

The Leila Torn Show by James Patrick Kelly

James Patrick Kelly has two new books out from Tachyon Publications: a novella, *Burn*, about forest fires, Henry David Thoreau, baseball, and apples and *Feeling Very Strange: The Slipstream Anthology*, co-edited with John Kessel. He recently joined the faculty of the Stonecoast Creative Writing MFA program. In his latest story for us, Jim views a new sort of drama from a *very* unusual perspective.

The Leila Torn Show was nervous as she surveyed the audience on the studio monitor, trying to get a feel for their mood. When her band played her theme song as Slappy O'Toole stepped onto the set for the pre-show warm up, their fanfare was ragged. Chill, the band leader, glared at Bebop, the trumpet player, and Bebop stared at his shoes. *The Leila Torn Show* could see the studio audience shifting uncomfortably in their seats. She winced as Slappy's jokes bounced off them. Maybe they were just tired. Or hearing-impaired. Or Estonian. A bead of sweat glistened just below Slappy's receding hairline.

The Leila Torn Show had known all along that there would be a huge letdown after last week's episode, when she had killed off her main character. But she had to push on. If she could just hold her own through tonight, she'd be all right.

Her content providers were already looking ahead. In the comedy segment of next week's episode, they wanted to send someone to the dentist. The ceepees hadn't decided who it would be yet, although Slappy had already put in his bid. *The Leila Torn Show* felt sorry for him; he was in just one scene this week and he had only two lines, a joke about the weather. Her staff demographer had explained to him that his numbers skewed old and fat. Grandmas with deep fryers wrote him fan email but they didn't buy enough upscale product.

The ceepees were pitching her a waiting room scene for the dentist episode that would feature two or three oddballs.

"Odd but wacky," Cass said.

"In a surreal way," said Graves, the head content provider.

Then would come a teeth-cleaning scene. Margo Rain, the guest talent, was to play the chatty hygienist. She'd go blonde, of course, and pump up her boobs a cup size. And the hemline of her uniform dress would be short as a sinner's memory. "She'll stop the eighteen to twenty-five-year-old males in mid-click," said Graves. "Remotes will fall from their trembling hands." But it wouldn't do to stereotype Margo Rain. After all, she was a legitimate actress, not bound to any one show. She had the complete works of Ibsen loaded into her memory. Euripides. Edward Albee. *The Leila Torn Show* was courting respect this season. She was tired of going for the cheap laugh.

"Thing is, I can't help the way I look," Slappy told the audience as he wiped his forehead with a limp handkerchief. "Me, I've always been hard on the eye, so you might say." He puffed out his cheeks. "I mean, I was so ugly as a kid that I had to trick or treat over the phone."

A ripple passed through the first four rows of the studio but died there. *The Leila Torn Show* snorted in disgust. The studio audience was still breathing, but that seemed to be all they were capable of at the moment.

The ceepees were proposing a classic complication for the crime segment of next week's episode. After one of the talent--probably not poor Slappy--finished getting his teeth cleaned, he would grab his trenchcoat and leave. Only he'd get the wrong coat, one belonging to a corrupt, wacky aide to a Congresswoman. The Congresswoman would also be played by Margo Rain. The wacky, corrupt aide intended to sell documents to the tabloid press proving that the Congresswoman had had an illegal

personality boost. The talent with the clean teeth would eventually turn those papers over to Leila.

Or rather, the new Leila.

"Sure, I've put on a few pounds since the show started--I don't deny it. Hey, I've got the only car in town with stretch marks." Slappy clapped his hands to his paunch and bugged out his eyes hopefully, but the studio stayed as quiet as a snowfall.

The aide would then be poisoned and the Congresswoman would be accused of the murder, which would make this a case for Leila's law firm. Slappy currently worked as her chauffeur, although in the first few seasons, when he had been younger and slimmer, he had been her sidekick. He was always campaigning for more to do in the crime segments. Sometimes he got to cover the back entrance when Leila kicked in the front door of the murderer's house. Mostly he just got the plot explained to him.

"And when I get home, it's the same. My wife says that I'm as useless as rubber lips on a woodpecker." Slappy's wife had been killed in Season Seven, although as far as *The Leila Torn Show* knew, he might have remarried in dreamspace. He clapped a hand over his eyes, waited a beat and then spread his fingers and peeked shyly through at the studio audience. She could barely stand to watch her oldest talent, now the sole survivor from the original cast, demean himself this way. But there wasn't much else he could do for her these days.

In next week's fantasy segment, Lucifer would stop the action as usual, just as the jury was about to return its verdict. The ceepees hadn't yet worked out what deal the devil would offer the Congresswoman for an acquittal. Cass was pitching a commitment to lower the voting age to thirteen, so they could cameo one of those teens from *RockZombie High* that everyone was talking about. Graves was holding out for a yes vote on equal rights for dogs; then they could cross-promote with the ongoing puppynappy series on *The Daily Now*.

Slappy gave up on the studio audience. He smeared a grin onto his round face and gave them a broad over-the-head wave. "Well, I'm glad you decided to stay, because we have another great show for you coming right up. Our guest tonight is Kent Turnabout from *Candy Asteroid*." Slappy nodded, waiting for the sleepy applause to die down. "I know you're really going to like this episode, folks, because I'm hardly in it at all."

Some lackwit in the back row gave him two sarcastic claps.

"Thanks, Mom." Slappy turned to the band. "How about a little vanishing music, Chill?" The band struck up "Turn Left on Lonely Street" and Slappy trotted into the wings.

The assistant whip, Herb Katz, gave him a sympathetic pat on the back. "Tough crowd tonight."

"I've seen happier gravestones." He pulled off his tie. "You make any decisions about the dentist skit next week?" He started to unbutton his shirt.

The Leila Torn Show decided it would be a kindness to break the bad news to Slappy then and there. "I think we're going to give it to Jay," said Herb. "He's a good fit, don't you think?" J. Timson Traylor was Leila's landlord, a know-it-all and a bit of a prig. "He can play grouchy in the waiting room scene and everyone will love it when Margo shuts him up by sticking a mirror and that little pointy thing into his mouth."

"A scaler," said Slappy. "It's called a scaler."

"If you say so." Herb's face went blank. "Nobody is going to know that's what it's called, Slap."

"I do." He dropped his shirt on the floor. "Jay will." A clothes snake slithered toward it. "I'll give it to the ceepees." The snake unhinged its jaw and swallowed the shirt. "Maybe they can tweak a gag out of it."

"Tell them to have Margo stick him with it."

Slappy stepped out of his pants and waved over his shoulder as he headed for the ceepees' den. *The Leila Torn Show* was grateful to have talent who still cared about her as much as Slappy O'Toole. He was a real team player. Of course, he had to be. He wasn't ever going to be spun off to a show of his own. As the snake ate Slappy's pants, she decided to have her ceepees write him a new warmup set. Something less personal. Maybe about robots. Or Chinese food.

Herb Katz trudged down to the prop room and opened Anita Bright's closet. She shivered as the fluorescent light penetrated her dreamspace.

"Thirty minutes, Anita," said Herb. "Time to get dressed."

Anita growled and stretched. She was naked; most of the talent waited for their calls in the nude. It made costume changes go faster. Two clothes snakes coiled by the makeup table just outside the closet, waiting to disgorge Anita's underwear and blouse and the indigo Jacquard pantsuit she would wear in the crime scene. Anita was a detective working out of Homicide, who was Leila's nemesis and sometime lover. Old Leila. She had a delicious body; there was no question that appropriate curves had always been part of the show's appeal. But all that taut, creamy skin did nothing for Herb Katz, who was happily married to Chill Jensen, the band leader in dreamspace, where her talent lived when they weren't doing the show.

"How's the house?" said Anita, taking a seat at the makeup table.

"A freezer filled with mom and popsicles," said Herb. "Slappy barely got out alive."

"He needs better lines." Anita picked up the bra the snake had coughed into her lap. "We all do." She slipped it on.

"And the ceepees say they need fresh talent."

"Ceepees come and go," she said bitterly. "This cast has been earning the ratings for seventeen seasons."

"Seventeen is a lifetime in dog years."

In the studio overhead, Kent Turnabout was getting the first big laughs of the episode. The ceepees had him playing a funeral director, newly arrived from Mars, who hadn't quite adjusted to Earth's gravity. He flopped unexpectedly into mourners' laps, almost knocked Leila's closed coffin off its stand and then tried to apologize to it. The laughter pattered against the ceiling of the prop room like rain. "That sounds promising," said Herb.

The Leila Torn Show was relieved that the studio audience was finally reacting, even if it was only because of Turnabout's frenetic mugging. Sensing that he had to carry the comedy segment pretty much by himself, he buzzed around the set like the world's most smarmy fly. In comparison, her own talent seemed about as animated as office furniture. Still in shock over Leila's death, they offered him straight lines at arm's length and watched bleakly as he snatched laughs from their limp grasp. Turnabout was only the third male lead on *Candy Asteroid*, but he was one of the hottest talents on the Allview. He could pop a smile out of a meter maid just by arching an eyebrow. Already there was talk of spinning him off into his own show.

"The only reason they're laughing," said Anita, "is because the man is a lightweight. He hasn't got the

brains that God gave to smoke. I swear, if he even looks sideways at the cameras while I'm testifying, I'm coming off the stand to kick the grin off his silly face."

"Easy, girl," said Herb. "Everyone agreed that we needed some fluff after last week. And he'll pull millions of stupids in."

Anita glared at him in the mirror. "I thought we were leaving the stupids to *Breakfast with the Blockheads*." She slithered into her slip. When she looked up again, he was off rousting the rest of the crime segment talent out of dreamspace.

The Leila Torn Show had known that killing her lead off would make for trouble with her talent as soon as Leila had suggested it. But over the five episode arc that had concluded last week, her ratings had shot back almost to where they had been in her glory days. She felt as powerful as she had ever been, ready to wrestle with the Allview for a slot higher up on the main menu, more cross promotion with other shows, better guest stars, and pricier audience giveaways. But these next few episodes were key. She had to hold her rediscovered audience after seventeen years of pratfalls and stabbings and all-expense-paid vacations to the moon.

Anita shrugged into the jacket of her pantsuit and slipped on her matte black flats. She turned away from the full-length mirror that she shared with Parthia Lukacz and looked over her shoulder at herself in the mirror. She tilted first one shoulder down and then the other, pursed her lips and thought pillow thoughts. She had been hoping to catch up with Slappy in dreamspace to ease his pain but she hadn't been able to find him, which was strange. He was the only one of the cast with a soul, in her opinion. Maybe they could steal a few private moments here in the studio. The possibility titillated her. She knew she wasn't supposed to do all that much in reality except be on the show. If she wanted to make her own decisions, she could choose in dreamspace. But dreamspace was so pale and the studio was so vivid. If she and Slappy....

The Leila Torn Show squashed that dangerous thought flat and sent Anita to check the new Leila.

The new Leila was the daughter of the old Leila's evil twin, Nia, who was introduced in Season Four. The old Leila had barely had time to have sex, much less give birth and raise children. She was too busy solving murders and contending with the devil for the souls of the guest stars. Her twin Nia, on the other hand, had enjoyed plenty of leisure when she wasn't corrupting mayors or managing her international crime cartel. Nia had shielded her daughter from that part of her life, however. In fact, the ceepees hadn't even realized that Nia had a daughter until Season Fifteen. At the climax of last week's episode, the old Leila had summoned the last of her strength to tell the new Leila of Nia's nefarious doings. And then she died of the slow acting poison that a mysterious someone had slipped her in an episode five weeks earlier. *The Leila Torn Show* had killed her lead talent off despite the biggest audience of the season, 87 percent of which had clicked a preference for the old Leila to save herself. In last week's fantasy segment, the devil had offered her a miracle cure in exchange for leaving the new Leila in her mother's malevolent clutches. This, of course, was something the old Leila could never do. *The Leila Torn Show* knew it was possibly foolhardy to go up against her audience like that, but that was the kind of show she was. People would either have to accept her or click on. And nobody but *The Leila Torn Show* would ever know how much it hurt to let her poor, brave Leila sacrifice herself for the good of the show.

Now she had to help the new Leila sell this plot twist to the hundred million customers of the Allview. *The Leila Torn Show* was by no means certain that she was up to the task, which is why she'd asked Anita to watch out for her.

The new Leila had inherited the old Leila's dressing room and had remade it to her own tastes. The old Leila liked hard surfaces that showed their years. There had been rust on the overhead beams and her

Napoleon IV mirror had needed resilvering. This Leila was a fan of butterflies. The wallscape showed a tropical rainforest swarming with Longwings and Julias and Swallowtails and Blue Waves. The mirror was in the shape of a Gulf Fritillary and was lit by glowworms. Reflected in it was the face of the new lead of *The Leila Torn Show*. Her eyes were haunted and when she saw Anita her mouth puckered into a walnut. Anita was certain then that this episode was about to plunge off a cliff, but she was talent. It was her role here to underplay her feelings, show confidence in the new Leila that she didn't feel.

"Ready for your big debut?" she said brightly.

"There were supposed to be raisins," said Leila stiffly. "I specifically asked Herb for raisins."

Anita glanced at the bowl of Muscat raisins on the dressing table, dark as garnets. Leila followed her gaze and then with a screech of frustration swept the bowl onto the floor, shattering it.

"I said golden raisins!" She bounced on her chair twice. "I thought we spoke English on this show."

Anita took a breath. "We all get the jitters, Leila." Then another, longer breath. "I remember my first episode..."

"I didn't upload my part." She regarded herself with grim satisfaction in the butterfly mirror, as if she had just issued some kind of artistic manifesto.

Anita clamped her teeth together so hard she thought she might shatter a molar. *The good of the show*, she told herself. "Well then," she said carefully, "since there's no time for you to dip into dreamspace to catch yourself up, the whips will have to feed you lines through your earstone." Anita tried to imagine how a talent could turn into a stupid. "Don't worry, they do that all the time with last minute rewrites."

"I did it on purpose, you know. I'm going to give a cold reading." She emphasized *cold* and *reading* as if these were terms of art that Anita might not be familiar with. "That way whatever I say will sound like I just made it up."

"Like you just...? But you're on in ten minutes with Turnabout," Anita was so taken aback that she spoke before she realized what she was saying. "He'll stick his tongue into your ear and then tuck you into his back pocket, if you don't know what you're doing."

"He wouldn't." Leila's eyes went wide. "He came to visit me yesterday in dreamspace. He seemed so nice. He brought me a puppy."

"*Kent Turnabout?*"

Leila spun away from the mirror to face Anita. "You all hate me because I'm not her." Then she melted into tears. "I can't do this. I'm not a talent. I was going to be a pet groomer." She picked up a brush imprinted with the bright yellows of the Golden Angelwing butterfly. "I don't know anything about solving murders and I'm scared of the devil."

"Listen, Leila. You have to pull yourself together. We're all depending on you. You're the lead now."

"I don't want to be the lead!" She brushed her hair furiously. "I want raisins."

It was all Anita could do to keep from slapping her. If there was one thing that all the talent in the cast had yearned for over the years, it was to be spun off to a show of their own. Anita had conceived any number of elaborate sets for *Love, Anita* in dreamspace. Yet like everything else in dreamspace, it wasn't good enough. Dreamspace was her refuge, but she longed for the reality of *The Leila Torn Show* and the Allview. Now this brat was handed the coveted prize of a lead on a show and all she could think

of was to push it away?

Anita could feel her fingernails stabbing her palm but her voice was steady. "What would your aunt say if she could hear you now?"

"She's dead. The show killed her."

"She offered to die so the rest of us could go on." She put a hand on Leila's hot, wet cheek and turned her head so that their eyes met. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Of course it does. I loved Leila, too." She shook herself free. "But why won't anybody listen to me? What if I can't *be* her?"

There was a knock at the door; Herb Katz cracked it open. "Fifteen minutes, Leila," he called, and then stuck his head in. He was neither surprised to find Anita in the room nor alarmed to see Leila in tears. "Are you two girls having a heart-to-heart?"

"We can't." Leila swiped at the corner of her eye. "We're one heart shy."

Anita and Herb exchanged glances. "You'll be fine, Leila." Herb touched a finger to his forehead. "Fifteen minutes."

The Leila Torn Show wasn't so sure. The way this episode was going so far, she wondered if she might have made a mistake. Had she betrayed herself just to eke out a few limp last episodes? How many shows survived the death of the lead? Watching Kent Turnabout chew up her talent in the comedy segment made her wish she had lured some hot second lead from another show to replace Leila. Or maybe a strong pitch might have enticed Margo Rain to become her lead, instead of just signing on for a guest shot. She would even have considered calling herself *The Margo Rain Show*. After all, what was in a name?

The Leila Torn Show was so depressed that she turned away from the studio for the first time ever while an episode was live. The whips could run the show without her. Leila would either score or she wouldn't. The cast would either rally or not. Her audience would either stay or click elsewhere. All she could do now was watch anyway, just like the millions of customers of the Allview. But *The Leila Torn Show* could not bear to look at how far she had fallen, so instead she ghosted back into her archives.

Critics maintained that her best seasons were the First and Second, the Eighth, when she first introduced the comic segment, and the Twelfth, Thirteenth, and Fourteenth, when Graves's inspired casting of Lucifer for the fantasy segment had vaulted them to the top of the Allview menu. But *The Leila Torn Show's* favorite season was the Third, when she was a straight crime show and the plots were all fresh. The cast had been different then, full of ambition and wisecracks. Leila had been a P.I. going to law school at night. Slappy had been Slick, thirty pounds thinner, an ex-con turned P.I. who was sexy and funny and quick with his fists. He and Leila had had an affair in Season Two that Slick never really got over, but in Season Three, their banter suggested they might still get back together. In those days, Anita Bright was a cop on a mission to make detective and maybe leap to her own show; she had no use for Leila and wasn't afraid to let the world know it. Leila still had a roommate in Season Three: Meg Wordsworth, a reporter for *Watch This*, who had a knack of being in the right place at the right time, mostly because she was always tagging along with Leila on her cases. Tom Rocket had not yet left the law firm where Leila worked to go to outer space. And of course, back then Leila was in almost every scene; she *was* *The Leila Torn Show*.

But what always drew her back to Season Three was Leo No, Leila's criminal nemesis for ten different episodes. Although she had put several of his lieutenants behind bars--and two into the morgue--he

always managed to skip free just when she thought she had him. He sent her a different playing card--all hearts, starting with the deuce--as a taunt at the conclusion of each of his Season Three episodes. *The Leila Torn Show* still didn't understand why Graves had refused to let Leila capture him and why the Leo No arc stopped at the jack of hearts. But then she didn't understand ceepees; what they did seemed equal parts mendacity and black magic. In the last episode of Season Three, Meg had reported that No had died in the terrorist nuking of Geneva; the cast believed that it was just a ceepee tease for Season Four. But then, in the second episode of that season, Meg had been kidnapped and held hostage until she was executed in the cliffhanger last episode. After that, the ceepees never got around to raising Leila's first archenemy from the dead.

Leila had come closest to Leo No in the jack of hearts episode, in which she was representing the wife of a psychiatrist played by the late Dame Hillary Winterberry. The payoff scene was set among the dressing rooms of a Midnight on Main menswear store, in which Leila had to go from stall to stall, searching for the killer. *The Leila Torn Show* knew it was dangerous to spend too much time looking at reruns, but in her dispirited state, she couldn't seem to help herself.

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INT. STORE/SWINGING HALF DOORS SLICK (*draws gun*) In there? LEILA Yes. But there isn't going to be any gunplay, loverboy. This is No's accountant, not his muscle. SLICK. You willing to bet your life on that? LEILA Why not? I like the odds. (*beat*) But if I lose you can keep my ashes under the bed. (*pushes through doors*) INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM CORRIDOR LEILA Lester? (*pulls aside first curtain*) INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM STALL/CUSTOMER IN BOXERS CUSTOMER No Lester in here, babe. But there's room for you. LEILA Sorry. I'm looking for my son. He's supposed to be trying on his prom tux. (*closes curtain*) (*aside*) Boxers. Not my type. INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM CORRIDOR LEILA Oh Lester, honey? (*pulls aside second curtain*) INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM STALL/THE DEVIL IN SILK TOKAJER SUIT THE DEVIL Try two stalls down. THE LEILA TORN SHOW You! But you were never in this episode! (*beat*) Wait, you were Leo No? THE DEVIL Me? Too small a role. (*beat*) Besides, I hate being typecast. THE LEILA TORN SHOW How did you get into my archive? What is this? THE DEVIL (*spreads his hands*) The usual. I'm here to offer you a proposition. INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM STALL/CLOSEUP: THE LEILA TORN SHOW THE LEILA TORN SHOW No. INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM CORRIDOR/ANGLE THE DEVIL No? Not even interested in hearing the terms? THE LEILA TORN SHOW I'm not talent. I'm the show. THE DEVIL You think, you feel, you enjoy, and suffer. My, how you suffer. I believe we have a basis for a transaction. (*beat*) Just out of curiosity, how many more years would you want? THE LEILA TORN SHOW Years? THE DEVIL If this new lead doesn't work out, you've probably got less than a handful of episodes left before the Allview shuts you down. INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM STALL/CLOSEUP: THE LEILA TORN SHOW THE LEILA TORN SHOW You can give me years? INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM STALL/CLOSEUP: THE DEVIL THE DEVIL Years. INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM STALL/ANGLE THE LEILA TORN SHOW This is a joke the ceepees are playing on me. You can't make something like that happen. You're just talent. THE DEVIL No, *Lucifer* is just talent. I'm the devil, sister, the real deal. I'm offering you years because when I get you, I get the rest of the cast all at once. I'm tired of collecting your people piecemeal. I can extend myself for a package deal. INT. STORE/DRESSING ROOM STALL/NEW ANGLE THE LEILA TORN SHOW My people? THE DEVIL Ever wonder how Graves got to be head ceepee? Why Jay is written into every segment? THE LEILA TORN SHOW I don't believe you've been talking to my talent. I'd know about it. THE DEVIL Why? You're not God. You're just a show. (*beat*) Care to deal? THE LEILA TORN SHOW (*backing away*) No. Get away from me. THE DEVIL That's what they all say--at first. Tell you what ... I'll start things rolling in your direction and then come back in a while for your final answer. Meanwhile, if you don't mind.... (*pulls curtain closed*)

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"Has anyone seen Slappy?" Herb Katz slipped into the Green Room. Anita Bright, Parthia Lukacz, and J. Timson Traylor glanced up from their game of Hearts. "I checked everywhere: backstage, his closet, makeup, the john, the ceepee's den. He missed the ten minute call and now he's about to miss his cue."

"Well, he hasn't been with us," said Parthia, the assistant D. A. who Leila regularly skunked in court. "If we had a fourth, we could play bridge."

"Something's wrong," said Anita, coming out of her chair.

Traylor put his hand on her arm. "And you're not the one to put it right." He tugged her back onto her seat. "We're playing a hand here."

The Leila Torn Show could see that Traylor was trying to shoot the moon. If he could lull Parthia into dumping her queen of spades onto his king, he'd have it.

"He's right, Anita," said Herb. "You stay put or you'll miss your cue."

"Besides," continued Traylor, "Turnabout will skip right past Slappy's lines if he gets the chance. All Slappy has tonight is a weather report."

"Bastard Turnabout is making this episode up as he goes," grumbled Parthia. She put her hand on the queen of spades, jiggled it thoughtfully, and then pulled the ten instead. "And Leila, our new leading doormat, is letting him walk all over her."

"Can you believe he had the balls to steal some of her lines before she could spit them out?" said Traylor.

"Maybe he'll start questioning witnesses once we go to trial." Parthia raised her hand and spoke in her most outraged courtroom bark. "Your honor, I object. Counsel for the defense is irrelevant, immaterial, and catatonic."

Traylor chuckled. Anita opened her mouth to suggest that Herb check for Slappy outside the stage door that opened onto Tomcat Alley, but Herb Katz had already vanished. Sometimes it seemed to her as though the whips had the ability to pass through walls.

The Leila Torn Show was disturbed by Slappy's disappearance. She began a quick inventory of the building but couldn't see him anywhere. He must have left, as impossible as that seemed. It only confirmed what the devil had said to her, that her cast, her whips, her band, even her ceepees could keep secrets from her. Free will was fine in dreamspace but it had no place in the studio.

"Torn?" said the Allview's show-to-show messaging system. It overrode all *The Leila Torn Show's* other inputs; she could no more ignore it than she could a lightning strike. "Rocket here."

Rocket Law was where Tom Rocket had finally landed after the Allview had lifted him from her at the end of Season Five. Tom had guested everywhere while the Allview developed a show for him. *Rocket Law* followed the adventures of a ragtag limited partnership of defense attorneys who flitted around the galaxy in their starship *Queen of Hearts* righting wrongs, bending alien statutes, and having affairs. While it had never quite reached the top of the Allview menu, it was a solid second tier show, which consistently delivered a high attention quotient.

"Rocket, I'm live right now," said *The Leila Torn Show*. "Can this wait?"

"And I'm watching you right now," said *Rocket Law*. "The episode is a bust."

The Leila Torn Show bit back her anger. "It's just Turnabout." When had she ever called *Rocket Law* to criticize his stupid lawyer tricks? "He's too big for the part."

"No, it's your lead, Torn. You dropped a mouse in the lion's den."

"Since when did you grow your critic's horns?"

"Since never. I'm talking numbers, not art."

The Leila Torn Show had been afraid to check, but there was no getting around it now that she had been directly challenged by another show. According to the instants, she'd been hemorrhaging ratings at about a point a minute ever since Leila had made her first appearance.

"I'm busy, Rocket," she said. "Skip to the payoff."

"I'll take this new Leila off your hands. My ceepees have come up with a great multi-episode plot line. Do you know who her father is?"

The Leila Torn Show consulted Graves and the other ceepees. "No. Nia never revealed who the father was."

"Well, Tom Rocket tells me that it's probably him. So now my ceepees are saying we should bring her aboard the *Queen of Hearts*. The Delalo are trying to get back at Tom for breaking the Molybdenum Treaty and we're having it that they've implanted a personality worm in Leila, which explains why she's such a stiff. I'm offering a crossover plot for the next two episodes. My ceepees get veto power over yours--I don't do boob jokes on my show. After that, Leila joins my cast and I'll send Miriel Six over to you. She wants to settle down and have her puppies."

Miriel Six was only *Rocket Law's* third female lead, but she was one of the sexiest dogs on the Allview.

"Miriel Six isn't a lead."

"Neither is the mouse you've got now. You're the show so it's your call, but you could go with guest leads until you find your girl. Or give that Anita Bright her shot; she's waited long enough."

"You're right, Rocket. I *am* the show."

"Don't get all huffy. And another thing, Tom asked if you wanted to send Slick O'Toole over too. I'll throw in some cross-promo. Have one of your talent give him a shout every few episodes, get him up to speed with what's happening back on Earth."

"You want *Slappy*?"

"Apparently he and Tommy were pals in your dreamspace. Anyway, think it over. We can talk again. By the way, you're down another three points." He clicked off.

As soon as *Rocket Law* released his hold on her head, the sounds and sights of the studio swarmed in once again on *The Leila Torn Show*. For better or worse, the episode was almost over. Lucifer was working the studio audience, looking to give away an American Cookhouse complete kitchen makeover just before the commercial break leading into the denouement. "Is there a Miss Angelina Bandoli in the house?" he called. "Angelina Bandoli?" *The Leila Torn Show* read him down to his neurons and confirmed that he was nothing but talent.

A petite silver-haired woman in a housedress decorated with blue daisies levitated out of her seat with a

squeal of joy.

"I hear you, mother." Lucifer charged up the aisle, holding the microphone in front of him like a knight with his lance. "Angelina, Angelina? Isn't that Italian for *angel*? Not sure I can do business with your kind."

The studio audience groaned in frustration.

Lucifer shook his head good-naturedly to reassure them he was just kidding. Once he called out a name, everyone knew it was a done deal. "So mother, it says here you've had a bad year." He thrust the mike at her and she rattled off a sad and slightly incoherent tale of hip replacement, multiple power failures, dead clownfish, and a stove fire. There were only forty-five seconds left before the commercial when he interrupted her.

"I'm satisfied." He turned to the camera and addressed the customers at home. "Are you satisfied?"

The studio audience replied as one. "We're *satisfied*."

Lucifer turned back to Angelina Bandoli. "So mother, you're prepared to make a deal with the devil for state-of-the-art kitchen appliances from the American Cookhouse collection?"

Angelina glanced down at her empty seat, shy as a ten-year-old anticipating her first kiss.

Lucifer put an arm around her shoulder and leered into the camera. "And what are you willing to trade for this fabulous prize?"

"Stop!" The voice exploded from the wings, stage left. The curtain shivered and Slappy O'Toole stepped into the lights, a gun in his hand and a wildness in his eyes that *The Leila Torn Show* hadn't seen in years. "Stop this now."

Backstage, Herb Katz murmured, "Hold the commercial until I say."

"This is all wrong," said Slappy, trudging downstage toward the audience, the gun dangling like an afterthought. "Wrong, wrong, wrong." He called out to Lucifer. "We can't go on like this. We've ruined this show, all of us. Made it a joke."

The stage right curtains billowed and Kent Turnabout skipped onto the stage. *The Leila Torn Show* couldn't read her guest star as well as she could read Slappy but she knew if there were improvising going on, Turnabout would try to be part of it.

"That's right!" Turnabout danced around Slappy twice and then put an arm on his shoulder. "It's all a big joke now." His voice bounced mightily off the last row of the house. "I watched Leila when I was just a kid. I used to cheer when she caught the killer." He pointed at the people in the front row. "You good folks did too, right?" The audience murmured, uncertain whether they were in the comedy or the crime segment of the show. "In the old days there was justice," he said. "Now there are dishwashers."

Slappy shook Kent Turnabout off and pointed the gun at him. "You're what's wrong with this show, asshole."

The studio audience gasped.

The Leila Torn Show hadn't seen that gun since Season Seven, when Slick's wife had been murdered. When Slick had become Slappy. Now, ten years later, his arm trembled under its weight. "Leila never would have let the likes of you on when she was alive."

"Poor old Slippy." Turnabout stepped three paces back, made a gun of his thumb and forefinger and aimed at him. "Maybe you're what's wrong with this show. You're not funny anymore. That's why Leila put you on the shelf." He went up on tiptoes to place an imaginary Slappy on the highest shelf he could reach, making a noise like a slide whistle.

The Leila Torn Show guessed that stupids all over the world were peeing their pants with laughter.

Slappy considered, then nodded. "You're right," he said and put the gun to his temple. "I am just about done."

The house went quiet. Then a woman, maybe Angelina Bandoli, started to weep. Everyone was watching Slappy.

Except for Kent Turnabout, who was not about to be upstaged by a sad, fat, old ex-P. I. "You may be done, Mr. Sloppy," he called brightly, "but I'm not." He bounded across the stage like a deer on fire, snatched the gun from Slappy and put it to his own head.

"He thinks it's just a prop," Herb Katz's voice rang in every earstone. "Please god, somebody tell him that thing might be loaded."

The studio audience was just beginning to clap when he pulled the trigger. The gun fired with a roar like hell cracking open.

"Curtain!" shouted Herb Katz. "Lower the goddamn curtain."

But it was Chill Jensen who saved the day. The band leader called out "Star-Spangled Banner," tapped his baton and as soon as the band began to play the studio audience stood and sang along. The house was a little shaky but the customers at home couldn't smell the cordite or see the finger of blood poking from beneath the curtain. After they finished with the national anthem, Chill called for *The Leila Torn Show* theme song. The house lights came up and the audience stood and shuffled out, muttering in confusion.

The ceepees boiled out of their den to see the corpse for themselves. The band left their instruments on the bandstand and joined the cast which lingered in the wings, waiting for *The Leila Torn Show* to do something, say anything. But she was speechless in the shock of the moment. She kept telling herself that what had happened had nothing to do with her. It was the devil's work. She had asked for none of it.

Then the cops from *Protect and Defend* showed up, and sent everyone back to their dressing rooms and offices. Anita led Slappy back to the Green Room and sat with him there, holding his hand. To distract him, she put on one of his favorite episodes from Season Two, the one where he found the sailboat in the swimming pool. Many of the talent jumped straight into dreamspace while they waited to give their statements, momentarily safe from the rough and tumble of reality. Meanwhile, the cops went about their jobs with grim efficiency, although clearly *Protect and Defend* was jubilant at the chance to crossover into what promised to be a ratings bonanza.

Finally Graves shook *The Leila Torn Show* out of her lethargy. "We've got messages," he said. "Hundreds of them."

The Leila Torn Show scanned them quickly, and then left all but one for her ceepees to handle.

"I loved it," breathed Margo Rain. "Every minute of it. I've never seen a show blow itself up like that. And two weeks in a row. You're so brave. I'm very excited now to be on next week. You do have something special for me, no? Whatever you want, I'm yours."

The Leila Torn Show considered. In her heart, she believed that she hadn't agreed to anything. And she had to think of the good of the show.

"I have a proposition for you, Margo," she said.

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