

Two years ago I met Tony Bennett at Lake Tahoe. He watched my set and afterwards, we had a conversation that inspired me to write this book. He told me, "Keep goin' man." And he wasn't pointing at the door.

This is my autobiography. It's about standup comedy and surviving as a single parent. It's about success and failure, love, humility, and separation, and how watching *The Godfather* over and over again in hotel rooms across the country has made me a better person.



1. SMILE

I'm in my 20th year of stand-up comedy. You would think my name, Mickey Joseph, should be a household word by now. It is, but only in my household.

After all, a man who doesn't spend time with his family can never be a real man.

My success in the past 20 years is not in the glory of the Letterman Show or appearances on Carson or Conan. I raised two kids as a single parent while fighting it out in the trenches of one-nighters, good gigs, bad gigs, appearing before thousands of audiences—standing on stages of all shapes and sizes, and then driving home.

Without the help of my family, friends, and good neighbors, there would have been no success. My struggle for custody involved courts, lawyers, accusations, restraining orders, visitation rights, child protective services, ordered evaluations, surprise investigations, therapy, and finally, the decision.

I was given full custody of my two children when my daughter was three and my son was about eleven months. I was the best choice, and I had my family behind me. The judge awarded these two beautiful children to a stand-up comedian. It was 1989, just weeks before the World Series between the Giants and the A's. My world was already shaking when the big one hit.

Years later, my kids became teenagers. To keep from having a heart attack four times a week, I have developed a mantra...a sentence that I say out loud, when things go terribly wrong in any situation. I take a giant step back and I ask myself, "*What would Don Corleone do?*" I believe that 99% of the time, *Don Corleone* does the right thing. One percent of the time he lets *Fredo* drive.

Now, right off the bat, you may be thinking: 'I know one thing *Don Corleone* wouldn't do, and that is to write a book'...It's business. I can only be honest, and leave out anything that might embarrass those that have loved and stood by me. When I started in comedy, the first rule of the road was explained to me by many of the eras headline acts. It's simple: Nobody talks. Let me apologize in advance to everyone...I'm sorry.

Men have called me crying into the phone, “How did you do it? How did you get custody of your kids? Tell me please.” Women have chanted, “How can you smile in the face of adversity?” This is a book that every one of my brothers out there should read. And I’m not just saying that to get the Oprah Winfrey seal of approval.

Sure, there are a few people out there who are going to tell a Mickey Joseph story that makes me out to be an a-hole. But they are only a handful. And all I can offer them is one finger. *People would have misconceptions about Don Corleone as well.*

And let me say up front, I never read the book. Well, I read page 28 when I was in the eighth grade because it was the right thing to do at Catholic school. That’s the page where *Sonny bangs the bridesmaid up against the door*. An excerpt that caused a certain swelling within my salt and pepper corduroy school pants.

When I started to write, I thought, I better read *The Godfather*... So I didn’t. I have decided at this point in my career that I can figure out what I should do. And then do the opposite, because everything always works out anyway. I’ll just work with the film. After all, to me the genius is Coppola. Had it not been for him, the story would have never been told.

We own the complete saga on DVD. Every good brother does. I have seen the movie on television on the road maybe 50 times. Even with my all-time favorite feature act Tony Castle in our underpants on a hot Ukiah night. I have been late for gigs because *The Godfather* was on the tube. I almost missed a plane once because I wasn’t going to the airport until *Carlo* went to the airport. I love it on television even when the language is censored. *Sonny says, “I don’t want my kid brother to come outta da toilet with nuttin’ but a stick in his hand.”*

I should never watch the movie right before bed. I'll dream about how my life parallels a different character every time. Tossing and turning; mumbling in my sleep. *"I'm the Freddy Corleone of comedy, Mike! I was passed over. I'm your older brother. You shoulda been openin' up for me. I shoulda been the headliner! Sure, send Mickey down to the writer to pick up some gags. Or send Mickey out to the airport to pick up Pauly Shore. I was passed over, Mike! I can do segues. I can deliver a Punchline. I have callbacks. I'm not dumb like everyone thinks I am. I'm... I'm funny! And I'm smart!"*

Some claim that *Don Corleone* was nothing more than a murderer and a hood. I have pity for them and I suggest that they watch the movie again. You can make a night of it. Invite your godfather over to watch *The Godfather*.

Make no mistake about it. This is not one of those *Goombah* books that have fun with the misconception that Italian Americans are stupid thugs. We're not. We are beautiful, sensitive people who live with passion and confidence. We can embrace the fact that Michelangelo was a marginally gay homosexual. In our glory days we ruled the world.

We lived up on Elm Street in San Carlos. That's where my kids grew up. On a hill, with a view of the Cal Train overpass construction project. The kids split the bedroom and I built a high pedestal for my mattress in the living room above the city lights. We were blessed with great friends I could trust. I had an open door policy with the neighbors in our hood. They were all decent people. *Just like Don Corleone, my intuition has always served me well.*



I decided one day to let a Jehovah's Witness into my apartment. Her name was Muriel, and as an actor, I was fascinated by her. She dressed well and drove a big expensive car. I brought her a glass of water, listened to her rap, nodded when cued, and I never asked an embarrassing question.

The first time she showed up at my door I opened it a crack. I tried to refuse her with an old joke from the Milton Berle File: "I'm actually already part of a similar religious group... The Jehovah's Bystanders...It's for witnesses that don't want to get involved." She laughed so hard that I had to open the door.

Things went so well with Muriel that she would drop in as often as possible and bring other witnesses with her. My apartment became a training camp for rookie door bell pushers for whom Muriel was showing the ropes. I'm pouring glasses of water like crazy. They believe that God is going to destroy everything and only the witnesses will be saved and invited to live in a perfect world where everyone gets along...even wild animals. That's why on the covers of their magazines, you'll always see tigers and zebras lying around with everybody...In the back of my mind I'm thinking, "What

if they're right?" That is one party I would like to be invited to. I remember seeing Muriel's car heading up the hill and my five year-old Gary saying, "I wonder when she's gonna bring that nice tiger over here."

It's not easy being the son of a comedian, especially if the comedian is the primary caregiver. Teachers, principals, den mothers... they all thought I was a nutcase. *Like Don Corleone, I am feared because of how I make my living.* Many thought, "No... Better not make eye contact. Don't want to end up as part of one of his idiotic routines." Or in line at the bank, "Don't get too close. He's gonna pick on you."

But most, they feared the stage itself. The spotlight. Even the thought of standing up at a birthday party to toast a friend will send most people into hyperventilation. Knees quivering, flop-sweating, melting down in front of everyone. Having to look at me, picking my kids up from school after a long nap, and realizing that they don't have the guts.

"Oh, he's Mr. Mom." Let me tell you, I hated that moniker. When I was going through it, I didn't want to hear it. "No, you've got it wrong, I'm Mr. Dad." Those mothers only asked me to bake cupcakes for the school once. They must have been hideous because they never me asked again. I've never been much of a baker. I can imagine my poor kids standing there as those bitches moved our cupcakes all the way down to the nickel table.

To say that my son, Gary grew up quickly is an understatement. He claims that he saw *Goodfellas* for the first time when he was in the forth grade. I remember that Halloween, He went trick- or-treating dressed in a suit and tie. He was *Sally Ball's brother "Pete the Killer"*.

The boy was in the 6th grade. They are discussing animal abuse. The teacher is showing a picture of two men with Pit bulls on leashes that are ready to attack each other. My son raises his hand. "That's almost like a cockfight." A little girl gasps and covers her mouth. The class giggles. Gary says so innocently, "No. No. Not that kind of cock." But because he is the son of a Comedian, he's guilty by association and down to the office he went. It's true. In seventh grade, they were having sex education. The teacher passes out a diaphragm, it comes to my boy, he puts it on his head, stomps his foot and shouts, "Mazel tov!"

One day they call me up from school and say, "We've got Gary in the office. He said hump." "He said what?" "Uhhh, He said hump." "Hump?" "That's right he said hump." I said, "Well I better come down and pick'em up."

What would Don Corleone do?

Never let anyone outside the family know what I am thinking. Go to the meetings with the teachers and principal and appear as a gentleman. Always mention the boy's kind heart. Perhaps bring a gift of a little *free olive oil*. "You think I'm gonna come in here and say something bad about my son, you're crazy." Seems to work.

My daughter, Tareh, could very well be the funniest woman that the world may never know. She is the one that could carry my legacy. I mean she is Lucy funny. At age 10 she could recite the Vitameatavegamin routine from start to finish. She could nail every nuance of the bit, from the furrowed brow to the sweaty upper lip.

And by the way, I had nothing to do with the spelling of her name. That's what her mother wrote on the slip when I wasn't watching. It's Tareh, pronounced Terra. I know, it almost runs a

close second to that whole Anthony, Anfrenee fiasco. But in Tareh's case, it is not a pronunciation issue.

I picked her up one afternoon when she was in the 4th grade. Five of her friends were at the car window telling me that Tareh was the funniest kid in school. I could easily teach her to be a comedian, when she's ready. I wrote it all down, each step to take. I love the girl.

She is funny and gorgeous. At 14 months, she was a show-stopper. At the grocery store, sitting in the cart, every woman adored her. Each grandma that we came across wanted to tickle those cheeks. To this day.

And she's hip. Out of frustration one day, I told her, "I hope that one day you have a 16 year-old daughter who drives you crazy!" She knows just what to say to bring me back to reality... "You're the one who had unprotected sex."

I've made the mistake of saying the wrong thing to my daughter. Insensitive things. I've seen her eyes well up with tears It's not easy being a single parent. A man raising a girl. Making your daughter cry should be avoided at all costs. I've learned to think before I speak. I'm proud of my kids. They are proud of me. The boy is nearly a man now at 17 and Tareh, 19, has become a beautiful woman. And most importantly, they both turned out to be really nice people.

I'm one of the Bay Area boys that avoided the lure of fame in Los Angeles. There are a few of us who were told over and over again to go down there, but opted to stick it out here and be with our families. Most of us are first generation Americans with European family values. Granted, some of my early accomplices have gone into huge careers down in the southland as producers, creators, actors, and film-makers, many of them are considered the cream of the crop.

I stuck it out here. To me, it's all about standing in front of an audience in my own back-yard.

Like Don Corleone, my business is risky and dependent on loyalty.

There is nothing secure about my occupation. No guarantee that I'll make my nut. No health insurance plan provided with this job No sick days or paid vacations. No pension or planned retirement. Comedians like me do not retire, we're lucky if we get to work to the very end.

This is my autobiography. A lifetime as an artist. It's about being a stand-up comedian. It's about trying to do the right thing. And what I have learned about parenting, staying calm and thinking. By watching *The Godfathers I & II* over and over. Many people feel that they are the greatest American films. Watch these movies. There is something there for all of you.