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The End of Seriousness

By Lauren Michele Jackson

*Our unfunny times are rife with laughter that seldom offers relief.*

The other day, I flew to New York, an event that normally occasions an elation only briefly dampened by the humming trepidation of flight anxiety. Flying scares me, it's true, not that my Instagram profile or frequent-flier status show it. Recent events, though, have ratcheted that worry to something more acute. On January 29th, American Airlines Flight 5342 crashed into the Potomac River in D.C., after colliding with a military helicopter, marking the deadliest airline accident in the U.S. since 2009. Two days later, a medevac flight operated by Jet Rescue Air Ambulance nose-dived into a Philadelphia neighborhood. These tragedies, whose causes are under investigation, followed decades of deregulation of the airline industry, and understaffing of air-traffic control sufficient to give even fearless fliers pause. Our reinaugurated President, meanwhile, was scything the payrolls of federal agencies, including the Federal Aviation Administration. As I brushed my teeth the day before the flight, my dread coalesced into the shape of a meme: *Does anyone know if we have airline safety tomorrow?*

The meme, in its original form, features an image of a bandanna-clad boy taking a serious-faced mirror selfie, given voice in screaming font that asks, "DOES ANYONE KNOW IF WE HAVE TO BRING OUR BACKPACKS TO THE FIELD TRIP TOMORROW." With some slapdash editing—slapdashery is part of the charm—others have turned the child's straightforward query into a template for expressing a memeable malaise, for example, "DOES ANYONE KNOW IF WE HAVE January TOMORROW," posted during the doldrums of that seemingly interminable month; or, perhaps, alluding to the current Administration, "DOES ANYONE KNOW IF WE HAVE federal government TOMORROW." Presented without the expected interrogative mark, these questions suggest a tossed-off despondency, retaining the anxiety of the child who seems unprepared for tomorrow's excursion. The meme's humor lies in its shallow expressions of deep feeling: existential problems otherwise worthy of metaphysics or high literature here flung out as low-res Internet flatulence.

I doubt anything bad would have happened had I posted my little joke; a few likes, that precious currency of attention, may even have come my way for the trouble. At worst, friends who saw the post might have clucked at my show of poor taste in the face of tragedy and then moved on with their lives. Nevertheless, I didn't post it. The line felt dumb and flaccid, derivative in an irritating rather than with-it sense, and lacking the transgression found in good gallows humor. What productively blackens such humor is its embrace of dire circumstance, the way it holds terror to its bosom like an old friend. This was not that, nor is much of sociable humor these days, however much it may purport to highlight our frightening moment. Cheaper laughs run rampant, invoking and evacuating seriousness in one limp gesture, smothering any thought or feeling at risk of requiring fortitude. Irreverent is not the word. This strain of humor is not too cool for school; it's desperate. It says, *LOL that's crazy*, emphasis on the *LOL*, before moving along.

This posture of unseriousness pervades institutional and individual channels alike. It's Duolingo, the language-learning app, siphoning cachet from the statutory-rape allegation against Drake teased on Kendrick Lamar's Record of the Year by inviting users to "learn how to play A minor in our music course." (Drake denies engaging in underage sex.) It's the State of New York, responding to President Trump's elimination of congestion pricing with a cutesy message on its official X handle: "beep beep babes we're taking you to court ☹️." It's the countless jokes leaning into the President's screwy supposition (which one, you ask?) that D.E.I. was to blame for planes falling from the sky. It's the chatty true-crime podcast "My Favorite Murder" cultivating fans who call themselves "murderinos." The proper first response to anything is laughter, it seems; nothing impugns one's taste quite so completely as being told one is "taking it too seriously." A critic, professional or otherwise, found too solemn in her critique just doesn't get it. Jokes are safer, forestalling opinion—and thereby contention—by forgoing one. And this attitude rather suits the powers that be in media and entertainment, for whom attention of any kind suffices. (How much of what appears on, say, Netflix *is* a joke?)

*LOL that's crazy* once felt apt as a response to our media environment, a quasi-absurdist means of palliating a 24/7 onslaught of slickly mediated information. But it shows its wear. I have to thank Ethel Cain for noticing. Last fall, the singer-songwriter posted to Tumblr that she felt "constantly bombarded by jokes," adding, "listen, i LOVE to laugh and i love funny shit but like. we are in an irony epidemic. there is such a loss of sincerity and everything has to be a joke at all times." Though the post was soon deleted, screenshots found a wider audience among people, myself included, who agreed with her read on our current climate. Our unfunny times are

nonetheless rife with laughter, and it's a laughter that seldom offers relief. When did everything—*everything*—become *ha ha ha*? What kind of laugh is this?

Comedy and tragedy have been involved in a long and fruitful two-hander; a faith that the best of one leaves room for the other undergirds the rhapsodies of Shakespeare and "The Bear" alike. The twin pillars of the American comedic sensibility, Black people and Jews, burlesqued their people's conditions to hysterical effect throughout the past century, metabolizing the times as they went. When Lenny Bruce threatened to piss and Richard Pryor opened his ass, they served up the very shit from which postwar America sought escape in the cleansing assimilation of the suburbs—"a flight from industry and business and money and filth," as the literary critic John Limon has put it, as well as "a flight from the power of jokes" and all their lowly associations. But people were laughing at what the standups had to say, long and loud and among fellow audience members who were (at least according to America) different from one another. Limon, who is credited with composing the first serious study of standup as an art form, is as fascinated by this collective laughter as he is by the comedy itself. The comedian curls the viewer into the drama of his own debasement, Limon theorized, and the relationship is christened, if the joke works, with a laughter that amalgamates the many into one. This became the hope, and the promise, of comedy as standup exploded in popularity in the latter half of the twentieth century, its cadences absorbed into other realms of American entertainment, from late night to the sitcom. "This eventuality—the comedification of America," Limon writes, "is the most astounding fact about the American sensibility from 1960 to 2000."

Limon was writing, incidentally, just a year before the nation would profess to have its sense of humor upended. On September 11, 2001, the Twin Towers came down and broke our funny bone, or so it was said. Comedy made a brief retreat from national life; late-night and comedy institutions such as *The Onion* went dark. The vacuum was filled with eulogies to irony and cynicism. The thought was that the U.S. had been irrevocably jolted out of a late-twentieth-century posture, an irreverence fomented by an age that understood irony "not only as a sneering overused pose of detachment," as the literary critic Michiko Kakutani put in a piece for the *Times*, "but also as a potent weapon for delineating a fractured and frightening world." Yet any viewer of the nineties film "Reality Bites," with its scene in which Ethan Hawke coolly recites the definition of irony, knew how available and thus threadbare the term had already become. In an essay from 1993, David Foster Wallace had ascribed the "trendy sardonic exhaustion" among his peers to the increasing sophistication of television. Writers strove to position themselves as more cynical than the idiot box that knew itself to be an idiot box. The effect was "not liberating but enfeebling," Wallace wrote. Even before 9/11 was said to have killed it, irony was no longer confrontational in its address. It pointed out everything while standing neither for nor against anything in particular. It said, as Wallace ventriloquized, "How very *banal* to ask what I mean."

When humor returned to the mainstream post-9/11, it was not irreverent or edgy but grating, jingoistic, and racist, complementing the nation's earnest reclamation of its tragedy to promulgate American values, which is to say war. "I'm here to give you permission to laugh," Rudy Giuliani, the so-called Mayor of America, said at a charity event a month after the attack. "If you don't, I'll have you arrested." Har har. America *needed* to laugh. Laughter was proof of coping, of winning. Laughter was American. It is telling that when "South Park" returned to air, after a hiatus, the show, previously impudent toward the establishment, now joined the rest of media in mocking Arabs and Muslims, and ended the episode on an earnest cheer: "Go America!" The thought was that to meet something with a laugh was the same thing as defanging it, a fearful humor inflated with American self-importance.

As media outlets wrung their hands over the utility of humor after tragedy, though, a burgeoning Internet culture lent no such consideration. Indeed, the digital world persisted as an all-hours laugh factory, with 9/11 providing "an impetus to a new genre," as the sociologist Giseline Kuipers wrote, of "cut-and-paste Internet jokes that were shared and spread around the world through e-mail, newsgroups, and Web sites." Slipshod, crass, and sick, these jokes, dialling in from abroad and at home, were distinct from the humor that had followed other U.S. catastrophes. Their authors didn't seem touched by the events they digested. The person who created an image of Teletubbies jumping to their deaths from the World Trade Center, evoking Richard Drew's harrowing 9/11 photograph "The Falling Man," wasn't doing so through tears, presumably, nor was anyone who passed the image along. The jokes that proliferated did not seem to be working through a singular grief. Nor were they "difficult and painful, and *productive*," as Wallace lauded the "rebellious irony" of postwar fiction that exposed bureaucratic hypocrisies.

No, humor of this sort, as it flourished online, was juvenile and unfeeling. It was smug, resembling the latter-day irony that Wallace associated with TV. So it makes perfect sense that it would be further propagated by the next big thing in telecommunications, the social Internet, where nobody had to be who they said they were, let alone own what they said. Maybe you meant it, maybe you didn't. Everyone was trying stuff out—a good thing, in life and in comedy, but any speech can get rotten, especially speech one never has to claim. The Internet—that is, the Internet as carved up by billionaires—didn't invent shock-joking; it only gave it a better alibi than it had on the radio. Online, jokey provocations feigned a detachment from real life. If friends were calling each other "mein Führer," it did not make them Nazis. That was just their sense of humor, a dose of online irony poisoning. A decade ago, one such friend, a firefighter trainee named Dirk Denkhäus, set fire to a refugee group home in Altena, Germany. On his phone were racist memes and xenophobic articles and the phrase "mein Führer" used among pals. His lawyer, as reported by the *Times*, argued that Denkhäus had otherwise displayed no prior anti-refugee sentiment: "It was only online that he'd dabbled in hate." The irony-poisoned spew the most darndest and heinous things not out of conviction—or so we're meant to assume—but just for funsies, until evidence shows otherwise.

The diagnosis of online irony poisoning tends to understate the extent to which social media's rightward drift regulates so much else in life, establishing the terms and the tenor by which we enter that bustling intersection called discourse. The comedification of America has become the memeification of America. Take, for instance, the ultimate Internet troll, Elon Musk, appearing a few years ago as a host of "Saturday Night Live," a coup that seems quaint, in retrospect, now that Musk is leading Trump's gutting of the federal government as the head of an agency that he renamed after a meme. The puerile hasn't confabbed with the establishment so much as replaced it, with the latter's permission. Jokes mingle with cruel and lethal austerity measures. At the podium during a rally held after the Presidential Inauguration, Musk raised a stiff right arm in what looked like a Nazi salute yet it was laughed off by the Anti-Defamation League as just an "awkward gesture." This month, Musk briefly changed his profile name on X, the social platform he owns, to Harry Bōlz, a brilliant display of homophonic potty humor that prompted a surge in an obscure cryptocurrency by the same name. This is where America lives and what America does. Nothing is funny, but everything is. And therein lies a sense of impotence, because our ability to discern the consequential ghoulishness of this nation's policies—*LOL that's crazy!*—doesn't in and of itself constitute resistance. Those who feel they can't do, laugh.

The inverse of falling Teletubbies and deniable *Seig heils* might look like a sincere attempt to meet the moment. But audiences, even for art-house entertainment, have gone feral with laughter. Two years ago, I went to my favorite movie theatre in Chicago to see Todd Haynes's "May December," a film that is funny in the way that melodrama, in its overdrawn intensity, can be. I enjoyed the movie. I laughed. Others did, too. But it did not feel like we were laughing together. The room was too loud, out of proportion with the film. Toward the end, the character played by Charles Melton attempts to confront his wife, played by Julianne Moore, about the fact that their two-decade-long relationship began with statutory rape; he was thirteen and she was thirty-six. "I'm saying, what if I was too young," he ventures, to which she replies, indignantly, "*You seduced me.*" There is something farcical in the retort—an older woman playing child to the man she coerced into sex as an actual child. What was comical about the exchange was the very thing that made it disturbing. In the theatre, though, peals of laughter drowned out Melton's cries and the scene's devastatingly anticlimactic end. The tragedy was lost to the comedy, rather than being thrown into relief by it.

Not long ago, the same theatre released a statement about an incident that occurred during a showing of David Lynch's "Blue Velvet"; instead of treating the film's "darker material"—including a bizarre, voyeuristic rape scene—"with respect," the theatre said, patrons had been "loudly mocking abuse on the screen." There have been similar reports of excess laughter among Broadway audiences at "Cabaret," especially during "If You Could See Her," the ridiculous duet with a gorilla that ends on the thud of an unfunny joke, a dose of antisemitism that is meant to jerk the audience back into the realities of late-Weimar Berlin. In each case, humor is proper to the unease—one cannot have their expectations (of a publicized scandal; of an American suburb; of a German night club) unsettled without first getting too comfortable. But each of these works asks audiences to attune themselves to on-the-dime shifts in atmosphere, to the psychodramas thrumming beneath the rituals of ordinary life. And, in each case, the audience seemed to only see a joke.

Laughter is both the easiest and the hardest thing to critique—easy because it is a conspicuous target, hard because taking issue with humor can put you in league with a bunch of pearl-clutching losers. The person accusing another of not taking something seriously might herself be too serious, missing a point best apprehended through the shoulder-shaking discomfort of an inappropriate laugh. In December, when the C.E.O. of UnitedHealthcare was gunned down in midtown Manhattan, an outpouring of online tomfoolery unfolded alongside the news story itself. Humorless pundits in the media were aghast at the crime in a way that seemed out of touch with the grand joke that is American health care, through the fault of people such as the man shot dead. "Fortunately the bullets were classified as preexisting," a user quipped on Reddit; another declared, "Thoughts and prayers are out of network!" To some observers, the incessant joking was the sort of heartless mirth that social media had been running on for decades. But I have to admit that, for me, the laughs were productive. The death of Brian Thompson and the hilarity that followed placed greater focus on health care than did our last Democratic President, who refused to plainly say whether he would veto Medicare for All if it came across his desk. Rather than holding the thing they referenced at arm's length, these jokes brought ugly truths close.

In a recent lecture on the visual artist Hamishi Farah, the writer Tobi Haslett wondered what role laughter can play when institutions unmask themselves. Farah had been commissioned to create an art work for the Transmediale festival, in Berlin, which then balked at Farah's submission: a tranquil portrait of Joe Chialo, Germany's senator for culture and social cohesion, who has, in lockstep with Western cultural institutions, endeavored to ban criticism of Israel from cultural life. The festival's withdrawal of the painting, presumably out of fear that it was a work of ridicule, was, Haslett wrote, a laughable "irony of ironies" best appreciated in his contemplative, principled read of the situation. Laughter, Haslett went on, remains "a political question, but also an art question, which is to say that it's a matter of everyday life." Laughter does not speak for itself. We must ask after it, and when we do we might find that it has things to say. We ask the universe, as one memesmith did, "DOES ANYONE KNOW IF WE HAVE TO maintain our senses of kindness and empathy despite the world constantly trying to destroy the individual and destroy feelings in impersonal society TOMORROW." We laugh, but the joke's on us until we answer, resoundingly—with thought and action, with politics—*yes.* ♦