

NAKED IN THE SPOTLIGHT

Feeding off the high of other people's laughter, a local dad takes to the stage for his fix. BY ANDREW KENSLEY



IN THE SUFFOCATING SPACE IN FRONT OF ME, I HEAR PINT GLASSES

touch down on tabletops. Anxious feet tap the floor. A weak cough and scattered murmurs—the antithesis of laughter—echo under the rafters.

The sound of distressed human breath, however, is distinctly mine.

I pace the stage and bow my head, as if I can hide. I still have about three minutes to go in my set; this could get ugly. I fiddle with my scratched-up notes and assure the crowd, “There must be something funny in here.” My impromptu mumbling elicits a smattering of sympathy, more than the lame opener that took me three days to write and 30 seconds to screw up. Several ill-timed jokes later inside the subdued room that reeks of judgment, I abandon ship. “You guys have been great,” I lie. “That’s my time.”

Despite the cursory applause, I feel naked and nauseated under the hot light. I slide the microphone into its holder. Kevin, the revved-up emcee, introduces the night’s next victim. I hurry to my seat.

I died. Everyone knows it.

In the bar afterwards, I hear “good set” from a bunch of the other comics, even the ones who killed it. I thank them. Their lies sure do feel good.

Tomorrow’s going to suck.

I AM EIGHT, MAYBE TEN YEARS OLD. DAD HAS LOST THE HANDLE AGAIN.

He’s screaming something about breaking the TV if we can’t finish our homework on time. With my head stuffed under the pillow I think, “I could have stopped this one.” I could have made him happier. I am, after all, the best son in the world.

My teenage sister fights hard for a lock on her door. Mom is just soooo mean. There must be something I could do to persuade them so the arguing would stop. No more yelling! Please, please, I whisper. A little louder, and maybe they’ll listen to me. I am, after all, such a special boy. If I’m so perfect, like my mom tells me, how come I can’t make this better? Look at me, you guys! Look

at me! No more fighting. Stroke my hair. Tell me I'm the best son in the world. Tell me again. See me.

I AM FUNNY. I'VE HEARD IT ENOUGH FROM MY FRIENDS, FAMILY, CO-workers, and even kids. "You should do stand-up," people say. "You'd be great at that!" They're not necessarily wrong. The scourge of perpetual seriousness doesn't suit me. Humor is my oxycodone for life's compound fractures. Or even paper cuts. One can never be too prepared.

I am sarcastic and quick-witted, comfortable in a crowd, and confidently self-deprecating. I am crude and sometimes obscene at guy's night at the Crown Pub, and smooth and complimentary and mostly PG when my wife hosts book club. People laugh when I'm around. It feels good.

"Is he like this all the time?" Tanya's friends ask. She responds with a familiar eye roll and a knowing grin. At my kids' birthday parties I am the British butler and Shrek and Gru. My audience roars when I take a stage that's not real. That is easy.

Impersonations are my forte. I once convinced some ladies in Vegas I was a surgeon from Australia for about an hour. I first did Johnny Carson when I was 13, to the delight of my summer camp counselors. I do Sean Connery better than Sean Connery. I've been memorizing TV commercial jingles since I was four. Ask my mother.

Lunchtime at work is filled with kinetic gesticulations and shameless non-sequiturs, constructed from the details of dysfunctional relationships and real life. I poke fun at everyone, including myself. I listen and watch, then volley back with a self-assuredness that is decidedly harder to find when the curtain's up. The requited laughter always comes, tickling my brain's pleasure centers. The acceptance and the adulation are nothing short of orgasmic.

An audience composed of friends and coworkers is always captive to my shtick, rooted as it is in a familiar context. The failures skitter away like mercury from a cracked thermometer. The laughs, however, abide.

Alas, being funny on stage for five minutes does not compare. There is no banter, no Newtonian action-reaction, no witty Letterman-Shaffer repartee. I am lit up and showcased like a blind mouse in a python tank. Everyone else in the room is armed with adult beverages and a license to withhold the approval I desperately seek. When they do, it can hurt. But only if I let it.

That is the essence of comedy. And, I'm learning, life.

AFTER A COUPLE OF COMEDIC TRIAL RUNS IN WEST PALM BEACH A decade ago, I dipped my toes into the local scene in the fall of 2011 at Hodi's Half Note in Old Town Fort Collins. I had planned on returning sooner, but couldn't commit to the preparation, or the likelihood of failure. At least that's how I justified it.

Then this past summer, while waiting for my kids at their swimming lessons, I run into Jsin Novak, the Fort Collins comedian/entertainer known around town as Captain Jsin. I recognize the Captain's handlebar mustache and pork pie hat from a couple of years ago. He looks the part.

"You still running an open mike?" I ask. As luck would have it, he happens to organize the Friday night open-mike comedy at Pateros Creek Brewery on North College. He encourages me to come out again. I'm nervous, I admit, smiling through my tachycardia and early perspiration. Through subtle body language hints, I beg him to guarantee me how easy it will be. And how great I am. And how I cannot fail.

"What's the worst thing that happens?" he says with a smile, as if he's been through failure and survived just fine, thank you. My mind drifts to an angry mob wielding torches and pitchforks. "You get up there and no one laughs for five minutes? It's not like they're going to throw things at you."

A best-case scenario, for sure, but it's enough.

I RECITE MY LINES, MAKING OCCASIONAL EYE CONTACT. I SCAN FOR pockets of enjoyment, head nods and smiles. It was funny in my head and in my notebook and during 12-mile hikes and bike rides to and from work. Recalling the information is a challenge, especially when the silence eclipses every other sound. My acceptance in life depends on success here. It's not really true. But it is.

This summer, my kids begged us to send them to sleep-away camp for a week. And I have to say, it was an emotional experience, a big step for my wife and me. We were finally living the hopes and dreams for our children that all parents strive for, from the moment our precious, adorable, sweet little creatures enter the world: to get the kids out of the house for as long as possible.

Chuckles.

I am a rare Jew in Northern Colorado. I meet a lot of folks from Wyoming in my job, and most of them, to be honest, have never even met a Jew before. Once, after I mentioned my religion in passing to a rancher from River-

ton, he stared at me for a few seconds, and eagerly waved his wife over. I thought he was sizing me up for taxidermy. But he squints at me and says, "Hey Myrtle, Pastor Bob was wrong! You really can't see their horns!"

Islets of laughter.

I can do this.

STAND-UP COMEDY IS MORE THAN CREATING funny. It's about taking chances and baring your soul, regardless of the result. It's about forging bonds with strangers who expect unreasonable success, as if some unpaid yahoo from anywhere can be reliably counted on to produce entertainment value. It's about sharing what you can't share any other way. Let's face it: failures and misfortune are funny, especially when it happens to someone else.

Yet taking the stage to tell jokes is not for everyone. What my mother brags about to her mah-jongg friends doesn't matter. (For the record, her son is hilarious.) Still, I have no Laugh Factory pedigree, no Improv bloodline. For all these people know, I could be Ted Kaczynski up there. Or worse. I could be Gilbert Godfried.

The experience is scary and exhilarating and perverse. Any idiot can put themselves on the list for five minutes of self-flagellation in hopes of achieving a dopamine-fueled rush of approval from strangers. You can't do that with any other job.

Yes, Mr. Jones, you're number eight on the open-knife surgery list. How about...let's see...you can do Mrs. Smith's hip replacement. Break a leg!

Live comedy is about connecting with pain and frustration and the curiosity and fellow humans. It's about developing the confidence to be who we are, regardless of the results. It's about forgetting the past, or at least learning from it, and relishing the moment. I reminded myself the morning after my bombed set that the audience would certainly have preferred to laugh than check their Facebook pages.

In the end, eliciting laughter is a reasonable goal. But whenever I tell people I performed at an open-mike comedy night, most of them open their eyes wide and say, "You'd never get me up there. Seems like a victory for just trying."

They may be right. 📧

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