

# The Deli Worker

*by* Jeff Geiger

This is the story of my friend, Gil. He lives in a New York City apartment in the heart of the comedy district and works at the deli across the street making sandwiches. He's in his 50's but appears much older due to his bald head, frail body, and beady black eyes that look like they're set too far back into his skull. He eats three large meals a day and never works out, but he still remains small. Sometimes he even loses weight. His muse is constantly in overdrive, filling his head with endless jokes that Gil must write in the journals so that he can think clearly. You see, Gil is a standup comedian. Well, actually, he's a comedy writer. Well, actually, he isn't a comedian at all. He's mute. But Gil will not stop trying to be a comedian until every joke in every journal has reached an audience.

If someone tried to lookup Mr. Gil Robert Reinhardt on the web, they wouldn't find anything. This is a man who keeps to himself both online and in person. He has a computer, but he doesn't use it for entertainment or communication purposes. Perhaps one day he'll get rid of those journals crowding his apartment and instead type his jokes, but probably not. Perhaps the website for the deli has him listed under the staff section, but Gil wouldn't check so he doesn't know. You'd think a mute would be in favor of being on the same level with millions of other people, but Gil simply doesn't care. However, the one day Gil does exist on the internet, the day fans are buying tickets for shows, or watching YouTube videos of his acts, that will be the day Gil is the happiest man alive.

Gil watches the comedians cross the street in a pack of laughter, wishing to be laughing with them. But he must stay behind the counter to feed others and remain a funny man who can't laugh at his own jokes, let alone others. Gil's eyes have never left the group as they enter the deli. A stout man with a thick black beard picks a number. That's Bruce Duffey. Then a lean man with a long red scarf. That's Erik Bernabe. Then another tall man with thick white glasses.

That's Damon Hillsman. Then finally a woman in a skirt with curly red hair. That's Toni Cates. They place their orders. As Gil readies each sandwich and rings the bell, he imagines the high tinny sound as laughter for the show he missed. When they all sit down and eat, they keep carrying on with comments of the show. He wants to sit with them. To share his jokes. To discuss the industry. But he can't.

The rain continues drumming away on the apartment windows. With each drop, Gil quickly jots a new joke in his journals. He's depressed and doesn't know what to do with his life. Some days he wishes other people could feel what he feels. He has dreams, or more like nightmares, of cutting off a pianist's hands, muting a singer, or blinding an artist. But he hopes these jokes will eventually brighten other people's days. Twenty jokes later, the cloud starts to lift from his mind, a wrinkled grin appears on his face. He starts to think of Liz.

Liz Draper is Gil's only other coworker, or, at least, the only other coworker that he personally knows. She is in her 20's and has short brown hair, with a figure that's pretty, but plain. She's a sweetie. She works as a cashier in the deli on same shifts that Gil works. Unlike Gil, who works there because of his condition and lack of college education, she could move on to a better job, but she works at the deli to help finance her pursuit for a business degree. The old man doesn't know yet, but Ms. Draper understands his passion. She noticed how he looked at those comedians the other day. Gil is right to think of her.

He should go to her for help, considering she's his only friend. Liz even let him off today, so he could clear his mind. She understands his muse related problem and is always willing to help. He keeps a journal on hand at the deli, but if the day is a bit slow, it fills fast. Today he does nothing but write. Well, that and worrying if he'll ever amount to anything. Finishing the journal and reaching for another, Gil looks out the window at the now clear sky. He'll ask for help.

Gil enters the deli and sees Liz at the cashier. "Morning Gil," she says smiling. He responds with a short nod and wave. He joins her behind the counter and they prepare for the day. A few orders go by and he's wondering how to bring it up. The fingers on his left hand keep fidgeting when he makes the sandwiches. Every time there's a break in customers he gets the guts to walk over, but then another person walks in. He decides to wait until their lunch break.

Hours go by and they're in the back room eating. Gil pulls out his pad and writes his question. He pushes the pad in Liz's direction and she reads it aloud. "'Will you help me? I want to get out of here. I want to do something I want...'" Liz pauses and looks up at Gil, "'To be a comedian. Will you help?'... I'd be all for it...but...how? What do you want to do?"

Gil shrugs and gestures at her. "You'd just thought I'd have your answer? Well...I dunno...We can't do open mic..." She glances down at her bag, in it is the latest David Sedaris book. "You could write a book and do a tour."

Gil eyes her doubtfully. "No, seriously, it'll work. Turn your journals of jokes into books. I'll try to contact some publishers. If that doesn't work..well...what if...what if we had someone deliver your jokes?" Gil gets up and hugs her until their break is over. The rest of the day Gil puts a new passion into his sandwich crafting and genially smiles at each customer.

The suited man across from them places the script on the table and pushes it toward Gil and Liz. "We're not going to take it," he says plainly. The duo stare at each other, eyes wide and mouth agape. Gil is trembling and wanting to scream. Liz will handle the conversation, they've been working together for so long that their thoughts have melded together.

"What do you mean? You said just last week that it was so close to being published. You don't understand, you're the last publisher. Without you, we have nothing."

It's true. The entire summer they've been going to all the major publishing houses in the Big Apple. None of them took the script

past the first level of review. With this house though, they really are on the cusp of publication.

"Another comedian came in and he was better. So we chose him. It just doesn't flow right. Something is off. It just does—"

"Because you're not reading it right," Liz said as she slams her palm on the table. She recomposes herself, but starts biting her nails. All the while Gil sits trembling, trying not to unleash the fury of emotion inside of him. "We...You...But...What..." Liz trails off. The man simply shakes his head. Gil and Liz get up from the table and storm out of the glass offices.

With all options exhausted, the duo turn to holding auditions with Gil's material. The current comedian onstage is terrible. Liz looks to her right at Gil who is scrawling messages on a note pad. It reads: "NO-too slow & clumsy." She looks back at the comedian. "Mr...um...McGinness...was it? Yeah, well...Gil and I have been discussing..." She notices the man step away from the mic and turn towards the exit. "We think you have a chance to go the next round. We'll contact you with details soon." She hears Gil drop his pencil. The young Neil McGinness is pleased and walks away happily. Liz looks down and let's out a worried breath. Gil and Liz have been talking on how these auditions would work for the past week. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. Turns out, amid all the coordination and planning, Liz never told Gil she had trouble saying no. I did mention she was a sweetie. "It's okay Gil, we'll just never contact him. That's better than saying no...right?" Gil just shakes his head and walks away.

Gil thinks he should head back in to see the remaining contestants. It's late and there's only a few of them left, so it couldn't hurt. Could it? Gil walks back in and sits down at the judges table. Liz just successfully rejected another hopeful. There's a short pause before the next contestant appears. Then I, a tall and fit black man, step out from the shadows and walk to the mic. I'm about the same age as Gil, but my hair is grey, not gone. I'm holding a black and white cane in my hands. Standing behind the mic, patiently, I look out at them behind a pair of horn-rimmed sunglasses.

"Name, please."

"Mel. Mel Harper."

"What is that you do, Mr. Harper?"

"I'm a manager at a local grocery store."

"Not a comedian?"

"No, sweetie. Just thought that I might have a knack for this. Co-workers and customers say I should do professional announcing, instead of what I say on the store intercom."

"Okay, just read the line, please."

Instead of pulling out the slip from my pocket, I say it aloud from memorization.

Liz lets out a little chuckle, the first all night, the first of the week, the first of the auditions. When hearing the line, Gil's ears perk up and eyes glisten with newfound happiness. He jumps out from his seat and grabs Liz. Shaking her with excitement, he stares into her eyes. His own little black pupils convey the simple message: This is it.

The voice they hear was smooth, silky and warm. It can make the deaf hear again. The sound-waves penetrate the soul. It wraps around their body and becomes the puppet master of their heartstrings.

I just stand there with a wide grin on my face. Hearing them jump up and down and imagining their own beaming faces touches me. I grab the yin yang top of my cane and feel my way down towards them. We leave together as a trio in ecstasy. Only as they start to regain themselves, and after we've walked for a few blocks, do they realize I'm blind. I don't care. It's showtime.

I sit in my apartment trying to imagine what Gil said. He and Liz were walking through Central Park, on their way to an upscale restaurant for lunch. It was a gorgeous day and the park was packed with tourists, locals, couple, families, and pets. There was even a Shakespeare play going on. Hamlet, Gil said. But they were on the fringe, between the park and the city. Away from the park-goers, daydreamers, and bard fans. They were mugged. It was a comic they

rejected, McGinness. He was pissed that Ms. Draper never called back. He tried contacting her over and over again. He's known for his asylum jokes, and apparently that's from experience. He saw them at the park and waited in the bushes. When they came near, he jumped out and punched Liz, knocking her out and giving her a nice shiner. He grabbed Gil's tablet from her tote and broke it across his knee. The comic silently and casually walked away back into the city streets, blending in with the crowd. Gil let out a muted cry and stared frightened at Liz, not knowing what to do. In a panic he scooped her up, her body almost outweighing his frail stature. He did his best to run back into the center, but he didn't know what to do. He just ran.

When he neared the stage, people took notice and ran over. But he just stood there panting, shaking, frantically and hopelessly gesturing what happened. The small group surrounding him doesn't understand. A couple dressed as Rosencrantz and Guildenstern join the group. The wife, Guildenstern, thankfully understands sign language and everything is figured out. Liz is fine. The tablet is replaceable. But how many rejections were there? Do I want a target painted on my back?

Gil and I hear the mail land with a thud at the entryway. Gil gets up to get it. I'm sitting at his kitchen table with a handful of journals, the last ones, stacked next to me. I hear Gil return to the table and set the mail down. He pulls out his tablet and starts typing. Our method of conversation is rather interesting. He can't speak to me and I can't read his signs or messages. Normally, Liz will tell me what he's saying, but she can't be everywhere all the time. So our interactions are aided by tablet computer that will read Gil's writings aloud in a robotic voice.

"What do we got today?"

"*New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time Magazine*, and a few pieces of junk mail."

"Any interesting covers?"

"Yeah, I'm on all three!"

A wide grin covers my face and I slam my hand on the table with delight. "That's great! Let's celebrate!" I hear a short snuffle from Gil. "Something wrong?"

"No. Just a start of a cold, I think. Let me get the whiskey."

I hear his loafers take him towards the cupboard and he grabs the glasses and bottle. As he pours, I grab the mail and start feeling the glossy pages. "Will you read me a line?"

"Sure. 'Gil is a fantastic comedian who has taken the country by storm.'" We take a shot.

"Another!"

"'This NYC born-and-raised deli worker can warm anyones heart!'" We take a shot.

More reading, more shots. The night is full of celebration. Or so I believed.

I stand on the dais of the stage facing the sold out crowd. I feel the lights bathe my body in a warm glow, though looking out I see nothing but darkness. I hold the microphone in one hand, my cane in the other. Gil sits in a chair on my right. Joke after joke the audience responds in an uproar of laughter. The show continues without a hitch. I feel the lights dim and I hear the crowd pleasantly funnels out of the theater. Liz greets me when I enter the back room. She sounds upset.

"Good show, eh, sweetie?"

"Not exactly, Mel. He's gone."

"Say that again? He's gone? Who? Gil?"

"Yea..he..um...started out fine. But about thirty minutes in he got...all...fidgety. Shortly thereafter he...just got up and left."

I sit down and move the top of my cane between my palms. "Well, the explains the murmurs from the audience around that time. But I guess I was still too caught up in the moment to hear him leave. Did you see where he went?"

"No...and I was too stunned to follow. Sorry..."

"It's okay. He'll come back shortly, I'm sure of it, sweetie. We can continue the tour without him if needed. He will come back, won't he?"

"I'm don't know Mel. I don't know..."

I hear Gil's light footsteps walk across the hotel room floor, straight in my direction. I may be blind, but I have a knack for reading emotions and faces that I can't see. I can feel his icy stare and sense the tension in the room. I know he's furious at me. The tablet comes out.

"Why are you doing this, Mel? I thought we had a deal!"

"I'm doing exactly what you wanted me to do. You wanted to get famous, and now you are."

"No. You're wrong. It's the other way around. I got *you* famous, Mel. I created you! This was supposed to be my dream come true. I was supposed to be the next big thing. But now it's all you. YOU! YOU! I had my 15 minutes but then you stole it from me and made it 30."

"Gil, settle down. You're on the cover of *Time*. You're on the front page of *The New York Times*. You're on—"

"I lied, Mel. *You're* on those covers. You couldn't see for yourself, and I couldn't stomach the thought of telling you. I couldn't voice my own failure."

The computer voice and typing have stopped. Gil is frantically pacing around the room. I sit on the bed in silence, not knowing what to say. Am I really on those covers? Am I really the funniest man around? I never wanted this. I only wanted to help. Or did I? The fame has been rather pleasant. Hearing hundreds of people laughing and imagining all those smile faces touched me. I like having that power to changes people's emotions. Liz and I have made a fortune doing so. I can't go back to working into a grocery store. No, this must go on. I must convince Gil that I'm not stealing the spotlight. I have a presence now.

The footsteps and heavy breathing pause. The typing resumes. "This has to change, Mel. I don't know how, but it has to. Or stop. Yes, stopping would be good. I don't know what I would do without



comedy, but at the moment this is anything but funny. I want my life back. I want *me* back. I was supposed to come out of the shadows. Not hide in bigger ones! Why did you do this to me, Mel? Why? WHY? I thought we we're friends. I thought we were in this together." The voice stops and I hear Gil sit down on the bed. "Calm down Gil. We can figure something out. We'll just change the show a little. Make your presence larger. Anything you want and it's yours. It is your show after all. *You're* the comedian. Not me. They love you. They really do."

I hear him get up and walk some more. Not pacing this time. The loafers are carrying him further away from me, to a side of the room I'm not familiar with. A zipper of a duffel. Shuffling of clothes. A plastic bag snaps open. I hear heavier plastic moving around. A *clink* noise. The loafers are moving back to me now, closer towards the center of the room. Does he still have his tablet with him? "Gil?" I quietly ask, "What are you doing?" Silence. I hear that heavier plastic in the air a few feet away from me. Whatever it is, it must be in Gil's hands. I think he's waving it around. It's quiet again. His breathing is getting louder. Louder. Then I hear it. The distinctive sound that ties it all together. The sound that makes me able to see the entire room in one vivid picture. It's the sound of a man pulling back a hammer of a gun.

The moment seems to stretch on for infinity, but I stay relaxed. I've known Gil for too long and I'm positive he wouldn't do such a thing. Then I hear the gun and Gil thump down on the floor. He begins to sob. I stand up, grab my cane and walk towards the door. Gil's message was clear. I exit the room, never to be with that hapless comedian ever again. In the hallway, I flip out my cell and speed-dial Liz. By the time I leave the hotel, she is waiting at the sidewalk in a red convertible. I hop in and tell her the news. She's stunned, but only a little. We'll do just fine without him. He's been showing up to shows less and less and we've used all his journals long ago. I've studied his style and I've been writing my own material that the critics enjoy even more. I'm called one of the

greatest comedians of the decade and Liz's apprentices are sought after all over the world. We drive to the airport to catch the plane for our next show in London, our first international gig.

I didn't steal anything from him. I didn't shove him in the corner. He was the careless one and misplaced what he should have held onto. It wasn't like he didn't get paid, he made the most. His muse should have come up with a way from him to be recognized. Liz and I will continue to tour the world and make millions effortlessly. The public has already forgotten him and moved on. However, I retell this story to remember him and thank him for the success he gave me.

It's a shame that Gil Reinhardt will remain a deli worker.

