

IT'S NO LAUGHING MATTER

Gordon Blitz

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Dedication

My husband

Neal Wiener

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PROLOGUE:

As Wade took the elevator to the sixty-ninth floor, his nervousness kept building as he passed each floor. And listening to the elevator music of “Laughter in the Rain” by Sedaka and “Laughing” by The Guess Who only added to his anxiety. This second interview as a tax consultant should have tamped down his stress after being told by one of the CPA partners, “Wade, we’ve whittled down our selection, and you’ve made the cut.” His grades were impeccable, and he nailed his CPA exam on the first try. Wade skipped a grade in high school and fast-tracked his college years from four to three. The 150-hour requirement for CPA licensure was accomplished by mentoring at Whitney/Ruby in the summer, the same firm he was applying to today as a Tax Accountant. But now his underarms were sweating, and he worried it would seep through his jacket. The record heat and humidity were trying to sabotage his potential job. This was Los Angeles, not the East Coast where humidity was the norm. And who could have

imagined a skyscraper in downtown Los Angeles? Weren't they afraid of earthquakes?

Then Wade got distracted by his new Florsheim lace-up shoes, not broken in yet. That classic look caused classic pain!

Oh god, why were there mirrors here? It was disconcerting having his image staring back at him. He could never understand narcissism; being so much in love with *yourself*. All he saw were his flaws. Ears that looked like they belonged on an elephant, for example. When he had asked to have them pinned back, his father had said, "They only do that for children five and six years old. You inherited this from your mother's family. Just grow your hair long. No one will notice them."

Damn, this elevator was slow. And to add to the turtle pace, the lights for *every* floor of the building were lit. The elevator doors would open, wait for a minute, and then close. No new passengers. Wade hoped he would make his nine o'clock appointment on time.

Wade had an elevator companion, and he was jealous of him. The young man wore a one-piece white garment that came down to his knees, a large belt and Greek sandals. It would no doubt make him feel cool, but it was an odd combination, like a costume for Halloween or something worn by an extra in a movie. Wade was baffled. *Why was the man smiling?* He had pushed the button for the next floor after Wade's, obviously not his competition. He looked younger than Wade.

At least he was not showing off muscles in his arms and legs. Just an average build. But those damn teeth and the way his smile filled his face added to Wade's anxiety. As though that one feature made the man a winner. *Must be an airhead!*

Wade on the other hand could not smile even if he wanted to. That inability could be the downfall of his job. But he rationalized that a tax consultant did not need a sense of humor, let alone be able to laugh. The kind of *gravitas* Wade would bring to his job should be more than enough. Really, was there any advantage in having a sense of humor? Wade felt that humor was used to disguise pain and unhappiness. A sort of coping mechanism or some stupid way to diffuse a volatile situation.

In school, Wade had witnessed students getting harassed and trying to make jokes. Thank god, he had never gotten bullied. One of the few blessings of his childhood. Being brainy had brought him riches. He had started tutoring in high school. And he never just solved algebra problems or deciphered themes in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Wade actually taught classmates to think for themselves. He gave them the skills to conquer biology and chemistry. And no one ever complained, "Oh, Wade is no fun. Takes everything so seriously."

Oh, god! Wade felt a bead of sweat dribbling from his forehead. With no handkerchief or tissue, where was that droplet going to land?

What were the chances that his companion could help? Wade still asked, “Hey, do you happen to have a tissue?”

Amazingly, the man opened his shoulder bag and gave Wade a small packet of tissues.

“I always carry these around for emergencies.”

“Thanks.”

“I have a whole array of items I keep in this bag. Mints and chewing gum. You should try one. Leftover habit from when I smoked. I quit six months ago. People were always complaining about that smoky smell. Now they come in handy for bad breath. And I also have this spray and cloth to clean my glasses.”

An implication that Wade might have sour breath forced him to ask, “Can I have one of your mints?”

“Sure thing.”

Wade pondered whether his own glasses were smudged. After receiving one of the curiously strong mints, Wade worried about sharing a space with a smoker, even an ex-smoker! *Ugh!* Well, this boy had saved the day. Wade quickly wiped the sweat from his nose. Disaster averted. That perspiration could have ruined his tie and his starched white shirt. And he had oily skin. Thank goodness he had used Gentle Breeze Soap this morning on his face. Without that treatment, calamity surely would have occurred.

Only recently had Wade experienced the multiple benefits of soap. First, it brought back memories of his parents; Gentle Breeze had been the go-to soap for all the Beekman household. And, at first, when he had seen commercials for soap and how it was part of Aroma Therapy, he thought it was utter hogwash! But the last time he had purchased bars of Gentle Breeze, he saw a bubble bath version. On a whim, he bought a bottle, and last night, he had prepared a bubble bath for himself. Talk about relaxation! Such a luxury! Unlike showering or washing with a bar of soap, the bubble bath not only instantly calmed him, but he felt like he was being transported to another time and place. He could even imagine meeting the most famous mathematicians of all time—Carl Friedrich Gauss, Issac Newton and Pythagoras. What a thrill it would be to be able to question those geniuses!

And after the bath, he was reminded of the kind of soap bubbles he would blow as a child. It was the closest he allowed himself to experience joy. An odd good luck charm that he hoped would work. But now those lingering effects were dissipating. D-Day was fast approaching!

“Well, thank you again. And I’d actually like to clean my glasses. Can I use that cloth and spray you mentioned?”

The boy quickly gave Wade the items, and then Wade asked, “Aren’t you concerned about this elevator stopping on every floor?”

The boy answered, “Doesn’t bother me, I’m super early for my appointment.”

Why was the boy laughing? What was so funny? Wade seemed to have made an art out of having a persecution complex.

“I’m sorry. It’s funny how many things I’ve given you. What would you have done if I had not been on this elevator? The way you’re looking at me, you were probably wondering why I was laughing. And I was just thinking of something funny about being in this elevator. I’m a philosophy major, so I’m always trying to make coherent sense out of a whole.”

Whoa! Was Wade in the presence of a philosopher? A like-minded brain awash in seriousness like himself? So the outfit made sense if he wanted to look like a Greek philosopher. *But why?*

“I have to stop you there. Can you please explain the reason that you’re dressed this way?”

“Oh, you mean this get up? It’s part of my final exam; to not only think like a philosopher but to actually look like one. A debate is being held in this building on my floor.”

Wade responded, “I guess that’s a logical explanation. Okay, continue about the meaning of being in this elevator.”

“So, I realized that when the elevator door first opens, in a way we are actually taking a leap when we enter, leaving the old

reality behind when the door closes. And when we press the button, we activate energy to take us to our desired level. When this machinery moves, we cannot influence the outcome. It forces us to let go. Then suddenly we get to our floor, the door opens, and we are at a different level, a different reality.”

Wade was confused. “You make it sound like we’re in some sort of time machine.”

“Exactly. The whole thing seems humorous to me. Like here we are, two strangers, taking this trip together. Like a road trip movie.”

Wade was lost and annoyed. It seemed that this kid ended his sentence with a chuckle. *What was the boy talking about?* And even if Wade understood or could appreciate humor; to find it in the elevator was beyond comprehension. At least the boy’s laughter had none of the obnoxiousness of the artificial laugh that Tom Hulce created when he portrayed Mozart in the film, *Amadeus*. Another example of how grating and useless laughter could be.

Then the supposed philosophy student said, “What do you think of these mirrors? They’re supposed to reduce anxiety plus give a sense of space making it less cramped. It’s meant to avoid feelings of being trapped. Have you heard of the *mirror rule*?”

“No, but I’m sure you’re going to tell me.”

CHAPTER 1

Wade's Family-past

“Stop laughing!” This command by Vincent became the law of the Beekman household after Wade’s eighth birthday. Wade could swear his father’s nose always pointed upward like an authoritarian who perceives themselves as a know-it-all; the poster child for sternness! Wade’s older sister, Brenda, called their father, “*Father Vincent*.” Although the Beekmans were Jewish, Brenda branded him as a mean-spirited priest, appropriately named Father Vincent. It had a nice ring to it. Never to his face, of course, and always with a giggle under her breath. He was deaf in one ear and never heard Brenda’s mockery. Wade had no idea that this was an unusual name for a Jewish man. According to Brenda, their father had been named after the American Jewish poet, Stephen Vincent Benet. When Vincent was born in

1929, Benet was more popular than Robert Frost or T.S. Elliot. Benet's long narrative poem, *John Brown's Body*, had just been published. Vincent's father was an English professor of poetry and insisted that his son be named after the Pulitzer Prize-winning poet.

So, what to make of this new rule. How could Wade suppress his laughter? In school, Wade was a master joke-teller. His classic Knock-Knocks had friends laughing. *Knock, knock! Who's there? Ice cream. Ice cream who? Ice cream when I get scared, don't you?* If he ran out of steam, he jumped to questions like, *Why didn't the dinosaur eat the baby? The dinosaur didn't eat the baby because dinosaurs became extinct before humans existed!* At eight he was on the road to being a stand-up comic; living a double life. Humorless at home, jokester on the outside. But that double life ended when Wade became paranoid that his father would have spies checking up on him. Never seeing his mother or father laugh intuitively led him to believe that it was wrong to show that emotion. Brenda and Wade lived in fear of breaking their vow in the confines of their bungalow home. When the family happened to watch a sitcom, mother and father looked stone-faced. Were they testing the children to see if they could hold back laughter?

Things came to a head when they were watching the sitcom, *The Mary Tyler Moore Show*. The episode was "*Chuckles Bites the Dust*." In the show, Chuckles the Clown is dressed up as the character Peter

Peanut for a circus parade. During the parade, a rogue elephant sees Chuckles dressed as a peanut and tries to shell him. Chuckles ends up dying. In the newsroom, the crew is laughing because of the absurdity of the death. Mary is offended and tells them off. "How can you laugh when someone dies?"

At this point in the show, Vincent said, "See, this is what is wrong with the world. Laughter should be outlawed. It serves no purpose."

Later, at the funeral scene, however, as people are delivering eulogies, Mary starts to laugh. At first, she tries to hold it in, but it keeps growing and growing until she changes the somber mood of the funeral.

Wade and Brenda were engulfed in laughter. This was beyond funny. Their laughter morphed to tears, and then back to giggling. Wade fell on the floor and rolled toward the television set as if he thought getting closer to the screen would immerse him further into the comic vibrations. While Wade rolled, his chin hit the television stand. What was that icky stuff? Brenda shouted through her cascading tears, "Wade is hurt! He's bleeding!"

Vincent rose from the couch and with one scoop lifted Wade off the floor and threw him into his chair. Wade held back tears as he cradled his chin. Instead of Vincent checking Wade's injury, he clicked off the television. He stared at Brenda and Wade and shouted, "Never