have to drop you."

OK, back to the present. The phone rings. You check the caller ID. It's your agent. Your heart is pounding as you pick up the phone and say hi, ready to hear the words that could change your life.

Then your agent's assistant asks you to hold on while the agent wraps up another call. Shit. You hold for what seems like an eternity, and then he or she jumps off their previous call. (In Hollywood people either "jump" on or off calls. If they like you, they "take" your calls. If not, they silently shake their heads to their assistants and mouth the words "call back," and the assistant then gets back on and tells you that person is in a meeting and will call you back. This is either the truth or bullshit. You know by whether your phone rings again.)

OK, so your agent gets on the phone. The tension is high as he starts the conversation with "I've just talked to the executive..." You say "And..." Then he or she says: "They passed." Then your head sinks and you consider suicide, which is usually preferable to having to tell friends and acquaintances that your show didn't go. But the mood usually passes when you remember that you had several other ideas and maybe one of them will sell. Or you're in denial or heavily sedated.

But for the sake of this example, let's say it's good news, which you'll know by their tone of voice and how quickly it arrives. Agents deliver so much bad news to their clients that it's exciting for them when they don't have to. "Congratulations," he says. Your heart soars. "They bought it." Your heart soars even more. Then there's a pause. If you're new, the pause confuses you. You think "Shouldn't there be more praise coming?" If you've done this before, you understand the pause. It's quickly followed by a "But." "BUT" means you're fucked but comes in the form of "They had a few concerns."

"Concerns" is studio- or network-speak for shit they want changed, which might range from a few caveats either in story or tone, to dislike for the main character, to the complete evisceration of everything you pitched. "Oh, and there's a funny, young black kid from some candy commercial that we just made a holding deal with so they want him in there as the son of the sexy neighbor, who could also be a love interest for the main character." Then you say "There is no sexy neighbor, it's a show about firemen, set in a firehouse, and the main character's got a girlfriend and I based the entire pilot story around their relationship." And your agent says "I'm getting to that."

And he does. Then, for a brief second, you consider whether you can make the changes they want or if your creative integrity is such that you just can't stomach your pet project being turned into pablum. 99% bend over and make the changes, as they can somehow make all your ambitions suddenly feel like pretensions. Sure, occasionally you'll hear the story of the writer who absolutely refused to compromise his or her creative vision and made the pilot the way they saw it, and it went on to become a hit. Of course, the only reason you're hearing that story is, like *Seinfeld*, the show went on to become a hit. You don't hear the stories of writers who told the studio or network to piss off because most often, the network said "OK" and those shows never came into existence. It's like Robert Townsend and *Hollywood Shuffle*. The story of how he maxed out his credit cards to make the movie is legendary. What you never hear about is how many people maxed out their cards with the same dream but without the same talent or luck and ended up with nothing but debt, obscurity, and a commemorative DVD.

But at this stage it doesn't matter. You say, "Sure, whatever, anything," due to the sheer relief of not having been rejected and the fact that you are now officially being paid to write and can hold your head up at any social gathering where other writers are present and say with confidence: "I have a project in development! I am somebody!" Then there's a moment of panic as you begin to wonder if you can even write this the way they now seem to want it. Yet you put those fears aside, as dollar amounts and deal points are discussed. Actors' names are dropped in the "You think we can get DeNiro?" moments of casting self-delusion. A subsequent meeting or notes conference call is set to discuss the changes and how you plan to deal with them. Still, it doesn't matter how much more you have to go through. You've reached the level where you're being paid to write a pilot, which means you can pay your rent, mortgage, alimony, and car insurance and feed your kids...well, for a while.

So, off you go to write the brilliant script that's going to become a huge hit, redefine the face of television, and get you on the Emmy red carpet, on your way to hanging out with celebrities and scamming one of those swag bags with all the free shit in them, right? Wrong.

THE OUTLINE

The next step in the process is the outline in which you'll incorporate all the studio and network changes, flesh out the pilot story while making good on the rough version you pitched—even on the parts where you knew you were blowing smoke up their asses and praying you weren't called on. Then you'll turn it back in and go through the notes process again, (and again, and again, and again) each time addressing more of their “concerns,” but eventually you'll get your story approved. Now you've been cleared to write something that, more or less, resembles what you originally pitched.

WRITING THE SCRIPT

It's now somewhere in October or November. This is the writing honeymoon period. The script is yours. You're still a virgin. You procrastinate for a few days, mulling things over, making some notes, basically letting it take shape in your head, while getting ready to sit down and begin to spew out vomit draft¹⁹. Then you read it, get depressed and begin to rewrite, rewrite, and rewrite more (“Writing is rewriting.”) You come up with more jokes. Better moments. New insights. You stay in touch with agents and executives who are all waiting eagerly for the script that might become the fall's big hit and will change everyone's fortunes. Maybe you show it to a writer friend and get some helpful suggestions or a few extra jokes.

OK, let's fast-track this. You finally turn in your 45-50 page script (for a multi-camera show; 30-35 pages for single camera). Now they have a document in their hands and a new development phase has begun. The communal euphoria over your clever pitch and amusing story turns is about to be replaced by a dispassionate, businesslike analysis of every word, moment, joke, and punctuation mark. This part of the process could be titled: Joy Takes A Holiday. Now it's time to get serious. It's time to get your notes.

NOTES

Check out any writer who's just come from getting notes on a script. They look tired, frustrated, and beaten up. (I've rarely been through a note session in which I wasn't privately regurgitating and rolling my eyes.) Even those times when the notes were dead on and I was caught with a sloppy outline or lazy first draft. Or sometimes, just a bad one. It's not that those note sessions are less annoying. It's just that ultimately they're easier to digest because, if you're at all honest with yourself, you have to admit they were right. But most often, the phrase “I just got my network notes” is uttered in the same tone people use to say: “I've just come from a colonoscopy.” But if you're in development, there's no avoiding them.

It's like that old joke about three explorers who get captured by some native tribe. The chi

strides up to the captives and announces they have two choices: death...or chi-chi. The first guy doesn't want to die and says he'll take chi-chi, at which point he's stripped down and sexually defiled in every way known to man by every member of the tribe. The second guy gulps, nervously, but figures there's no way out and opts for chi-chi. He is similarly defiled. The third guy goes, Fuck this! I've got my dignity, I'm not going through that shit—and says “Give me death.” And the chief goes “OK, death!... But first—chi-chi!”

Sad, but true. You can't escape notes. Or the fact that they tend to arrive in the same predictable form, couched in the same familiar phrases. A character's “too mean” and “not likeable enough.” “The story starts too late.” “We need more heart.” “Shine a light on this.” “I need to root for her more.” “The ending's not satisfying.” “There's not enough fun.” Not that every draft of every script is perfect. Far from it—every writer knows you need notes at some point to get you out of your own head and give you some perspective or objective viewpoint. The difference is you trust your own kind because they know how to make suggestions that help you achieve what you're after. Notes among writers usually take a more Socratic approach, i.e., the search for the best idea. Studio or network notes traditionally take the form of smoothing every edge, removing every subtlety, softening every extremity and are part of a two-step development process: Step one: Give us something different; Step two: Now make it more the same.

I've experienced it personally a dozen times and heard hundreds of similar stories. It's what drives writers insane. If you put a dozen writers in a room, you'd get horror stories for hours, but none relates the experience better than an article from *Written By* magazine, from the Writers' Guild. In terms of the emotional response to getting notes, this says it all.

sample content of "Hello", Lied the Agent: And Other Bullshit You Hear as a Hollywood TV Writer

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