

## The Funniest Joke Ever Told

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Two hunters, from a region that the people from your region look down on, are walking through the woods. All of a sudden one of them keels over. His eyes roll back he begins to shake, his skin starts to turn clammy, and before his friend has gotten two wits about him the man has gone still. So, the friend grabs his phone and as quickly as he can through his rising panic, he calls the local emergency number.

“Help me help me,” the friend says in an accent you find both amusing and indicative of a lower socioeconomic status than your own. “My friend has keeled over, he’s turning blue. I, I believe he’s dead.” The operator responds.

“Alright sir, I need you to calm down. The first thing you should do is make sure your friend is dead.”

“Well. Alright then.” The operator remains on the line waiting for confirmation when she hears a gunshot. Then the friend’s voice returns. “Alright, what next?”

In 2002 a somewhat informal study was conducted that concluded that the above is the funniest joke. Or at least it is the joke with the broadest appeal across cultures, classes, ages, etc. I can see why, it’s a good joke. But is it the funniest joke you’ve ever heard?

I didn’t think so.

Me neither.

So, what is the funniest joke ever told?

I have no idea.

None whatsoever.

I believe that I, and most everyone you have ever met or even heard of, is incapable of answering that question. I’m not even going to try. There will be no setup, no building of tension, no humorous asides, and most of all, no punchline. In this essay, I won’t tell you the funniest joke ever told.

I will however do my utmost to help you find it.

So where do we look for the funniest joke? Well, we can always start with a good sturdy ladder and a patient giant, to see if Newton was on to something. Let's stand up on some broad shoulders to see if we really can see far enough into the mysterious realm of what makes a thing funny to find our joke.

Maybe it can be found in superiority. Some very smart Greeks were under that impression and at least one, more modern, government/sea monster/philosophy enthusiast agreed. We laugh at something because it shows us as superior to others. It is an evolutionary reaction to winning a contest of fitness thoroughly and satisfactorily. "How many of an ethnic group I do not belong to does it take to screw in a lightbulb? More than you would think. And for a very insulting reason!" The Darwin Awards is a whole series of books based on this idea. The hunters have the silly accents of poorer, less sophisticated people...

But that can't be all of it.

Some of the hardest laughs of my life were at my own expense. I assume you've all done something at least once that would make you less fit for survival/reproduction/induction in polite society that has split your sides and had you rolling.

Perhaps then what makes us laugh is the release of tension? A certain Early psychologist believed it was, though perhaps we had better ask his mother about it. That would explain why we laugh at ourselves when we fall or flail. It would make sense of the nervous laughter after a fright or the giggles we get when we discuss a taboo. "What do you call an African American who flies a plane..."

live in that tension for a minute.

Are you currently reading something that will make racist jokes to make a silly point about comedy?

Should you now stop?

Does it make you a less virtuous person to continue to lend your eyes to something that could quickly get racist?

"...A Pilot"

See isn't that better? It was a joke about racist jokes and now we are no longer expecting something uncomfortable. Tension is built and then released as laughter. "What will happen to this poor man on his hunting trip? How will this desperate and frightening situation resolve itself? What would I do if a friend suddenly keeled over and... Oh, oh he shot him! This isn't the kind of story we have to empathize with. This is a joke, and now all the tension of the situation is resolved." And we laugh and laugh.

Unless of course, we stay in those woods after the punchline. Perhaps we stay with the not so bright man who must remain cradling his dead friends' body and beginning to come to terms with the fact that, in his panic and fear, he misunderstood the poorly chosen words of a trusted authority, and now he wonders, as his sobs turn to whimpers, if his friend's blood will ever really wash out of his hands... if it should.

Maybe that's what's really funny? The unexpected! The Incongruous. We expect one kind of thing to happen. A funny joke about silly hunters ends. And then, incongruously, we linger, and it becomes sad. But if we step back maybe it becomes funny again? I thought so. It would certainly make sense of all those times we laugh without a long build-up, without the need for dramatic tension, just a twist of expectation. The one-liner, the word joke, the turn of phrase.

"My father died because we couldn't figure out his blood type in time. I will always remember his last words to me though. Be Positive. They've really been a source of inspiration for me ever since."

"A plateau is the highest form of flattery."

You fall down in the creek and laugh and laugh at yourself and your own foolish surprise.

But the simply unexpected can't be all of it. Humor often comes from a darker, more transgressive place. You've all laughed at a joke you knew you probably shouldn't. You've had a good chuckle and perhaps an outright guffaw as a skilled comedian reaches beyond the lines of taboo that oft go unexamined in your society. A violation that is close enough to the line or is in a safe enough context that it's still fun, and oh so funny. A benign violation. The violation part is easy. Benign can be a bit trickier. It needs to create psychological distance. Either by violating a line you never cared much about, or one that your society is abandoning or by making the audience distant in some other way from the violation, distance physically helps.

"Those hunters over in that place".

Or culturally. "Those hunters aren't like us folks".

Or temporally "well that happened a long time ago". And tragedy plus time is comedy.

Maybe benign violation is what makes a thing funny. But I'm willing to bet that the hardest you ever laughed wasn't when a skilled comedian expertly threaded the zeitgeist to deliver the most perfectly constructed benign violation. Think back on it a minute, on the time you laughed the hardest while I tell you what I think might be the most important part of a joke.

Who gets it.

The joke about the hunters appeals to an extremely wide audience. That's why it was the funniest joke in the survey. Personally, if I were a betting man and was looking for a joke that would get the most humans laughing I would pick a long, loud, preferably moist, fart at an inopportune moment. But that's not what I'm going for. I'm going for the funniest joke ever told. Not the one that has the most people laughing but the one that has created the greatest, the longest, the loudest, and the best laughter.

And I think that that kind of joke is only for a few.

For example, have you ever heard a joke in your area of passion, whether it's woodworking, world history, or internet memes, that you found hysterical and that no one around you understood? It required specialized knowledge and expertise and was all the funnier for it? For the shared senses of exclusive understanding and depth of context needed to find the humor?

Or let's get smaller "What would you call a classic Mark Twain Story featuring Bubby, and Peter's dog? Dingleberry Finn!" That's a joke that eight or so people on earth would find funny. I assure you it's very funny.

Every one of the best laughs of my life has been these kinds of jokes. The ones that only a few people have the full context to understand and are made so much richer for it.

The funniest jokes ever told to me and by me were in a dimly lit dining hall at one in the morning on a mountain in Vermont. They were told in a dorm room after a symposium or a TV binge. They were told in whispers in the back of a high school class, or in a best friend's room too late at night. They were told by a lover across the table at a game. Or by family at dinner around a fire. The jokes all started as one thing and were added to as friends wheezed for breath, they were improved as lovers leaped from chairs, they were brought to crescendo as family fell off of them. They were not jokes told to me or by me but by everyone there, a grand harmony, an orchestra of the absurd. I can't tell you those jokes, both because I can't remember them and because you would never find them funny.

You aren't me.

You aren't us.

You weren't there.

But I am willing to bet if you really think about it. About the time in your life, you laughed the hardest. It was one of those times. A moment, a few people, precious, unrepeatable, hilarious.

I think that is the key to finding the funniest joke ever told. It will be found in one of those moments. And like a physicist who does not yet have the tools to measure a particle that they

theorize is out there I will describe the shape and effect of that joke; in the hopes, it may one day be found.

It is told and understood by only two people in the whole world. They are older. Not so old the memories have faded but old enough that there is a mountain of them to fade. Perhaps they are very old friends, perhaps they are siblings, perhaps they have been married or together for many years. The nature of the relationship is less important than the length. The length and the intimacy. They must have shared huge parts of their lives both in livening them and in discussing them. I believe, I certainly hope, they are happy to be near each other.

The joke begins as one thing. I can't tell you what. It begins as a loud hard laugh, a good laugh, the kind of laugh that they have shared many many times throughout their acquaintance. Then it is added to by the other one. This addition adds the memory of victory. A hard old superior kind of triumph that only they ever remember, and only together. Now they are wheezing and making gestures that only add to the memory of, the joke. For the victory and the joke are connected, intimately, by paths invisible to all but those two.

Then it is added to again, perhaps by one, perhaps the other. This time the joke has been linked to the little drifts of white lies that have mounded up around their old recliners like the last snow of spring. The joke has become in some brief and precarious way a confessional, a place to air old grievances that, in the light of laughter, don't seem all that important anymore. They are pouring out their hearts until all they have to share with one another is the oldest and deepest and best truths of their intimacy. In that release of tension their laughter redoubles, and they laugh so hard tears stream down their faces.

Then a new element is added to the joke. It's brought in by both of them. Something unconnected, incongruous, and yet in the brilliant alchemy of humor it is the natural extension of the joke. And now everything is open. They bring back all those other times they have wheezed and laughed and cried together. This one joke becomes an extension of all those others. They are laughing at the memory of laughter, laughing at their own laughter, laughing at each other's. They fall from their chairs and roll on the ground.

The last thing added to the joke is arrived at together. In perfect harmony. It is tragedy. They bring back the worst moments of their lives. Their failures, their losses. Perhaps they laugh about that time one of them shot the other on the instructions of an emergency line operator, but perhaps not. They bring back dead, friends, parents...children. It has been enough time if time is ever enough. and they laugh and laugh at the tragedy and it's time. In the comfort of their long intimacy, all transgressions are benign.

Perhaps that is the end of the greatest joke ever told. They laugh until they cannot laugh anymore and then subside, over hours, until they are only giggling. Until they fall asleep.

But I think not. After the punchline. After the end of the joke, there is always more hardship, always more love, and triumph, and long wet farts. There is always more life. More fuel for an even better joke to come.

And so the best joke does not stop.

They laugh and laugh until their hearts give out. Until their bodies cannot laugh anymore. They don't notice the moment they die because they are too busy laughing, too busy telling and being told the greatest joke of all time to worry about a little thing like death. And besides, why would they notice? If there is a better place to go after this is all done, wouldn't it be like that? And if there is nothing at all, then what is there to notice but the echo of laughter, in the only world that mattered?

That is where I propose the greatest joke to ever be told resides. In the last hours of two people who knew each other well enough and loved each other long enough to create it.

But that isn't much help in finding the joke, is it? Even if you went around watching all the old friends or happily married couples in the world you wouldn't get the joke they created.

So how do you find the kind of person who has such a long rich life of love and intimacy with another that they can tell such a joke?

It's simple.

Become them.