

THE SECRETSO

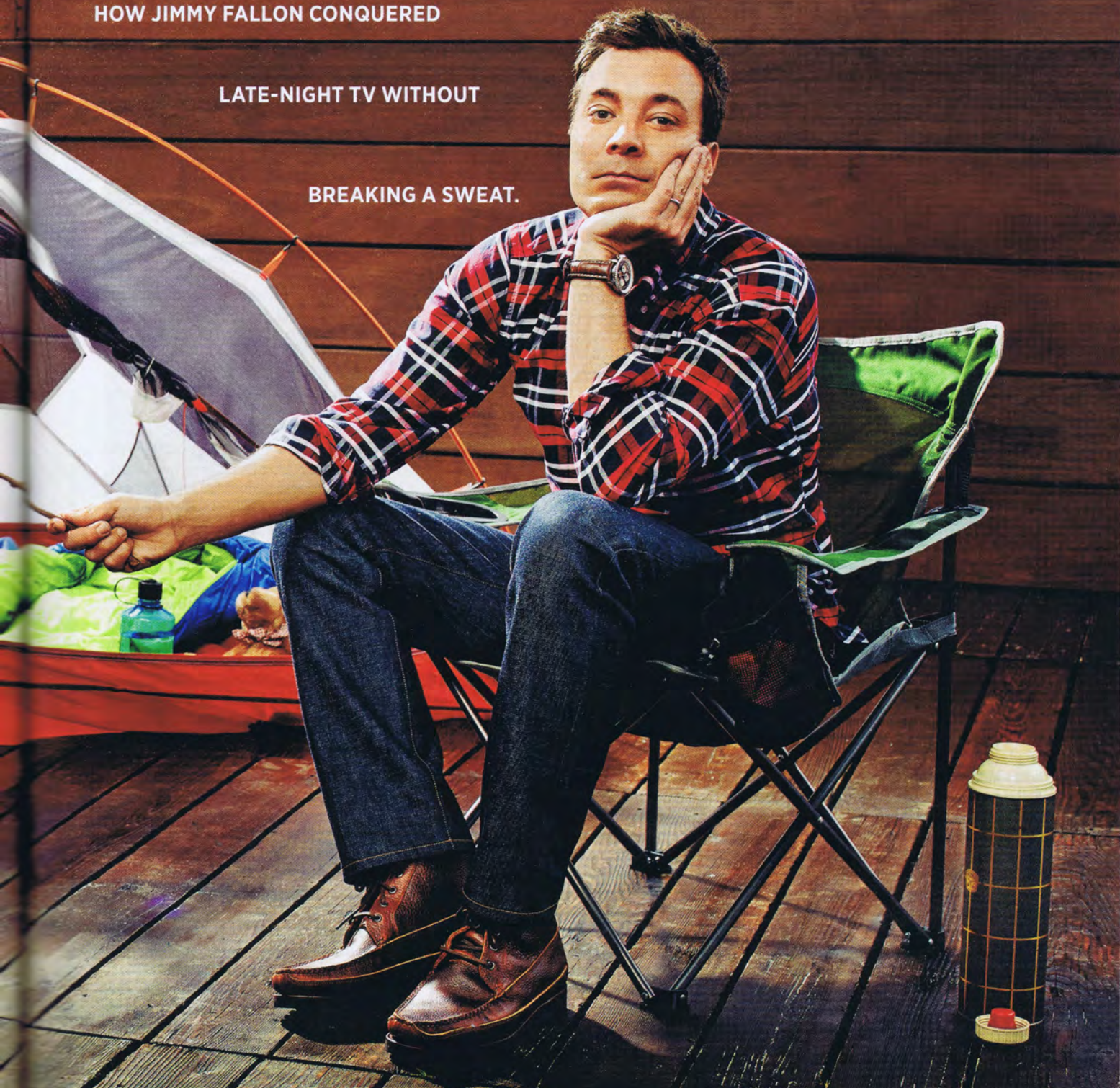


SO OF JIMMY'S SUCCESS

HOW JIMMY FALLON CONQUERED

LATE-NIGHT TV WITHOUT

BREAKING A SWEAT.



BY ANDREW GOLDMAN • PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOE PUGLIESE



nly nine months have passed since Jimmy Fallon took over *The Tonight Show*, and the gig is already taking its toll. On a recent morning in his sixth-floor office at 30 Rock, with the red neon "RAD" of Radio City Music Hall lit up outside

his window, Fallon pours himself a cup of green tea. Normally he'd do this with his right hand, but the middle finger of that hand is sticking straight out in a metal splint, like a kickstand. It's been broken for a month, but Fallon ignored the swelling and the throbbing pain,

and kept up his regularly scheduled hijinks, which sometimes makes *The Tonight Show* seem like a star-smattered take on a Japanese game show: He chipped golf balls at panes of glass with Rory McIlroy; raced Jason Statham inside huge hamster spheres; and took on Julia Roberts in a game of Face Balls, in which the host and his guest took turns winging plastic balls at each others' heads. But eventually the pain in his finger became too much, so Fallon took 10 minutes out of his schedule to let a doctor take a gander. "I think I broke it when I was fooling around with Heidi Klum," he says guilelessly. One night, Fallon stopped in the middle of interviewing the German model, once dubbed the Body, to inquire, "Do you want to show them how we roll?" and then, in a bit he'd previously consummated with Halle Berry, he and Klum got down on a mat where they did a two-person roll — grabbing each other's ankles and tumbling like some clumsy two-headed Mummenschanz creature. He crunched the digit along the way.

While many insist that Jimmy Fallon is the TV reincarnation of Johnny Carson, in many ways he's also the anti-Carson. Johnny was TV's louche who never tired of ogling Angie Dickinson, Suzanne Somers, or any busty model falling out of her dress, while Fallon is the chaste little brother. He even managed to make Klum's suggestion to try the "German version" of the stunt, in which the pair rolled across the stage, pressed together in a tit-à-tit hug, seem as dirty as two puppies somersaulting in a pet-store window. "I'm not going to peek," Fallon said, while he was afforded a view up Klum's skirt from the mat below. "My eyes are closed. I promise!" And one of Fallon's many gifts is that you believe him.

ANDREW GOLDMAN wrote about filmmaker Alex Gibney in the November 2013 issue.

Perhaps more than his talents for mimicry, music, and a quickness to find the joke, innocence is Fallon's greatest asset. It's easy to believe that celebrity upskirts, network black arts, and Seacrestian empire-building don't appear to have ever crossed his mind. Fallon's office, which features four Nintendo Wii controllers, only reinforces the idea that he's a preteen living out some high-stakes *Big* scenario. For a 40-year-old man, he is shockingly familiar with *Pretty Little Liars*, a girly tween obsession on ABC Family on whose convoluted plot points he is well versed. Does he consider this part of his job, a way to relate to the teens that NBC tasked him with bringing back to late night? "Ah," he says, nodding. "Let's go with that."

And so this is the man who ascended to the throne of *The Tonight Show*, the greatest franchise in the history of broadcasting, and did it with such grace that it seemed like he was simply falling into a pile of feathers? "Yeah," Fallon says. "I mean it just happened. It's not like *House of Cards* or anything. I'm just not that smart."

"IT'S A POPE JOB!" Jerry Seinfeld declared on Fallon's second night taping *The Tonight Show*. "It's a bizarre human experiment. 'We're going to seal him up in this studio for 20 or 30 years, and see if he can survive. Can he manage to not have a social, psychological, or sexual eccentricity arise? Let's just see.'" The permanence of the position only hits home when you take in the majesty of the renovation that NBC ponied up for 30 Rock's Studio 6B: the expensive blond wood, the art deco rendering of New York skyscrapers, and the pristine acoustics that Fallon requested after hearing Audra McDonald sing at Lincoln Center.

Even before Fallon took over, Lorne Michaels declared, "There is no job for Jimmy after this," a sentiment at once reassuring and paralyzing in its finality for a 40-year-old. And then, of course, there is the baggage that

comes with those comparisons to Carson, who hosted his *Tonight Show* from this same studio for years before moving it to Burbank, to be closer to the movie stars. "The first person to make the Carson comparison to me was Steve Martin in the first week of *Late Night*," in 2009, says Michaels, who not only serves as the show's executive producer but is the overlord of *Saturday Night Live*, where Fallon rose to fame in his six years as a cast member. Michaels is also Fallon's mentor, protector, and benefactor. "Steve watched him and said, 'Oh, he's Johnny.'" Even Fallon's predecessor, Jay Leno, gets the comparison. "I think he's more like Johnny than me or Conan were," he says.

Late-night hosting jobs have had an effect on men like Tolkien's One Ring, transforming once-reasonable Smeagols into Gollums. Carson was the undisputed King of Late Night, but he was also an absent father, a mean drunk, and an inveterate philanderer who was, according to his onetime manager, "the second-unhappiest person I've ever known." And over the years, the men who've aspired to be Carson's heirs, like Conan O'Brien and David Letterman, haven't always been much more content. During a commercial break in the '80s, the privately gloomy Letterman slipped guest Teri Garr a note. "I hate myself," it read.

Though Fallon is not immune to deep funks, he may be the one to break the cycle of misery. Certainly, his ascension to the *Tonight Show* (a process that had been so fierce and bloody that *New York Times* TV reporter Bill Carter has gotten two books' worth of *Tonight Show* skullduggery) was shockingly smooth. "I just kind of did what I do," Fallon says with his usual babe-in-the-woods manner. "Maybe Lorne was playing the chess game more than I am. I could be just a piece that he's playing. But if he is, it's a great move for me. We're both winning." But behind the scenes, the new host leaned on his political gifts to pave the way. Fallon might have taken Leno's job, but he also took great pains to allow the 64-year-old comic to keep his pride, and to find common ground with him as a comedian, a bond Leno makes clear he never shared with O'Brien. "Jimmy gets it," Leno says. "Jimmy is a comic. He's not a comedy writer. He worked little crappy clubs, dragging the guitar around and having drunks throw shit at you. And that's why he and I have a bit of a bond. It's almost a father-son kind of thing."

During his *Late Night* run, the 12:30 slot he took over from Conan O'Brien in 2009, Fallon would call Leno, who was then doing *The Tonight Show* an hour earlier, to ask his advice, as he did when he had an opportunity to interview the president in 2012. (Howard Stern and Barbara Walters also got calls.) "I could have taken it like, 'Oh is he putting me on?'" Leno says. "I don't think he really needed my help. And some of the advice he might have used and some he might not have, but he actually listened.

PREVIOUS SPREAD: PROP STYLING BY LINDA KEIL. FALLON WEARS THOM BROWN SHIRT, DIOR HOMME JEANS, BREITLING WATCH, MANSAI BRACELET, EASTLAND BOOTS.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: MARY ELLEN MATTHEWS/NBC/ABC PHOTO BANK/GETTY IMAGES;



Clockwise from top left: The Fallons on their usual summer vacation in Lake George, 1985; with "Weekend Update" co-anchor Tina Fey in 2002; with Lorne Michaels in 2013; with wife, Nancy, and daughter, Winnie, last year in New York

Most people in show business think they know everything. They don't really listen to the other person. They just wait for the other person to stop talking. *Respectful* is the best word I can use for Jimmy."

Fallon emerges from behind his desk, over which is a photo of Johnny Carson, mid-monologue. A bouquet of dying white tulips are in a vase on the desk. "Gwen Stefani sent me them," he says. "Because she flubbed Stephen Colbert's name at the Emmys and I took it upon myself to make a bit about it." It's unclear why Stefani would feel compelled to send Fallon flowers, since the mistake provided him with an opportunity to scamper onstage, commandeer the mic, and announce that perhaps it was his show, not Colbert's, that had won the best variety series Emmy. "She said it wrong, so there must be a mistake!" he pleaded from the podium. Colbert thrust the award into his hands and allowed Fallon to hijack his entire acceptance speech.

"You guys are the best!" Fallon gushed to the Colbert team of writers, many of whom will be heading to CBS with Colbert when he takes over from David Letterman next year, where they will attempt to do a funnier, more star-studded, more highly rated show than Fallon's. If the stunt had been, as Fallon swears it was, unplanned, how could he be so sure that Colbert would welcome this intrusion on his moment?

"Steve?" Fallon asks, sounding almost hurt, as if the very idea that two late-night hosts might be competitive is absurd. "He's a nice guy. We're family."

It's entirely possible that when Fallon pictures a perfect Thanksgiving, he envisions a tableful of Colberts and Kimmels — last year he gushed of his primary rival, Jimmy Kimmel, "Love him! I'm so happy he's moved to 11:30" — but it's unlikely that his corporate overlords at NBC think of the 11:30 time slot as a sandbox with room for

everyone. In March, the website the Wrap quoted a source at a rival network who claimed that NBC insisted that no guest on Fallon or any other NBC show appear on another network for three months. It's hard to imagine Fallon slamming down his Wii controller and personally issuing an edict like this. After all, it was he who ended Carson's ban of Joan Rivers from NBC, one that Leno honored even after Carson's death. "I heard about this ban, and I'm like, 'No one's banned anymore, this is such a silly thing,'" Fallon says. "When I wanted to have her on *Late Night*, one of the NBC people was like, 'I don't know, man, you should ask Jay and see if that's cool.' I said, 'I don't get it. She never did anything wrong to me.' Then we had her on, and she was so funny, so unbelievably funny."

But it's a miscalculation to mistake Fallon's mellow stance for a lack of competitive grit; at least on the show, he's not one to sit

back and let his guests win. He destroyed Pierce Brosnan in a game of Nintendo 64 GoldenEye and dusted NASCAR champ Jimmie Johnson in a beer cooler scooter race. In the real world, Fallon is a decent golfer, with a handicap in the "late teens," and when he can, he sneaks in a round with friends Mario Batali, Justin Timberlake, and Michael J. Fox.

Getting time with Fallon can be tricky: He does five shows a week, working from 11 AM until well past 8 PM weeknights, while also finding time to shoot loads of remote spots and scripted spoofs, and rehearse song-and-dance routines. There's always some unforeseen, important *Tonight Show* business blowing up his schedule. Today, like many days, it's the Web that has intervened, more specifically, an opportunity to capitalize on the show's uncanny ability to win the internet with clips that will go viral the next day and generate digital revenue. He pulls out his iPhone and is soon pumping his head to "Ew," a song that will.i.am composed, on a whim, for Fallon's recurring sketch ("Ew") in which he plays Sara, a perpetually grossed-out tween who hosts a show from her basement and invites guests like Taylor Swift and Michelle Obama to share her disgust at pretty much everything except One Direction's Harry Styles. Fallon was surprised when, a few days ago, will.i.am emailed him a finished track; the song is good enough to demand an elaborate video shoot that nobody had scheduled for. The night before, the two were up until midnight dressed up like 13-year-old girls and resumed shooting at 7 this morning, completing a big dance number featuring a bunch of actual teenage girls. In between, Fallon shot his show and found time to kiss hello and goodbye his wife of seven years, Nancy, and their one-year-old daughter, Winnie.

One thing that Fallon's *Tonight Show* is not is effortless; the elaborate parodies of *House of Cards* and *Game of Thrones* require a level of production miles beyond any other late-night show, and even when he's on vacation, his head is still in the game. "If we have a week off and I see a story, I'm like, 'Ugh, what do we do?'" he says. "I wish we could be back on. Let's just get everyone here, and I'll just do something for the Web. I've just got to get it out of my system."

FALLON HAS HAD TWO DREAMS in his life, and neither was to host a late-night talk show. For the majority of his 40 years, the candles-on-every-birthday-cake, wishing-well-penny dream was to be a cast member on *SNL* or a bona fide leading-man movie star like Leonardo DiCaprio. He grew up two hours north of Manhattan, in Saugerties, New York, in an Irish Catholic family that was a weird mix of overprotective and permissive. Fallon's maternal grandparents lived in a cottage behind his parents' house, and his grandfather, a Brooklyn cop who'd seen a lot of bad shit happen to cute

kids, made sure Jimmy and his sister, Gloria, were always within sight. "Be on the *aloit*, and don't get *hoit*" was his Brooklynese sign-off to the kids. The Fallons weren't allowed to play with friends in the neighborhood and had to stay in their backyard. "So me and my sister were forced to be best friends in this backyard," Fallon says. "I had a basketball hoop installed in the grass, which doesn't work. You can't dribble on grass. I mean there's no Wimbledon for basketball." Schoolmates would marvel at Fallon riding his bike in circles behind the family's chain-link fence, wearing a mom-mandated football helmet.

Fallon's dad, Jim, who worked at IBM, had been in a doo-wop band in his teens, and encouraged his son's interest in music and comedy. And as an early VCR adopter, Jim would tape *SNL* for the kids, skipping over any dirty bits. Jimmy and Gloria would do "Two Wild and Crazy Guys" at family gatherings. In high school, perhaps in an effort to keep their kids close, the Fallons furnished the kids with beer, expanding young Jimmy's

"Most people in show business think they know everything," says Leno. "They don't listen. Jimmy actually listens."

circle of friends to include pretty much everyone at Saugerties High. "Jimmy was friends with all different types of kids," says Gerard Bradford, a buddy of Fallon's since the 10th grade. "The burnouts, the jocks, the nerds, they all liked him equally. Whatever that is that he had then, he still has."

For Fallon, watching *SNL* as it aired live was sacrosanct. "There are only a handful of people I can name who care as much about *SNL* as I do," says Michaels, "and he's one of them." If he thought he actually had a chance to follow in the footsteps of his idol Dana Carvey with a gig at *SNL*, he didn't share it with his friends. Instead he quietly perfected a stable of impressions and worked on bits with Gloria. He joined his friend Gerard at Albany's College of Saint Rose to pursue what had become the family business, computer science, but he never stopped working for laughs. He and Gerard wrote a few goofy songs like "Idiot Boyfriend," which Fallon would croon in Beck's soul falsetto at campus gigs. Along with eerily dead-on impressions of John Travolta, Jerry Seinfeld, and Robin Williams, Fallon started touring campuses with a solo act heavy on college-friendly bits

like "Chris Rock Was My R.A." Randi Siegel, a receptionist for the comedy manager Bernie Brillstein, caught his show and made Fallon her first client. A semester shy of graduating, Fallon dropped out of school and went to L.A., to crash on a friend's couch and seek his fortune.

In 1997, years of prayers were answered when his manager got him a coveted three-minute spot in a showcase at New York's Comic Strip for Michaels, who showed up incognito in a ball cap. "I just bombed," Fallon says. "I could tell. My manager could tell. This might have been my lowest point ever." The man who comes across on TV as almost incapable of despair was laid low. "I was depressed."

He and sister Gloria, a grad student at the time, started a morbid email correspondence that became 1999's *I Hate This Place: The Pessimist's Guide to Life*, a humorous 128-page peak inside a pair who might give Letterman a run for his depressive money: "Growing up," the Fallons wrote, "I always wanted to be like Abe Lincoln. Dead." On family reunions: "Your immediate family is bad enough. Do you really want to see the people who are responsible for starting this whole mess?"

His year of misery ended when *SNL*'s former producer Marci Klein flew Fallon to New York for a second chance. He bought an outfit that was more expensive than anything he'd ever owned, spiked his hair up, and took pictures of the peacocks on the elevator carpet in case he never set foot in 30 Rock again. But his 10 minutes killed. Michaels, famous for not laughing, chortled at Fallon's Adam Sandler impression. Says Klein: "I remember I said to Lorne, 'Oh, my God, he's going to be our star. Everyone's going to have a crush on him. Every girl's going to be in love with him.'"

She was right. Klein took a special shine to Fallon, as did Lorne Michaels. At the weekly afterparties, the famously inscrutable Michaels would preside over a table, usually hosting famous friends like Paul McCartney or Steve Martin, that was unofficially off-limits to the cast. Only Fallon found his way in. "I was afraid of him," says Fallon. "I'm such a fan. I didn't know what to say to him. But Marci gave me a bit of advice: 'After every show, go over to Lorne and you thank him for the show.' And I did. I thanked him every single show. And by the third show, he probably got tired of me coming up. He was like, 'Sit down, come have a drink.'" By the time he'd logged a few seasons, Fallon would be immediately shown to Michaels' table, where he'd do the postmortem with the boss, often in the company of the likes of Jack Nicholson. An armchair psychologist might postulate that Michaels, who put up with three decades of personality quirks, outside egos, and a variety of demons, had found in Fallon the ideal comedy son. Michaels hated whenever the cast laughed during sketches, but somehow when it came to Fallon, he didn't mind. "There's some kind



FALLON WEARS MONCLER COAT, RAG & BONE T-SHIRT, BRIETLING WATCH

of very strong connection," Michaels says. "I can't really describe it beyond that. But it just has always been there."

At the end of his sixth season, the last four of which he spent honing his hosting skills at the "Weekend Update" desk, he left, and like Chevy Chase, Eddie Murphy, Adam Sandler, and Will Ferrell before him, went to Hollywood to become a movie star.

"Honestly, I wanted to be a dramatic actor," he says. "I love River Phoenix. And Leonardo DiCaprio and Johnny Depp. Those were my movie-icon guys. I wanted to do stuff like they do." He sighs. "They wanted me to do all these romantic comedies."

He settled on *Taxi*, a much-rejiggered remake of a French blockbuster, in which he played a cop who needed to be driven

around by Queen Latifah in a supercharged cab. "I'm not gonna win an Oscar," he told a reporter before it opened. "But it's worth 10 bucks. It's got explosions, hot chicks — everything you want." Privately, he expected it to be a star-making blockbuster. The week it opened he was in Toronto, on the set of *Fever Pitch*, co-starring Drew Barrymore, when he got the news that *Taxi* would be only the second-biggest movie of that weekend — the kiss of box-office death for a widely hyped movie. Fallon called Martin Short, who offered him his lake house in rural Ontario. There, Fallon, his sister, and an assistant spent the weekend rowing around the lake, drinking themselves into oblivion, and exploring the dark sides of Harry Nilsson and Randy Newman. "I just kind of got sad," he says. "What a bummer."

A year later, in 2005, *Fever Pitch* became the second Fallon disappointment. "They just killed me in reviews," he says, sounding uncharacteristically brittle. "Someone wrote something like, 'Jimmy Fallon's acting is like someone dropped a DVD player on my nut sack.' I was like, 'Well, dude, I worked six months on this movie and then sold it for three months — almost a year of my life. It's a little bit better than that.' But I would love to see a DVD player dropped on his nut sack."

The next few years were dark ones. "It was tough," he says. "I couldn't get arrested. It breaks your confidence. You go, 'Am I not a good actor? Am I not funny?'" He was wallowing in his failure, drinking too much, feeling like just another in a long line of failed ex-SNLers, doing voice work in animated films, pleading for decent roles with his agents, who just a few years earlier had convinced him that he'd be sailing to A-list success. "And you see all these other guys who'd come up the ranks behind you," he says, "and they start passing you, and you're like, 'I could have done that.'"

It was around this time that he located a lifeboat in Nancy Juvonen, Drew Barrymore's producing partner, who had worked on *Fever Pitch*. On the set, they'd developed a close but platonic relationship and reconnected while doing press for *Fever Pitch* in London. "I've missed you," he told her. They fell in love and were married in 2007. Juvonen, who is seven years Fallon's senior, has also taken the role of show business consigliere, the one always unafraid to say no, the one to remind him that there might be something pathological about practicing dance moves in the kitchen

at 1 AM for a "History of Rap" sketch. "She's the brains," Fallon says. "She's my... what do you call that board? She's my soundboard. My sounding board!"

Juvonen suggested Fallon hire his old friend Gerard Bradford, who was then working as a copywriter. The two would hole up in the Wolf Room — a room in Fallon's Gramercy Park apartment that had been papered with photos of wolves he'd cut out from a calendar — and write funny songs, which they eventually played on the road, warming up for the Strokes on several dates, wearing matching white Juicy sweatsuits. "People would throw stuff," Bradford says. "They'd throw quarters, I guess because they thought it would be easier to hit us with them than with dimes or nickels. (continued on page 104)

I remember playing at Nassau Coliseum and seeing coins bouncing off the guitar."

About this time, Lorne Michaels called about an opportunity that he'd floated to Fallon before he left SNL, one that Fallon had initially shot down in favor of his soon-to-be-red-hot movie career: taking over for Conan O'Brien, whom Michaels had tapped for *Late Night* years before. Unlike O'Brien, who fought hard to get the 12:30 slot, Fallon wasn't sure he wanted it. "It was not his dream," says Michaels. "But he was born to do it. It uses everything he's got as a performer." Juvonen helped her husband see the wisdom in the job, while NBC executives expressed their doubts that Fallon — enshrouded with the stink of a failed movie career — was their guy. Michaels threatened to ditch the show if the network didn't agree. The entire world's feelings about the pick were expressed by an early *Late Night* sketch, voiced by Steve Higgins: "You loved him on SNL! You hated him in the movies! Now you're ambivalent!"

EVEN BEFORE THE GUY in the Hello Kitty costume bounces by, it's clear that the happiest hallway on Earth may be outside the small band room just down the hall from

The Tonight Show's Studio 6B. The Roots are stuffed into the room, armed with kazoos and tambourines, to tape the newest in their series of pop hits accompanied by classroom instruments — this morning it's Meghan Trainor's plus-size anthem, "All About that Bass." Fallon arrives, slapping backs and leaving a trail of "Hey, buddies" as he goes, hugging Trainor and the Roots and anyone else he can get his energetic hands on.

If a recipe existed to create the perfect talk-show host, its first ingredient might be finding a guy with an almost allergic aversion to introspection and gloom. It's early still, the experiment Seinfeld referred to is just barely under way, but Fallon seems unable or unwill-

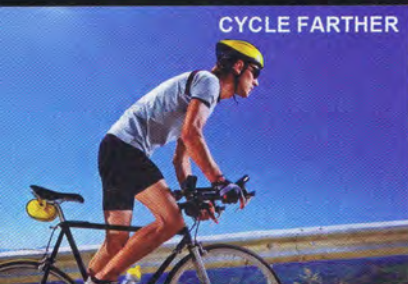
ing to slow down or look back long enough to consider the darker side of what he's signed on for: delivering five nights a week, 200 nights a year, for the foreseeable future. I ask him if he's ever thought about what kind of man he'll be 20 years from now, what kind of father he'll be to now one-year-old Winnie, who is named after New Hampshire's Lake Winnepesaukee, where Fallon proposed.

Fallon swats this away like a winning overhead in Wii tennis. "You bring up a lot of things," he says just a little glumly. "I don't really think about all that stuff, because it's moving so fast right now."

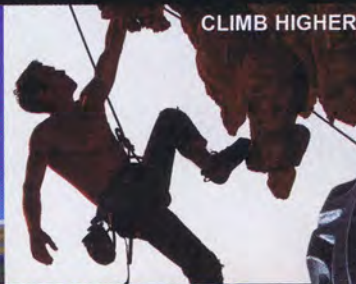
Suddenly, as if to change the subject, he grabs his phone. "Let me see if I have the 'dada' video," he says, scrolling through. Fallon finds the video of Winnie in her high chair at the family's weekend beach house in Sagaponack, New York. The Winnie of the video doesn't seem capable of emitting even one decipherable syllable despite the encouraging baby talk from her mom and dad offscreen. Getting to "dada" seems like it might be a pipe dream. Then finally, Fallon appears in frame and tickles her under her chin. Winnie's been worn down, and she finally relents. "Did you hear her say it?" he asks. "Dada! She said 'dada!'" Carson stares down from the wall behind Fallon, but it's never been more apparent that the old man's finally left the building. **M**

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