

“Tragedy Plus Time”

My father left the shower, knees dripping, loose flesh dangling, blood alcohol level at “Seahawks in the playoffs”, and, at the highest step of the stairs leading down to the basement, slipped. I went to check what had happened and with my grade nine eyes I could barely glimpse through the darkness his body curled next to the cat box: a pale, flabby, fetal croissant. You might say it was a moment of great gravity. You might now say that my figurative finger-gun and “ay-YO” here is inappropriate. You might be right. But then again, this happened seven years ago.

The next morning in gym class, I told a friend that my dad had fallen down the stairs and she had laughed. She must have thought of a slapstick oh-daddi-o, tumbling like a gymnast, slipping on a banana peel, bounding down the stairs by hands and knees, bouncing up at the bottom, an “oh whoops!”, bowing for the audience, grin all teeth like an old film star; but my father’s teeth are too round, too coffee-stained, too gapped, to beam like Cary Grant. When he was standing, rag pressed to his head, collar crooked as always, concussed, about to be driven to hospital, I don’t remember his teeth. Only his eyes, unfocused, sleepy. My mother had called his name like he was late for work—“Kermit! Kermit!”

“Kermit”, before the frog’s debut on May 9, 1955, was a perfectly normal name for a boy to have. Or so my father says, born January 20, 1955. Either way, it always goes like this: “what’s your dad’s name again?” “Kermit. Like the frog.”

According to E.B. White, “Explaining a joke is like dissecting a frog. You understand it better but the frog dies in the process.” A common theory of humour is that we laugh at inane threats. Standard, tell-em-and-time-em jokes present some incongruity which resolves—“A preist, a rabbi, and a minister walk into a bar. The bartender says, ‘What is this, some kind of

joke?”—punchlines are a surprise that make sense. If you see Charlie Chaplin tumble down some stairs, you laugh because you know he'll jump right back up. If you hear banter, you laugh because it's safe: those insults won't break real relationships, won't make real arguments.

Imagine with me the sound of an argument upstairs. Muffled fortissimo noncommunicative communication. Imagine the slam of a door that swings two centimetres above the floor, made of hollow plywood that bangs against its frame. Then imagine your father, shuffling down the stairs, sheepish, taking them one at a time. He raises his hands, gestures, mumbles: “everything's fine.”

I don't remember if we laughed at him. We can't have. I know we laughed before, and after. Under the muffled fortissimo my brother, my sister and I were playing Scattergories, a game where you roll a die to get a letter, then fill in a list of categories with words starting with that letter. I loved to write joke answers more than I loved to win—“vacation destinations; things you travel with; things in a hotel room—starting with R?” “Rome, Rsuitcase... Rtinysoapthatyougottastealtogethermoney'sworth.”

Whenever he came home from a trip abroad, bearing tiny soap and complimentary shampoo, he would enter a state of extra muddledness. This would also happen on most days past 9pm. I thought this absurd delirium was just him: the strange, absent-minded university professor, moods tied to time like a weirdness werewolf. In hindsight I know that airplanes meant duty free and evenings meant beers and plastic-bottle vodka. We would talk to him like we talked to the text-to-speech function on his laptop, typing out what he said to have a laugh: “I'm on the dark side of the moon... There's no time on the dark side of the moon”; “I'm on the dark side right now”; “I sleep for 36 hours. It's the dark side of the moon”; “It's good to be back... I'm alive... survive”.

Five years after his concussion he had a second stint in the hospital, one with an “oh my, your brain has shrunk.” Picture a pinch of the cheeks and a “you’ve gotten so small!” Don’t picture the nurse telling him that if he kept up the habit he would die within a year. Do picture him trying to escape on the second night, wandering around the ward like a spy in a heist film, side-lit by the moon spilling through venetian blinds, caught by a nurse on night duty. Picture him telling that nurse that he was just “looking for a bathroom”, with one hand on the fire exit. Picture that nurse putting up safety rails up on the side of his bed.

A few weeks later we went to visit him at rehab. It was on a nearby island both because it was available on short notice and we knew he would try to escape—mid-detox, day five of hospitalization, safety rails down, nurses charmed, he told them he wanted to use the computers a few floors down; still dressed in a patterned white hospital gown, courier-new-printed bracelet around his wrist, he nonchalantly unlocked the back door of our house with the spare key and proclaimed that he’d snuck on the back of the 99 and escaped “the jailhouse”. At rehab we met his short-term friends (gracious, smiling, ordinary) and like a parent-teacher conference they reported to us: “Kermit, he makes us all laugh.” “Such dry wit.” “He’s very funny.”

It’s important to separate theories of humour from theories of laughter: we don’t laugh at jokes, usually. We laugh socially: we laugh to acknowledge, to include, to bond. You might remember a moment when you were watching a show with someone and you laughed, and they laughed, and you looked at them, unconsciously, mid-laugh, almost to check that they were laughing, and you were laughing, and they were laughing with you.

I only remember laughing at, never with, him. He was funny: a cat leaping confidently and just missing a ledge is funny. He was not funny: the Bond villain stroking the trigger of a torture machine and chuckling to himself is not funny.

During our visit we sat in his bedroom, my mother, my sister, my brother and me, as he read us a letter that, despite him being two weeks in to rehab, included the conclusion “I don’t think I’m an alcoholic”. As he spoke my mother sat at a distance from him and they talked. My sister leaned against the bare stucco wall, arms crossed together, fingers clenched. My brother and I sat by the sliding glass doors and tried to fix the venetian blinds, bending them back in to horizontality. Some of the pieces stayed crooked; some lay almost flat; but they seemed, ultimately, irreversibly damaged. When we left the rehab centre I don’t remember us talking. We must have, but I only remember running my finger through the mist inside the car window, staring out, mad, angry, sad, exasperated, frustrated, angry. Angry. Any emotion but laughter. He wasn’t funny. He wasn’t allowed to be funny.

We must have driven from the island onto a ferry to get back home, but I don’t remember it. When I think of ferries I think of the time we were listening to the soundtrack of *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* as we drove onto the ferry and we sat for a moment, parked, and I turned up the volume during a quiet bit, a decrescendo, a moment of hesitation and suspense, just a single trembling flute...only for the song to immediately crash into a car-shaking-drum-smashing-guitar-shred fortissississississimo. I scrambled for the volume and collapsed laughing.

Three days ago my father was trying to print a ticket for a flight and, printers being printers, he had ended up with a ticket the size of a coaster. Giggling, he had asked, “can you

help me print this out?”, and with my first attempt, the printer spat out a ticket the size of a postage stamp. “Take this to the airport,” I said. “Bring a magnifying glass.”

The moment was fleeting. The joke was dumb. He still doesn't think he ever had a problem: he blames his concussion, his arthritis, his thyroid, his psoriasis, anything but his drinking, for any errant past behaviour. You can't joke about something that someone is still denying. But this fleeting, dumb joke was the first time I laughed with my father in over seven years.

The line separating comedy from tragedy is thin, and it wobbles, like the shaking hand of someone going through withdrawal; like loose flabs of stomach mid-chuckle. “Delirium tremens” sounds so fun, like an amusement park ride, one where the ride shakes so hard your heart feels like it might explode but it decelerates and you get off the ride and, given the choice, maybe you would do it again. Maybe.