

A Good Old Compromise



by

Matt McHugh

There were five of them, which was two more than I'd been expecting. They looked out from the framed, black-and-white photo, dressed in everyday clothes, but with suitably impish grins.

"See, everybody knows Groucho, Harpo, and Chico," Harvey began, "But most people forget about Zeppo—and almost nobody remembers Gummo."

"Oh. Well. That's very interesting," I said, enthusiastic enough to be polite, but bored enough to make a point. The point was lost.

Individuals may distribute this story freely for private, non-commercial use provided all author and copyright information remain intact on each copy.

"That's because Gummo was never in any of the films, even though he and Groucho started the family Vaudeville act. By the time they started making them, he'd already stopped performing and had become an agent. He managed the Marx Brothers' career very successfully for years."

"Huh. That so."

"Oh yes. He had some other pretty famous clients, too. There's a funny story about one time when he called Glenn Ford..."

Harvey Kliegman was an old movie buff. Among the things that first attracted me to him were the pictures of Marlene Dietrich and Jimmy Stewart on his desk, and the copy of *75 Years of the Oscar* on his bookshelf between *Programming in C++* and *XML for Dummies*. I kind of like old movies, so we got to chatting around the office. Soon, I found myself verbally boxing him in so he had no choice but to ask me out. He didn't seem averse to the idea, just inexperienced, so I streamlined the process for him. He is not what one might rush to call a "catch"—a little thick in the middle, a little thin on top—but he is a decent, friendly person who gladly paid for meals and held my coat for me. Now, on our third date, he offered to cook me dinner at his apartment.

All this sounds good. And it was, save one thing. Harvey Kliegman was an old movie buff. Fanatic, rather. Obsessed, perhaps? It was all he talked about. Who was in what directed by whom who used to work where who got his start with... on and on. Now, I liked to watch the Saturday TV matinees as a kid, but I didn't know a religion lurked behind them. I endured this—feigned interest where possible—because I, myself, would not likely qualify as a "catch" by most standards, as well. Divorced, big-boned (as the charitable might put it), and clinging to 40 like someone in late January who still has their Christmas tree up. I have come to understand, and grown at peace with, the fact that escaping loneliness will mean compromise. Still, sometimes concessions are hard to make when facing them dead-on.

I suddenly realized his voice had risen, as if in question. "I'm sorry, what was that?" I asked.

"I said, what's your favorite movie?"

"Oh. I'm not sure, actually. Maybe *Wizard of Oz*. I guess I latched onto it as kid and it never left."

"Such a good film. Amazing it ever got made. Five different directors were attached to the project at one time or another. Shirley Temple was originally supposed to play Dorothy, you know. Can you imagine what a different animal it would be if that had gone through? And you know who was first cast as the Tin Man."

"So what are you cooking tonight?"

"Buddy Ebsen. He had to quit because the aluminum-based silver make-up made him sick, but he actually filmed several test scenes. They're on the DVD. Want to see?"

"Not right now, thanks. How's dinner coming?"

"Yeah, I hear you. Seen it way too many times myself. But you know what's a great DVD? *Oklahoma*. The movie was originally shot in seventy-millimeter widescreen and thirty-five-millimeter CinemaScope. But not simultaneously. They did a scene, changed cameras, and did it again. The CinemaScope version is the one that's always been shown on TV and video, but the seventy is on the DVD. Can you imagine! A film you know every instant of, in a completely parallel version, every second a different performance! Someday, I've got to hook up two TVs and run them side by side to see the differences."

"Harvey—"

"There's this one moment when Gordon MacRae comes on and—"

"Excuse me, Harvey."

"You see this sweeping vista behind him, since they used a lot of location shots, which was unusual at the time, especially for musicals—"

I hated to do it, but I raised my voice. Had to.

"Harvey!"

He stopped, looking baffled. "What?"

"You know, I like old movies and everything, but it's all you talk about! You go on and on, and it's a bit much sometimes. Can't we just sit down to dinner like two adults and talk about something else?"

"Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't mean.... Let me get the food."

He shuffled off to the kitchen and in a few minutes, dinner was served. Candles, wine, salad, bread, twice-baked potatoes, green beans almondine, London broil done just right, and a slightly droopy orange soufflé for which he apologized profusely. He was not about to put any chef out of business, but I was pretty impressed. During this fine meal, I tried to introduce topics ranging from politics (no interest) to sports (no knowledge) to work (a little gossip, but face it, we were the item of the week). We ate mostly in a cumbersome quiet.

After dinner, Harvey cleared the table morosely and I wandered back to the living room. As he futzed in the kitchen, I looked at his photo of the now-I-knew five Marx brothers. When he came in with a coffee tray, I pointed to it and said,

"I don't think I've ever seen a Marx Brothers movie all the way through."

A little spasm ran over his face and he almost-almost spilled the tray. He subdued his expression and said calmly, "Oh. Well, they're good. You'd like them. I think."

"What's the best one?"

Again, a twitch in his eye which he controlled with a squint. "*Duck Soup* is my favorite."

"Do you have it?"

"Sure. Somewhere around here." His voice was calm, but I saw the quiver in his hand as he plunked in a sugar cube.

"Can we watch it?" I finally had to say.

He looked up slowly, fighting the excitement on his face. "Really?" he asked softly.

"Really."

Soon we were on the couch, sipping latte and chuckling at four of the five Marx brothers. I found the movie very funny, witty and silly in quick, alternating bursts. From time to time, Harvey simply couldn't contain himself.

"I love the Paul Revere joke! ... Watch how the big musical number uses all these Busby Berkeley elements. ... The mirror scene is one the all-time great moments of film comedy. ... Did you know Mussolini actually banned the film because of its anti-Fascist sentiments."

I gently patted Harvey's thigh. "Shh, please. I'm trying to watch."

"Oh. Sorry," he whispered and made a bug-eyed, zipping-my-lips gesture. From then on, his bits of commentary were fewer and quieter. He still drowned out lines from the movie sometimes, but I just nestled close to him and tapped the volume on the remote up a tick or two. He slipped his arm over my shoulder and I leaned into his warm, cushy body and felt the tremors of his laughter. We sat together in the low light and basked in the madness of Freedonia.

Now, this isn't so bad, I thought. Not bad at all.

END