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Chapter 1:

AN OLD WHITE MAN
WITH A TALK SHOW

FADE IN.

Los Angeles.

Sunday, January 15, 2024.

A typical January afternoon. Sunny and warm. Not like the east side of my beloved Cleveland, where I grew up. January is the rainiest, coldest, snowiest month of the year in *Believeland*.

Right now, two o'clock in L.A., sitting in a shiny black-on-black Escalade that still has the new car smell, I'm heading downtown to the 75th Annual Emmy Awards. I've been invited to be a presenter. First time I've been invited to attend the ceremony in, well, it's been a while. I'm giving out the award for Outstanding Writing for a Variety Series. I expect John Oliver will win because he always wins. I love John Oliver. I know what he does and how hard it is to keep that up week after week. He's won a million Emmys. He deserves them. I'm happy to hand him his next one.

When I had my show—*The Arsenio Hall Show*, from 1989 to 1994—we received six Emmy nominations. We won two—in 1993 for Outstanding Technical Direction, and in 1990 for Outstanding Sound Mixing. We deserved those—we had a fantastic crew—but I would have loved to win for Outstanding Writing, like John Oliver, or for Outstanding Variety Series, like John Oliver, or Outstanding Talk Series, like John Oliver, but we never did. When you win for Outstanding Sound Mixing, but not Outstanding Series, it feels like Hollywood is saying, “We hear you perfectly, and we don't like you that much.”

For the show tonight, I've picked out a blue-and-black tuxedo and a matching blue-and-black custom-made fedora. I like hats. My dad loved hats. He bought me a fedora at age three. He never left home unless he had on a dressy lid. He always took his hat off indoors. I'm not the gentleman he was. If not for the protruding brim, I'd sleep in a hat. My friend George Lopez turned me on to his hatmaker and this hat is at least ten fire emojis. It's all that, and extra butter. Dad would have loved it.

Shaved, made-up, and slapped with Burberry Hero, I slide into the backseat of the Caddy. The driver eases away from The Comedy Store—where I’ve met Kelly, my makeup artist—goes across Sunset, and turns down the treacherous La Cienega hill, heading toward the 10 Freeway and the Peacock Theater downtown. I’m going to the Emmy Awards solo, no date, no plus-one, just me. My choice. I have a wonderful son, Cheron, I’ve been in a relationship with my partner, Natalie, for twenty years, and I have a couple close friends, but when it comes to events like this one—when it comes to most work situations—I prefer pullin’ up alone.

Some people call me a recluse. That sounds like I don’t like people. I love people. I just prefer intimacy most of the time. Crowds and strangers intimidate me, make me anxious. If my friend Lon Rosen gives me Dodgers tickets, I start getting nervous at the thought of attending two days before the game. But I’m an actor, so I *act* like I’m comfortable in public. I handle my *bitness*, do what I need to do. But I’m a purebred homebody, and if I have my choice, I’d rather stay home with my woman, sipping a great bottle of wine, watching some bullshit like *Love Island*, or chillaxing with a good movie or documentary. That’s a perfect evening. I have a nice little crib. I don’t want it to go to waste. Okay, maybe I am a lightweight recluse. Whaaaaatever!

As we drive down La Cienega toward the entrance to the freeway, I think about the past week. Super producer Jesse Collins called me out of the blue on behalf of the *75th Primetime Emmys* broadcast. They had an idea. Jesse asked me to speak for a minute or so before I presented an award. They want to honor me, he said. They want to pay tribute to *The Arsenio Hall Show*. They’d gotten access to my opening graphics, my crazy, stabbing signature—an *A* with a line shooting off into the air in blue cursive—that began each show. Then, as I come out, they’ll play my theme song, “It’s Hall or Nothing”—which I wrote—and Anthony Anderson, the show’s host, will introduce me with the same exaggerated basso profundo that my announcer, Burton Richardson, did every night for six years, booming and elongating the *O* in Arsenio. The audience will love it, the producer said.

Hopefully, I think.

Hopefully, people will remember the show.

Hopefully, people will remember *me*.

I went through a lot during those six years.

In the beginning, nobody knew what we had, what the show would be. It debuted and took off like a rocket. Scorched the ratings. Blew *up*. Paramount had hopes, but they’d never expected anything like that. We were literally an overnight success. We were a star in syndication, which, for those of you who don’t know, is a bunch of loosely connected stations all over the country,

often fewer than a hundred total. We could be on in Boston or Butte, Montana, at different times—late at night, early in the morning, middle of the afternoon, or delayed or canceled for a city’s MLB game. Our show wasn’t on a network with hundreds of stations, all broadcasting the show at the same time, in late night, with an iconic mainstay like *Today* or *Good Morning America* waiting for my audience the next morning. All the more remarkable that we often went up against Johnny Carson, and knocked him back, a little bit. We at least got his attention. People heard my voice. People watched the show. Overnight I went from unknown to omnipresent.

Then time passed, things settled, reality hit, and reality bites. A year went by, two years, three, my champion at Paramount, Lucie, left, and I got caught in the middle of the late night wars, squashed between Leno and Letterman. The show lost its heat, the ratings fizzled, and we came down to earth. Meanwhile, I went from a leader of the pack to the man in the middle. I started to get slammed by both sides, Black and white. White people thought the show was too Black, and Black people wanted it blacker. I spent the last three years fighting for the show’s life and my emotional and mental health. I kept trying to ride in that middle lane between Black and white America. It was difficult and exhausting because the lines kept blurring. Finally, I had enough. I decided to call it quits. I wrote a letter of resignation to the chairman of Paramount Television, Kerry McCluggage. I walked away. But the *Los Angeles Times* and some tabloids wrote false stories saying that Paramount canceled the show. Not true. They didn’t. I resigned.

But the show did end. Six exciting, provocative, original years of comedy, conversation, and *music*—soul, R&B, gospel, indie bands, pop, hip-hop—hot sounds and hot talk, often with American artists and personalities not seen on any other talk show, like Bill Clinton, Robert De Niro, Prince, Michael Jackson, Madonna, Maya Angelou, MC Hammer, Snoop Dogg, and, huge controversy, Louis Farrakhan. I took my chair and went home, literally. I’ve basically stayed at home ever since, my choice.

But this afternoon, I’ve come outside.

I’m going to the Emmys. I’m a presenter.

I’m terrified.

The car pulls up to the artists’ entrance of the theater, where my longtime assistant and friend, Corey Yamamoto, is waiting. I thank the driver and carefully exit the backseat. Don’t want to wrinkle the suit, smash the hat, or bring attention to myself.

I make my way toward the door leading into the theater and I spot Kelsey Grammer and Ted Danson a few feet away. I love both of them. It’s been years since I’ve seen them. I want to rush over and give them each a hug.

But I don't.

I'm too shy and insecure. I've always felt like a visitor to the world of stardom.

My nerves paralyze me. I veer toward the stage door, where I see one of my former stage managers wearing a headset. "Hey, boss," he says. I dap him, sign his iPad, then go inside, duck into a corner of the backstage area, and disappear into the darkness.

I close my eyes and think about what I'm about to say. Everything I wrote will be on the teleprompter, but I don't rely on that. I've got my minute memorized. I sway a little, whisper a prayer. *Be with me.*

The stage manager tells me ten seconds. I press my hands against my sides, feel the sweat on my palms as Anthony Anderson announces, "It's Arsenioooo *Hall!*"

I lower my head, step into the light. I raise my head and—

The audience is standing.

Applauding, cheering, pumping their fists—

Barking.

"Woof! Woof! Woof!"

They're *all* barking. The entire audience has become my "Dog Pound."

My throat tightens.

I nod, look into the audience, and try to make out faces. I recognize Tyler James Williams from *Abbott Elementary* and Ayo Edebiri from *The Bear*. They're barking and pumping their fists. I spot Kieran Culkin from *Succession*. He's grinning, cheering, pumping his fist, and then I glance at the front row and see Hannah Waddingham from *Ted Lasso*, tall, blond, imposing. She's standing, applauding, and laughing, and a strange feeling comes over me.

They know me?

They're so freaking—

Young.

Then I hear myself say, “Hey, thank you!”

The ovation keeps coming. I bow, and when the cheering, clapping, and barking finally subsides, with my voice quivering slightly, I say, “As a kid, I idolized Johnny Carson. When most kids in Cleveland wanted to be football stars like Jim Brown, I wanted to be an old white man with a talk show.”

Booming laugh.

Cracking the atmosphere like thunder.

I chuckle with the crowd, and I instantly feel calm. Relieved. Relaxed. I’m on a stage, telling jokes, talking to a crowd. To me, this is also home. I smile and say—

“I was a very weird ten-year-old. I even was a magician like Johnny. Check this out.”

I point at a large screen to my right. A photo of me appears. I’m twelve years old, doing a magic trick called the Floating Zombie Ball. I’m wearing a suit and a tie. I’m holding up a large purple scarf with a skeleton in the center. I’m grinning.

The audience *awwws* at the old childhood picture.

“Yes. There I am in a black suit and tie, doing magic in the ghetto of Cleveland. Yes, I’m still alive.”

The audience laughs.

“But I got my ass beat a lot. I loved Johnny so much I used to do *The Tonight Show* in the basement with my friends as guests. Eventually, I became a standup comic. I got my big break on *Late Night with David Letterman*. Then, on January 3, 1989, I debuted *The Arsenio Hall Show*.”

Applause starts as a ripple, becomes a wave, then explodes.

“I was host now of that show I used to do in my basement, and I got to go head-to-head with the king, Johnny Carson, and his heirs to the throne, Dave and Jay. It was an honor to face off against that talented trio, but to be honest with you, I wished they sucked. But they didn’t. And now here are some other folks who absolutely do not suck.”

I announce the nominees for Outstanding Writing for a Variety Series, open the envelope, and read the winner—what a shock, it's John Oliver. After his acceptance speech, a tall woman wearing a glitzy gown whisks me offstage. She deposits me backstage, in a crowded, bustling pack of Trevor Noah writers and producers, taking photos as they continue celebrating his Emmy win for Outstanding Talk Series. Trevor is leaving *The Daily Show*, and this was his last chance for an Emmy. I'm excited for both Trevor and Oliver. They will head to the press room now, and afterward go to all the Emmy after-parties. I point to Corey and tilt my head to the left, my signal to call my driver and have him bring the car around so I can go home. That's where I have my after-parties. Home. With Natalie. I'll text her and ask her to open a Pinot from Napa and roll me a joint. With traffic, I should be home in about an hour.

Suddenly, John Oliver, clutching his statue, approaches me.

"I want you to know," he says.

His voice is low, hushed, and filled with a sort of—reverence. He looks at me. His eyes are bright, his accent thick, charming, British. He puts his arm around me and moves us away from the people near us.

"I am such a fan," he says. "You don't know how important you are to late night."

I blush, embarrassed, truly moved by his words, and then as if summoned, Trevor Noah, whom I've met many times, appears. He reaches past John Oliver, gives me a pound, and a hug.

"Arsenio," Trevor Noah says. "I am not here without you."

"You're our hero," John Oliver says.

For one of the few times in my life, I honestly don't know what to say. I nod and murmur thank you. Getty types and social media ninjas materialize, and we pose for pictures. I hug John, dap up Trevor, and then leave as quickly as I can, Corey hustling me out the stage door.

In the car, heading west on the 10 Freeway toward Pacific Coast Highway, I think about Trevor Noah and John Oliver, their genuine affection and gratefulness. I was so touched by them.

Hero, John called me.

I have been called so many names throughout my life. People in the 'hood always had trouble pronouncing *Arsenio*, I guess because the name seemed foreign. Every other kid on my block

was Daniel or Alex. I don't think there was another Arsenio in the country. Now there are plenty, most of them named after me. The other day, a twenty-seven-year-old Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf barista named Arsenio took my order.

My dad, a pastor, never called me Arsenio. He called me "son" or "Little Buddy." Others called me "Little Rev" or "A-man" or "Senio." My mother, who named me, called me Arsenio, except when she was extremely angry at me. Then she called me A.H., her code for "asshole." My stepsister called me "Wang Wang." I have no idea why. Donald Harris, the star football player in my junior high school, called me either "Magic Man" or "Alakazam." I dropped everything and did my magic tricks whenever he wanted, usually in the school cafeteria. I doubt David Copperfield ever had to do magic in self-defense, the way I did. It always made me popular with neighborhood gang members and school bullies.

"Hey, Magic Man, come over here," Donald Harris would say. "Forget your lunch. You'll eat tomorrow. Somebody get this motherfucka a coin. Lou!" Lou Weaver, a badass bully, handed me a coin, which was poetic justice because he had taken my lunch money the day before.

"Here you go, Magic Man, okay, show them some shit."

To this day, people rarely call me Arsenio. Folks want to give me a nickname. Natalie calls me "A." My good friend Johnny Gill calls me "Hall." Eddie Murphy calls me "Mysterio." Tracy Morgan calls me "R." Jay Leno calls me "Brother Hall" and always has. Kevin Eubanks calls me "Ghost Dog" or "Ghost" because he says I always disappear without a trace. He even wrote a song for me called "Ghost Dog Blues."

But... *hero*.

Nobody had ever called me that before.

Not sure I deserve it.

I appreciate their kindness that night, at the 75th Emmys