

Some Guys Just Can't Tell a Joke
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So, there's this story about that lonely man and his hard night in prison. There were many hard nights in prison—like the nights that he missed his family, like the nights that he missed his friends and how they used to joke around all that time, like the nights that followed the days of his parole hearings over the years... It's hard to be denied so many times.

They say that the fastest way out of jail is to commit yourself to a single cause: To promise yourself to get up just one more time than you fall down. Do this and you'll live a life of decency, honor, dignity and respect...and if you find the love that you're looking for, you'll treasure it.

There were, indeed, many hard nights in prison but the hardest of all had been the first. You see, the lonely man didn't know anybody. He was scared on that first night. He kept mostly to himself before nightfall but the darkness, he feared, would do him in. He wasn't supposed to be in prison but there he was behind those bars...with hundred and hundred of others who would have said the same. No one felt like they were supposed to be in there...even though almost all of them were truly guilty.

Only one man admitted his guilty—freely and unabashedly. His name was Red. He was a good man and get back to him...after we tell the story of the lonely man and his hard night in prison.

So, like I said, there were many hard nights. The days were better but they were tough too. The hardest night, perhaps, had been the first. When that door closed and the light went out, the man felt terrible inside. He was terribly afraid of what might happen...until something did.

Someone in a distant cell called out a number, loud and clear. "615." Following this outburst, there was a rumbling of laughter that gracefully died down...and until there was silence. That silence was broken when another prisoner in a different, distant cell called out a different number, loud and clear.

The process went on for more than an hour. The lonely man became less and less afraid. He was calmed. He was reassured by all of the laughter. He felt less alone...even though he didn't know what was going on.

The next day in the jail yard, the lonely man had several questions but he kept them to himself. He didn't share his thoughts with anyone. And that next night, it happened again but most of the numbers were different. I mean, the first one was the same but almost all of the others numbers were new. The lights went out and then, one heard, "615!" "227!" "1104" "782!" And each number was follow by varying levels of laughter.

The day after this in the jail yard, the lonely man could no longer contain himself. He had to share his questions. He had to ask someone what was going on. He turned to the nearest prisoner and said, "Hey, what happened last night? What happens at night in this place?"

"What do you mean?" the seasoned prisoner asked.

"I mean at night, when the lights go down," the lonely man said with curiosity. "People start shouting numbers and laughing. What is that? Like a code or something? Are you all laughing at me? Are you poking fun of me?"

"Oh, you mean the joke book. You must be new around here. We're not making fun of you, man. We're just telling jokes to one another."

"Jokes?" the lonely man asked, confounded. "I didn't hear any jokes. All I heard were numbers. I wrote them down so I'd remember—615...227...1,104...782. I've been trying to decode this for hours."

The other man laughed and said, "You must be new around here. Let me tell you about what happens around here." The other prisoner explained that in order to pass the time, the prisoners used to tell jokes to each other in the jail yard everyday. The jokes were so funny and the laughter became so raucous and the ritual became so popular that the prison guards just shut it down, fearing what they figured was a 'joyful revolution.'

"So, the jokes were outlawed on the yard," the seasoned prisoner said, "and the whole thing went underground. We made a book of all the jokes that we've been telling over the years. We've been laughing together for so long that we don't even bother actually 'telling' the jokes anymore. We just call them out by number because we know them all by heart."

The seasoned prisoner dug through his belongings and gave the lonely man his old joke book. It was really beaten up and falling apart. The prisoner said that he didn't need it any more.

The lonely man joyfully accepted the gift and studied it was unbridled passion. In less than a week, he had the first half of the joke book committed to memory. His confidence was growing because he could better understand the nighttime laughter.

Finally, the day came when the lonely man had the whole joke book memorized. He was ready to join in the evening's festivities. That night, when the lights went out and the nightly ritual commenced, the lonely man had the joke book opened to his very favorite, opened to the joke that struck a chord in him. Things got underway, the numbers and the laughter—"615!" "122!" "97!" "406!" The lonely man waited his turn. He looked for the proper opening. When it arrived, the lonely man jumped in and said, "243." His articulation was precise and his voice was loud enough but nobody—and I mean no one—so much as even chuckled. And no one spoke another number or laughed for the rest of the night.

The next day in the jail yard, the lonely man found the seasoned prisoner, the one who had given him his joke book and he said, "Tell me what's going on? What happened last night? I spoke out for the first time and no one laughed and everything stopped. I don't understand what's going on."

And the seasoned prisoner said, "Yeah, I thought that might have been you."

"I don't understand," said the lonely man. "I picked the best one in the book!"

"Yes, you did," said the seasoned prisoner. "Number 243 is a classic. It's one of the all-time favorites."

"So, what happened then, man? I don't get it. I did just what I was supposed to do!"

Then, the seasoned prisoner said, “I don’t know what to tell you. I guess some guys just can’t tell a joke.”

Now, if you didn’t like that story, I welcome your critique but please know that I am newly free. I wasn’t trying to entertain. I didn’t tell it with the goal of receiving an approval of some kind. I shared that story because I believe it’s important for our world. It’s something that my mother taught me years and years ago. I’m just catching up with her wisdom now.

Good morning and good Sunday. I hope that this new day finds you well. Today is Sunday, May the 8th. It’s Mother’s Day. [to camera] “Happy Mother’s Day, Mama!” Today is the day that we celebrate those beings that have brought us into this world. From near nothingness, from deepest darkness we are born into miracle-life to grow and to beautify and to befriend and to fall in love and to tell bad jokes in front of lovely people who don’t deserve it! Can you believe that the miracle of holy life has come this—mediocre comedy.

There is a brilliant comedian named Tig Notaro. I adore her. I think that she’s really funny. She was on the Conan O’Brien show some time ago after having undergone a double mastectomy. She was totally open about it. Conan asked her questions directly and she said,

I went through a lot last year and not to be totally intense, heavy, serious, but, you know, I learned that it’s important to present and to live your life.

And as she’s saying these last few words, she fidgeting for something in her pocket. She says, “It’s my phone. I forgot to turn my phone off.” The audience starts laughing at the irony. Conan, who seems slightly uncomfortable, tries to keep the interview from going too far off the rails. He gently prompts his guest, “You were saying that you only get one life...” and this is enough to get things going again. Tig Notaro continues on, she says,

Yeah. You’ve got to love the people you’re with and enjoy your life and just to be... [her phone is going off again and she’s distracted as she completes her sentence, looking at her phone] ...you know, it’s important just to be present.

...which at this point she’s obviously not and Conan sees that he’s been taken in...that we’ve all been taken. She’s captured us. She’s enlisted everybody She’s holding all of us captive in what clearly is a ‘joyful revolution.’

There are yellow sheets of paper populating the sanctuary this morning. I hope that you’ve had a chance to see one of them. They’re all the same. It is a cartoon of a priest in a Christian pulpit somewhere and the caption reads, “Let us pray. If any of you are Unitarians, do whatever it is that you do.” I posted it 16 hours ago on Facebook and it has already received 143 likes. I love the readiness of my Facebook friends to appreciate the beauty of this.

We strive no simply to reject the traditions of the past as they are handed down to us but to make them meaningful in the here and now. What is this if it is not a joyful revolution, gentle way of making life matter.

My mom used to roll her eyes... My dad thought that he was funny and he would try to tell us joke but my mom would roll her eyes...and that only made my dad laugh more. You're not supposed to laugh so hard at your own jokes. It's like a rule or something. My father disposed of that rule pretty quickly...or he never knew about it...because my dad thought that he was his own comedian. He laughed at his own jokes...but it really was my mom who brought the magic.

We each do our own part. My dad would bring the jokes—usually pretty bad ones—and my mom would roll her eyes, dismissively, to make sure that the moment was truly funny.

Not by laughing. She isn't an enthusiast, not a spousal cheerleader—at least, not as a faithful son would have imagined her to be. She's paradoxical. She made sure that things were funny by making my dad look a little foolish. I'm not sure that her heart was always in the right place when she did this, by the way, but she was never mean about it.

It's just that my dad had a bad habit of getting halfway through the joke before his own laughter would get the better of him. His laughter would begin, anticipating the punch line, ruining the moment of surprise. It was the way that my mom was with him that made it all so funny, that made the laughter last still through today.

We're up against some pretty tough things today—the violence in Ukraine, the threats to Roe v. Wade, the threats against Anthony Fauci by John Bennett in Oklahoma, the GOP leader who wants to put him in front of a firing squad for trying his best to save lives against the dangers of a disease that has taken millions. We pick our prisons in this life and we pick when we choose to get free. I'm quite serious about this. It's no laughing matter.

Prisoners

—Ric Masten

Though I have seen photos of those rugged, weary men
Still, I think I envy them, the prisoners
Caught in some good and holy war,
which every war has been
Stubbornly clinging to secret information
for which I'd rather die than tell
Caught in a roach- and rat-infested cell
My eye fixed on that thin sliver of hope
The crack of light that keeps us alive in this solitary prison
For out here, in this giant field of sunshine
It is far, far more difficult to plan the great escape.

I think that one of the greatest challenges we have to face is the imprisoning challenge of meaninglessness. It's so easy to get stuck in there. It is so common to stay stuck in there for years...behind the bars of ambiguity, chained and bound by...something...by something terrible, for sure. We may not even remember what

it is. However, we are certainly imprisoned by it (whatever it is) and we're looking for some way out. We must get out. We must break free. And to this idea of breaking free, we are enchained—strangely, perhaps. But it is worth asking: To what are we enchained? By what force are we imprisoned? It is better to know these things, better to choose these things that to not. It is not better when our prisons are chosen for us.

Whatever we choose, it would seem, we still must break free. And when we find our great escape, our safe passage out of meaninglessness... ~~Strike that.~~ When we find true and safe passage out of meaninglessness, we take part in something of a miracle.

A man named Andy Defresne was falsely imprisoned. In 1982, Stephen King wrote a book called Rita Hayworth and Shawshank Redemption. They turned it into a movie in '94—Tim Robbins, Morgan Freeman. Tim Robbins played Andy Defresne and he was imprisoned by meaninglessness. He was falsely accused of killing his wife who was running off with another man. He was wrongfully convicted of the crime and subsequently incarcerated for it. He wound up in prison in 1946, serving two life sentences back to back.

The narrative climax (or the best part of the storytelling) is the part about Andy escape. He escaped through the sewage system...which is gross. It's pretty hard to think about. Morgan Freeman tells it as a voice-over. Morgan has a beautiful voice, a voice you long to listen to...which made a little better. But not really enough. It's pretty disgusting which is why—for some reason—I feel called to share it with you. As Morgan Freeman explains it...

Andy [Dufresne] crawled to freedom through five hundred yards of foulness [that] I can't even imagine. Or maybe I just don't want to. Five hundred yards. The length of five football fields. Just shy of half a mile.

And the movie shows it, how gross it was. Stephen King is great at gross. The disgusting factor builds and builds until that great release, where the Shawshank Prison sewage pipe dumps its feculence into the flowing waters of a nearby brook. It's raining hard—it's storming, actually—and Andy Defresne is cleansed...by the flowing brook-waters, by the hard-falling rain and by the breaking of a terrible curse that almost got the best of him.

The spiritual climax of the book-turned-film comes a whole lot earlier. The spiritual climax happens while Andy is still very much imprisoned. The spirit climax arrives by way of music...by way of Mozart, actually. Andy Dufresne had ingratiated himself with the warden and high-level guards. He'd been a hot-shot banker on the outside. So, he made himself useful by offering sound, financial advice. He was fully trusted by the men who held him captive. He earned many perks and privileges from them. He took on special projects. One of those projects was the creation of a prison library—books and audio recordings.

One day, after incessant and consistent nagging, a whole truckload of books and records was delivered to the warden's office...and the warden wasn't very happy about it. His office had become so overcrowded with new library materials

that he couldn't even find his own desk. The warden angrily summoned Dufresne and ordered him to clean up all of the mess. He was heading off-site for a meeting and he was adamant. He demanded that all of the library materials be removed from his office immediately. By the time that he got back from his meeting, he expected that his office would be clean.

For good reason, Andy was smiling as the warden was order him around. His campaign to create a library was meeting with great success. He sorted through books written by Robert Louis Stevenson and Alexandree Dumas. He sorted through record albums by Hank Williams and Johann Sebastian Bach. When he came upon a recording of The Marriage of Figaro, he froze with irony. He removed the vinyl recording from its protective plastic sleeve and set it carefully on the turntable and listened. The music touched him. The music freed him. He wanted to share his experience of metaphysical release.

He locked the warden's office door from the inside. He brought the warden microphone across the room and positioned it advantageously, next to the turntable. The warden's microphone was the one he used periodically to publically address all of the prisoners at once. There were speakers in the dining halls and recreation areas. There were speakers in the prison yard and along its fence-lines. There were speakers in the prison cells and in the watchtowers. No square inch of the prison grounds escaped the warden's voice when it was his intention to be heard. Andy knew this, of course. And he broadcast Mozart's message far and wide...just as the warden was returning.

Obviously, the warden was not pleased. That little stunt earned Andy Defresne two week in solitary. Just two, short weeks alone...this was the cost of freedom. It was worth it for everyone...even if you couldn't speak the language. I know this because Morgan Freeman said so himself. He said,

I have no idea to this day what [those] two Italian ladies were singin' about. Truth is, I don't want to know. Some things are best left unsaid. I'd like to think they were singin' about something so beautiful [that] it can't be expressed in words, and makes your heart ache because of it.

He said,

I tell you, those voices soared. Higher and farther than anybody in a gray place dares to dream. It was like some beautiful bird flapped into our drab little cage and made these walls dissolve away. And for the briefest of moments, every last man at Shawshank felt free.

My mom would roll her eyes. She knew that my dad wasn't all that funny...but she always nurtured that laughter that made us free.