

Another Day In The Salt Mine

By Chris Zell

People often ask me what I do during my busy day and how I get these stories. I explain to them that there has to be a guardian of truth. Someone wandering around to search out the inequality of life and then point at it and laugh. That was a job that I felt I was uniquely qualified for.

But that doesn't seem to appease people who feel that I'm actually a B&E guy. That would be one way to explain my vast black wardrobe, but its untrue. I have trouble with locks when I have the key. I was once knocking on a door and sliced up my arm when it went through the window. So, a life of crime is something I'm uniquely unqualified for.

And to prove this point, I'm going to take you along with me during my busy day. I picked last Tuesday. You'll get to see the triumphs and tribulations, meet the people and feel fortunate that its not your life. It wasn't a unique day, but it was a bad one.

And I knew this was going to be a bad day the moment I stepped into the shower. I noticed that there wasn't any soap so I had to climb out of the shower to get some. Once that simple task was done, I started to lather down my Arnoldesque chest (just to avoid confusion, when I talk about my Arnoldesque chest I'm referring to Arnold Ziffle, the pig from Green Acres) and I drop this brick of soap onto my foot.

As I'm jumping around the tub trying to grab my foot and not slip and crack my skull open, I ask myself why I always drop the new bar of soap, when its at its hardest and sharpest and the name usually leaves its imprint, on my foot and never when its of the consistency of marshmallow. After coming to the conclusion that I'm just pretty inept when there's bubbles around (I once swallowed about three gallons of that toxic green bubble stuff while trying to use one of those bubble blowing pipes) it dawned on me that someone could clean up if they invented Nerf soap. Not only could you get clean, you could also shoot hoops. I'll have to call the Nerf company tomorrow.

After I bandaged my foot (it wasn't a big cut, but it was deep. I found Mike Dukakis' charisma) I seriously thought of calling today off on account of it would be too much trouble to continue. But after considering the sympathy that I get for that reason from my so called friends ('aww, poor baby, attacked by a little bar of soap' was the kindest one that I could think of) I figured that I'd just play hurt. Tough it out, show the world that no bar of soap could stop me. No siree.

After that horrible ordeal, I figured that I'd treat myself to a little orange juice to get my day under way with a smile from Florida. I opened the refrigerator and was horrified by what I saw. It could have been the cure to some disease bubbling up on a shelf. We've come up with a cure or two in the past.

I moved closer to check out this strange apparition. I was totally shocked to discover that what looked like the underside of a couch was, in actuality, something called alfalfa sprouts. Now I'd heard of this stuff before (I think its fed to prisoners of war) but I'd never actually seen it. Kinda looks like the hair on top of Einstein's head.

But that wasn't the most troubling part of it. The most troubling part was that I had no idea how something as terrifying as alfalfa sprouts could have got into the refrigerator. I know that I didn't do it and a balanced meal to my roommate is sweet and sour pork. I think these vegi-terrorists are going just a little too far. Planting this stuff in unsuspecting refrigerators and scaring the poor junk food eaters. There should be a law.

After the hazardous waste team showed up to rid my home of the offending weed, I tried to make the best of my day. I knew that it wasn't going to be easy, seeing raw food was quite a shock to my system, but I knew that I had to go forward. I figured that the first thing I'd do is return a call from an editor. He'd called about a week before asking if I had a story that he could print in his next issue. As luck would have it, just that day I wrote one on babies and told him I'd send it right out. I figured this was a call to tell me that he liked it so much he's going to pay me double scale. I guess I'll never get my fortune tellers license.

"I have a problem with the piece you sent me," was the beginning of the conversation. Now I may not be a good fortune teller, but I know when a conversation isn't going my way. I thought about the piece, OK, so maybe I did start out by asking the musical question 'If all babies are smart and pretty where do all the stupid and ugly people come from?' but what's so offending about that? It seems that this editor had a list.

After about ten minutes of hearing what a horrible sub-human I am (during this time I realize that he has some valid points), he finally gets to why I'm such a horrible person. Its not that the piece itself wasn't funny (although he said that I should rethink my 'vomit factory' stance) its that his wife pushed out a puppy a couple of months ago and he's buzzing from the glow of new fatherhood. My timing couldn't get any better, could it?

He told me that he couldn't run the piece and that his wife saw it and requested that I never be allowed sully the fine pages of this wholesome rag again. Yeah, I can see her point, you wouldn't want me next to a piece on the different kinds of farts (that actually happened). What would the subscribers think? I figure that when the kid hits three they'll hire me back to go really in-depth about what horrible creatures three years olds are. I'll be waiting.

While sitting there thinking about other forms of employment the mail came. Being the kind of day it was shaping up as, I figured that there'd be plenty of red enveloped bills. And I wasn't disappointed. Mixed in with my bills and veiled threats was a letter from a greeting card company that I'd recently sold some cards to.

"Oh great, who did I upset there?" I said opening the letter. "I sure hope they don't want their money back." But no, it was good news. It seems that they wanted me to submit some more cards for their consideration. I'm reading the letter and all of a sudden a few terms jump out at me:

'. . .caustic and sarcastic, alternative humor, push those bounds of good taste...'

"Wait just a minute here," I say wondering if this wasn't some type of hidden insult on the line of, 'You know, he doesn't smell bad for a dead guy.' or the ever popular (and this actually happened) 'You're funny, but we think that you'd frighten our readership.'

"Push the bounds of good taste, indeed." I pick up the phone and call my friend Suzy (who has the smallest nose of any Homo sapien in the entire world and New Zealand) will stick up for me and say that they must have put the wrong letter in the envelope. That the card company just doesn't understand what a nice guy I am.

"They sure have your number," she says. That's it, she's off my speed dialer. And her nose really isn't that small at all. Nope, just a plain old, normal sized, nothing abnormal here nose. I guess I'll just cancel that meeting with Jim Rose's Circus Sideshow. No 'The Impossible Nose Breathing Lady' career for her.

All these insults and accidents and its not even noon. And I know that it'll just keep getting weirder. A new client called and said she'd like to come over to talk and could I give her directions to my house.

"Sure, where are you coming from?"

"My house." And people have the nerve to call my thinking alternative. I quietly hung up the phone and wondered how much money the person in the photo booths in mall parking lots makes. It may be time to re-evaluate my career choice.

I finally had to go out. I know, I'm pushing my luck but I have no choice. I'm hungry and I don't know if that sprout stuff got on anything in the refrigerator and I'm not taking any chances. I'm walking down the tree lined street of my neighborhood (can it really be called a neighborhood if you don't know any of your neighbors? I've lived in the same house for a few years now and the only neighbors that I ever got to know are now dead. Maybe that's why I haven't met any of the other neighbors) and as I was preparing to cross the street, it was one of those 4-way stop sign concepts that no one seems to be able to grasp, a car crashed into the back of a Keebler Cookie truck. It was a pretty serious accident. Three Keebler elves died and six were seriously injured. There was rich, creamy filling everywhere.

Leaving the scene of disaster, after picking up some pre-lunch snacks, I reached the restaurant and saw a friend of mine and her three year old daughter. They were just finishing their pizza and I stopped over to talk for a moment. I needed some moral support after the horrific scene that I'd just witnessed. And anyway, I took more cookies than I could carry.

The little girl was putting on her sweater when I noticed that she'd left the crust of the pizza. So I asked her why she didn't eat her crust. She looked at me with that sideways glancing, smirking, you're the stupidest person in the world little kid look and said,

"You don't eat the pizza bone."

I watched them leave the pizza bone behind and found my way to a table. I wasn't there for three minutes when a friend sits down. He sits there for a few seconds without saying a word. I look at him wondering if the breakdown is complete or he's trying some Zen ordering technique. I notice that the waitress isn't clued in to his wavelength so I figured I'd try the normal way.

"Hey Pete, do you want to order something?" He seems truly surprised that I'm sitting here.

"No, I'm here for lunch." He says grasping my theory perfectly.

"What's the matter with you? You seem really out of it. Even more than usual."

"My uncle died last night."

"Gee, sorry to hear that." Pete looks around the room and calls over a friend.

"And I have to go witness the cremation today." Yikes. I wonder why he has to witness this. What's the chance that they'd saut, the wrong guy? Wouldn't they keep pretty detailed notes of this thing? At least you'd hope there'd be a notation on the toe tag they could check off titled Cremation: q Yes q No.

"Well," I say hoping that this next offer doesn't get me into something that I really don't want to be involved in. "If there's anything I can do. . ." Please don't ask me to witness you witnessing this blessed event.

"There is one thing." Oh no, me and my stupid mouth. Please just want me to pay for your lunch or paint your house. "The family's going to have a memorial service for him Saturday." Whew. From here I'm on Easy Street. I don't have to witness the. . . "Would you write some cremation jokes for the service?"

"Ummmm," I, as usual, was wrong. It seems like I took a wrong turn off of Easy Street and landed on Bizarre Boulevard.

"You once said that any situation can be funny." I hate when people remember things that I've said. I'm hoping its just that he's dazed with grief and he'll forget about this possible foray into the world of bad taste.

"This is the guy?" Pete's friend says pointing at me and laughing. I hate when that happens. I always wonder if there's something hanging out of my nose. "Pete's been looking for you since yesterday."

"Why didn't you just call my house?"

"I didn't think of that." Grief, has to be. "So are you going to do it?"

"I don't know. This is kinda one of those things that's a fine line between bad taste and. . ."

"I'll pay triple scale."

"What was the loved ones name and hobbies?"

(As a postscript, I wrote about 20 cremation jokes none of which I will subject you with, you can thank me later and from what Pete told me, they were the talk of the service. He said all the younger people loved them and, the part that I'm proudest of, the guest of honors two grandmothers put curses on my person. All in all, not a bad days work.)

Moments after Pete and his friend left to charbroil a relative, Ed came over to bother me. Oh sorry, share quality time with me. He was waiting for his girlfriend and then they were going to the beach. I said that was nice as Ed lit up a cigarette.

"I didn't know you went back to smoking?" Ed tossed the match towards the ash tray and hit the floor.

"Rebecca doesn't like it when I smoke." I thought for a second and realized that she smokes and wondered about that old kettle black thing. When I brought this up he said that she did it because she loved him. Oh, and the fact that you've almost burned your house down three times means nothing. OK, I understand. "Do me a favor, watch the door and tell me when she comes in."

"You got it." To show what kind of person Ed is, he trusted me not to misuse this guardianship. What this shows is that Ed is 1) an incredibly trusting fool who doesn't pay attention to the things that I do or 2) stupid. Its up to you. "There she is." I'd say ever couple of minutes just to watch Ed scramble under the table.

After about the fifth time I was bored. I mean, just how stupid can one person be? But then having met Rebecca I know. I'm not saying that she's a moron (I've seen her walk through a couple of doors without bumping into the frame) but let's just say that if she were a bullet train she'd be a BB.

"Ed," I say with total concern for his households well being. "Won't Rebecca smell smoke on you when she kisses you hello?"

"Oh no," he says with true concern for this new development. "I didn't think of that." He puts his cigarette out, breathes into his hand and sniffs. "I'll just chew some gum."

"That's fine, but she'll still smell it on your beard." This factoid sends him into a frenzy of beard yanking.

"She'll get so mad. What am I going to do?" Now, you are my witness, he asked for my help. But first let me ask what you would do in this situation. Would you 1) tell him to get a grip because she won't notice or 2) tell him to spray oranges in his face to mask the odor?

"Will that work?" He asks calling the waitress over for some orange slices.

"Of course, Ed." It'll work for my agenda. It'll make everyone in the restaurant think you're nuts or have just gone into some fruity flavored fit.

So, as Ed is spraying sticky orange juice all over his face and I'm pointing out places that he missed (twice I had him spray himself in the eye) Rebecca walks into the restaurant in a seemingly confused state. More so than usual that's how I noticed.

"Sorry I'm late but the strangest thing happened." She leans over to kiss Ed and backs off quickly. "Why are you so sticky?" She's wiping an errant seedling off her cheek. Ed explains that he had some orange juice and,

". . .you know how much of a slob I am." I couldn't have said it better myself. "What were you saying about the strangest thing?" Rebecca takes turns looking at us with a frightened, puppy like expression.

"I parked in the restaurants parking lot, right next to Ed's car and, I don't know what happened, but I got confused and walked into the next building."

I'm going to explain a few things here. There are two buildings fairly close to one another, each with its own parking lot and facing in totally different directions. What that means is that she looked at the front of one building and the back of another and made the decision to walk towards the back of a building. And if you think that's strange, stay tuned, it gets weirder.

"So," Rebecca continues. "I walked in and do you know what I saw?" She's totally distressed at the image she saw.

"Probably a naked lady." I point out just in case she didn't recognize the species. You see, the club in question is a strip joint and that's the kind of thing they do in places like that.

"Yes!" She yelps grabbing Ed. "She was rolling all over this stage thing and shaking her you knows all around. The first thing I thought was 'I wonder why Ed wants me to meet him here.' So I walked around looking for him. Its really dark in there so I had to walk around a couple of times. I didn't see him and finally figured out that I made a mistake. You know, though, everyone in there was really friendly."

The waitress, who has heard this tale of utter stupidity, leans over and tells me that Rebecca won't be served. I guess their motto is: No shirt, no shoes, no brains, no service. I can live with that.

Soon after Ed and Rebecca left for the beach, I was getting prepared to leave when a couple sat in the table next to mine. There was one thing about this couple that pointed out the exact difference between me and the rest of humanity. I'm not good at small talk. I've never been good at it and I can't understand the reason for it. It never seems to go anywhere. Most small talk that I've ever been involved in (and believe me when I say that its not something that I generally get involved in) goes something like this:

"Those Red Sox!"

"Yeah!"

"They do it every year!"

"Yeah!" And then we both reach for some cheese dip.

Maybe its just that I don't like sentences that end in an exclamation point. But the moment I see that small talk look in another persons eyes I tend to pretend that I just had a vicious groin injury and scurry to another part of the room.

But this couple's talk was so surface that Formica is going to be giving them tour sponsorship. I don't know how long they've been dating but I've have more meaningful conversations with Maggie, this little Scottish Terrier I know. Then it happened, the conversation, having exhausted itself of exclamation points, took on a whole new level.

The woman started to talk about this movie that she'd just rented, Fried Green Tomatoes. She was telling the guy how much she liked it.

"Yeah, and it reminded me of that other movie about southern women. What was the name of that movie? It had Sally Field and Olympia Dukakis in it. What was the name of that movie?"

During this time the guy is going through his movie database to get some serious brownie points with the correct answer. With the vast knowledge that this man has in his head, he confidently answers her simple question,

"Full Metal Jacket?"

Yeah, I seem to remember Dolly Parton crawling across the backyard with an M-16 during the wedding scene. With that I paid my check and scurried quickly home. It was almost time for The Flintstones and my mid-afternoon nap.