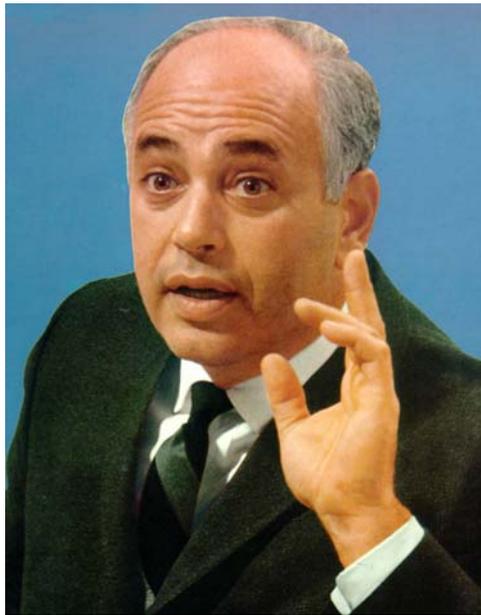


# Candidly, Allen Funt

## *A Million Smiles Later*



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### Chapter One: The Boomerang Effect

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**W**e were about an hour out of Newark when I heard a terrible commotion in the back of the jet. I turned and saw a man dragging the flight attendant up the aisle, holding a butcher knife to her throat. He walked her the whole length of the jet, disappeared into the cockpit, and slammed the door. Everyone on the plane was frozen with fear. A few minutes later, the captain got on the intercom and confirmed what we already suspected – we had been skyjacked and were going to Cuba.

It was 1969 and I was with my wife, Marilyn; our babies, Juliet and William; a nurse; and three members of my film crew. We were flying to Miami to film “Candid Camera” and a sequence for my feature-length movie *What Do You Say to a Naked Lady?*

I turned to my wife to reassure her. But before I could speak, she said, “It’s your fault. You had to fly out of Newark, didn’t you?”

She was right, of course. It was my fault. We had planned to fly out of JFK, but everything was booked. So we jumped in three cabs and hurried over to Newark – only to have this happen.

But I knew that her accusation held a deeper meaning. What she meant was that it was always my fault when anything went wrong for anyone. Indeed, as the creator and producer of “Candid Camera,” it was my business to make things go wrong in people’s lives. I had, in a way, become America’s provocateur.

I looked up the aisle toward the cockpit, hoping to see what was developing, but my view was blocked by a rather stout woman. Her eyes bore into me accusingly, and she took a threatening step my way.

“Say something,” she said. I couldn’t figure out what she wanted. So I told her, “Lady I’m scared as you are. Please don’t do anything crazy. Just sit down and leave me alone.”

“You’ve said enough,” she barked, and turning to the rest of the plane announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, I’m pleased to tell you this is not a skyjacking. This joker is Allen Funt, and we’re all on ‘Candid Camera.’”

The plane went absolutely crazy. People began cheering and stamping their feet – with relief, really. The commotion went on for so long and was so loud that the skyjacker stuck his head out of the cabin. This only made matters worse because 150 people gave him a big round of applause.

I slumped down in my seat, trying to disappear. All I could think was that someone would go up to the skyjacker and his partner to congratulate them on their acting performances, and the blood would start to flow.

Looking around, I spotted a priest in the back of the jet. I went over to him and said, “Father, I have no right to ask you for a favor, but maybe they’ll believe you. Tell them this is no joke. This maniac is for real.”

He studied me for a long time, then smiled and poked me in the ribs. “Oh no you don’t,” he said. “You’re not catching me too.” My credibility was shot, even with a man of the cloth. I gave up and returned to my seat.

Luckily, we landed in Cuba before anyone got hurt. Police and soldiers rushed aboard and took the skyjackers away. In those days Cuba was making a lot of money from skyjackings, so we were treated royally. They showered us with cigars and books about Castro. But the passengers were still furious with me. They still thought – even with the soldiers and the Cuban officials – it was a “Candid Camera” gag. They just couldn’t get it through their heads that it wasn’t “all my fault.”

That evening we flew to Miami. After we landed, and everyone filed past me on their way off the plane, they all cursed me in their own unique ways. The last guy stared at me for a long time, then said with a sneer, “Smile, my ass.”

Even though it had happened before, this was the first time I clearly identified the “Boomerang Effect” in my life. The Boomerang Effect occurs when the practical joker becomes the butt of life’s own jokes. For the past twenty-two years, I had been playing practical jokes on other people – first on the radio show “Candid Microphone” and later on “Candid Camera.” In every conceivable way, we tried to rewrite the

script of everyday living to test people's responses. From mailboxes that talked, to cars that split in two, to bowling pins that fell down without being hit, we put ordinary people on the spot.

With the skyjacking, I saw quite clearly how ironic it was that I was perceived as America's number-one practical joker. I've never been the life of the party. In fact, I haven't worn a single lampshade, danced on a table, or slipped a whoopee cushion under anyone. I was a sensitive kid. I wanted to be an artist. I even went to art school. All along, though, the invisible threads of life were weaving a different pattern for me.

I often wish I could isolate and review each event in my life that led me to "Candid Camera" and beyond into spin-offs, feature films, and more recently, the study of "Laughter Therapy." Perhaps, somewhere among the many stories I've accumulated, I might find out how it all began. But life is too subtle for such a cause-and-effect analysis. So I'll just tell the stories.

After all, what really matters is that I've had a rare opportunity to study and interact with people in a unique and wonderful way. I've worked with the great actors and athletes and celebrities of our time. I've even come face to face with world leaders and played tricks on our presidents. Most valuable, though, are the laughs I've shared with millions of ordinary men and women – and especially children – who were remarkably good sports when I told them, "Smile! You're on 'Candid Camera.'"

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**I**t's many years earlier now. I'm about twelve years old, and I'm standing on a stage in summer camp performing in a play. What's about to happen is one of the few things that foreshadowed the career I was to later pursue. The audience of parents and camp counselors is trying to stay awake for a rather tortured rendition of Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*. The stage is decorated to look like the jungle and, on the armrests of the emperor's throne, are cans of burning Sterno that are supposed to look like torches.

Suddenly, in my acting zeal, I overgesture and knock one of the Sterno cans flying. The flaming liquid coats my arm and continues burning! But in a flash, so to speak, I realize that it's the liquid that is burning and not my flesh. So I keep acting. Everyone seems riveted, and they give me a huge round of applause.

That incident taught me two important things that I later used on "Candid Camera": find a way to make use of your mistakes, and always stay in character – no matter what happens.

Other than that incident, there were few clues in my early years that would point to a life spent entertaining audiences with the unexpected. Neither of my parents was in show business. My father, Isidore, had actually studied to be a rabbi. However, somewhere along the line, he became disillusioned with organized religion, although he remained an avid reader and fancied himself a scholar.

My father was born in Russia and, as a young man, worked as a hat salesman. He met my mother, Paula, in a nearby town in Poland, and they were married when my mother was only sixteen. They moved to Belgium and then to the United States, passing through Ellis Island in 1913.

Like many salesmen, my father collected jokes and stories, and he had a great talent for making a small amount of material go a long way. He had perhaps only a dozen stories, but he had the uncanny knack of being able to apply them to any situation.

One story I remember particularly well was about the “village idiot” from my father’s town in Russia. The guy runs up to another man and says, “I think I have the problems of the whole world solved. What we do is get the rich to give half their money to the poor.” The other man says, “You’re crazy, that’ll never work.” The idiot says, “Don’t laugh. I have it half finished already. I’ve checked with the poor, and they’re willing.” You can’t imagine how many times my father could work that phrase into a conversation: “I checked with the poor, and they’re willing.”

Before immigrating to this country, my father became a diamond dealer, but once in New York, he found the business had many ups and downs. One year we would have enough money to vacation in Europe; the next we could barely keep the bill collectors at bay. Because of this, perhaps, my father got himself involved in a scheme in which the stewards on ocean liners would bring diamonds into the country to avoid import duties, and dealers such as my father would sell them.

One particular steward named Jimmy was caught and lost his job. He then began pestering my father for handouts, and it continued for several years. This was painful for my father because, in every other way, he was a completely moral man. I can remember that when the phone would ring and it was Jimmy, it sent a chill through our household.

Unlike my father, my mother was anything but a scholar. I don’t believe she even finished high school. But what she lacked in education, she made up for with enthusiasm and charm. She loved life, every minute of it. Whenever things were at their worst – and they often were when I was growing up – my mother would always say, “Let’s have a party!”

Throughout my childhood, my mother was always involved in raising money for charities. And she was the nerviest person you could ever meet. She would ask anybody for money, but she always bothered them with a great deal of charm. She was a complete optimist and an inspiration to us all.

I was born in Brooklyn, New York, on September 16, 1914. My early days were spent in an apartment on Flatbush Avenue in a modest neighborhood of immigrants and working-class people. My older sister Dorothy had a tremendous impact on my life. Not only was she brilliant, and graduated with every honor known to the world of academics, but she was also pretty. And if that wasn’t bad enough, everyone adored her. In short, I hated her.

Once, at age thirteen, my frustration built to the point where one day I couldn’t stand her anymore. I don’t remember what provoked me, but I picked her up and threw her – fully clothed – into a bathtub full of water. But she was so well behaved, she didn’t fight back. She just scolded me, and that was the end of it – which was more infuriating than anything.

Dorothy became a successful businesswoman and reached the top of a company that dealt with organized labor and union benefits. She was also very radical in her politics, and my father and I would have terrific fights with her. But in the fighting, we saw firsthand how her debating skills paid off in labor management.

In my early days, I knew more about what I *didn’t* want to be than what I *did* want to be. I didn’t want to be like my sister, and I definitely didn’t want to be a diamond dealer. My most vivid memories of the diamond trade are the hours spent on my hands and knees, searching the floor for diamonds my father had dropped – sort of like hunting for a contact lens, only harder.

I had vague dreams of being an athlete, even though I had only average abilities. The test of your talent is how quickly you are picked for a team by your schoolmates. I was always chosen somewhere in the middle – not the last, but never the first. But when we played punchball or football, what I lacked in ability, I made up for with a dogged tenacity.

The only sport I excelled at was boxing. This was thrust on me, to some degree, because my mother insisted on dressing me in black satin shorts with big white pearl buttons down the side. If you were a little Jewish guy dressed like that, and you lived in an Italian neighborhood, you had to know how to take care of yourself. I boxed a lot at summer camp, an upper-class camp where the kids were kind of soft, so I was actually known as being pretty tough.

Self defense was handy at times when I was confronted with anti-Semitism, but the kids in my Brooklyn neighborhood were very fair-minded – they hated anything they were not. So I quickly learned not to take their remarks personally. Probably because of my father's suspicion of organized religion, I didn't have a strong Jewish identity. At one point I remember getting in a conversation with some kids about religion. Finally, I ran over and stood below our apartment window and called up, "Hey Mom! What are we?"

Because of the example that my sister Dorothy set for me, I did fairly well in school. She made me desperate to succeed – at anything. As a result of my good marks, I became the victim of a terrible system where they kept making me skip grades. I graduated from New Utrecht High School at the age of fifteen, studied pictorial illustration at Pratt Institute for a year, then went to Cornell University.

My sister had gone to Cornell (on a triple scholarship, of course), and I found myself in her shadow again. I was too young to be in college, and I was a moody out-of-place guy. My sister got me a job waiting tables in a sorority house that she had been the head of. It was an awful job. We didn't get paid – we just got free meals. That wouldn't have been so bad, except the girls were always on diets and eating things like prune whip, cottage cheese, and skim milk. I couldn't stand it.

In my third year of college, my younger brother Billy contracted leukemia and his condition slipped rapidly. I wanted to go home and be with him, so I arranged my schedule to graduate in three years and a summer.

It was a difficult experience for me because everyone seemed convinced that there was nothing that could be done to save Billy. They said, "It's terminal and that's that." But it's not in my nature to give up without a fight, so I tried like hell to find a doctor who could find a cure for his condition. Despite everything, he died five months after he was first diagnosed. Years later, I named one of my sons after Billy, and happily, he's quite a lot like my brother was – a good, sweet guy.

I managed to make it all the way through college without losing my virginity. When I told a buddy of mine about this, he took it upon himself to correct the situation by taking me to a brothel where he was a regular. He picked a lady for me, and it looked as if I was going to finally do the great act for the first time.

However, once I was alone with this woman, she completely upset my equilibrium by asking, "What kind of love do you want?"

I knew so little about sex, I couldn't even grasp the idea that there was an assortment of options to choose from. I answered in my suavest voice, "What do you recommend?"

“How about ‘Around the World?’” she asked.

“I don’t know what that is,” I told her, “but if you recommend it, sure.”

“Around the World” turned out to be this: you started kissing her at one place and then went all the way around her body until you got back to the starting point. Being a considerate kind of a guy, I thought at least I should be giving her some pleasure too. So I began touching her and exploring her. I was just beginning to feel I was getting the knack of this when she suddenly said, in a very cold voice, “Watch your nails, sonny!”

This so shattered my poise that I grabbed my clothes and ran, putting my pants on as I went. That was my one and only experience in such a place.

My first job after college was in a telephone boiler room where a group of high-pressure salesmen tried to sell questionable stock to widows. I was the guy who delivered the stock. Soon, though, I abandoned the boiler room because I heard about a program at Macy’s called the Executive Training Group. This turned out to be quite a rip-off. They recruited college graduates, sold them a bill of goods about executive training, then stuck them on the sales floor for the Christmas rush. But I was making twenty-five dollars a week and, since it was the depression, I was delighted just to be working.

My next job was in the art department of an advertising agency where it seemed my chief duty was to remove excess rubber cement from storyboards. I got to be an expert at rubbing that stuff off. At the same time, I was going to Columbia and Pratt Institute taking graduate art classes. I was beginning to admit to myself, though, that there was something lacking in my talent. I would be drawing in class and look over the shoulder of the fellow next to me. It always seemed his artistic ability flowed so naturally while everything for me was a struggle.

Fortunately, the boss at the ad agency took me under his wing. I was pulled out of the art department and allowed to dream up gags and gimmicks for radio shows. I seemed to have a knack for getting people’s attention – which is what advertising is all about.

During this time, I learned some tricks I was to use later, from a strange character named Curt Odin. Curt was a freelance idea man who kept trying to sell me on various ad campaigns. I ignored him and wouldn’t return his calls. One day, in the mail, I received a wastebasket. In the wastebasket was a letter, torn into a hundred pieces. I took an awfully long time to put it together and found it was from Curt Odin. It basically said, “You idiot. I guess this is the only way I can get your attention.” Later, when I was trying to get sponsors for my radio shows, I used the wastebasket trick – and it worked.

One of my early stunts involved trying to get Philip K. Wrigley, the chewing gum magnate, as a sponsor. Wrigley was a copywriter’s dream because if you approached him in the right way, he would bring you to Chicago and hire you to do a lucrative advertising campaign. I tried the normal avenues of calling and writing, but he didn’t respond. Finally, I got an old plank that looked like part of a park bench, and I stuck onto it a few pieces of chewed gum. I wrapped up the whole thing and mailed it to Wrigley with a letter that said, “I have had these analyzed, and NONE are Wrigley’s. Let our radio show correct this situation.” That gag did the trick and he called me. Alas, for some reason, he never sponsored our show.

My fondest memory of advertising was when I worked as a script boy for Eleanor Roosevelt. She was doing a radio series called “My Day.” This must have been at the peak of her popularity, because FDR was

running for his fourth term. One day when she came into the studio, there was a group of blind children who had come to visit her.

Apparently, it came to her intuitively that she should mingle with the kids. What she did was simply to walk among them, touching them all. As I watched her do this, I felt like I was seeing somebody who came straight out of heaven. The children responded to her touch as if it was a magic caress. She was no great beauty, and she had a high squeaky voice, but she exuded a gentility and nobility that I'll never forget.

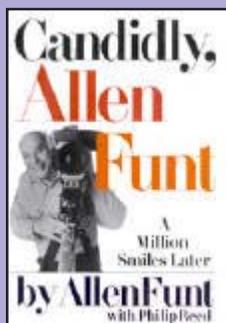
Besides those few experiences, I didn't like the advertising business. I felt then, and I think it's even truer now, that advertising is often organized lying. You are pretending your product is something it isn't. Or that it is more than it really is. The goal of the advertising man is to create clever deceptions. Consequently, I left advertising and opened my first office, Allen Funt Productions, on Vanderbilt Avenue, near Grand Central Station.

My plan was to create and sell syndicated programs to radio stations around the country. It was slow going in the beginning – so slow that I sometimes had to borrow subway fare from my secretary. But eventually I sold several shows that became successful.

One hit show I dreamed up was the “Funny Money Man.” It was idiotically simple. The disk jockeys at radio stations would form a “Funny Money Club” that listeners would write in and join. From the list of names, DJs would select people and ask them to send funny things of no actual value. The disk jockey might say, “Send me a check for a million dollars but don't sign it. In return I'll send you fifty-eight cents.” It was amazing, but that program became quite popular and spawned a syndicated comic strip by the same name.

I actually had to lie in order to sell the show. I knew no one would want it until some other station had signed up. So I'd tell stations if they subscribed they would become “the 140<sup>th</sup> station,” or some such thing. Finally, one of the biggest stations in New York, WAAF, signed up. We got them on a lie, but they never found out because we quickly sold the show to many stations.

For the first time in years, things were beginning to click for my production company. But then the war started and I knew I was going to be drafted, so I turned my fledgling business over to my sister to manage while I was gone. What I didn't know was that I was about to take the first direct step closer to the world of secret recordings – a route that would eventually bring me to the top of the world of television with “Candid Camera.”



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