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COLORADO

Set-up

We walk into the Squire Lounge just as the Denver watering hole is gearing up for its weekly open-mike comedy night. Looking around, Pete grins. "This is fantastic!" he yells over the ruckus, sounding like a field biologist who's just discovered a strange new animal species. The mirrored walls display awards for "Best Dive Bar in Denver," the stench of industrial cleaner hangs in the air, and the sound of clanging beer bottles blends into the police sirens wailing through the night outside. The clientele sports tattoos and ironic mustaches, lumberjack shirts, and plastic-rimmed glasses.

Pete is wearing a sweater vest.

The professor sticks out here like a six-foot-five, 40-year-old sore thumb. He's also calm for someone who's about to do stand-up for the first time. Or for someone who's been warned that this open mike is the toughest one around. As a local comic put it to me, "If you fail at the Squire, you will not only fail hard, but then you will be cruelly, cruelly mocked."

Rolling up the sleeves of his button-down shirt, Pete orders us a couple whiskeys on the rocks. "This is a welcoming crowd," he cracks sarcastically.

I'm soon ordering another round. I don't know why I'm the more nervous of the two of us. I have little at stake in Pete's stand-up routine. We've only known each other for a few weeks, but I'd like him to succeed. I fear that's not likely to happen.

Pete's already working the room. He zeroes in on a woman by the pool table. She turns out to be another open-mike first-timer. "Did you think about your outfit tonight?" he asks. "I put this on so I look like a professor."

He glances around the room. The neon Budweiser signs on the walls cast a bluish, sickly hue on the grizzled faces lined up at the bar.

Turning back to the woman, Pete offers an unsolicited piece of advice: "No joking about Marxism or the military-industrial complex."

I'd stumbled upon Pete after having written an article about gangland shootings and fire bombings for *Westword*, the alternative weekly newspaper in Denver. I was eager for a palate cleanser. I hoped that it wouldn't involve cultivating anonymous sources or filing federal open-records requests. Yes, such efforts have brought down presidents, but I'm no 31-year-old Woodward or Bernstein. I'd rather find another story like the profile I wrote of a McDonald's franchise owner who used his arsenal of fast-food inventions to break the world record for drive-thru Quarter Pounders served in an hour. Or the coffee connoisseur I'd followed to Ethiopia in search of the shadowy origins of the world's most expensive coffee bean. (The expedition broke down several dozen miles short of its goal thanks to caffeine-fueled bickering, impassable muddy roads, and reports of man-eating lions.)

When I heard about a Boulder professor who was dissecting comedy's DNA, I'd found my story.

It's true, Pete told me when I first got him on the phone. He'd started something he called the Humor Research Lab—also known as HuRL. His research assistants (the Humor Research Team, aka HuRT) were just about to run a new round of experiments. Maybe I'd like to come by and watch.

A week later, sitting in a large, white conference room at the University of Colorado's Leeds School of Business, I witnessed Pete's peculiar approach to humor research. Four student volunteers filed into the room, signed off on the appropriate consent forms, and then sat and watched as a somber-faced research assistant dimmed the lights

and played a clip from the hit comedy *Hot Tub Time Machine*. After ten minutes of scatological gags and off-color sex jokes, the students filled out a questionnaire about the film. Did they find the scene in which the BMW keys were removed from a dog's butt funny? What about the line "A taxidermist is stuffing my mom"? Or the part where a character breaks his catheter and sprays urine on everybody?

The experiment, Pete explained to me, was the latest chapter in HuRL's attempts to understand what makes things funny. Other tests included forcing subjects to watch on repeat a YouTube video of a guy driving a motorcycle into a fence, to determine when, exactly, it ceases to be amusing. Another exposed participants to a real-life ad of an anthropomorphized lime peeing into a glass of soda, then had them drink lime cola to see if they thought it tasted like pee.

For someone like Pete, there was nothing unusual about this research. Over the course of his relatively short career, he's haggled with casket manufacturers at a funeral directors' convention, talked shop with soldiers of fortune at a gun show, and sung hymns at a Fundamental Baptist church in West Texas, all for the sake of science.

His experiments aren't limited to his day job. The professor has a tendency to live his research, no matter the disastrous results. While he was working toward his PhD in quantitative psychology at Ohio State University, a mentor invited him to Thanksgiving dinner. Pete offered to pay for his meal just to see the reaction to the obvious faux pas.

Pete puts himself and others in uncomfortable situations to make sense of human behavior—or figure out why so much of it doesn't make sense. There have to be logical rules behind humanity's illogical decisions, he figures. He just has to find them. "It's a way to keep control in an uncertain world," Pete told me the first time we met. Growing up in a working-class town in southern New Jersey, he sometimes faced the harsh realities of that uncertain world. Yes, there was always food on the table for him and his younger sister, Shannon, but his single mother had to work two or three jobs and sometimes rely on food stamps to do it. Yes, his mom took care of them, but her headstrong and forceful manner didn't always make her household a fun place to be. And, yes, he sported high-tops and Ocean Pacific T-shirts like the other boys in high school, but by age fourteen, he

was working as a stock boy at the local Woolworth's to pay for it all himself. Maybe that's why ever since, he's always been determined to keep everything tidy and under control.

I could identify with Pete's compulsive tendencies, maybe more than I liked to admit. In an industry populated by ink-stained shlubs and paper-cluttered offices, I come off as a tad neurotic. To streamline my reporting process, I've assembled a small, über-geeky arsenal of digital cameras, foldaway keyboards, and electronic audio-recording pens. In the Denver home I share with my wife, Emily McNeil, and young son, Gabriel, every bookshelf is arranged alphabetically by author and segregated into fiction and nonfiction. (I'd say this drives Emily up the walls, but she's my perfect match: as orderly and organized as they come.) In my world, unhappiness is a sink full of dirty dishes.

Pete offered me an all-access tour of his scholarly world. He explained to me that a chunk of his research could be classified as behavioral economics, the growing field of psychologists and economists who are hard at work proving that people don't make rational financial decisions, as classical economists have long suggested. Instead, they've discovered, we do all sorts of odd stuff with our money. While completing his post-doctoral training at Princeton, Pete shared an office with Daniel Kahneman, the Nobel Prize-winning psychology professor who helped establish the field. Kahneman's office would never again be so organized.

But Pete's interests extend well beyond behavioral economics. He's not just interested in why people act strangely with their money. He wants to know why they act strangely all the time. A few years ago, he became fascinated by what could be the most peculiar human phenomenon of all.

While giving a talk at Tulane University about how people are disgusted when churches and pharmaceutical companies use marketing in morally dubious ways, Pete mentioned a story about a church that was giving away a Hummer H2 to a lucky member of its congregation. The crowd cracked up. And then one of the audience members raised her hand with a question. "You say that moral violations cause disgust, yet we are all laughing. Why is that?"

Pete was stumped. "I'd never thought about it," he told me. He decided to figure it out.

It doesn't take long for the Squire to fill up with patrons ready to cheer—or jeer—the comics tonight. Folks are soon packed in so tightly that the communal body heat overwhelms the slowly rotating fans overhead.

"Welcome to the Squire," cracks the night's MC, grinning into the microphone from the bar's cramped corner stage. "It's the only place with an indoor outhouse." He follows the bit up with a joke about accidentally smoking crack. The room roars, and he turns his attention to three innocent-looking audience members who've unwisely chosen to sit at the table closest to the stage. Soon he's detailing the horrendous sexual maneuvers the wide-eyed threesome must perform on one another. The three, it turns out, are friends of Pete's who thought it would be nice to cheer him on.

As the MC introduces the first of the night's amateurs, Pete slips to the back of the room to look over his note cards. "I'm worried my routine may be a little benign," he admits to me, as the comic on stage fires off a bit about slavery and watermelons.

I pat him reassuringly on the back, but secretly I'm glad that I'm not the one getting on stage. I'm far from spineless, but anything I've done that would be considered gutsy has been under the guise of reporting. I've always been content being the guy in the corner taking notes, the one asking the tough questions, and not the one who answers them. When one of the comedians hears there's a *Westword* reporter in the house, he can't help but make a joke about the paper's numerous medical marijuana dispensary ads. "It should just be a bunch of rolling papers," he ad-libs as the crowd laughs at my expense. I try, and fail, to turn myself invisible.

Other aspiring comics take their turn at the mike, trotting out one offensive subject after another: masturbation, misogyny, Jim Crow laws, drug overdoses.

It's Pete's turn. "This next guy isn't a comedian," says the MC, "but a moderately funny professor from the University of Colorado. Give it up for Dr. Peter McGraw!"

Pete bounds onto the stage and grabs the microphone from the stand—promptly disconnecting it from its cord. The audience goes silent as the professor fumbles with the device.

Comedy 1, science 0.

Pete is far from the first scholar to dive into the wild world of humor. There's an entire academic association dedicated to the subject: the International Society for Humor Studies. Launched in 1989 as an outgrowth of an earlier organization, the World Humor and Irony Membership, or WHIM, the ISHS now includes academics from disciplines ranging from philosophy to medicine to linguistics, a group that has little in common other than a shared fascination with humor and a tendency to be snubbed by colleagues in their own fields for their offbeat scholarly interests.¹

Altogether they're a productive lot, organizing an annual international conference covering topics like "The Messianic Tendency in Contemporary Stand-Up Comedy" and "Did Hitler Have a Sense of Humor?"; founding *HUMOR: The International Journal of Humor Research*, a quarterly publication chock-full of fascinating reads like "The Great American Lawyer Joke Explosion" and "Fartspottings: Reflections on 'High Seriousness' and Poetic Passings of Wind"; and compiling the soon-to-be-released *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, a 1,000-page behemoth covering the whole of humor research from absurdist humor to xiehouyu (a humorous Chinese figure of speech).

What's fascinating about the ISHS, though, is that its members can't seem to agree on a single theory of what makes things funny.²

It's not as if the experts don't have enough humor theories to choose from. Over the centuries, efforts have been made to explain why we laugh at some things and not at others. The problem, however, is that the world has yet to agree on the right answer. Plato and Aristotle introduced the superiority theory, the idea that people laugh at the misfortune of others. But while their premise seems to explain teasing and slapstick, it doesn't work for a simple knock-knock joke.

Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, had a different view. In his 1905 work, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, he argued

that humor was a way for people to release psychic energy pent up from repressed sexual and violent thoughts. His so-called relief theory works for dirty jokes—it's one of the few cases in polite society in which folks are at liberty to talk about their naughty bits. The theory also apparently works for Freud's own witticisms. In 1984, enterprising humor scholar Elliot Oring set about psychoanalyzing the 200 or so jests, riddles, and pithy anecdotes in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*. He concluded that the famously private psychotherapist had hang-ups around money lending, sex, marriage, personal hygiene, and, last but not least, Freud's self-described "instructress in sexual matters," his randy old Czech nanny.³

Score one for relief theory. Still, it's hard to fit a lot of things people find funny, like puns and tickling, into Freud's model. It doesn't help that the rest of Freud's theory of the unconscious has been abandoned by research psychologists.

Most experts today subscribe to some variation of the incongruity theory, the idea that humor arises when people discover there's an inconsistency between what they expect to happen and what actually happens. Or, as seventeenth-century French philosopher Blaise Pascal put it when he first came up with the concept, "Nothing produces laughter more than a surprising disproportion between that which one expects and that which one sees."⁴ Incongruity has a lot going for it—jokes with punch lines, for example, fit this model well. But even the incongruity theory falls short when it comes to tickling or play fighting. And scientists have found that in comedy, unexpectedness is overrated. In 1974, two University of Tennessee professors had 44 undergraduates listen to a variety of Bill Cosby and Phyllis Diller routines. Before each punch line, the researchers stopped the tape and asked the students to predict what came next. Then another group of students was asked to rate the funniness of each of the comedians' jokes. Comparing the results, the professors found that the predictable punch lines were rated considerably funnier than those that were unexpected. The level of incongruity of each punch line was *inversely* related to the funniness of the joke.⁵

There's another dilemma with all these theories. While they all have their strengths, they also share a major malfunction: they short-circuit

when it comes to explaining why some things are not funny. Accidentally killing your mother-in-law would be incongruous, assert superiority, and release pent-up aggressive tensions, but it's hardly a gut-buster.⁶

It might seem that there's no way to cover the wide world of comedy with a single, tidy explanation. But for someone like Pete, a guy who yearns for order, that wouldn't do. "People say humor is such a complex phenomenon, you can't possibly have one theory that explains it," he told me. "But no one talks that way about other emotional experiences. Most scientists agree on a simple set of principles that explain when most emotions arise." It's generally accepted that anger occurs when something bad happens to you and you blame someone else for it, while guilt occurs when something bad happens to someone else and you blame yourself.

It has to be the same for humor, Pete figured. There has to be a simple explanation that the authorities have long overlooked. He thinks he found it by doing a Google search for "humor theory."

One of the first results led to "A Theory of Humor," an article published in a 1998 issue of *HUMOR: The International Journal of Humor Research*, written by a man named Thomas Veatch.⁷ Veatch posited what he called the "N+V Theory," the idea that humor occurs when someone perceives a situation is a violation of a "subjective moral principle" (V) while simultaneously realizing that the situation is normal (N). To prove that his idea worked, Veatch, who had a PhD in linguistics from the University of Pennsylvania, laid out point after compelling point, meandering from computational linguistics to developmental psychology to predicate calculus. It's heady, compelling stuff, and to Pete, Veatch's theory was closer to the truth than anything he'd come across. But it hadn't rocked the field of humor scholarship. Why had Veatch and his N+V Theory sunk into obscurity?

While Veatch had once taught linguistics at Stanford University, he'd since dropped off the academic radar. It took several weeks of online sleuthing and unreturned voice mails to get Veatch on the phone from his home in Seattle.

The N+V Theory started with a simple joke, Veatch told me:

Why did the monkey fall out of the tree?

Because it was dead.

"I first heard it in '85 or '86, and I laughed for like an hour," said Veatch. That didn't make sense to him, so he thought long and hard about it—as he did about most things. Growing up, Veatch says, he was a loner who read every book in his grade-school library. It was the first inkling of a prodigious mind that, according to Veatch, would later dream up the MP3 player long before anyone had heard of MP3s and devise a phonetics chart that he believes can teach literacy to downtrodden people around the world.

Before those endeavors, he decided to explain the dead-monkey joke. So he sat down in his Stanford office one day in 1992 and came up with the N+V theory. The concept seemed to explain the joke. The lifeless monkey was a violation, but the situation was normal because dead monkeys will fall out of their trees. The premise seemed to work for every other kind of humor Veatch could think of, too. So in 1998, he published his theory in *HUMOR* and waited for a response. And waited. And waited. And waited.

It wouldn't be the last time Veatch's plans wouldn't go as expected. After his stint at Stanford, he tried to make a go of it in the business world, but his attempt to build a speech-synthesizing e-mail reader fell through, as did Teachionary, a language-learning program he developed. He's since tried other jobs: construction manager, carpenter, pizza delivery guy, plumber's helper.

Veatch's tale seems like a testament to just how daunting a task it is to define humor once and for all. But his predecessor's fate hardly gave Pete pause. Veatch's theory engrossed him. As far as he could tell, Veatch had nearly hit the theoretical bull's-eye. But something about it still seemed not quite right.

Pete's department chair, Donnie Lichtenstein, summed up the problem when doctoral student Caleb Warren tried to illustrate Veatch's theory by referring to a fictional story used in psychological surveys that often got people chuckling. As the tale goes, a man decides to use his kitten as a sex toy, with the feline purring in enjoyment. That situation may be funny, said Lichtenstein, but nothing about it is normal. x

So Pete and Caleb set upon improving Veatch's work and ended up with a new comedic axiom: the benign violation theory. According x

to this amended theory, humor only occurs when something seems wrong, unsettling or threatening (i.e., a violation), but simultaneously seems okay, acceptable, or safe (i.e., benign). When something is just a violation, such as somebody falling down the stairs, people feel bad about it. But according to Pete and Caleb, when the violation turns out to be benign, such as someone falling down the stairs and ending up unhurt, people often do an about-face and react in at least one of three ways: they feel amused, they laugh, or they make a judgment—“That was funny.”



To them, the term “benign,” rather than “normal,” better encapsulated the many ways a violation could be okay, acceptable, or safe—and gave them a clear-cut tool to determine when and why a violation such as the feline-turned-sex-toy story can be funny. While heavy petting with a kitten may not be normal, according to the story, the kitten purred and seemed to enjoy the contact. The violation was benign—no kittens were harmed in the making of the joke. Later, when Pete and Caleb used this story in an experiment, participants who read a version in which the kitten whined in displeasure at the heavy petting found the tale far less funny than the “happy kitty” scenario.⁸

Then there’s the story of the church-raffle Hummer that got Pete pondering what makes things funny in the first place. The idea of mixing the sanctity of Christianity with a four-wheeled symbol of secular excess strikes people as a violation. But when Pete presented the raffle story to regular churchgoers as well as people who rarely go to church, those less committed to Christianity were more likely to find a holy Hummer benign and therefore found it funnier.⁹

Immoral behaviors are not the only kind of humorous situation that could be explained by the benign violation theory. A dirty joke trades on moral or social violations, but it’s only going to get a laugh if the person listening is liberated enough to consider risqué subjects such as sex okay to talk about. Puns can be seen as linguistic violations that still make grammatical sense, though they’re typically only funny to cerebral types and grammarians who care about the nuances of the English language. Sarcasm violates conversational rules by meaning the opposite of what’s said. No one is going to be amused by a crack like “You’re good at basketball? Yeah, right!” if they don’t notice the exaggerated tone and grasp the intended meaning. Nor is the guy who thinks he’s good at basketball.

And tickling, long a sticking point for other humor theories, fits perfectly. After all, tickling involves violating someone’s physical space in a benign way. People can’t tickle themselves—a phenomenon that baffled Aristotle—because it isn’t a violation. Nor will people laugh if a creepy stranger tries to tickle them, since nothing about that is benign.

Pete’s ideas about tickling were recently boosted by, of all things, a tickle robot. Cognitive neuroscientists at University College London devised an apparatus in which subjects could control, via a joystick, a mechanical arm brushing a piece of foam over their other hand. When the arm corresponded to the joystick movements, participants didn’t find the feeling all that ticklish, but the more the experimenters delayed or shifted the direction of the arm’s movements from that of the joystick, the more ticklish folks rated the sensation.¹⁰ These findings meshed with the idea that laughter occurs when tickling is a benign violation: adding a small delay or change in direction of the robotic arm added just enough of a violation to make it ticklish.

Almost as soon as Pete unveiled the benign violation theory, people began to challenge it, trying to come up with some zinger, gag, or “yo momma” joke that doesn’t fit the theory. Although Pete is willing to engage in such rhetorical debates, he’s weary of doing so. For one thing, humor theorists had been relying far too long on such “thought experiments,” trying to shoehorn as many jokes as possible into their theory of choice. But outside of philosophy, thought experiments

only get you so far. For another, says Pete, it's fine to criticize the theory, but you'd best offer up a better alternative. And Pete's confident that the benign violation theory outperforms incongruity, relief, superiority, and all other humor-theory contenders. To prove it, he and Caleb turned to science—hence the founding of HuRL. “Your intuition often leads you astray,” Pete said to me. “But within the lab, you can set theories against one another.”

In one HuRL experiment, a researcher approached subjects on campus and asked them to read a scenario inspired by a story about legendarily depraved Rolling Stones guitarist Keith Richards. In the story, Keith's father tells his son to do whatever he wishes with his cremated remains—so when his father passed away, Keith decided to snort the ashes. Meanwhile, the researcher, who didn't know what the participants were reading, gauged their facial expressions as they perused the story. Then the subjects were asked about their reactions to the story: Did they find the story wrong, not wrong at all, a bit of both, or neither? As it turned out, those who found the tale of Keith and his obscene schnozz simultaneously “wrong” (a violation) and “not wrong” (benign) were three times more likely to smile or laugh than either those who deemed the story either completely okay or utterly unacceptable.¹¹

Pete and Caleb became more confident. Pete came to believe the benign violation theory could even help people improve their schtick. As he puts it, folks could use his theory to make upsetting concepts more amusing by making them seem more benign. He calls this tactic the Sarah Silverman Strategy, after the comedian who gets away with jokes on abortion and AIDS because the way she tells them is so darn cute. On the flip side, he believes that pointing out what is wrong with our everyday interactions with soup chefs and “close talkers” can help make those experiences hilarious. Pete calls this technique the Seinfeld Strategy.

HuRL's research has started to gain traction. Pete and Caleb's first paper on the benign violation theory appeared in one of the top mainstream psychology journals. Meanwhile, some of Pete's fellow humor researchers are starting to take notice. “I absolutely consider it significant; it furthers the field,” Don Nilsen, co-founder of the

International Society for Humor Studies and co-author of the *Encyclopedia of 20th-Century American Humor*, told me. “I don't think there are any examples of humor that don't fit this.”

The benign violation theory has also been endorsed by a very different sort of humor expert: Ben Huh, CEO of the Cheezburger Network, the multimillion-dollar silly-picture web empire that includes sites such as “I Can Has Cheezburger?” and “FAIL Blog,” with whom Pete has shared his research. “I'm a guy who makes his living off of internet humor, and McGraw's model fits really well,” Huh told me over the phone. Lately he's been using the model to determine which content could be the next big meme. Take a post about a church funeral getting interrupted by a parishioner's “Stayin' Alive” ringtone. “The benign violation theory applies to that,” said Huh: it's clearly a violation for “Stayin' Alive” to come on during a memorial for someone who'd just died, but it's more benign—and therefore funnier—than if somebody purposely turned on the theme to *The Walking Dead*. All in all, says Huh, “He's just a lot more right than anyone else.”

But the theory doesn't impress everyone. The skeptics include Victor Raskin. In the world of humor scholarship, Raskin is a titan. Among other achievements, the Purdue University linguistics professor founded the journal *HUMOR*, edited the influential tome *The Primer of Humor Research*, and helped develop the general theory of verbal humor, one of the preeminent theories of how jokes and other funny texts work. He's also, I discovered, not one to mince words. “What McGraw has come up with is flawed and bullshit—what kind of a theory is that?” he told me in a thick Russian accent. To Raskin, the benign violation theory is at best a “very loose and vague metaphor,” not a functional formula like $E=mc^2$. It doesn't help that among the tight-knit community of humor scholars, Pete's few years dabbling in the subject is akin to no time at all. “He is not a humor researcher,” grumbled Raskin. “He has no status.”

Status or not, I decided to reserve judgment on Pete's theory until I saw it in action. I wanted Pete to put his theory to the test. I asked him to accompany me to a Denver stand-up show so he could use his theory to critique the comedians.

He offered one better. "How about I get up on stage myself?"
 "That," I replied mischievously, "would be a very good idea."

"Thank you very much," Pete says into the Squire's microphone, once he gets it reconnected and begins his act. "Being a professor is a good job. I get to think about interesting things. Sometimes I get my mind on something non-academic. Lately, I have been thinking a lot about nicknames."

"First, a good nickname is mildly inappropriate," he says. "An ex-girlfriend referred to me to her friends as 'Pete the Professor.' Not inappropriate, and not good. Now, if she referred to me as 'Pete the Penetrating PhD-Packing Professor'—mildly inappropriate, and thus a good nickname."

But Pete trips over the words "Pete the Penetrating PhD-Packing Professor" and doesn't get a laugh. Nor do folks chuckle at the other funny names he tries out: Terry the Dingleberry. Thomas the Vomit Comet.

He throws out a line about "a well-endowed African American gentleman," hoping to get some snickers, but it's too pedestrian for a crowd used to hearing about late-term abortions and the joys of meth. He does get a few laughs when he says that most good nicknames involve alliteration and then pauses to explain the meaning of "alliteration"—although it's possible folks were just laughing at the professor's presumption.

People turn away and get lost in small talk. By the time Pete gets to the end of his four-minute routine—with a zinger about a 35-year-old virgin nicknamed Clumpy Chicken—he's lost much of the audience.

"Thanks. Have a good night," Pete says, then leaves the stage amid polite applause. He's replaced by the open mike's MC, who's eager to punch the crowd back up. He has the perfect target.

"I thought you were going to talk about your humor theory!" the comic calls after the professor. "He has this theory, see . . . well, who cares. Obviously, it's WRONG!"

The crowd's back, laughing uproariously. But the MC's not finished.

"All you black people, that's a sweater vest he's wearing, not a bulletproof vest."

He waits a beat. "So go ahead and shoot him."

Standing at the bar after his act, Pete considers his performance. "You can't just get up there and expect to kill."

But why didn't he kill? He spends the night mulling it over. "I clearly underestimated the audience and the challenges in creating sufficient violations," he tells me later. "This means the Seinfeld Strategy would have needed to be multiplied severalfold." Of course, trying to outdo the other comedians in Squire-appropriate violations wouldn't have been a good move, either. Once word got out about the professor who spouts one-liners about slavery and crack cocaine, Pete might have had to start looking for another job.

Pete's stand-up attempt gives the usually confident professor pause. It's clear, he tells me once the article comes out, that he has a ways to go before he understands the vagaries of comedy—and HuRL alone won't take him the rest of the way. There's a big, comical world out there, he says, and if he wants to figure out what really makes things funny, he's got to venture beyond the confines of his lab.

But he can't do it alone. Just as his scholarship needs to be vetted by his academic colleagues, he needs an objective observer, someone willing to call him out if his conclusions don't pass muster.

Someone, in other words, like me.

I'm in. The adventure sounds like a blast, plus it may help me figure out why I am such a screwed-up, hopelessly lighthearted reporter. It will be like *Eat, Pray, Love*, but with awkward guy hugs and dick jokes.

Still, I offer a condition. At the end of the journey, Pete has to again try his hand at stand-up. But this time, at a slightly bigger stage than the Squire: The Just for Laughs comedy festival in Montreal, the biggest comedy event in the world. Comics work for years to earn a shot there, and a single routine can make or break a comedy career. If Pete thinks that he's going to crack the humor code, he has to get up at the festival—and win one for science.