

MAN WALKS INTO A RESTAURANT

Jason K. Friedman

The family was gathering at Johnny Harris, the famous old barbecue place on its last legs, to celebrate my brother's fiftieth birthday. I'd come back to my hometown of Savannah for Thanksgiving and was staying at my parents' house, and we drove to the restaurant together. We parked in the near-empty lot behind the building and walked in the back entrance. My father must have come in first and disappeared inside, because he doesn't figure into what happened next.

The back door opens onto a short narrow hallway that dead-ends into a perpendicular one: a 'T'. I followed my mother past a men's room. A man appeared before us, bouncing a walking stick, moving from left to right along the arm of the T, overshooting the hallway my mother and I were walking down. She turned left, into the same hallway as the blind man, but I stopped. He turned around, his gaze falling between my mother and me, and asked, "Do you know where the bathroom is?" "It's the door that says Men on it," she replied.

My mother said it to his face, staring at his lowered lids. Her wisecrack was at the blind man's expense. But I felt as though I'd been punched in the gut. I felt ambushed, though I'd been listening even longer than my brother had to my mother's witticisms. She's never been able to resist making a joke. She sees the world through a comic lens, laughing at life's absurdities as well as its cruelties. She's a considerate person, really she is, but when a joke takes shape in her head, she's sensitive to nothing but its demands, mainly that it come out.

Most of the entries in her vast catalog are victimless. Exempli gratia: "You know, your sister's had three caesarians. By the last one they were thinking of putting a zipper on her." Once when I was visiting she asked whether I'd gone to synagogue on the High Holidays. "Yes," I said, "I went to the gay shul." "The gay shul!" she exclaimed. "It must look just like the Orthodox shul. Men on one side and women on the other!" Although I rather sourly explained that this congregation of same-sex couples did not in fact sit segregated by gender, she repeated the joke again and again, to whoever was around.

The one about the blind man and the bathroom door must have seemed like low-hanging fruit. My mother simply reached out and grabbed it.

I understand the need to be funny. The *importance* of it. As a writer I get compared to Philip Roth, though in fact our work has little in common aside from the yuks and the Jews. In my twenties I loved Lorrie Moore. Most short story writers, it seemed to me, applied some metaphysical vacuum

cleaner to their work and sucked out all the humor; the field was wide open for a writer like Moore, who shovels it in. Funny is good: this also appears to be my credo in relationships. Like some gay girl out of Dorothy Parker or Dawn Powell, I try to be a laugh riot from day one. I'm devoted to the clever narrator of Norman Rush's *Mating* because she understands that the measure of a good relationship is the state of its comedy.

I understand the impulse to tell a joke. It's the fact that my mother doesn't hold back that I couldn't get. Just to indulge in a bit of verbal irony, she made fun of a blind man, who happened to be standing right there? Seriously?

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Sigmund Freud categorizes jokes into "innocent" ones, which harm nobody and make us smile, and "tendentious" ones, which discomfit us and make us howl. He makes some attempt to distinguish jokes from non-jokes: jests are a stage on the way to jokes; jokes become something else when their omissions are restored. But despite all this analysis, Freud is far more descriptive than prescriptive on his subject. He starts with well-known jokes and tries to understand how they work. Sometimes, he acknowledges, a joke just seems like a clever remark. What makes a joke, in the end, is subjective, what Freud calls a "certain feeling."

I've conveyed my mother's remark as a joke, perhaps to justify my approach to it, to back up with evidence the feeling I had that night, that something more than an offhand remark had surfaced, though I was too horrified to laugh. I gave you the setup, followed, *boom*, by the punchline, illustrating what Freud finds that most jokes have in common—their economy. But before my mother could blurt out her line, I said to the blind man, "It's right here. Just follow me." I had just passed the men's room when he asked where it was, so perhaps I meant *I'll stay here, just follow my voice*. He got it and began moving toward me, at which point my mother said, dryly, "It's the door that says Men on it."

Opinions vary about how funny or mean it was, but what seems most essential about my mother's remark is its uselessness. She told a blind man how to identify a door by the word painted on it! And the word, "Men," wasn't even right—the door said "Gents"—so that even if he could see, he would never find the door she described. And if he could see, why would he, a grown man, need to be told how to identify a clearly marked men's room? Finally, I'd already told the guy where the bathroom was and he was heading that way.

Stripped of their utility, my mother's words were a feast of pure play—and Freud traces the enjoyment in telling jokes to a child's pleasure in play. Adults aren't, for the most part, allowed to play, and so they tell jokes. My mother seemed to be doing the opposite of sticking a leg out to trip the blind man, but achieved a similar result: some fun at his expense.

I wonder what it cost her. It isn't just language that jokes use economically, Freud observes; they also involve psychic expenditures and gains. To satisfy a hostile instinct to, say, crush the weak requires some means other than murder, on which civilization frowns. Overcoming societal inhibitions around mocking disabled people requires much less effort than killing, or even tripping, them; and the wellspring of hostility you tap is so ancient and deep that the pressure it releases far exceeds the trouble to access it. The person to whom the joke is told actually gets more pleasure, because he hasn't had to clear the same hurdles; his pleasure is mostly profit.

Now, psychic costs accrue only to people with inhibitions to begin with. Freud considers children and uneducated people "naïve" joke-tellers, since they don't know enough to be inhibited. I wouldn't let children and so-called uneducated people off the hook so easily, but I'd definitely add sociopaths to the list. My mother is none of these things, though she did claim ignorance of what she was doing. "Why'd you say that?" I demanded as we headed toward the dining room. "Didn't you see his walking stick?" "No," she said, claiming a selective blindness for herself. "You didn't see his walking stick?" I asked. "I did," she allowed, "but I didn't know he was completely blind."

Eventually, if I'd pursued my inquisition, my mother would have admitted to knowing the man was blind. Needing happiness so much that this is the way she goes about it—this is what she won't fess up to.

I'm keenly attuned to my mother's pleasure. At suppertime when we kids were growing up, she sat facing away from the television, head wrenched backward, gnawing on a chicken back she held between her hands like a squirrel. I didn't know she ever experienced pleasure, or cared to. Then one afternoon I came upon her in the kitchen, alone at the table, her back to whatever soap was playing, eating a little bowl of spaghetti in a milky sauce, studded with tiny slices of celery. It was the wrong time of day to eat pasta, and the wrong pasta dish to eat. We never ate cream sauces; the celery was also unusual, as was the absence of meat, which I myself hated in sauces but still expected to see. I don't know how old I was, but the strange scene jolted me into an awareness that was long overdue.

My mother, I realized, had tastes apart from our own, and it was at this moment that I realized she existed as a person separate from the role she played as my mother. From then on I was on the lookout for more evidence, and I found it. She mentioned a little pink turntable she had as a girl, and the Elvis records she played on it. She liked a candy called a turtle, a mound of peanuts bound by caramel and coated in chocolate, and on birthdays and Mother's Day my father took us kids to Kmart to buy her a box.

These days her pleasure lies mostly in being noticed. Getting dinner on the table involves a racket of sighing and schlepping and slamming dishes around. "Mom's sick of cooking," I once told my sister-in-law. "Really?" she

asked. "I thought she loved it." Of course my sister-in-law was right. My mother takes pleasure in the suffering required to cook as well as in the joy the result gives others. When we sit down to a meal she's prepared, she digs in and announces how delicious it is—a priming of the pump that makes us all shower her with praise.

In public she talks too loudly, sweeping up admirers in her verbal net. Cracking wise is something to do around the house, an essential element of domestic life; but it's even more fun to do out in the world. Once when I was a kid we were waiting in the customer service line at Sears to take back some underwear she'd got me. She made some crack (pun intended) about the unsatisfactory article that I no longer remember. It wasn't funny, I remember that, and probably exhibited few of the characteristics Freud prized in jokes. But it sounded like a joke, felt like one, with me as its object. After her announcement Mom looked around, smiling at whoever might have heard.

In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* Freud tells one about a blind guy:

"How are you getting along?" the blind man asked the lame man. "As you see," the lame man replied to the blind man."

This joke, Freud notes in a discussion of double meaning, invigorates the language it uses. *Wie geht's*, used as "how are you?", literally means "how goes it?" "As you see" would normally mean nothing more than a shrug, but here it refers to the blind man's vision. I first read this joke shortly after my mother made hers, and I missed half the wordplay. I was blinded to it by the lame man's aggression against the blind man, whom I'd decided was the innocent here. I suppose I identified with the blind man in the joke as I had with his incarnation in the restaurant.

My mother, then, is the lame one, herself wounded but not so bad off that she can't lunge for any worse-off creature that crosses her path.

Our setup on the T-shaped hallway—my mother on the left side of the letter's arm, the blind man on the right, me on the stem—arranged in space the *dramatis personae* Freud found necessary for the classic mean joke to work. Generally speaking, a tendentious joke calls for three people: in addition to the one who makes the joke, there must be a second who is taken as the object of the hostile or sexual aggressiveness, and a third in whom the joke's aim of producing pleasure is fulfilled.

It's the third person, in this case me, who elevates a "comic thing" into a joke. My role was crucial! My mother's pleasure was at stake and so was my much greater share.

All my life Mom has been performing for strangers, they the privileged number 3, me the shitty number 2. But now, no longer a child, I'd been promoted, from number 2 to nothing less than my mother's ally. And there was my replacement, the new number 2, heading the wrong way,

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stranded, lost, blind...*He* was the one being treated like a child, told what a bathroom door looked like. The man was standing there, my inhibitions were too great, the joke wasn't strong enough to catch me unawares. But I can't help feeling I botched my lines. I wasn't supposed to have any lines, wasn't supposed to think or judge or offer assistance to the butt of a joke. All I had to do was laugh.

But instead of laughing, and thereby completing the perfect communion by which my mother's unconscious spoke to mine, I stared stony-faced. I accused, torpedoed her pleasure, which had for so long been so important to me.

And as in a dream, the unscripted line I did utter made no sense. The blind man asked where the bathroom was and I told him it was *here*, as if he could see. I told him to follow me, though I was standing next to the door. Truth is, I panicked, blurted out my own useless remark even faster than Mom did hers, tripped over my tongue to indulge my instinct to do good, or assuage my guilt at being able to see. What a pair this poor man stumbled upon! Perhaps it was as birds of a feather that we flew out of there, my mother and I.

Number 2 wasn't supposed to say anything either. Nobody's supposed to talk but number 1, though number 3 has the other active role. Number 2 is just supposed to be there as an object, to represent the roadblocks that society throws up to reaching our deepest pleasures. Numbers 1 and 3 get a moment's fulfillment by throwing number 2 under the bus.

My mother told the blind man how to visually identify the men's room, and instantly he replied, "Well, I wouldn't be able to see it now, would I?"

Nothing is supposed to follow a punchline. The blind man's snappy rejoinder undid the joke.

I was surprised and impressed by his bitchiness. Maybe I believed that living with a disability allows you to master all lesser nuisances, like traffic or weather or the insensitivity of others. But this man gave back as good as he got. He sounded like one of those tough Southern bar queens who served as audience to my coming out thirty years ago. A joke, Freud explains, catches you off guard, tapping unconscious sources of pleasure before your conscious inhibitions kick in. A joke is a sort of blinding. But this man, already blind, could clearly see the meanness of my mother's remark.

Still, in no way could he see where she was coming from. She was just this bitch who appeared out of nowhere. In analyzing my mother's remark, I'm trying to be the audience I failed to be that night. But for a moment, numbers 2 and 3 had allied themselves against number 1. Number 2 called number 1's bluff. Number 3 jumped down her throat, and the joke died with a thud.

FALLEN

12X12" GRAPHITE ON PAPER

RON NORMAN



In an extraordinary scene in the documentary *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*, that other Jewish theorist of jokes is doing a show in Wisconsin and says, "The only child I think I would have liked is Helen Keller, 'cause she didn't talk," then pulls an imbecile face. "It's not very funny," a man in the audience shouts out, "if you have a deaf son." "I happen to have a deaf mother," she says, "oh you stupid ass. Comedy is to make everybody laugh at everything and deal with things, you idiot. My mother is deaf, you stupid son-of-a-bitch." After the show she allows that it was a hard moment for everyone but that maybe the heckler benefited from it. "He had kind of a catharsis," she suggests, sympathetically.

In the fragments of the *Poetics* that have come down to us, Aristotle doesn't explain how the purification, or *catharsis*, of tragic acts is supposed to work. But consider the blind man, Oedipus, whom Aristotle discusses at greater length (and whom Freud, of course, made a household name). Aristotle finds great beauty and art in the fact that Oedipus kills his father without knowing it, only later realizing what he's done. The art consists in the fact that "the repulsive quality does not attach to the act, and the recognition has a shattering emotional effect." If because of Oedipus's ignorance the murder isn't repulsive, then the "recognition" here, as shown by Oedipus's self-blinding, serves no moral purpose; his conscience is already clean. The gory act is included in the play only to generate fear and pity in the audience, a spectacular moment of catharsis.

When we talk about catharsis these days, as Rivers herself did after her show, we usually mean a personal cleansing. But in her onstage lecture on humor, Rivers also goes big. Where would we be, she asks, if we couldn't laugh about 9/11? The audience seems uncertain that we could laugh about 9/11. Then Rivers tells an Osama bin Laden joke that brings the house down.

The kind of relief from repressed urges that Freud sees in comedy seems related to the release the audience gets from tragedy. Catharsis is traditionally a communal experience, while most kinds of jokes need only two people to work; still, society benefits when we make jokes, not war. Freud acknowledges Joseph Breuer's cathartic therapy as a forerunner to psychoanalysis, and Freud himself practiced the method, which used hypnosis to induce a release of emotions.

But by the time he writes *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, published in 1905, Freud has rejected hypnosis for free association, a way to surface unconscious urges rather than trapped emotions. Catharsis doesn't even get a mention in the book. For Freud, a joke is a gentleman's agreement; surprisingly, considering her foul mouth, for Rivers, too. The contract between audience member and comedian is the one between the teller of a joke and the person to whom it is told, numbers 1 and 3. Rivers understood this. When the Wisconsin heckler breaks their contract, she feels licensed to rip him a new one; all the suppressed hostility on both sides comes out. In Rivers's show, the number 3 who *doesn't get the joke*, or at least refuses to

participate in it, experiences the most legible emotional release. The rest of the audience just laughs.

The heckler remains in the realm of tragedy. So does the performer who gets heckled. Challenged on her Helen Keller joke, Rivers dredges up all the sorrow behind it: her deaf mother, her dead husband who lost a leg. Rather than distancing herself from the joke, she implicates herself in it. All this is happening in the context of a comedy routine; she can't well deny she was making a joke. But my mother was in no place to deny hers either, I pointed out that night. I was, I suppose, giving her the chance to choose tragedy or comedy. She could have shared her own feelings of frailty when faced with disability, or admitted to her starvation for attention after half a century of lavishing it on her family. Or she could have said, "What, I should have told him it's the door that says Ladies on it?" Instead she dodged my questions, looking a little lost as she hurried away from me.

I left out one line of the story. It was a bit of dialogue, spoken by my mother after the blind man called her on her remark. Her identification of the door by the word "Men" wasn't helpful, he pointed out, because he couldn't see it. *I'm blind!* he was saying to her, in a tone that showed he knew that she knew it. And she said, "Oh!"

Less a word than a sound, a moan, a sign of interest, an avowal, a question, a challenge, an apology, a burst of delight, oh contains opposites. It can mean yes or no or nothing at all. I don't know what the blind man thought of my mother's response. He was done with us, and headed off to the john. But I could see the slight collapse of my mother's expression, hear the way her tone of mock surprise failed to cover her embarrassment at being called out.

Mildly traumatized, I repeat my mother's joke to everyone. Most people laugh, whatever the form of communication. My ex, to whom I'd told it in email, reported "howling with laughter" and imagined her saying it with her "sly expression."

I'm no funnier than my mom. My friends are no less sensitive to the suffering of others than I am. So why did my mom die out there in the hallway while I slay everywhere else?

Obviously, my friends are less inhibited than I was because the blind man's not around. He's as abstract as the blind man in Freud's joke, and my pals don't have the same emotion invested in my mother's wisecracks as I have. But the blind man's absence is only part of the broader distancing I achieve when I tell my mother's joke. I started this essay by telling the joke as a joke: setup, punchline. But when I tell my friends, I report each actor's line in sequence. The blind man asks where the bathroom is. I say right here. My mother says the thing about the door. The blind man shoots back. She cries out. We flee. I'm, like, *Mom, what the hell!* I wrap the joke in a story to

distance my friends and myself from the cruel reality, to build us a safe space. It works. I get the laugh, which is interesting, since my story actually kills the joke, thanks to the blind man's elaboration of the punchline. Absent of the economy on which jokes depend, my story is what Freud might identify as a mere comic tale, which he nevertheless recognizes can be quite funny. Still, if the psychic circuit reserved for true jokes isn't completed, and neither my friends nor I gets the deep relief of indulging our worst instincts, so be it.

On the other hand, when I tell the joke my way, as a story, I place myself in a superior moral position to my mother's, but I still have the pleasure of telling the joke.

A tendentious joke is a sacrifice. The object has his heart carved out, but no matter—it's for the greater good. The teller and the one to whom the joke is told get pleasure at the object's expense and in this way indulge their hostility to women (the obscene joke) or the weak (the generally hostile joke) without resorting to violence outright. It's a tidy little schema, when the joke works. Freud doesn't get into what happens when jokes fail, though we don't have to imagine the dark consequences of humorlessness on a large scale. The failure of my mother's joke reveals just how unstable Freud's schema is, how easily the three principals can find themselves playing one another's parts.

My mother may have pounced on the blind man, but she was the one who ended up on the chopping block. The man disappeared and I was left holding the knife. I felt no pleasure at all. The kitchen blasted us with heat, smothered us with meat fumes, as we navigated the narrow hallway to the dining room, where the party was being held.

15X17"

AMARYLLIS IN B (BEE) GRAPHITE ON PAPER



RON NORMAN