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## When I Was Famous

Colin Rafferty

The first time I was famous, it was because I hadn't watched television for a year, and had won \$500 from my father for doing so. *The Star*, the local paper, wrote an article about me, and ran a photo of Dad handing me the cash. I wore a Batman t-shirt. When I got to high school two years later, a lot of the students from other schools told me their teachers had shown them that article and dared them not to watch TV for even a week. It didn't do much to help my social standing.

It was pretty easy to be famous in Kansas City, because there just wasn't much competition. We had major league football and baseball teams, but we even got excited over seeing one of the forwards from the indoor soccer team (the Comets) at the shopping mall. Once, I saw the mayor of Kansas City at Sears, buying a suit—the town had that level of celebrity sighting.

So whenever real celebrities came to town, we went a little crazy. My mom met Julia Roberts when the *Pretty Woman* star was in town with then-boyfriend Keifer Sutherland while he filmed the forgettable movie *Article 99* at the same hospital I'd been born at; she couldn't stop talking about it for weeks. When Paul Newman was in town shooting *Mr. and Mrs. Bridge*, I heard for the first time the urban legend about the woman who gets so distracted by a star that she puts her ice cream cone in her purse; the version I heard set it at the Baskin-Robbins at the Plaza.

So when I became famous for the second time, during my junior year of high school, I had a pretty good idea of how the town would react. A few curious callers, an article in the paper, and then it would be over. No fuss. Very Midwestern.

In February, I'd appeared on the *Jeopardy! Teen Tournament*, and although I'd lost my match, I'd still put up a fight, scoring \$9000 (I'd like to point out that this was still the era when the most valuable clue was worth just \$1000). In the interim between filming in January and the

episode's airing, I'd gotten over losing, mostly, and had for the most part enjoyed watching myself on the local station, which had, in a flash of synergistic brilliance, sent a reporter and crew over to interview me during the immediately-following five o'clock news. There were articles in both *The Star* and the *Johnson County Sun*, a suburban newspaper that consisted mostly of high school sports news and water utility updates.

I even got recognized, twice. The first time, I was in the same Baskin-Robbins as the Paul Newman incident when a young boy asked me if I was “the *Jeopardy!* guy.” The second time happened while I was on a double date with my girlfriend and another couple; our waiter recognized me. My girlfriend was disappointed that he didn't comp us the meal; it was the night of the Sadie Hawkins dance, and she was picking up the tab.

I loved this kind of fame. The first time, the no-TV-for-a-year thing, felt like being famous for doing something weird, like walking on fire or eating glass. Being famous for *Jeopardy!* felt like I was finally recognized for the one thing in life I was really good at—trivia. People noticed—sometimes! People cared—kinda! I did what a hometown celebrity's supposed to do; I made them feel proud about the town they were from, made them able to say, *Hey, look who else is from Kansas City*, even if only for a short time.

All of this happened within about a week or two of the episode's airing. As I understood it, my fame was about to run out.

One night, I got a phone call from a local radio station asking me to participate in something they were doing the next morning, a trivia contest between, they hoped, me and Herb Stempel.

If you're not well-versed in game show history, Herb Stempel is the contestant who blew the whistle on the *21* scandal, in which contestants were given the answers to questions ahead of time, told how long to wait before answering, and when to lose it all. Herb Stempel is the reason game shows

became actual contests and not soap operas with a lot of questions, a cerebral pro wrestling.

And Herb Stempel is smart—really smart. The movie *Quiz Show*, a dramatization of the scandal, had just come out, and while watching it, I was amazed at the trivia that Herb (played by John Turturro) knew, vast lists of arcane information that made my “What is Father’s Day?” or “Who is James Watt?” feel like remembering how to tie my shoes in comparison.

I agreed to the station’s request—how I could I not, really?—and so, the next morning, I woke up before dawn and waited for the phone to ring. When it did, the show’s producer told me to wait just a moment, that I’d be on soon. I could hear the show in the background, the sad patter of the morning show DJs as they ran down wacky news from around the world.

Then, they announced Herb Stempel, and a voice best described as “1950s Bronx Storekeeper” filled my phone’s earpiece. They chatted with him for a while, and, without warning, brought me in, referring to me as “Kansas City’s own *Jeopardy!* contestant.”

“Colin, meet Herb Stempel,” one of the DJs said.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Stempel,” I said. I was in a little bit of awe.

“Please, call me Herb,” he said. “Everyone else does.”

The strangest thing about being a radio show’s guest is that you can’t listen to the radio while you’re on; if you do, it feedbacks through your phone. Divorced from its usual context, what’s normally a passive experience shared by thousands of listeners turns into a personal conversation between individuals. Listening to a tape of the show later, I realized that it really had gone out over the airwaves, that it was more than just me and Herb and the DJs.

The first DJ explained the contest; he would ask us each three questions, and whoever got the most right would be declared the winner. Herb took the first question—the capitol of Albania—and quickly answered it. I also knew the answer to my first question—the capitol of Kenya—but just before I started to answer, the other DJ spoke, sotto voce, into his microphone.

“The answer is Nairobi.”

I swallowed my eager answer, paused, then quietly said, “Nairobi.”

This was a setup. This, I realized, was a stupid morning disk jockey joke designed to make fun of the whole *Quiz Show* scandal and not anything like a real contest.

I had wanted it to be so much more than that. I’d wanted it to be a meeting of two trivia geniuses, of two generations of men who were good at one thing, something defined by its uselessness, and had found a way to get noticed, even famous, for it. I’d wanted it to be a chance for me to show Herb Stempel, *the* Herb Stempel, how much I knew, not to beat him, but to perform for him. I’d wanted it to be confirmation for me, legitimacy for me, exposure for me, celebrity for me.

And it wasn’t. Herb and I were, I realized, not famous. We were footnotes, written in small type at the bottom of the page. Herb, at least, had managed to secure a place in history thanks to the scandal; I wasn’t even going to survive the first revisions. I’d be forgotten by that afternoon. No more public recognition. No more newspaper articles. I would go back to being a high school student.

I ended up beating Herb that day, despite the fact that we both got one question wrong—the DJs just added one point to my score so their joke could have the punchline they wanted. We talked a little more on the air, me about *Jeopardy!* and Herb about *Quiz Show*, and then we were thanked for our time, and done.

I hung up the phone. The sun was starting to come through the clouds to the east. It was quiet in my room. I could have turned on the radio, but didn’t. I waited for someone to tell me what the next question was.