

BEING HENRY

The Fonz...and Beyond



HENRY WINKLER

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The Fonz . . . and Beyond



HENRY WINKLER

written with James Kaplan



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*It is with enormous gratitude, love, and appreciation
that I dedicate this book to my wife, Stacey,
for loving me, supporting me, and standing by me
for our forty-seven years together.*

BEING HENRY

1.

It was the biggest audition of my life, and the sweat stains under my arms weren't just clearly visible, they were a cry for help.

I was in an office at Paramount Studios in Los Angeles. It was a sunny Tuesday morning in October 1973. About a dozen people were in the room, all of them seated except for me and one guy, the person I was supposed to read with. He, I would later learn, was a casting assistant named Pasquale. Seated on a couch were (I would later learn) the producers Garry Marshall, Tom Miller, and Ed Milkis, along with Garry's sister Ronny. Paramount's casting director Millie Gussie sat behind a large and impressive wooden desk. I believe several other important people were in the room, though I couldn't tell you for sure.

I was in an altered state.

I smiled. "Hi, how are you?" I said. Blank looks from the people behind the table.

"Okay, honesty is the best policy," I said. "So I'm just gonna tell you that the sweat under my arms is running like the Hudson River.

These sweat stains under my arms are in direct correlation to the fear that is running through my body.”

This drew faint smiles from the people who were there to assess me—but they had an expectant look about them. It was time for me to do what I was there to do. I had a couple of script pages in my hands (my palms were also good and sweaty): I had six lines to read. The show, titled *Happy Days*, was to revolve around a group of wholesome high school kids in 1950s Milwaukee. The character I was reading was the group’s one renegade. His name was Arthur Fonzarelli, aka the Fonz.

This Fonz was supposed to be a knockabout guy, a man of few words, rough around the edges. Confident. A guy who could make things happen with a snap of his fingers. Someone his fellow teenagers would listen to and obey unquestioningly. If this wasn’t the diametric opposite of who I was in the fall of 1973, it was pretty close. I was twenty-seven years old, soon to turn twenty-eight, a short Jew from New York City with a unibrow and hair down to my shoulders, confident about next to nothing in my life.

The one exception was when I was acting.

When I was on a stage, playing someone else, I was transported to another world, one where pretending made you successful. What I was miserable at was being myself.

I thought I had a vague idea how to play this Fonzarelli. I rustled the papers and cleared my throat. And somehow, at that moment, terrified as I was, I was able to make a firm decision. I decided that I was going to make this guy who was standing up and reading with me—Pasquale, though I didn’t know his name yet—sit down. The force of my character’s personality would give him no choice.

How was I going to accomplish this? I had no clue.

He read his first line. Something about how he’d been talking to the girls, trying to persuade the girls to come to this make-out party.

Then I opened my mouth, and something very odd happened. What came out was a voice that was not mine. One I’d never heard or

used before, deeper and lower in my chest than my regular speaking voice. Assured. Authoritative. Rough around the edges. I pointed at Pasquale. “Ayyy,” I said.

I had his full attention.

“Let *me* do it from now on,” I ordered him, in that voice. “*You* don’t talk to the girls. You have *me* talk to the girls.”

He was backing up involuntarily.

“Got it?” I said. In that voice.

Now Pasquale was slowly lowering himself into a chair. I’m not sure he even realized he was. Now he was sitting down. Instead of reading his line, he just nodded. Silently.

Then I was done. That was it. I beamed at the people behind the table, tossed my script in the air, and sauntered out of the room, like the badass I was pretending to be.

• • •

Who was I really? That’s always been the big question—and it’s taken me fifty years to realize that there really is a me inside me. If you’d asked me back then, I would’ve told you all I knew at the time: Henry Franklin Winkler, formerly of 210 West 78th Street, Apartment 10A, New York, NY. The son of Harry and Ilse, younger brother of Bea. I had a BA in drama with a minor in psychology from Emerson College in Boston, one of the two schools of the twenty-eight I applied to that had accepted me. I’d somehow managed to scrape through four years of Emerson despite the fact that I couldn’t really read. I mean that literally. Reading was not then, is not now, and never has been my forte. At Emerson I once wrote a report on a book by the French sociologist Émile Durkheim by looking at the chapter headings in the table of contents and channeling a sense of what he was talking about: I got a B-minus on the paper.

I was a terrible student as far back as I can remember; this was a real problem for my parents. From my earliest days, the only thing I wanted to do was act: now and then my mother and father pretended

to indulge me. A charming childhood photograph shows a seven-year-old Henry on the telephone: the joke I made later on was that I was calling my agent. In my senior year at Emerson I applied to the Yale School of Drama, the *crème de la crème* of drama schools, despite thinking, *Oh my God. How could you possibly do this? It's Yale, you've been told you're stupid; it's Yale—it's not only the crème de la crème of drama schools, but of students from all over the world—how dare you think you can?* But finally I said, “I’m just going to—I’m just gonna try.” It was the schizophrenia of: *Are you crazy? How dare you?* But finally—*Shut up and just try it.*

When I do speaking engagements, I say, “You can’t catch a fish unless your fly is in the water.”

At my Yale audition, when it came to performing the Shakespearean monologue I’d been told to memorize, I suddenly realized it had completely fallen out of my head. So instead I improvised something on the spot, something I thought sounded Shakespeare-ish, and, miracle of miracles, I got in. Into the Yale School of Drama! I mostly played fourteen-year-olds in student productions. (I was short and baby-faced.) But I got the chance to act in plays by Euripides, T. S. Eliot, and Eugene O’Neill. I was in the Greek chorus of *The Bacchae*. By my third year, I’d grown enough to play Albert Einstein in Friedrich Dürrenmatt’s *The Physicists*, speaking in my parents’ German accent and wearing a curly wig and my father’s 1930s shoes, shoes that were so well made they were indestructible. . . .

. . .

My father had once dreamed of being a diplomat. Short, authoritative, always elegantly dressed, Harry Winkler spoke eleven languages and could be charming in all of them. He was good with people; I think I inherited that from him. He also demanded that you stand up when he entered the room. (I don’t make that demand. Thought about asking my daughter’s boyfriends to do it; didn’t.) My mother was small, round, and often sad. I would gradually discover what she

was sad about. She was also often angry. She was triggered by dust. And I don't mean dust on the floor. If dust floated by, she was off on a rant.

Harry and Ilse Winkler were refugees from Berlin. They managed to get out in 1939, just under the wire, with a subterfuge: my father, an executive in a company that imported and exported lumber, told the authorities that he had to go to the USA for six weeks, on business. He had a letter from two companies in New York wanting to buy the trees owned by the company he worked for, Seidelman. He told the same story to my mother, knowing she would never agree to leave Germany for good if her family couldn't come with her. Her parents and brother stayed behind, as did my father's brother and business partner, Helmut, who'd been just about to go with Harry and Ilse but changed his mind at the last minute. The Nazis murdered him, just as they murdered my mother's and father's whole families and millions of other Jews. I mourned that I never had relatives: my only relatives were faux—members of the German refugee community in New York.

There were a lot of lies in my family; this big one that my father told my mother to get her to the United States was the most benign. Benign as it was, though, my mother never got over it.

Harry, a clever man, had brought the seed money for rebuilding his lumber business in the US by smuggling his mother's jewelry out of Germany. He'd bought a box of chocolates in Berlin, melted the chocolate down, then poured it over the jewelry and put the candy-coated jewels back into the box. When the Nazis stopped him and asked if he was taking anything of value out of Germany, he said, "No, you can open every bag; we've got nothing." After Harry and Ilse passed through Ellis Island, my father pawned the jewelry. It wasn't an easy decision to make, but he was later able to buy all of it back.

Many of the German Jews who stayed behind as World War II began remained in Europe because they felt they were *Germans* above all; their Jewishness came second. The Nazis begged to differ.

But my parents, strangers in this strange land of America, in this new city of New York, really were German above all. Like many German Jews, they looked down on . . . well, nearly everyone, but especially all those Eastern European Jews who'd been flocking to America since the 1880s. German Jews, and especially the ones from Berlin, the culture capital of the country, were just better: more cultured, more refined. Yiddish was not spoken in my household—not if Harry and Ilse could help it, anyway. German was spoken, though—it was my parents' life mission to teach me the language. I eventually learned four sentences in German, the only four German sentences I can speak today.

Harry's and Ilse's German was very expressive. Take the colorful nickname they gave me: *dummer Hund*.

It meant *dumb dog*.

I didn't find out I was severely dyslexic until I was thirty-four. For all the years before that, I was the kid who couldn't read, couldn't spell, couldn't even begin to do algebra or geometry or even basic arithmetic. If I bought a slice of pizza with paper money, I had no idea how much change I was supposed to get—nor could I add up the coins in my hand. When we read *A Tale of Two Cities* or *Ivanhoe* in tenth or eleventh grade, the only thing I read was the cover. I would sprinkle water on the book and let it dry, so the crinkled pages would make it look as if I'd been poring over that book—beating it into submission! I never read one classic—the closest I got were the *Classics Illustrated* comic books. (And even those I couldn't read—but at least I understood the pictures.) I consistently brought home report cards filled with Ds and Fs—first from PS 87, just down the block on West 78th, then, after I was twelve, from the private McBurney School. What did my parents make of this? They were embarrassed by it; *they* were diminished by it. Clearly I was just lazy, defiant, stupid—a dumb dog. So the lesson for my life was, when we are born into this world, we are separate beings from our parents, not extensions of who they want us to be. Stacey and I have a wonderful friend who is a pediatric neurosurgeon. He told us

that at the beginning of his medical career he was convinced that the influence on a child was 80 percent nurture, 20 percent nature. Now, years and hundreds of patients later, he's convinced that it's 80 percent nature, 20 percent nurture.

I used humor to cover everything I couldn't do—which was most things. One day, in my Hebrew class at Habonim, the German Jewish congregation my family belonged to, the rabbi who taught us was handing out report cards when I made a silly joke. I don't remember exactly what I said, but the other kids thought it was hilarious. The rabbi gave a thin smile. "Let me have that report card back," he told me.

"No, I just got it," I said.

"Let me have it back," the rabbi said, and snatched it from my fingers. And ripped it to shreds.

This was business as usual for me: wandering attention, failing grades, making jokes; humiliation. And business as usual for my parents, who felt humiliated by every bad report card I brought home, and therefore felt the need (I guess) to humiliate me back. They were somehow convinced that the more they punished me, the better my grades would be.

[GERMAN ACCENT] "You are not trying hard enough. You are not concentrating. Stay in your room. You cannot go out on the weekend. You cannot go to the temple dance. No TV.

"Dummer Hund."

. . .

One of my father's favorite expressions was *le ton fait la musique*—the tone makes the music. Meaning, it's not so much the words that you say as the way you say them. Which, since he and my mother used to scream at me all the time, tells you a lot about my mother and father.

. . .

Apartment 10A was a big apartment, with a wraparound terrace that had views of the Hudson River. The Winklers lived in fine style.

We even had a country house, in Mahopac, New York, on a lake in southern Putnam County. From the beginning, my father's new business had some very good years. He also had some bad years—but he didn't talk about those. He preferred concentrating on his successes, and believing more of them would come.

I wouldn't realize for a long time that between the good years and the bad years, Harry was barely breaking even: we were constantly living beyond our means.

The apartment was big, but my room was small. And I mean *small*. Gray-green plaster walls. A bed that folded up against the wall when you weren't using it, a tiny sink like something you'd see in a train compartment, and a little closet that was probably meant for brooms—it had no depth. You opened the door and the wall was right there. I hung my clothes on a pipe. I didn't have space for a lot of ensembles.

My room was probably meant to be the housekeeper's room if a family had a live-in housekeeper; instead, we had a cleaning lady, Aury, who came in five times a week—fancy shmancy—so the housekeeper's room was all mine. After Aury came Rosalie, a big, wonderful woman. She was my solace. She taught me to dance at a very young age, in the kitchen. A swinging door led from the kitchen to the dining room, where my father sat at the head of the table and you did *not* sit in his chair. On the dining room wall hung a painting of some Flemish creep, whose eyes would move wherever you went in the room, always looking at you.

[GERMAN ACCENT] "Everysing was *severe*."

My sister, who was four years older, had a real bedroom, with a real, non-folding bed, and drapes on the windows. Maybe it was because she was older; maybe it was because she was a girl; maybe my parents liked her better. I don't know. Now and then she took notice of me; usually she didn't. She used to have her friends over and they would listen to records and whisper together. I was the annoying little brother. Once she asked me to kiss her on the lips: she wanted to practice. Oh, that was horrible. I could just barely manage a peck.

My room was tiny, but it was my refuge. For my fourteenth birthday I got a tan faux-leather Westinghouse record player with two speakers in front that you could lift off their hinges and pull out as far as the wires went. (Once I had a dance party in the living room; Suzy Rosenbaum was my date. And we listened to Johnny Mathis. Otherwise, the record player lived on top of the shelf above the bed that folded into the wall.) And when my parents were yelling and screaming in German about something and I had no idea why they were angry with me—which was often—I would go in my room, close the door, and listen to arias from opera. Yes, opera. My mother and father, if you can believe it, used to take me to the Metropolitan Opera when I was young. Ten years old, and I had to rent a tuxedo when we went on Monday nights. So when they were screaming at me, I would close the door and listen to arias. Tebaldi. Corelli. It didn't even have to be opera, as long as it was dramatic: *Finlandia*, by Sibelius. I would wave my arms, pretending to conduct. And sooner or later I would stop feeling bad.

Sitting in any class at McBurney School, I would start laughing to myself, because I would fantasize that my parents would move while I was at school, and leave no forwarding address. And I would figure out how to take care of myself.

I felt, when my parents were shrieking at me in German, or in English with their German accents, as though my brain were turning from pink to gray. As if the blood were draining out of it. And when I listened to music, it was like I was getting into an elevator in my brain and going down, down, level by level, like in a department store. And if the music really carried me away, I would reach the lowest level and my brain would turn from gray back to pink. The blood would start to flow, and I could breathe again. At those moments, I made a pact with myself that if I was ever a parent on this earth, I would be a completely different one.

. . .

I'm twelve years old, it's a Saturday night, and I'm grounded for the umpteenth time because of my latest report card. My parents are

going out to play canasta with their friends. I'm supposed to stay home and do my homework: watching TV is strictly verboten.

I'm not supposed to watch TV, but they do leave me with a Swanson TV dinner. This is a very good thing: Salisbury steak or the turkey with the stuffing and the little apple cobbler with the tinfoil you peel back so it would crisp up in the oven. I put the frozen tray in the oven, and a half hour later I have a delicious dinner—in front of the TV, just the way Swanson meant it to be.

Our TV set is an Olympic television/radio/record player. Big console at the end of the living room. And Saturday night has three important Westerns on Channel 2—*Wanted: Dead or Alive* at 8:30; *Have Gun, Will Travel* at 9:30; and *Gunsmoke* at 10.

My parents get home at 10:15. (So I never get to finish watching *Gunsmoke*.)

The second I hear the key in the lock, I move like lightning. They find me sitting at the kitchen table, conscientiously pretending to do my homework. The first thing my father does, even before taking off his coat, is put his hand on top of the TV set, to take its temperature. Still warm.

Grounded again.

. . .

The M104 bus went up and down Broadway on the Upper West Side; that was the bus I took every weekday morning from 78th Street down to the McBurney School for Boys at 63rd. Every weekday morning I would be on the bus going to McBurney in my gray slacks, blue blazer, and necktie, and if there was an empty seat next to me and someone was about to sit down, I would stop them and say, "Oh, wait a minute, wait a minute"—and then I would have a good discussion with my imaginary horse, George. "Please, George. No, no, no, no. Come on, be a gentleman. Get off . . . thatta boy. Step down. There you go. And yes, ma'am, it's all yours."

Because I was on the bus at pretty much the same time every day, it

was usually the same driver—Sam. Once when I was late for my mid-term exams at McBurney, I got on and made an announcement to the entire city bus. I said, “Ladies and gentlemen, ladies and gentlemen. I am the future. And I am late for my midterms. I can’t fail. Does anybody have to get off between now and 63rd Street? Can we speed down and get me to my exams on time? Can I see a show of hands?” We took a vote and everybody cheered. Sam complied. And I got there. Now, I flunked my midterms anyway, because I was in the bottom 3 percent in the country academically, but at least I flunked them on time.

I can’t remember not feeling an intense need to perform. I recall putting on my sister’s muumuu bathrobe, applying some makeup, and popping out into my parents’ parties with little dramatic presentations. I’d announce: “This is written by Henry Winkler, produced by Henry Winkler, and directed by Henry Winkler.” Then: “And I’m thanking you as Henry Winkler.” They all laughed, then they went back to their drinks and conversation.

Was my need to perform a desperate cry for attention? Did it stem, way back, from never really feeling seen or heard by my parents? Did I not feel seen or heard because I was constantly disappointing them?

Something like that.

I wasn’t without friends. Lee Seides lived in my building, on the fourth floor, with his beautiful single mother. I used to take the elevator down and hang out with Lee. We tried making a rope pulley down the airshaft between his apartment and mine so we could send messages back and forth in a milk carton. Gerald Love—I would go over to his place after school; we’d eat cheese and crackers and listen to records: my favorite was Sil Austin, master of the melancholy saxophone. I liked songs that were sad and yearning—mournful, even: they completely matched the way I usually felt inside.

At school, where I was failing at everything, I was always running after the cool kids, trying to get into cliques, always just out of reach of making it. Harvey Joel Meyer; Bill Murphy—cool kids. I would go up to them at the beginning of the school year and say, “I’ve changed,

over the summer. I'm better! I'm so much better!" Thinking about it now, they must have looked at me like I was an alien. *What the hell is he saying? Better than what?*

I was kicked off the swim team when I ate breakfast before practice one morning and vomited in the pool. I played left wing on the soccer team until it was discovered that I completely lacked foot-eye coordination. Sports were not going to make me popular.

Is this making you sad? Me too!

My miserable academic record at McBurney mostly disqualified me from participating in school plays, but I squeaked through twice: once in an eighth-grade production of *Billy Budd* (I played Billy), and then in my junior year, when I starred in the Gershwin musical *Of Thee I Sing*—which was a little ironic, because I couldn't sing. I sort of talked my way through my musical numbers. Like Rex Harrison, only not as good.

The drama teacher's name was Donald Rock. Mr. Rock was very flamboyant, so he was very wonderful. He was the one teacher at McBurney who encouraged me. "Winkler," he used to say, "if you ever do get out of here, you're going to be great." He was *my* rock, and I loved him deeply.

But I barely did get out of there: I failed geometry four times. My first geometry teacher at McBurney was Mr. Sicilian. Michael Sicilian. He was a former college wrestler with a crew cut and no neck—you didn't know where the head ended and the shoulders started. A tough-looking guy, but a kind man: Mr. Sicilian honestly wanted me to do well. He had a college ring with a red stone in it—and I got a permanent indentation in my head from all the times he would rap me with it. "Winkler! It's the Pythagorean theorem, Winkler!" He was warm about it—but it didn't make geometry one iota more comprehensible. Summer school was an annual ritual, from seventh grade to twelfth. Riverdale's summer school in the Adirondacks; Rhodes Prep School on West 54th Street.

Rhodes was when I lost my virginity. Kind of.

This is my senior year: if I don't pass geometry, I can't go to college. And I meet this girl at summer school at Rhodes. I unfortunately do not remember her name. But she invites herself over to my apartment.

We take the bus uptown. I'm looking at all the other people on the bus, thinking, *They have no idea what's about to happen to me.* I have no idea what is about to happen to me. We get off at 78th, walk over to my building, ride the elevator to the tenth floor. My parents are not home. My sister has long since gone away to college and gotten married: I've moved out of my tiny bedroom into hers. I now have floor space, the non-folding bed, the drapes on the windows.

My parents are not home. I am vibrating. And I don't know how to get undressed in front of her. So I go behind the drapes. And now I'm undressing—not so easy, behind the drapes! Meanwhile, she is very comfortable. Undressed, in the bed, smiling. Somehow I realize this is not her first time.

I have a condom.

Like every hopeful teenage boy in America, I have bought a condom and put it in my wallet, just in case. It's been sitting there for years, waiting patiently. And now Just in Case has actually arrived. And somehow, over the months and years since I bought the condom, the lubricant has leaked out, and the little envelope it's in is stuck in the compartment in my wallet where I kept it.

I finally manage to extricate the condom, and I take it out and put it on. And I am so excited that I'm still a virgin when it's over, because I have never actually entered her body.

Did not know what my responsibility was. Did not know I could make her feel good. I didn't really understand any of it. I was locked inside myself, a victim of emotional dyslexia.

I passed geometry with a D-minus. I wish I could say the same for my virginity.

. . .

A word on shoes.

For the first twelve years of my life, I had to go around in heavy brown shoes with round toes and thick rubber soles that would never wear out—the cousins of my father's indestructible German footwear. You can imagine how much I loved that. And so my first pair of loafers, in eighth grade, was a very big deal, until I went to Riverdale summer school in the Adirondacks, where I stepped in mud and pulled my foot out without my shoe, and that was the end of my first pair of loafers.

My second pair was also a big deal. I was in my freshman year at Emerson, the year was 1963, and Bass Weejuns penny loafers were *the* shoe. People wore them forever; if they wore a hole in them, they'd tape it up with duct tape—it was a whole cult of Bass Weejuns.

They were *the* cool shoe, but I didn't realize before buying them how painful it was to break them in. They didn't give, these shoes. I didn't know whether wearing them to break them in was even worth it—they should've paid *me* to wear that shoe.

Anyway, I'm wearing my painful new shoes and walking up the steps to Brooks Brothers in Back Bay Boston, just a couple of blocks from school. And I suddenly became 360-degree aware that I existed. It was like cellophane had all at once peeled back from my brain, and I was completely aware of being.

It was a bigger thought than any I'd ever had—or any I've had since, in whatever analysis I've ever gone through.

I paused on the steps for a second.

And the moment I began to explore the thought—*poof*—the feeling was gone. The cellophane came back, and I was just a human being walking around moving air on the earth.

I've given that moment a lot of thought since. They say that we're created in God's image, but we only use 10 percent of our brainpower. Maybe God is 100 percent of our brainpower. Maybe those people who are geniuses are just the ones who use more than 10 percent. I don't know. All I know is that the memory of that total awareness has stayed with me for a long time—and I've been looking for it ever since.

. . .

My father *really* wanted me to take over his business. So in the summer of 1966, between my junior and senior years at Emerson, he sent me to Germany, to work at a lumber mill. I did not want to take over his business. I did not want to go to Germany to work at a lumber mill. But that was the edict from Harry.

The town was Wiedenbrück, a picturesque village on the Ems River in the north. I lived at a small hotel in town; I became really close to the family who ran the hotel. I even met a German girl. And I worked at the mill.

I was an apprentice to *der Sägemeister*, the saw-master. I helped with putting these huge logs on the saw bed, slicing thin slices to make furniture veneer, changing the blade every three logs. Loud. Scary. Dangerous. I stood knee-deep in sawdust, which it was my job to clean up every day after the Meister went home. But the worst part was the Meister himself. I grew a beard that summer. And the Meister of the machine said to me, "Oh, you look like an old Jew."

"I am one," I said. That ended that conversation.

Needless to say, I was not cut out for the lumber business.

. . .

Back at Emerson, I was kicked out of acting class for not being able to memorize lines. My cognitive challenge would also get me in trouble at Yale. One of my teachers there was the great Bobby Lewis: cofounder of the Actors Studio, famed Hollywood character actor, legendary Broadway director, mentor to Marlon Brando and Montgomery Clift. And one day I made Bobby Lewis cry.

And not in a good way.

Bobby had an exercise. We each had to pick a figure in a painting, pose like the figure, then step out of the pose and create the person's character. The painting I picked was a famous one by Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People*, commemorating the Second French

Revolution of 1830. In the picture, a bare-breasted Liberty, holding a French flag high with her right hand and a carrying a rifle in her left, leads the revolutionaries through the smoke of battle, bodies lying at her feet. Next to her is a young boy with a pouch slung over his shoulder and a pistol in each hand. I chose to play a mash-up of Lady Liberty and the boy, with a pouch over my shoulder, a gun in one hand, and a broomstick with a dish towel attached to it (that was supposed to be the flag) in the other.

I'd borrowed a toy rifle from the Repertory Theatre for the exercise. I'd hung a poster of the painting on the wall for reference. And as I struck the pose, I raised the flag with my left hand while I held the gun with my right.

"Is there any reason you're doing the pose completely backward?" Bobby asked.

"No!" I said, as I realized my error. Naturally, being totally dyslexic, I'd had absolutely no idea that I was doing it backward. Like lightning, I switched the flag to my right hand, the rifle to my left, and raised the flag high once again.

The class, some twenty-five kids, giggled.

And Bobby Lewis thought I was making fun of him.

He sputtered. "You take no care?" he said. "You just, you just make a mockery of my life's work?" His eyes glistening with tears, he ran out of the room.

I looked around. "Anybody?" I said. "Could anybody help here? Because I think I'm going to die. Nobody? Okay, fine."

My reputation may have preceded me when the great Stella Adler came to teach a class at Yale. Stella, of course, was also legendary—she had studied with Stanislavski himself! She was probably in her early seventies when she came to New Haven, and every inch the *grande dame* of theater. She once bragged to us that she poked her husband, the great theater director Harold Clurman, in the ribs while he was asleep, and said, "Stop sleeping like an important man!"

In Stella's exercise, you were supposed to get up and walk through

a garden in your imagination, all the while describing what you were seeing.

My turn came. I got up, pushed open the imaginary white picket gate, and said, "And here—"

"Sit down! You see nothing!" said the great Stella Adler.

"Bluebells! I see bluebells!"

"You don't see anything!"

But I couldn't stop pleading my case. "Hey—the tulips over here, they're variegated!"

"*Down, Winkler.*"

That threw me into a terrorized tizzy. I was sure I was going to be thrown out of school for going up against Stella Adler. And I was beginning to realize how much I hated not being seen or heard, especially when I knew what I was talking about. I really *was* seeing bluebells and tulips; the tulips really were yellow and red! How did she know I wasn't seeing what I really was seeing? Even though she was the great Stella Adler?

. . .

My dating career, at Emerson and then Yale, was *not* stellar. In my sophomore year at college, I was madly in love with a girl named Susan Salter—she was a freshman and I was a sophomore. I used to leave class early so I could stand outside the class she was in and stare at her through the small square window in the door, just stand there and wait for the bell to ring. I used to write her letters every day—a hundred and fifty letters before spring break. I was like the guy in the cartoon, sitting in a pile of crumpled paper up to his knees, because I couldn't spell. And my penmanship was terrible; I had to cross out one word, then another, then throw away the paper, trying desperately to express the depth of my emotion, never feeling that I had gotten the phrase right.

Then it turned out that she had a boyfriend at BU. My song that year was "You've Lost That Lovin' Feelin'" by the Righteous Brothers.

At Yale I was living with five other people in a house by the beach on the Long Island Sound. One was a nurse, two were young lawyers, another was a psych student, one was an architect. A young lady I was dating came up to New Haven on the train. We drove to the house on the beach, very romantic. And after she'd been there for around an hour and a half, she said, "I have to leave. I can't be here for one more minute."

I asked her why.

"The way you are, it's horrible," she said.

What way was I? I had no idea what she was talking about. Which, of course, was at least half of the problem.

Around the same time, I went to a party and saw another girl. She was a dancer. And she was walking around on the furniture. I mean, from the chest of drawers to another chest of drawers to the desk, and I'm staring at her—oh my God, that face; those *legs*—and I can't breathe.

This was Lula. Of Alabama.

We start dating. She's in her senior year of college in Virginia, and I drive down to see her. When I come back, I write her letters every day, the same as I did with Susan Salter. Now she graduates, and starts teaching dance at a college in upstate New York. Seven hours away. She drives down to see me. Whoa.

Then she's back in Alabama for the summer, and I go down there to visit her, at her parents' home. And I am a Northerner. And an actor. And a Jew. I remember her mother said to me, talking about Black people, "Oh, God bless that race, they got all the rhythm."

She didn't get around to telling me her feelings about Jewish people.

Then Lula wanted to make love to me while her parents were upstairs. Under the dining room table.

Oh my God.

Turned out this Northern Jew actor had zero sense of sexual adventure. And that was the beginning of the end for me and Lula.

. . .

Memorizing lines was supremely difficult, but not impossible if I read them over and over. And over and over again. It always helped a lot if the thing I was trying to memorize was well written. So I got my MFA in 1970, but more than that, I was one of only three people from my graduating class of eleven invited to join the Yale Repertory Theatre company.

Did this imbue me with ringing confidence? It did not. On June 30 of that year I began my professional acting career, earning \$173 a week doing Story Theatre in East Hampton, appearing throughout the 1970–71 season in plays by Brecht, Shakespeare, and Terrence McNally.

Story Theatre was the creation of Paul Sills, one of the cofounders of the Second City, the great improvisational troupe in Chicago. It was akin to the “poor theater” of the Polish theater director Jerzy Grotowski: there’s only a suggestion of scenery—the same set can be used for whatever the play happens to be—and there are no props at all; we would just pull them out of the air. If I needed a bow and arrow, I would create one using mime; when it was no longer needed, it vanished back into the air, and a paddle to take a trip down the river in a canoe would appear. It was so much fun, so exhilarating.

Carmen de Lavallade, the prima ballerina for the Alvin Ailey dance company before Judith Jamison, was part of the troupe that summer. I was in awe of her. We played one scene together where we both had to play a deer—I said to Carmen, “You are a prima ballerina; how could I possibly be a deer alongside you?”

She said, “Each of us is our own being, in our own body—you will be a different kind of deer.”

That unlocked a way of thinking that had never occurred to me and became one of my watchwords: *a different kind of deer*.

Cliff Robertson, a big-deal movie actor at the time, saw me perform in East Hampton and asked me to be in a Western he was about to star in, *The Great Northfield Minnesota Raid*. With real regret, I told Cliff that since there were no understudies in the Repertory

Theatre, I couldn't just leave—especially after feeling so honored by being selected.

That really would have been a different life.

There was a Yale teacher who was part of the professional company: Betsy was her name. And one day during a rehearsal I was kidding around, doing shtick, being cute, making the rest of the company laugh—I was good at that. And Betsy turned to me with a frown and said, “If you don't stop joking around, I'm going to punch your teeth out.”

It got my attention. And taught me a big lesson. Laughs were all well and good, but the work was always to be taken seriously.

. . .

In the fall of 1971 I was invited to be in the cast of *Moonchildren*, a new and exciting play by Michael Weller to be produced at Washington, DC's Arena Stage. While I was in DC, an old friend from Emerson, Ceci Hart, invited me over for dinner—it was lovely to have a home-cooked meal while I was far from home. Ceci later married James Earl Jones, who became a family friend.

Moonchildren had a great cast, full of people who would become famous: Jill Eikenberry. Jimmy Woods. Ed Herrmann. Christopher Guest. The director was the semilegendary Alan Schneider. I wasn't fully baked yet as an actor, but I was finding my way. One day after three weeks of rehearsal, I went to Schneider and said, “I've solved the monologue in the third act.” And he said, “You're fired.”

At that moment, my brain became cream cheese. As if I were underwater, I said, “What?”

He said, “You're fired.”

I put my snow tires back in my car. I said goodbye to the cast. They were all sad, or seemingly sad, to see me go. And I drove back to New York thinking, *I will never be hired again. My career is over at the beginning. Who's going to hire an actor who's been fired? I'm dead in the water.* I didn't know what to do. Weeping up the turnpike, between

Washington and New York. Oh my God. It turned out that Kevin Conway, the actor Alan Schneider really wanted for my role, was in a movie, and Schneider had hired me as a space filler. You know, like the seat fillers at the Emmys or the Oscars. When the star has to go to the bathroom, the seat filler fills in until the star comes back, so there won't be empty seats on camera. The minute Kevin Conway became available, I was toast.

What a shitty thing for Alan Schneider to do, you say? Well, Schneider wasn't just legendarily brilliant; he was also a legendary prick. I later found out that there were actors who put a clause in their contract if they were in a play: if the director was let go and Alan Schneider was hired, they could leave the play.

I dusted myself off and somehow got back on my feet. Back in New York, I sublet an apartment from the actor Lewis Stadlen at 72nd Street and West End Avenue—a bedroom, a living room, a little eating area, and a kitchen; \$174 a month—and through Margie Castleman, a beautiful dancer I'd recently started dating, I got an agent, Joan Scott. Joan handled movies and theatrical. But another agent, Deborah Brown, began sending me on auditions for, of all things, TV commercials.

I auditioned the same way I'd tried out for Yale: winging it. A few people were annoyed that I wasn't saying the words that were on the page—"Excuse me, that's not what we wrote." I'd say, "I'm giving you the essence." Some were put off, but more of them were charmed.

I got really good at auditioning for commercials. And I started getting work! Sometimes I'd get two jobs a week. American Airlines! Sanka coffee! Talon zippers! It wasn't Shakespeare. For the Talon spot I was supposed to be an English gentleman wearing an ascot, sitting in a leather chair in his library—except that I was headless. This was somehow supposed to demonstrate that Talon zippers were invisible. I had to be fitted with a foam-rubber suit that covered almost my entire body; I could just barely see through the mesh in the costume's head. And once I was suited up, the producer on the shoot was so

disrespectful and mean to me that—now that I *really* wasn't being seen or heard—steam began to come out of my ears. It was like some nightmare version of getting yelled at by Harry and Ilse.

Afterward, the prop person said, "Man, I could *feel* your rage coming right through that rubber suit."

I'd stayed in touch with some people from Yale, and when they heard I was acting in commercials, they were scandalized. "We were trained for the *theater*," they said. "What are you *doing*, doing *commercials*?" they said. And then their next question was, "How do you get them?"

I have to admit that I wasn't immune to guilt. In the eyes of Yale, I was prostituting my art. Still, I was making money, and that felt good. And my earnings allowed me to do plays for free for the Manhattan Theatre Club or the St. Clement's Church theater space, which also made me feel good.

I was also working on an improv show, *Off the Wall*, with four other people: Marc Flanagan, a friend from Yale; a couple, Mark and JoAnne Lonow; and a woman named Nikki Flax. In the evenings we would put together the show at Mark and JoAnne's apartment in Greenwich Village while their nine-year-old daughter, Claudia—who later became a successful actress, comedian, and producer—was instructed to remain in her bedroom. During the day I'd shoot commercials or go around to the various advertising agencies looking for work. And one day while I was making my rounds, I heard about a possible part in a small independent movie. I called my agent, and she got me in—the script was called *The Lords of Flatbush*. The setting was Brooklyn in the fifties; the protagonists were four leather-jacketed guys who were more interested in making it with girls than rumbling with other gangs. The part I was to read for was Butchey Weinstein, who pretended to be a tough greaser to cover up his true poetic nature. I went to meet with the director, Marty Davidson. He had three other actors—Sylvester Stallone, a couple of years before *Rocky* made him a superstar; a handsome guy named Perry King, who would also go on in TV and movies; and playing Sly's sidekick, Paul Mace.

I auditioned for Marty, jumping all over his couch with my free-wheeling improvisation. Apparently I made a good impression: I got the part. A thousand dollars for eight weeks' work, but it was a movie! (I later heard I was replacing a soon-to-be-famous actor who'd been fired for not getting along with Stallone; it was the only time my career ever intersected with Richard Gere's.)

Suddenly I was shooting this picture every day from six in the morning to five in the evening, then going over to Mark and JoAnne's to work on the improv show from six to eleven. It sounds exhausting to me now, but I was young and filled with energy, excited about everything I was doing.

Not long after *The Lords of Flatbush* wrapped, I got a call about another independent film. The director was an Italian named Carlo Lizzani; the movie, *Crazy Joe*, was about the recently deceased real-life gangster Joe Gallo. It was a very short meeting: I shook Lizzani's hand and began to sit down; he said "Thank you" before my ass hit the chair. So that was that. But a week later I got a call: "Would you like to join the production as Mannie, the driver for Joe Gallo, and come in tomorrow for a costume fitting?"

Without saying a word, I hung up. I was sure someone was playing a joke on me: how could I possibly have gotten this job without even auditioning?

Then the phone rang again: same voice. "Do you want five hundred dollars a week?"

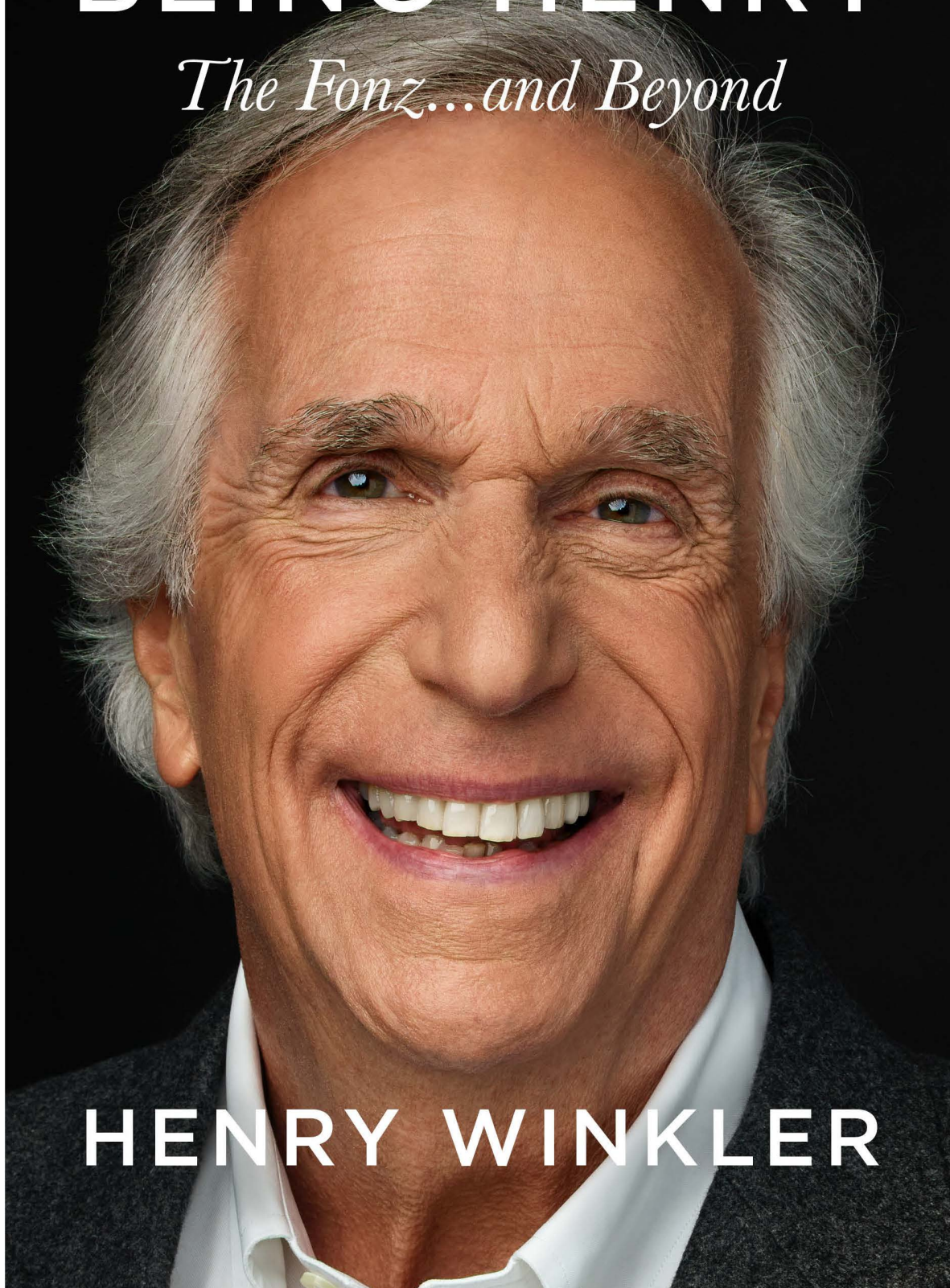
Apparently it was not a joke.

I was making money! I was making movies!

Sometime that year Joan Scott went to Los Angeles to open an office there, and I had a career talk with John Kimball, the agent now running her New York office. John was glad for my success, but he had a different idea. "If you want to be known to New York, stay here," he told me. "If you want to be known to the world, go to California."

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