

*Mike D. Parker*

## **The Outrageous Roy Joseph**

Roy Joseph arrived in town at five o'clock. He asked a passer-by the way to the nearest Catholic church, found it, lit a candle, and contemplated his dead friend, Ernesto.

Ernesto had died ten days ago. The burial laid Ernesto to rest but not Roy Joseph. He'd begun to believe that the Catholic faith was not accessible at Moments of Primary Pain. It was magical when he reflected upon its mysterious theology during joyful times, but it seemed to have retired now that he required ultimate meanings as solace.

*At the funeral, the showbiz eulogies had felt out of place. Not that Roy doubted the sincerity of the tributes, it was rather that he perceived a desperation in them because the performers were unable to fathom an ultimate significance in the formal service.*

**Are you really dead, Ernesto? I feel I'm spreading false rumors.**

Roy Joseph usually arrived in the town where he was booked to perform at aroundabout five. Occasionally he spotted posters announcing his show.

THE  
OUTRAGEOUS  
ROY JOSEPH  
★ ★ ★  
TONIGHT  
AT . . .

It occurred to him that people might wonder what it was like to be billed as outrageous. When asked, he'd reply, "Fabulous, of course," which was untrue. As a comedian with a "blue" reputation his answers weren't taken too seriously. He felt that audiences somehow expected him to have his mind in a lascivious elsewhere, as if his Act demanded that he continuously research degradation and keep up to date with its latest manifestations.

Smut, filth, innuendo . . . their universality, actually made his job much easier than that. Without feeling blasphemous he thought, "They might very well lay claim to a peculiar eternal status of their own." Unlike his stage suits, which glittered, shone, went to the dry cleaners, faded and had to be replaced with as much ephemeral dignity as a long-life battery. Yet he smiled with a grin as wide as a pensioner's underpants.

After his trip to the church, Roy telephoned the club's manager and informed him that he'd arrived. The Manager, a man who celebrated the eccentricities of performers as portents of genius, acknowledged Roy's politeness and recommended a seafront bar as relaxed and therapeutic. Genius generally enjoyed a few drinks before going on stage, he'd found.

"There was a question raised, however, at the Council Meeting last night about your Act." The Manager added: "However, it was dropped. Not deemed important enough business, however."

"However . . . here I am. I shall turn up in good time," reassured Roy Joseph who understood that Council Meetings meant full attendance. "You could ring the local newspaper and tell them that I'm dismayed to be so misinterpreted."

"Not a bad idea," agreed the Manager.

Roy Joseph was a credulous soul. He headed for the bar. He believed the Manager's assessment. For years he'd believed he couldn't stand the cold because a clairvoyant had told him so. Even in Summer he used to wear furlined boots until he'd contracted Dhobi itch and been forced to change to sandals.

As he entered the pub, his presence was noted by two men playing pool. They observed the particularly confident masculine body posture, the largeness of the hands and the holdall. They might have mistaken him for a boxer, in town to fight on the Metropole bill. And yet, like many masculine man, his traits were exaggerated to the point of dandyism.

When he ordered his drink he was steadfastly polite. When he lifted it, his fists made the jar seem delicate. When he neatly crossed his legs, the firm musculature allowed him a relaxed, feminine repose. He nodded toward them, with the composure of a gunslinger; people like them, he'd made them laugh until they thought their lives were worthwhile: until all their prejudices were exposed and their bigotry clarified and documented. They confessed in their laughter.

The sea was scampering sideways, bullied by a west wind. It looked like it was on its way to somewhere quieter and in a hurry to escape from its own wildness. Roy remembered Ernesto again, but in a different way. Outside of the church, his memories were purely human. He recalled their conversations. He recalled how Ernesto disapproved of his Act.

*Ernesto, himself, had been the voice and manipulator of a beloved glove puppet. The voice was so distinctive that he'd been recognized wherever he went. So he'd developed a fake accent to give himself some peace. With his sincerity about truthfulness, this public deceit had tortured him. Even though Roy consoled him by pointing out it was necessary for survival and privacy, Ernesto wouldn't accept survival as a justification for lying.*

Roy Joseph never attempted to justify his Act on those grounds but he didn't see his encouragement or sick laughter as leading people into temptation either.

The drink was refreshing after the journey. He bathed his tongue in each mouthful and felt its anesthetic effect. If the tongue had independent morals of its own, then the alcohol would compromise them. Often, as he scanned an audience, Roy Joseph observed how every member appeared to be hugging him or herself in some way. Young men hugged their beers and their girls. Older men hugged their experience and inhibitions. Certain types of middle-aged women hugged their handbags.

These women, who generally presented themselves as the guardians of civilization, laughed like sadists at torture when he invited them to ridicule Blacks, the French, their husbands, and even the natural functions and geography of their own bodies. And they sat there and hugged their handbags, as if they contained Uranium.

After his drink, Roy strolled around the town centre. It amused him to watch the shops shutting and the stalls closing and pretend that the whole town was rushing home to tart itself up to come to his show. But

he knew his audiences would always be limited: no TV exposure, no posh cruises. His brand of material was too vulgar, too offensive. Many of his contemporaries had started out with him on the Stag Nite circuit, learned how to control and defeat an audience, and then moved on to more sophisticated comedy. Of course he'd developed as well. Only now he seemed to cater to those same Stags and Hens, after they'd been married twenty years or so.

Unlike those performers who despised their past training ground as a necessary evil, Roy Joseph considered the expression of human sexual and racial immaturity to be the real necessary evil.

**Ernesto's act had been completely harmless. Through it Ernesto had introduced children to a satirical view of the adult world with an ethically flawless compassion. His comic technique was considered incomparable. Somehow, he'd managed to balance an adult need for verbal skill with an absolute directive to communicate. Most of all, his show was funny, witty, and entertaining.**

Roy Joseph flagged down a taxi and asked the driver to drop him at the nearest pub to the Jacks Club. He adopted a demeanor which protected him from trespass by the cabby. (Taxi drivers recognized him without fail.)

*Not even the theatricality of the Catholic service had moved the assembled celebrities. As non-believers, its sense had remained unannounced, so most of them couldn't define the mysterious novelty of the performance. The sweet incense had mingled with an embittered disappointment; take up a daytime job, leave your name at the door.*

. . . Roy tipped the taxi driver and pushed the door shut softly. He didn't drive. He had no idea what pressure to apply to shutting a car door. This trait, Ernesto had respected: it promised some innocence at least.

But the ash and marble dusk persuaded him not to go straight into the pub. In the bar, he would begin to lose his personality, or aspects of it. There, he'd discard his moral finery ready to become the projection of the night's audience and its special degradations. Instead he wandered along a parade of antique shops, painted in dream-railway green and vanilla, courting the shared solitude of the comedian and the recently bereaved.

**People don't die suddenly, Ernesto, do they? It takes years for that.**

Some habits, Roy Joseph had retained from his Stag Nite ancestry. He travelled alone: without a band, without a warm-up Act, without a

companion. When Ernesto had admired his comic virtuosity but condemned his use of it, Roy Joseph used to point this out. How HE was a solitary figure. How this loneliness was the brutal truth of matters, however vague and dramatic that sounded.

*When Ernesto performed for the children ("Of all Ages," as he was billed), Roy Joseph had felt the presence of the true forces of life behind Ernesto's act. Although, it was supposed to appeal to the young and unformed, it really concerned everything that was vital to existence: Love, Friendship, Confusion, Betrayal, Family.*

Roy Joseph detected no such metaphysic behind his own joke-telling. Dealing, as he did, with the bleakest pulses of the adult heart, it still seemed that his vigorous disillusion and bawdy publicizing were alien fragments from a culture which had never existed and never could. They weren't even responses or reactions: they were so partial, so cowardly.

He left the run of shops and prised open the pub door.

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Crowds didn't arrive at a Club in the same way as at a Theatre. There were no excited queues. People arrived in taxis and cars to adequate parking spaces. Before the show, there would be dinner; sometimes it was a meal in a basket, sometimes a buffet, sometimes steak and salad with a prawn cocktail starter. The resident Band soothed or irritated. Occasionally a singer with shameless sentimentality crooned a few jazz numbers in the style of Sammy Davis, Jr., or Charlie Rich.

About an hour before this, Roy Joseph had already met the Manager and been shown to his dressing room. At Jacks, however, the Manager had invited Roy into the lounge for a "quick" drink. Often it was necessary to entertain both the public and his employer. Managers tended to be vain and immaturely solipsistic. They tried to hide this under a bishopric diplomacy, as they ushered him in serious conversation around the cloisters of their domain.

**Ernesto, why is it I can't quite remember you?**

Fortunately, this Club owner, Jack Trinity, hadn't ever had fantasies about being a performer himself. His face, posture, and manner declared moderation. His preening was a private activity. Yet he dressed like one of his staff in the drab formality of a nightclub tuxedo and his dulled

shrub-green eyes held the familial pain of a disappointed father: disappointed with the business of family; disappointed with the commerce of himself. His experiences made him ravenous for information about Men of the same age as himself such as Roy Joseph.

He was perplexed why this top-line performer didn't breeze in, complete with business agent, female escort, and chauffeur. Why did he take the train? Was he staying at a hotel in town? Everyone in the business knew about the celebrity tightwads who penny-pinched on transport, food, and time, but Roy Joseph didn't have that reputation.

"I was sorry to hear about Ernesto, however," said Jack Trinity. He was a close colleague of yours. My condolences. "He sat on a stool at one of the question-mark shaped bars, at the edge of the main seating arena. He watched Roy Joseph's eyes memorize the layout. "Quite spacious. I hear you like to 'walkabout' during the Act. I haven't seen you myself—apart from the records, as I say—my booking agent does the . . . the booking. Trust. I trust my personnel . . . from . . ." He looked toward another bar counter where the staff were stocking the shelves. "From the bar personnel to the Band Leader, however."

"Yes, Ernesto was a great friend and fellow professional," said Roy Joseph with a weary indifference to disguise his annoyance. Two types of Club Managers liked to fraternize with him before a performance: those who were privately appalled by his Act, but allowed it because it was good business and wanted to meet the perverted exponent face to face; and those who personally enjoyed the material, though Roy must be kindred soul and harbored obscene hatreds which they hoped he would endorse in the flesh as they presumed his words did on stage.

Jack Trinity, Roy immediately recognized, was one of the former. The assumption freed him to be rude, if he pleased, since the Jack Trinities of the showbiz circuit had paper morals, mere borrowed family ethics, and fears that their wives might think them boorish.

"It's a nice Club, Jack. Big, well-designed, good colors," complimented Roy, as if he were reassuring Trinity about the substance of his penis. "It's strange I've never played this town or this Club before, really. Excellent venue. How many you expecting in tonight?"

Trinity sighed, relieved at a straightforward performer's question. "Full house, of course."

Roy Joseph nodded. Again he memorized the layout of the Club: the dance floor with its inset airport runway lights, the confusing excess of mirrors which cast the form of the bouncers into every alcove, the green upholstery. He noted a big table to the right, with its reservation cards set for a large party. There were few small tables. It wasn't an evening for intimacy.

"Roy?" interrupted Trinity, "I've got to attend to a few things, you know. However, Evan over there has been delegated to look after your drinks. And anything else. He'll show you to your dressing room . . . if you want to meet the Band? Well, they'll be next door but one . . . But I must rush. Got some new personnel starting tonight . . . hmm?"

"Of course," said Roy Joseph, realizing that he was being less gregarious than usual. So? It might offend the Manager but it wouldn't affect his performance. He'd performed under the curse of blessing of every conceivable human mood. "I'll just call Evan if I've a need."

"We'll talk later . . . yes," hurried Jack Trinity. He waved over to Evan and put out his hand to Roy as if their conversation had been a transaction. Roy Joseph returned his shake, expecting his own reticence to be interpreted either as stage nerves or professional calm.

Evan swapped places with Trinity, as the entertainer to the entertainer. Domestically, deferential behind his counter, he asked, "Another cocktail Mr. Joseph?"

"I wouldn't say no." He watched Evan analyze his buttock-length brown leather jacket and smart slacks, trying to ascertain how expensive they were. At least the young man wasn't the type to crack a favorite joke.

Evan placed a healthy cocktail on the bar. "Always dark in a night Club . . . like the soul." He pronounced soul with elastic vowels to indicate that he knew he was saying something inappropriate.

"You're a bit young not to find some lights in your soul," answered Roy Joseph. "There are worse jobs."

Roy Joseph worked all year round. He had to have somewhere to go. He needed the routine of encountering strange towns. The desolate travelling soothed this restlessness. He made his schedule uncomfortable, then practised relaxing within it. In this way, he never had to start from tranquillity and strive further to real peace.

Any breaks in the itinerary, Roy Joseph had used to visit Ernesto, where he lived in a modest Gloucestershire town. It had seemed as if Ernesto had planned, and designed the entire surrounding countryside in the same way that he had chosen his interior decor. On the journey to and from Ernesto's, Roy Joseph read; the only time he could settle to a book.

**Dexterity. Ernesto's adroit and versatile fingers were famous in the profession. At home he rolled coins along his knuckles and kneaded light pastries for his guests. He'd preferred sheets and blankets to duvets because he enjoyed making a bed just-so, with the sheets crisp and tight, the blankets uniform and unwrinkled. He could juggle with fruit. These seemingly aimless pursuits found their way into his Act. Enrico, his puppet moved and gestured with gymnastic vitality as if his body had to keep pace with the verbal trickery of Ernesto's imagination.**

Now, Evan was counting the rings on Roy Joseph's fingers. Why, wondered Roy Joseph, when there's obviously one per finger? The rings covered up his clumsiness. They diverted attention away from the Himalayan knuckles and old scars from Roy's youth as a Council gardener.

"Time?" asked Roy Joseph ungraciously, beginning to metamorphosize into a Star. "And another cocktail, please, Evan."

"Nearly seven," replied Evan. He stared beyond Roy. "Diane Fletcher's arrived . . ." He winced. "She's the singer tonight . . . before you go on."

Roy swivelled around to the dance floor, where a tall woman in her late thirties was swinging across towards him. She wore a large shimmering arctic blue jacket over an enormous cleavage. The jacket was supposed to proclaim loud elegance but Roy thought she carried it like a barber's smock. She ferried her breasts as if they were of immense interest to everybody. He prepared to meet her with a sympathetic colleague's smile. At least, it was unlikely she would upstage his Act. Jack Trinity's booking manager must have organized that.

"Diane," he greeted loudly before she'd fully docked at the bar. "Evan," he called. "Bring Miss Fletcher a cocktail, thank you." Having stolen the introductions, he sat back and allowed the flattered Miss Fletcher to power the conversation.

"Well . . . Roy." She began, glancing at the ironically scurrying Evan. "I wasn't aware you knew I was on the bill tonight."



"I make it my business Diane. I like to know if I'm on with class or not, makes the difference." He gave no indication on which side of the value judgment she stood. Observing the pulsating cleavage, he rather sadly amended an old joke of his, to kick the Act off with. She would give her all to an appreciative audience and then he'd appear later and crack a line about her breasts. They'd laugh. Her singing would be forgotten. You had to be ruthless dealing with children.

He hoped she wouldn't take his showbiz familiarity as a signal that she could mention Ernesto's death. The professional fraternity liked to think of their members as a brotherhood; they adhered to a dramatic, "for whom the bell tolls" mentality. Fortunately she was more interested in herself.

"I had actually decided to put a couple of new numbers in tonight. Nothing too drastic, we've been rehearsing them for quite some time. It was just a question of the right time to include them."

"Timing's all important," concurred Roy Joseph.

"Nothing accompanies quite like a good singer," asserted Diane. (Roy noted that her brown eyes were rather gentle; the eyes of someone who genuinely needed to support others.) "A singer can back-up any Act, without upstaging them."

"Unless, that's what they're trying to do," replied Roy Joseph, who'd had such experiences but really didn't want to get interviewed into anecdotal bitterness. "Singing's a joy, Diane, don't be bullied into seeing it as harmless. Belt your stuff out . . . I can look after myself. After all the public's come to be entertained . . . in both ways." He suspected that she'd been seeking his permission to perform all out. Of course let her compete. Although Roy Joseph had no intention of dropping the cruel joke that would give his entrance that special buoyancy.

"Even-even if I give it something extra tonight . . . I want you to know that I'm nevertheless supporting you . . . I feel that it's-it's the best way." She stopped suddenly and forlornly sipped her cocktail. To Roy, it felt as if he had just witnessed the primary motivating dilemma of her Being. Diane appeared to be unaware that this intimate aspect of her personality had waved impudently at the Comedian before her.

Then Roy Joseph twigged: every part of her soul must be open for visitors and if there weren't any then they'd drag some off the street.

Like a vicar making up numbers at a wedding by indirectly informing regular parishioners of the venue.

"It's said, that comedians are very lonely people," reported Diane.

"And Singers," replied Roy Joseph and having mutually acknowledged solitude, they sat silently together and felt the rising warmth of the plush carpets.

**Ernesto. I'd rather sit, with you alive, on a wet February afternoon in a coffee shop than join you in some blissful memory: the only places you inhabit now you're dead.**

"Resident band?" inquired Roy. Diane nodded and glanced towards Evan for another cocktail. Three cocktails, she'd found enabled her to reach those few notes on the lower register, which gave her singing enough huskiness to suggest eroticism. She'd worked hard for her limited success and even harder to accept that it would always be limited.

Like Jack Trinity, she was puzzled by the outrageous Roy Joseph. His appearance was unexpected, his drinking restrained and his manner contemplative. On the circuit, it was recognized that his notoriety concealed genuine talent. Occasionally, he'd written brilliantly for other people, but for himself, he stuck to the usual obscene material. As a woman, she found much of his Act offensive. As a performer, she admired the technique, confidence and skill of his show. It was as if he couldn't believe the human race was capable of growing out of its primitive prejudices and felt obliged to embrace them in this infancy.

When Evan returned with the magical third cocktail, Diane lifted it off the bar and said, "Well, I've got to go and discuss the numbers with Willy. We'll meet after, I expect."

"Of course," said Roy Joseph. "Is there a casino in this town?"

"Oh yes, MAJORS . . . If you want to get a night membership, I'm sure Jack'll be able to arrange it. OK. Well, I'll see you after."

*One of the beauties of Ernesto's act was his ability to unite timeless moral themes with contemporary juvenilia. He read comics and magazines, watched kids' TV and researched in toy shops to keep up to date. But then, he transformed those commercial artifacts into the world of Ernesto with its own rules and obsessions and logic. However modern his props and language, Ernesto's puppet creation of Enrico, seemed to be living in another time, elsewhere. It was this sense which attracted adults.*

*It was this eeriness which moved and fascinated them and not a nostalgic feeling for the time/space of childhood.*

The Club uncoiled around Roy Joseph, as he sat on his stool. Diane had taken refuge in the dressing room corridors and backstage dust, where she found the earnest preparations reassuring. Superstition ruled there. Many performers found it more comforting than a rational build-up. Roy Joseph preferred to watch the night Club yawning and preening itself.

An industrial vacuum cleaner was prowling around the distant foyer and Evan was still bottling up the shelves. An invisible hand tested the stage spots a couple of times, shocking the arena with light, like a police raid. From the kitchens the aroma of volume-cooked food penetrated the table areas, in a rehearsal of its own. Roy Joseph felt the grubbiness of his travelling outfit and twitched with desire for his impeccable shoes, smooth trousers and silk shirt. The longing was part of readiness.

**But Ernesto, you yourself, were never seen, only experienced indirectly through your creation. What manner of performing was that?**

Roy Joseph picked up another cocktail from Evan and wandered down into the main arena. He wasn't wearing his stage shoes which had a slight heel. The heels held him up and forwards, so that he had to move formally. Often he wondered how much of his professional discipline came from this simple source. He paced the width of the raised stage, sipping at his cocktail and throwing out an actor's sonar beams to gauge the parameters of the auditorium. There was a scratching behind the main curtain where the electricians were taping up something or other. The band's drum kit was already assembled to the left of the stage. He walked over and hit the snare. It wasn't tuned yet, however.

In the past, he used to try a song occasionally, but he wasn't a cabaret artiste in that way. It had been vanity, to show that he could sing, not an internal part of his Act. Stage air was different from real air: drier. It fell in a curtain at the exact edge of the dais. When a performer broke this boundary and moved into the audience, he took a supply of it with him, like a diver's scuba kit. It gave him a limited time out there. He had to measure his paces, check his position and get back to the stage before it ran out.

Roy Joseph liked the layout of this Club. He'd spend a long time with the audience. He might even go up to the bar during the performance. An idea? He called over to Evan.

"Evan." The lad acknowledged the call. "D'you want to be a star? . . . Mix me up a double one of these. Leave it safe under the counter. I'll come over for it during my Act . . . Understand? About fifteen minutes into the show . . . Now I want you to hand it to me . . . I'll give you the cue. Something like Ah, Evan my cocktail please. OK. Don't let me down. Mr. Trinity won't mind. Have you got that?"

Evan nodded. The new Roy Joseph standing on the stage didn't suffer fools at all: his voice held the threat of ridicule, his words were armed with a brutal humor.

"Of course, Mr. Joseph . . . anywhere in particular along the bar?" He felt obliged to ask a sensible question, in case he was attacked for stupidity.

"Left of the main aisle . . . just a bit further than you are now. I'll cue you and give you a minute or so to get it up on the bar." It was a technique Roy Joseph had employed many times before. When he collected his drink, he'd sacrifice Evan to laughs. He'd humiliate the boy. Something along the lines of shaking cocktails and wanking. He'd throw the boy's sexuality before the audience, like dragging him naked out of bed to be examined by a crowd of factory women.

"Does Jack Trinity comper his own show?"

"Yes."

"I thought so." And with that, he dismissed Evan from his moral compass. The lad was now one more victim among the rest. The whole audience were his victims.

*Ernesto had had an ambivalent attitude toward tricks of the trade such as involving Evan. He appreciated how they worked: success presupposed sound technique. Yet, his conventions had developed naturally out of higher rhythms. He realized that humor had forms which he celebrated as divine structures, but again he never consciously duped enjoyment out of his audiences in the same way Roy Joseph did: as an act of cynicism, as an expression of the frailty of human will.*

A muscular, young drummer in a T-shirt jiggled out from behind the curtain to tune his kit. He nodded cheekily at Roy Joseph and said: "Don't worry, mate . . . this ain't my stage clothes. Dicky bow, slick

shoes, the works, tonight. You, Roy Joseph?" Roy nodded. "Want me to emphasize any of the punch lines with a quick roll on the drums? A bit of cymbal?"

"No, I don't."

The drummer rolled his sticks over the drums anyway, rebukingly pointing out, "A lot of them appreciate it."

"I should think that'd drown out the laughter of a lot of them . . . if there is any . . . You take care of your solos, my young friend, and I'll emphasize my punch lines how I see fit."

The drummer shrugged. He was more concerned with the physical joy of playing the drums than the mental prowess of debating with Roy Joseph. His only worry was a terror of getting ugly veins from seven years of pressing the foot pedal to the bass drum.

**Ernesto, Ernesto, come back and let me discuss your death with you.**

Roy Joseph closed his eyes and strolled to the third table, in the second aisle, on the right and sat down before opening them again. His conscience itched at this little moment of vanity, even though it was good to know he'd gauged and memorized the distances perfectly. In former days, that kind of perfectionism watermarked greater from lesser stars. In the contemporary cabaret of prejudice, such subtlety seemed superfluous.

Strange, how his billing suggested that he represented some kind of old school of comedy, some tradition. He knew he didn't. The raw, crudeness of his humor with its insistence on raking over the flawed skin of human goodness to reveal the fermenting bloodiness beneath, was a diagnostic modern calling. Although his audiences tended to middle age and believed they were being treated to laughter with a wholesome legacy, Roy Joseph understood how their grosser bigotries had only recently found so direct a reflection as himself. The world had come to this. He had come to this. They would come like children, to hear their farts, their hates, their poisons, their vengeance being replayed and endorsed through a more glamorous medium than the living room or the bar.

And glamor was one of the things at stake. He felt that obscenity demanded to be glamorized through wit. He felt, that if he didn't do this, he'd have to believe these people were capable of genuine joy, as Ernesto had believed.

The band began to drift in and set up its stands. Jesse Root's Modern Orchestra, said the blue sashes on the music stands in archaic gold, balloon-lettering. Roy Joseph could foresee the line up. Leader and arranger Jesse on piano. Rhythm section: drums, bass and guitar. Brass: first and second trumpet, someone doubling on saxophone and clarinet. The clarinet would look sacred and the saxophone profane.

They bantered amongst themselves in a community babble, breaking off to unpack their instruments with a solitary fondness. Like all the musicians on the circuit, they fostered a secret superior aesthetic; that their art was the true art, that the other acts were in reality an accompaniment to their greatness. In Roy Joseph's estimation they were seeing the world of entertainment upside down.

"Hey, Ralph? You gonna try and stay in tune tonight?"

"Only if you promise to play in something other than C."

"What's Madam singing tonight?"

"Doesn't matter. Can you tell the difference?"

"I don't know, with bazoomas like those, you can't say she sings flat."

Such is the sophistication of the highest art, thought Roy Joseph wearily, the art which speaks in the abstract to the heart, without the interference of the fallen mind. He strode back over to the bar counter and picked up his holdall. His stay-pressed jacket, nevertheless needed at least half an hour hanging to drip away its creases. Now, it was time for the dressing room. To go backstage, where he could admit the possibility of failure and accept that he might flop.

He walked the long way round, avoiding the kitchen and the cellar and taking the private door to the narrower corridors beyond. The real size of the building was impressive. What kind of business it was formerly, he couldn't fathom. Perhaps a clandestine operation or some oppressive outfit which caged its employees in tiny, discrete offices. The corridor opened out into a hallway with three doors either side and a small staircase up the Manager's Office.

Here a general backstage factotum in a carpenter's coat approached him with a false wonder, informing: "Mr. Joseph. Your room is that one there. The Star dressing room. A drink or anything? No . . . well if you so require, we have actually affixed a bell system to that room. Simply press when you need service."

"Thank you," smiled Roy Joseph, politely. He never upset backstage staff, they genuinely wanted to help.

The smell of the wallpaper hit him as he moved over to his dressing room. It seemed to stand like a haze, a foot out from the wall with its aroma mirroring its colored pattern. He sneezed. "Bless me," he thought, remembering that the phrase was originally intended to protect the sneezer from inhaling the devil's host in their breath.

"In we go," murmured Roy Joseph, pushing the door open.

The dressing room was second bedroom size, with second bedroom cupboards but a master bedroom dressing table. He was pleased to note that Jack Trinity had supplied a stool instead of a chair. Roy disliked chairs.

"Unpack the jacket," continued Roy Joseph who understood its central role in his appearance. He lifted it out, unfurled it on its hanger and hooked the loop onto a wardrobe door. ". . . lay out the shoes and a duster . . ."

*Some comedians still followed the comic convention of detailing "what a week they'd had." They ran through the days in sequence with a joke for Monday, a quip for Tuesday, a funny situation on Wednesday and the odd character who accosted them on Thursday. Sunday was reserved for anti-religious laughs. At least, he, Roy Joseph didn't go in for such crudity of form. The structure suggested too much order and decency, for a start. Whereas his Act assumed the opposite . . . Ernesto, in private kept a spiritual diary: his own personal missal. He wrote it alongside of reading a Book Of Days, where each day presented a moral dilemma for contemplation. Both activities were overseen by his quest for purity. They were the celebration of Hope in the face of incomprehension. Somehow Ernesto could believe that if he, personally was trying to journey towards meaning then everyone else would benefit from his struggle: that if he suffered, then they were capable of the same suffering, of the same desire for spiritual maturity.*

". . . To think, underneath the glitz, I'm wearing the same underpants I've just travelled seventy miles in, in a grubby railway carriage . . ."

He didn't make-up. He sat by the dressing table without looking into the mirror. Stretching over he pressed the bell system mentioned by the stage hand. A few minutes later, someone knocked at his door. "Mr. Joseph?"

"Come in . . . I want a cocktail. Ask Evan, he knows what sort."

The door which had half-opened, wavered on its hinges and shut again. The figure beyond pattered respectfully down to the bar and returned with a cocktail on a tray, knocked and entered more confidently, now he was bringing a gift.

Roy Joseph observed "the runner." The young man seethed with an ironic modesty. His real wish was to throw the drink over Roy's shirt front. Preferably over the stage shirt to cause the optimum inconvenience.

"D'you believe in God?" asked Roy Joseph.

"Ah?" hesitated the lad, expecting a jibe: on the lines of, "well you'd better do your praying now, if you call that a cocktail."

"I see," pursued Roy Joseph. "You have a difficult faith. Hard to articulate . . . or have you recently lost it altogether?"

"What's this got to do with your cocktail?" inquired the lad, courageously.

"Nothing. Do you always have to talk only about the thing in hand? If you're sitting on a chair, you only talk about chairs. If you're drinking wine you only talk about grapes."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Joseph, I've gotter go. I've got . . . to look after the band as well."

"Heathens all, no doubt," played Roy Joseph. "It's alright. Thanks for the cocktail." The lad left.

It was satisfying to realize that this behavior would send messages to the other performers. News of his eccentricity would suggest that maybe something special was on the cards tonight. Sure enough, a few minutes later Jack Trinity popped in to investigate the prophecy.

"Everything OK, Roy?"

"Oh yes," answered Roy Joseph, staring at the wardrobe but watching Jack In the Mirror. "All ready for nine thirty."

"Nine-?" Trinity acknowledged the joke belatedly: Roy was due on at nine. Trinity was delighted by this sudden peculiarity, since Roy Joseph was known for never giving a sub-standard or even standard show. "Well, I'll leave you be, then."

**Ernesto, how superior to me do you feel now? How small do I compare with the others?**



"Five minute call for Mr. Roy Joseph," shouted the runner through the dressing room door.

Roy Joseph was ready. He was dressed and sparkling. His fingers and teeth brushed. The trousers fell lightly from his hips. His socks held position at the perfect height. He never rehearsed. He knew his Act. All ten rings on both hands had their emblems and jewels facing front. Even his jacket moved across his shoulders without static. The silk ruff looked like natural petals.

For half an hour, he'd been undisturbed, as he liked, allowing the demons of cowardice to tempt him. They promised him relaxed drinks if he ran away. They promised him a greater triumph another day. They eluded to a new, more fulfilling career in public service. With outrageous irony, they pointed out the immorality of his Act.

As usual, he conquered his fears, in the stubborn loneliness which he felt was the resting place of human existence. He lived as much for the tortured hour before going on, as he did for the jubilant rapport of controlling his audience.

He clapped his hands together loudly, so they hurt. He pinched the skin around his nails to focus the pain. Opening the dressing room, he smelled again the aroma of the wallpaper, except this time it reminded him of the scent of boarding houses. Along the corridor and around the corner, the band was winding up with an instrumental number. Diane had left the stage, leaving the audience in an emotional mood that needed to be mildly defused before he came on.

The Runner returned. Roy Joseph waved him away. The air around him was precious and private at this time. He carried his own set of mental curtains, out of which he'd appear. He had to feel that his journey to the stage was uniquely self-directed. Breathing in fast, he started along the corridor.

**Ernesto. So here we are. So here we go. Like a man to be hung. Well hung. Ha! Ha!**

As he arrived at the furthestmost point of safety, Jack Trinity was at the microphone, announcing him with a eulogy, spiced by self-congratulation at having procured such a renowned artiste. Roy Joseph's contempt and spite bubbled gloriously at Trinity's vain conceit. Already the necessary bile and spleen were decorating his demeanor. Roy Joseph leant

on his front foot like a sprinter, prepared to discard the quieter self in the race for laughs.

". . . the Outrageous Roy Joseph . . ." And Jack Trinity skipped off the stage, as if he'd just introduced a savage pack of Lions at a circus.

Roy Joseph stopped a second, centre stage in a silent, momentary challenge.

"Good evening, Ladies and Gentlemen . . . I'm not going to insult your intelligence tonight. Oh no. I'm gonna tell you the truth of things . . . Anyone here smoke Turkish cigarettes? Anyone? YOU. That woman over there. You like having a Camel in your mouth then? . . ."

*Usual mix of people. Don't like the look of the big party. Few smart arses there. Might have to slap 'em down. Young couple, back left. Aha. Monstrous cleavage third aisle-south. A sprinkling of Asians—whatta they doing here? This is high racism. Their decision.*

". . . Man goes to the doctor with a three piece suite up his arse. Genuine Chesterfield. Cost him a bomb on hire purchase. What's the matter? said the doctor. Short-sighted. I mean you'd notice a man with a three piece suite lodged in his chuff wouldn't you . . . ? Of course you would. Especially when one of the seat covers was hanging out . . . Dead giveaway. Anyhow. The doctor says, Be seated . . . He begins to take his notes . . . So you've got a three piece suite stuck up your colon? Does it hurt? Is-it-com-fort-able? Actually, replies the man, it's lovely, dead comfy? What's your problem then? Asks the doctor? . . . Man says, They're coming to repossess it tomorrow . . ."

*God, they're a pushover tonight. Scum of the earth. Taxi drivers. Knocker boys. Money grabbing molls. Bags and Baggage. Bigots and liars. Listening to this abuse. These prejudices and lies.*

**Tell me Ernesto. Am I the Father of Lies, The Devil, for telling the lies? Or are they The Devil for listening and believing?**

". . . Jewish Jockey. Jewish Jockey: Cohen Bareback . . . mates with his favorite racehorse . . . months later the foal's born . . . it's got a muzzle on it like that. A great big shonky nose. They all it Cohen's Lad. Cohen's Lad's first race: The Gold Cup . . . wins by a nose . . . Second time out; The Platinum Stakes . . . again wins by a nose . . ."

*Sometimes I think a Believer's gonna jump up at this point and yell out that Christ was Jewish . . . Must watch out for the troublemaker on*

*the Party table: he's three sheets to the wind and dying to prove his virility by topping a joke.*

From the wings Jack Trinity surveyed the audience reaction, as Roy Joseph went into a short routine about Marriage. Alongside him Jesse Root sipped a lager and laughed with his sax player. He was relaxed and so were his sensibilities. At the bar, Evan misheard orders as he nervously awaited his cue for the cocktail. It stood, ready mixed in its glass, against an ice bucket under the counter.

*It's like descending into the abyss, sometimes: like being the Evil one. I'm definitely going to have trouble with the large party over there and I've just noticed a group of four black people. Are they here to enjoy or refute? Are they missing the point or seeing it too clearly?*

". . . Rastas is looking for a job. He scours the job pages. Sees the post of Professor's Chair vacant at Oxford. Applies for it, 'cos he thinks it means sitting down all day."

*Jesus. Here we go. Knew it; the Pakistanis are laughing at the image of lazy blacks . . . the blacks are about to get up and blame me for inter-racism. What are they doing here? This is C. of E. The Coterie of the English: the impure but purely white.*

One of the black men was out of his seat, shouting. Across the wall mirrors rippled the image of two bouncers, on red alert. As usual, Roy Joseph continued until he clearly caught one of the heckler's phrases. He knew his audience demanded absolute control from him. He knew they would tolerate anything except feeling that their fun was being interrupted by the seriousness of a proper attitude.

The black man was accusing: "You're the sort of bigot who thinks blacks can't even write . . ."

"Of course they can," answered Roy Joseph." How else could they draw the social security?" The cruel laughter swept singeingly through the Club. The voice in the wilderness was pulled back into his seat by his girlfriend, where a bouncer tiptoed over and had a word in his ear.

*That'll either encourage the big party or put them off.*

"Two queer boys sitting outside a building site . . . eating prawn and watercress sandwiches . . . Beefy young hod carrier walks in. First queer boy: D'you think he's a bricklayer?" Second queer boy: "No I think he'd go through with it."

"... It's America the Jehovah's Witnesses are at it again. It's the end of the world in five days. They climb a mountain waiting for the sign . . ."

**Tell me Ernesto. Why haven't you given me any sign? Are you there or nowhere? Maybe signs are only given to the very blessed or the very wicked, often seems to run like that, which puts me somewhere in the middle. Better off than I thought I was.**

"Quiet respectable man . . . goes to the same prostitute, same time, every Wednesday. They play out a Mutiny on the Bounty fantasy . . . with her as Mr. Christian," he calls out in the throes of ecstasy. "One week, he asks if they can swop roles because . . ."

*If the closely bereaved take on the characteristics of the newly dead, then I should have acquired some of Ernesto's saintliness. Doesn't seem to have happened, I feel more of a reprobate than ever. It could be that you only take on the bad characteristics . . . Ernesto was dead stubborn. Believed his beliefs and wouldn't let go of them.*

Roy Joseph started into his first sortie into the audience, as part of the growing rapport. His Act grew intimacy and intensity, until the punters became citizens of his comic world. He introduced them slowly, however. Gradually, he moved down the centre aisle towards the big party and its disruptive threat. With the anticipated main adversary in his sights, Roy Joseph rolled into a sequence about Fashion and clothes. Sure enough, the loud-mouthed man who was picking up the bill for the whole company, called out something about Roy's blue jacket.

But by then, Roy Joseph was practically beside the man and close enough to touch his lapel and remark: "Those demob suits were made to last." He knew the age and snobbery of his audience. The put-down was nicely judged and affectionately successful.

"English family, on holiday in Jerusalem: go to the weeping wall: row of Jews, beards and hats, banging their heads against the wall: the child asks his dad: 'Dad, why they doing that, is it religious?': Dad answers—'No they backed the wrong horse in the Grand National' . . . Same family . . ."

*Somehow, that joke reminds of a time out walking with Ernesto. We passed some Evangelical church or other. Place of tambourines and tongues and laments and the Holy Spirit giving prophecy to all and sundry. Ernesto went haywire. Couldn't stand it. Didn't like the idea of tight-fisted greengrocers, Hitlerian traffic wardens, bullying middle*

*management bores pretending they'd got the gift of the seers. Not that he was undemocratic: he hated short cuts to the Truth; short cuts to the mysteries; short cuts to the Vision; short cuts to understanding. Felt it was babyish. I remember he detested the slogan outside; "I'm Backing Christ." As if Christ were a racehorse. He didn't even respect their alleged suffering. He said he preferred Struggle to Suffering; everyone suffered, what was the grandeur of it? Accused them of gross spiritual pride.*

"Englishman, Irishman and Scotsman, Charles, Paddy and Jock, go into a newsagents . . . Sign on the counter goes—Please check change, no refunds given later . . . Charles, the Englishman says: 'I always check my change before I leave the shop' . . . Jock says: 'I always give them the exact money so they cannee shortchange me' . . . Paddy says: 'Well, fellas, I' . . ."

*Gone from this Vale of Tears . . . I can't comprehend it, Ernesto. The Priest said it, the congregation almost nodded but I can't hold it inside myself, to find if it's true or not. It was the same with so much of the Service. I desperately wanted it to settle the issue. That made me feel like a child: scrubbed, spruced up and sent to bed to sleep until the Great Dawn. You must've despised me, standing there not worshipping, not disbelieving, not doing anything at all really . . .*

"What d'you mean . . . in the biblical sense? replied the bigamist to the judge . . ."

*. . . for you your Religion meant Independence, I've begun to realize. You stood in Church every week, solitary and strong. You prayed your own prayers, even as the proper ones were being recited. I'm jealous. It feels so grown-up, now I think on it . . . But you must admit: a lot of the people there weren't you, were they? . . . They were this audience, desperate to turn the tears of the Vale into tears of laughter . . . tears of comfort. So you can't blame me for my Act . . . I don't, I can't ask either Them, or Myself to be you . . . I shall have to stay guilty in my infancy. We'll laugh the wicked laughs 'cos we aren't big enough to stay silent.*

"Irishwoman, gives birth to Quads . . . She's a religious woman, so she decides to call them after the Apostles: Matthew, Mark, Luke and John . . ."

**Tell me, Ernesto. I used to ask you things, like I was your son. Now I have to ask your ghost. But did He take you to punish me? Did He take**

**you, so that I would have to grow up? Because I only glimpsed Him through you, like the sun through stained glass.**

"Stained glass . . ." faltered Roy Joseph, on stage. "Er. which reminds me . . . Evan. My cocktail please, sir." Roy Joseph strode down the centre aisle toward the bar. Evan was proudly retrieving the lovingly assembled drink from its cache. The audience was forced to watch the comedian walk to his booze. They turned their heads, as if they were watching a procession. Roy Joseph kept up a commentary on his movements. "My throat feels like I've just given an elephant a blow job . . . but Evan here knows how to shake up a stiff one, don't you Evan? . . ."

In the wings, Diane craned her neck to observe Roy Joseph. She could barely make out the words, now that he'd taken the microphone to the bar but she caught the drift of an unjust humiliation of the young barman, applauded by a ruthless audience, envious for his youth. She felt a motherly hum in her chest: the weak should be protected and what was being said of the boy wasn't so.

**Ernesto. Ernesto. Why did He take you so ruthlessly? Why a brain hemorrhage? To strike at your source. To leave you mute and gagged at the end. To render your puppet arm useless. Are we stripped at the moment of Death, of that thing which so characterized our individual humanness? That last badge, has to be removed before we take on a higher status?**

Roy Joseph leant on the bar and surveyed his audience. They were his. He owned them for the next hour. He'd tamed them. He'd decided how they were to be. He defined Humor. He defined Fun. If he should falter or crumble, their evening would be ruined. They were utterly dependent on him. And he despised this weakness in them. He loathed their fawning and their praise. It was the perfect image of human abasement to a false ideal, however temporary. In this frame of mind, he was ready to walk among them again and feel free to ridicule; to set one against another, husband against wife, neighbor against neighbor, friend against friend; to demand that each accept it in the right spirit.

He sipped at his cocktail. From this new vantage point he could see more clearly. The party of Black clubgoers had had enough, risen from their seats and were leaving discretely, appalled by the shameless racism of the act.

*Only great prophets and chosen disciples walk with their enemies.  
Only the specially elect can convert.*

**Ernesto. I had you as a model and I cannot believe enough to rise. This audience has only me. What chance do they have? They're not fallen: they were never risen.**

Unknown to Roy Joseph, Jack Trinity personally saw the Black party out, reimbursed them and apologized. He suggested they come back on another, more appropriate night. He assumed right and wrong could co-exist in polite separation.

**Ernesto. Please walk with me all of my days.**

"Seven virgins book in at a Holiday camp . . ."

**Ernesto. Don't ever let me be untroubled.**

"The receptionist gives them chalets 63 to 69 . . ."

**Ernesto. It's possible I might believe that if I turned, they'd turn with me.**

"Next morning, the camp stud knocks at the door of 63 . . ."

**Ernesto. Death's not the dark vale. In here is.**

"Are you going to take me to paradise?" he asks.

**Ernesto. How can the Truth be different from how it is?**

"She opens the door. He enters . . ."

**Ernesto?**