

# MY LUCKY STAR

A NOVEL BY JOE KEENAN

author of BLUE HEAVEN

"A comic masterpiece that in intricacy of plotting and brilliance of language rivals the best of P. G. Wodehouse."

—*Publishers Weekly*



Back Bay Readers' Pick

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~~Reading group guide © 2006 by Joe Keenan and Little, Brown and Company (Inc.)~~

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Back Bay Books / Little, Brown and Company  
Hachette Book Group  
237 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10017  
Visit our Web site at [www.HachetteBookGroup.com](http://www.HachetteBookGroup.com)

Originally published in hardcover by Little, Brown and Company, January 2006 First eBook Edition  
November 2006

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ISBN: 978-0-316-01335-2

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# Contents

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[Copyright Page](#)

[One](#)

[Two](#)

[Three](#)

[Four](#)

[Five](#)

[Six](#)

[Aside: Who's Who in the Cast](#)

[Seven](#)

[Eight](#)

[Nine](#)

[Ten](#)

[Eleven](#)

[Twelve](#)

[Thirteen](#)

[Fourteen](#)

[Fifteen](#)

[Sixteen](#)

[Seventeen](#)

[Eighteen](#)

[Nineteen](#)

[Twenty](#)

[Twenty-one](#)

[Twenty-two](#)

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[Twenty-three](#)

[Twenty-four](#)

[Twenty-five](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Author's Notes and Acknowledgments](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Reading Group Guide](#)

[A conversation with Joe Keenan](#)

[Questions and topics for discussion](#)

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My Lucky Star

“Joe Keenan fills *My Lucky Star* with the kind of zany twists he perfected in *Frasier* .”

—Raven Snook, *Time Out New York*

“Keenan's comedy is of a high order . . . sophisticated, deliciously camp entertainment.”

—Kate Saunders, *The Times*

“Part high satire, part *Will & Grace*, and part clue-sniffing Nick, Nora, and Nick.”

—Emily Gordon, *Newsday*

“When you think page-turner, you probably think of a crime novel or a thriller. Or maybe a juicy tell-all biography. Now take the suspense and gossip and stir in a good splash of laughs. *Voilà!* You have a novel by Joe Keenan. . . . The main attraction is Keenan's seemingly bottomless inkwell of bons mots and witty zingers. . . . Bring on the popcorn!”

—John Terauds, *Toronto Star*

“Keenan's command of the written word is as deft as the words he puts in other people's mouths on TV. . . . *My Lucky Star* is a venomously funny autopsy of the hypocrisy and venality of Hollywood . . . the funniest novel of the year.”

—Ian O'Doherty, *Irish Independent*

“Keenan clearly has been schooled in the Academy of Plot. . . . The novel is fueled by twists and turns, contrivances and coincidences. There's even a car chase.”

—Debra Weinstein, *Washington Post*

“The Hollywood farce, with its made-up celebrities who are never quite as ridiculous as the real thing, is tricky to pull off. But as a former head writer on *Frasier*, Keenan has the advantage of insider knowledge for this hilarious tale. . . . The manic twists and jibes at modern celebrity are a delight.”

—Andrea Mullaney, *Scotland on Sunday*

“There must be few if any novelists who can scatter showbiz-skewering jokes more lavishly over every page and paragraph, or who are more adroit at plotting, piling twist upon twist. . . . Keenan makes a thing of beauty of what could have been tired camp.”

—Gavin Borchert, *Seattle Weekly*

“Keenan deftly guides us through the S-curves of Hollywood fortune with the aplomb of someone who knows that even the sturdiest-looking facade is propped up with sticks.”

— Thane Tierney, *Bookpage*

“What a succulent treat: this is a laugh-out-loud literary masterpiece.”

— Richard Labonte, *Between the Lines*

“The urbane wit and high comedy of *Frasier* run like quicksilver through the veins of *My Lucky Star*. . . a delightful, feel-good, beautifully crafted romp.”

— David Phelan, *Independent on Sunday*

“In Keenan’s Hollywood, blackmail, nepotism, and chutzpah are rewarded at least as regularly as tight buns and taut scripts. On this sort of playing field, the graceful management of coincidence — otherwise known as timing—is everything. Keenan understands that well.”

—Ariel Swartley, *Los Angeles Magazine*

“Fantastic. . . . Keenan is unashamedly burlesque in his writing, which is thick with humor and a joy to read.”

— Rob Dawson, *Gay Times*

“Peppered with witty one-liners. . . . Keenan’s twinkly prose keeps you firmly tethered to his *Lucky Star*. ”

—Joe Dziemianowicz, *New York Daily News*

“A delight . . . relentlessly humorous. . . . Although Keenan’s sidesplitting writing is often compared to P. G. Wodehouse’s . . . the wit is incredibly elegant and owes more than a little to Oscar Wilde and Ronald Firbank, with more subtle dashes of the lyric agility of Noel Coward and Cole Porter.”

— Frederik Liljeblad, *Paget*

“An uproarious satire on Hollywood life. *My Lucky Star* is a gift from the gods.”

— Kelly Apter, *The List*

“*My Lucky Star* is madcap, charming, and hilarious. . . . Keenan’s in fine form here with both farce and wit.”

— Marilyn Dahl, *Shelf Awareness*

“Witty, twisted, dry as a martini, and sporting more daringly stylish wrinkles than a Hollywood bad boy’s tuxedo after a long night in questionable company, *My Lucky Star* lampoons the very excess in which it gleefully partakes, jumping from the lofty to the low and back again with easy abandon.”

“Joe Keenan’s novel has taken him two decades to complete, but it has been worth the wait. It’s a feisty, entertaining tale.”

— *Metro London*

“The glamorous Hollywood novel gets a sharp send-up as a smart drawing-room comedy crossed liberally with farce. . . . The witty banter, zany plot twists, and colorful, likable characters (even the dastardly villains) prove a delight for fans of brainy comedy. If the ghost of Noel Coward isn’t pleased, Frasier’s is.”

— *Booklist*

“A hilarious cast of writers, actors, agents, and hacks collide in vicious, psychotic, backstabbing, and back-scuttling mayhem . . . fart-out-loud funny.”

— *Lads Magazine*

Also by Joe Keenan

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*Blue Heaven*

*Putting on the Ritz*

For Chris and David Lloyd

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IT IS NEVER A HAPPY MOMENT in the life of a struggling artist when some fresh assault on his fragile dignity compels him finally and painfully to concede that Failure has lost its charm. He has up until this point soldiered bravely along, managing to persuade himself that there's something not merely noble but downright jolly about Struggle, about demeaning temp jobs, day-old baked goods, and pitchers of beer nursed like dying pets into the night. He would, of course, grant that *la vie Bohème* with its myriad deprivations and anxieties was not an unalloyed delight. But whenever its indignities rankled unduly he could console himself with his certainty that Bohemia was not, after all, his permanent address. Oh, no. His present charmingly scruffy existence was a mere preamble to his real life, a larval stage from which he would soon gloriously emerge into the sunshine of success. Its small embarrassments were, if anything, to be prized, not only for their lessons in humility but for the manifold, self-deprecatory anecdotes they would later provide, stories he'd polish and trot out for parties, interviews, and—why be pessimistic?—talk shows.

Then one day he is faced with some final affront, minor perhaps, but so symbolically freighted as to land on him with the force of an inadequately cabled Steinway. He reels, stunned, and dark speculations, long and successfully repressed, rampage through his mind. For the first time he allows himself to wonder if his life twenty years hence will be any different than his present existence. "Of course it will be different," coos the voice in his head. "You'll be old."

From this icy thought a short road leads to panic, and from panic to despair, self-pity, desperation and, finally, Los Angeles.

MY OWN RUDE EPIPHANY came a year ago last fall shortly after the closing of *Three to Tango*, a larky little comedy I'd written with my good friend and collaborator Claire Simmons. The play had been enthusiastically received in a series of readings, stirring a cautious hope in Claire's heart and extravagant optimism in my own. The production, alas, was doomed from the start, owing chiefly to our producer's decision to present the show in a small basement playhouse that was as damp as Atlantis and harder to find. We tried to persuade him that the show might fare better in a space that felt more like a theater and less like a hideout, but he felt confident that people would find us. People did not. We opened in mid-September and by month's end the play had closed and I was back to my day job, pounding the pavement as an outdoor messenger for the Jackrabbit Courier Service.

You might suppose this experience would have left me a broken and bitter man, but on the day in question my mood was actually pretty chipper. The autumn weather was brisk and lovely. The job, though lacking a certain prestige, allowed me to write much of the day, and I'd just gotten an idea for a new comedy. Best of all, my chum Gilbert, whose consoling presence I'd sorely missed during the deathwatch for my play, was due to return soon from Los Angeles. I'd been slightly miffed at his desertion but couldn't really blame him. His mother, Maddie, had recently snagged herself a rich Hollywood mogul, and Gilbert—who if mooching were an Olympic sport would have his picture on Wheaties boxes—could not resist flying west to bond with the lovebirds poolside. I looked forward to

hearing of his romantic exploits, which, if the hints in his e-mails were any indication, would give new life to the phrase “Westward Ho.” So buoyant in fact was my mood that I was even coping stoically with the news that a musical penned by the loathsome Marlowe Heppenstall, my nemesis since high school, had opened to unfathomably kind reviews and was looking like a major hit.

By late afternoon the benevolent sunshine had given way to darker skies and a sudden cloudburst forced me to sprint the six blocks to my final destination, a Park Avenue law office. I raced into the building, ascended to the seventeenth floor, and entered a spacious foyer, every mahogany-paneled inch of which bespoke the age and prosperity of the firm. The prim, bespectacled woman at the desk glanced up and fixed me with that look of quizzical disdain legal receptionists have long reserved for dampened members of the messenger class.

I removed from my satchel an envelope addressed to a Mr. Charles O’Donnell and marked PERSONAL. I presented this to the human pince-nez, who gazed right past me and said, “Mr. O’Donnell, this just came for you.”

I turned. Walking toward us was an extremely handsome blond fellow about my age, dressed in a flawlessly tailored charcoal pin-striped suit. He had wonderfully broad shoulders though I couldn’t say if this was the result of weight training or if it was workout enough just lifting the massive Rolex and chunky gold cuff links that sparkled on his tanned wrists.

Reminding myself, as I need to at such moments, that this was not a movie and the fellow could see me, I tried not to stare too blatantly as I handed him the envelope. He took it, barely glancing at me, then did a little double take as though he recognized me but wasn’t sure where from. He suddenly looked familiar to me as well. I wondered if we’d shared some fleeting romantic liaison but immediately dismissed this notion as it hinged on the ludicrous premise that I could have slept with such a man then forgotten him. I knew that if we’d dallied even once ten years ago, I’d still be mooning over him and writing maudlin sonnets starting “If love, thou wouldst but phone me once again.”

His puzzled look morphed suddenly into a smile of delighted surprise.

“Phil?” he said. “Phil Cavanaugh?”

Light dawned.

“Oh my God! Chuck O’Donnell! How the hell are you?”

“I don’t believe this. It’s so great to see you!”

We’d been friends back in high school, though only briefly as we’d moved in very different circles. Chuck had been the brightest member of the football-playing, cheerleader-groping set, while I had been a leading light of the sarcastic, underwear-ad-ogling theater crowd. He’d crossed lines once, gamely agreeing to play the braggart warrior Miles Gloriosus in *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* when our own group failed to produce a single nonrisible candidate for the role.

I scrutinized his face, which seemed different, improved in some way.

“You’re looking at my nose, right?” he said with a laugh. “I broke it boxing a few times. They kept having to reset it.”

“Ah,” I said, wondering what it must be like to live so charmed a life that facial injuries only made you handsomer.

“Look at you.” I grinned. “Mr. Big Shot Lawyer.”

“Not so big, trust me. How ’bout you? Still writing plays?”

“Just did one.”

“That’s great! How’d it go?”

“Really well,” I said. “Big hit.”

It was the sort of fib I might have gotten away with had we met at a cocktail party and I was wearing the secondhand yet stylish jacket Gilbert calls my Salvation Armani. The problem was we weren't at a cocktail party. We were in the stately foyer of his white-shoe law firm and I was wearing faded jeans, waterlogged Nikes, and a gray polo shirt adorned with my company's logo, a zealous, bucktoothed rabbit in a mauve tracksuit. In short, I was in no position to swank.

Charlie, bless him, managed to say "Great" without a trace of irony, but the receptionist, who'd never liked me, didn't even try to keep her eyebrows in neutral. Mortified, I averted my gaze, which landed on the foyer's large gilt mirror.

I spoke earlier of moments that carry a great symbolic weight. This was unquestionably such a moment. There we stood, Charlie looking straight out of a Barneys catalog and I in my soggy ensemble from the *Grapes of Wrath* Collection. So perfectly did we exemplify our divergent fortunes that we might have been allegorical figures from some medieval morality play, with Charlie starring as Diligence Rewarded and self in the cameo role of Dashed Hopes.

"So," said Charlie as the blood drained from my face, "been in New York long?"

"Since school," I mumbled, searching for a way to say that, while I was enjoying our chat, I should really get going as I'd be needing to burst into tears soon. The receptionist, more eager to rescue Charlie than me, reminded him of an impending meeting.

"Gotta run. But hey, let me know next time you've got a show on."

"You bet."

"My wife loves the theater. In fact that's what you just brought me—tickets for this new musical. Friend of mine couldn't use 'em."

"Ah."

"Maybe you've heard of it?" he said, then smacked his forehead comically. "What am I saying? Course you have. It's by Marlowe — you know, Marlowe Heppenstall from school? Are you two still in touch?"

WHEN SUCH MOMENTS BEFALL US, we have, of course, two options. We can say "Fiddle-dee-dee" and shrug it off or we can surrender entirely to self-lacerating despair. I chose the latter course and, after walking sixty blocks in the rain to my small, unkempt apartment, settled into a chair with a nice view of the air shaft to contemplate my future.

It did not look bright.

I was twenty-nine. This meant I was still technically a young man, though no longer *young* young, thirty being, as everyone under it knows, the middle age of youth. True middle age was still reasonably distant, though not, as it had once been, unimaginably so.

My career to date had consisted of a frustrating series of near misses. While I'd never had any trouble imagining the ultimate breakthrough, it was now equally easy to picture this dispiriting pattern repeating itself till I woke one day to find I'd become that most poignant figure the theater has to offer, the Struggling Old Playwright.

I'd met my share of them, bloated pasty fellows, doggedly upbeat or surly and embittered, haunting the workshops and readings where their younger brethren gathered. I'd seen them in theater-district bars, cadging drinks while boasting of their latest effort, often a retooling of some earlier work culled from the trunk and reread with a parent's myopic affection.

"Amazing how well it holds up! Why it's more timely now than when I wrote it. Can't believe Playwrights passed on it back then. Just as well though since Streep was too young at the time to play

Fiona and she'd be perfect now. Damn, left my wallet home."

~~There was one especially Falstaffian old gasbag whom Gilbert and I had often observed in our favorite watering hole. Not knowing his name, we'd christened him Milo. In my imagination, which had grown uncontrollably morbid, I pictured him twenty years from now, older, fatter, but still warming the same bar stool. I watched him turn toward the bar's entrance, his blubbery lips parting in a smile of welcome. He patted the stool next to his with a nicotine-stained hand and bid the weary newcomer welcome.~~

"Philip! We've been wondering where you were. Wouldn't be a proper Friday without you. Sorry missed your birthday bash at the Ground Round. Any word from MTC on the new one?...The philistines!... How awkwardly you're holding your glass—the old carpal tunnel acting up again? We then, here's a bug I'll just put in your ear—you tell Blue Cross they can stuff their job, then come join me behind the necktie counter at Saks! What fun we'll have, discussing our plays and ogling the young ones! I tell you, Philip, the days just fly by!"

This ghastly reverie was mercifully interrupted by the shrill buzz of my intercom. I shambled to the door and asked who it was.

"It's me," said Claire through the crackle of static. "Can I come up?"

I buzzed her in, relieved to have a sympathetic listener to whom I could relate the day's tragic events. You can imagine my chagrin then when she burst melodramatically through the door, her mood apparently even fouler than my own.

"It's over!" she declared hotly, stabbing her umbrella into the orange crate that served as a stand.

"Oh?"

"I mean it this time. He saw her again!"

"He," I knew, referred to her boyfriend, Marco, a very hirsute ceramist Gilbert and I had nicknamed "Hairy Potter." "Her" could have referred to either of his two former girlfriends. Since moving in with Claire he'd vowed to put them both behind him, though when he met one he tended to put her beneath him. Claire did not elaborate. She just removed her raincoat and hurled herself onto my couch, where she sat, arms crossed, awaiting compassion.

I found this quite irksome. I'd assumed that if there was any sympathy to be offered I'd be on the receiving end. To be asked, in my shattered state, to start dishing it out made me feel like a stabbing victim who's just lurched into the emergency room, only to be tossed a pair of scrubs and told to get to work on the burn victims.

"What's with you?" she asked, noting my tetchy expression.

"Sorry. It so happens I've had a pretty vile day myself."

"Oh?" she asked.

There was a note of challenge in her voice, and, hearing it, I decided not to elaborate. A woman whose man has just done her dirty was not likely to care that I'd been seen to bad advantage by an old classmate. I could, of course, have thrown in the stuff about Milo and the necktie counter, but Claire's a logical girl and would only have pointed out that my undistinguished midlife, however sad, was still somewhat theoretical, that her own misfortune had actually *happened* and that this was, perhaps, a useful distinction.

"Never mind. Scotch?"

"Please."

I poured us both stiff shots of Teachers as Claire poured out her tale, which differed little from the others I'd heard since Marco had oiled his way into her heart. Three suspicious hang ups, questions as to recent whereabouts, inept lying, expert grilling, confession, tears, shouting, "Go back to your

whore,” curtain.

“It’s really over this time,” she proclaimed. “I mean it.”

“Good.”

“And don’t roll your eyes.”

“When did I roll my eyes?”

“Just now. Inwardly. You’re enjoying this.”

“Excuse me?”

“You never liked Marco. You’re thrilled to see your low opinion’s been borne out.”

“Thanks a lot!” I said, miffed. “You think it *pleases* me when Chewbacca mistreats you? You’re my friend, for Christ’s sake. This upsets me.”

A noble sentiment, if not entirely true. There is, I confess, a small mingy part of me that feels, if not quite pleased, not exactly crushed either that, when it comes to men, Claire’s instincts are even sorer than my own. It’s not that I wish her ill. It’s just that in every other aspect of our lives she’s so annoyingly and unquestionably my superior.

She’s smarter than me. She speaks four languages to my one and I’ve stopped even trying to play chess with her, as my odds of winning are the same I’d enjoy in a Czechoslovakian spelling bee. She’s a much better person too. She volunteers, writes thank-you notes, and adheres to a code of ethics the average bishop might find uncomfortably lacking in wiggle room. Most unforgivably, she’s more talented than me. She composes marvelous music, something I can’t do at all, and, when we write plays, tosses off bons mots and plot twists with a facility that leaves me feeling both dazzled and superfluous.

So when she periodically announces that she has, owing to her woeful misjudgment, taken yet another one on the chin from Cupid, my compassion is always leavened by an agreeable dollop of condescension. How nice for a change to be the one who gets to cluck sympathetically while thinking “Poor dear, when *will* she learn?”

I topped off her glass and let her vent some more. When she’d finished I described my mortifying encounter with Charlie, adding several poignant embellishments.

“How awful for you!” she gasped. “There were actual pigeon droppings on your cap?”

“I had no idea till Charlie pointed it out!”

“How utterly tactless! Almost as bad as Marco. You know what he said when he left?”

“We’re on to me now.”

“Sorry, go on.”

When I’d finished we agreed that our souls required the healing balm that could only be provided by a highly fattening meal sluiced down with a suitably excessive quantity of wine. We were donning our coats, debating the relative merits of Carmine’s fettuccine Alfredo and Szechuan West’s Double-Fried Chicken Happiness, when my phone rang. I let the machine answer and heard Gilbert’s voice bellowing cheerfully from the speaker.

“Hi, Philip, it’s me! Are you there? Pick up! That’s an order! You may not screen this call!”

Claire shot me a pleading look, but I raised two fingers promising brevity and crossed to the phone as Gilbert continued his wheedling.

“Pick up! I have news, Philip! Amazing news!”

“Hey,” I said, “are you back early?”

“No, I’m still in LA.”

“When are you coming back?”

“Never!” he said exultantly. “I never want to leave this magical place and neither will you once

you're out here."

"What are you talking about?" I asked, confused. "What's this earth-shattering news?"

"He saw Cher at Home Depot," said Claire.

"Tell Claire I heard that. What's she doing there? No date tonight with Hairy Potter?"

"No, they broke up."

"Do you *mind*?" said Claire.

"About time," said Gilbert. "The hair on those shoulders! Like epaulets!"

"Your news?" I prompted.

"I got us a job!"

So intrigued was I by the last and loveliest word of this sentence, i.e., "job," that it took me a moment to register the more ominous one lurking dead center. How could he have gotten "us" a job when there did not, for ample reason, exist any professional entity that could be described this way?

"What do you mean, 'us'?"

"You and me, naturally. Claire too, of course. Can't have her back home mooning over wolf boy while we're off conquering Tinseltown."

"The job's for all *three* of us?"

"Hang up," said Claire, her instinct for self-preservation undulled by the scotch.

"Yes. And for big bucks too. I should think at least fifty apiece."

"Fifty thousand *each*?! " I exclaimed and even Claire's eyes betrayed a wary glimmer of interest. "What is it, a writing job?"

"No, I got us a gig as astronauts. Of course it's a writing job. We're adapting a novel into a screenplay."

"But... but *how*?" I sputtered.

"Connections, baby! I'll explain it all when I see you tomorrow. You're booked on the two-thirty flight. American Airlines."

"Tomorrow?!"

"First class, of course!" he assured me, as if that were the issue.

"*Tomorrow*?"

"Is that a problem?" he asked impatiently.

"Well, it's pretty damned sudden! We're supposed to just drop everything and hop on a plane?"

"What the hell's stopping you?" he said, getting testy.

"Well," I sniffed, "I *do* have a job."

The moment I said it I realized that, while there may have been valid reasons for me to reject such an offer, my standing commitment to trudge through Manhattan delivering parcels to the contemptuous was not the most compelling I might have offered. Gilbert concurred.

"Your JOB?" he shouted incredulously. "Your MESSENGER JOB? Are you *insane*?! For ten years I have listened and pretty damned patiently while you've bitched and moaned about your tragic career. Poor noble Philip, struggling to keep the torch of Molière aloft and no one will give him a break! Now I'm standing here handing you Success on a silver tray with tartar sauce and you're *arguing* with me! I'll only say this once—TAKE THE DAMN JOB! Pass it up and, as God is my witness, I'll write the damn script myself, win an Oscar for it, then spend the rest of my life following you with a sharp knife and a saltshaker!!"

"All right! Calm down! Did I say we wouldn't come? I just need to talk it over with Claire."

"Talk all you like, just get her out here. And by the way, you're *welcome*!"

"Give me a break, okay? This is all a bit abrupt."

“That’s how things happen out here,” he said, all cheery again. “It’s a very impulsive town. I’m fitting in beautifully. See you at LAX!”

“Don’t hang up!”

“I’m late for a date. Your tickets will be at the counter. Bobby arranged it.”

“*Bobby who?*” I asked, but he was gone. I replaced the receiver and turned to Claire, whose face had taken on that stern squinty look it gets whenever Gilbert descends on our playground proffering candy.

“Well! How’s that for good news? He’s found us a job!”

“I gathered.”

“Hollywood, baby!” I said in my best Sgt. Bilko voice. “Our ship has come in!”

“Have you counted the lifeboats?” she replied and exited to the hall.

I locked the door and caught up with her in my building’s cramped vestibule-cum-gentleman’s lounge. She sailed grimly into the drizzly night and I fell in beside her, wondering how on earth I could coax her onto that plane.

YOU MIGHT SUPPOSE THAT a high-paying Hollywood job would not be a difficult thing to sell to a heartsick lady playwright whose most recent offspring had expired quietly in the cradle. You would only suppose this, however, if you didn’t know Gilbert.

Claire knew Gilbert.

And even if she were willing, in the hope of financial gain, to overlook his complete lack of talent, his nonexistent scruples and altogether tenuous grasp of reality, there remained still his most unique and troubling feature, i.e., the spectacular, almost supernatural rottenness of his luck.

Gilbert’s friends and victims have long debated what lies at the root of his uncanny knack for misfortune. Some feel it’s karmic payback for misdeeds in a previous life in which he must have been, at the very least, a Cossack. Others maintain that a touchy sorceress must have been given the bum’s rush at his christening. Whatever the reason, bad luck trails Gilbert like some relentless paparazzo. It dogs his footsteps, pops up where least expected, and rains disaster upon him and any hapless confederates he’s cajoled along for the ride. Twice in the past Claire had (thanks solely to me) become embroiled in Gilbert’s affairs with results ranging from mere humiliation to mortal peril. She was not eager as such to enlist for a third tour of duty, no matter how generous the signing bonus.

I understood her apprehension, feeling more than a shiver of it myself. But, convinced that my alternative was Milo and necktie land, I’d decided to view Gilbert’s previous debacles as a mere bad-luck streak that *had*, after all, to end *sometime*.

“I can’t believe,” I said, as we settled into our favorite booth at Carmine’s, “that you’re thinking of refusing this.”

“I can’t believe you’re not.”

“C’mon! This is exactly what we need! After all we’ve been through. The timing’s perfect!”

“That,” said Claire, “is what scares me. It’s so typical of Gilbert. He always oils around with these offers just when you’re at your most vulnerable. He’s like some—”

“Friend in need?”

“Opportunistic infection. And by the way, what’s this nonsense about him passing us off as a team? You don’t find *that* alarming?” asked Claire, who’d sooner have collaborated with Al Qaeda.

I replied that though a creative partnership with Gilbert was unlikely to prove the maxim that many hands make light the work, his motive for proposing it was obvious. He’d clearly used his formidable

powers of persuasion to talk his way into a job, then, fearing himself not up to the task, drafted us as partners. “~~And a lucky thing for us, considering how bad we are at selling ourselves. Anyway,~~” I added, playing my strongest card, “I can’t wait to see the look on Marco’s face when he hears you’re scaling the heights in Hollywood.”

I could see that Claire had not yet viewed the matter from this perspective. Her scowl softened, and a smile, fleeting but unmistakable, played across her lips. As any wronged lover knows, success is the best revenge, and nothing stokes ambition like an unworthy ex begging to be left in the dust.

“He *never* took your career seriously. It’s one of the things I hated most about him.”

“It really is charming how willing you are to exploit my heartbreak for your own greedy purpose.”

“Your heartbreak,” I countered, “is half the reason we should go. What better time to take a free trip to Hollywood as guests of a real live mogul! We’ll blow town, see L.A. We’ll party with Gilbert and his mom—whom you *adore*. We’ll find out what the job is and if you don’t like it you’ll fly home. First class! At best it’s a job, at worst a vacation, so cut the Cassandra routine and eat fast ’cause we need to pack.”

This tough-love approach, abetted by wine and more catty allusions to Marco, eventually won the day. She agreed to join me so long as I understood that she was not committing to anything whatsoever.

Her subsequent references that night to our “glittering new careers” were all made in the droll manner of a governess humoring her delusional charge. But for all her glib ironies I could detect in her quick smiles and flushed cheeks the first reluctant stirrings of hope. I knew that beneath that wry guarded exterior she burned with the girlish desire to win some small sliver of Hollywood fame, then stab her sweetie in the eye with it.

My own optimism was less guarded and soared higher as the level in the wine bottle descended. I marveled at how my fortunes had rebounded and chided myself for my earlier pessimism. How absurd that a man of my gifts and obviously shining future had allowed himself to wallow in morbid, cravat-themed fantasies.

Swell talk show story though!

MY THOUGHTS WOULD NOT return again to old Milo until a bleak and drizzly afternoon the following February.

Gilbert and I, reeling from the latest in a seemingly endless string of catastrophes, had wandered numbly into the Beverly Hills Neiman Marcus in the preposterous hope that a spot of shopping might cheer us. We discovered a bar on the top floor and agreed that a cocktail might soothe our nerves and quiet the facial tic I’d recently developed.

As I nibbled morosely on my olive, I glanced up and noticed the necktie counter, where a well-dressed man about my age was meticulously arranging the latest merchandise. How cheerful he looked. How content to spend his days among so many pleasing fabrics and designs. How blissfully unencumbered by lawsuits and threats of imminent incarceration.

The song playing over the Muzak system ended, and another began, something old and familiar from *South Pacific*. I couldn’t place the title, but hearing it, I felt a sharp, inexplicable pang.

“What’s this song?” I asked Gilbert.

He listened a moment.

“‘This Nearly Was Mine.’ Why?”

**I**F THERE SHOULD BE AMONG MY readers any underpaid couriers who are contemplating giving notice, can tell them right now that there's no more agreeable place from which to do so than the first-class compartment of a 767 just after the free champagne's come around.

"Carlos!" I said, ebulliently addressing my foul-tempered supervisor. "Cavanaugh here."

"About fucking time!" replied Carlos, to whom an expletive-free sentence was a pale and juiceless thing. "Where the hell are you?"

I told him, not omitting reference to the champagne. He countered incredibly that if I did not promptly report for duty I could consider myself fired. I assured him that I comprehended the gravity of my situation but could not focus on it fully at the moment as I'd just been handed a menu and couldn't decide whether to have the merlot or cabernet with my steak au poivre.

"Any suggestions?"

He had one, of course, and, after making it, hung up.

As I pocketed my cell Claire nudged me and said, "Looks like the in-flight entertainment's starting early." She directed my attention to a drama unfolding on the other side of the cabin. It involved a dispute between a large disgruntled businessman and an aging Hollywood actress.

When I say she was an aging Hollywood actress, I do so not because I recognized her, for I did not. But everything about her dress and bearing so clearly announced this as her station in life that a child of three, beholding her, would have lisped, "Look, Mommy, an aging Hollywood actwess."

The face was still pretty in a pixieish way with an upturned nose and a pert little chin. She'd traded in her wrinkles for the taut, pink translucence of the frequently pulled and peeled. Her vivid orange hair was teased high in the front, cascading down to a flip at the nape of her neck, giving her that aging cheerleader look familiar to anyone who has spent even two minutes on Rodeo Drive. Her outfit was chic in a retro "cocktails with Ike and Mamie" sort of way. She wore a kelly green travel cape and beneath that a blouse of copper silk with a high neck such as Katharine Hepburn favored in later life. Also deployed on wattle-hiding duty was a flowing red silk scarf. Charm bracelets adorned both wrists, and her ears sparkled with costume diamonds the size of doorknobs. This ensemble was finished by large dark glasses meant to convey the laughable pretense that she desired anonymity.

She was sitting in an aisle seat, scribbling intently in a small notebook and ignoring the many-chinned fellow glaring down at her.

"I said *excuse* me. You're in my seat."

She affected not to hear this and a passing flight attendant asked what the problem was.

"This woman's in my seat and she won't move."

Aging Hollywood Actress looked up and removed her sunglasses, blinking strenuously in an unpersuasive show of surprise.

"I'm sorry, were you addressing me? I get so engrossed when I'm working!"

"I'm sorry," said the attendant after verifying the man's claim, "but this isn't your seat. May I see your boarding pass?"

"There's no point in my showing it to you. It's a mistake. It says I'm supposed to be at the back of

the plane.”

“Did you purchase a first-class ticket?”

“I didn’t purchase it. The producer of the play I was doing— fabulous production, raves everywhere — bought it for me. I’d made it quite clear to him after my horrible flight east that I wanted first class going back. He said he’d see to it, but then the lady at the counter — dreadful woman, I’m fling a complaint—claimed to know nothing about it and stuck me in the back. Can you imagine!”

“I’m sorry, ma’am, but you’ll have to return to your original seat.”

“Sorry. Quite impossible. I was recognized by the man next to me. He began asking one question after another so I had to get as far away as possible!” She laughed ruefully. “The price of fame!”

“I see,” said the attendant, who clearly hadn’t an inkling who she was. “Look, I’m sorry for the mix-up —”

“Ah!” said the actress triumphantly. “So you admit there was a mix-up?”

The attendant said she’d instruct her cabin-class neighbor to respect her privacy but she had to return to her seat immediately as she was holding up the flight.

The actress gasped dramatically. “Holding up the flight!” She turned and addressed the whole cabin, hoping to rally support. “ ‘Holding up the flight,’ she says! As though I’m some sort of terrorist! *Me!!* ” She gestured to her seatmate, a young Donna Karan-clad woman who’d been staring wretchedly out her window through the whole contretemps. “Perhaps this young lady — or *someone*, she added, pointedly eyeing the rest of us gawkers, “would be kind enough to change seats with me. I’d be immensely grateful.”

This request inspired a sudden cabinwide fascination with the in-flight magazine. The actress cast her eyes at the unchivalrous souls around her, shook her head in disgust, and addressed the attendant.

“Send more champagne back to me. It’s the least I am owed.” And with that she rose and, donning her shades, indignantly withdrew.

There are few things so wounding to a young homosexual’s self-esteem as finding himself unable to identify a bejeweled Hollywood actress over seventy, however obscure. Claire too found her vaguely familiar and we bandied names for a moment before turning to the more pressing question of what films we should watch on our personal DVD players.

My savvier readers are no doubt stroking their chins and thinking, “This mystery woman—she’ll be back.” And of course she will or I’d have left her out entirely. But our bizarre entanglement with Lily Malenfant (for that was her name) was still, like so much else that lay before us, happily beyond our power to imagine. I didn’t think about her again for the rest of the flight. I was too busy savoring the wine, the warm mixed nuts, and my frequent and pleasant chats with our handsome steward, who somehow managed to coax from me the news that I was bound for Hollywood and cinematic glory.

GILBERT, TRUE TO FORM, arrived at the terminal ten minutes after we’d retrieved our bags. I didn’t recognize him at first. His tan was very deep and his chin now sported a Hollywood hipster goatee. He wore a tight, navy short-sleeve shirt and de rigueur Hollywood sunglasses, a choice I took, incorrectly, to be satiric.

“Darlings!” he cried, embracing us both in a single hug. “Welcome to my town!”

“You’ve been here three weeks,” said Claire.

“Work fast, don’t I? Oh, Dimitri!”

A short, stocky man wearing a dark suit and an unfortunate ponytail materialized at our side

wheeling a luggage cart.

~~“Dimitri, these are my dear friends and writing partners, Philip and Claire. Dimitri works for Max.”~~

The chauffeur nodded deferentially and, displaying surprising strength for a wee fatty, hoisted our bags onto the cart. He murmured an order into a scarcely visible headset, then wheeled the cart outside, reaching the curb just as a limousine long enough to bowl in pulled up. An assortment of onlookers stared at it, eager to see what celebrity it had come to fetch or disgorge. Gilbert, never one to waste an opportunity for drama, made us hang back in the terminal till Dimitri had opened the rear door for us. Then, shielding his face, he dashed from the terminal and into the car with a fleetness meant to suggest years of paparazzi dodging. Claire and I, relegated to the role of entourage rolled our eyes and sauntered behind, passing the rubberneckerers just in time to hear a teenage girl say, “No way Brad Pitt’s much cuter — and he’s *not gay*.”

We settled into the car’s luxurious interior, noting the bar, flat-screen TV, and buttery soft black leather.

“Isn’t this fun?!” laughed Gilbert, bouncing in his seat like a toddler.

“Oodles,” deadpanned Claire. “So, what’s the job?”

Gilbert put a warning finger to his lips and jerked his head back to where Dimitri stood loading our luggage into the trunk.

“We can’t talk in the car,” he said. “Dimitri has big ears and he’s very loyal to Max. We can’t risk him ratting us out.”

“What don’t you want Max to know?” I asked.

He smiled impishly. “Let’s just say it wasn’t easy getting you two in on this. I had to fudge a few things.”

“We’ll contain our astonishment,” said Claire.

“Chateau Marmont!” exclaimed Gilbert once Dimitri had taken the wheel.

“And lay on the speed. My guests need to change for dinner.”

It was maddening that the one topic we burned to discuss was off-limits, but the luxury had a certain lulling effect and we contented ourselves to sit back and watch the palm trees glide by while listening to Gilbert rhapsodize about the joys of LA. Knowing that Dimitri was listening, he reserved his highest praise for the man who was subsidizing his stay and who might, if properly buttered, refresh the linens indefinitely.

“You’re going to *adore* Max. He’s an absolute prince. Charming, generous—and talk about smart

This last at least I had no trouble believing. I knew from what little I’d read of Max Mandelbaum that he was, if not quite the town’s richest mogul, widely considered its shrewdest. He’d managed to turn a small record company into a media behemoth, comprising TV and radio stations, magazines, theme parks, and, most famously, Hollywood’s second-oldest studio, Pinnacle. His zest for acquisition had caused him to be so often caricatured as an octopus that people’s first response on meeting him was to marvel at how well his tailor had concealed the extra arms.

When we reached the hotel, Dimitri saw to our luggage while Claire and I followed Gilbert into a small elevator that brought us up to the reception desk. The clerk apologetically informed us that our rooms were not ready, as the previous occupants had been a rock band and untidy even by the standards of their profession. Gilbert ordered champagne, then asked the bellman to have Dimitri wait while he discussed key creative matters with his colleagues. He then led us across the lobby to a cozy corner far from prying ears.

Like most people who only knew the Chateau Marmont as the place where John Belushi’s demons

yelled, “Checkmate!” I half expected to see a chalk outline on the carpet. What I saw instead was a large, lovely time warp of a room, decorated in the grand Hollywood Spanish style of the twenties. It had a high-beamed ceiling and soaring arched windows giving onto a lovely vaulted portico and garden. So completely did it evoke the silent era’s languid glamour that it would not have surprised me to turn and spot a young Gloria Swanson sipping bootleg hooch from Joe Kennedy’s hip flask before retiring to walk her ocelot.

We settled onto a plump sofa next to an arched alcove hung with richly brocaded drapes. Gilbert plopped his feet on the coffee table and spread his arms like a genie taking a bow after delivering on particularly tall order.

“Not too shabby, huh?”

“Not too,” I agreed.

“First-class travel, limos, legendary hotels! Stick with me, kids!”

“From what I gather,” said Claire, “we’re pretty well stuck. You’ve told people we’re writing partners?”

“And so we will be!” he said cheerfully. “I hope you’re looking forward to it as much as I am. I’ve often wondered what the result might be if you two pooled your talents with mine.”

I sensed that Claire did not consider “pooled” quite the mot juste and would probably have chosen the more straightforward “diluted,” but she just smiled dryly and asked how our happy union had come to pass.

“Well, it all started when—oh, good, just in time!”

A darkly handsome tray bearer was approaching with a bottle of Dom Pérignon. Gilbert beamed at the sight and I wasn’t sure if this was just his usual delight in champagne or if he felt that now would be an excellent time to start addling our brains.

“Cheers!” he said, raising his glass. “To the Oscar we’ll win for this!”

We offered our dubious toasts, then Gilbert said, “So! This restaurant we’re going to tonight’s *the* most exclusive in town, but thanks to good old Max —”

“The project?” Claire said firmly.

“Oh, right.”

His eyes swept the lobby as though to make sure Dimitri wasn’t skulking behind a potted palm. Then, satisfied that our privacy was sufficient, he leaned toward us with a conspiratorial smile and unfolded his improbable tale.

**T** TRUTH TO TELL," HE BEGAN, "I'VE been planning this ever since Mom let drop ever so casually that the old fart she'd met at a party and who'd sent her roses the next day was none other than Max Mandelbaum. I mean, talk about your lucky breaks! I think, Philip, that I may have said something to you at the time about how perfect it would be if they really clicked."

I said that yes, he'd mentioned the blossoming romance frequently over the last months and had seldom failed, when requesting a loan, to cite it as proof of his future solvency.

"Well, I was right, wasn't I? Anyway, I did my best to help things along, you know, encouraging her to go for it. She liked him well enough, but she found his weight a bit off-putting. I mean, her last husband was an absolute hunk, but Max—you could tear him down and build a stadium. But I kept pointing out what a romantic he was, which, thank God, he really was. Between the daily flower deliveries and the packages from Tiffany's, the old blimp finally wore her down. I mean, Mom's no gold digger but if you keep the bracelets coming, well, c'mon, she's only *human*.

"Once they got engaged I played things pretty carefully, y'know, not wanting to seem too eager. I waited two whole months to come visit and even then I didn't mention my work to Max or ask him to introduce me to his big-shot friends. No, I went completely through Mom. I encouraged her to throw dinner parties—she *loves* entertaining—and helped her draw up all these 'fun' guest lists. I knew if she threw enough A-list dinners with me there piling on the charm that lightning *had* to strike eventually. And it did!

"It was last week and there were just twelve of us at table. I'd fiddled with the place cards and snagged myself a seat next to Bobby Spellman. You know, the producer?"

"Lucky you," Claire said sardonically, and I snorted in agreement.

"I can't stand that asshole."

"You might try to be a little nicer," chided Gilbert. "He paid for your plane fare and hotel."

"Bobby *Spellman*?" said Claire, stunned.

"*That's* who we're working for?"

"He's the man! So you can see we're not talking low budget here!"

Bobby Spellman, I should explain for those rarefied souls whose nights out are confined to opera and stimulating lectures, is Hollywood's leading purveyor of those noisy, extravagantly budgeted action films that the press cannot seem to describe without recourse to the phrase "high-octane." I've seen three of them and found each more un stomachable than the last. I've nothing against the genre, mind you, having passed many a happy hour watching attractive stars outrun fireballs. It's just that Spellman's films are, like the man himself, filled to bursting with snide machismo. His heroes are all cocksure bad boys whom we're invited to admire not for their courage or heroism but for their unflinching flippancy under pressure. Their response to mortal danger is sarcasm and they're never more snarky than when they've just been shot, which is always in the shoulder or thigh, no villain in these films ever possessing the good sense to aim for their hearts or, better still, mouths.

"Bobby *Spellman*?" I repeated, aghast.

"Wants *us* to write a movie?"

“Isn’t it great?! Of course, this won’t be his usual sort of picture.”

“Let’s hope so!” said Claire.

“What sort is it?”

“I’m getting to that. So anyway, we’re at dinner and he starts talking about this book his aunt sent him. It was written back in the fifties and he put off reading it forever, but he finally did and was blown away by it. It’s called *A Song for Greta* and you’re going to love it.”

Claire asked if it was a comedy.

“In parts. And there’s room for lots more. But it’s got everything! Great plot, amazing characters, romance, intrigue. It’s a lost classic, which is why Bobby’s dying to make it—it’s his bid for respectability. He wants to show people he can do something besides make money and maim stuntmen.

“So anyway, I asked who was writing it and he said no one yet. And that’s when Mom, bless her, piped up about me—how talented I was, what wonderful scripts I wrote. And I knew then and there the job was mine!”

Claire and I exchanged a baffled glance. We couldn’t imagine anyone, even Bobby Spellman, putting much stock in the literary judgments of Gilbert’s mother. Maddie Cellini is a warm, thoroughly delightful woman, but even her fondest admirers will concede that her brain is 90 percent meringue.

“He took her *seriously*?” marveled Claire, adding hastily, “I mean, she is your mom.”

“Hell, no,” smirked Gilbert. “But what could he do? He can’t blow Mom off without insulting Ma and he’s the last guy anyone in this town wants to offend. So he said, ‘Great, send me a writing sample and I’ll send you the book.’ I said, ‘Fine,’ then I sent him *Imbroglia*. And that’s how we got hired!”

“*Imbroglia*?” I asked, confused.

“Oh, right, I haven’t mentioned that. I just wrote a new spec script.”

Claire and I exchanged a second goggle-eyed glance as I mopped up the champagne spill from the flute I’d just knocked over.

“You wrote a spec script?”

“Yes.”

“And *finished* it?” asked Claire, whose astonishment could not have been greater had he claimed to have licked cold fusion.

“Yes. Just last week.”

We exchanged a third and still more mystified glance.

“And Bobby *liked* it?”

“Yes!” he said, getting peevish. “Is that so hard to believe?”

“No!” I said, flabbergasted.

You might have assumed from Gilbert’s references to his “work” that there exists somewhere a set of actual completed texts of which Gilbert is the author. There does not. There are many things Gilbert likes about being a writer. He enjoys the drinking, the convivial shoptalk with fellow scribes, the sense of superiority to less creative beings. The one thing he does not like about being a writer is writing. Every project he embarks on soon falls prey to his fatal lack of perseverance, and his longest completed work to date is a haiku. For him to claim now that he’d dashed off a spec script brilliant enough to win him a fat Hollywood contract did not merely strain Credulity; it beat the crap out of Credulity and sent Credulity’s next of kin scurrying to its bedside.

“When did you write this?” I asked.

“I started it, oh, about a month ago, and I was done by—stop that!”

“Stop what?”

“Every time I say something you two look at each other. It’s very annoying.”

Claire replied diplomatically that we were merely wondering how we fit into all this. Gilbert assured us he was getting there and ordered more champagne. He then explained that Bobby had sent a messenger to deliver *A Song for Greta* and pick up Gilbert’s spec. He paused here and his tone strained for poignancy.

“I saw him, the messenger, standing on the doorstep — this morose, badly dressed fellow. Naturally I thought of you, Philip.”

“Thank you.”

“I mean it. It broke my heart to think that’s what you’d been reduced to—a genius like you, schlepping packages around midtown.

And you, Claire, scraping by as a rehearsal pianist, flogging your songs in grimy little cabarets. The more I thought about it the more unfair it seemed. Why should I be out here getting rich and famous while my two most gifted friends were back east, toiling fruitlessly away in their squalid apartments? So I decided if Bobby wanted me he’d have to hire you guys too.”

“And how’d you manage that?” asked Claire a bit coolly, as her apartment was not remotely squalid.

“Easy. I just typed up a new title page and put your names below mine. As far as Bobby knows we wrote it together, which is good news for you because he *loved* it! Called it the best spec he’s ever—what did I say about not looking at each other?”

The impulse had been impossible to resist. Credulity-wise we were now at the memorial with Credulity’s best friend belting out “Time Heals Everything.”

“So,” said Claire evenly, “you just decided to cut us in out of the goodness of your heart?”

“Now please! I know what you’re going to say—you feel funny about riding my coattails. Well, don’t. I can’t think of two people who deserve a break more than you guys and it thrills me to be the one who can give it to you.”

He raised his glass in a toast.

“To partnership!”

We toasted limply, then Claire said, “So, your script...?”

He wagged a cheerful finger. “*Our* script! Don’t forget that— especially when we meet Bobby. That’s tomorrow at two by the way.”

“As we’re supposed to have cowritten it, perhaps you might tell us a bit about it?”

“Happy to!” said Gilbert, refilling my glass. “It’s basically a good old-fashioned love story, but funny, with strong suspense elements and — oh look! I think your room’s ready!”

I turned and saw the desk clerk crossing the lobby toward us. Gilbert rose then, glancing at his watch, bugged his eyes like the bad high school actor he once was.

“Gosh, I’d better run if I’m going to get home and make myself pretty. Dress up, kids! We’re going to the hottest place in town. I’ll pick you up at eight!”

“Perhaps,” suggested Claire, “you might bring along a copy of ‘our’ script?”

“Good idea! I can’t wait for you to read it!”

And with that he left, walking, we agreed, a touch briskly for a boy with nothing to hide.

TEN MINUTES LATER CLAIRE and I sat nibbling from the complimentary fruit plate in my large, sunny suite while dissecting Gilbert’s story, which was, we concurred, fishier than last week’s sevicehe.

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