

Just a Joke

by vic fortezza

The pizza was perfect, ingredients genuine, not artificial: crust charred slightly; cheese gooey; sauce steaming, requiring careful eating lest the mouth suffer burns. Such quality was becoming rare around town. The product in Manhattan, by and large, was counterfeit, its shape the only relationship to the real thing.

Here, in this cramped Brooklyn shop that hadn't been renovated in years, business boomed. Commuters, shoppers, students were in and out all day. On the sidewalk just beyond the doorstep, young blacks in the blue jerseys of Lincoln High School stood munching as they awaited the bus. Invariably, a person or two would veer into the place from each wave that poured from the train station two doors down.

Seated at the first of three tables, headset piping Sinatra into his ears, Joe reveled in the bustle. This's livin', he thought, savoring his treat, craning his neck as the young Russian beauty from the accessory shop next door hurried by, ignoring the stares she attracted. He could picture that face, the devastating blue eyes and natural golden hair, peering out from the covers of fashion magazines. She might be too short for runway fame, but he was certain her face would command a fortune. He wished he knew someone in the business so that he might send her on her way.

Stop, he told himself, doubting his motive was pure, chuckling at the absurdity of the fantasy. What would she want with a paunchy middle-aged educator? Suddenly he felt guilty about snacking. His wife, should she find out, wouldn't let him hear the end of it.

Sonny, the manager, whose face was perpetually tanned, squeezed past the counter and toward the door, pulling on a jacket. "Awright, fellas, I'm leavin'," he said, gazing over his shoulder at the bakers. Noticing Joe, he took the seat opposite him and leaned forward. Despite the interruption of his reverie, Joe smiled and removed his headset.

"Big black guy struts into a bar..." said Sonny quietly, deep blue

eyes and the white hair at the sides of his head standing out handsomely against the bronze flesh.

Joe listened eagerly and tittered at the punchline, although he found it disappointing. Sonny left. Headset back in place, Joe returned to his treat. As he tilted his head to take a bite, he noted a customer waiting at the counter. He grew queasy. Although he was unable to determine the sex let alone race, as the person was wearing a large coat and wool cap, his instincts sensed trouble. Sure enough, a slight turn of the head revealed a black, female face. Flushed with shame, he despaired. Why did these situations always find one? he wondered.

You didn't ask to hear it, he told himself, peeved. Had she heard it? Of course, he thought. That was life. You couldn't help hurting people even when you had no intention of doing so. Sometimes you just wound up in the middle against your will. What could he have done - censure Sonny?

No doubt the woman thought him a bigot. He dared not apologize, as it was possible she hadn't heard. Having lost his appetite, he left, discarding the half-eaten slice in a litter basket down the street so as not to insult the bakers. So distracted was he that he failed to sneak a peak into the accessory shop. Realizing the oversight, he became irked. He'd allowed the incident to rob him of the pleasure of looking at a pretty girl, which indicated a shift in personal priorities, which translated into : "over the hill."

He grasped Jean's hand as they exited the theater.

"Want to stop off for a drink?" she said, yawning. "We have the sitter until midnight."

He shrugged.

"What's wrong? You've hardly said a word all night. Are you coming down with something?"

He related the incident, without repeating the joke.

"You're supposed to be on a diet." She looked away, muttering angrily, letting go of his hand. "And I let you talk me into buying that popcorn."

He'd hoped her sense of priorities would have had her ignore his dietary lapse.

"Why'd you laugh?"

"To be polite, to be sociable. His jokes are usually crude but harmless. I wasn't expecting an ethnic slur."

She smirked. "Only a sexist one, which's okay, of course. These foul-mouthed comedians should all die."

"Don't bring them into it. The only thing they're ever guilty of is not being funny, I tell you. Nobody forces you to listen. As long as it's behind closed doors it's okay."

"Okay to perpetuate stereotypes and despicable behavior?"

"People often conform to a stereotype. That's why the word exists. Without them there'd be even more chaos. Besides, how do you know the laughs comedians generate don't diminish the hostility of guys in the crowd, and that that in turn doesn't prevent rather than encourage abuse?"

"Yeah, right."

"You don't know that it doesn't."

"You don't know that it does."

"Exactly. Feminists say pornos lead to abuse and rape. How do we know that they don't prevent a hundred times as many by letting guys get off and shed some of their frustrations? Guns are used to kill thousands of people, but nobody can estimate how many shootings the possession of them prevent. It might be twice as many. Way more people are killed with bats and knives. The nuts even want to ban toy guns."

"Our son will never have one."

"But don't you worry that we might be emasculating our society? Guns are a fact of life. Our enemies have them. We need them too."

"The police and the army do, not the average citizen. I can't believe you've swallowed that NRA crap. All their lobbyists care about is profit."

"Why should they be any different than other lobbyists? You won't even admit that there's an argument. That's dangerous."

They strolled silently a while. The crowd thinned around them.

Soon they were practically alone, encountering only an occasional passerby.

"Why do bigots assume the rest of us share their bigotry?" said Jean abruptly.

"Don't jump to conclusions. You don't know for sure he's a bigot. It's just the devil in all of us."

"What a weak excuse - and so typically male."

"Look, I know what's correct, but people aren't robots. You can't program them to always do and say the right thing."

"Then why teach?"

"Teaching and programming are the same?" he said, surprised.

"Why not just give up and let crudity and bigotry flourish?"

"C,mon, Jeanie," he said, impatiently, extending his hand, which she refused. "Now who's being intolerant? Some people would argue that the schools encourage crudity, as long as it's the 'right' kind. It's not a big deal. It was only words."

"Ask that woman if that's the case. She's been hearing how worthless she is her whole life. It has to stop."

"You want to stop people from being human? Good luck. We're all victims and victimizers - as long as it's only words. Sometimes it's even more than words, though. We contribute to pollution every time we start the car, all for the sake of convenience. Walking to the movies is only a drop in the bucket."

"But it helps."

"Lately you've been on this preserving paper kick, saving every little scrap, using the backs even for letters. That means less is being sold, which means people may lose their jobs. That's life - pluses and minuses. We hope the pluses stay ahead."

"What's this have to do with bigotry?"

"It's just that living involves hurting. That can't be helped. Have all the Irish or woman jokes you've heard in your life held you back even one iota?"

"They do irreparable damage to self esteem."

"There's nothing wrong with your self esteem," he snapped.

"Mine's the one that wavers, and it isn't because of any ethnic slurs

or fat jokes."

"How can you compare that to what blacks have suffered in this country?"

"I'm not. The sheer numbers of the majority make the burden of blacks incredibly greater. But don't insults often motivate a person to prove himself?"

"And that makes them legitimate? I thought we moved way past that fifties Catholic school mentality."

"If we can't withstand name-calling, what'll we do against really hard knocks? I've read where gays as a group have the highest standard of living of all Americans. What's their gripe, then? Are their little feelings hurt when someone calls them names? Please. These groups don't want equal rights - they want an edge."

"Maybe if you'd ever been beaten for what you were, or for the color of your skin...."

"Nobody in his right mind'd condone that, but you can't tell me that's any worse than mugging somebody for his wallet. Assault and murder are despicable no matter the motivation."

"How profound."

"If we were all one color and straight we'd still find ways of attacking each other. Such is man - 'Ecce homo.' When I ran into your Uncle Sean the other day he started right in. 'Why's Italy shaped like a boot?' he said."

Jean looked at him.

"'cause all that crap'd never fit into a shoe," he said, unable to restrain his chuckling.

"How can you laugh?"

"It's funny. It's just a joke. Where's the harm?"

"Listen to yourself rationalize. Face it, you were a bigot today."

"I admit - I sinned! Are you gonna be selective in your forgiveness of sinners?"

"You should've apologized to that woman."

"How naive is that? You sound like one of these multicultural fanatics who feel America has no claim to greatness because of slavery and the slaughter of the indians. America freed its slaves,

and lots of their descendants have made it big here. And the indians've discovered the wonder of running tax-free casinos. People of all colors flock here to pursue the dream. No multicultural society works better than America. Sure we have our problems and sins, just as individuals do, but this country is still the best that civilization has to offer, and we don't have anything to apologize for."

"We shouldn't try to make things better? You should've apologized to that woman."

"Should I do penance for every bigoted thought too, or does this apply only to action?"

"The unspoken doesn't hurt anyone."

"Only oneself, but that's not important, of course - except in select cases."

"Always 'you'! You sinned - not the woman. If what you did wasn't wrong, why are you so upset? I'll tell you why. You're more concerned about the woman's opinion of you than you are about her feelings."

Dismayed, he lowered his head. "Bingo. That's it exactly. How is it you were able to articulate it better than me?"

"Because you're so steeped in yourself you can't see straight. And don't you dare turn this into a treatise on Ayn Rand and the virtue of selfishness, how even Mother Teresa was motivated by selfishness."

"In her single-minded zeal to do good she accomplished great things, just like any entrepreneur who creates thousands of jobs on his way to riches."

"But Mother Teresa never drove other businesses to extinction."

"She never created any, either. Plusses and minuses."

"Mother Teresa has no minuses."

"Where would the world be without the ambitious? Thousands of Mother Teresa's wouldn't stem the chaos. All I'm saying is that life is complex."

"Bigotry is simple. Some things should never be said."

"Not even in anger?"

She rolled her eyes heavenward in exasperation.

"Will we ever have the right to be angry any more? Or

momentarily stupid? How do people in the public eye take it? You have to watch every little thing you say. The wolves are always ready to pounce. It wouldn't be so annoying if it was universal and not selective indignation, though."

"That joke was cold calculation, not a momentary lapse."

"Granted. So anger and momentary stupidity are permissible?"

"Therefore no apology was necessary - more twisted logic. You've apologized for less to me."

He fell silent, hands in his pockets.

"Promise you'll never go off on one of these tangents in the classroom. That's all we need."

"The thought police are everywhere."

She stamped her foot. "Dammit! I hate when you get like this."

Nearby, a car slowed at a stop sign. The young man at the wheel cried: "Hit 'er!." His companions echoed the sentiment.

"Blow it out your ass, moron!" Jean shot back at the fleeing automobile.

"Easy," said Joe urgently. "I'm in no shape to take on a bunch of punks."

"You're soft all the way around."

"Don't get your Irish up now."

Her shoulders jerked. "You see?"

"It's just an expression. What is wrong with you?"

"What's wrong with me? You're the one carrying on and on like an ass. Once and for all - there's never an excuse for bigotry."

"I never said there was."

"That's all you've been saying."

"Sometimes bigotry's not bigotry. It's the heat of the moment. You don't believe for a second that Jesse Jackson's a bigot because of what he said about New York?"

"You're the one who hates him."

"I hate liberalism. I hate the sin, not the sinner."

She made a face. "Then why'd you gloat when he said it?"

"Because it discredited this whole hysteria about political correctness. At least it should have. The partisans and their lackeys

in the press always find a way to spin."

"You better stop listening to those idiotic talk shows. They're conditioning you."

"Aren't our schools conditioning kids to the left? It doesn't take a genius to see that sexual harassment's just a smoke screen for a larger agenda that has nothing to do with petty gripes. As for the Right Reverend, I'd never be so cynical as to believe he's really a bigot, but it was great to see him put his foot in his mouth. Here's a guy who constantly bemoans the fact that on the one hand young blacks are an endangered species and on the other calls for federally funded abortion for the poor. Excuse me, but isn't that a contradiction?"

Fuming, Jean stopped short. "Oh, no you don't. I see exactly where you're going: 'Abortion is worse than racial slurs; we should be more concerned about that.' You lost that argument a long time ago. Get over it."

"You see no correlation between the tyranny of each?"

"Shut up."

"Why is one form of tyranny acceptable and the other not?"

"Shut up, I told you."

"The first involves words, the second extermination."

"Go ahead, convolute all you want. Throw the whole lexicon of conservatism on the table, see where it gets you."

"Might as well," he mumbled. "Something tells me it's the doghouse already. How can you deny that issues are related? How 'bout the nuts in the theater who jumped all over that couple for lighting up?"

"We should all have to breathe in that filth?"

"We missed five minutes of the movie because of all that arguing."

"The movie was more important?"

"At the time. Granted, smoking is disgusting, but the secondhand smoke of two cigarettes won't kill you. We were in greater danger from the buttered popcorn."

She sneered. "They could've waited until they were outside."

"You should've said that to whoever was passing gas."

She grimaced. "But he couldn't help it."

"How do you know it was a guy?"

"Because they smelled like yours."

He laughed heartily. "But don't you see? That's life. Sometimes you breathe in other peoples farts and germs. You can't avoid it. How much smoke have we breathed in at family functions?"

"We should stop going."

"Oh, sure. You can't regulate life. Last quarter the trade deficit shrank dramatically because of the sale of cigarettes. Should we stop exporting them?"

"Yes. Teen smoking is back on the rise. Education isn't working."

"I hate smoking too, but I'm not gonna become intolerant about it. It's a legal product. It got America on its feet. And you can argue that the revenue it generates more than negates the harm it does. Red meat, butter and cake do harm too. Should they be banned?"

"It wouldn't bother me," said Jean, arms folded tightly to her chest.

"Do we have the right to dictate what people should consume?"

"Yes, when taxes pay for health care."

"Some people who smoke live to a ripe old age. Some people do all the right things and still die young. That's life. This hysteria's got to stop. A few weeks ago there was an uproar because a black coach used a slur against a white quarterback. Writers called for an investigation. What a crock! A man got angry and said something stupid. Apologize and move on."

"But you didn't apologize. You're such a coward. Come to think of it, there's no danger of you ever going off on one of these tangents in the classroom. You know exactly where your bread is buttered. You annoy the hell out of me and kowtow to everybody else."

Stung, he paused, hoping for an apology. "I do vote, if that's any consolation. I wish they'd have a referendum on political correctness. In the effort to moderate behavior we're becoming more intolerant than ever. After all that arguing in there I lost all interest in the movie."

"Oh, bull. Every time that big-breasted bimbo came on you sat up straight in your seat. No wonder you wanted to see it."

"And, as we all know, the appreciation of beauty is just another form of tyranny. 'You just don't get it,'" he said to himself ironically.

"I couldn't have said it better — you and your appreciation of the accident of genes."

"You're not stirred by attractive men? Your hormones are dormant? Fortunately, I know that's not the case. I suppose we'll come to the point where we'll be sued for simply gawking at a pretty girl."

"See how you convolute? You know you can't win on merit so you twist and twist and twist."

He paused, pensive, and looked into her eyes. "What were we arguing about again?"

She stormed away.

"It was just a joke."

She did not break stride.

"See what I mean?"

She did not stop.

"Jeanie."

The gap between them continued to widen.

"Light of my life," he muttered weakly, failing to amuse himself.

"Jean!"

