

# PROLOGUE

**Los Angeles, November 17th 1993**

It's late on a Wednesday night and Bill Hicks stands onstage at Igby's, a small out-of-the-way comedy club in West Los Angeles. "Folks, I appreciate you coming out," the thirty-one-year-old comedian says into the microphone. "It's a very sentimental evening for me and a very exciting one."

He scans the sold-out crowd, crammed around tiny cocktail tables, sipping beers. He runs his hand lightly over his stomach. "This is my final live performance I am ever going to do, stand-up comedy wise."

Nervous laughter and a soft chorus of *nos* float through the room. *What?* someone blurts.

He can't be serious. As many of the staunch fans and close friends in the club tonight know, Hicks has made empty threats to retire from stand-up almost every year since he began performing professionally in 1980. And at this moment, after "sixteen years of virtual anonymity in the country I love," as he puts it, the tide is rapidly turning in America. Hicks is already a hot name in the UK and Ireland, has been for two years, selling out 2,000-seat theaters in London, Dublin and Glasgow. Now with the publication, two weeks ago, of a *New Yorker* profile in which renowned drama critic John Lahr calls Hicks "an exhilarating comic thinker in a renegade class all his own," his profile at home has never been higher.

"It's almost as though I've been lifted out of a ten-year rut and placed in a position where the offers finally match my long-held and deeply cherished creative aspirations," Bill has just written Lahr in a note thanking him. "Somehow people are listening in a new light. Somehow the possibilities (creatively) seem limitless."

And tonight, at Igby's, there is a change in him. Trimmer than he's ever been, the typically husky six-foot-two Bill has abandoned his signature head-to-toe black for an ensemble in earth tones: "delightful fall colors," as Bill calls them. No more "angry comic," he's been telling friends. His brown tweed jacket, khaki pants and olive button-down shirt hang on his lanky frame. The hair he usually slicks back is longish, also thinned out, and hangs just over the rim of his round granny glasses. His dark brown eyes are as piercing as ever, though they look a bit larger on a face that has suddenly lost its pudge. The effect, in front of the beige stage curtain, is anti-hip, professorial.

Quitting the stage, he assures the audience, has come about because incredible things are happening to him. He has another big announcement.

“I found out today I got my own TV show on CBS coming out in ’94.” Bill grins beneath his patchy reddish beard.

He raises his hand, interrupting the cheers. The half-hour show that CBS is about to put on the air every week starring host Bill Hicks is called—he pauses here—*Let’s Hunt and Kill Billy Ray Cyrus*.

The crowd roars.

Bill nods proudly and, encouraged by the show of support, he paces the stage, one hand in his jacket pocket, while he details how he plans to catch Cyrus, “that no-talent cracker asshole,” by his “fruity ponytail,” pull him to his knees and put a gun in his mouth. He punctuates his point by shoving his fist in his own mouth and emitting a ferocious gun blast.

His reference to a deal with CBS is a note of typical Hicks irony. “Let’s Hunt and Kill Billy Ray Cyrus” is one of the jokes the producers of the new CBS program *The Late Show with David Letterman* called a “hot point” when they censored Bill four weeks earlier. (Even though on air, Bill called Cyrus a “no-talent cracker *idiot*.”)

On Friday October 1st, Bill had taped a six-minute set for *Letterman* in its much-heralded new 11:30pm time slot. About two hours after the taping, around 7pm, the show decided to pull Hicks’s performance: *Unsuitable for broadcast* Bill was told when he got the call in his suite at the Mayflower Hotel that evening. “Certain things you don’t talk about,” CBS spokesperson Rosemary Keenan sniffed to the *New York Post* in the wake of Bill’s banning. “Religion is one. Blowing somebody away is another.”

But the rumor was that it was Bill’s pro-life jokes—“If you’re so pro-life, do me a favor: don’t lock arms and block medical clinics. Lock arms and block cemeteries”—that made the show especially nervous.

The producers tried at first to say it was the CBS Standards and Practices department who pulled Bill’s appearance. *Standards and Practices*, Bill snorted to anyone who would listen. “Isn’t this the same network that shows *Full House*? What are your standards exactly? Stupid to retarded?”

But Bill knew the truth now. It was *Late Show* producers under the helm of executive producer Robert Morton and David Letterman—not CBS—who had decided to strike his entire set; a set which had been *approved* by those same producers, information that Bill reminded nearly every one of the roughly twenty reporters he’d talked to in the month that followed. He had played by their rules for ten years, performed all twelve *Letterman* appearances with a gag in his mouth until he barely recognized his own act and it wasn’t enough for them. They were *still* afraid of some stupid jokes.

Still, the censorship furor had provided the perfect news hook for the *New Yorker* piece, which detailed the shutting up of America’s secret boy genius by the nation’s reigning cool

comedian. Even Bill half joked to Lahr that the non-appearance had earned him “more attention than my other eleven appearances on *Letterman* times one hundred.”

There will be a *Let's Hunt and Kill* Christmas special, Bill tells the Igby's audience, stretching the bit out to three minutes. In that one he'll crossbow Marky Mark in the “abs” and watch the model/rapper disappear into the melting blood-soaked snow. Hicks merrily skips across the stage as he describes a perfect Marky-free universe where birds chirp in harmony and everyone walks with a spring in their step. “All I'm tryin' to do, folks, is rid the world of all these fevered egos that are tainting our collective unconscious and making us pay a higher psychic price than we can fucking imagine.”

That, Bill says, is precisely how he pitched the show to CBS. And all the development executive wanted to know was, “Will there be titty?” Bill had agreed there would be, and the executive had pronounced him a genius. But the guy was curious about something. *Where had Bill Hicks been all these years?*

“Ohhhh, at the Comedy Pouch in Possum Ridge, Arkansas, you *fuck*.”