

Dramedy: Introductory Post and Call for Submissions

written by Erin Wisti | July 13, 2016



There's a "Treehouse of Horror" *Simpsons* episode in which Bart has an evil twin. Bart and Lisa hear strange noises upstairs one night, and ask Homer whether there's something in the attic. Between bouts uproarious laughter, Homer mumbles, "Attic? Oh, that's silly," and then suddenly turns stern and says, "Seriously, though. *Do not ever go up there.*" I think of this in conjunction with my relationship with my abusive ex, Randall.^[1] Each time I told him our relationship felt abnormal, he would assure me it was all *perfectly normal*, that *nothing* was amiss, that couples *fight*, but we were a healthy, happy couple nonetheless. At the same time, he discouraged me from talking about our issues with others. When we broke up, I made my confessions. The first month was a blur of drunken nights at bars I could not reasonably afford, buying drinks and custom shots for my friends, chugging vodka tonics as my voice grew hoarse from spot on impressions of an irate, screaming Randall, spouting out all his most absurd quotes with theatrical flare. I told them *everything*: the yelling, the cursing, the irrational jealousy, receiving the silent treatment when I turned down sex, the time he threw my laptop from the bed to the couch during an argument while screaming, "Go fuck yourself!" I was blamed for all of it. I made him jealous, I made him angry, and his temper would not change until I did.

The first thing my friends did with this information was make jokes.

Jokes about subjects like abuse are controversial. This is for the best. Sensitive subjects warrant a cautious approach. You do not want to negate the gravity of a situation, or to laugh *at* someone rather than *with* them. Sensitivity is important, of course, but it's also vital we find a way to joke, appropriately, about difficult topics. Laughter can heal; ridicule is among the best means of deflecting someone's power. My friends' jokes were never at my expense. I was never mocked for being abused, and the abuse itself was never treated lightly. It was Randall, and his justifications for abuse, that were laughable. Jokes illuminated the *sheer fucking stupidity* of the abusive mentality. This diminished the strength of Randall's memory. He became a sad little man so pathetic that the only appropriate response was overt mockery. His power wavered under our giggles. Edgy humor works when you

are on the right side. My friends were unquestionably on my side.

Randall once passively aggressively threatened to kill my cat. He was so *good* at being so shitty. He could use words to make me think I was irrational, prone to exaggeration. He once screamed at me, "You're like an emotional vampire!" The next day, I said, "It hurt my feelings that you called me an emotional vampire." He offered no apology. He curled his upper lip in rage and retorted, "I didn't *call you* an emotional vampire. I said you were acting *like one*. *Do not* put words in my mouth." When he threatened Murphy, he did so with the same maneuvering of language and behavior that would later allow him to get out of admitting to the meat of what he had said. Murphy got in a fight with Randall's dog, and Randall screamed, "I might *kill* that cat if he does it again. I don't know if I can control myself!" When I told him the following day how much the statement upset me, he ran out of the room pulling his hair and making guttural noises of outrage that sounded like a dog barking. I followed him into the living room, begging him to talk to me, and he swirled around—his lip curled in his usual dog-like hot wrath—and cried, "I was in fight or flight mode, and *you know it*. You know I can't control myself in fight or flight mode!" When I recounted this story to my friend Carrie, she nearly choked on a beer laughing.

"He got put into fight or flight mode by an *11 pound cat*?" she said.

A few days later, Carrie came over to hang out. Murphy jumped into her lap and kneaded his claws into her chest, and she shrieked, "OH MY GOD! NOOOOO! I'm going into fight or flight mode! Murphy, run! I may kill you if triggered!"

I laughed so hard I cried.

There's a saying that's always acutely annoyed me—"If I didn't laugh, I should cry." What irks me is the idea comedy is some kind of perverse defense mechanism against honest emotions. I reject the idea laughter is not, in and of itself, an honest emotion. Laughter is often seen as nefarious, a means to conceal some latent sentiment. It can be used this way, of course, as illustrated by the aforementioned *Simpsons* episode, but can't crying be used in the same deceptive fashion? Randall used to cry when I told him I wanted to leave. He would cry, say he felt horrible, that he had no control over himself when he got angry, and then beg for another chance. I always gave him one because his remorse seemed so real. It was not. It was all just crocodile tears.

Emotional manipulators often make use of laughter and tears because, when sincere, these sentiments are unadulterated. Crying and laughing are both pure expressions of a singular emotion so strong it cannot be expressed with words. It must come out in a mangled sound. Such uncorrupted noise does not lend itself to easy fabrication.

Comedy can come out of darkness. I do not deny this. Many comedians have had lives ripe with hardship, or are dark thinkers by nature. This does not mean their laughter is defensive. Laughter and tears are expressions of internal intensity, and those who are intensely emotional are prone to frequent bouts

of both. People don't laugh so they will not cry. They laugh because they cry, and cry because they laugh. Laughter in response to tears is natural, and I want to hear your stories of the moments in which the boundary between absurdity and sorrow, between the comical and the tragic, was blurred to the point of invisibility.

Send me your dramadies. Send me your stories filled with levity but centered around a decidedly serious theme. Tell me how humor has helped you heal. Tell me about the inappropriate moment when you laughed at a funeral, or the joke your dad made about gaining supernatural powers from the radiation during his cancer treatment.^[2] Bring me the stuff of an episode of an episode of *Louie*, works in the spirit of David Sedaris writing about his mother's death. Show me the levity you find in the tears, the moments you laughed until you cried, or cried until you laughed, or laughed and cried in the same breath.

Please email submissions to wistierin@gmail.com. This series is ongoing, so there is no strict deadline for submissions.

^[1] Name changed to protect the very, very guilty

^[2] My father actually made these jokes when he had cancer. He invented a superhero persona known as "the mantis" who had "all the awesome power of a praying mantis!"