

KING OF COMEDY

INT: CHINESE RESTAURANT ON UPPER WEST SIDE - NIGHT

We are in the kitchen watching two dishes being chopped, shredded and boiled in deep fat. The activity is frantic. WE FOLLOW the two dishes as a WAITER carries them from the kitchen to a booth where PUPKIN and RITA are talking. It is a painfully plain restaurant, shaped in a rectangle, with booths lining either side and a row of little tables in between. At the back is the kitchen and two phone booths, facing each other. An old Chinese WOMAN mans the cash register by the door. The WAITER sets the dishes down before RITA and PUPKIN and clears an enormous plate of spare rib bones from RITA's place. RITA hands the WAITER her empty cocktail glass. RITA and PUPKIN are facing one another.

RITA

Another one, Chan.

PUPKIN

(to WAITER)

Chopsticks, please.

The WAITER nods and leaves.

RITA

So all this time you've been thinking about me, huh?

PUPKIN

That's right, Rita.

RITA

What kinds of things were you thinking?

PUPKIN drops his eyes shyly. RITA starts laughing.

RITA

Oh, ho! Those kinds of things! Shame on you, Rupert.

PUPKIN

Rita, I assure you there was ...

RITA

Rupert Pupkin is an unclean person!

PUPKIN

Come on, Rita. People will hear.

RITA

(in a whisper)

Rupert Pupkin is an unclean person. Oh, come on, Rupert. Relax. Have a little fun.

WAITER arrives with RITA's drink and chopsticks and a beer for PUPKIN.

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PUPKIN

This is a very important evening to me, Rita.

RITA

Did you know your nose wiggled when you talked?

PUPKIN

It does?

RITA

Yeah. Just the tip. Like a rabbit.

(pause) Hey, are we gonna eat or what? I'm starving.

PUPKIN serves RITA.

RITA

It always looks like they put worms in this stuff.

PUPKIN

Just taste.

RITA tastes.

RITA

Well, I guess it won't kill me.

PUPKIN

This is supposed to be the finest  
Cantonese cuisine in the city.

RITA

Yeah? Then what happened to the  
tablecloths?

PUPKIN drops his eyes.

RITA

Oh, don't worry about it. This is  
fine. (She takes a long drink) I'm  
having a good time. So you've been  
devoted to me, huh?

PUPKIN

I used to see you at the Garden  
every year.

RITA

Oh, the Follies. That was the right  
name for 'em. How did you know which  
one was me? We all looked like chickens.  
What I mean is, we all looked like the  
same chicken. I thought it was gonna be  
Rita Keane in the Ice Follies and I  
wind up looking like Henny Penny.

RITA chuckles to herself.

PUPKIN

You just didn't get the breaks.

RITA

Breaks, bullshit! My parents didn't  
have the money for the right coach.  
But what difference does it make?

She starts laughing to herself.

RITA

I remember once we were down in Atlanta and the ice machine broke down. We did three hours of slush. Everyone was falling on their faces and hopping up with their arms open for a bow like the whole thing was planned. And the people ate it up.

PUPKIN

I liked the show.

RITA

Yeah? The Follies? You really must have been carrying the torch. What did you think when I got married? You knew I got married?

PUPKIN

I knew it wouldn't last.

RITA

You think I should have married you, instead, huh?

PUPKIN

Peter Drysdale! Really, Rita!

RITA

If he'd only been hit by a train. He was worth a helluva lot more dead than alive, I can tell you that.

RITA raises her glass to the WAITER who is standing nearby, talking with another WAITER. As she does, a nice-looking young MAN sitting in the middle aisle raises his glass of beer to her and drinks it, as a kind of toast. RITA smiles briefly and her eyes return to PUPKIN. The YOUNG MAN is seated behind PUPKIN, facing RITA. The WAITER comes over and collects the glass. Throughout the rest of the scene, a subtle flirtation continues between RITA and the

YOUNG MAN.

PUPKIN

Are you seeing anyone?

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RITA starts for a moment, thinking PUPKIN has caught her looking at the YOUNG MAN.

RITA

What do you mean?

PUPKIN

I want to know about the competition,  
that's all.

RITA

Well, tomorrow night, I've got a date  
with Joe Namath -- you know Joe. And  
Thursday --- let's see --

PUPKIN

I'm serious, Rita.

RITA

(imitating him)

I'm serious, Rita. (In her own voice)

Sure I see people. I'm not a nun, Rupert.

I see a lot of people.

PUPKIN

Anyone special?

RITA

(chuckling)

You mean am I "going steady"? Rupert,

I'm thirty-one years old!

PUPKIN

What about that guy tonight?

RITA

Him?

PUPKIN

Why him?

RITA

What am I supposed to do, huh? Sit home watching TV? He's just some guy. He's got his own aluminum siding business. He comes into the city sometimes, that's all.

PUPKIN

You don't go out with him for his money?!?

RITA

Oh, horrors! Look, Rupert, what do you think they pay me in that dump? Ninety-five bucks. And you don't get the world's greatest tippers in there either. Somebody has to take care of me.

PUPKIN

That's what I want to talk to you about, Rita.

The WAITER arrives with RITA's drink.

PUPKIN

Who's your favorite movie star?

RITA

You are, Rupert. Especially your nose.

PUPKIN

Just tell me.

RITA

Is this some kind of game? Are you going to tell me something about my character?

PUPKIN

You'll see. Give me his name.

RITA

I can't think of anybody.

PUPKIN

You've got to have one, Rita. Everybody does.

RITA

Okay. Okay. Let's see. (pause)

Marilyn Monroe.

PUPKIN slowly pulls out a leather-bound book from his inside jacket pocket.

RITA

Oh, Rupert! Are we going to exchange phone numbers!?

PUPKIN expertly flips to a middle page in the book and, keeping the book open, his finger pointing under a name, he turns the book to RITA.

RITA

That's her name.

PUPKIN

Her name! She signed this herself, especially for me.

RITA starts flipping through the book, curious about the other names. She isn't paying any attention to what PUPKIN is saying.

PUPKIN

She wasn't a great actress but she had a real gift for comedy. She died tragically, you know, alone, like so many of the world's most beautiful women. I'm going to see that doesn't happen to you, Rita.

RITA

Who's this one?

PUPKIN checks the book.

PUPKIN

Burt Reynolds.

RITA

Oh yeah, the guy with no clothes.

Who's this?

PUPKIN

Mel Brooks.

RITA

And this?

PUPKIN

Carol Burnett.

RITA

No kidding. How about this?

PUPKIN

Glenda Jackson.

RITA

Never heard of her.

PUPKIN

(pointing to other names)

And that's Woody Allen and there's  
Ernie Kovacs -- he's dead -- and that  
one's Lauren Bacall.

RITA

You don't really know any of these  
people?

PUPKIN

Take a look at this.



PUPKIN flips to one of the back pages and shows a name to RITA.

RITA  
(squinting)  
I can't make it out.

PUPKIN  
Try.

RITA  
This is really weird handwriting!

Exasperated, PUPKIN follows the name in question with his index finger.

PUPKIN  
Roooooper ....

RITA  
(guessing)  
Redford!

PUPKIN  
That's Robert Redford.

RITA  
It is?

PUPKIN  
No! It's ... it's Rupert Pupkin

PUPKIN tears out the page and hands it to her shyly. RITA just stares at it and back at PUPKIN.

PUPKIN  
Don't lose it. It's going to be worth something in a couple of weeks.

RITA start laughing.

PUPKIN  
That's what I've been trying to tell

you. Things are really breaking for me. I'm ticketed for stardom.

RITA laughs harder, despite efforts to be serious.

PUPKIN

Only a couple of hours ago, I was talking to Jerry Langford, the Jerry Langford. Stop it, Rita!

RITA pulls herself together for a moment.

PUPKIN

We were talking about my doing my act on his show.

RITA

(suppressing a smile)  
Your act?

PUPKIN

Get that guy you knew from Clifton out of your head right now. You're looking at Rupert Pupkin, Rita. Rupert Pupkin, the new King of Comedy.

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RITA starts laughing hysterically, in spite of herself.

RITA

(getting a grip on herself)  
I'm sorry.

PUPKIN

Why not me, Rita? A guy can always get what he wants if he's willing to pay the price. All it takes is a little talent and sacrifice and the right break. If you've got a friend in the right place, that's all it takes. And that's exactly what I have going for me right now. After all, crazier things have happened.

RITA listens silently for a moment, then begins to giggle. As PUPKIN resumes speaking, we CUT between RITA and the YOUNG MAN. Their flirtation picks up steam. The YOUNG MAN raises his eyebrows as if to ask, "Are you interested in me?" She smiles. All the while, PUPKIN rattles on.

PUPKIN

You just don't realize what a shot on the Langford Show can mean. That's coast to coast, national TV, a bigger audience than the greatest comedians used to play to in a lifetime. A shot like that means a free ticket on the comedy circuit -- Flip Wilson one week, Cosby the next, then Sonny and Cher or Carol Burnett. And you've always got those other talk shows to fall back on -- Carson, Griffin. And all that leads straight in one direction, Rita -- Hollywood! That's when we really start living. How does this sound to you -- a beach house in Malibu, right on the ocean. You'll get a beautiful tan, believe me. And we'd keep a suite at the Sherry. That's the only place to stay when you're big. We could get something on a top floor and look down on all our old friends in Clifton and just laugh. How does that sound to you?

RITA

It sounds wonderful, Rupert, and I really hope you get what you want. But it's getting late and I'm a working girl. You know what I mean?

The telephone at the back of the restaurant starts ringing. A WAITER in the background moves slowly to answer it.

PUPKIN

You going to spend the rest of your life in that place? Is that what you

really want, talking about nothing with nothings? I thought you wanted something a little better than that and that's what I'm offering. Every King needs a Queen, Rita. I want you to be mine. What do you say?

RITA

You really want to help me out? You see this. (She points to her lower back molar) A hundred seventy-five bucks. If you could spare fifty, say, until next Monday, that would keep three people really happy -- me, my landlord and my dentist.

During RITA's speech, the WAITER has been working his way from the phone booth towards the front of the restaurant.

WAITER

Telephone for you, Miss.

RITA

(looking puzzled)

Me? Nobody knows I'm here. You didn't tell anybody, did you?

PUPKIN

No.

RITA

(getting up)

What the hell's going on?

CAMERA FOLLOWS RITA, who walks to the back of the restaurant and picks up the dangling receiver in one of the two facing booths, the other of which is occupied.

14 INT: THE PHONE BOOTH - NIGHT

RITA

Hello?

MAN'S VOICE

Hi.

RITA

Who is this?

MAN'S VOICE

Who do you think it is? I've been  
staring at you all evening.

RITA

Where are you?

The YOUNG MAN taps forcefully with his index finger on the  
glass door of his booth. RITA, hearing the noise, turns  
around and finds herself staring at the YOUNG MAN. She  
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smiles.

CUT TO:

15 INT: THE RESTAURANT - NIGHT

PUPKIN at the table looking over the check. He gets out a  
ten dollar bill. RITA emerges from the booth in nervous  
high spirits.

RITA

(with repressed gaiety)

You know who that was -- the bar. I  
have to go back to work.

PUPKIN

How did they know you were here?

RITA

(gathering her things)

I guess I must have told them. They  
need someone right away.

PUPKIN

(accusingly)

You don't even care, do you?

RITA

Oh, no. I do. Really!

PUPKIN

It's not the bar, Rita. Don't tell me it's the bar.

RITA

Don't be angry. It has nothing to do with you. I had a nice dinner, really. It was great seeing you again.

PUPKIN stare at her icily.

RITA

Come on. Let's see a smile.

PUPKIN

Why don't we finish the evening up at the bar together? End the evening where it began?

RITA

After what happened there?

PUPKIN

Well, I could at least drop you off!

RITA

(hurriedly making up her face)  
That's okay. Really. I can manage. Why don't you just go to a movie or something? Don't let me spoil your evening.

PUPKIN

But that wouldn't be right.

RITA gets up and stands before PUPKIN.

RITA

(firmly)  
Look, Rupert. It's been a lot of fun,

really. I'll see you sometime, huh?

PUPKIN

But Rita!

RITA starts moving towards the door.

RITA

Come on, Rupert. I'm in a hurry.

RITA marches out with PUPKIN trailing behind. He throws the check and the ten dollar bill at the CASHIER.