

H.P. Lovecraft: Stand-Up Comedian!
by Scotto Moore

SCENE ONE

In a blackout, ominous music rises, and we hear the menacing voice of our Narrator - a Vincent Price voice of stately and sophisticated horror.

NARRATOR: In our world, Howard Phillips Lovecraft was born in 1890. He spent his short life toiling as an unknown horror writer, expressing in prose his terrifying vision of a cosmos full of eldritch gods bent on humanity's destruction. But in a world not too distant from our own, Howie Lovecraft was born in the late twentieth century, and now expresses his own unique vision in comedy clubs on the east coast. Come with us into this not too distant world, and witness the strange journey of H.P. Lovecraft: stand-up comedian!

Lights up as music fades out. Howie stands on one side of the stage, staring at Sonia, who sits on the opposite side of the stage.

HOWIE: You look kinda dazed.

SONIA: That was... an *experience*.

HOWIE: Looked like you were into it.

SONIA: I mean, it definitely had an *effect* on me, for sure.

HOWIE: A good effect?

SONIA: I don't know? I mean, I certainly - I couldn't stop watching you, that's for sure.

HOWIE: That's a good effect, right?

SONIA: Usually it would be, but...

HOWIE: But what?

SONIA: But - I mean - it was really *out there*. I mean, it was - practically speaking - *not* actually stand-up comedy - kind of at *all*, you know? I mean, it was a very, very brave new direction to try, I want you to know that. It really takes guts to try such a - an "experiment" like that.

HOWIE: You're doing that thing you do when there's something you really don't want to tell me.

SONIA: What thing?

HOWIE: Like, when I buy you a birthday present and you open it and it's something really stupid that you hate, you always try really hard to figure out at least one sincerely nice thing to say about it, before you shove it under the couch and forget you ever saw it.

SONIA: That's a thing I do?

HOWIE: It's really sweet actually.

SONIA: I dunno, I bet it doesn't encourage you to get me better presents next time.

HOWIE: Just let me have it, Sonia. Don't be my girlfriend for a sec, just be my manager - and give me your honest professional feedback.

SONIA: The same feedback I would give any other comedian that I manage, if they auditioned that same stuff for me?

HOWIE: That's what I want.

SONIA: Fine, Howie. I'll say it. That whole - "performance" - felt like a prank. Like, the only joke was on *me* that you actually got me to sit through the whole thing.

HOWIE: I admit there's a lot of set up.

SONIA: The whole *thing* was set up! I started to think you were in character as a completely different comedian with this deliberately weird and terrible material, like the whole thing was all meta like Andy Kaufman playing Tony Clifton.

HOWIE: Andy Kaufman was a genius.

SONIA: Sorry, that was a bad comparison, I did not mean to suggest that you're a genius, at all.

HOWIE: You looked like you were into it. Your eyes were really wide, like you were really *focused* on what I was saying.

SONIA: Something definitely - *happened* to me while I was listening to you, like I couldn't physically *stop* listening to you - but didn't you think it was odd that I wasn't actually *laughing* at any point?

HOWIE: No. I just figured...

SONIA: What did you just figure? That I was saving up all my laughs until you were done and then I'd bust out with some giant uncontrollable wave of laughter and tell you how hilarious it all was? Because, no.

HOWIE: I did warn you to expect something different.

SONIA: Yes, but I guess I still expected to hear jokes.

She motions for him to join her. He goes and sits next to her. She puts her hand on his knee.

SONIA: Howie... sweetie... that was really horrible.

HOWIE: Come on.

SONIA: I'm serious. Don't ever show that to your manager, 'cuz she'll hate it.

HOWIE: That's not funny.

SONIA: Which is sort of keeping with the theme we've got going here tonight.

HOWIE: Come on.

SONIA: I think it's really good that you're pushing yourself as an artist. But I don't think an actual audience would really *get* your new act, kind of at *all*.

HOWIE: I think there are people who would laugh at that act.

SONIA: Zero percent of audiences would laugh at that act.

HOWIE: Oh really. Zero percent.

SONIA: Zero percent's my estimate, yeah.

HOWIE: Based on what?

SONIA: Based on ever having been in a comedy club in my life.

HOWIE: Maybe that's the problem here. I mean, you've been managing comedians for so long, maybe you're too jaded to see it, but I think modern audiences actually *do* want something different. Something *visionary*. That's what I'm trying to do here. It's the juxtaposition of unexpected elements that makes it work.

SONIA: Except it doesn't actually work.

HOWIE: It does work, because of the underlying *vision* that infuses the whole thing.

SONIA: No one is expecting "vision" when they go to a comedy club.

HOWIE: If I only ever do what people *expect*, I'll just be mediocre forever!

SONIA: Could be worse - I see a thousand comics a year who'll never be as mediocre as you.

HOWIE: I guess we'll find out what people think soon enough. Boston's only a couple weeks away.

Sonia removes her hand from Howie's knee, her face barely masking a suddenly rising fury.

SONIA: You are *not* performing that stuff on this tour.

HOWIE: This is all I've been working on.

SONIA: Then you'll have to do your old set.

HOWIE: The same exact set I performed in the same exact clubs three months ago?

SONIA: You're not going to put your entire career at risk - not to mention *my* career booking comedians in these clubs! I want you to *swear* on your grandmother's *grave* that you won't perform that stuff-

HOWIE: Insert obligatory joke about my grandmother still being alive-

SONIA: Yes, insert obligatory *jokes* that have *punchlines*, which are the kind of jokes that got you a manager and a career in the first place. But you will *not* set foot on stage in Boston or anywhere else on this tour and try that "visionary" stuff, do you understand me?

HOWIE: Fine.

SONIA: Really?

HOWIE: Yeah, fine, I swear.

SONIA: Are you pissed at me?

HOWIE: No, it's cool, you're absolutely the boss. You got us this far. I asked you for the truth, you gave it to me, and I trust you completely. I always do, right? *Pause*. Tell you what though. I'll make you a friendly wager. I know an open mic night we could hit before the tour starts. Small college town off the circuit. Never performed there - probably no one there will even know who I am.

SONIA: I'm listening.

HOWIE: We go there. I'll probably get five minutes tops. And I will do my new material.

SONIE: In front of live human beings.

HOWIE: Yes. And I will bet you five thousand dollars that I can get... let's say, if I cannot get *three* individual laughs in five minutes, you win five thousand dollars.

SONIA: And you just randomly have five thousand dollars floating around for this occasion?

HOWIE: Yeah, I finally returned all those presents from under the couch. But if I *do* get three or more laughs... then I will perform my new material on this tour.

SONIA: No way.

HOWIE: Then I will perform *snippets* of my new material on this tour.

SONIA: Absolutely not.

HOWIE: I will perform snippets, but only on *the very last date* of the tour-

SONIA: No fucking way.

HOWIE: -after the audience has already left and I'm on stage alone in front of just the janitors-

SONIA: The janitors might have blogs! Just forget it! *Long pause.* How about... if you do get three laughs... I'll spend Christmas with your family this year.

HOWIE: Oh really.

SONIA: Not Christmas Eve - just Christmas day.

HOWIE: Of course.

SONIA: And I'll make my own food while I'm there.

HOWIE: Naturally.

SONIA: And I'm not gonna make eye contact with anybody.

HOWIE: I accept the revised terms of our wager.

SONIA: Good. It'll be good for you to get this out of your system. So where's this open mic night?

HOWIE: Arkham, Massachusetts.

Blackout.

SCENE TWO

Lights up on GUS, a disheveled open mic host, standing in front of a mic stand in a spotlight. A stool sits nearby.

GUS: Okay you guys are in for a treat. He's just about to kick off another east coast tour, but he's here tonight to try some new stuff out for you guys. All the way from Providence... first time ever on our stage... show some love to Mr. Howie Lovecraft.

Howie enters, carrying a glass of water, as Gus exits; they shake hands awkwardly and then Gus exits as Howie takes the mic.

HOWIE: Thank you. Thanks a lot. Thank you.

Howie takes a sip of his water, sets the glass down very deliberately on the stool. He very patiently approaches the mic - very calm and very confident.

HOWIE: So these two guys walk into a bar, and the bartender says, "What can I get for you gentlemen?" And the first guy says to the bartender, "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn!" And the bartender looks at him kind of funny and he says, "Sorry, pal, didn't catch that, what'll you have?" And the first guy just kind of nods and smiles, and he says, "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn!" And the bartender still doesn't understand him, and he says, "Sorry, buddy - you speak English?" That's when the second guy leans over and says, "Oh, allow me to translate for my friend here. The passage he's

chanting means, roughly: 'In his house at R'lyeh, dead Cthulhu waits dreaming.'" To which the bartender replies: "So... he's not ordering a drink?" And the second guy says, "Sir, this man's mind has been *ravaged* by unspeakable knowledge - he has seen *horrible things* beyond the stars that cannot be unseen, and worse, those horrible things have also seen *him*, and *corrupted* him completely - do you think, sir, that he is capable of ordering a *drink*?" To which the bartender replies, "He was capable of walking into a bar, wasn't he?" Which cracks the second guy up, and he says, "Sure, I mean, if his emptied out, formerly human husk getting puppeted around by mind-devouring aliens from outside our conception of space and time is your idea of 'walking,' then yeah, sure, he 'walked' right in here, didn't he."

Just then the waitress - her name is Mary Ann, she comes over and she hands a couple menus to the two guys and she says, "Hey fellas, we're on the happy hour menu, dollar off wells and appetizers, would you like to hear about the special?" And the first guy says to Mary Ann, "Ph'nglui mglw'nafh Cthulhu R'lyeh wgah'nagl fhtagn!" And Mary Ann gets this look on her face, and she says, "Yes, truly, but that which dreams will someday *rise!* And when the Great Lord Cthulhu abandons his desolate temple R'lyeh and ascends from the blackest ocean depths, no *happy hour menu* will satisfy his *ravenous hunger!*" Interesting trivia about Mary Ann - she was born with gills, and she can breathe underwater.

Anyway, my name is Howie Lovecraft, and I like to tell that story as a joke, but in reality, that bartender was me. Before I became a comedian, I spent many years as a bartender, over in Innsmouth. Anyone here from Innsmouth? Right, most people won't admit they're from Innsmouth. I didn't actually *live* in Innsmouth myself. I lived in Ipswich. Kind of a suburb of Innsmouth. Not so many gill people living in Ipswich. Just a small population of gill people in Ipswich. You'd forget they were there sometimes, and then you'd be checking out at the supermarket at three in the morning and the checkout lady's gills would like, *flap* at you. They're kind of useless out of water, you know.

But then one night, true story, Obed Marsh walks into *my* bar, with his half-witted manservant Maurice. And we get to talking, I buy him a few shots, and he gets a little drunk and he starts bragging about how he's high priest of the Esoteric Order of Dagon. And eventually he busts out his first edition copy of Abdul Alhazred's terrible grimoire, the Necronomicon. Which, how many people here tonight have only read the Kindle edition of the Necronomicon? *Most* people, right? I mean, even on a retina display, you can't tell the ink is actually blood. You just miss so much. I'm old-fashioned, you know, I like the *feel* of a book, I like the *smell* of a book, and I mean, first edition Necronomicon is bound with human skin, so you do smell it.

So he shows me a page in this first edition Necronomicon, and then suddenly I'm having this incredibly vivid dream, and in the dream I'm underwater, deep below the surface of the ocean, floating through the submerged ruins of an ancient temple, and I'm filled with unspeakable dread because even though no light can penetrate the blackness of these murky depths, I recognize these ruins, this temple is R'lyeh, and suddenly I am swept into the presence of a horrifying creature, hundreds of feet tall, a morass of tentacles floating gently around his gaping maw, reclining against the wreckage of a sunken ship, its unfortunate crew long ago consumed by this, the Great Old One, Cthulhu, ancient beyond reckoning, born beyond the stars. And even though he sleeps, his tentacles wrap themselves around me in a sickening embrace, and I realize that I have been chosen to be the Herald of the End Times, announcing Cthulhu's imminent awakening, for soon he shall rise from the depths to cleanse the surface world of the blight called human life.

Long pause.

Anyway, you guys have been great, thanks for letting me close the show! Good night, Arkham!

Lights out.

SCENE THREE

Sonia sits at a bar table, drinking a martini. Howie enters, sits opposite her.

HOWIE: I counted three laughs. The happy hour menu joke got a laugh.

SONIA: That was somebody coughing.

HOWIE: And when the checkout lady's gills flapped out of water...

SONIA: Coughing. No, the predominant sound in the room was the sound of people staring at you in disbelief. Seriously - what do you imagine is actually funny about a town full of gill people?

HOWIE: Well - it's my delivery.

SONIA: Gill people are gross.

HOWIE: The whole point is, it's the juxtaposition of unexpected elements-

SONIA: A book made out of human skin is just *gross*.

Gus enters, all smiles.

GUS: Mr. Lovecraft! What an honor to have you on our stage tonight!

HOWIE: Thanks for giving me a spot last minute, Gus. This is my manager, Sonia Greene.

GUS: Ms. Greene, thank you for escorting Mr. Lovecraft all the way to Arkham!

SONIA: Howie's been experimenting with new material - sorry you had to be the guinea pig.

GUS: Oh, my treat, my treat! I was listening back in my office while I was doing the books. You should have heard me. The bit where, the human husk puppeted by an alien walked into the bar - laughed my head off. And then just casually mentioning that Mary Ann had gills, nearly choked I was laughing so hard. Oh, and god, when the checkout lady's gills were flapping because they're useless out of water... I mean, it's funny because it's true, right?

HOWIE: Would you say you laughed at least three times, Gus?

GUS: Oh, absolutely.

SONIA: That's interesting, because I was out in the house during the show, and I didn't hear any laughs.

GUS: Well - that's a pretty cerebral routine you got there. Kind of thing people sort of nod and appreciate even if they don't laugh out loud.

SONIA: How do you think that routine would play in Boston?

GUS: Who knows. But Arkham's full of cerebral types, and they're buzzing about you on the Internet. Listen to this. *Reading from his phone*: "Howie Lovecraft says he is the Herald of the End Times in his new set. Time to cash out the trust fund and go on a killing spree." So that's good buzz. Listen, how much of that new material do you have? I can bump my Friday night headliner here if you want to try out a full set.

HOWIE: Really?

GUS: Sure thing, and I bet we can squeeze you onto the Saturday bill at my other club in Innsmouth. Could be big - there's a growing cult scene out here that's hungry for smart comedy about the pantheon of ancient elder gods. Also, they like karaoke, I mean, they *kill* old Stevie Nicks tracks, know what I'm saying?

SONIA: That's sweet, but Howie's got to work on his actual set for his actual tour.

HOWIE: I've got a set for the tour.

SONIA: The same set you performed in the same clubs three months ago?

HOWIE: I - no one is going to remember that set.

SONIA: You're a brat, you know that? You want to headline shows out here in the sticks - be my guest. But you better be on your game when you get to Boston. *She rises*. Let's go back to the hotel.

GUS: Actually, Mr. Lovecraft, I was hoping to buy you a drink, if you wouldn't mind staying a bit longer.

HOWIE: I could use a nightcap actually. Sure you don't want to stay?

SONIA: Positive. I gotta drive back to Providence in the morning.

Sonia gives Howie a peck on the cheek.

SONIA: Actually - I wasn't being fair. I don't think the predominant sound was people staring in disbelief.

HOWIE: Oh yeah?

SONIA: Yeah - it was weird. I think there was a lot of actual *belief* going on.

HOWIE: That's gotta be worth something, huh?

SONIA: Maybe. I mean, it's not worth five thousand dollars.

HOWIE: About that - I did return those presents, but they were only worth about eighteen bucks.

SONIA: And you wonder why I wasn't impressed by them.

She exits. Gus sits opposite Howie at the table.

GUS: You spun quite an interesting tale tonight.

HOWIE: Thank you. Sonia doesn't really get it, but...

GUS: How much of your story is true?

HOWIE: What?

GUS: Did you actually meet the high priest of the Esoteric Order of Dagon in a bar?

HOWIE: Um... that's kind of a strange question-

GUS: Don't be coy - did he actually show you a first edition Necronomicon?

HOWIE: I'm - so this routine, see, it's all about the juxtaposition of unexpected elements-

GUS: Does Obed Marsh know that when he showed you his book, he actually awakened the long-awaited Herald of the End Times? You may confide in me, Mr. Lovecraft. I too am a worshipper of Father Dagon and Mother Hydra.

HOWIE: I'm not-

GUS: I too have made blood sacrifice to the Deep Ones.

HOWIE: I never-

GUS: I too have studied the forbidden pages of the Necronomicon - well, it was an adaptation actually, a graphic novel, but still, very creepy. Tell me, did you actually visit the temple R'lyeh in your dreams?

Long pause.

HOWIE: Yeah, actually. I did.

GUS: That must have been rad.

HOWIE: It was pretty rad.

GUS: What do you remember about Obed Marsh?

HOWIE: I don't... I can't remember his face, really. I just remember... he put the Necronomicon down on the bar, and he opened it up to a specific page, and when I read that page... I received a *vision*.

GUS: A vision of the End Times?

HOWIE: No, a vision of a secret, alien form of comedy. A juxtaposition of unexpected elements-

GUS: Why do you think he chose *you* to receive this comedy vision, Mr. Lovecraft?

HOWIE: I'm just... lucky, I guess.

Gus starts typing on his phone.

GUS: I'm gonna tweet about your Friday show here. "Howie 'The Herald' Lovecraft, back by popular demand! Mention Azathoth, blind idiot god at the center of the universe, and get \$1 off." I mean, normally you wouldn't want a bunch of people randomly invoking Azathoth, but fuck it, the Herald of the End Times is already here, am I right?

HOWIE: You really think people will come?

GUS: I do. You really think Cthulhu's going to rise?

HOWIE: Oh. Someday, probably, I guess. I wasn't given any specific schedule information. I mean technically, on the galactic time scale, the "End Times" could last for eons, you know?

GUS: Most people live their whole lives, and never swim through R'lyeh in their dreams. But you're the Herald. You've got *purpose*, in an otherwise bleak and existentially pointless universe.

HOWIE: I guess so.

GUS: Don't get all cocky about it - you'll be consumed just like the rest of us when the Great Old One rises.

HOWIE: Well yes, that's definitely true.

GUS: Anyway - I'm sorry, let me get you a beer.

HOWIE: I could use something stronger.

GUS: Whiskey?

HOWIE: Heroin if you have it.

GUS: I'll see what I can find. *Starts to exit.*

HOWIE: So Gus... I mean, how did you learn about...

GUS: I got family in Innsmouth.

HOWIE: Are they...

GUS: Yeah, they're gill people.

HOWIE: Dude, I'm sorry.

GUS: Don't be sorry.

HOWIE: I was kind of talking trash about gill people, though.

GUS: I don't care - they're fucking gross.

Lights fade.

SCENE FOUR

NARRATOR: Thanks to Gus's enthusiastic promotion, Howie's Friday night show in Arkham was a sold out smash.

Lights up on Howie at mic stand.

HOWIE: Oh hey, I think you guys are really going to like this. Yesterday I launched my first ever Kickstarter campaign. It's a great project - I'm going to build a massive black chapel for the unholy demon choir that constantly sings to me in my mind, endlessly chanting the unpronounceable secret names of the ancient evil entities that will someday consume us. I figured, why should I be the only one tormented by these insidious anti-melodies? Why not build a massive black chapel where the unholy demon choir can puncture its way right into my neighborhood with its horrible aesthetic desecrations? I mean, wait til you hear this stuff, it's really just *not* what music was intended to do. So yeah, any donation would really help. At the \$5 level, you'll be rewarded with a vague sense that contributing to this campaign probably wasn't really a great idea. At the \$50 level, the demon choir's unnatural voices will slowly begin to replace any moments of peace and silence in your mind with vulgar, despair-inducing canticles. At the \$75 level, you get a T-shirt. One size fits no one... constricting you in ways that feel pleasant... at first. And of course, at the \$100 level, you'll get a chance to sit in with the unholy demon choir during one of its rehearsals, which as you know, they really like to integrate the sounds of terrified human shrieking as kind of a percussion instrument, so that's just a great opportunity, if you're a musician, or if you like screaming. Then finally, only a limited number of these rewards available, a few lucky donors at the \$500 level will actually be physically embedded deep within the walls of the black chapel itself, where they will *truly feel* the sickening resonance of these infernal lullabies vibrating throughout their own helpless skeletal and nervous systems. Also, I think you get a CD.

Lights out.

NARRATOR: Buzz about Howie's performance spread like wildfire, and his Saturday night show in Innsmouth had crowds lining up around the block.

Lights up on Howie, pacing nervously back stage at a club. Gus enters.

HOWIE: How's it look?

GUS: There's crowds lining up around the block.

HOWIE: Yeah, but I mean... how do they *look*?

GUS: Oh. I didn't see any.

HOWIE: You sure?

GUS: They're usually pretty obvious.

HOWIE: Yeah, okay. The gill people jokes stay in.

GUS: They could be hiding their gills under a scarf.

HOWIE: Dammit, you're right - I should cut the gill people jokes. This is fucking *Innsmouth*. Of course there will be gill people out there.

GUS: It's kind of racist making fun of them in the first place.

HOWIE: It's not racist. It's like making fun of rednecks. You can totally make fun of rednecks, but not in Alabama. And you can make fun of gill people, but not in Innsmouth.

GUS: I don't know, man. When you make fun of rednecks, you're making fun of their behavior really, whereas gill people, I mean it's not their fault they were born the hybrid offspring of immortal amphibian creatures and their pathetic human worshippers.

HOWIE: I said I was cutting the gill people jokes.

GUS: I'm just making a point about your belief system.

HOWIE: You said gill people were gross.

GUS: I meant my *family* was gross. We were talking about my family when I said that. In-laws, by the way.

HOWIE: And what's so gross about your family?

GUS: It's not the gills. It's their eyes. Big bulging eyes that never blink because they have no eyelids. I bet you never noticed they have no eyelids, because you always tried to avoid gill people, because you're a racist.

HOWIE: Oh, get off it - just because you married outside your species doesn't make you morally superior.

Lights out.

SCENE FIVE

NARRATOR: As the buzz continued to build, Howie quickly booked gigs in Cambridge and Salem in the last remaining days before his official tour began.

Lights up on Howie at mic stand, stool & water glass nearby.

HOWIE: Anyway, I don't know what you heard about my show... you might have heard that I'm a stand-up comedian. But I'm also kind of getting into the cult scene, lot of great cults here in this part of the country. Show of hands - how many cultists do we have here tonight? About half? Who's representing the Esoteric

Order of Dagon? Give it up for Dagon! Wonderful, thanks for coming. How about, uh... Cult of the Black Goat, any Black Goat cultists here tonight? Perfect - hey, you know what they say, "Iä! Shub-Niggurath!" - am I right? *Insincere laugh.* Interesting trivia, you'll often hear Shub-Niggurath referred to by her full ceremonial name, "the Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young." Now - how many mothers do we have in the audience tonight? Mothers, I want you to close your eyes, and imagine giving birth a *thousand* times. And each time, you're giving birth to this horrid - it's like a big round - it's like a basketball, but it's a fleshy, gaping mouth-blob full of teeth, no eyes, just a mouth and teeth running around on these stumpy little pig legs, and it only eats human flesh. And you give birth to a *thousand* of these things, all by yourself too because, like, the very first one would eat the midwife or whatever. *Pause.* Cool, I don't have a joke here, I just wanted you to imagine that.

Lights out.

NARRATOR: Howie's Boston show sold out days in advance, and the buzz was clear: people were coming to see the Herald of the End Times. Howie's career was at a tipping point. But he had made a promise to Sonia, who joined him backstage before the show.

Lights up on Howie and Sonia, sitting together.

SONIA: If you do this, there's no turning back. Arkham and Innsmouth are one thing, but Boston is different. Everything you say on stage tonight is gonna wind up on YouTube. You go out there tonight with that "visionary" stuff, and for the rest of your career, you're just gonna be the guy who does the gill people jokes. Is that what you want?

HOWIE: I stopped doing gill people jokes.

SONIA: You know what I mean.

HOWIE: I never did that many gill people jokes in the first place.

SONIA: What are you doing instead?

HOWIE: I have this new bit about how Nyarlathotep can't decide what to get Azathoth for Father's Day. Which, the joke is, Azathoth is a blind idiot god who desires only destruction. Kind of a cheesy set up, but it works because I do this funny voice for Nyarlathotep.

SONIA: You are totally killing me with this shit. I don't understand why anyone would spend good American money to hear this shit. It's like some giant post-modern stunt at my expense. Half the people in line outside the club right now are wearing hooded robes and chanting. Like they actually worship the gods in your routine.

HOWIE: They probably do.

SONIA: Come on. The gods in your routine want to destroy all life on Earth.

HOWIE: Kind of the only rational response to the human race, don't you think?

SONIA: Of course I don't think that.

HOWIE: I'll do my old set if you really want me to. I promised you I would.

SONIA: Just ... did people actually *laugh* in Cambridge? Or Salem?

HOWIE: People were *entranced* for sure. It's like - I go on stage, I start talking, everything seems normal at first, and then at some point without realizing it, we all go into a shared dream state, and it's like we're all together underneath the ocean, we're tiny mindless plankton drifting in a murky cesspool, and then two horrible glowing eyes suddenly gaze upon us and we dissolve into nothingness... and then people are clapping and I'm backstage and someone usually hands me a beer. So I guess - technically, I don't think people have been laughing much. But look, they're buying tickets. They're tweeting and they're buying tickets. The stars are finally lining up in our favor, you know?

SONIA: Do whatever you want.

HOWIE: Why do you sound - why are you sad about this?

SONIA: Because I don't understand you any more. I mean, I was "entranced" too the first time I heard it, but all these people seem to understand what it *means*, and I *don't*, and I just feel - left out, or left behind... and I'm really trying to keep up with you, but I just... you know, I looked for the Kindle edition of the Necronomicon. That bit was bullshit, wasn't it?

HOWIE: Yeah, I made that one up. *Pause*. You actually looked for it though?

SONIA: You keep acting like it's real. So yeah, I looked for it.

HOWIE: The Necronomicon *is* real. When the tour is over, I'll track down a first edition for you.

SONIA: Gross, no, I specifically wanted the non-human skin edition.

Lights out.

SCENE SIX

NARRATOR: The moment of truth finally arrived, as Howie Lovecraft took the stage in Boston, and with Sonia's blessing, he performed his visionary new material.

Lights up on Howie, standing in front of a mic on a mic stand in a spotlight. A stool sits nearby with a glass of water on it.

HOWIE: Lot of history here in Boston. I was reading about the Boston Massacre. You know how many people were actually killed in the Boston Massacre? Five people. *Insincere laugh*. That's not a massacre, it's an afternoon snack. For Cthulhu. Because he eats people.

Anyway, I heard we have a lot of cultists in the house tonight, so I've prepared a joke especially for the cultists out there. Now if you're not a cultist, don't worry, I've got plenty of normal comedy jokes coming up that everyone can enjoy. But please, bear with me, as I do want to tell this one special joke that I wrote just

for my fans who are cultists. If you *are* a cultist, this is something you can memorize and take back to impress your high priest or high priestess. OK, here we go.

So this acolyte in the Order of Yog-Sothoth is summoning a Mi-Go to remove her brain from her body and send it to the outer edge of the galaxy in a shiny metal brain-cylinder. Just then, who should appear but Nyarlathotep, the Crawling Chaos, God of a Thousand Forms. And he interrupts the incantation, and he says to the acolyte, "Why do you trust the Abominable Ones to grant your brain safe passage to the outer edge of the galaxy? What if instead they trick you and plant your brain inside a demon?" Well this infuriates the acolyte, who produces several parchment pages from the Pnakotic Manuscripts, transcribed by Doctor John Dee himself, and she looks Nyarlathotep right in the eye and she reads to him, and says, "A Mi-Go thus summoned is bound to send the spellcaster's brain across any distance until it thus reaches the shoggoth." So the Mi-Go appears and removes the acolyte's brain, but sure enough, instead of sending it to the outer edge of the galaxy in a shiny metal brain-cylinder, it plants the acolyte's brain inside a demon. And just before the acolyte goes mad from shock and horror, Nyarlathotep leans over and says, "It says shoggoth, not Yuggoth!" *Insincere laugh. Long pause.* Were those cultists supposed to be here *this* show?

Lights fade.

We hear applause fading in the distance as lights come up on Howie, slumped in a chair in his dressing room. Sonia enters.

SONIA: That was amazing. Nobody asked for their money back. Hey, someone's here to see you.

HOWIE: Did you bring me a groupie? You know, I think they might be naked underneath their robes.

SONIA: I did not bring you a groupie, asshat.

She waves, and Gus enters, carrying a gift-wrapped package.

GUS: Good show, Mr. Lovecraft!

HOWIE: Gus! I didn't know you were out there!

GUS: Couldn't miss the official opening night of your tour! I feel like I played a small part in your success after all.

SONIA: I need to find the club owner and settle up. I'll be back in a few minutes.

Sonia exits. Gus hands the package to Howie.

HOWIE: What's this?

GUS: An opening night gift. Go on - open it.

Howie carefully unwraps the package. Inside is an ancient and evil grimoire. Howie is stunned. Ominous music rises as Gus speaks.

GUS: Yes, Mr. Lovecraft, you've seen that book before.

HOWIE: Is this-

GUS: Yes, Mr. Lovecraft, you are holding the Necronomicon.

HOWIE: Is it-

GUS: Yes, Mr. Lovecraft, it is the same first edition you once read in a bar in Innsmouth.

HOWIE: Were you-

GUS: Yes, Mr. Lovecraft, I was there that fateful night, although you do not remember my face.

HOWIE: Are you-

GUS: Yes, Mr. Lovecraft, sometimes it pleases me to wear the form of Obed Marsh as I walk this wretched planet, but my true name is actually - Nyarlathotep! The Crawling Chaos! God of a Thousand Forms!

A loud thunder clap is heard.

HOWIE: Why are-

GUS: You must be wondering why I'm here, on the eve of your great comedic triumph! I am here in service to the All-Mother, Shub-Niggurath, who demands payment for the vision we granted you, the vision of a secret, alien form of comedy! Or did you believe, foolish Herald, that your sudden success came without a price?

HOWIE: I never-

GUS: It did *not* come without a price! There is definitely a price! Open the book, Mr. Lovecraft, and discover the tally for your success!

HOWIE: But I-

GUS: Open the Necronomicon to page two hundred and forty-three, Mr. Lovecraft!

HOWIE: I don't-

GUS: And study closely the second footnote at the bottom of the page!

HOWIE: I'm not-

GUS: Do it! Do it right now! Page two hundred and forty-three! The second footnote!

Slowly Howie opens the book and begins flipping through it. He stops, finds a passage, begins reading.

HOWIE: "Some scholars believe that the correct translation of this phrase is actually 'bread pudding.'"

Howie looks up at Gus, confused. Gus takes a quick peek at the page he's reading from.

GUS: I meant page two hundred and forty-seven, Mr. Lovecraft! Do it! Do it right now!

Howie flips forward a few pages and reads.

HOWIE: "But he who becomes the Herald of this secret, alien comedy must pay a steep and horrible price. He must build a black altar to the All-Mother, Shub-Niggurath, upon which he must... *spill the blood* of the one he loves most. Only with this blood sacrifice will Shub-Niggurath be appeased."

GUS: You entered into a contract with me when you gazed upon the Necronomicon in your bar. I am the executor of this contract, as the avatar of the Outer Gods in your reality.

HOWIE: But I had no idea I was entering into a contract.

GUS: Your pathetic human ignorance is no excuse, Mr. Lovecraft! You must sacrifice Sonia Greene to appease Shub-Niggurath!

HOWIE: Maybe.

GUS: The footnote is very clear on this topic!

HOWIE: Yeah, but it doesn't say what will happen if I *don't* appease Shub-Niggurath.

GUS: Horrible things will happen, I assure you!

HOWIE: What horrible things specifically?

GUS: Things ... too horrible to express in human language!

HOWIE: Just give me a range, like... on a scale of, getting a parking ticket, to like, Cthulhu awakening from his slumber and destroying the Earth, is it, like, in the middle somewhere?

GUS: It is more horrible than the middle of the scale you describe!

HOWIE: What if I don't sacrifice Sonia and just wait for Cthulhu to rise, since that's going to happen eventually anyway?

GUS: Shub-Niggurath will punish you long before Cthulhu awakens! You must appease her before your tour is over!

HOWIE: Where does it say that?

GUS: The *third* footnote! Read it, read it now!

HOWIE *reading*: Damn, it's so specific!

GUS: You will appease her before your tour is over, or I will claim your soul on behalf of the Outer Gods, and you will suffer an eternity of torment playing the flute in the court of my dread father Azathoth!

HOWIE: I hate the flute!

GUS: I told you - horrible things!

Sonia enters. Howie clumsily closes the book.

SONIA: Car's outside. You want to come back to the hotel with us for a nightcap, Gus?

GUS: Sorry, the last Greyhound back to Arkham leaves soon and I have to go, so I can feed my kitten Snowball in the morning. But I'm sure I'll see you both again... *Ominously*: ...before your tour is over. *Pause*. Because I have tickets to additional shows.

Gus exits. Sonia notices the book on Howie's lap.

SONIA: Whatcha got there? Is that from Gus?

HOWIE: It's the Necronomicon. Human skin edition.

SONIA: And you're touching it with your bare hands? Gross!

He shows her the open pages of the book.

HOWIE: Read the second and third footnotes on that page.

Without touching the book, she reads the footnotes.

SONIA: That's so specific.

HOWIE: I know.

SONIA: Damn it, Howie - I'm supposed to review *all* your contracts!

HOWIE: I know.

SONIA: I'm a contract lawyer! I'm your *manager*!

HOWIE: I know! I know. How many more tour dates do you think you can schedule?

SONIA: Probably quite a few. You're hot right now. But you can't tour forever!

HOWIE: Why not?

SONIA: There's only so many times you can hit the same markets over and over again without a break to develop new material. Your audience will get bored with you. Your routine will turn into *sh*tick*.

HOWIE: I'll *never* let that happen. Maybe I can find some new material in the Necronomicon.

SONIA: Absolutely not! You've made it perfectly clear you can't be trusted with the secrets in that book. *She grabs the book from him. Pause as she realizes:* I'm touching dead human skin right now.

HOWIE: You are.

SONIA: It feels like leather.

HOWIE: Technically, any preserved skin *is* leather. Oh and check out the blood ink-

SONIA: Please be quiet.

Sonia becomes engrossed in reading the open Necronomicon.

SONIA: So this is it... the arcane source of your visionary comedy.

HOWIE: I mean, I do add my own personal flair to it.

SONIA: It's really hurting my brain to read this.

HOWIE: You don't have to keep reading it.

SONIA: I totally have to keep reading it. I have to keep reading it, *a lot*.

HOWIE: I know, it put me right into a trance when I first read it.

SONIA: My brain, my whole face - it's like it's a red hot psychic cheese grater, but I can't stop grating.

HOWIE: You might, I dunno, try reading a different page-

SONIA: Why did you wait so *long*? You've had this power since before we ever met, why didn't you *use* it sooner?

HOWIE: I needed time to learn proper comedy basics first. I mean, that's advanced comedy in that book. You gotta have all the fundamentals ingrained like they're second nature before you ever start layering that elite alien stuff into your act. God, all these years... you know, if you hadn't believed in me...

SONIA: ...what, this never would have happened? So it's *my* fault you have to sacrifice me on a black altar?

HOWIE: No, that's not - I'm not saying that, I just mean - the past few days, performing my new material for people who really love it and understand it... it's been the pinnacle of my life as a comedian, as a *person*, and - I never could have done it without you. I always just wanted to make you proud of me.

Long pause.

SONIA: Maybe I can find a loophole. A footnote that he overlooked.

HOWIE: If it's an option, baby, I would happily trade my life for yours.

SONIA: Oh, Howie... you would?

HOWIE: I mean - not "happily."

Sonia starts flipping pages as lights fade to black.

SCENE SEVEN

NARRATOR: Sonia extended the tour beyond the east coast, and they travelled all over the United States, postponing the inevitable day when Nyarlathotep would come to demand a blood sacrifice. The seemingly endless tour was a grueling nightmare for Howie.

Lights up on a clearly exhausted Howie in front of a microphone.

HOWIE: How many elder things does it take to screw in a light bulb? *Pause.* None, because elder things reproduce asexually via spores. IT'S FUNNY BECAUSE IT'S TRUE!

Lights crossfade, going dark on Howie and coming up on Sonia elsewhere on stage, sitting cross-legged on the floor reading the Necronomicon, wearing rubber gloves to handle it.

NARRATOR: Meanwhile, Sonia became an avid student of the Necronomicon, teaching herself the dark arts described within, hoping to discover a power that could save her life. But they could not see for themselves how the book's constant malevolent presence in their lives swiftly drove both Sonia and Howie toward madness.

Howie enters carrying a pet carrier, with a hopefully realistic-looking stuffed dog inside. Sonia appears to be in the later stages of a severe mania, excited and frantic at the forbidden knowledge she's learning.

SONIA: Did you bring it?

HOWIE: Not exactly. I brought this.

He sets the pet carrier down in front of her.

SONIA: This is not a live goat.

HOWIE: Nope. One of the cultists in the audience brought her dog to the show.

SONIA: The ritual calls for a live goat.

HOWIE: I couldn't get a live goat at 10:30 at night. I asked the club owner, how early did he think I could get a live goat to slaughter in the morning, and he said, "Here is your money and please go somewhere else now."

SONIA: Well, I just don't think Shub-Niggurath will be happy with this substitution.

HOWIE: You're not even *consecrated* to Shub-Niggurath, so the whole ritual's blasphemy in the first place!

SONIA: Oh listen to you, now *you're* an expert in ritual blood magic?

HOWIE: And *you're* just a *contract lawyer*, which - okay I see the similarity there.

SONIA: I think you're just getting squeamish about the sacrifice. Listen, this book is no bullshit cover-to-cover blood magic and death magic. Almost every spell and ritual I've studied so far requires a sacrifice.

HOWIE: But what do we *get* for sacrificing this dog?

SONIA: We get *power* - I'm teaching myself to be a *wizard of the dark arts, IN CASE YOU HADN'T NOTICED*. I'm gonna learn enough spellcraft to kick Nyarlahotep's lying face in.

HOWIE: How is that gonna appease Shub-Niggurath?

SONIA: It's not, it's just gonna make *me* feel good. I haven't found anything better yet. But look - if I *do* eventually find a loophole, some ritual or counterspell that *will* magically appease Shub-Niggurath without you killing me, it'll almost certainly still require some *other* sacrifice. We're not getting out of this for free, Howie. I need to know that you can *handle* that sacrifice... especially if it will save my life.

After a beat, Howie reaches into the pet carrier and snaps the dog's neck. Long pause.

HOWIE: Did it work?

SONIA: Yeah, so next time, you should let me actually *do* the ritual first. The sacrifice is at the *end*.

Blackout.

SCENE EIGHT

NARRATOR: The Necronomicon's madness steadily crept over Howie's performances, signalling ever more strongly to his followers that the End Times were truly nigh.

Lights up on Howie in front of a microphone, stool & water nearby. He seems more disheveled and manic than ever before.

HOWIE: I got a friend request the other day from Cthulhu. I'm like, aren't you supposed to be asleep under the ocean in your fancy temple of R'lyeh or some shit? But no, I guess he tapped an undersea fiber optic cable and now he's like, harassing me because he's got a fat pipe and doesn't know what to do with it. I'm like, here's an idea, how about you *rise up* and *destroy civilization* like you've been promising for centuries, am I right? Or else, maybe a free trial to Netflix. But no, he wants to be friends on Facebook, and now... because it's so hard for him to type with his tentacles, now he's just *poking* me four thousand times a day. *Pause - then he shouts at the audience:* Yes, Cthulhu using Facebook Poke is timely observational humor!

On the galactic time scale, Facebook Poke is still a cutting edge feature! Fuck you, I'm the Herald. Anyway Facebook *is* a fucking sign of the End Times.

Lights crossfade, going dark on Howie and coming up on Sonia elsewhere on stage, sitting crosslegged on the floor reading the Necronomicon.

NARRATOR: Finally, with her survival at stake, Sonia's relentless studies produced a meaningful breakthrough that could save her life.

Howie enters carrying a bottle of champagne, sits wearily nearby Sonia in a chair. She can barely contain her delirious excitement.

SONIA: See, Nyarlathotep is the servitor of the Outer Gods, but he isn't like *any* of them! I mean, the Great Old One Cthulhu sleeps and dreams below the ocean... the blind idiot god Azathoth writhes in the center of the universe, hypnotized by invisible flutes and drums... Yog-Sothoth is the gate to our universe and yet he's trapped *outside* of it, smeared across space and time... But Nyarlathotep takes human form and walks among us! He enjoys *deceiving* us and *manipulating* us, not destroying us or consuming us!

HOWIE: What's your point?

SONIA: He tricked you into this situation by acting like a *human*. Maybe you can trick *him* in return, while he's still in human form! The whole bargain is sealed in human concepts in the first place, but human concepts are inherently ephemeral, because language itself is susceptible to constantly changing definitions!

HOWIE: So?

SONIA: So maybe, for some limited window of time, you can *change* a definition for *yourself*. You can change how you feel about love. You can change how you feel about loving *me*. You can love someone else *more* than me, just for a little while.

HOWIE: I guess, with enough booze-

SONIA: No, with this big fucking bag of Ecstasy I scored off a cultist.

She hands him a bag of pills.

SONIA: I'll get lost for the night, you go back to the hotel suite, you take as much Ecstasy as you can swallow, and you *love someone else more than you love me*. Not forever. Just long enough to...

HOWIE: Wait... you want me...

She hands him a ceremonial dagger.

SONIA: I've prepared a black altar, in the bedroom of the suite. I mean, I put black sheets on the bed. I think that should work.

HOWIE: But... who...

SONIA: I brought you a groupie.

She waves, and a GROUPIE enters, completely shrouded in a medieval style hooded robe, ideally one that shrouds the groupie's face in shadow, but we may see a long blonde wig perhaps escaping from the hood.

SONIA: This is Janine.

HOWIE: Come on.

SONIA: She's a consecrated high priestess in the Cult of the Black Goat.

HOWIE: Come on.

SONIA: Janine, as we discussed, the Herald is going to take you back to his suite at the hotel and slit your throat in sacrifice to the All-Mother.

HOWIE: Come on!

JANINE: Truly it is an honor for me to be chosen by the Herald for this sacrifice! My entire sect will be venerated among the most wicked of all believers. Believe me when I tell you - I *want* my lifeblood to flow!

SONIA: You're the Herald of the End Times, Howie - the End Times are just coming a little early for Janine.

Howie regards Janine for a long moment. Finally:

HOWIE: Are you naked underneath that robe?

JANINE: Fucking totally.

HOWIE: All right, let's do this thing.

Blackout.

SCENE NINE

NARRATOR: Sonia kept vigil in the hotel lobby. The pages of the Necronomicon were cold comfort to her that night, each footnote another nail in the coffin of her soul. In the dark moments just before dawn, her conscience faltered, and she tried to stop Howie before it was too late.

Lights up on Sonia in the doorway to the suite.

SONIA: Howie? ... Howie, it's me - it's Sonia. Is everything okay? Are you okay, baby?

From opposite, Howie staggers onstage, wearing a white hotel bathrobe.

HOWIE: Sonia!

He rushes to her and embraces her in a huge, crazy, Ecstasy-soaked hug. His speech is vaguely slurred.

HOWIE: I couldn't do it, Sonia... I couldn't do it... I took all the pills you gave me and I still couldn't do it...

SONIA: Ssshh, it's okay, I'm here now.

She takes his arm and they sit.

HOWIE: I'm sorry, it was a good plan, it should have worked, but I just couldn't do it...

SONIA: It's okay. Howie - look at me. Where's Janine?

HOWIE: In the bedroom.

SONIA: I'm going to ask Janine to leave.

Sonia exits, then quickly re-enters.

SONIA: Howie - Janine is dead.

HOWIE: I know!

SONIA: I thought you couldn't do it!

HOWIE: I couldn't *love* her! Of *course* I could *kill* her, that part was *easy*. I didn't use that knife - I strangled her because, this is a nice white robe and blood likes to spray. Anyway - I *almost* loved her more than you because, killing her was *saving* you, but - as I watched the life go out of her dead eyes, I realized - her dead eyes could never be as pretty as *your* dead eyes would have been. My heart betrayed me, Sonia - because it was *you* I wished I was strangling to death, not Janine at all.

SONIA: Ohhh you're adorable. *Pause*. Who's the dead guy on the floor in there?

HOWIE: Room service. I thought I'd try one more time while I was still high, just to be sure. Didn't wind up loving that guy very much at all, actually.

Defeated, Sonia slumps down next to Howie, who puts his arm around her shoulder.

SONIA: What are we gonna do?

HOWIE: I would like to do a shit ton of muscle relaxants. My jaw won't stop clenching from all that Ecstasy. You know, heavy jaw clenching is a common side effect, also high body temperature, and inappropriate back rubbing-

SONIA: I'm *serious*, Howie! Eventually this tour will end, and you'll have to choose. Let Nyarlathotep torment you for all eternity... or kill me on the black altar, just like he wants.

HOWIE: I couldn't possibly kill you on the black altar. Not unless you help me shove Janine's body off it, because I couldn't move her by myself. I'm totally kidding.

SONIA: Then what are we gonna *do*?

HOWIE: Um - well I haven't read the Necronomicon as closely as you have, so let me ask you, did you ever come across any spells or incantations or rituals in that book that could possibly - *summon* some muscle relaxants? Or anything at all about making jaw clenching stop? I'm totally kidding. Although wouldn't it be ironic if eternal jaw clenching was Nyarlathotep's punishment? I mean, if I was getting eternal jaw clenching, you'd be on the black altar so fast - I'm totally kidding!

Sonia gets up and slowly heads for the door.

HOWIE: Sonia, wait. I know I let you down here, and I'm sorry. But I'm starting to have an idea.

SONIA: Oh really.

HOWIE: Yeah really. I want you to send out a press release. Tonight's gonna be my very last show. We're canceling the rest of the tour. I'm gonna retire from stand-up comedy forever. Make sure the whole world knows. I want to make sure Gus is in the audience tonight.

SONIA: What good will that do?

HOWIE: That which dreams will someday rise, Sonia. I just gotta set off the alarm clock.

Long pause.

SONIA: I don't get it.

HOWIE: I'm the Herald of the End Times! I'm gonna figure out a way to summon Cthulhu from beneath the ocean!

SONIA: What good will *that* do?

HOWIE: I don't know, I'm *improvising*. A little help would be nice.

Reluctantly, she returns to sit next to him, and starts flipping through the book.

SONIA: How do you imagine we would survive after you summon Cthulhu from beneath the ocean?

HOWIE: We could have our brains removed and sent to the outer edge of the galaxy in shiny metal brain-cylinders.

SONIA: No.

HOWIE: Sonia, we're *improvising* - don't say no, say "yes and".

SONIA: Summoning Cthulhu to destroy the Earth is not the solution!

HOWIE: *Your* solution didn't *work!* And you came up here to *stop* me, didn't you - but I'm *glad* I killed Janine, because now I know for sure that I would rather Cthulhu consumed the entire population of the planet - than have to sacrifice *you* with my own hands.

SONIA: That's sweet, but... actually, no, that's not sweet, at all.

HOWIE: It's a little sweet-

SONIA: No, it's horrible. Just let me think.

HOWIE: I wonder sometimes if we're both crazy, like the Mad Arab and everyone else who ever spent too much time with the Necronomicon.

SONIA: I bet that's why Gus gave it to you in the first place. He knew the only way you'd agree to sacrifice the one you love the most is after you'd been driven insane and lost your moral compass.

HOWIE: Or it was just random and stupid, because he's the son of a blind idiot god.

SONIA: Also a possibility.

HOWIE: Why don't you... run as far away from me as possible? I can't kill you on the black altar if I have no idea where in the world you're hiding.

SONIA: No way. You still owe me five thousand dollars. *She rises.* I think you were onto something though. I'll send out the press release about canceling the tour.

HOWIE: Oh, I know that look. You've got a plan.

SONIA: We've got until tonight to find a loophole. We're gonna scour every single page in this book one last time. Either we find a loophole in the next twelve hours, or we give Shub-Niggurath what she wants. This ends tonight... one way or another. *Pause.* Now let's get some breakfast.

HOWIE: We'll have to go out - I don't think they'll send up more room service.

Blackout.

SCENE TEN

NARRATOR: And so, word spread across the land of Howie "The Herald" Lovecraft's final performance. His fans were stunned, and the concert hall was filled beyond capacity with teary-eyed cultists, preparing to say goodbye to their idol. Finally, Howie appeared on stage to the roar of the crowd. He calmed them with a soothing gesture, and began to speak.

Lights up on Howie, standing in front of a mic on a mic stand in a spotlight. A stool sits nearby with a glass of water on it.

HOWIE: Man, all day today, people have been coming up to me, like, "Howie! Howie, why you quitting comedy at the top of your game?" People really, genuinely wanted to know, and I didn't really, uh - I didn't have a good - like, I wanted to have the *perfect* answer, you know? "Howie Lovecraft, I'm dying to know, why are you quitting comedy?" And the *perfect* answer would have been, "Well, that's easy - I'm retiring to focus on fucking my way through a twenty-mile tall mountain of sacrificial virgins! I'll be descending onto these virgins by skydiving from a balloon over 137,000 feet above the Earth! Setting the record for highest skydive from the stratosphere onto a mountain of virgins. Oh, but the challenge doesn't stop there, because the virgins on top are already freezing to death, and the ones underneath will be smothered by the weight of the corpses above them, so I've got to work fast if I'm going to fuck a single live virgin in that entire mountain! I've just no time left for comedy I'm afraid."

But obviously I do have a reason for quitting stand-up comedy. See, I used to be a typical struggling comedian. I'd play in these dinky little clubs and I'd come out, and go, "So! Aren't men *different* from women?" You know, that kind of thing, right? But then I got my big break. I was tending bar in Innsmouth, Massachusetts... Innsmouth High School of course known for its undefeated swim team... and I was exposed to a first edition volume of the infamous Kitab al-Azif, also known as the Necronomicon. Now how many of you have actually seen a first edition? Well, you're gonna *see one here tonight!* Sonia, please bring out the Necronomicon!

Sonia enters, displaying the Necronomicon to the audience, still wearing rubber gloves on her hands. She comes to a halt next to Howie.

HOWIE: What did I learn from this book, Sonia?

SONIA: Forbidden knowledge of a secret, alien comedy.

HOWIE: And who was my mentor in forbidden alien comedy? Ladies and gentlemen - Obed Marsh! I know he's out there somewhere. Can we get a spotlight on Obed Marsh?

A light comes up at the back of the house, top of the center aisle, framing Gus, standing defiant and resplendent in the garb of an Egyptian Pharaoh.

GUS: You may refer to me by my true name, Mr. Lovecraft - for I am Nyarlathotep! The Crawling Chaos! God of a Thousand Forms!

A loud thunder clap is heard.

GUS: I grow tired of your prattling! Yes, you were granted forbidden knowledge of a secret, alien comedy! Invented by the Great Race of Yith, and buried deep within the Yithians' massive library - on the planet Yith! Until the cunning wizard, Abdul Alhazred, was granted a boon by the All-Mother, Shub-Niggurath! She swapped his mind and body for a day with a Yithian, and he wandered freely as a Yithian in the Yithian library of Yith! There, he discovered the secret Yithian style of comedy, and upon his return to his own body, he hastily transcribed all he could remember - which was tough, because Yithians usually prefer a very physical style of comedy, it's hard to execute a Yithian lazzi without four claws and a cone-shaped body. And so, thanks to the will of Shub-Niggurath, you have tasted the sweet syrupy nectar of stand-up comedy success! Now she is due her blood sacrifice on the black altar as the footnotes clearly specify!

Our attention pivots back to the stage, where Howie and Sonia have removed the glass of water from the stool and dressed it with a black sheet. Howie holds the ceremonial dagger Sonia gave him earlier.

HOWIE: I've got a question, before you get your sacrifice. Why'd you choose me in the first place?

GUS: I chose you completely at random, Mr. Lovecraft. I could as easily have chosen a vagrant across the street. For absolutely no reason whatsoever, sheer whimsy led me into your bar, and simple boredom compelled me to open the Necronomicon for you. It made no difference to me what condition your mind would be in after the fact. I am sure you must realize by now that this is exactly how our universe itself operates - devoid of meaning, empty of conscience, unable to laugh at the best of its own jokes.

HOWIE: And that, my friends, is why I'm quitting stand-up comedy. 'Cuz it don't mean shit.

GUS: Come now, some of us do still appreciate the grand dramatic gesture now and again. I eagerly await your sacrifice of the lovely Sonia Greene!

SONIA: Sorry to break your heart, but I read those footnotes a zillion times. They clearly stipulate that Howie needs to spill the blood of the one he loves the most. Which, allow me to inform you based on personal experience, is not actually me at all. It's Howie.

Howie swiftly draws the dagger's blade across his wrist, which begins to spray blood. Howie carefully aims the blood at the black altar, soaking it. I don't care how fake or realistic this looks, as long as it goes on for a stupid long time.

HOWIE: Is it ever gonna stop?

SONIA: I don't know.

HOWIE: Is Ecstasy a blood thinner?

SONIA: I don't know.

Finally, the blood spray dwindles to a trickle and Howie collapses to his knees.

HOWIE: Sonia.

And then, he collapses entirely in a heap on the floor, dead at last. Sonia turns to face Gus, who begins clapping.

GUS: A twist ending - how original! Mr. Lovecraft should have tried his hand at being a writer.

SONIA: Your contract with Howie is satisfied.

GUS: I suppose so.

SONIA: I'm not asking you - I'm telling you. Shub-Niggurath has been appeased.

GUS: Cheeky.

SONIA: *Say it! Tell me she's been appeased!*

GUS: Yes, yes, congratulations, pathetic human! The All-Mother is appeased! Now I want that first edition back-

Sonia flips open the book and swiftly reads an incantation:

SONIA: *"Allee ekmar Azathoth - allee bakmar HALLOTHET!"*

A sudden electric zap sound fills the air, and the light around Gus flickers.

GUS: What have you done, wretched woman?

SONIA: Hand of Azathoth spell. Traps you in your pathetic human form for a night and a day.

She hurriedly flips to another page and reads another incantation.

SONIA: *"Hellenius Mi-Go ek barsooth - Mi-Go dak venius ek YUGGOTH!"*

The sound of flapping bat wings fills the air around Gus, who shrieks and swats at invisible talons.

GUS: What's happening to me? Make it stop, I beg you!

SONIA: I summoned a Mi-Go to remove your pathetic human brain and transport it to the outer edge of the galaxy. I did not request the shiny metal brain-cylinder option.

GUS: You can't kill the Crawling Chaos! I'll be back for you someday, Sonia Greene, I swear! Ow - quit it! Ow - quit it! Ow - quit it!

Lights out on Gus as he flees. Sonia turns to face Howie's body.

SONIA: And for my last trick...

She kneels next to Howie, flips to a new page in the book, and murmurs a chant too quietly for us to understand. Then she takes the dagger, pricks the point of it to her thumb, and presses her thumb to Howie's forehead. As she sits back and waits, a low rumbling briefly fills the air, then subsides. Suddenly, after a huge gasp of air, Howie lurches to his hands and knees. He coughs horribly, then stops.

SONIA: Howie?

Slowly Howie turns to face Sonia, a confused look on his face.

SONIA: Howie, it's me. It's Sonia. How do you feel?

HOWIE *after a long pause*: I could use some muscle relaxants.

They embrace as lights fade.

EPILOGUE

NARRATOR: After their ordeal, Howie Lovecraft and Sonia Greene settled down in Arkham, Massachusetts. Sonia became a Professor of Applied Arcana, in the Department of Occult Studies at Miskatonic University, preparing for the inevitable return of Nyarlathotep - or the rise of something much worse. Howie bought a small bar near campus and hosted weekly open mic nights for budding young comedians; true to his word, he never set foot on stage again, and the locals soon learned never to ask about his days on tour as the Herald. But after many years passed, and time seemed to heal most wounds, Sonia did work up the courage to ask Howie a question of her own.

Lights up on Howie on Sonia, sitting together.

SONIA: Howie - what was it like when you were dead?

HOWIE: Really? You wanna go there?

SONIA: I do, I wanna know.

HOWIE: I don't wanna talk about it.

SONIA: Come on. You were dead for like two or three minutes. Do you remember any of it?

HOWIE: Why are you so curious all of a sudden?

SONIA: I've been curious this whole time.

HOWIE: Why didn't you ask me sooner?

SONIA: Because I'm getting older. It's making me a lot more curious.

HOWIE *takes a deep breath*: I don't remember being dead. The first thing I remember, literally the first thing, is gasping for air in this unfamiliar body, and I'm disoriented, and covered in blood, and confused. And I look over, and I see you, and at this point - I don't recognize you, not yet. And you say, "Howie?" And that name sounds familiar for some reason, and suddenly I'm hammered with all these memories, and I start to panic, because - they're not *my* memories, but they belong to this *body*, and I realize this body *is* Howie, and *I'm* Howie now, and I'm starting to freak out. But then you say, "It's me - it's Sonia," and I'm just - overwhelmed, I'm flooded with this body's memories of you, and that - was the exact moment I actually fell in love with you. And I stopped panicking, and I stopped fighting, and I just started claiming those memories and making 'em all mine.

SONIA: But that would mean...

HOWIE: Howie - *original recipe* Howie - is long gone. You reanimated his corpse with that necromantic spell, but his soul had left the building... and his empty body became a beacon for the first formless entity in the void that came along, looking for an escape from eternal loneliness, looking for a home in your physical reality... and that incredibly lucky entity must have been me. Mind you, I don't remember any of that now. I

suspect living alone for eons in the void is the kind of thing any intelligent being would try hard to forget at the first opportunity. I'm very happy with the way things turned out.

Very long pause.

SONIA: Are you fucking with me?

HOWIE: I am totally fucking with you.

SONIA: Come on.

HOWIE: I don't wanna talk about it.

SONIA: Come on!

Fade to black.