

I. Arrivals

Chapter One

"Johnson."

"And where might that be?" Adrian asked, dreading the answer.

Syd Mandel, Adrian Conway's longtime Hollywood agent, tried to appear casual in response. "Ohio."

"Ohio." Adrian repeated the name as if the territory had not yet been admitted to the Union.

Becoming a bit defensive, Syd added a third "Ohio," adding, "It's east of here."

"Then why do they call it the Midwest?"

"Sorry, A, the real East wasn't available. Something to do with the economy...or something."

Adrian decided to ignore his agent's implied reference to the recent trajectory of Adrian's film career and instead narrowed the focus of the conversation. "And why... Johnson, is it?"

Syd dropped his head into a nod and kept it there, finally raising it only to interrupt Adrian's geography lesson about the only notable, no, worse, *noticeable* cities in Ohio beginning with the letter "C."

"They weren't available either."

"No? Why ever not?"

"Look, Adrian, try to look on the bright side. It's a great play, Lancaster totally fucked the film, so the coast is clear for a knockout performance..."

"In Johnson, Ohio. Got it." Adrian savored his sarcasm like truffles on pasta.

"...Inge is hot right now..."

Adrian continued to annotate Syd's spiel. "Word has it he was as much of a drunk as the character you're asking me to play."

"No, Adrian, Doc is a *recovering* alkie. But he does have one hell of a drunk scene when he almost murders his wife."

Adrian appeared not the least bit mollified, shifting his position on Syd's sofa to avoid sitting on the slash in the hyde of the dreaded nauga.

Syd continued, finding it easier to avoid observing Adrian's increasingly despondent demeanor. "And the female lead..."

"Let me guess. Blondell, Sterling, Booth..." Adrian taunted his agent with a recitation of the major Hollywood stars who had appeared in the play either on screen or on stage.

"Only if we're casting from a casket."

"Then who?"

Adrian was hardly relieved when his agent had to consult a clipboard before answering. "Eileen Brockway."

"Surely not *the* Eileen Brockway!"

"Yes. The first lady of the theatre," then joining Adrian in finishing the sentence, "in Johnson, Ohio."

"Look, Syd, I accepted the ignominy of appearing in regional theatre a while back... okay, a long while back...but I comforted myself with the notion that it was *for* local audiences, not *by* them."

Syd produced an eight-by-ten-inch glossy photo from his clipboard and tossed it across the expanse of his only slightly larger than his eight-by-ten-foot office.

Adrian's personal and professional reactions to Eileen Brockway's somewhat insistent beauty were at odds with each other. He decided to express only the latter. "Great, Syd, just what we need. Slatternly Lola as a babe. Regional theater verité."

"Beauty is easier to tone down than to ramp up, A."

Beaten on that subject, Adrian awkwardly segued to, "Does Johnson at least have a decent hotel?"

Addressing arguably the hardest sell of all, Syd soldiered on, "Actually you'll be staying with the Brockways."

Again, Adrian, looking at Eileen's composite photo, complete with face and figure coverage at times scanty and at all times alluring, experienced mixed feelings. He settled for silence.

"The Brockways have a large and beautiful home. In fact, they're the pillars of the community."

"They?"

"Well, of course. Her husband's the town's leading lawyer and they have a son." Pressing his luck, Syd added cautiously, "Actually, the son's playing Turk."

Adrian decided it was time for the tantrum. He could deal with the husband—he'd done that before. He even felt a kind of kinship with the guy. After all, they were both playing big fish in the small pond of Johnson, hubby permanently, he temporarily. But stacking the cast with *two* members of the host family was too much.

"Syd, this is too much. You're asking me to go into deepest, darkest Johnson, play a drunk..." Adrian ignored his agent's change of expression, particularly the brow lift, "... share a shower with half of my supporting cast..."

Syd decided to stem the lava flow.

"Reality check, Adrian. Lola is not a supporting role. If anything, *your* part is. You'll have your own room and bath, so any shower sharing will be strictly consensual. The money we're saving on your housing and the use of local actors will permit the producer to pay your usual fee despite..."

"Despite what!" Adrian roared as he struggled to rise from his sunken seat on the sofa with at least a suggestion of suddenness.

"Despite the fact that your career is beginning to make Norman Maine's look like Vicki Lester's."

Syd's reference to the falling and rising stars of *A Star Is Born* was not lost on Adrian. "That's vicious, Syd."

"Sorry to be blunt. Call it tough love."

Adrian let a major inhalation straighten his spine. "You know, Syd, there are other agents in this town."

Syd lifted the blackest of black phone receivers from its cradle and pointed its waxy earpiece directly at his longtime client.

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If a manufacturer of laundry detergent wanted to launch a TV ad campaign showing how severely damaged an "average" town would be if all of its housewives were deprived of the company's product for a week, Johnson, Ohio would be the perfect choice. Not only being in the Midwest, Johnson represented the middle of just about everything else from population to politics, from income to crime statistics. Johnson's only brush with extremes was the glacial bite of its winters and the smothering heat of its soggy summers. Its short transitional seasons were more threatening of things to come than times to be enjoyed for themselves.

Bearing one-half the name of a famous manufacturer of sterile bandages wasn't enough to save Johnson from the impression that it was, indeed, invisible. In less connected times, Johnson would not have been so incessantly reminded of its significance when compared to Ohio's "C" cities, but thus aware, Johnson seemed to develop a sort of inferiority complex as a more palatable alternative to acknowledgment of actual inferiority.

Against this background, the slightest suggestion of culture or artistic expression was seized upon like a life raft. One such institution, if a 5,000-square-foot cinder block building can be so called, was the Benign Albino Theatre, located two blocks off Johnson's inevitable Main Street.

The Benign Albino Theatre (not to be confused with "Theater") was founded ten years earlier by an actor whose film career had crashed even faster than Adrian Conway's. But before the fall, the founder had had a brief but substantial success in a well received film called The Benign Albino. After that, the actor had done everything but change his own name to Ben Albin to keep his personal limelight lit. The founding of the theater having served its legacy-establishing purpose, the founder sold it on the condition that its name would never be changed and returned to fight the good but losing fight in Hollywood.

Now all that was left in Johnson was the theater itself, which staged a succession of tried, true, and trite comedies and musicals with proven track records of commercial success elsewhere. To date, the only exception had been a production of *Medea*, starring the ubiquitous Eileen Brockway. The box office receipts from *Medea* made the theater's cash flow go from sluggish to glacial. The holders of the theater's two mortgages were only too happy to see the show replaced after one week with a revival of *The Man of La Mancha*, which set the population of Johnson back to humming *The Impossible Dream*. For most of that population, dreams in Johnson were exactly that.

The decision to "go serious" again with William Inge's *Come Back, Little Sheba* was a bold one for Artistic Director Duncan Shields—a decision which would never have been made but for the unexpected availability of Adrian Conway to play the role of Doc. Duncan, who usually relied on teachers from the performing arts department of the town's only community college to direct shows at the Benign Albino, would direct this production himself, drawing on directorial talents he'd honed at various black box venues near New York's Sheridan Square in a theatre subset best described by imagining someone with a bad stutter trying to say, "off-Broadway." Having been kicked out of his rent-controlled and, for him, rent-free apartment in New York's Greenwich Village by an older man who had tired of his superannuated boy-toy's pretensions, Duncan fled to Johnson to live, again rent free, with his aunt.

Duncan and other directors working at the Benign Albino entered into a kind of unspoken pact with local actors cast in the theater's productions. Had it been heard, it would have gone something like, "I promise not to expose your lack of talent if you agree to return the favor regarding mine." Duncan was hoping that Adrian Conway's ego had been sufficiently tenderized in recent years as not to create too much of a problem and that he would join in the love fest that seemed to satisfy everyone save the theater's audiences, who, after most performances, would breathlessly return to their TVs.

As the woman most frequently cast in any role roughly answering to "female," Eileen Brockway was a frequent visitor to Duncan's tiny office at the Benign Albino. This day they were gushing over the prospect of working in *Come Back, Little Sheba* with the Hollywood star who had managed to fall into their laps on the way down to total obscurity. Duncan apologized for the necessity of casting in the small role of a neighbor

the only woman in town that posed even the slightest threat to Eileen's supremacy as the drama queen of Johnson.

Although Eileen would fight to the death the comparison, and Duncan would have noted it at his peril, Eileen and the character of Lola she was playing in *Come Back, Little Sheba* had much in common. Both were high school knockouts. Lola was the Charleston champion, Eileen such an obvious yearly choice for prom queen that the high school had to invoke term limits. In later years, however, Lola aided nature in taking its course, whereas Eileen fought the good fight with the assistance of gyms, sports, spas, and regular applications of potions and lotions from New York's most expensive boutiques. Eileen was no more proud of her Midwestern roots than those of her mousy brown tresses. Thanks to Miss Maxine at Continental Coiffures, Eileen's natural hair color was effectively and regularly exterminated. As far as make up and coiffure were concerned, Eileen Brockway would as soon go out naked as natural.

Regarding her personal provenance, Eileen always imagined that the affects of a southern belle represented a step up from Johnson. And, after all, if the very British Vivien Leigh, Eileen's favorite actress, could "go southern" in not one, but two epic films, why shouldn't Eileen have a little fun in her hometown? She knew the ruse would confuse rather than fool, but so what? So Eileen's "I declare" along with other quasi-precious monikers related to confections, became fixtures in her personal lexicon.

Eileen and Emma Bovary, the tragic heroine of Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*, would also have got on although they may have fought for first browsing rights to the monthly fashion magazines. Mmes. Bovary and Brockway both believed that bearers of beauty were by that fact alone entitled to more excitement from life than the amounts parceled out to the plain.

Eileen would have never imagined herself continuing to live in Johnson twenty years after her marriage to Dan Brockway, the physically and intellectually impressive captain of the high school debating team. She never dreamed that her husband wouldn't share hers, or that Dan would be more or less content with a beautiful wife, handsome son, and a modestly profitable and, more important to Dan, highly respected law firm bearing his name.

Through the years, Eileen would beg her husband to volunteer to defend criminals with national and notorious profiles, so convinced was she that such a move would propel them into the public spotlight and out of Johnson. After all, Dan was a graduate of a preeminent law school, was more handsome than Jeffrey Pfeifer, admittedly a low bar, trimmer than F. Lee Bailey, more Christian than Robert Shapiro and a whole lot whiter than Johnnie Cochran. But her pleas were rebuffed with Danton's characteristic gentleness and grace, leaving Eileen to find solace in being Johnson's most beautiful and gracious hostess and most steadily engaged leading lady in productions at the Benign Albino.

While Eileen, star, and director, Duncan, were each secretly and elaborately planning to do precisely the opposite, Duncan and Eileen agreed upon the critical importance of treating Adrian Conway as just another member of the Benign Albino band, entitled to no special treatment or deference whatsoever. Eileen chose not to mention to Duncan the party she was giving for Adrian to celebrate his arrival in Johnson, thereby giving her additional time to come up with an excuse for not inviting her treasured director to it.