

## ONE OUR FUNNY CENTURY

**S**top me if you've heard this one before. A man walks into a sex ed class.

In my defense, I was supposed to be there. It was the first night of "For Boys Only," a popular four-hour seminar on puberty and sexuality given every month or so at Seattle Children's Hospital. The class, along with its "For Girls Only" counterpart, is the brainchild of a local nurse who thought parents shouldn't be outsourcing sex talk with their kids to elementary schools. "This is a relationship-building class," my registration e-mail told me, "so it will be important to your child to have you attend both sessions. Because class includes interactive exercises for the adult and child, our teachers request that you sit together." The classes have become so popular locally that they're virtually a rite of passage for Seattle-area fifth-graders and their helicopter parents, and the program has since spread to Oregon and California. Retaking sex ed with a roomful of twelve-year-old boys wasn't my idea of a relaxing Monday evening. To make matters worse, my son, Dylan, discovered a week beforehand that two of his best friends from school had been signed up for the same session. So of course we all had to meet up beforehand for burgers, and then I had to sit through two hours of sex ed with my son's goofy friends *and their dads*. Also, right before the class was set to begin, a familiar-looking bearded man walked into the auditorium with his young son and sat down a few rows in front of us. It took me a few minutes to recognize him as longtime NBA coach P. J. Carlesimo. This is in no way relevant to the rest of the story, but you can't just go to sex class with P. J. Carlesimo and not mention it.

The instructor, Greg Smallidge, was exactly who I expected: a friendly-faced middle-aged white guy with receding brown hair, a vaguely professorial air, and an easel stacked with, I could only assume, the same grisly cross-sections of the human reproductive system that I remembered from fifth grade. But when Smallidge began the class, I couldn't believe what I was hearing. He was funny! In my day, sex ed wasn't funny. Maybe the girls' class was funny? I don't know, I still have no idea what went on in there. But the boys' class was only funny unintentionally, like when my friend Glenn asked the teacher, "What if pee comes out instead and you pee inside the lady?" and Mr. Jenkins explained that his wife liked morning sex and even when he *really* had to go, pee never came out when he ejaculated, and then everyone got incredibly uncomfortable and quiet.

Smallidge was a slow, careful talker, but what I had initially taken for unflappable dullness turned out to be a calculated deadpan, in the vein of Bob Newhart. He introduced the topic of masturbation by saying, "It's a very personal subject. It's not like a kid comes home one day and says, 'You know, I had a rough day at school. I'm going to go up to my room and masturbate for about ten minutes.'" He paused and let the laughter build, then added the topper. "Dad, could you make me a sandwich?"

Later, he asked the room to suggest slang terms for "penis" and jotted down a list on his big drawing pad. Many of the kids had obviously never been given license to yell anatomical slang in a crowded roomful of adults, and they jumped in with gusto, some of them possibly inventing terminology on the spot. "Old one-eyed Mr. Johnson!" shouted a boy two rows back, which I thought was a bit much. The room teetered on the brink of anarchy.\* But Smallidge got them back! It was essentially a two-hour stand-up set for the most tentative of audiences, and it was masterful. I felt like applauding at the end.

“It’s like Houdini,” he told me later when I asked him about his crowd work. “How do you get out of this and survive?” Smallidge was

\* When I asked Smallidge later about this interlude, he asked if he’d also done his “penis opera” bit at that point. “I don’t know if I saw the penis opera,” I replied. “You would remember it,” he said. “Is there actually a singing penis?” I asked eagerly. Reader, there is not a singing penis, just a song *about* the penis.

a corporate trainer back in the 1990s when a friend at Seattle Public Schools called him out of the blue to see if he’d be interested in teaching puberty classes. He’d been a philosophy major in college and had no background in medicine, psychology, or education. He didn’t even have any kids. “Sure, I’ll do that,” he said. He’s now been a full-time sexuality curriculum guy for more than twenty years.

“It does feel like stand-up comedy,” Smallidge said, but he disagreed with my assumption that “For Boys Only” is a tough room. No one is expecting the instructor in a hospital auditorium to be funny, he explained, so it’s easy to beat low expectations. And he thinks the laughs are what makes it possible to spark real family conversations about sex. When parents come up against issues of sexuality with their kids, he said, the first response is usually discomfort and defensiveness. “But with humor, you don’t have to be defensive for a few minutes, because you’re laughing.”

I told him that my childhood sex ed classes were never funny on purpose. “You could get in trouble for laughing.”

“There’s this one very conservative teacher, he always starts my introduction with, ‘There will be no laughing! You know the rules!’ Because they’ve gone over all the ground rules. ‘I’m going to be watching you!’ Very severe. It’s sort of like having a bad opening act. I’ve got to undo that intro without offending him.”

“Does that guy have a point? Are we giving kids a more casual view of sex because they got dick jokes with their puberty class?”

Smallidge smiled. “Something can be important without being serious,” he said. “That’s what it is for me.”

## **In the Land of the Comedy Natives**

One joke-heavy sex ed class isn’t exactly headline news. My favorite schoolteachers were always the funny ones, and I’m sure that was true in my parents’ and my grandparents’ day as well. But it’s part of a pattern, one that we sometimes fail to notice, the way a frog in simmering water doesn’t notice each degree of temperature change.

*Everything* is getting funnier.

For millennia of human history, the future belonged to the strong. To the parent who could kill the most calories, in the form of regrettably cute, graceful animals, with rocks and sticks and things made out of rocks and sticks. To the child who could survive the winter or the scarlet fever epidemic. These were success stories.

The Industrial Revolution changed all that. Ideas replaced muscles. A century ago, we believed the future belonged to the efficient, those who had discovered the best ways to streamline a manufacturing process. Fifty years ago, our anointed were the best scientific minds. Slide rules and engineering know-how weren’t just going to defeat Communism, they were eventually going to get us into flying cars and domed underwater cities.

Today, in a clear sign of evolution totally sliding off the rails, our god is not strength or efficiency or even innovation, but funny. Funniness.

If you assume that all modern institutions have always been as joke filled as they are now, you’re part of the problem—and probably part of the rising generation. A 2012 Nielsen survey found that 88 percent of millennials say that their sense of humor is how they define themselves. Sixty-three percent of them would rather be stuck in an elevator with a favorite comedian than with their

sports or music heroes. “We called them Comedy Natives,” MTV research executive Tanya Giles told the *New York Times*. She’s now the general manager at Comedy Central. “Comedy is so central to who they are, the way they connect with other people, the way they get ahead in the world. One big takeaway is that unlike previous generations, humor, and not music, is their number one form of self-expression.”

Comedy, in other words, is no longer just a vehicle for selling nightclub drinks or ad time, something people passively consume because it’s an “easier sit” than drama. More and more, we actively seek it out. We’re connoisseurs. Instead of dozing off to a single late-night monologue, we stream highlights the next day from six or seven different late-night shows, assembling our own comedy *SportsCenter*. Instead of relistening to the same album or two by a favorite comedian, we use newer media like Twitter and podcasts to check in on them weekly or daily or even hourly. Instead of quoting the occasional comedy catchphrase with pals at work, we can consult Frinkiac, an online *Simpsons* search engine stocked with three million screengrabs, which will produce a *Simpsons* meme for almost any occasion. (Just found out your boss is out of the office this Friday? Time for a quick “Everything’s coming up Milhouse!”) Being this kind of obsessive comedy geek is now an avocation, and an increasingly mainstream one.

When *everyone* starts to turn into a comedy expert, very specific comic tropes and references can start to invade real life in surprising ways. The Kazakhstani government took out a four-page ad in the *New York Times* to rebut Sacha Baron Cohen’s roasting of the Central Asian republic in his movie *Borat*. (“Nothing disturbing happens to me here,” enthused a Turkish architect quoted in the puff piece.) Professional football players like Von Miller and Lance Moore have been flagged and fined for reenacting the touchdown dance of Hingle McCringleberry, a character from a *Key and Peele* sketch, in actual NFL games.\* In 2011, Australian morning show host Karl Stefanovic, given a few minutes to interview the Dalai Lama, even tried to tell the Tibetan spiritual leader the classic joke about the Dalai Lama walking into a pizza shop. “Make me one with everything!” is the punch line. His Holiness just stared at Stefanovic blankly.

The most shocking comedy/reality crossover came in 2014, when Seth Rogen and his writing partner Evan Goldberg announced they were making *The Interview*, about two tabloid TV journalists who are recruited by the CIA to assassinate North Korean dictator Kim Jong-un. The premise didn’t feel particularly edgy to me; it was a comfy throwback to the days when Leslie Nielsen would reenact Three Stooges smackfights with Ayatollah Khomeini and Muammar Gaddafi in a *Naked Gun* movie, or Saddam Hussein would show up on *South Park*. You could even go back fifty years earlier. When Robert Benchley published a silly faux interview with Benito Mussolini, or Bugs Bunny terrorized Hitler and Goering, no one was actually afraid the dictators in question would seek revenge on comedy writers. (Even in the case of Charlie Chaplin’s

\* Keegan-Michael Key and Jordan Peele felt so bad about Miller’s \$11,000 fine that they wrote a check in that amount to his eye-care charity for children.

celebrated *The Great Dictator*, an international smash hit, there’s no firm evidence that Hitler ever even saw it.)

But this time, things couldn’t have gone more differently. Six months before *The Interview*’s planned release, North Korea’s state-run media called the still-in-production movie “the most blatant act of terrorism and war” and vowed “merciless” retaliation. It was one thing to blow up the leader of North Korea in a fiery helicopter explosion *onscreen*, but now the moviemakers began to get cold feet: what if the carnage spilled over into real life? Sony asked Rogen and Goldberg if they’d consider rewriting the ending so Kim would survive. They refused, but writer Dan Sterling worried openly about his silly screenplay leading to “some kind of humanitarian disaster.” “I would be

horrified,” he said. When North Korea threatened terrorist attacks at theaters that screened *The Interview*, Sony canceled its wide release in favor of a digital rollout—and was criticized by President Obama for capitulating to terrorism. In the end, the only real casualty of the threats turned out to be Sony cochair Amy Pascal, who stepped down after a massive data dump, almost certainly coordinated by North Korean hackers, revealed months of embarrassing studio secrets.

It was a rude awakening to open the newspaper one morning and realize that James Franco and Seth Rogen would probably be appearing in my kids’ and grandkids’ history textbooks. (That was the *best* case. Worst case was North Korea getting a missile that could reach the Pacific Northwest, and my kids and grandkids not existing to read history textbooks.) Stern, saber-rattling statements between two nuclear powers, followed by one of the biggest acts of cyberterrorism in history, had been provoked by a goofy stoner comedy. It was all almost as unfunny as the movie itself turned out to be. What changed between *The Great Dictator* and *The Interview*? Sure, you could chalk it up to the unprecedented paranoia and strategic chaos practiced by the North Korean regime. But the real takeaway is that Kim probably wasn’t wrong. North Korea has always survived by trading on larger countries’ perception of its government as dangerous and unpredictable. Seth Rogen’s painting “Supreme Leader” as a buffoon and then blowing him up for big movie laffs might have a real effect on how long his regime will last.

Today, we’re savvy enough about the influence of comedy that we take it very, very seriously. Just ask Seth Rogen and James Franco, who were issued hulking round-the-clock studio bodyguards in 2014. Just ask advertisers paying five million dollars to show a goofy, cameo-filled comedy sketch during a Super Bowl time-out. Just ask ordinary people who have lost their jobs when the wrong joke attempt went viral on Twitter. Just ask the staff of *Charlie Hebdo*.