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## The Best Medicine: An Exploration of Laughter and Dark Comedy

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# **The Best Medicine**

*An Exploration of Laughter and Dark Comedy*

An Honors Capstone Project

By Helen Anderson

Advisor: Dr. Tom Moore

## *I: Cancer Perks*

When my mother was diagnosed with a particularly aggressive form of stage three breast cancer, as expected, nobody laughed. There's nothing intrinsically amusing about a potentially fatal diagnosis. Thankfully, I was a typically self-absorbed teenager entering my senior year of high school, so it was easy to focus on comparatively petty concerns: where would I go to college? What could I afford to major in? When I tried to curse at school, was it coming off naturally or was I still putting too much emphasis on the "f" in "fuck"? The question of why my only kiss by age eighteen had been with my gay would-be college roommate seemed much more pressing than any concerns about my mother's increasingly perilous mortality.

Even after my mother's second hospitalization, when the severity of the situation made it impossible to ignore, I could not bring myself to address it directly. My mother's cancer was too intimate, too overwhelming, for sober discussion. Cursed with law-abiding parents and a belated birthdate, alcohol was out of the question, so we turned to humor as an alternative conversational lubricant. As comedian Neal Brennan puts it:

“Sometimes the world can feel like a room that's filling up with water. And for me, to be able to think of a joke is like an air bubble.” A space to breathe, and to escape.

Safe in our bubble, my mom and I started an active list of cancer perks:

*Cancer Perk #1:* No more pesky shaving! Who's got the time? Not you!

*Cancer Perk #7:* New friendships! There's no relationship like that between you and your many doctors. A unique intimacy is expected from any relationship that centers around one's breasts.

*Cancer Perk #33:* Excellent joke material! Upon being informed that her cancer was in remission, my very direct mother asked, “So I'm not dying anymore?” To which her oncologist deadpanned, “No, you're still dying, just at a more normal rate now.”

Tempered with a genuine humor, our bitter resentment melted into a productive dark comedy that helped us weather the cloying, Splenda-sweet clichés of the months to come. At one point,

my peace-loving, 100-lb, 5-foot-nothing mother suggested that perhaps the best response to “everything happens for a reason,” was a swift punch in the face. For years before my mother’s diagnosis, I had managed a fundraising team for the American Cancer Society, but as my mother’s treatment dragged on, I found myself drowning in the aggressive, fideism-fueled optimism I had once found so inspiring.

At one charity event, in the middle of what I have to assume was intended as a moving ballad about how *Fallen Warriors Find Their Wings in Heaven*, my mother leaned over and whispered, “The only kind of wings I want are buffalo wings.”

\* \* \*

Judging from the growing popularity of satire and dark comedy, my mother and I are not the only ones to have benefited from the power of laughter as a means, not merely of escapism, but of connection to something otherwise too painful to address.

The feminist poet, Audre Lorde, once wrote that poetry is not a luxury for women but a necessary means of self-expression. In much the same way, laughter is no trivial or foolish indulgence for humanity, but instead plays a vital and important role in our biology, our psychology, and our society.

## *II: What Happens When We Laugh? Our Bodies and our Brains*

Before we can understand why laughter is so important, we need to define what laughter is beyond the “ha ha ha” of Sunday fame (Davis).



Yet where to begin? Pronounced a “conspicuous but frequently overlooked human phenomenon,” (Ruch), scientists and linguists have in truth been studying the nuances and subtleties of laughter for well over a hundred years, with formal scientific papers dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century and beyond (Piderit). These early studies on laughter typically focused on its physical mechanisms: intricate combinations of respiration, vocalization, facial action, and bodily movement, both voluntary and spontaneous. So, in deference to the experts, we, too, begin quite literally with the physical *how* of laughter.

Estimated to be approximately seven million years old (Niemitz), laughter is a deeply evolutionarily conserved prelingual vocal expressive-communicative signal, predominantly used to enhance the social signaling initiated by facial expressions. In other words, laughter is a means of amplifying unspoken social cues to the end of promoting interpersonal organization and communication. In even fewer words, laughter conveys an unvoiced message. This is why laughter is often paired with natural smiling, with smiles accompanying both the onset and offset of spontaneous laughter (Ruch), like a pair of joyful bookends. A smile’s sidekick.

Emotional, or *spontaneous*, laughter fulfills this ancient purpose: an innately inarticulate, prelingual, and emotionally-driven sound, no higher-order language or speech skills are necessary for its production. Ontogenetic studies support this innateness, with laughter easily observable among deaf-blind children and even in deaf-blind thalidomide children, who could not “learn laughter” through visual, auditory, or face-feel mimicry of their parents or caretakers (Ruch). A study conducted in 1986 further demonstrated that certain patients with degenerative brain disorders and limited voluntary control of the muscles involved in laughter were nevertheless able to demonstrate “vigorous expiratory movement” during bouts of spontaneous laughter (Bright). This kind of laughter develops without consciousness or deliberate effort, and modern ontogenetic studies report its regular occurrence in *Homo sapiens* infants at approximately four months of age, following the cessation of reflexive (non-emotional) smiling by about two months and the initiation of genuine (emotionally-stimulated) smiling by about one to two-and-a-half months (Reece). This biological pattern of genuine smiling preceding the development of spontaneous laughter supports the theory of laughter as an evolutionarily

conserved expressive-communicative means of enhancing other innate, prelingual social signals, such as smiling.

However, not all laughter is equally primeval (Ross). Contrived or faked laughter, referred to as *voluntary* laughter, is expected to involve different neural pathways than spontaneous laughter, as well as unique facial-morphological structuring. These alterations result in a different laughter sound and facial expression pattern than those associated with spontaneous laughter (Ruch), as might be suspected from the differences in inspiration. Perhaps unsurprisingly, these inconsistencies are not as subtle as someone meeting their in-laws might hope; in a recent study, participants from twenty-one different societies across six different regions of the world were able to accurately differentiate between the two kinds of laughter 64% of the time (Bryant). By its very nature, spontaneous laughter is unplanned and assumed to be guileless, while voluntary laughter usually follows a more calculated, though by no means negative, motivation. Voluntary laughter not only requires more sophisticated muscle control than spontaneous laughter, but is furthermore initiated by the relatively nuanced motivation to consciously mimic such laughter, “providing a deceptive tool to artificially quicken and expand social bonds – and so increase survival odds” (Raine). Self-serving or not, voluntary laughter likely evolved in tandem with the acquisition of speech and higher-order language skills in early human beings, and is therefore affiliated with the development of increasingly nuanced social interactions (Ross).

Yet it is not motivation itself that produces the discrepancies between spontaneous and voluntary laughter, but the altered configurations of facial musculature which these various motivations promote. If the theory applies that spontaneous verbalizations were initially produced as an enhancement to facial displays in order to underscore the message being conveyed, then it follows that the sound produced would be influenced by the emotion-specific facial configuration triggering its manufacture. For example, spontaneous laughter associated with joy classically initiates with a *Duchenne display*, the facial configuration associated with joyful smiling (Ekman). Tartter’s 1980 study even demonstrated that listeners can reliably infer this smiling from strictly vocal recordings. In the Duchenne display, the zygomatic major and orbicularis oculi muscles contract jointly, pulling the corners of the lips upwards and back, and raising the cheeks to produce eye wrinkles, respectively (Ruch). This inclusion of muscles

around the eyes is a key determinant in distinguishing between voluntary and spontaneous smiling and laughter. In literature, the villain is often described as flashing a cold, sinister smile “that does not reach the eyes.” In a treatise on the subject in 1872, Charles Darwin noted a brightening of the eyes during emotional laughter, which he credited to an enhanced lacrimation and increased tension around the eye produced by contraction of the surrounding muscles (Darwin), though others attribute this “twinkle of the eye” to an increase in fluid volume of the eyeballs as a result of enhanced circulation (Piderit). Something to keep in mind the next time you find yourself questioning the nature of a smile: check the eyes for a “sparkling quality,” and you’ll know if you’re looking at something simple and sincere, or else a little more polite than pleased (Ruch).

With the given differences in facial muscle configuration and motivation for voluntary and emotional laughter, scientists have unsurprisingly identified differences in the auditory quality of these alternate forms of laughter as well. Recent studies have even found that people can accurately identify laughter as occurring between friends or strangers, further supporting the significance of the alterations in the sounds produced by emotional and voluntary laughter, even positive, polite voluntary laughter (Vedantam). All laughter follows the same basic auditory pattern. The average duration of a single unit of laughter, referred to as a *laughter bout*, is about five seconds, with the upper limit of average at around eight seconds (Ruch). Each laughter bout is composed of approximately five *laugh pulses*, separated by interpulse intervals, which can be spoken of in terms of *vibratory cycles*, or frequency. A true laugh contains four or more laugh pulses (i.e. *ha ha ha ha*), while a chuckle may contain only two (i.e. *ha ha*) (Provine). Furthermore, each laughter bout obeys the same chronology:

1. Onset

The *onset* of laughter incorporates the initial forced exhalation of the tidal or resting volume of air in the lungs. This is not typically preceded by an inhalation, and includes the pre-vocal facial part of laughter, for example, the triggering of the muscle formation necessary to produce the Duchenne display. The onset may also include “explosive laughter...very short and steep,” before giving way to the apex (Ruch).

## 2. Apex

The *apex* of laughter is denoted by initiation of the laugh cycles, the repeated expirations typically associated with laughter. In extended laughter, the laugh cycles may be interrupted by inhalations, and the expiratory reserve volume of the lungs (the additional air that can be forcibly exhaled after the expiration of normal tidal volume), may be released. This repeated expression of the expiratory reserve volume may be why people often report feeling “breathless,” during a particularly intense bout of laughter.

## 3. Offset

The *offset* of laughter marks the end of a respiration cycle, and is predominantly post-vocal. Ruch poetically describes this phenomenon as “a long-lasting smile fading out smoothly.”

Though both obey this same basic pattern, the muscles involved in each stage vary between spontaneous and voluntary laughter. All laughter involves the same trunk musculature: the diaphragm, the abdominal muscles (rectus abdominis), and the rib cage muscles (triangularis sterni), though the only the former of these three is involved in resting breathing in humans (Ruch). Variation in sound composition comes chiefly from alterations in the muscle configurations associated with each kind of laughter. It should further be noted that though there are many subclasses of laughter within the broad categories we have been discussing thus far, namely, spontaneous and voluntary laughter, for brevity’s sake we focus only on the overarching differences between these two.

For example, Ruch reported multiple studies that implicated the muscles of the lower face, upper face, and mid-face in the production of emotional laughter. Particularly:

1. the orbicularis oculi, pars orbitalis (produce crows-feet wrinkles around eyes),
2. the orbicularis oculi, pars palpebralis (raises lower eyelid, causing crinkling of the eyes),
3. the zygomaticus major (pulls lip corners up and back),
4. the zygomaticus minor (produces “smile lines” around the mouth),
5. the levator labii superioris, caput infraorbitalis (exposes the canine teeth),



6. and the risorius (stretches lip corners directly to the side), whose name is derived from the eponymous Latin for “smiling, laughing.”

Strong emotional laughter involves additional muscles of the upper face, including the corrugator supercilli and frontalis muscles, as well as a general tensing of the face. This tension may contribute to the common experience where, after smiling or laughing for an extended period of time, individuals report that their faces feel sore, stiff, or tired. Engagement of trunk muscles and additional voluntary or semi-voluntary large muscle movements, such as rocking or flailing, may also accompany and further alter the auditory quality of strong laughter (Ruch).

Variations in the state of tension or relaxation of the specific muscles associated with the unique emotional state triggering voluntary laughter (i.e., derision, courtesy, anxiety, etc.) may impact the pitch, duration, and quality of the sound, though no generalizations may be made which pertain to all forms of voluntary laughter (Ruch).

All laughter is a fundamentally visceral action, a physical sound. As such, it is no surprise that our kale chip society has taken an interest in pursuing laughter as a natural and enjoyable means of exercise (Reynolds). Dr. Dunbar and his colleagues set out to test the legitimacy of the enthusiastic assumptions behind this pursuit in 2011, by measuring individuals’ pain thresholds before and after they watched funny videos inducing emotional laughter. Why measure pain in a study about laughter? As it turns out, the two are not far removed. Both exercise and laughter have been shown to trigger the release of endorphins, also known as natural opiates, compounds which play a critical role in pain management (Dunbar). Using pain threshold as an indirect measure of endorphin production, Dunbar’s team found compelling evidence that it is at least in part the physical act of laughing, “the contracting of muscles and resulting biochemical reactions,” that contributes to the emotional response of amusement. When the participants watched the funny videos and laughed, they felt less pain and more pleasure.

Even more dramatically, some studies have shown that humor or any form of provocation for spontaneous laughter may not be necessary for a person to reap these physiological benefits. Rather, the singularly physical effort of laughing, even voluntarily, may be enough to promote a feeling of wellbeing in some individuals (Mora-Ripoll).

Whatever it's inspiration, we are drawn to the act of laughing as a physical and psychological pleasure. Nearly a century ago, Hall and Anlin described its appeal rather romantically:

“[t]he objective world has vanished and is forgotten, the properties and even the presence of others are lost, and the soul is all eye and ear to the one laughable object. Care, trouble, and even physical pain are forgotten, and the mind, as it were, falls back through unnumbered millennia and catches a glimpse of that primeval paradise where joy was intense and supreme.”

A joy “intense and supreme” in exchange for trouble and pain quite often seems a trade worth making.

### *III: Fresh Wine*

My grandmother once said,

“Depression is a luxury for rich people. The rest of us must get on with it.”

As a teenager, she raised her four younger brothers; at twenty-one she married my grandfather and raised their two children; in her early forties she became her husband's nurse, and in her mid-forties buried him. Karl wasn't yet fifty, my father not even half that. My grandmother has spent most of her life taking care of other people, and hasn't the time for weakness, not in others and not in herself.

If there's much of this strong woman in me, it's not obvious. She's beautiful, with olive skin, dark eyes, dark hair. How both her children look like Swedish American Girl Dolls is beyond me.

I'm named for my mother's mother. We have a painted photograph of Helen from when she was recently married to Pop: curly brown hair, blue eyes, yellow sweater. I'm told she was attractive in a vibrant sort of way, and an amazing cook. I am neither of these things, the latter obvious from my embarrassing dependence on raw produce and instant oatmeal. It's a little trickier to judge our own looks though, so I asked about that one.

“Beautiful people can never really trust anyone,” they assured me, “But if someone ever tells *you* they love you, you’ll know they mean it.”

\* \* \*

So I was to be the Beast from Disney, waiting for a love beyond appearances. I’d never been more disappointed in my distinctly inanimate furniture.

Unfortunately, here my story diverges from a world of flamboyant candlesticks and takes a turn for the Grimm.

On July 30, 2016, the summer between my freshman and sophomore years at Western, one of the people whose “I love you” I had come to trust, one of the people I too late came to recognize as one of my closest friends, was shot and killed. Her name was Anna. Anna Maria Bui. She was then nineteen years old. She was joined that night by two more friends, Jacob (Jake) Long and Jordan Ebner.

Anna Bui. Jake Long. Jordan Ebner.

19, 19, 19.

Others knew and loved them better than I, I know. Others lost more. Parents and siblings and people that might as well be. Yet I cannot write their stories, only mine, and how it was touched by the same people as theirs.

It is not a personal tragedy I write of, but a mass shooting. A tragedy, but not unique. Yet the people that died were, as real and tangible and independent as you and I and every other person that has ever lived. Their lives, as every mortal life, were transient, ephemeral: even as we live, it seems our lives are memory fermenting, and theirs uncorked too early.

Countless studies have shown that emotional stimulus enhances memory formation and longevity, that emotional experiences appear to be remembered “vividly and accurately, with great resilience over time” (Tyng). Like tannins in a fine wine: dry, potent, and likely to result in a powerful hangover, a cloudy commemoration of what came before.

Why then do I not remember the funerals? Or the wakes? The memorials. The church services. I should be drunk on these memories, yet I remember only bits and pieces, nothing in its entirety. I could blame it on my notoriously faulty memory, but even in the first stage of grief would know this as a lie.

Laughter is not an emotion, but there are times it might as well be. My memories of Anna are not dominated by the way she died but by the way she laughed, the way she made us laugh. In my memories, Anna cannot be a victim of the 2016 Mukilteo Shooting, as she's immortalized on Wikipedia, but the funny, vibrant, beautiful girl from barbershop, and carpools, and our high school production of *Little Shop of Horrors*. I don't remember what she was wearing on the day she was buried, but I remember her pajamas and the way she cried over her love for bread, her addiction to drugstore gummies, the way she held people close. I remember that time she made Annabelle brush her teeth, and how much she loved the music of Eric Barnum.

If emotional memories are the most vivid memories, then my strongest emotions must come with laughter.

Selfish Beast that I am, if a genie were to grant me three wishes, I already know what I'd ask for, and it wouldn't be world peace or an end to global warming or a more obvious demarcation between raisins and chocolate chips in a cookie.

No. I'd say:

1. Bring them back.
2. Help them to laugh.
3. Let us never forget that sound.

\* \* \*

Clearly, laughter is not limited to humor. My memories of Anna are more complex than a Garfield comic strip, and who among us hasn't laughed when they felt like crying? In fact, some studies suggest that when we laugh, humor is rarely the primary motivation.

#### *IV: Why Laugh? Our Species and Our Selves*

It's easy to dismiss laughter because it's fun, and it *is* fun. Laughter makes us feel good, and medical research supports this intuitive appreciation: "mirthful laughter" has been shown to improve immune function (Louie), inhibit stress hormones like cortisol and modulate catecholamine levels, increase endorphin level to reduce pain perception, and even improve blood vessel function and reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease (Savage). Some medical providers have even gone so far as to actually prescribe laughter to patients suffering from dementia and depression, with multiple successful applications in geriatric care (Louie). The trouble arises when people reduce laughter and amusement to one and the same. Then laughter becomes viewed as a trivial side effect, not a "serious" subject worthy of scientific exploration. Yet laughter has profound and subtle effects not just on human interactions, but on the collective institutions of many social species.

For instance, numerous independent studies with rats (*Rattus norvegicus domesticus*) have shown that not only do these rodents laugh, but that this laughter signifies something beyond amusement. Rats produce two general kinds of ultrasonic vocalized calls, which can be characterized as such despite significant variation within these two emission-types: 22-kHz vocalizations, which are typically associated with negative affective states, and 50-kHz sounds, which are usually reflective of a positive emotional state (Knutson). Particular variants of this latter call have come to be referred to as "rat laughter" or a "laughter-like" reflection of positive affective state in rats, and may be induced during play and even by tickling (Panksepp, 2003). As aforementioned, laughter like this is deeply evolutionarily conserved, and requires no speech or higher-order language skills (Ross). However, the mechanical stimulus of tickling alone is not enough to induce this laughter-like sound: laughter in response to tickling is regulated by *social need*, the neurological processes which promote social tendencies in certain organisms, like rats and primates. This is why tickling, when one's not in the mood, will not trigger emotional laughter. One study even found that in order for tickling to produce laughter, the rats needed to be isolated for at least two days, otherwise rat-rat or rat-human interactions satiated the animals' social need, and tickling by humans was not found to be effective in promoting a positive affective state (Panksepp, 2003). Other deprivations, including hunger, do not significantly alter

the response to tickling, further implicating laughter as a predominantly social phenomenon (Panksepp, 2009).

This desire to fulfill social need, to satisfy that neurological drive for pleasure, is far from trivial. Early studies in neurological pleasure circuits demonstrated that rats would overwhelmingly choose stimulation of these pleasure circuits over food and water, even to the extent of potential self-starvation (Linden). As early as the mid nineteenth century, over one hundred years before the aforementioned study, an English publication reported accounts of “animal suicide” in response to loneliness, most frequently dogs following the deaths of their masters (Ramsden). A woman in California, upon learning about rat tickling, decided to carry out a little “experiment” of her own with her son’s rat, Pinky:

“It’s been about four weeks that I have been tickling him every day and now, the second I walk into the room, he starts gnawing on the bars of the cage and bouncing around like a kangaroo until I tickle him. He won’t even eat when I feed him unless I give him a good tickle first...” (Panksepp, 2003).

Still, these findings say little about the *effects* of laughter, only some of the social motivations that influence its production; yet there are studies that address this former question, too.

To observe the role of this 50-kHz call in social interactions, scientists decided to observe play-fighting in adult male rats and record what vocalizations were produced, by which rat, in response to what stimulation, and to what end. In order to truly understand the impact of these calls on social signaling, two types of interactions were observed: interactions between two vocal rats, and interactions between pairs of rats in which one of the two was devocalized (unable to produce 50-kHz calls). The findings were remarkable.

Adult male rats use play fighting as a social exercise, “both reinforcing and testing dominance relationships,” (Burke). Other species, including strepsirhines (primates) and canids (dogs) have been found to use play fighting to much the same end, testing and reinforcing relationships with established allies and peers, as well as ascertaining dominance relationships with outsiders and newcomers (Antonacci; Bekoff). For social species, like our own, the formation and solidification of such affiliative bonds is critical in promoting social order and reducing

infighting (Sussman). Beyond science, the essential nature of cooperation in social species is enshrined in Plato's *Protagoras*, wherein every man is given unique talents, but all receive the gift of *politics*, the fundamental skill of citizenship (Plato).

Lacking the necessary facial musculature for production of the primate play face, rats seem to depend predominantly on the auditory quality of these ultrasonic calls to establish their intentions and reinforce playful attitudes. In the aforementioned studies with devocalized rats, the devocalized animals initiated just as much as play as their vocalized partners, but play escalated to aggression much more frequently in these pairings, with devocalized rats in particular displaying the telltale signs of aggression, e.g., hair on end and rattling of the tail (Burke), potentially as a response to feeling threatened. Such observations imply that these rats crave social contact as much as any other, but struggle with its actual achievement. Most dramatically, "none of the intact pairs escalated to actual biting, whereas all pairs with a devocalized member did so," (Kisko). This finding rather strikingly implicates rat laughter, both its expression and reception, as essential to typical social functioning in this species. It is not lightly that we use the designation of *essential* here. In a study on psychopathy in human males, brain scans of individuals displaying or at risk for antisocial behavior revealed atypical processing of laughter, implicating laughter as an essential mechanism in the typical formation, maintenance, and interpretation of social relationships (O'Nions).

Likewise, the findings from these rat studies indicate that reciprocity may be enormously important in these calls. These ultrasonic vocalizations appear to be used in a particular call-and-response manner to diffuse tension, communicate positive affective states, and coordinate social interactions (Burke). This finding is supported by recent studies on the neurobiology of human laughter, which indicate that shared laughter predominantly involves the regions of the brain responsible for social reciprocity and emotional resonance in human primates (Scott). Thus the reciprocal nature of these 50-kHz calls may further support their association with human laughter. Imagine the following scenario:

A man is sitting in a conference room with three other people, who we shall call Persons 1, 2, and 3, respectively. The man makes a comment, which he laughs at himself, loudly.

Person 1 laughs with him, loudly. Person 2 laughs briefly, politely. Person 3 does not laugh.

Who likes the man in the story? Who does not like the man in the story? Who is dominant?

Exclusively from limited information about laughter succeeding an unheard statement, we can make implicit assumptions about the social relationships between these four people.

Person 1 likes the man. Person 2 feels submissively toward the man, and/or to Person 1, both of whom may have more power than Person 2. Person 3 does not like the man.

Though given little information, we do not need to know the content of the comment to make these instinctual inferences about the relationships between the individuals in this scenario, though further information may of course alter these knee-jerk assumptions. Nevertheless, the message's content is less important than its issuer. In fact, humor appears to be irrelevant to the majority of the laughter we produce, with most human laughter deriving from purely social origins: early research found that more than eighty percent of human laughter followed social but distinctly un-comical phrases like "see you later," or "nice to meet you," (Vedantam).

Neuroscientist and laughter researcher Sophie Scott asserts that when we laugh in response to someone, what we are really doing is expressing encouragement to that person, saying, *I understand, I agree, go on*. In this way, laughter in everyday conversation can serve as another form of active listening. Yet with our laughter we are communicating more than engagement. When we laugh, we are letting the speaker know that we support them as a social partner, and with our laughter say *I like you* (Vedantam). On an episode of *Hidden Brain*, Scott proposed the following mental exercise:

Think about a person whose laughter you find distasteful, whose laughter rubs you the wrong way.

Now ask yourself: is there really anything wrong with the way they laugh, or (and be honest) do you just not like *them*?

Alternately, have you ever laughed at a friend's flopped joke, not because it was particularly



amusing, but because they were your friend and you wanted to spare them the embarrassment of social rejection?

We previously discussed the differences between voluntary and emotional laughter, but the motivations behind even voluntary laughter are usually deeply social and emotional. In fact, Scott found that in some parts of the world, including the U.K., people seem to be actively marking their communicative laughter, their socially-motivated, voluntary laughter, so that it is obviously distinct from their spontaneous laughter (Vedantam).

As aforementioned, people are naturally very good at discriminating between spontaneous and voluntary laughter (Byrant, 2018), and do not need additional distinctions between the two to aid in identification. In fact, when presented with laughter fragments just one second long, listeners from over twenty-four different societies were able to identify, in that second, whether or not the laughter was occurring between friends or strangers with 61% accuracy (Bryant, 2016). The accuracy of identification rose to over 80% when listening to laughter between two women, and findings indicate that, regardless of cultural background, the participants were most likely to associate co-laughter between women as an indication of genuine friendship (Bryant, 2016). These findings are consistent with other research indicating that “women take longer than men to develop friendships that result in genuine co-laughter,” (Wolf), and may imply universal differences in friendship and laughter patterns between the sexes across cultures.

So if it is already so easy to distinguish real from faked laughter, why widen the gap?

According to Scott, by marking their communicative laughter, “people are going out of their way to say, look; I’m giving this to you. This is laughter I’m trying to produce for you... If somebody makes us laugh, we will say, oh, they’re hilarious. They’ve got a great sense of humor. They make us laugh. What they mean is, I really like them. I really like them, and I laugh when I’m around them so that they will know that I like them, and maybe they’ll like me, too,” (Vedantam).

By giving or withholding our laughter, we are telling people how we feel about them; I laugh around you and with you, I laugh for you, I like you. There is something very powerful and very

positive about this use of voluntary laughter as an implicit sort of social gift, a deeply evolutionary, intuitive reminder that *hey, you and me, we're allies*. It's an indelibly important social signal, and its usually incredibly positive.

However, when people form a bond, by definition, others are excluded from that bond. This exclusion is necessary but dangerous, as attempts to invite the “other” in may even provoke violent feelings of betrayal and accusations of traitorship; a bond is only valuable so far as there is exclusivity (Vedantam, 2017). Us and them. Us and not us. Empathy with the other and expansion of the ingroup both threaten the active social organization and any present ingroup bonds, and our dependence on these communal constructs as social animals forces such attempts at bond broadening to contend with hostility, anxiety, and general resistance (Vedantam, 2017). There is no in-group without that toxic *other*, and laughter has its own dark side rich with the caustic symptoms of this exclusivity.

*Hidden Brain* addresses two brilliant and heartbreaking examples of laughter's power to exclude and excuse (Vedantam). First, a portion of the direct transcript from the 2018 Supreme Court confirmation hearing for Brett Kavanaugh, then a Supreme Court nominee, who was accused of sexually assaulting the psychologist Christine Blasey Ford when they were teenagers:

SENATOR PATRICK LEAHY: What is the strongest memory you have, the strongest memory of the incident, something that you cannot forget? Take whatever time you need.

CHRISTINE BLASEY FORD: Indelible in the hippocampus is the laughter, the laugh – the uproarious laughter between the two, and their having fun at my expense.

LEAHY: You've never forgotten that laughter. You've never forgotten them laughing at you.

FORD: They were laughing with each other.

LEAHY: And you were the object of the laughter?

FORD: I was, you know, underneath one of them while the two laughed, two friend – two friends having a really good time with one another. (Bloomberg Government).

There is something very interesting happening here with the language of Ford and Leahy, in that Leahy emphasizes the laughter *at* while Ford recalls the laughter *with*. The two were using her body and her pain as a means of bond formation as well as amusement, and their laughter confirmed both their security in their friendship as well as her exclusion from it. They treated her like a joke, but because she is a sentient being, this was made all the more cruel by her awareness of the reduction from being to body, from person to punch line. Among other troubling and painful considerations, this is an example of the harmful effects of *laughter at*. Their laughter heightened their enjoyment and made explicit their dominance over her, saying *we can laugh at you because we have power over you. You do not matter here, and we want you to know that you do not matter.*

As Scott explains, the acknowledgement of one's exclusion is a very painful experience because we are social creatures, and so when we are excluded from a bond like shared laughter, "it's awful because we have a very, very strong understanding of what that means," (Vedantam).

Still, there lurks a third darkness to this laughter of dominance and exclusion, most clearly on display in another recording by a man of similar accusation:

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP: Yeah, that's her with the gold. I got to use some Tic Tacs just in case I start kissing her. You know, I'm automatically attracted to beautiful – I just start kissing them. It's like a magnet. Just kiss.

TELEVISION PERSONALITY BILLY BUSH: \*laughter\*

TRUMP: I don't even wait. And when you're a star, they let you do it. You can do anything.

BUSH: Whatever you want.

TRUMP: Grab 'em by the pussy.

BUSH: \*laughter\*

TRUMP: You can do anything. (Vedantam)

Laughter, so used, has the power to make a joke out of things it should not, like the rape of a teenage girl or the endemic sexual harassment and depravedly misogynistic behavior endorsed by certain men in positions of power.

When laughter is wrongly interpreted as a simple indication of humor, it can be bastardized to defend a wrongful action as “just a joke” or “locker room talk.” Bush, perhaps not entirely untruthfully, attempted to justify his laughter as “playing along” with a superior, as succumbing to the temptations of bond formation with and submission to a more dominant social partner (Farenthold). Often laughter becomes twisted into an unwitting ally in the cover-up of the powerful’s misdeeds.

However, if laughter is a power, it a power as universal as Plato’s politics, and can be used to regain subject ownership and reclaim power from those who might otherwise take it from you.

Up next, this power suffers a deceitfully simple misnomer: dark comedy.

### *V: Dark Comedy*

In light of the misapplication of laughter used above, let us set some ground rules.

In this paper, the designation *dark comedy* denotes humor that deals with the taboo. Humor that embraces issues or topics that might otherwise be deemed unsuitable content for comedy or public discussion. In the United States, this includes socially sensitive issues like religion, death, sex, race, gender, immigration, and mental health, among others. Dark comedy as used in this paper does not mean hateful comedy, it does not mean bullying, it does not mean using laughter and an audience to disguise verbal and emotional abuse or belittlement. Dark comedy as discussed here refers to comedy, not the misappropriation of laughter.

Specifically, dark comedy refers to the kind of humor epitomized by Peter McGraw’s humor theory, the benign-violation hypothesis.

According to this theory, for a situation to be considered humorous, the following three conditions must be mutually satisfied:

1. The situation must present a *violation*: offer a breach of social norms, evoke taboo content, or pose a potential threat.

2. The situation must occur within a *benign* context. Seemingly contrary to the first condition, the situation must be perceived as safe, harmless, or playful.
3. *Simultaneity* must exist to reconcile the first two, namely, a humorous situation must be deemed both a violation AND benign in the same instant, and these two states must coexist in the mind of the audience despite their contradictory messages (McGraw).

In the form of an equation: *violation + benign conditions + simultaneity = humor*.

The first of these conditions, the link between humor and the taboo, has been endorsed since the earliest theories of humor, though we have only recently been able to support these theories with empirical data. Freud suggested that humor transforms acknowledgement of a perceived threat into a pleasurable affect, endorsing it as a mechanism rather than a product of the circumstances proposed by McGraw (Christoff). Meanwhile, Aristotle and Plato were rather severe in their delineation of humor, as its subject, to the realm of the taboo and morally hazardous (Morreall). Excepting the negative connotation, more recent studies have sought to confirm this association, with significant success even outside of human studies. For instance, play fighting and tickling in chimpanzees is strongly associated with amusement and laughter, though in different contexts these behaviors could pose a physical threat (Provine, 2000). Within *Homo sapiens*, McGraw was able to confirm the challenged norm condition through simple social experiments: when presented with two scenarios, one which challenges a social norm, and one which obeys it, not only do participants more readily laugh at the objection than the control, but a significant percentage also reported considering the behavior wrong but laughing regardless, a pattern congruous with the benign-violation hypothesis (McGraw).

The third condition has been referred to by several popular theories of humor and given many names, by turns simultaneity, bisociation, synergy, and incongruity, though our theory employs the first of these (McGraw). To test this theory, McGraw's team had participants read a scenario like those employed in the aforementioned study regarding the first condition, but this time, followed the reading of the scenario with two yes-or-no questions:

1. Can you interpret the behavior in this scenario as wrong (i.e., immoral)?
2. Can you interpret the behavior in this scenario as not wrong (i.e., okay)?

The findings were consistent with those of the earlier test and with the benign-violation hypothesis, as participants who identified the behavior as both wrong and not wrong were significantly more likely to display signs of amusement than those who viewed the behavior as strictly wrong or strictly not wrong (McGraw). In other words, participants were more amused by an incongruous, or partially supported violation, than a pure violation (or no violation) alone. The second condition, the *safety* condition, is arguably the most interesting, and the most important in walking the fine line between amusement and offense. On *Hidden Brain*, comedian Bill Burr explained this tightrope walk in the context of the following clip from one of his live shows (Penman):

BILL BURR: So the end of the hour, they come to the logical conclusion. They're like, there is no reason to hit a woman. There is no reason to hit a woman. And I was just like, really? I could give you, like, 17 right off the top of my head.

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

BURR: You could wake me from a drunken stupor I could still give you, like, nine.

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

BURR: Dude, there's plenty of reasons to hit a woman. You just don't do it. But to sit there and suggest that there's no reason...

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

BURR: ...Dude, the level of ego behind that statement, what are you, levitating above the rest of us? You're never annoying?

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

BURR: Women, how many times have you thought about slapping your [expletive] guy in the head this week?

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: Every day!

BURR: There you go.

Burr explained that its funnier when the woman jokes about domestic violence because “[they’re] in different weight classes.” A woman joking about beating up a man is a benign violation because realistically the threat is very low, as this sort of event does not often occur in the real world. However, a man joking about beating up a woman is often interpreted as offensive because that sort of occurrence happens quite frequently (Penman), so the threat feels more imminent. When the threat seems real, the situation no longer feels comedic, just uncomfortable. Good comedians are aware of this, and employ one if not all of McGraw’s three proposed strategies to render the violation benign:

1. Introduction of conflicting norms.

This strategy takes the concept of simultaneity and manipulates it to tip the scales in favor of amusement over discomfort, while still sustaining the violation. With this method, the breach of one taboo is moderated by the maintenance of another. In McGraw’s studies, they found that participants were significantly more amused by scenarios in which one norm was broken and another maintained than scenarios in which multiple taboos were broken. It should be noted that, by the nature of simultaneity, the creation of safety in the situation does not remove the discomfort of the violation. Rather, a benign violation simply opens the space up to laughter, giving the audience permission to laugh by pairing the discomfort with amusement. Comedian Ali Wong employs this strategy in her Netflix special, *Baby Cobra*, when she talks about her desire to be physically abused in bed by her husband.

ALI WONG: My husband is unfortunately just not as freaky as me. When I’ve asked him to spank me, this is what he does. [tapping lightly on microphone; grimaces]

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

WONG: “Hey. Hey, are you OK? Are you all right? You know I respect you, right?” I’m like, “Yes, I know you respect me and that’s why you need to abuse me. OK?”

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

WONG: ‘Cause it’s the most strong-headed, loud-mouthed women who like to be abused the most in bed. Women who are C.E.O.s, they just wanna be roughed around. They just want their – [miming hair pulling, etc.] – glasses always means the woman wants some – [slapping face, miming choking] – It’s because we’re so in control all the time, that we just want to experience some risk, and be outta control, you know? Like, I don’t wanna die! Don’t kill me! I don’t wanna die! But I also don’t want to be sure that I’m gonna live.

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

In this scene, Wong employs two norms, one of which is violated by the joke, and one of which is not. As social norms are unique to the culture in which they are employed, humor may not be transmissible across cultures if the specific taboos engaged by the situation have no equivalency. Wong utilizes the following American social norms:

*Norm 1:* Physical abuse is wrong.

*Norm 2:* Romantic partners should be motivated to make each other happy.

In this instance, Norm 1 is violated while Norm 2 is maintained. Supported by Wong’s delivery, the strength of Norm 2 is sufficient to make the violation of Norm 1 benign.

Daniel Sloss, a Scottish comedian, demonstrates a particularly successful and powerful application of this strategy in his show, *Dark*. In this scene, he is telling the audience about the time his family got into a car accident, and his sister, Josie, who had cerebral palsy, had to be carried from the vehicle.

DANIEL SLOSS: So my dad gets out of the car. He picks me up. My mom gets out of the car. She can’t get Josie’s wheelchair out of the back, so she’s just gonna have to scoop Josie up like the pile of wet towels that she is.

AUDIENCE: \*some laughter, sounds of discomfort \*



SLOSS: Who are you being offended on behalf of?

AUDIENCE: \*uncomfortable laughter\*

SLOSS: It's not you. It's not me. You're being offended on behalf of my sister. My sister. She didn't ask you to do that. I didn't ask you to do that. Right? When you get offended or react like that to the way I talk about my sister, subconsciously, it's your way of letting me know that you think the way I talk about my sister comes from a malicious or angry or hateful place. You have no right to tell me how I feel about my sister. I'm very aware that I love her. So I'll describe her in anyway I [expletive] please, get off your high horse. Nobody asked you to be Batman.

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

SLOSS: So my mom scoops up Raggedy Ann...

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

This adjustment of the audience's response to Sloss' speech about his sister is exceptionally interesting, because with his rebuke, what Sloss managed to do was take an uncomfortable situation and create a safe space in which to engage with this discomfort. Before the reprimand, the audience engaged with one norm:

*Norm 1: Do not laugh at disability or disabled persons.*

Then Sloss reminded the audience of deeply held, widely practiced second norm:

*Norm 2: Siblings may tease each as a sign of mutual love and affection.*

Familial love and affection are deeply held social norms, and in reminding us of this, and challenging the audience's hesitation to accept his authority regarding his sister's feelings as well as his own, Sloss conveys to the audience, *it is okay to laugh because I am telling you it is okay*. When the audience trusts the comedian as an authority on the subject of their humor, the comedian is able to create or invoke new norms to lessen audience discomfort and promote amusement.

2. Commitment to the violated norm is weak.

When people are less committed to the violated norm, they perceive its violation as less of a direct threat, and are therefore more likely to find humor in the situation (McGraw). As this condition is dependent upon the personal values of the individual responding to the situation, I will use myself as the sample audience in the following example to illustrate this tactic. This bit is also from Daniel Sloss, this time from his second show on Netflix, *Jigsaw*:

SLOSS: Every month since my sister died, my mom and dad have to go up to Josie's grave to do maintenance on it, because that's the [expletive] thing about dead people in graves. It's a very one-sided relationship.

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

SLOSS: They're very needy, the dead. And they rarely give back unless you're delusional or religious.

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

SLOSS: I could have just said religious.

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

SLOSS: Understand by the way, if you subscribe to any faith whatsoever, I 100% respect your right to have that belief, but you also have to understand, at no point do I ever actually have to respect your belief. It's stupid and you're wrong. But...

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

SLOSS: I do respect your right to be wrong in public. See if I give a [expletive].

In this situation, the violated norm is that of respect for religion and religious beliefs. As someone who is not particularly religious, this norm is of more limited personal significance, and so I do not feel especially threatened by its violation. However, were this exact bit retold replacing the concept of faith with that of women's rights, the violation would be much more direct, and I would likely need further encouragement to perceive the threat as benign. Just as we have previously discussed

laughter as social phenomenon, so too is humor culturally and socially mediated; what we perceive as humorous or not humorous says more about us and our beliefs than the joke itself. In fact, evolutionary anthropologist Robert Lynch postulates that humor may even have evolved as a means of distinguishing between those who belong to one's in-group and those who do not (Penman), since those with whom we share our norms and culture will also be more likely to appreciate our sense of humor. This theory is further supported by findings that most positive affiliative social signals are not universal, but rather exclusively shared with in-group members (Sauter).

### 3. Significant psychological distance from the violation.

In the same way that spatial distance from danger promotes feelings of physical safety and well-being, increasing psychological distance from the violated norm renders such violations more benign, be that distance temporal, social, likelihood, or hypotheticality (McGraw). As with the first and second methods, this mechanism introduces a feeling of safety into the situation by the minimizing the threat of the violated norm. The following example comes from John Mulaney's stand-up special, *The Comeback Kid*.

JOHN MULANEY: Being married is so nice. I never knew relationships were supposed to make you feel better about yourself. That's not really a joke, that's just a little sweet thing I like to say.

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

MULANEY: 'Cause I've been in relationships where I got cheated on, like, long ones. I don't know if you've ever been in a long relationship where you got cheated on, but it changes your whole worldview. 'Cause like when I was a kid, I used to watch *America's Most Wanted*. You know, how kids do.

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

MULANEY: And I would always think to myself, "How could another person kill someone? How could a human being kill another human being?" And then I got cheated on, and I was like, "Oh, okay."

AUDIENCE: \*laughter\*

MULANEY: “I’m not gonna do it, but I totally get it.”

Here, the psychological distance is provided by the very low likelihood of the violation (Mulaney killing his ex) ever actually occurring, in much the same way that Burr attested jokes about female-to-male violence were better received than jokes about male-to-female violence. As the likelihood or viability of the violation diminishes, the safety of the situation increases, and amusement is more likely to be tolerated (McGraw). This implies that the routine above would be less well received if the audience genuinely believed Mulaney capable of violating the evoked norm.

Once the audience feels safe enough to laugh at the violation, it becomes an enjoyable shared breaking-of-the-taboo. As McGraw puts it, “laughter and amusement signal to the world that a violation is indeed okay.”

What does it mean to say that a violation is okay? Dark comedy does not excuse bad behavior so much as it breaks the taboo of *silence* surrounding such behavior. Dark comedy can be an effective means of addressing sensitive issues and challenging social norms that might otherwise be ignored. Comedy that deals with the taboo, with broken norms, facilitates increased communication of nuanced social subjects, as good comedians use humor to create safe spaces for such discussions. These spaces are not merely physical, but extend into the realm of social consciousness and promote public discourse, even at the risk of controversy. For example, each of the following popular, Netflix-supported comedians has received backlash for discussing the following socially sensitive topics, among others:

ALI WONG, miscarriage (*Baby Cobra*, 9:44 – 7:48)

DANIEL SLOSS, death & disability (*Dark*, 19:26 – 17:40)

TREVOR NOAH, racism (*Son of Patricia*, 12:28 – 6:21)

HASAN MINHAJ, immigrant experience (*Homecoming King*)

ILIZA SHLESINGER, gender roles & body issues (*Elder Millennial*, 6:28 – 3:42)

This is only minute sample of the many comedians who create spaces for recognition, representation, and discussion through the use of humor. Dark comedy can help people to feel seen, and to feel more comfortable with their own experiences. That is why it is so important.

\* \* \*

“I was dating a guy, and we were going to sleep together, and he said he wasn’t a condom guy – who isn’t a condom guy?!” In a piece for Bitch Media, Katherine Leyton discusses how it feels for women to use sometimes less-than-benign violation humor to open up about their own experiences with sexual assault. It’s the notorious “rape joke.”

Leyton had mixed feelings during her friend Alexandra Howell’s performance, quoted above:

“I laughed along with the audience, then immediately felt ashamed – my friend’s assault was upsetting, not funny...

‘But I gave you permission to laugh!’ [Howell] responded.”

For Howell, as well as other female comics like Georgea Brooks, Lisa Lampanelli, and Diana Love, addressing her experience with sexual assault through comedy is empowering and cathartic (Leyton). Brooks addressed backlash saying, “It makes me feel stronger,” while Love defended her right to tell rape jokes as her right to reclaim the narrative, her narrative. When we laugh at something, we give ourselves power over it. While many female comics worry about the repercussions of those who may interpret such comedic routines as making light of a serious issue, most report therapeutic feelings of empowerment and authority over discussions of the subject as they lead the narrative through their preferred medium (Leyton). By claiming the rape joke, female comedians make clear who is allowed to laugh, and who isn’t. Women, who comprise 90% of rape victims, have the authority to joke about rape. Men like Brett Kavanaugh and Donald Trump do not.

With dark comedy, we do not validate the subject so much as we validate the comedian. As described in earlier sections, when we laugh with someone, when we give someone our laughter,

we say *I like you*, and, *I support you*. When we laugh for someone who is joking with us, sharing with us something painful, something taboo, something intimate to them, we say, *it's okay, I like you anyways*. We are social creatures. We know what it means to feel accepted, and we know how it feels to be excluded. Dark comedy helps us to say:

*I like you. Even with all this, I like you.*

*You are not alone. You are part of my people.*

When we laugh, what we really indulge in is the one thing we social creatures crave above all else: inclusion and connection. When we laugh, we say what *I love you* means:

*Friend, I accept you as you are.*

\* \* \*

### ***VI: Welcome to Shambletown!***

It seems to be a universal experience to be one second packing up your bag at work and the next instantly home, pulling into your own driveway with absolutely no clue how you got there.

(This is dangerous.)

Imagine this happening, except when you pull into your driveway, *that isn't your house*. And you realize *this isn't your car*. You toggle with the radio dials – someone else's stations are on here, you don't listen to much talk radio these days – and grab the clutch to reverse only to remember that *you can't drive stick shift*. So you get out of the car, strange keys in familiar hand, and take a cautious lap around the vehicle, the way your parents did when you were learning to drive and tapped the bumper against a trash can. The parking spot is printed with your name in faded white letters, and when you stick your hands in your pockets, you find a key: *Apt 113*.

You climb up three aggressively adequate concrete steps to a perfectly average door. You knock. An embarrassing but forgivable mistake. You correct yourself: slide your key into the lock. A dull click of recognition, the fumbling, familiar hold of a forgotten childhood friend, and the door stumbles open.

You step into your apartment, because surely that's what it is: there's the elliptical you bought and never used, that "Mondays" mug from your coworker, a neglected paint set from that art class you promised yourself you'd go to. "To express myself," you'd said, "to reconnect with my inner me."

But you didn't go, and now you're here.

Welcome...

*to SHAMBLETOWN.*

\* \* \*

Don't be scared! I speak from experience. The same thing happened to me, but I tried to drag the car backwards by the hitch, just managing to kill some time in the Hamlet of Denial. I found my way back here eventually.

Most of us do, sooner or later; in fact, Shambletown is a bustling place! The headline of our mayor's resume reads Proud Dog Enthusiast, and the President of our Homeowners Association was a *Bachelorette* contestant. My neighbor in 214B is an Aspiring Dolphin Trainer, and that tall guy there – no, that one – he was a successful surgeon before developing haemophobia. Now he can't even get a bloody nose without fainting. Don't feel too badly for him though, he'll be okay. See that sheepish grin? He's heard back from a PhD program. We're all hoping he'll be evicted next week, the bastard. (We're a very supportive community.)

I can see you're still confused. That's understandable. Perhaps you've heard some of our fine city's other titles? A rose by any other name, and all that.

Some call it Oizys, for our ancient Greek patroness. Pop culture types call it Neverneverland or the Twilight Zone, "a land of both shadow and substance." Bookworms prefer the Fire Swamp, as our brittle lawns have a nasty habit of spontaneously combusting (don't worry, it can't hurt you). Middle Child Mecca? Land of the Eternal Bridesmaid. Hellishly literal types of use the dull

appellation, The Dismal Isle, or the antiquated Land-of-He-Who-Stumbles, or more boring still: Clinical Depression.

How did *I* get here? (Oh, hi, Mayor Gufton- you can wave, if you like, he won't bite.) Well, it's a long story.

*I was born in 1997, the year of the ox and the second of three children –*

Okay, even I'm bored. Let's hit fast forward.

*A hop, skip, and a jump and I'm 18 years old, moving in at Western Washington University. I would grow to love my school, but at the time I was resentful; childishly sullen that my National Merit Commended Scholar status, 3.98 GPA, 23 community involvement activities, and binders full of local awards and honorifics hadn't exempted me from the steep tuition at the fancy private colleges I favored. (Pretentious, forgive me.)*

*At the time, I lived with that curse of children who read too many fantasy novels growing up: I believed I was special. Yet there was no emerald-inked letter in the mail, my sketchy uncle owned no magic rings; I didn't even have a wardrobe. He might have been a fool, but Polonius was onto something: "to thine own self be true, and it must follow, as the night the day, thou canst not then be false to any man."*

I think it still counts as lying if you're lying to yourself.

*I didn't know myself enough to be faithful, or trust myself enough to be honest. So I dragged myself blindly through a major I mostly hated – "Looks good though, right?" – and kept up appearances, waiting for greatness to be thrust upon me, save me from my mundane self. Gym, work, lab, class, volunteering. Every day everyday. I waited for no prince, but for my own greatness to reveal itself, as it surely must.*

*Three years passed in this manner, but it wasn't until I found myself laughing over my six graduate school rejection letters that I saw myself as I am: aggressively average.*



*There is no better version of myself coming to rescue me; we can't expect the future to spare the present. I'm a cog in the wheel. The sidekick's sidekick. In a world of baked goods, I'm a boxed mix.*

*I packed up and left the Hamlet of Denial in my rearview mirror.*

Ah, here we are! Town Square! (Yes, it's basically a mall food court, but Town Square sounds so much better, wouldn't you agree?)

What flavor of soup? Just regular.

Can't go wrong, really, it's all fine. (The most duplicitous four-letter word.)

I like to save the graham crackers for dessert.

*As I unfolded my six rejection letters, a row of awkward "it's not us, it's you" breakups, my laughter broke something, knocked something into place. I wasn't mad or sad or crazy; it was just really funny. I had managed to believe something wrong for my whole life, and I was seeing clearly for the first time in a long time. Behind that film of self-obsession, the webbing of anxiety and decorum, the world is really funny. I realized that if you can laugh at something – cancer, loss, failure – it can't threaten you. It might hurt you, but you're not weak. You can fight back.*

People say "I'm sorry" before realizing there's nothing to apologize for.

You see, pity's got nothing on genuine laughter. Corn-syrup optimism will never be as hopeful as the darkest humor or as encouraging as a single shared laugh.

Don't apologize for who I am. Laugh and say *I like you anyways*.

There are many ways out of Shambletown. I'll find mine, and you'll find yours, get that sunny eviction notice stamped with a paw print.

Just remember:

When the rest of the world gets to be a little too much, you're always welcome here.

\* \* \*

I know what you're all thinking.  
After all this, what's the answer?  
Is laughter really the best medicine?

I recall a conversation my mother had with her sister shortly after her diagnosis:

*Aunt:* You just have to channel good energy, keep positive.

*Mom:* I think I'll go ahead and channel a combination of taxotere, carboplatin, and herceptin. Thanks.

If you have cancer, talk to your doctor. If you have the flu, get a vaccine next time. Laughter is no silver bullet – it's just the best damn thing about this life.

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