

THE JOKE'S ON ME

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Tim rolls over like a sack of potatoes. No snuggling after sex. No whispered sweet nothings. A solid helping of slam, bam, thank you, ma'am. Minus the thank you and heavy on the snoring.

Wide awake in my lingering resentment, I stare at the ceiling wondering for the hundredth time why I love this man. Was it his Midwestern innocence? That corn-fed, gee-whiz earnestness? His cookie-cutter desire to start a family? Maybe. But if I'm being honest—and at 3:12 a.m. post-coital clarity, I'm painfully honest. It's because I'm 31 and eleven-twelfths old with a biological clock ticking as loudly as rain on a tin roof. And the message is clear: Impregnate me and I'll drop my misgivings.

I hate the thought. It's not romantic, it's logical. He'll do. Tim is husband-material in the way particle board is building material: serviceable, uninspiring, likely to warp in time.

His snoring gets louder. I shift to thoughts that don't involve smothering him with a pillow. No jail time for me.

I love owning my comedy club. I mean with a passion that I'll never extend to a man. Tucked in the heart of our sleepy Oregon town like a neon middle finger to boredom, it's the only nightlife that doesn't involve bingo or Karaoke. It's my dream. My chaotic, always-on-the-verge-of-financial-collapse baby.

Waking up with the sort of exhaustion that makes your bones scream, "nope," I try to sit up. And what's the first thought that stumbles into my foggy brain? Tim begging me again to let him do a stand-up set Friday night. FRIDAY. The most lucrative night of the week. My club is sacred. And Tim, with the comedic timing of a dial-up modem, wants to headline.

He sucks. Not in a cute, he-just-needs-practice way. No. He's terrible like lukewarm coffee or family texts that include your ex's new wife. He read somewhere that Jewish and Black comedians dominate the industry, and now, this mayonnaise on white bread man from Indiana thinks he can pull off a "Seinfeld meets Chris Rock" routine. The only Black person in a hundred

miles is a throwback lawn jockey in a rich guy's yard. And the Jewish population of our town is precisely zero.

Spoiler: he can't even tell a one-line joke.

But did I say no? Of course not. Because I don't want to be an aging spinster. I fear being seventy, surrounded by gal pals, swapping horror stories about our aging bodies like grocery store coupons. And the organ recital. "I've got a double bypass!" "Oooh, I'll trade you for two herniated discs and an endoscopy!" I'm terrified of that future. I want children. I want to be a neurotic, overbearing mother who forgets her own name but remembers every detail of her kid's preschool snack preferences. I want to hover like a helicopter parent. I want to raise the kind of adults who never leave home but insist they're "just between jobs."

So yes, I let him do his set. And I'll sit in the back, trying to smile. Because despite it all, despite his off-brand comedy, his snoring, his lack of post-sex affection—I'm playing the long game. Love? No. White picket fence. Yes.

Besides, somebody's gotta parent my future codependent offspring. Might as well be Tim.

Tim takes the stage to a full house. The room is buzzing from the band that just finished. The crowd is in beer-fueled euphoria, bodies swaying, a few people trying to remember where they left their shoes.

And then... Tim.

He steps into the spotlight wearing a tragic collision of cultural appropriation: a mop of synthetic dreadlocks, topped off with a crooked yarmulka.

I'm in the back already calculating how many refunds I can issue before my Venmo account breaks up with me.

"Helloooo sports fans!" he booms in a style that suggests he's headlining at Madison Square Garden. "Bet y'all haven't heard this one. I tried to join a Jewish dating site, but my profile got flagged for excessive guilt!"

Crickets. One guy coughs. Several check their phones, others eye the exit.

Of course, Tim doesn't notice. He grins like a baby taking his first step. And then, like a kamikaze pilot he dives in deeper, speaking vanilla Ebonics.

“Yo! Then I fahgured, hey—ahf I dated a ebony wogeezer, fer shure, mah rhythm would ahmprove.”

A shudder passes through the crowd. A woman near the front quietly zips up her purse getting ready to hightail it. A group at table 6 stands and exits like mourners leaving a wake.

My bar tab profits go up in smoke. That was three Johnny Walkers and two baskets of garlic fries. Gone.

Tim? Oblivious. In his head, he’s killing it. He pivots, thinking a classic Jewish joke will save him. (It won’t.)

“This Jewish kid gets cast in his Hebrew school play,” he says, throwing in a weird Yiddish accent for some reason. “And he runs home saying, ‘Dad, I got the lead role! I play the father!’ And his dad goes, ‘Why didn’t you get a speaking part?’”

Dead silence.

You could hear a pin drop. The only sound is my heart going into A-fib.

No laughter. Not even pity chuckles. People want to heckle, but this is a small Oregon town—too polite to boo, not drunk enough to throw fruit. They sit in stunned silence like someone farted during a eulogy.

Pete the bouncer meets my eyes and slowly, dramatically, drags his middle finger across his neck.

Tim bounds offstage like he just wrapped up a Netflix special. He high-fives the confused bartender, finger-guns the sound guy.

“Well?” he asks, eyes sparkling with delusion. “They loved me. They were speechless!”

I blink. “Yes, Tim. They were definitely... without speech.”

“I mean, wow. That rhythm joke? Nailed it. And the Hebrew school one? Classic!”

“Mm,” I reply, sipping my drink like it might erase the last 15 minutes from my memory. “It was certainly... something.”

“I felt like I was channeling Lenny Bruce or Moms Mably. Like I was finally connecting with the crowd on a deeper level.”

“Definitely deep,” I say. “Like six feet deep.”

He refuses to hear me.

“I think I might’ve found my voice tonight.”

“No, Tim. What you found was the bottom of the barrel with no pickle.”

He brushes it off, riding his ego train. “Did you see the couple at table 9? They loved me.”

“They were playing Wordle, Tim.”

“Well, I think I need to tighten up the timing a bit,” he says, pacing like he’s preparing for a TED Talk titled *How to Alienate an Audience in Under Five Minutes*.

“But the content’s strong. Real strong.”

“Yep. One can enjoy it like a romantic dinner at a greasy spoon.”

That one lands. He frowns. “You’re just jealous.”

“I’m definitely jealous,” I deadpan. “In the same way I’m jealous of people who get Long Covid.”

He laughs, slaps my shoulder like I’m just kidding, and says, “You’ll see. They just weren’t ready for my big city shtick, or should I say, Yo, I is da greatest.”

A couple of regulars walk by and pat me on the shoulder. One says, “We still love the atmosphere,” and the other whispers, “You should charge double when he’s on stage. Call it a suffering surcharge.”

Tim doesn’t notice. He’s already pulling out his phone, recording a selfie video for his nonexistent fanbase.

“Hey fans! Tim here. Just wrapped up a killer set at *The Laugh Barn*. Oregon’s hottest comedy club. I was on fire. A big hit! Stay tuned for the next gig. Big things coming!”

I whisper to the bartender, “Cut him off. Not the booze—the mic. Forever.”

The bartender nods.

Tim turns to me. I killed it baby. “So... can I do next Friday too? I’ve got a whole new bit on Bar Mitzvahs and Juneteenth.”

I stare at him for a full five seconds.

“Sure, Tim.”

I barely made it through the next week. And forget the sex—his one-and-done turned into shrimp and limp. The only thing rising was my blood pressure. Tim kept rehearsing his routine like he was auditioning for the Ghost of Stand-Up Past. In front of the mirror. In the shower. At one point, the water shut off mid-routine, like even the plumbing had enough of his act. I'm not saying the faucet had taste, but... just a wee exaggeration.

Still, I had a plan.

While Tim was backstage, nervously fluffing that inflated ego, I activated Operation Laugh track. I bribed all the regulars at the club to blow up Tim's phone after the show with fake requests for "Middle America" jokes—like he was the Rust Belt's favorite insult comic. I offered them free drinks and comped admission next Friday. People are cheap until you mention free. Then they become patriots for comedy.

Tim strutted onto the stage like he was headlining the Ghetto Oscars. He sported a cane, fastened a fake gold front tooth in his mouth the size of a Chiclet, and wore a giant plastic gold chain. Pimp Central for a loser who had no stable of girls. Draped across his shoulders? A tallit. A prayer shawl. Where he got it, I had no idea. But there was an Amazon package Wednesday that he treated like a state secret. I figured it was socks.

Then came the opener.

"Nothing says Juneteenth like corporations celebrating freedom with 15% off shackles and watermelon ice cream."

There was a beat. And then... nothing. Not even a groan. Just the sound of whiskey swirling and ice cubes judging him. Until a drunk voice from the back piped up, "What is a Juneteenth?" which made it worse.

And still, Tim forged ahead.

"I had my Bar Mitzvah at 14." (Wrong. It's 13) "It was so bad, even the Torah portion skipped me!"

That's when some guy in the back yelled, "You're a putz?"

Tim lit up. Broad grin. He misheard it through the buzz of the crowd and slurred voices. Thought the guy called him *Tuts*. As in *King Tut*.

He bowed, spread his arms like Moses parting the Red Sea, and said, "See? Finally, some respect."

I sank deeper into my barstool. If humiliation were a sport, Tim just qualified for nationals.

Then it turned. Don't ask me how. I'm not a theologian, a therapist, or a pharmaceutical rep. All I know is that the laws of the universe hiccupped in my favor.

And let's be clear. I'd given up on miracles long ago. My faith died the day I prayed to Jesus for a puppy and my parents got me a gecko. A gecko. What does a kid do with a glorified paperweight that blinks twice an hour and lives in a terrarium filled with sand?

But a miracle did occur that week. I don't mean the subtle kind—like finding parking downtown—I mean the full holy trinity package. Praise Jesus, Mary, and Joseph. Hell, throw in Moses and Madonna while you're at it. Yes, the singer.

It started when Tim spent an entire Sunday rereading those texts I had people send. He paced like a man possessed—muttering about “regional relatability” and “performative inclusivity.”

Then, Monday morning, he waltzed into the kitchen wearing nothing but boxers and a serious look of self-importance.

“Hey babe,” he said, holding his phone like the Dead Sea Scrolls. “I'm the picture of diversity. After the wild success of my people-of-color material and my Jewish mishigas, my fans are demanding jokes about the last untouched tribe of America: the WASP.”

Then he squinted. “By the way, what does mishigas mean? I heard it in a Woody Allen movie.”

I didn't even blink. “Google it like everyone else,” I snapped. “It's 2025. We don't ask questions. We scroll.”

But here's where things got spooky. From that night on... the sex changed.

No, not changed. Transcended. I'm talking multiple, choir-of-angels, tear-down-the-curtains orgasms. Not once. Not twice. Nightly. Three rounds. And afterward? The man snuggled. Willingly. No elbow jab required. No “I have a headache.” No “The dog's watching.”

And the miracles didn't stop there. He stopped snoring. His skin cleared up. He started folding towels correctly. I checked under the bed for bots or demons. I even called our parish priest to casually ask if demonic possession can work in reverse.

But no, nothing sinister. Just cosmic alignment.

Maybe the Old Testament God exhaled in relief that Tim stopped offending Jewish culture. Or maybe Tim had internalized Black sexuality so fully that he unlocked a secret frequency of pelvic motion.

I'm not lying when I say: his penis not only functioned—it grew an inch.

Science can't explain it. Medicine won't touch it. But it happened.

For two weeks, Tim disappeared into himself. Not in that zoned-out, sleep-through-life way he used to, but with purpose. He rewrote his act from scratch. No more cringey Jewish tropes or awkward Black impressions in thrift store costumes. Simply good ol' Indiana corn-fed humor. Jokes about casseroles at church potlucks, tractors that won't start, and uncles who think mayonnaise is a spice. The kind of homespun comedy that would've made Bob Hope tip his hat and say, "*Now that's wholesome.*" Stories Johnny Carson would have been proud of. Clean, no cursing, uplifting humor.

And damned if it didn't work.

He stood straighter. His voice lost that frantic edge. He had timing. Warmth. And when he looked at me after a set, there was something awake behind his eyes. For once, it felt like we were on the same planet. Not him drifting in apathy and me on Xanax.

And he even got aware. One night he cornered me to confess. "Hey, babe. I wasn't that good doing other people's material. I must thank you for sticking by me when others would have walked."

And me? I was spiraling.

You'd think I'd be thrilled, right? Tim 2.0 — thoughtful, sexy, mentally present. A man reborn. But no. I started to panic.

See, I had it all planned out. A neat little life with lowered expectations: marry the flaxen-haired scarecrow, pop out a baby before my ovaries turned to folklore, and split parenting duties like a chore chart. I wasn't aiming for fireworks. Just stability. Predictability. Me a baby incubator with him a sperm donor.

But now here comes Tim, this funny, insightful, pillow-snuggling anomaly. And I'm left wondering if I'm the one who doesn't measure up. For

the first time a fear surfaced that he might leave me. Now that he has real fans, he's going to want a younger, prettier woman. Will he leave me behind like a piece of gum picked from the sole of his shoe?

Could I really hold a relationship with this newer, shinier version of him? One with layers, ambitions, and opinions I hadn't heard before because he used to mumble through life like an extra on a movie set!

He touched something soft in me, and it scared the hell out of me.

Because just maybe... I'd convinced myself I wasn't worthy of anything more than a lukewarm love and a shared mortgage.

And now that the real thing might be sitting across from me, sexy, alert, and reading actual books. I was left asking the scariest question of all:

Did I even know how to accept something real?

Go figure.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Weiner has over 40 years' experience as a clinical psychologist who specializes in trauma recovery and anxiety disorders. He enjoys using stories to help readers harness their resilience to aid them on their healing journey. He has been published in a variety of professional journals and literary fiction in over fifty magazines. His psychology books include *Shattered Innocence* and *the Curio Shop*. Non-psychology publications are *Across the Borderline* and *The Art of Fine Whining*. He has a monthly advice column in a Portland Newspaper, AskDr.Neil. nweiner@usa.net