

CHAPTER 1

Fired!

MOST PEOPLE DON'T have the luxury of reliving their own suicide, but anytime I want, I can power up my VCR and witness myself standing in front of 500 gamblers and a few co-workers, all of whom have gathered to laugh at me as I commit career *hara-kiri*.

Look at that stooped, thin man stepping up to the microphone. He stands within the crowded confines of a hotel ballroom. Waiters clear away dessert plates from a grid of banquet tables, and the guests face forward, skeptically waiting to be amused. A sign affixed to the front of the podium reads, "LARRY FLYNT'S X-RATED ROAST." *Hustler* magazine publisher Larry Flynt sits to the right on the rostrum, silksuited and egg-shaped, inert but imposing in a gleaming gold wheelchair. Crippled by a would-be killer with a deer rifle 25 years earlier, America's cuddliest pariah looks like Humpty Dumpty put back together again, but older, fatter and dyspeptic. Flynt's glazed emerald eyes stare the camera down. His lips hold a pout of gassy forbearance. The thin man standing to Flynt's left peers out through thick, black-framed glasses, scanning the audience of half a thousand as though it were packed with assassins. The condemned man coughs nervously, not quite prepared to speak. That man was me.

I leaned sideways and squatted level with the jowly, dispassionate face of my boss.

"Hey, Larry," I said, "did you lose a bet? Why are you submitting to this roast?"

He ignored my questions, as usual. His smile might have been enigmatic, or maybe it was just a sneer. "I hope you like your job," he drawled.

Ambivalence plagued me on that point, but now was not the time to discuss it. “You know what I do for a living. I write ‘Asshole of the Month.’ Why pick me for a roaster?”

“You get paid to fuck with people, and I pay you to fuck with people, but I don’t pay you to fuck with me.”

His mouth clammed shut, his way of saying that no further discussion would be brooked. I stood up half-straight and faced the cameras, the crowd and my future.

“My name is Allan MacDonell, and I have come here tonight to help honor a man who is bigger than life. Wait a minute; I fucked up already. To honor a man whose head is bigger than life.”

Polite laughter. The audience was thick with milling gamblers and their mercenary girlfriends, still grumbling about the price of drinks at the no-host bar. Sitting at the head of this surly mob, oblivious to the complaints about his cheapness, Flynt puffed up like a venomous, red-faced toad. When I was a kid, before we’d ever met, Larry Flynt had been one of my favorite famous Americans. Discounting the bit about being stuck forever in a wheelchair, it was fun to romanticize Larry’s reputation as an iconoclast and a rebel, to envy his profligate wealth and his excesses with the ladies. Then I’d gone to work for the real guy, and now this: trapped in a Holiday Inn side room packed full of extras from *Married to the Mob*.

Tomorrow morning, play would commence on a million-dollar grand slam of poker, sponsored by the Hustler Casino, a hillbilly-fabulous card club owned by Flynt and located in a crummy Los Angeles suburb. The seven-figure jackpot had drawn hundreds of high-stakes cardsharps from all over the country. As a treat to the contestants, the casino’s management was hosting a pre-tournament dinner. This roast of Larry Flynt followed dessert. Former President Bill Clinton’s half-brother Roger and former professional comedian Gabe Kaplan had been recruited to poke fun at the wheelchair-bound sleaze merchant. A decent roast requires more than one past-prime yukster and a sibling liability, but Larry Flynt had been reluctant to shell out for extras. He padded the lineup with unpaid employees, including me. Who am I? Up until that night, I was Larry’s trusted editorial director.

I had a dilemma. Larry Flynt is a funny guy. He can take a joke, up to a point. He is also profoundly sensitive and once offended tends to stay that way. He resents anyone overstepping their familiarity with him, but he also punishes timidity. If I cobbled together a string of anecdotes that went soft on him, he would label me a chickenshit, and that evaluation would go into the continually revised mental file he keeps on everyone who works for him.

A few old-timers were lurking around the office, deep-fried charity cases who'd been leeching off Larry since the 1970s when he ran *Hustler* out of a seedy storefront in Columbus, Ohio, and could still walk. The bolder of these weasels were after my top-dog job, and had been ever since I'd clawed my way to it years earlier. Undermining sneaks were constantly sending Larry secret memos pointing out my imagined failings, memos that Larry would forward to me. Any passages that he deemed pertinent were double-underlined. Our sales had been skidding. The entire "men's sophisticate" niche of the magazine market was spinning into the toilet. I could not afford to be notched down in Larry's timidity category.

On the other hand, if I pressed too close to home with well-aimed jokes that twisted the dessert fork in any of Larry's delicate areas, he might decide he hated me. I'd seen him suddenly hate better, smarter men than me, men more indispensable to the well-being of his empire, and he'd cast them out as if they had given him the clap. My commentary would have to talk a fine line, and there was no way of knowing where that line might be drawn. It's not as if I could ask Flynt for ground rules. The man has a sadistic streak. Nothing would make Larry Flynt happier than to watch his editorial director—a snot-nosed middle-aged would-be big shot who thought he was smarter than everyone else—stutter and falter and slowly die in front of an auditorium packed with poker-faced friends.

I have a tendency to rush when I speak, slurring words in a rapid-fire, marble-mouth mumble. I cautioned myself to read my prepared script slowly, one word for every three beats of my heart.

"A major Hollywood movie and countless TV shows have tried to get at the real Larry Flynt, the man behind the image. The movie and TV shows are fine, as far as they go, but if you really

want to take a man's measure, you should talk to someone who works for him."

Even now, many months afterward, I have trouble watching the videotape. On the screen, I see a lone, thin man sag slightly within a light trained upon the lectern. The glare off his wet forehead flashes in the camera lens. He looks toward his right. Larry Flynt sits within arm's reach, glowering with impatience.

"I've been on Larry Flynt's payroll for 20 years. And I have the four-figure net worth to prove it."

Light snickering gave me confidence that my enunciation was passable. I shot the cuffs on my Prada suit.

"So I might not qualify for a loan to buy a condo in La Puente, but I am qualified to give a fair and unbiased account of Larry Flynt."

A miracle happened. Laughter came, real laughter, loud and sustained. I was able to pause and gather my wits, waiting for the outburst to subside. My wife, Theresa, covered her mouth and quietly laughed, sitting one table away from where Liz Flynt, Larry's wife, held court. Liz Flynt waved to me. I looked away so as not to be blinded by the flash of diamonds on her fingers and wrist.

"Larry called me into his office this afternoon. Between the door of his office and his desk is about 70 yards of green carpet, the exact color of money. As I walked across this no man's land, Larry glared out at me with pure malevolence, which is how he shows affection to an employee. His evil face made me think of the man in the moon squatting on the toilet, straining to force out a dry turd."

This punch line received less enthusiasm than I had hoped for. The top of Larry's head moved at the periphery of my vision. He stifled a yawn.

"I was afraid that he'd been sitting on one of his testicles all day. Either that, or Doug the bodyguard had misplaced Larry's pocket pussy."

Again, I was allowed to wait while the laughter died down. It didn't take long. My mind concentrated on the task at hand, shutting out all observational data regarding Liz Flynt and refusing to consider the potential reactions of Larry to my immediate right.

"Allan," Larry said, "you say whatever you want about me tonight. It's a free country."

For some reason, the crowd found that funny. Puzzled, but pleased, I went on.

“Then he had Doug take me up to the roof of the Flynt Building and show me the view from what he calls the Launching Pad.”

I had them. Poker might be their business, but they were suckers for my sly, mordant wit. I stuck with the material I had spent three weekends working on. My jokes shocked me. How could I be so vile, crass and humorless? I’d unconsciously tapped into a raging undercurrent of resentment toward my employer. He’d stiffed me on my annual raise—again—after saddling me with unpaid special projects, then he had the gall to shove me into this false position.

“I hope it is safe for me to say that Larry Flynt is a complex man, and working for him is full of contradictions. Larry Flynt runs the only company in the world where he makes you pay to park in his building, but he promises all employees a free defense attorney with every sexual harassment suit.”

That one sank with only slight ripples of amusement, which didn’t stop me from mining the vein.

“Most of you here, I’m told, know Larry from the gaming world. He claims he is a world-class poker player. Nobody who works for him can understand how that’s possible. We can’t imagine him giving anyone a credible raise.”

The casino crowd fell for the gaming reference, loud and hearty. This performing was like being an unwilling passenger on a runaway roller coaster: a sensible person might reason he should disembark before the first big dip, but knows there is no profit in jumping off.

“A few years ago, I was at Circuit City with my wife, and we were spending my Christmas bonus. The wife and I couldn’t decide if we should buy a toaster or put a Walkman on layaway. I saw a bank of television sets, and I wondered if I would ever be able to afford one. Suddenly, Larry’s man-in-the-moon face appeared on a whole row of TVs. He was on *Entertainment Tonight*, live from Las Vegas. He’d just lost a million dollars in one sitting at blackjack. My wife was shaken by this news. She said, ‘Allan, what if that man loses *Hustler* magazine in a poker game, and you’re forced to go work for some cheap bastard?’”

There is no accounting for what people think is funny. My wife had predicted this jab would fall flat, but hilarity tore through the crowd. I put a hand to my sliding glasses and pushed them back up my greasy nose. I looked up toward the ceiling as if for help. Bigger laugh. Larry Flynt glowers like an alpha toad who has ingested a lesser amphibian, one that is too wiry to swallow. The skinny toad is dead, but still kicking.

“Larry assured me he would never wager something so precious as his beloved *Hustler* magazine. He apologized that my retirement account was another matter altogether.

“And so when I look out at this crowd, I don’t see friends and associates of my boss. I see a roomful of fuckers who are hoping to win my 401K money.”

I earned an ovation. Had I stopped at this high point, everything that had come before might have been forgiven, but the ride was not over.

“There is a common belief that having Larry Flynt in charge of a porno magazine is like leaving a priest in charge of an orphanage.”

A couple of groans. I was confident that I would win them over.

“Part of my job at *Hustler* magazine is to review photo sets with Larry. We take our special magnifying lenses, and we inspect pictures of naked young women.”

I mimed this activity, preparing to impersonate the distinctive Flynt drawl.

“‘I love a hairy pussy’ is something I’ve heard Larry say far more often than ‘lunch is on me.’”

Serious gamblers, in my experience, can’t get enough jokes that demean a miserly multimillionaire. Against all odds, I was still ahead. I put a hand on Larry’s shoulder, and he turned to me. His green, yellow-rimmed eyes sized me up. His icy stare was the look he’d give across a poker table, calling a bluff.

“The secret truth about Larry Flynt is that he is the most pussy-whipped man I have ever met. He talks a big game, but his wife Liz only lets him wear the pants because it takes two grown men to lift Larry off his ass so she can strip those pants off of him.”

I began to understand the emotions of the dive-bombing kamikaze pilot. The end is near. It will be swift and spectacular.

“I’m just reporting the facts.

“Liz Flynt met Larry when she went to work for him as a private nurse. She weaned him off of painkillers, turned his health around and whipped him into shape. Then she persuaded him to marry her. I always wondered how she did that.

“I discovered Liz’s secret one night recently when my wife and I went out to dinner with the Flynts ... Dutch treat.”

I’d been losing my audience, but again the penny-pinching reference brought them to my side.

“Larry has a wandering eye. Every time any woman from any table in the restaurant stands up to go anywhere, Larry’s head pivots, and his eyes track her tits. I could see that this was pissing off Liz, and I tried to warn Larry, but he never listens to me. Finally, nurse Liz reaches into her purse and pulls out this giant enema bag, right there in Wendy’s.

“So that’s Liz’s secret. The corrective enema.”

I prepared to soften the sarcasm by bringing the joke around so that I too am a butt of it.

“The sad part about this story is that my wife made me stop on the way home and buy one of those bags.”

If you consult the tape and listen closely, you will hear that this stab at self-deprecation wins the affection of the crowd. They appreciate that I am not mean-spirited. I see the humor in myself as well as in those around me. Love inhabits that applause and laughter. Video does not lie. But no love inhabits the face of Larry Flynt. He recognizes my feeble stab at self-abnegation for the meaningless, manipulative gesture it is. As far as he is concerned, I am finished.

“So I could talk all night about Larry’s philanthropy and generosity. Because I’m a huge bullshitter.

“But it is time to discuss Larry’s professional achievements. When the history is written, what will be seen as Larry Flynt’s defining contribution to American culture?

“Will he be remembered for the battles for free speech and a free press?”

“Yes!” responded an enthusiastic butt-kisser in the audience, as if I’d been fishing for that answer.

“Or might Larry’s lasting fame be as the pornographer who cared enough to save President Clinton’s ass?”

Again, rumbles of affirmation formed, but I snuffed them.

“Perhaps our grandchildren will recall our guest of honor as the man who offered Jenna Bush \$10 million to pose nude in *Hustler* magazine. Plus a quart of Colt .45 if she spreads her butt cheeks.”

The crowd was thrown off. Had they really thought I was paying serious tribute? There seems to be no end to the limits of human miscommunication. My subtext, for instance, had been lost even on myself. The underlying message was coming clear: I was tendering one of the most passively aggressive resignations in history.

“My vote is that we remember Larry as the guy who invented the Scratch ‘n’ Sniff centerfold, an innovation that was created in his own image. The Scratch ‘n’ Sniff centerfold is the perfect representation of Larry’s legacy. When you scrape its surface, it’s sort of flaky, and it smells vaguely fishy.”

I was on a slide, falling flat. Now for the soft ending.

“Larry, thanks for all the excitement over the years. I’m grateful for all the opportunities you’ve given me. Even this one. I really do love you.”

The “love you” came out spontaneously. There’s no mention of love in the 24-point type of my roast script. I took my seat, after the feeblest attempt to shake Flynt’s hand, and the red in my face deepened as I endured an embarrassment of applause. Finally, Roger Clinton was called to the podium, and the attention shifted to his slow-pitched softballs. I estimated how many weeks would pass before I was *Hustler* history. That “really do love you” bit had sealed it.

The word *love* doesn’t occur naturally in my everyday conversation. The wife complains that she never hears it. To this day, I feel a twinge of shame for having made the public avowal to my old boss. Telling someone you love them in front of a crowd is seldom the right thing to do. Take for example the LFP Christmas party of 1998: Doug the bodyguard rolled gold-plated Larry to the center of the cleared dance floor, and the publisher addressed his guests and his minions through a handheld microphone. Bob Livingston, the freshly elected Speaker of the United States House of Representatives, had announced his resignation that very day, claiming that he had been “Flynted.”

Larry's voice quavered, and his hands trembled as he recounted LFP's victories of the past year. He cited the company's unprecedented profit margins. The moment was perfect for announcing year-end bonuses, something that had been missing from our annual festivities since Larry's emergence from a narcotic stupor several years earlier. We employees held our collective breath. Larry faltered; something had stuck in his throat. He girded himself, and then forced out the four words that had gagged him: "I love you all."

Saying "I love you" cost him almost as much as if he had offered to give us money. I had felt his pain and admired him for enduring it. Still, not one of us employees wouldn't have rather had a check. In the story of Larry and me, *love* is clearly an overstatement, best left unsaid.