

A Night Ride With the Mobile Humor Police

by Con Chapman

CHATHAM, Mass. This picturesque seaside community on Cape Cod is a vacation dream spot for many extended families, and for good reason. “There are tons of playgrounds for the kids,” says Courtney Phelan, a mother of teen-aged twins. “There’s fishing for my husband Pete and his father, and there’s the sun—and shopping—for my mother-in-law.”



Chatham, Mass.

But the intergenerational composition of many vacation rentals can lead to dinner-time strife, as jokes that win laughs among the elderly fall flat on teen ears, and the edgy, satirical style of humor favored by adolescents is perceived by many senior citizens as disrespectful or “flip”.

“Why does your t-shirt say ‘Dead Kennedys’ on it?”

“We’re caught in the middle,” says Phelan. “Once grandma has her second Whiskey Sour she starts in with the ethnic jokes, and the kids make fun of everything.”



“Grandma, that’s not funny—it’s stupid.”

Into this valley of dinner-time discord has driven a specially-trained squadron of humor police, The Odd Squad, which cruises the roads leading to beachfront houses beginning around cocktail hour and ending their shift just as grandparents are nodding off after “Wheel of Fortune”.



“This game is hard to follow when you’re senile.”

“We try to get there before trouble starts,” says Chris Donaldson, who will do a stand-up routine at a comedy club in Provincetown after his public safety work is done for the night. “Once the grandparents go nuclear and say ‘I can’t believe how you’re raising those kids’ you’ve got blood on the deck and somebody being disinherited.”

“We’ve got a priest and rabbi joke in progress on Seagull Lane.”

The two-way radio crackles and the voice of the dispatcher is heard to say “Mobile Unit 1, come in.”

Donaldson's partner, Tom Minos, a free-lance joke writer, picks up the handpiece. "Mobile Unit 1," he says.

"I've got a report of a priest and rabbi joke under way on Seagull Lane, do you copy?" the dispatcher says.

"Roger that, we're on our way. 10-4."



Donaldson turns on the flasher but not the siren. "I don't want to disturb the sunset-watchers," he says. "Also, it gives the perps advance notice."

They arrive at the scene; an alcohol-fueled elderly couple about to attempt small talk with their grandchildren while the parents are distracted making a summer dinner of steaks, corn on the cob, tomato slices and salad.

"This baby's likely to blow sky-high," Minos says as he notices that the grandparents are drinking pre-dinner cocktails made with distilled spirits, whose alcohol content is seven times as great as a glass of wine.

"Kids, look—grandpa's copping a feel!"

"We need to get there before the Sammy Davis, Jr. jokes start," Donaldson adds.

His hopes are dashed when the grandmother, a 78-year-old former executive secretary who married her boss, stumbles under the influence of her “highball” as she sits down at the table.



“You slay me, granny!”

“I’m getting to be like Sammy Davis, Jr.!” she exclaims to blank stares from her grandchildren Todd and Tricia, who are both wearing iPod “ear buds” but can still hear their grandmother over the noise of Flo Rida and Lady Gaga.



Lady Gaga: Turquoise is the new purple.

“Why’s that?” Todd asks, genuinely mystified if not exactly interested.

“Well he had so many things wrong with him—he was handicapped, he was a Jew, and he was a n—”

Donaldson grabs the woman around the neck and in a second has her under control, a bit discombobulated but clearly docile.

“You have the right to remain silent. You can call an attorney, or tell one Little Moron joke.”

“Was she choking on something?” her husband, an 80-year-old former captain of industry asks.

“She was about to make a lame joke incorporating a derogatory racial epithet in violation of local ordinances,” Minos says grimly. “It may seem like an unconstitutional prior restraint on speech, but it comes under the fire-in-a-crowded-theatre-or-incredibly-stupid-remark-at-a-family-gathering exception.”



“ . . . so she gets into bed with the mailman . . . ”

“Oh,” the elderly man says, his voice trailing off as he notices that his daughter-in-law has placed a juicy steak before him.

Everyone digs in after a celebratory toast, and as the food fortifies his blood sugar, the grandfather tries to engage the younger generation in conversation. “So, what do you kids think of that Susan Boyle—pretty good singer, huh?”



Well, you’ve never seen them together, have you?

"I think she looks like Andy Rooney in drag," Todd says.

"What does 'drag' mean?" the grandmother asks.

"A man dressed up like a woman," Tricia says, causing both grandparents to sit up straight in their chairs, obviously offended by the remark.

"I like Susan Boyle," the grandmother says.

"And I like Andy Rooney," the grandfather says.

It looks like an ugly confrontation is about to erupt when Donaldson steps in to keep the peace.



"That's not such a bad thing, is it?" he asks with a conciliatory demeanor. "I mean—men dressing up in women's clothes is funny, right? Like Benny Hill?"

"Ha-ha-ha," the patriarch of the family laughs, his head thrown back. "Benny Hill—funny."

"I just love him!" the grandmother says. "We'll have to watch some of his old shows on videotape after dinner!"



Peanut brittle can with gag snakes inside: Always good for a laugh.

The officers put away their "Peanut Brittle" cans stuffed with gag snakes, which they had removed from their holsters in case things had escalated any further.

"I think we're all set here," Minos says to the parents.

"Thank you so much," Pete Phelan says, a look of relief on his face.

“Just give us a call if they start to tell any gay hairdresser jokes.”

