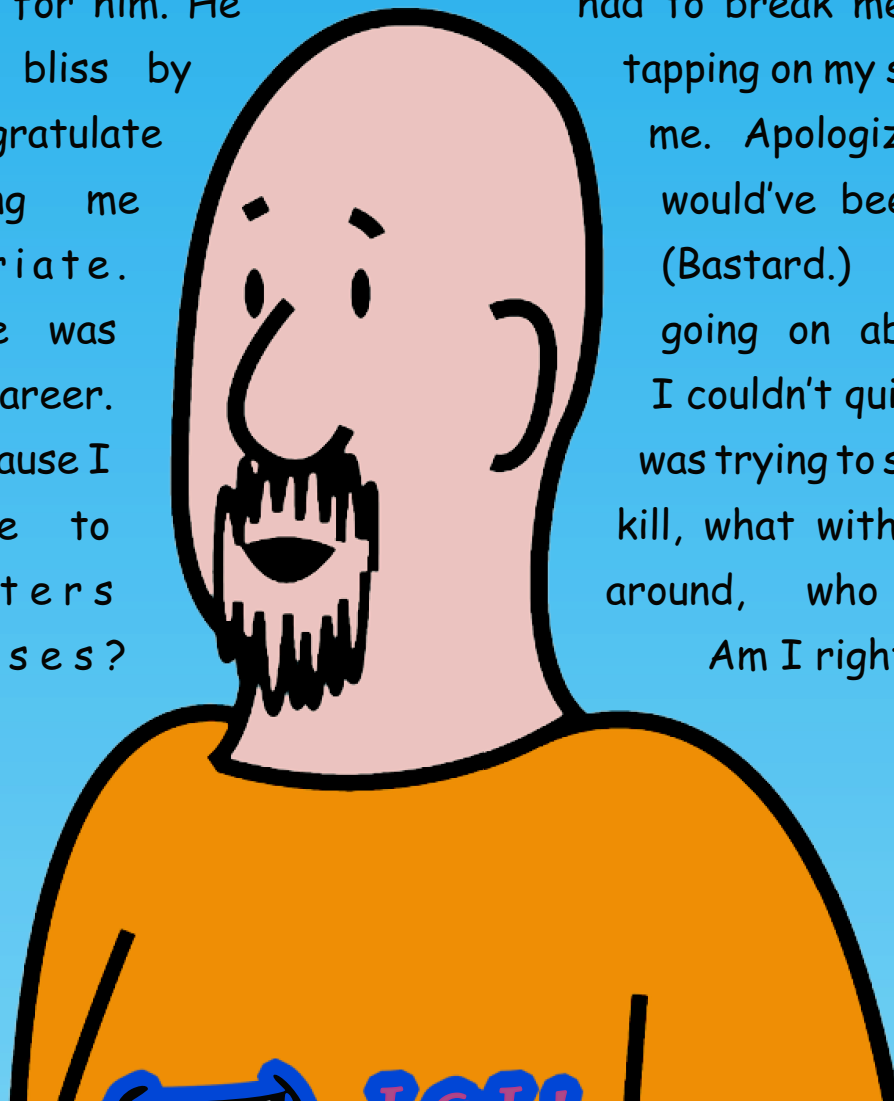


# BORN THIS WAY

a memoir by Richard Ryder

So, I recently ran into someone I went to public school with. Too bad I wasn't in a car at the time. It was one of the many kids who'd made public education hell for me. They'd seen me on TV recently (yeah, that's right bitch!) doing stand up and now there I was, years later, on the subway, ignoring the despair by trying to imagine myself anywhere other than underground in a metal tube. It was

too much for him. He  
my iPod bliss by  
to congratulate  
terrorizing me  
appropriate.  
there he was  
comedy career.  
it out because I  
the urge to  
commuters  
witnesses?



had to break me out of  
tapping on my shoulder  
me. Apologizing for  
would've been more  
(Bastard.) Anyway,  
going on about my  
I couldn't quite make  
was trying to suppress  
kill, what with all the  
around, who needs  
Am I right?



LOL!

“I don’t remember you being funny”, this hellion from high school said. Of course you don’t! Why would you? It’s hard to hear the punch lines when you’re chasing someone through a field, trying to give them a few ‘punch lines’ of their own... I wanted to yell: It gets better, my ass! What about when it gets bitter? Revenge! ...but I digress. The troglodyte had a point. Was I always funny or was it something I learned?

At this point I’d like to make it clear that I always knew I was gay, even at a young age. I knew I was gay way before I even knew I was funny. But in my defense, it was the ‘80s, which in retrospect, were pretty gay! All that hairspray and eyeliner,

wasn’t a power failure, TV was always there for me. Waiting with open arms were Carol Burnett, Lucille Ball and Dick van Dyke, all the greats (I still can’t believe that Dick and Dyke made it onto TV all those years ago), who made shut-ins like me laugh through the tears. Maybe that was it. Being shunt from teenage life forced me to learn comedy 101 from the pros. Would I have had such a thorough education in comedy if I’d been popular and busy? And, like my grandmother, my comedy gurus were women. Would I have cared to hear what these phenomenally talented females had to say if I’d been straight? But in the mad world of bullies and haters of the late ‘70s,

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## ***I THINK MY SEXUAL DESTINY WAS SEALED WHEN MY MOTHER NAMED ME RICHARD RYDER, WHICH JUST SHORTENED RIGHT DOWN TO DICK RYDER...***

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hello? Duran Duran? George Michael? The Go-Go’s? Who did they think they were? Regardless, I think my sexual destiny was sealed when my mother named me Richard Ryder, which just shortened right down to Dick Ryder for every single person I ever went to school with. Guess who the fag was? That would be me. (Bastards.) Thank God I was practically born 6’4”, which helped keep the haters at bay... to a point. It also explains the expression my mother has had on her face ever since. On quiet nights you can still hear her calling for an epidural which explains why that was my first word. Anyway...

Being a pariah in public school didn’t help me develop social skills until after high school. I was completely ignored by friends and family. Well I didn’t have friends, no point splitting hairs; it’s hard to miss what you didn’t have. Actually, that’s not entirely true; I did have two very good friends: TV and my grandmother. As long as there

women were my protectors. Even if they didn’t like me they made sure I was safe, which totally made recess a less stressful experience, let me tell you!

But all this early comedy training hadn’t bubbled forth in my day to day existence yet, probably because that existence was cluttered with a lot of running away from the hateful hordes. So it steeped deep within me waiting for its inevitable release. It wasn’t too long before I discovered theatre. Did I mention I was gay? My grandmother, my only other friend and the joy to my world, my greatest protector and the reason I am who I am today, used to take my brother and I to see plays all the time. Whether it was community theatre or a production for kids at the local library, I’m sure I’ve seen every fairytale live on stage thanks to my Grandmother. So it was inevitable that I would end up on a path to the stage. But community theatre and acting

classes didn't coax the comedy out of me. Just the opposite in fact. That audience breathing in the dark scared the poop out of me! So I retreated deeper in my comedy closet, refusing to draw attention to myself. Whoever said there was a forth wall in theatre, lied. (Bastard.)

It was while I was sweating it out in the chorus that I was introduced to Improvisation, the lazy person's theatre. Now I know that some of you feel that Improv has become the mime of the new millennium, but back in the early '80s it was a breath of fresh air. No scripts, no rehearsals, just actors on a stage taking suggestions from

old donkey at anything that I thought was funny, which explains why my mother made me watch TV in another room. But Improv solved that. Nothing makes you sink or swim better than getting wet and the way you get wet in Improv is to stand on stage in front of an audience with no script to save you. The first time I made people laugh I was in an Improv class. I can't tell you what the scene was we were doing, mostly because it was being made up as we went along, never to be repeated, but I can tell you how that laughter felt. It felt how I imagined being popular felt. All of a sudden I had friends. People talked to me

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***NOTHING MAKES YOU SINK OR SWIM BETTER THAN GETTING WET AND THE WAY YOU GET WET IN IMPROV IS TO STAND ON STAGE IN FRONT OF AN AUDIENCE WITH NO SCRIPT TO SAVE YOU.***

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the audience and creating content with it. Sure sometimes it missed the mark, but Improv is a very unifying experience for both the actors and the audience. Those watching feel part of the show because their suggestions are helping shape plot lines. Most importantly for me, it forced me to interact with the audience. It made me rely on them and stop being afraid of them as if they were lurking in the dark ready to pounce. Instead, these audiences were lurking in the dark waiting to laugh. And boy did they! It was a huge revelation for me to stand on a stage and talk to an audience. My first hurdle on the comedy course was cleared. Fear of being on stage fell away from me like a cheap costume on a stripper at Remington's. (What? No tip?)

The second hurdle for me was trust...of myself. I didn't know if I was capable of being funny. I knew I liked funny. I laughed like a big

and invited me out for after class coffees. I was popular...and hooked.

Those years performing and chatting with like minded theatre geeks helped me tap into my funny. I learned to listen. I learned timing. Being funny was my gateway drug. I started performing more and more. I even joined an Improv troupe—it was fabulous until one of my new Improv friends took me to a comedy club.

She had been secretly doing stand up at open mic rooms around the city, unbeknownst to our Improv coterie. You have to know this before I continue: Improv comics hate stand up comics. Don't ask me why. It boils down to grandness. Stand up comics perform alone. They don't share the spotlight. I think the Improv comics are jealous. (Sissies.)

Anyway, off to the comedy club I went, crossing



**LOL!**

to the dark side with my fellow defector. I loved it. Stand up spoke to me. It involved all the tools of Improv, but without other actors screwing it up. Comedy is about timing but let me assure you a room full of Improv comics don't sync up over time like women can. Just 'cause you work together doesn't mean you can perform together. It's not all standing ovations and flowers in the Improv arena. But stand-up comedy is different. You write it alone, you develop the jokes alone and you go onstage to perform it...alone. If that audience doesn't like your act, they're as much as saying they don't like you! Well, all I can say is they liked me, they really liked me!

Almost right out of the gate I did well at stand-up. Improv had helped me overcome my fear of an audience. In fact I embraced them, made them part of the act. There was no fear. Public school's years of torment were far worse than anything a comedy audience could throw at me. In fact I remember a couple of years later

before a show, I came across another gay comic who was getting ready for his set. Like me, he was fairly new to stand-up but not new to being gay. He wasn't a twink is what I'm saying. Anyway he was in the bathroom sweating buckets, and not for the usual reasons gay men sweat in bathrooms. (Dirty!) He was nervous about going on stage and full in the throes of 'flop' sweat. So I asked him what the problem was. He said he was scared to go onstage in front of all those straight people. He was convinced they would hate him because he was gay. 'Are you kidding?' I asked. 'We're gay survivors of public school. That audience can't possibly say anything worse than anything you heard on the schoolyard.' I don't know how much

that helped in the long run (that guy has since quit comedy and entered into the wonderful world of selling real estate--yep, no humour there!), but at the time, I could see that it helped him get over that initial fear so he could get up on that stage.

That said, I think gays are built better for comedy, well at least the lesbians are: Rosie O'Donnell, Ellen DeGeneres, Wanda Sykes and depending on what day of the week you're talking to her, Margaret Cho. Gays have faced adversity for centuries and have long been the observers to our straight dominated world. How else do you think we came up with ways to pretty it up? If

we're gonna watch the straights, they gotsta be pretty! I feel I'm a much better comic because I'm gay—I'm certainly more interesting. Have you ever heard a straight guy talk? For more than 20 minutes? I rest my case. I was in my element. I was finding my funny and taking it with me on stage. Now all that was left for me to do was to come out of the closet and let my

family know I was on the comedy road to funny town. Can you imagine having to come out of the closet—again—but this time as a comic? My poor mother! It's one thing to have a gay son, but to have a gay son that's also a stand-up comic? Well, all I can say is, it wasn't pretty. So after a lot of screaming and yelling and a 20-year period of self-discovery, I can proudly say, where comedy is concerned that baby, I was born this way! Damn you Gaga and your timely hits!

Richard Ryder can be seen weekly on OUTtv and heard daily on 103.9 PROUD FM's Your Morning With Richard and Chris, where he dishes the dirt and judges the judgeable from 6 to 10am. It's the best way to start the day! Honest. (Seriously, if he has to get up that early, so should everyone else!)

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