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STAGE FRIGHT



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CHAPTER ONE

AT HOME ONSTAGE

Chris steps into the spotlight.
“Bună seara, prieteni!! My name is Chris Fisherman, and I’m an American living the dream, performing stand-up comedy in Bucharest, Romania!”

“But that’s not my day job. Noooo. Did you think that was my day job? No, no, no! Of course not! I have a real job. I’m an actor.”

“You might not recognize me because I’m the kid that *didn’t* get the part in *Home Alone*. I gave a great audition! Here, I’ll show you!”

Chris puts the mic down and rubs his hands together, pats them on his face, then screams à la Culkín. The crowd roars.

“Most people dream of going to Hollywood. But not me. No. I dream of Rollywood! Trust me, it’s all the same. Possibly better! Hollywood actors dream of getting interviewed on Jimmy Kimmel. I get Măruță Maimuță²!”

1. Good evening, friends!

2. Măruță, the monkey! – Cătălin Măruță is a famous Romanian television host.

“Hollywood has Madonna. Rollywood has Loredana. Hollywood gets Justin Bieber, Rollywood gets Selly. Sure, Hollywood gets Brad Pitt, but Rollywood gets... me!”

“In Rollywood I get access to better parts in bigger films. I just filmed a part in a Casey Affleck movie. I played ‘rapey guy’. Didn’t even have to meet the director or go to a casting. They picked me right from my picture!”

“Being an American actor in Rollywood doesn’t always pay the bills, but I love living in Romania! Yet every time I tell a Romanian I love Romania, they say, ‘*You like Romania? Why you like Romania? Romania is the worrrrsst. Every other country is better!*’ Really? Even Bulgaria? ‘*Okay. Not Bulgariaaaa.*’” Chris says, adopting the standard American imitation of an Eastern European accent where needed.

“Now how does a Romanian pay the bills? Așa! Fac combinație!¹ Every time a Romanian says, ‘Romania sucks,’ I’m going to say, ‘Give me five cents.’”

Chris’ hands extend in a “gimme gimme” gesture as he surveys the audience.

“Come onnnn, you can afford it. Romania is not this poor country everyone says it is. Doing quite well, in fact. I was in the city center last week, and even the beggars are like ‘Boss, ai și tu un Euro?’²”

1. Like this! A get rich quick scheme!

2. Hey boss, got an extra Euro?

“No joke. Every time I hear ‘Romania sucks,’ I’m demanding five cents. Come back and find me in a few months. I’ll buy you a drink. All of you. And your mama. And the horse she rode in on. And the horse’s mama! Because I will be soooo rich! I’ll be... I’ll be... Bogat ca un notar!¹ That’s how much Romanians say ‘Romania succckkks.’”

“I’ll be easy to find too, because I’m not going to take my money and move to some ‘better’ country where the rent and – more importantly – the beer, is eight times as expensive! So, I won’t be moving to Cluj-Napoca² either. I’m staying right here in Bucharest, baby! Although I will start dressing like a cocalar³.” Chris points to his shoes. “Maybe even get me some Papucii Gucci!⁴”

“You’re probably saying, ‘Chris, of course you prefer Romania, because you’re from the U.S. and... Trump.’ Well, Trump is living proof that the American dream is alive and well. That anybody can be president. *Anybody*. Gives me hope that maybe someday we might get the right *anybody*. Like me. Unfortunately, I won’t be running for president. Because I’m running for... Romanian citizen!”

1. Rich like a notary!

2. Romania’s Silicon Valley.

3. nouveau riche

4. Gucci slippers

“Trust me, I have perspective. I haven’t just lived in America. I also lived in France, and I want to tell you why Romania is better than France. Wanna know why?”

The audience demurs.

“That’s a *Da?* Okay. Reason #1: politics. Yes, politics. In the last EU elections, France sent their Trump” – Chris cups his hands, coughs as he says ‘Le Pen,’ and clears his throat – “to Parliament. You sent yours” – Chris cups his hands again, coughs “Dragnea” and clears his throat once more – “to prison! Good job, Romania! Rock that vote, baby!”

“Reason #2: the cinema. Going to the cinema with Romanians is nooo picnic. Well, it’s sort of like a picnic. Because you got the popcorn, you got the nachos, and what the hell, throw in a bucket of KFC too!”

Chris munches on imaginary popcorn, nachos, and a big old juicy chicken leg in rapid succession.

“To be fair, my fellow Americans do the same thing and – well... fatties! Romanians at least look good doing it. You are the only people I know who get all dressed up to sit in a dark theatre.”

“No, no, no, the problem is the phones. Yes, the phones. Romanians are texting during the movie, swiping through pictures of their niece. Sometimes

you guys even answer the phone like, ‘Ce faci, frate?... Nimic. Sunt la film.’¹”

Chris puts a finger to his lips and leans forward. “SHHHH!!!”

Pause. “Nu merge.”²”

Chris leans in further, whispering loudly, hand cupped over his mouth.

“Liniște, vă rog!”³

Pause. “Nu merge.”

Chris leans in even closer.

“Taci! Pula mea!”⁴ he shouts.

Pause. “Merge.”⁵”

Pause. “... Câteodată.”⁶”

“I’ve been to the cinema with the French too. They respect the film buuuutt...”

“...they smell! They smell so bad! I thought it was a stereotype until I moved to France, but turns out nobody taught them how to take a shower, so they haven’t been passing this skill down through the generations.”

“Romanians, on the other hand, finish their snacks eventually, and turn off their phones. The French? You gotta smell them the *whole movie!* Woo! Stinky cheese!”

1. What’s up, brother? Nothing! Watching a movie.

2. It doesn’t work.

3. Quiet, please!

4. Shut up! My dick! (Romanian equivalent of “damn it!”)

5. It works.

6. Sometimes.

“Reason #3: the worst one! Discrimination. The French are so racist! Sunt căsătorit cu fată româncă frumoasă¹ and we lived in Paris together. One time she got robbed at the bus station.”

Gasps ripple through the crowd.

“Yeah! Yeah! It’s true! She finds the guard to watch the security tapes, and all the way to the security office, the guard is like ‘Must be Les Romaniunnn. Dirty gyp-zeez. Teeves! All of dem teeves!’ My wife is behind him like...”

Chris paces the stage anxiously, hands on his forehead. “Please don’t let them be Romanian, please don’t let them be Romanian, please don’t let them be Romanian!’ They get to the office, they put in the tapes, they watch the tapes” – Chris “watches” the tapes – “and my wife’s like ‘Yes! Arabs!’ Security guard is like ‘Sacre Bleu – les terrorists!’”

Cheers erupt, blended with guffaws.

“Enough negativity. What do I like about Romania? The swears. Especially impressive is how Romanians can have entire conversations using just the word *pula*. Watch:”

Chris launches into an act-out, a lynchpin of stand-up comedy technique, playing both sides of the conversation.

“Ce faci?”²”

1. I’m married to a beautiful Romanian girl

2. What’s up?

“Pula mea.”¹

“Ai primit salariu?”²

“Ehhhh, pula!”³

“Ești okay?”⁴

“Vaiiiii de pula mea!”⁵

The crowd explodes with delight. Chris soaks it in and forges forward.

“That’s just one swear. There are so many, it can get confusing. Like, at Kaufland, I’m at the register to pay and the clerk says – Chris assumes the pose of a bored supermarket clerk – Vrei pungă?”⁶

“I’m like. *Poftim?*”⁷

“Tsk. Vrei pungă?”

“Uhhh... *poftim?*”

“VREI PUNGĂ!!!!???”

“Pisda⁸.... pula...”

“Pung – ah, he’s cursing me!” Chris holds for the laughter.”

“Nope... just asking if I want a bag. Well, that’s it for me folks. Mulțumesc! Sunteți audiență excepțională!”⁹

1. Nothing much.

2. You received your salary?

3. Of course not.

4. Are you okay?

5. Oh, for fuck’s sake!

6. Do you need a shopping bag?

7. Excuse me?

8. Pussy

9. Thank you! You are an exceptional audience!

Guess who's next? The Pope! This should be fun. Ladies and gentlemen... The Pope!"

The audience bursts forth with applause.

Chris hops off the stage of Copper Club in Bucharest, passing the mic to The Pope. The Pope is Alin Poponași, a fellow stand-up comedian who graciously invited Chris to try out material for his big network competition at one of Alin's weekend showcases. The Pope's been in the stand-up game in Romania since 2005, when there was no stand-up game in Romania. As the game matured, Alin became kind of an outsider on the circuit. Chris doesn't hear his name much on the scene.

Chris started his stand-up career about eight months ago, mostly at the urging of his Romanian wife, Ana. Stand-up comedy was something he always dreamed of doing. Acting since the age of seven, Chris didn't think he was funny or spontaneous enough to perform stand-up. He didn't trust himself. When he decided he wanted to be funny, he tried writing sketch comedy instead, feeling more secure playing a character in a narrative, lines memorized. Now, after over twenty-five years as an American actor, Chris has decided to give his other dream a try, in Romania, of all places.

The Pope blesses the stage with his set, and afterwards, Chris joins him for a drink. It is the first time Alin has seen Chris perform.

“Man, you killed!” decrees his Popi-ness. “Did you really audition for *Home Alone*?”

“No. But it made a great Halloween costume.” Indeed, Chris does possess a picture of his twelve-year-old self in that very costume, hands to cheeks, mouth agape. Just like onstage now, thirty years later.

“I think you’re gonna be ready for your big network debut.” Alin says. “After you’re on the show, maybe we can do a tour. I’ve always wanted to make a bilingual show.”

“Sounds cool. I would love to tour Romania and see it all.”

“I told you, you could have gone on longer. Is that all your material?”

“No, I got more.”

“Well, listen, you can come back next week and work it one more time if you want. Go longer, if you’re killing like you did tonight. Try that new material. When’s the taping?”

“Monday after next. You’ve been on the show, right, Pope?” The show being *iGlumă*¹, a Romanian stand-up comedy competition on Satellite, a network that could be reasonably compared to FOX. Recently,

1. iJoke

a comic named Mamadou became the first foreigner to win. Chris is hoping to become the second.

“Yeah. Twice.”

“Any advice?”

Alin scrunches up his face, searching for words.

“It’s... a weird show.”



CHAPTER 2

PRIDE AND PUNISHMENT

Six weeks earlier

“Like, for example, in America have...”

“Hollywood.” Chris replies.

“Da, in Hollywood have Simon Cowell, in Romania have...”

“Rollywood.” Chris replies.

“Domnul Director”¹ sits across from Chris in the conference room. Not looking like a man to be taken too seriously. Slender, curly hair, glasses. Shabby is a quicker way to describe him. His fitting name: George.

Next to Chris sits the casting director, Afina. Last name Matache, like the market near Chris’s house, where every day bountiful vegetables and sweet peasants are in abundance. Sweet abundance not

1. Mister Director

really being a term to apply to the casting director. We'll call her that anyway.

Finally, another girl with abundant cleavage. Not really sure what purpose she serves. We'll just call her Gazongas, for short.

Chris wonders how much of a command Domnul has over the English language. Enough to cover up not really knowing it too well, Chris guesses.

On the whole, Romanians speak English exceptionally well. Best in the European Union. Especially now that the UK left.

Wanna know where they learned it? Ask anyone from Chris's wife's generation and they'll happily tell ya: Cartoon Network. That's right – Looney Tunes, Dexter, SpongeBob, Tom and Jerry. After the revolution, pent-up demand was unleashed and American products flooded the market. Well, legally. Cartoons included. There was no time for dubbing. This made Romanian kids smarter, giving them the globalized advantage of two languages. Now thanks to nationalistic and EU policies, most cartoons are dubbed and the kids are getting stupider. But I digress.

“Yes, in Rollywood have Bentdik! You have jokes more like this? You can to make more?”

“Who?”

“You know our judges?” says Sweet Abundance. Gazongas remains silent.

“I know Massiv. Big fan, actually. I admire Hoții¹ – first Romanian band I got into. Of course I know Doli. I have jokes about both of them. The other guy, no. No idea who he is.”

Abundance smirks. “This is funny. Most persons they do not heard of Massiv and Doli. Every persons always knows Bentdik.”

Which Chris finds odd. All his friends know Massiv’s rap band, Hoții, and Doli is a veteran pop star, filling the Paula Abdul/Gwen Stefani shoes on the show.

“Yeah. Not me. But it’s okay. I only need two likes.”

The judges each give a Facebook thumbs up or down to all the contestants. If you get at least two likes from the judges, you move on to home audience voting.

Everyone laughs.

Domnul Director jumps back into the fray. “We must to use this thing.”

“Because Mihai has very big attitude ego. Thinks himself is most important person. It will to be funny” adds Abundance.

Chris wonders who Mihai is.

“What is your job? You are actor?” asks Abundance.

“Yes. And dialogue coach.”

“What is this?”

1. The Thieves

“I help foreign actors with their accents. I’ve worked with big Romanian actors. And Ukrainian, Spanish, Danish, British...”

“This is great also! Mihai thinks has accent perfect British.”

“Well, I specialize in American accents, not British.”

“You must to make fun of Mihai, mess with her” Dom’ Director says.

Chris is now more than mildly confused.

“Who’s Mihai?”

“Bentdik!” replies Dom’ Director, silently adding a “duh!”.

“Oh.”

“And you have jokes in Romanian?”

“Mostly English, with some jokes and act-outs in Romanian.”

“You tell me some Romanian?” Dom’ says.

“Okay.” Chris launches into *pula, pula, pula*, finishing with “Vrei pungă?”, directing the bit toward his entire audience, all the way through to “They’re cursing me!”

Gazongas shakes heartily, full of mirth. Dom’ and Matache laugh too.

“Yes! Yes! You must to say this!” Dom’ says.

“I can say *pula* on TV?”

“Of course. Massiv is every time ‘pula pula pula!’”
Abundance says.

“I know. I’ve heard Massiv’s song: ‘Say pu-la la la. Say pu-lalalalalala!’. I even have my own version: ‘Say Peace. Da da da. Say Pis-dadadadadada!’”

They don’t get it.

Abundance jumps in with details. “Okay, January 27, 9 a.m. until 8 p.m. You can to come?”

“Yes. I will be there” Chris says, smiling.

“Binazz velkluma.” mumbles Dom Director unintelligibly.

“Huh?”

“Welcome to iGluma!” Abundance exclaims, clarifying Dom’s garbled Romanian.

“Oh, cool. Yeah! Thank you...” Chris suddenly blanks on George’s name. “...Domnul Director. Thank you, Afina. Vrei rahat?¹ Got it at the Christmas fair today. Turkish rahat², not Romanian rahat³.”

This gets a couple of chuckles. Chris can’t be sure they completely understand.

The ladies say no. Dom’ Director offers Chris a turtă dulce⁴. Not in the mood to chew on his way out the door but also not wanting to seem rude, Chris

1. You want rahat?

2. Turkish delight

3. Romanian shit

4. Turtă dulce = gingerbread

tosses the turta into the container with his rahat and gets up from his seat for the obligatory handshakes.

He pauses at Gazongas. “Ce este numele tau?”

“Huh?” says the girl, a universal expression everyone can understand.

Chris alters his approach to be understood. “Eu sunt Chris. Și tu?”¹

“Ahhh.” Gazongas smiles. “Ana.”

“Ahhh! Este numele de soția mea, Ana. Mi-e preferat! Este nume cel mai frumoasă!”²

Chris flashes her a thumbs-up, smiles, and walks out of the conference room, Sweet Abundance hot on his tail.

Chris now stands to win, in the best-case scenario, the ten thousand euros cash spoils awarded to the final champion. Whether he wins the competition or not, he could now add the “as seen on iGlumă” badge of honor so many Romanian comedians display proudly on their advertising. Maybe local clubs would start booking him, instead of having to beg for five minutes at open mics and putting on his own shows. Maybe sign with the only management company in town, Marquee Management. This could be it, the big break!

1. My name is Chris. And you?

2. That’s my wife’s name, Ana. My favorite! The most beautiful name!

Waiting on the couch in the reception area is Tony, a pretty funny comedian Chris has seen on the scene and smoked a joint or two with. Tony is... pleasantly plump. Balding young, like many Romanian men. Thanks, Chernobyl!

“Hey, you going on the show too?” asks Chris after a salute.

Tony smirks, his right foot resting on his left knee, nervously twitching.

“We’ll see.”