

COMEDY IS TRUTH AND PAIN

When I was twelve years old, I fell in love with Leslie Parker. She was cute and smart, with blond hair in bangs, and a smile that made my head sweat. All through seventh grade, through lunch hours and band practice and the first yearning boy-girl parties of my aggrieved adolescence, I mooned after that girl as only a hormonally enraged lunatic in the throes of puppy love can moon. I was a sad case.

And then, one day during math class, while thirty sweaty youngsters in bellbottom pants and "Let It All Hang Out" T-shirts pondered the imponderables of pi, Leslie Parker mentioned in passing that she and her family were moving away. My world imploded like a dark star. The amputation of a cherished body part could not have hurt me worse. My hand shot' into the air.

The teacher, Mr. Desjardins, Ignored me. He did that a lot because, I think, I was always asking vexing questions like, "What's the square root of minus one?" and "Why can't you divide by zero?" I waved my hand like an idiot, trying to get his attention. No go.

Ten minutes pass, and Leslie Parker's stunning revelation fades from everybody's mind but mine. At last, just before the bell, Mr. Desjardins casts a reluctant nod my way. I stand up. Pathetically and wildly inappropriately, I bleat, "Leslie, *where* are you moving, and *why*?" By which, of course, I mean, "Don't *leave* me!"

There was sudden stunned silence, for I had committed the cardinal sin of seventh grade. In a classic act of bad timing, I had revealed my feelings. In the next instant, everyone burst out laughing. Even Mr. Desjardins, that sadist, smothered a chortle in a shirt cuff. Let me tell you that the instant is etched in my memory like acid on a photographic plate, the single most painful and humiliating moment of my life up to that point. (The last such moment? Oh, would that it were so. Remind me some day to tell you about the college co-ed shower fiasco.) And I'll never forget what Mr. Desjardins said as my classmates' laughter rang in my ears, and Leslie Parker looked at me like road kill. "They're not laughing at you, Mr. Vorhaus. They're laughing *with* you."

He was lying, of course. They were laughing at me. All those little monsters were just taking ghoulish delight in my shame. And why? Because they knew, in their tiny, insecure, prepubescent hearts, that, though I was the one who had stepped on the land mine that time, it could have been anyone of them. And so in one single heartbreaking and mortifying instant, I discovered a fundamental rule of humor, though it was many years (and many, many years of therapy) before I recognized it as such:

COMEDY IS TRUTH AND PAIN.

I'll repeat it for you bookstore browsers who are just grazing here to see if this tome is your cup of cranial tea: *Comedy is truth and pain.*

When I debased myself before Leslie Parker, I experienced the truth of love and the pain of love lost.

When a clown catches a pie in the face, it's truth and pain.

You feel for the poor clown all covered with custard, and you also realize that it could have been you, sort of *there but for the grace of pie go I*

Traveling-salesman jokes are truth and pain. The truth is that the salesman wants something, and the pain is that he's never going to get it. In fact, almost every dirty joke rests on truth and pain, because sex is a harrowing experience that we all share-with the possible exception of one Willard McGarvey, who was even more pathetic than I was in seventh grade, and who grew up to become a Benedictine monk. I wonder if Willard's reading this book. Hello, Willard.

The truth is that relations between the sexes are problematic.

The pain is that we have to deal with the problems if we want the rewards. Consider the following joke:

Adam says to God, "God, why did you make will like them. " Adam says to God, "But, God, why did you make them so stupid?" God says, "So that they will like you. "

The joke takes equal shots at the attitudes both of men and women. It makes men look bad, it makes women look bad, but behind all that, there's shared common experience: We're all human, we all have gender, and we're all in this ridiculous soup together. That's truth, that's pain, and that's what makes a joke jump.

In a classic episode of *I Love Lucy*, Lucille Ball gets a job in a candy factory where the conveyor belt suddenly starts going faster and faster, leaving poor Lucy desperately stuffing candy in her mouth, trying to stay ahead of the belt. What's the truth? That situations can get out of hand. And the pain? We pay for our failures.

Even greeting cards boil down to truth and pain. "I'll bet you think this envelope is too small for a present," says the cover of the card. And inside? "Well, you're right." That's truth (*I'm cheap*), and that's pain (*so you lose*).

My grandfather used to tell this joke:

A bunch of men are standing outside the pearly gates, waiting to get into beaten. St. Peter approaches and says, "All you men who were henpecked by your wives during your lives, go to the left wall. All you men who weren't henpecked, go to the right wall. " All the men go to the left wall except one timid little old man, who goes to the right wall. St. Peter crosses to the little old man and sa-, "All these other men were henpecked in their lives; they

went to the left wall. How come you went to the right wall?" Says the little old man, "My Wife told me to."

Truth and pain. The truth is that some men, sometimes, are henpecked, and the pain is that some men, sometimes, are stuck with it.

There's something else present in this joke, and that's fear of death. Now, some philosophers argue that all human experience reduces to fear of death, so even buying a cheap card instead of a birthday present somehow relates to mortality. Maybe. I dunno. This book is not concerned with such ponderous possibilities. If it were, it would be called *The Philosophical Toolbox: How to be Heavy, Even if You're Not*. Nevertheless, it's true that death, like sex, is fundamental to the human experience. Is it any wonder, then, that so many of our jokes turn on the truth and pain of death?

A man dies and goes to hell. Satan tells him that he'll be shown three rooms, and whichever room he chooses will be his home for all eternity. In the first room, thousands of people are screaming in the agony of endless burningflame. The man asks to see the second room. In the second room, thousands of people are being rent limb from limb by horrible instrnments O/ torture. The man asks to see the third room. In the third room, thousands of people are standing around drinking coffee while raw sewage laps around their knees. "I'll take this room," says the man. Whereupon Satan yells out to the crowd, "Okay, coffee break's over! Everybody back on your head!"

The truth? There might be a hell. And the pain? It might be hell.

A man falls off a cliff. As he plummets, he's heard to mutter, "So far, so good. "

The truth and the pain: Sometimes we're victims of fate. Religion is similarly an experience that touches us all, because it tries so hard to explain those other human fundamentals, sex and death. Jokes that poke fun at religious figures and situations do so by exposing the truth and the pain of the religious experience: We want to believe; we're just not sure we do.

What do you get when you cross a Jehovah's Witness with an agnostic?

Someone who rings your doorbellfor no apparent reason.

The truth is that some people strive for faith. The pain is that not everybody gets there. And by the way, people who don't "get" a joke, or take offense at it, often feel that way because they don't accept the "truth" that the joke presents. A Jehovah's Witness wouldn't find this joke funny because he *has* faith, and thus doesn't buy the so-called truth that the joke tries to sell.

Look, it's not my intention to prove or disprove the existence of God or the value of faith. My beliefs, your beliefs don't enter into it. What makes a thing funny is how it impacts the *generally held beliefs* of the audience hearing the joke. Religion and sex and death are rich areas for humor because they touch some pretty strongly held beliefs.

But it doesn't have to be that way. You can also find truth and pain in small events: *Why does the dieting man never get around to changing a light bulb? Because he's always going to start tomorrow.* The truth is that the human will has limits, and the pain is that we can't always transcend those limits. If you want to know why a thing is funny, ask yourself what truth and what pain does that thing express.

Take a moment now and tell yourself a few of your favorite jokes. Ask yourself what truth and what pain is suggested in each joke. Consider that this truth and this pain are the theme of the joke.

As you'll notice, not all themes are universal. After all, not everyone is on a diet, or henpecked, or even afraid to die, though most of us know someone who is on a diet, henpecked, afraid of death, or all of the above. Humor works on the broad sweep, of big truth and big pain, but it also works on the intimate level of small truth and small pain. The trick is to make sure that your audience has the same points of reference as you.

When a stand-up comic makes a joke about bad airplane food, he's mining a common vein of truth and pain. Everyone can relate. Even if you've never flown, you know airplane food's, shall we say, ptomainic reputation. You get the joke.

You don't have to be a stand-up comic, or even a comic writer, to use the tool of truth and pain. If you were giving an after-dinner speech, for example, you could start your talk with something that acknowledges the truth and the pain of the situation.

THE COMIC TOOLBOX

"I know you're all anxious to get up and stretch after that long meal, so I'll try to be brief" (Pause.) "Thank you and good night. "

The truth is that speeches run long, and the pain is that audiences get bored. The savvy speechmaker cops to this reality. For reasons we'll discuss later, you often don't have to tell a joke to get a laugh; sometimes you just have to tell the truth.

Sadly, politically incorrect humor, like sexist or racist jokes, also trades on truth and pain. Let's see if I can show

you what I mean without offending anyone.

Suppose there's a group called the Eastsiders and a rival group called the Westsiders, and these two groups tell jokes about each other. From an Eastsider, then, you might hear a line like, "If a Westside couple divorces, are they still cousins?"

The Eastsiders, as a group, hold in common the truth that Westsiders are venal or immoral or stupid. Their common pain is that *we* have to put up with *them*. I won't press this point, since I have no desire to teach racists or sexists how better to practice their craft. Suffice it to say that any human experience, no matter how large or how small, can be made to be funny if its truth and its pain are readily identifiable to the target audience.

In television situation comedies, for example, you'll hear more jokes about body parts than about sacred texts, because most viewers (and I'm willing to bet on this) know more about butt cracks than the *Bhagavad-Gita*.

Here's a joke that a lot of people don't get:

"How many solipsists does it take to screw in a light bulb?"

"Who wants to know?"

This joke is only funny (and then only barely) if you know that a solipsist believes in nothing but his own existence (and in that only barely), and so is forever and always alone in his world. When you throw a joke like this at an unsuspecting audience, you make them work far too hard to discover its truth and pain. By the time they sort it all out, if indeed they do, the moment has passed and the joke is no longer funny.

The difference between a class clown and a class nerd is that the class clown tells jokes everyone gets while the class nerd tells jokes that only he gets. Comedy, thus, is not just truth and pain, but universal, or at least general, truth and pain.

But wait, there's more. We know from the commutative property of addition that if comedy = truth + pain, then truth + pain = comedy as well. (See? I learned something else in seventh grade math beyond the fact that love makes you stupid.) So if you're dying to be funny even if you're not, simply pick a situation and seek to sum up its truth and pain.

Any situation will work. A trip to the dentist. A family vacation. Getting money from an ATM. Doing your taxes. Reading this book. Cramming for an exam. Anything. Anything. Because every situation has at least some implied truth and pain. Suppose you're studying for a big test. The truth is, it's important to pass. The pain is, you're not prepared. The joke that encompasses this truth and pain (using the tool of exaggeration, which we'll discuss later) might be:

I'm such a lousy student, I couldn't pass a blood test.

See how easy?

Okay, okay, I know it's not that easy. After all, if everything you needed to know about comedy were right here in chapter one, then you could read this whole book standing in the checkout line, and I'd be out a not inconsiderable royalty.

Also, let's not kid ourselves. This book won't make you funny, not by itself. That'll only happen if you do a lot of hard work along the way. And it won't happen overnight. No reason why it should. Look at it this way: Suppose you wanted to be a wood carver, and someone told you there was a thing called an adze, great for carving wood. "Wow," you'd say, "an adze! Imagine that." Just knowing that the thing exists, of course, gives you no clue how to use it, and further, knowing how to use it doesn't mean you're going to carve a teak *Pieta* on the first try. You have to learn to crawl, to coin a phrase, before you can pitch forward on your face.

Excerpted from "The Comic Toolbox" by John Vorhaus