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SF PERUSALS

Shtick

by Henry Meyerson

A Samuel French Acting Edition



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CAST

HELEN (60) - A woman who is ready and able to cope not only with her husband Murray's physical problems, but his rotten disposition, as well. She radiates energy and is as skilled at verbal repartee as Murray.

MURRAY (60) - Murray is in a wheel chair and partially paralyzed. Having always been sarcastic and irascible, his stroke certainly hasn't improved his disposition.

GLADYS (55) - Helen's freewheeling, younger sister. More stylishly attired than Helen, but perhaps a tad too glitzy. While she is no match for Helen's verbal ability, she is the breezier, more self-assured of the sisters. Gladys lives by the creed of honesty and having a good time.

PLACE

Helen and Murray's living room

TIME

Present

Among the many mysteries of life two stand out in my mind: 1) Why are some people able to stay married for endlessly blissful years, and 2) What makes people laugh? While writing SHTICK, I discovered that often these two mysteries are intertwined. Which leads me to Ronnie, my wife of endlessly blissful and laugh filled years.

- Henry Meyerson

ACT ONE

*(**SETTING:** A hospital waiting area.)*

*(**AT LIGHTS:** **HELEN** is pacing. **GLADYS** enters.)*

HELEN. Thanks for coming, Gladys. Hospitals are not really people friendly places.

GLADYS. Not a problem. We're sisters, right? Where else should I be? So, tell me what happened.

HELEN. He was in the middle of one of his jigs…

GLADYS. He was dancing?

HELEN. I meant gigs. I always get that wrong. Gigs.

GLADYS. Where?

HELEN. What difference does it make?

GLADYS. No difference. Go ahead.

HELEN. I will if you promise not to ask a bunch of your silly questions.

GLADYS. Go ahead.

HELEN. He was in the middle of one of his…performances…in New Jersey, okay?

GLADYS. Figures. Okay.

HELEN. Why does it figure?

GLADYS. He loved New Jersey.

HELEN. How do you know?

GLADYS. It's not important. Go ahead.

HELEN. So Jack said…

GLADYS. His agent?

HELEN. Yes, his agent. How do you know his agent?

GLADYS. Never mind. Go ahead.

HELEN. Jack, said…he said…

*(**HELEN** begins to cry.)*

GLADYS. That's okay, Helen.

HELEN. I'm not asking permission, Gladys.

GLADYS. So Jack said…

HELEN. Jack said Murray just collapsed. Just fell over. The microphone fell on top of him. He fell and didn't move.

GLADYS. Then?

HELEN. Then? He just laid there, Gladys. The audience thought it was part of the act. He laid there with the God damn microphone on top of him and the audience laughed their asses off. Finally, Jack got some guys to carry him off and he wound up here.

GLADYS. How awful.

HELEN. I got the call last night. They rushed him here.

GLADYS. This is a great place, Helen. He'll get great care.

HELEN. How do you know?

GLADYS. I dated some doctors from here.

HELEN. You dated doctors from everywhere.

GLADYS. Let's not discuss my sex life now.

HELEN. You're right. I'm sorry.

GLADYS. You've always been critical of my dating.

HELEN. Only because you haven't been.

GLADYS. Haven't been dating?

HELEN. Haven't been critical.

GLADYS. I'm here for you, Helen. Get off me.

HELEN. "Get off you" is a line Murray would never pass up, but I'll let it go.

GLADYS. How come Brenda isn't here?

HELEN. She was here last night and this morning. It's not easy for her to see her father like this. If the coma doesn't end soon, she might not have to come back.

GLADYS. Morbid thinking, Helen. Stop that.

HELEN. I'm just telling you what the doctor said.

GLADYS. It's that serious?

HELEN. The stroke was big and he thinks it made a lot of damage. They won't really know how much until he wakes up. If he wakes up. Until then, we wait.

GLADYS. He's such a young man.

HELEN. Not if you saw him now.

GLADYS. In his prime.

HELEN. Let's not push it, Gladys. Sixty years might be good for wine, but not necessarily for a stand-up comic. I hate seeing him like this. With all the tubes and pipes going in and out of him he looks like a bag-pipe.

GLADYS. Given the situation, the news about Murray, I have to tell you something, Helen.

HELEN. I know.

GLADYS. You do?

HELEN. And I thank you for it.

GLADYS. Really? Why?

HELEN. Why? Because you're a nice person, that's why. And because you're my little sister, that's why.

GLADYS. But I'm not a nice person, Helen. That's part of what I want to tell you.

HELEN. Why would you want to tell me that?

GLADYS. To set the record straight.

HELEN. Gladys, you don't have to explain why you came here to be with me. That's what family does.

GLADYS. That's not what this is all about.

HELEN. What then?

GLADYS. I just hope this doesn't cause tension between us.

HELEN. No more than I'm feeling by this conversation at this moment.

GLADYS. Good. Because not only are we sisters, but good friends and you have to believe I treasure our relationship.

HELEN. This is starting to worry me, Gladys. Tell me now. What the hell are you getting at?

GLADYS. *(said quickly, to the point of being unintelligible)* I had an affair with Murray.

HELEN. What? I didn't…

GLADYS. *(said as above)* I had an affair with Murray.

HELEN. If you don't slow down, I'm going to hit you.

GLADYS. *(normal)* I had an affair with Murray.

HELEN. What?

GLADYS. I had an affair…

HELEN. STOP! I heard you. I just don't understand you.

GLADYS. It started three years ago. I thought it would be important for you to know, in case, you know… Murray…well…

HELEN. I still don't…

GLADYS. We bumped into each other at the Jersey shore. He was appearing at…

HELEN. …yeah, I know what he does, Gladys.

GLADYS. We talked, had a few drinks…

HELEN. …I said, I know what he does, Gladys. What I want to know is why.

GLADYS. Maybe it was the alcohol.

HELEN. For three years? What the hell were you two drinking?

GLADYS. No, I meant…

HELEN. What the hell were you two thinking?

GLADYS. I'm not sure what…

HELEN. HOW COULD YOU DO THIS TO ME?

GLADYS. Stop yelling at me. This is very difficult for me, too.

HELEN. Not like for me, Gladys. And why would you tell me? Did I really need to know this? Did I really need to know this now?

GLADYS. I've always believed that before a person dies, everything should be laid out on the table.

HELEN. Just like you were laid out in bed.

GLADYS. That's uncalled for, Helen.

HELEN. You figured when you told me, I was going to kill you, and you wanted to make sure you died with a confession on your lips.

GLADYS. I was talking about Murray, not me. You're misinterpreting what I said.

HELEN. The only thing I misinterpreted was just how stupid our parents' kids were. Particularly me. Murray, the only snake with a visible dick and Gladys the only sister with no visible conscience. How stupid am I? How did I miss this?

GLADYS. Oh, I don't think you're stupid, Helen. You were always the brighter of us.

HELEN. I used to think so.

GLADYS. You always got better grades.

HELEN. THIS ISN'T ABOUT GRADES. THIS IS ABOUT TRUST. *(beat)* I'm getting dizzy.

GLADYS. I'll get a chair.

HELEN. Don't bother. When I sit down you'll probably pull it out from under me.

GLADYS. I would never…

HELEN. Bullshit. You already did.

GLADYS. I think you're taking this a little…

HELEN. You knew about Jersey. You knew about Jack. YOU KNOW WHERE HIS GOD DAMN BIRTHMARK IS.

GLADYS. Calm down, Helen. You don't want to have a…

HELEN. Stroke? Why not? I can move into the bed next to Murray and you can visit both of us. Banging doctors for a hobby I can understand, but brother-in-laws? Your brother-in-law?

GLADYS. You always get crude when you get angry.

HELEN. You and Murray. At the beach. I'm in the Bronx under a tree with birds shitting on my head and you and Murray are romping at the shore. Beautiful.

GLADYS. No need to be sarcastic.

HELEN. That's the least I want to be. Try murderous.

GLADYS. Don't be silly. I'm your sister.

HELEN. I'm taking away your sister licence. It's revoked. Go away, Gladys.

GLADYS. You're upset, Helen, and I think someone close should stay with you at this time.

HELEN. You stayed close with Murray and look what happened.

GLADYS. I meant I should stay…

HELEN. Go home, Gladys. I'll call you if Murray gets horny.

*(***GLADYS** *starts to go, then hesitates.)*

What are you stopping for. GO!

*(***HELEN** *charges off stage after* **GLADYS**. *Lights dim, then relight full on a middle class living room. A sofa stretches across the stage, in front of which is a small table. Stage rear are two doors, one to the outside, one to the kitchen.)*

*(***HELEN** *enters pushing* **MURRAY**, *weary and bedraggled, in a wheel-chair. They wear jackets,* **MURRAY** *a hat and scarf.* **MURRAY** *sits forlornly, immobile, quietly watching* **HELEN** *as she bustles around making room for the wheel-chair, pushing chairs around, arranging things,)*

HELEN *(cont.)* Fall is on the way. You can feel the chill in the air. Always liked fall, except for the chill. Maybe someone will invent a warm fall, but that would be like spring, wouldn't it? *(laughs)*

*(***MURRAY** *stares ahead, not responding.)*

That was a joke, Murray. I think you've lost your sense of humor.

*(***MURRAY** *looks away and grimaces. Undaunted,* **HELEN** *busies herself removing her coat.)*

Terrible about that dog. You'd think that stupid woman would know to keep the dog on a short leash.

*(***HELEN** *touches the cuff of his pant leg.)*

HELEN *(cont.)* It's dry now. I'll wash them tonight.

(She starts removing **MURRAY***'s coat and hat. He doesn't move to help and she has a difficult time of it.)*

Wish you could do this on your own. Maybe if you lost a few pounds this would be easier. Dr. Shapiro wants you to go on a diet.

*(***MURRAY** *grimaces again. In fact, he seems to be purposefully hindering her. There is a petulance about his behavior.)*

Yes, I know about you and Dr. Shapiro. It wasn't his fault you fell out of the chair. You shouldn't have been chasing that guy down the hall just because he said you shuffled the cards lousy.

*(***MURRAY** *begins to object, but is brushed aside by* **HELEN***'s behavior.)*

He wasn't wrong, was he? Even before the stroke you were all thumbs so I don't understand your getting so crazy. And Shapiro is right. You better lose some weight. I can't keep moving this lard around. Shapiro told me you're the only guy in history to ever put on twenty pounds in a hospital. I'll leave your scarf on in case you get a chill.

*(***MURRAY** *is mute as* **HELEN** *continues to help him with his clothing then moves to the kitchen door. She stops halfway.)*

Oh. when would you like to do your physical therapy?

*(***MURRAY** *dismisses her with a wave of his right hand.)*

(She makes the sound of a buzzer, ala a game show.) Wrong answer. Let me rephrase the question. When would you like to do your physical therapy?

*(***MURRAY** *looks away.)*

After dinner?

*(***MURRAY** *doesn't reply.)*

Ah, good. So after dinner it is. Now, would you like some coffee?

(With his right arm, **MURRAY** *lifts his left arm and shakes it.)*

HELEN *(cont.)* What does that mean? "Yes" for coffee, or "no" for coffee? I'm still having trouble learning your signals.

*(***MURRAY** *again uses his right arm to shake his useless left arm.)*

What is it with the pantomime bit?

*(***MURRAY** *again uses his right arm to shake his useless left arm.)*

The hospital bracelet?

*(***MURRAY** *nods.* **HELEN** *gets a scissors from the table and cuts off the bracelet.)*

I don't know why they put a name tag on you every time you go for rehab. I know who you are and you're sure not going to wander off. *(beat)* Now, would you like some coffee?

*(***MURRAY** *slowly nods his head as* **HELEN** *exits to the kitchen. She now speaks from off-stage.)*

I'll fix us both some coffee. *(beat)* Something to eat? *(pause)* Murray?

*(***HELEN** *appears in the doorway.)*

I said, do you want something to eat?

*(***MURRAY** *shakes his head no,* **HELEN** *goes back to the kitchen.)*

Well, I'm hungry so I'm eating. And the pantomime is growing thin, Murray.

(With **HELEN** *gone,* **MURRAY** *sits and stares morosely out at the audience. We hear* **HELEN** *bustling around the kitchen, plates banging, other noises. Finally,* **HELEN** *re-emerges carrying a tray with two cups.)*

Brenda called last night. She wants to come over today to see you.

*(***MURRAY** *shakes his head "no.")*

HELEN *(cont.)* Right. That's what I figured so I told her it was your rehab day, to hold off 'till I called her. Brenda seemed really upset. Kept worrying about your "psychological adjustment." She wants you to see a shrink. She thinks you're depressed. Here, I'll hold the cup.

*(***HELEN** *lifts the cup to* **MURRAY***'s mouth and he drinks.)*

MURRAY. What makes her think I'm depressed?

HELEN. Just a wild guess.

*(***HELEN** *feeds him more coffee.)*

I am too.

MURRAY. What?

HELEN. Depressed.

*(***HELEN** *feeds him more coffee.)*

I spoke to Dr. Shapiro about it. Interesting. He says the reason I can't sleep is because I'm depressed and the reason I'm depressed is because I'm angry.

MURRAY. I have noticed you've been a little testy lately. What have you got to be angry about?

HELEN. I can't imagine. Shapiro says I should talk to you about my anger.

MURRAY. So talk.

*(***MURRAY** *nods his head as if falling asleep.)*

HELEN. That's what I told him you would do. And I told Brenda you'd sooner eat a pile of thumb tacks than talk to someone. She said she could arrange it either way.

*(***MURRAY** *smiles.)*

I figured you would like that. I think I'll get something to eat. Want anything?

*(***MURRAY** *shakes his head "no," and* **HELEN** *exits to the kitchen.* **MURRAY** *attempts to lift the coffee cup with his right hand, but his hand wobbles spilling some coffee so he puts the cup down.* **HELEN** *enters with a piece of cake on a dish. She eats and finishes the cake as she talks.)*

HELEN *(cont.)* Listen, Murray, when are you going to quit with this "I'm paralyzed" routine? It's getting old. Let's get some new material.

*(***MURRAY** *smiles at this as* **HELEN** *lifts the cup for him to drink.)*

You liked that one, huh? That's what comes of living with a comic. You begin to see the world as just bits of shtick. Okay, Murray, today we're going to do the one where the girl with the big tits walks by and you leer at her, jump out of the chair and follow her and this time I won't be jealous. I might even applaud. I might even get it out of your pants for you.

MURRAY. *(mumbles)* Groucho.

*(***HELEN** *bends to him to hear better.)*

HELEN. What? Damn it, speak up, Murray, I can't understand.

MURRAY. Groucho.

HELEN. Yeah, I know that was Groucho's bit, but that never stopped you from using it. Murray the Shtick Thief. You liked it, you took it. You were so cocky and had that swagger. When we first met I thought you had the greatest swagger and the greatest ass. Man, the way you moved.

MURRAY. I still have a great ass.

HELEN. You're right. That's because there's so much more of it. Yep, you had a great swagger.

MURRAY. I seem to have lost that bounce in my step.

HELEN. Well, you'll get it back.

*(***MURRAY** *checks the watch on his good hand.)*

MURRAY. What time should I expect it?

HELEN. That's what you have to work on, Murray. Rehab?

*(***MURRAY** *leans back, dejected.)*

It would be a relief for Brenda to see that you're making progress in rehab, but you want to keep all the good stuff for yourself. Selfish, like always.

*(***MURRAY** *looks away in apparent rejection of the idea.)*

HELEN *(cont.)* Wouldn't you like to relieve her mind?

*(***MURRAY** *looks more beat than before, if that's possible.)*

All right. I'll drop it.

*(***MURRAY** *brightens up as if nothing happened.)*

You got me again, didn't you. You are such a manipulator.

*(***MURRAY** *smiles.)*

You may have had a stroke, but you haven't changed. Such smugness!

(He smiles more.)

Such arrogance!

(His smile broadens.)

Such selfishness.

MURRAY. It's a new me.

HELEN. Baloney.

*(***MURRAY** *shrugs.)*

You know, this mute routine is really starting to get annoying, Murray. I couldn't tell if that shrug meant you agreed with "baloney," barely agreed, or that you didn't give a damn what I said and were falling asleep on me.

MURRAY. My shrugging has nothing to do with you.

HELEN. You silly man, of course it does. That's like saying your stroke has nothing to do with me.

MURRAY. IT DOESN'T.

HELEN. Ah, I finally got you. Would you repeat that please?

MURRAY. It doesn't have anything to do with you.

HELEN. Not at all?

MURRAY. Not like it has to do with me.

HELEN. Just like you, you selfish oaf. You always hogged everything. The bed, the TV remote, now your stroke. Self-centered for as long as I've known you.

MURRAY. In all our years together I never had anything to call my own. And now you want to jump into this stroke I had. Sorry, Helen. This stroke is all mine, so bug off.

HELEN. Nothing to call your own? How about your career, piddling as it was? And how about the freedom it gave you. Frankly, I think you had too much freedom.

MURRAY. What does that mean? Is this what Shapiro told you to say to me? Did he tell you to get me pissed off, because now I am. Damn doctors should butt out.

HELEN. Want more coffee?

MURRAY. Answer me. What does that mean, "I had too much freedom?"

HELEN. Some people can't handle freedom. They get into trouble. And I don't want to talk about it now.

MURRAY. Why not?

HELEN. It'll get us into a fight and I don't want to upset you. I don't want to be responsible for your next stroke.

MURRAY. I'll absolve you now, not to worry. And according to Shapiro, I didn't have a damn stroke. He keeps calling it a CVA. So that's what I have. I mean, he should know, right, a doctor like that. So that's it. It's only a CVA. Just a little old garden variety Cerebral Vascular Accident. Get that? An accident caused by a blood clot. Did anyone get the licence number of the blood clot that hit me?

HELEN. Don't get worked up.

MURRAY. Then tell me what you meant before about having too much freedom and "getting into trouble."

HELEN. Stop trying to harass me and bait me.

MURRAY. Well, I didn't have too much freedom and I didn't get into any trouble. Well, maybe a little trouble, but this stroke isn't because of anything I did wrong, is it?

HELEN. Want to watch some TV?

MURRAY. You didn't answer me again. Do you think this is because of something I did wrong?

HELEN. I don't know. Have you done something wrong?

MURRAY. Not a thing. *(pause)* Yeah, maybe a little TV would be a good idea.

HELEN. Too late. Now I don't want to.

MURRAY. You trying to torture me?

HELEN. As if I could. You're beyond torture, Murray. All comics are beyond torture or you wouldn't be comics.

MURRAY. Then I'd like to hear a good bedtime story. Tell me about mean little Murray and his supposed freedom.

HELEN. Were you home every night like other fathers and husbands or did you travel all over the country to do your jigs?

MURRAY. Gigs, for crying out loud. In all this time, you should once get it right. And I had no choice. I went to them because they wouldn't come to me.

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