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BRENDAN MAHONEY

What Are You Laughing at?

The joke shivered through the school bus from front to back. It looked like it started out all the way up by the bus driver that time. The fake leather seat covers cracked as kids leaned over their shoulders to whisper the setup and laugh their way through the punch line. The joke moved through the sixth graders, then through the seventh graders, and soon it reached us eighth graders in the back. I leaned in to see if I could cheat the order of the universe and overhear the joke from someone else, but the warm summer wind was flying past my ears even as the evergreens and quiet homes of small-town New Hampshire flew past my window. The heads poking out from the sticky seats in front of me started to look like the segments of a centipede writhing with mirth, limbs clicking while each part tittered away on its own. The joke reached the kid in front of me. He listened intently. He cocked his head. He burst out laughing. He turned to me. I pulled my head out of the wind tunnel. He bit his lip. He told me the setup. There were tears in his eyes. He choked out the punch line. We exploded. I turned. Took a breath. I told the joke to the very last kid on the bus.

“What do you do when you see half a black guy holding your TV and crawling around your living room in the middle of the night?”

“What?”

Keep it together. Pause for effect. Choke it out.

“Reload.”

Comedy. It's difficult to define. You could even say it's impossible. But we all know it when we hear it or see it. No matter where you are or what you're doing—if we're watching a stand-up special or a TV show, or we're just walking down the street and we happen to see someone slip on a banana peel—comedy can sneak up on you and tickle your mental armpits when you aren't expecting it. Before it spreads to your stomach and makes you yuck like a fool, before it spreads to your lungs and makes you gasp for air, before it spreads to your lips and forces them to spasm outward in the shape of a smile, before it spreads to your eyes and makes them light up, it starts in the back of your brain as a mysterious little shiver. It's easy to identify the symptoms of comedy, but for literal millennia there's been a debate over exactly what the root of it is.

I think a lot about exactly what makes me laugh. I was your archetypal class clown for the first dozen or so years of my life. Laughter was a big deal to me. Getting people to like me was the ultimate goal and making them laugh was the instrument I chose in this quest, but it's become so much more than that to me since then. Comedy is a big part of just about everyone's life, I think. Most everyone I've ever met has had some version of a sense of humor. I certainly enjoy comedy. I make it my mission to know exactly why I do anything, and laughter is sort of singular in the way it frustrates that mission. I can reflect on any one thing I find funny in any given day, but harmonizing everything I've ever found funny under one massive umbrella is a puzzle that minds greater than my own have left unsolved. What's the joke?

For a lot of the people I went to middle school and high school with, jokes were like the one I heard on that bus ride. The punch lines ended more often than not with a racial stereotype or a debilitating disease. They yucked and gasped at jokes that involved the pain and suffering of others. Maybe this was just a function of the kinds of kids I hung out with. Maybe it was just a function of the town I grew up in. But racist jokes like the ones from my junior high bus ride followed me as I changed schools and as I changed states. They seem to follow me wherever I go, even after I stopped laughing at them myself, and I find myself wondering, *what are you laughing at?*

The hockey locker room smelled like sweetly fermenting armpit. (It's been years since I've played hockey, and even though I have trouble remembering everything else, that smell has stayed with me.) Everyone around me was lazily gearing up before a game. The room was hot and hazy from all the bodies and teen testosterone in such a small space. I remember racist jokes being something of a commodity in these pre-game moments of bonding. They were bartered and traded, one-for-one or two-for-one as each of my teammates tried to one-up each other over who could be most offensive to

the imaginary minorities in the room. Everyone groaned and insisted that we were terrible and that we were all going to hell, but no one was ever actually offended.

A redheaded kid that everyone called Murph leaned over and confided in me, just loud enough for everyone to hear.

“I heard this team has a black kid on it.”

Another kid named James perked up from across the locker room. I remember thinking when I first met him that James looked like an Abercrombie and Fitch model, if that model had been dropped on his head as a baby. I also remember thinking when he first opened his mouth that he was an asshole.

“Did you say they’ve got a black kid?” James said to Murph. Murph affirmed this statement. James’s wicked grin spread wide across his face.

“Better bolt down our bags before we leave so he doesn’t steal ’em.”

The locker room laughed. All other conversations ceased. A game began, but not the one we were all expecting to play that day.

Johnny, our team captain, was next. “Damn,” Johnny said. “I’m just surprised that he managed to find a cup big enough.”

Justin (I don’t know why in the hell we had so many names beginning with *J* in that locker room) was quick to fire back.

“Nah, he doesn’t need a cup. He can use it as a stick!”

Everyone joined in then, building off one another in a cavalcade of comedic prejudice.

“I bet he probably has to since he can’t afford a real stick.”

“I bet he just tries to dribble the puck like a basketball.”

“I bet he has Kool-Aid instead of water in his water bottle.”

James stood to get everyone’s attention, and by pinching his home jersey, which was white, over his head he caused it to taper off above him into a point. He pursed his lips in malicious glee.

“Do you think if we all went onto the ice like this we could scare him off for good?”

Everybody laugh-groaned in response. Everyone except for Brian, a smaller kid that my teammates liked to check into the boards when the coach wasn’t paying attention at practice. Brian spoke up in a voice that clearly hadn’t gotten within the same neighborhood as puberty yet.

“Let’s get ready, boys.”

“Shut up Brian,” Johnny said, “You’re the coach’s son.” Brian was, in fact, the coach’s son. How that was an insult remains a mystery to me.

“Yeah, Brian,” said Murph, “Shut up.”

“Yeah, Brian,” repeated James. He was determined as he sat down to have the last word, to justify his remarks.

“It’s not like any of us are black.”

That stuck with me, I think. It stuck with me enough that I still remember it today. *It's not like any of us are black.* He wasn't wrong. No one in that locker room was black. On the day of that game, no one in that whole hockey arena besides that poor kid on the other team and his family was black. It would be inaccurate to say no one in the state of New Hampshire on that day was black, but it wouldn't be inaccurate by very much. New Hampshire is the third-whitest state in the country. A full 91 percent of the million residents are white, which puts it right behind Maine and Vermont. Together the three states form a Northeastern tip so pale that you can see its summertime sunburn from space. I'm a part of that 91 percent. I grew up right in the middle of Wonderbread, NH. You could walk my whole high school top to bottom, end to end without seeing any more than a dozen people who weren't really, really, really white. You could walk my whole town top to bottom, end to end without seeing more than a dozen families of color, and that's according to the 2000 federal census. My town was so white that up until about the tenth grade I can't consciously remember thinking of myself as white. Looking in the mirror I didn't see a white kid. Gargoyle with a thyroid disorder? Yes. Rat prince? Sure. Wheezy vampire? Kind of mean at this point, but also probably not incorrect. My perception of myself as far as I can remember, though, was devoid of race. It's easy to not think of yourself as any particular race when you look the same as everyone around you. It's easy not to think of other races at all when you look the same as everyone around you.

Comedians have a pretty sick view of humanity. I guess that's probably obvious from watching just about anything by George Carlin. What I mean more specifically, though, is that comedians have a pretty sick view of humor and what it is that we're all laughing at. There are a lot of different theories about comedy. It's something that just about anyone can understand and, on some level, study, so it makes sense that just about everyone might have an opinion on it. And I'm not trying to say that any of those opinions are wrong, but a lot of the most well-regarded ones involve the whole world having what people might consider antisocial behavior. There are influential theories—prevalent, dominant theories—in the contemporary discussion of humor, that try to link everything we laugh at, on some level, back to cruelty or sociopathy.

Pain Theory.

My middle school best friend Ryan ran up to me while I sat under the shade of the rock wall on the middle school playground. He was out of breath, having run from across the basketball court and the gravel pit to tell me the latest and greatest joke.

“What’s the difference between a Boy Scout and a Jew?” he asked, his eyes beaming proudly. Ryan and I were both in the Boy Scouts together for years.

“What?”

“Boy Scouts come back from camp.”

Pain theory is basically the idea that everything anyone will ever find funny is something that injures someone else. The lengths that humor theorists will go to in order to justify this one is impressive. I’m sure someone has gotten tenure from a dissertation about the aggressions implicit within your favorite Knock Knock joke. If that someone was writing this essay for you now, this section on pain theory would be a lot longer. But I’ll keep it short and summarize: we like to laugh at the misfortune around us from a safe distance away where it won’t touch us, like from a movie theater seat or from under a rock wall in New Hampshire.

Superiority Theory.

I was in the back of a high school biology class next to my high school best friend Connor, and we were both incredibly bored. We began writing notes back and forth to one another about how bored we were, how bad the teacher was at his job, how funny our teacher looked, how funny everyone else looked, and before we knew it we were swapping racist jokes like we were in a hockey locker room.

How is school like a boner? I wrote to him.

How? he wrote back.

It’s long and hard unless you’re Asian. We both snickered and quickly hid it as our teacher paused in his lecture to look back at us. Connor grabbed the paper. His turn. He thought for a moment, and then smiled to himself like he had a good one.

Why do Mexicans eat beans with their dinner?

I thought for a moment about the connotations each word might have in the joke—Mexicans, smelly-illegal-dumb, beans, baked-refried-farting—but only a moment. I preferred that he just tell me.

Why? I replied.

So they can take hot bubble baths before bed.

Superiority theory depicts comedy as a euphoric high that we all experience when we’re made to feel like we’re better than someone, or something, else. It’s kind of similar to pain theory, I guess. They both involve someone being put down in one way or another. But like I said, all these theories blend together in more ways than one. Superiority theory specifically deals with the idea that all we want is to feel better about ourselves at something, or someone, else’s expense. It would have us believe that anything we’ve ever

laughed at can be explained by us somehow being exalted to a higher status through the joke.

Subversion Theory.

I was on the internet after school, as was my daily habit for most of the tenth grade. Most afternoons I would go on the website Reddit, which claimed to be the front page of the internet. They might've been the front page of the internet, but they were also the obituaries and the Sunday comics and the tiny ads in the back that I don't believe anyone reads anymore. Reddit had it all. If I was in the mood to read up on world news (rarely), they had a page for that. If I was in the mood to look at pictures of what's fondly referred to as "food porn" (occasionally), they had a page for that. If I wanted to look at pictures of birds with photoshopped human arms (most days of my life), they had a page for that as well. On this particular day after school, I was in the mood to laugh at something inappropriate.

And my God, did they have a page for that. A whole community of people wanting to laugh together at things that were depicted as horrific virtually anywhere else, gathered on this very page. Every day, links were posted and jokes were made about national tragedies like 9/11, Columbine, rapes, epidemics, incurable diseases—you name it, they found a way to mock it.

That day, I was in the mood to mock global politics. The first link that caught my eye was titled, "*Not all Muslims are a part of ISIS...*" I clicked on it and found myself looking at a picture of a tweenage boy wired up with a suicide vest and an angry look in his eyes. Underneath him, the caption to the picture completed the joke:

"...Some are a part of Al-Qaeda and the all the others seem to like Boko Haram."

Quality comedy. More.

The next was a post titled, "*The Mexican Pledge of Allegiance.*" I clicked on it, preparing to laugh at the brutality. I was linked to a picture of a Mexican drug cartel's victims, dangling from an overpass, their arms broken and bent and stapled to their lifeless chests.

Hilarious. More.

The last post on today's page: "*African scientists unveil cure for AIDS?*"

I clicked on it. Prepared for comedy.

I was redirected to a picture of an African man writhing on the ground as he was surrounded by yellow hazmat suits.

"It's called Ebola."

Subversion theory is, I think, the nastiest and most pessimistic of the three. It essentially states that how funny people find something is dictated by how shocking or offensive they find it. Well, not exactly. To be offended

by something, you need to have an emotional or moral stake in it. According to subversion theory, people aren't laughing at how much something deviates from their own personal morals so much as they're laughing at how much something deviates from, or violates, the expectations and taboos of our collective cultural morality. It's the type of humor that, more than any other, requires a complete lack of emotional attachment to the subject of the joke. Now, I'm not a comedic essentialist. I'm not sure I believe that there's any one explanation for what we find universally funny. I do see elements of these three theories in most jokes, but I don't think that any of them individually cut it. So maybe the question of, *what are you laughing at?* isn't one we can answer with a word or even with several. Maybe there's no one thing that we can all universally agree is the *what?* of comedy. Maybe comedy will forever remain a mysterious shiver in our brain stems.

That's not to say that there's no root of comedy, though. Maybe the root isn't hidden in the *what?* of comedy, but in the *why?* The question that I think all these theories involving really messed up motivations beg isn't *what are you laughing at?*, but *why are you laughing?*

Let's talk movies. One of the foundational shots that all movies are built on is the close-up. The exact frame of the shot is flexible, but it should end no higher than the top of the head and no lower than the shoulders. Every movie does it. From *Argo* to *Zero Dark Thirty*, this shot is vital to storytelling. The theory behind it is that it's used to communicate a character's emotion to the viewer. The closer you get to something with the camera, the more important it seems. If you stick the camera straight into Brad Pitt's face right as he's about to shout or cry or laugh, it seems that much more important. The camera is a bit like a magnifying glass in that way. But instead of allowing a little kid to burn ants into the ground, it allows directors to burn emotions into our memories. Here's an example of what I mean:

PITT'S PLIGHT

INT. BRAD PITT'S MANHATTAN APARTMENT — THE STUDY

BRAD PITT stares out a floor-to-ceiling window. His wife ANGELINA JOLIE, literally illuminating the room with the glow from her success, enters the study and walks up to him.

ANGELINA

Brad? Brad, what's wrong?

Brad turns to her and we see a CLOSE-UP of his face as he fights back tears.

ANGELINA

Is it cancer, Brad? Is it terminal? Oh, Brad...

BRAD

Angelina...

CLOSE-UP of Pitt turning to his wife. Every pore on his perfect face is crying out in anguish.

BRAD

I have...

EXTREME CLOSE-UP of his eyes. EXTREME EXTREME CLOSE-UP of a single tear running over every divot of skin like an avalanche.

BRAD

(whispers)

...too much money.

FIN. A CURTAIN FALLS IN THE DISTANCE. ROSES ARE THROWN ON STAGE BUT THEY DIE BEFORE THEY CAN LAND.

The audience can empathize more strongly with whatever Brad is feeling if we have it shoved in our faces. That's why comedy lives in the long shot, which is the antithesis of the close-up. For us to laugh at something that involves pain or suffering or misfortune (as almost everything on the planet does) we necessarily need to see that thing as Other. For humor to exist, distance must be increased and empathy reduced. An old rule of comedy is this: if it happens to me, it's tragedy, but if it happens to you, it's comedy.

Comedy fulfills the lives of millions every day. I think you could make the argument that if humans didn't have the ability to laugh, none of us would exist. For there to be no comedy, there needs to be no separation of subject and viewer. For there to be no separation of subject and viewer, there needs to be a perfect mobility of emotions. For there to be a perfect mobility of emotions, everybody needs to feel every emotion ever—from history, from around the world—in its vivid and often painful detail. If everybody were to feel every emotion ever in its vivid and often painful detail, everybody would combust. I'm convinced. Poof. There we go. It's the end of the world as we

know it. Humans who are incapable of laughter are incapable of existence. Laughter even enables us to handle our own problems when we laugh at ourselves. Those problems are not my problems. They couldn't be—they're funny! But now that I'm looking at them from further away...maybe I could solve them. Laughter is the best medicine. It's something we do every day without even thinking about it. But laughter necessitates a separation between you and whatever it is you're laughing at. Can we ever laugh at something and empathize with it at the same time? Is there such a thing as ethical consumption in a comedic society?

The most insidious part about comedy is that it doesn't even have to directly involve the thing you're separating yourself from. The other day, I was talking to a friend of mine, and I said the word *Ebola* in passing. She stopped me and she made me say it again so she could hear how I was pronouncing it.

"Ebola," I said, pronouncing the *E* as in "effected."

"Ebola," she corrected, pronouncing the *E* as in "evil."

"Ebola," I said, repeating my mistake.

"A-bola?" she mocked gently.

"A bowl o' what?" I shot back.

We both laughed at the pun and we continued with our conversation. It wasn't until much later in the day that I realized we'd both been laughing about a disease that's killed over ten thousand people in West Africa since 2014. We didn't make fun of an Ebola victim. We didn't make fun of Africans. We didn't really even make fun of Ebola at all. We just made fun of the way I pronounced it. In order for us to find humor in that pun, however, we had to be separated from all the deaths and the grieving families and the last look on the face of every victim. We had to be separated by the entire Atlantic Ocean. That's the longest of the long shots.

I think these jokes really started to change for me when, for the very first time in my life, I visited New York City. It was for a band trip near the end of tenth grade. We were supposed to play on top of the USS *Intrepid*, a retired aircraft carrier that was permanently docked in Manhattan as a museum, but none of that is important here. We visited a bunch of cultural landmarks, but none of those are important here either. The only place we visited on this trip that's stuck with me was the 9/11 Memorial Museum. My band director deemed it of equivalent cultural value to the other stops on our trip and we devoted a full afternoon to it.

I don't remember September 11. It's something that I sometimes feel bad for saying out loud or for thinking, but I don't. I don't remember what my kindergarten class was like when it happened. I don't remember how my mother or father or teacher or anyone looked on that day, and I don't remem-

ber crying. The only reminder I had my whole life that anyone in my family really cared about it was the little NEVER FORGET sticker that we had next to our front door. Even when I feel bad about not remembering, I don't blame myself for it. I was five, I was living hundreds of miles away from more or less anything, and I absolutely would not have understood if someone had tried to explain to me that the socioeconomic destabilization of the Middle East gave rise to terrorist groups like Al-Qaeda. On September 11, 2001, I think the only thing I would have understood was the sound of my mother crying as she sat on the couch in front of our TV. But being just on the cusp of not remembering this national tragedy, I always felt this sort of detachment, this separation from the America that I grew up in—the post-9/11 America. It was this national bonding experience, this moment of unity in tragedy, that I had missed out on.

The museum in Manhattan is designed to take the viewer on a descent, which I'm sure is supposed to be symbolic on some level. My whole band was led down, down, down, down into this display of despair. The museum functions as a timeline for September 11, 2001, showing major plot points throughout the day. I walked through with my mom, who was chaperoning the band trip, pretending like I was affected by everything I was seeing, but it all just made me feel so numb—the kind of numb that you're uncomfortably aware of, like when you sit on your hand and then you pinch the skin but feel nothing.

We were led further and further into the museum, and we began to see images from after the planes crashed. Smoky shock waves. Firefighters and journalists rushing IN as everyone else was rushing OUT. A model of the Twin Towers before and the plans for the new Memorial Tower built after, which has since been finished. I didn't remember any of this. It was functionally before my time. It might as well have been the *Titanic*. I found myself viewing the museum with the same attachment with which I looked at jokes on the internet. This, though, was not a joke. I don't imagine that museum has ever made someone laugh.

The trip concluded with a performance by our school's choir, which had accompanied us, and with personal testimonies. We heard from a first response firefighter and from a man whose brother had been inside the World Trade Center when it collapsed. The stories were hard for them to tell, obviously, and it was hard for many people to hear. As the man whose brother had died that day began describing the buildup to hearing the news that morning, my mother began to sob quietly next to me. I don't see my mother cry very often, but when I do, it's abrupt and it's a tidal wave. I put my arm around her because I thought that's what a son should do, and soon she was hugging me and sobbing into my shoulder. The man continued and I stood there gripping her arm, shocked and numb, as the sound of her crying

reverberated throughout the little room at the end of the tour. More people started sobbing quietly with my mother as the man that I didn't understand continued, crying himself, to describe that morning and the act that took his brother from him.

9/11 jokes that I read on the internet just weren't as funny after that. Soon enough, most jokes on the internet weren't.

The longest of long shots that you need to laugh about a disease killing people a continent away can also be found in places like New Hampshire. New Hampshire is a great state. I mean it no disrespect. Well, maybe that's not true. But I mean it respect as well as disrespect. It's one of the healthiest, safest, richest states in the country, and I try to appreciate how growing up there benefited me in that way. But its greatest strength (nothing happens there) is also its greatest weakness (NOTHING. HAPPENS. THERE.) There's no sense of connection you feel to the rest of the world when you view it through your TV. Time doesn't move there. Nobody dies, nobody lives. I was joking when I named my town "Wonderbread, NH" before, but it might as well be official. Like Wonderbread, my town is starch white and stale, but somehow it'll probably never decompose. Wonderbread will live on, and its townsfolk will continue the legacy of not understanding anything else that's going on in the world. They'll continue the legacy of telling racist jokes, or at least secretly laughing at the ones they hear, because who's going to stop them? Who cares there? At this point, New Hampshire's chief export is sheltered white teenagers. With a population that's 91 percent white, most everyone I know from New Hampshire only knows about the lives of American minorities from movies or from the jokes they heard on the bus home from school.

I think I was in the eleventh grade at this point. I'd moved up from hockey locker rooms to soccer locker rooms, and from actively furthering racist jokes to pretending I didn't hear them, because I was too afraid to say anything. I was kneeling by my locker and trying to remember the combination as my teammates around me returned to the familiar art of humor at someone else's expense.

"Why did President Obama get two terms in the White House?" asked a kid named Tyler.

"Why?" echoed another.

"Because the black man always gets the longest sentence."

"I've heard that one before," said yet another. I fiddled with my shin guards amidst laughter.

"Why did so many black people die in Vietnam?" Tyler tried again.

“Why?”

“Because when the general shouted ‘GET DOWN!’ they’d all start dancing.”

Oof. War and stereotypes. That one was a twofer.

Tyler decided to have one more go at it.

“Did you guys know seventy-eight percent of black men enjoy sex in the shower?”

A moment’s pause. Someone decided to take the bait.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah,” Tyler replied, “and the other twenty-two percent hasn’t been to prison yet.”

At that moment, the only player on the team who wasn’t white, Sean, got up from behind a set of lockers and walked slowly out of the room. He didn’t say anything, but he looked at everyone—including me—good and long before he made it all the way to the door. It was common knowledge among the people who knew Sean that his father was incarcerated.

I stopped hearing racist jokes in the locker room for a time after that. They started up again eventually, but for a good week or two there was silence. Maybe my teammates just started telling those jokes elsewhere. But maybe, for some of them, that was too EXTREME of a CLOSE-UP.

The long shot is great for comedy. It’s also great for ignorance. And, in case you haven’t picked up on it at this point, let me save you the effort of connecting the dots and tell you that COMEDY CAN BE GREAT FOR IGNORANCE. It’s scary for me to think that the only permission we need to detach humanity or emotion from somebody is the absence of objection. It’s even scarier for me to think about the fact that there are so many places where this objection doesn’t exist. New Hampshire might be towards the white end of the spectrum in comparison to other states, but a lot of states aren’t very far behind.

I know I’ve been talking about my town as if it were black hole in the middle of New England, where there are no people of color, and no tragedies, and no emotions, and where racist jokes grow on trees like Macintosh apples. But the only things that enable New Hampshire to serve as this oasis from the problems that so many are facing are that it’s made up of mostly white people, and that it’s far, far away from any major metropolises.

Question: Where else can you find a town that’s mostly white and far away from a major metropolis? Answer: Most of America.

Black Americans comprise only *3 percent* of the population in around *three quarters of counties* across the United States. About 75 percent of America is white, according to the most recent census in 2014, but the remain-

ing 25 percent of Americans who don't identify as white aren't spread evenly across the country like rainbow sprinkles on vanilla ice cream. Whole towns remain largely untouched. There's a disturbingly large number of places in the United States where there's just vanilla, where there are miles of nothing but farmland and white people, where racist jokes are a hot commodity, where everything else is viewed through the longest of long shots, where there's no one to ask, *what are you laughing at?*