

But, I digress. . .

By Chris Zell

I went to a Boston club the other night with Jim and his new girl friend, Eddie (when I introduce her I can't help adding that I think she had a sex change and just got so busy that she forgot to change her name). To say that she doesn't get it is an understatement. We were in the car on the way over and I told a joke. She turned around and said that she didn't get it. Oh, like that's a big surprise. So, you know me, Mr. Soothing, I told her not to worry, she's still on Arizona time. In three hours she'll be rolling on the floor.

We get to the club and, to segregate, some clubs put little hospital like wrist bands on you if you're over 21. The doorman is putting one on Eddie and she asks what it's for. Again, you know me, Mr. Helpful, I said that it's in case she gets into an accident later tonight, the police will know which hospital to take her to.

"Oh, that's a nice idea," she says.

We're sitting in the club and she's staring at these two leggy blondes with black mini's on, shaking her head. I ask her what the problem is. "Girls here sure do dress strange."

"Why? Because they don't have cowgirl hats and spurs." I turn and point to a girl dancing by herself. "I think that she has spurs and I know that she'd like to meet you."

Now don't let me forget her boyfriend, Jim. He's no prize in the cranium division himself. He needed some help with his computer so I went over. This is a perfect example of how Jim's brain works. I know nothing about computers.

We're driving the two miles to his house and he has to call her. I know that cellular phone companies all over the world are going to be fighting over this guy's business.

We get to the house and I sit down and watch these two college graduates' first say some-a-thing-bunga and then move their index fingers slowly, very slowly, towards each other and just as they were about to touch, they yanked their fingers away as if they finally figured out what they were doing was stupid.

I raised my hand and asked what they were doing and what they said.

"It's just something that we say and do." The male of the duo answers, a little embarrassed. You see, in his mind I know that there was a battle over whether it was easier to put up with his girlfriends pouting and bitching if he didn't do this 'your brain on drugs' movement or the rips that I would tear into him if he did. I knew that outcome before he did. The girl will win every time.

"Well don't do it in front of me." I understand that when you're in love you do cute little things together, but please, as a public service, don't do it in public. "And what did you say?"

"Some-a-thing-bunga." The reason I keep typing some-a-thing-bunga is that what they say is way to disturbing for human digestion. I'm saving you, take my word for it.

"Isn't it cowabunga?" I've been infiltrated by those reptiles on the half shell enough to know what the damn word is.

"We made up our own word."

"Who died and made you Webster?"

Changing the subject, Eddie asks me what I want for dinner. I try to explain that I am the guest. In Boston the guest shows up, eats, steals something and leaves. We don't make dietary plans. As a personal thing, I think that kitchen is French for passage way to the backyard. One time I was at a party and the hostess kept asking me how long I thought things should cook. After she explained what an oven was, I said three days. It didn't matter what it was. Three days. I figure that if I remain consistent, I'll be right at least once before I die.

"Do you like chicken?"

"Yes."

"Do you like steak?"

"Yes."

"Do you. . ."

"Yes." I think that she started to get the hint because chicken was the meal of choice. This is great because I know that I'm the only person in the world who can screw up chicken. I've never cooked a chicken, but I once burned popcorn. So I guess chicken is just a little out of my area of expertise. She also has that age old adage going for her, 'everything tastes like chicken.'

I lean back and figure I'm on terra firma. Sometimes I wonder how I've come this far in life.

"What do you want with the chicken?"

Have you ever heard the sound of a marsupial being squashed by a steam roller? Me neither. I can imagine that the sound I made would be close though.

She asks and asks and asks. Maybe she's being nice. She doesn't know me that well after all. Maybe this is the way they do things in Arizona. If this is true, you'll never find my ass there. Maybe she's just one of those tries hard to please hostesses. If that's the case, next time we eat out.

"Listen," I bark. "Just pretend this is a Garanimal meal. Match up two giraffes and let's eat."

Remember what I said earlier about everything tasting like chicken? I have to apologize. I'm a lying sack of shit. This chicken tasted like moth balls without the zing. So I spent most of the meal talking (Oh, let me tell you, that was a good move on my part. There's nothing in the world like cold moth balls.) and wishing they had a big dog. They did have a cat though, but its rectum fell out. No joke. But it does bring new meaning to the joke, 'rectum, nearly killed him.'

The story Jim swears by is that one day the cat was walking across the carpet and bloop. Well, I don't know if that's the exact sound it made, I wasn't there. But it's the story Jim's sticking to.

A few weeks earlier they asked if I wanted the cat. I thought that they loved the cat. They said that they do, but Eddie was allergic to it. Now, here's where we separate the world into the 'Yes, I understand basic concepts' people from the 'How's this toilet paper thingy work?' segment of the population. I asked,

"Did you know that you were allergic to the cat before you purchased it?" A simple question, don't you think? Now let me explain the grading system. There will be no curve used here. It's a straight pass or fail. You're either an idiot or the jury is still out. And the answer is,

"Yes." I'm sorry, the correct answer is Albania. Now wait a minute here. If you knew you were allergic to something, would you buy it? Of course not. You're not one of them. Yeah, sure.

Back to dinner. I was eating the chicken, not because I'm polite (I can't remember the last time someone made that mistake about me.) but because I remember the words of my Mother when I wouldn't eat all my dinner. It was a heart rendering plea in favor of a better world for all,

"Eat you're dinner or I'll freeze it and you'll eat it every day until its gone." Now if the sight of mashed potatoes and meat loaf frozen each night for a year or so doesn't make you chow down, you're a better man than I, Bobby Sands.

So, I hide some of it under the rice (mushed down nice and tight) and continued to talk. Jim must have thought that the semi-empty plate of mine looked lonely. So he gave me more. There's no fucking way I'm this nice. Right now I am searching through the chicken looking for a bone. I'm going to see just how much pressure it takes to get a chicken bone stuck in someone throat from the outside. But, of course, this is one of those mutant boneless chickens. They must be real easy to catch.

Remember a little while back I told you that I would mention why I purposely used the word fuck in front of Eddie? Of course you don't. Well, that's because I didn't. I just wanted to see if you were paying attention.

But, there is a reason. Before Eddie's flight got in from Arizona the day she was moving in, we went out to eat before he picked her up.

We're driving to the restaurant and Jim asked me a serious question,

0"You know, people have been staring at me since I got my new car." He purchased one of those little red turbo flying, header humming, carburetor chunking, spark plug firing, RPM pinning, speedometer snapping, suspension straining, mind of its own power steering, CD blasting, high revving engine, death traps. The first time I sat in it I told him that in all the years I've known him, we've never been this close. But, Jim continues his serious question,

"Since I got it, have I got better looking?"

"Oh yeah, Jim. You're a real killer now. Its too bad that you're getting a live-in. Hearts are going to be breaking all over the world tonight." Oh, God.

We get to the restaurant and after a while Jim gets to the point of this meeting.

"Will you do me a favor when you meet Eddie?"

"No." Hey, why lie?

"Oh, come on." Jim plays with his food and looks up at me. I can tell that what he is going to say is important to him. Which is like giving me one of those 007 license to kills. Open season on neuroses. "She's, ummm, just never met anyone like you."

"Now what the hell is that supposed to mean?" I look at Jim and can see that the speech that he's practiced for hours just jumped out the window and it's now evening at the improv.

"Well, it's not that she's a priss, it's just that she's never met anyone like you."

"We've established that. Now 'splain to me just what you mean." At this time you may think that I dislike this guy. Nah, Jim's a great friend. It's just that I like to see how far I can yank his chain. It's about 40 feet long now.

"I don't know." Jim's totally perplexed. He's taking bread sticks from the next table. "She's not used to people like you."

"What? Bostonians? People not stupid enough to move 3000 miles away from their family to move in with someone that they've known for three months? What?"

"Well, she's not used to people who swear. Even I have to watch my language around her."

"So," now do you understand why I used the word fuck? Of course you do. Because it gave her the willies and made Jim look at me with that 'I'm gonna hear about this later' look. "I'm not going to live with her. Why should I have to watch what I say?"

"It's not that she's a priss or anything, but she's just not used to it."

"Well, Jim," I say in my most sincere tone. Just so you know, that's probably more sarcastic than your most sarcastic tone. Hey, it's not my fault I was born this way. Yeah, sure. "You've just insulted me."

"What do you mean? I didn't mean. . ."

"It's not like I have Tourette's Syndrome. I don't just go off without a set routine. Man, I'm pretty hurt right now."

"Don't get me wrong, it's not that she's a priss. . ."

"Fweep." I pull out the whistle I carry just for these occasions. "We have a judges ruling on the 'she's not a. . .' three times rule." Everyone's head in the restaurant turns. "You see Jim," I try to explain after I scrape him off the ceiling fan. "If you say that someone isn't something three times in one conversation, that means they are." I'm explaining this to Jim as the manager escorts us out of the restaurant. I get more free meals this way. As we're approaching his car he says,

"Well, she's not," he's choosing his words very carefully. See, you may think that I just rip him because it's fun. No my misguided friend, I do it so that he will learn to live with earthlings in harmony. Besides, it's almost as much fun as watching the faces of people whose credit cards have been declined. "Just watch how crazy you get."

"Jim," I say as I struggle to get my not all that large body into this Playskool sized car. "You've insulted me. That's like my saying, 'Hey Jim, you're going to meet a friend of mine tomorrow. Try not to be so stupid and ugly.'" After this conversation, it took Jim over a month before he introduced me to Eddie. But I digress.

We're sitting in the club (Remember the club? This is how all this got started.) and I ask Eddie what's so special about Arizona. I mean other than being stupid enough to recall their governor. Every state makes some serious blunders in that department. Most of them just say,

'Shhh, let's not say anything. How much damage can this grapefruit do in 4 years?' So they sit on it so the rest of the country doesn't get a chance to stick their tongue out at them.

"We have the Grand Canyon." She says with all the pride of someone who lives in a state with no personality (No letters or nasty phone calls please. This is called comedy. To make you feel better, go ahead, make fun of Massachusetts. Go ahead. Hey, that was a good one. Drew blood, I'm not kidding. Now go catch a clue, will ya?)

"We have holes in the ground too. We call them potholes. We just don't take that much pride in them."

"People come from all over the world to see the Grand Canyon."

"People come from all over the world to do serious underbody damage to their cars in our potholes."

"It's majestic." I can tell that she's not happy with the way this is going. She seems nice and maybe I do feel bad. But I'm going to keep picking on her. Come on I don't feel that bad.

"Some of these potholes, if the moon catches it just right after a rain shower, can bring a tear to your eye." I see that Eddie keeps looking over my shoulder. I turn around and notice that we've developed a crowd. I don't mind tweaking someone, but I don't like to outright embarrass them. Unless it's totally their fault and I can get a laugh. Needless to say, that comes later.

Remember the little finger thing and expanding on an already crowded dictionary that Jim and Ed do? Remember that I warned them not to do it in public? OK, you can't say they're not going to deserve this.

Jim and Ed are standing next to me and they start talking in, what seems to this professional, made up fucking words. Again I'm going to ask for a ruling. Yes, the judges decree these two have brain damage.

So I figured that if they were going to do it, I should milk some laughs out of it. I turned to the mother of the drummer of some band that I'm supposed to be paying attention to (Why should I pay attention? I already know what I'll say when any band members, parents, fans or total strangers who just happens to get in my way asks me how the band was. I'll say, 'You've (They've) expanded quite a bit in the last year.' Of course they have, they still suck, but even a tadpole expands in a year.) and explain to her that Jim and Eddie do really strange things in the not so privacy of their own home. She didn't believe me. Silly lady, now I have to embarrass them.

"Jim," I call out with all the sincerity that I can muster. "Do that finger thing for these people." You know what amazed me about this request? They actually did it. People are looking at me as if I taught them how to be stupid beyond belief. Sorry, they came up with this one themselves.

But then what would I expect from a person I can make give me the sweater off his back. I'm talking about Jim. Eddie doesn't even have winter clothes. She has these oh so cute cowgirl shitkicker clothes. The first time I saw her she looked cold and it was only 40° out. Her lips were a lovely shade of blue. I thought she was dead and started dividing up her stuff. Boy did I feel foolish when she asked me what I was doing with her TV. How do you explain to someone that you thought they were dead and wouldn't be watching much of The Jeffersons anymore? It's tough, let me tell you.

I asked her if she understood that 40° isn't considered cold here. "You're the type of person who moves to rustic old Boston to go to school and starts wearing winter clothes in October."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Nothing," I said. "It makes it easier for us to pick out the new comers to mug."

After Jim explained that it was just a joke (little does he know that's how I got my matching luggage), I continued to tell her about the things that happen in Boston.

0"White shit falls out of the sky. It piles up and makes the hanging parts of your body very uncomfortable. We're talking so cold that your nose hairs freeze and break off when you sneeze." Amazingly, she's still in Boston. It must be true love. Either that or she's wanted in Arizona. I'm going to have to pay attention to that show 'America's Most Wanted' next week. But, I digress.

One night Jim was over my house and my roommate Bill came home and said that he liked Jim's sweater. So, because Bill pays half the rent, I figured that Jim should give Bill the sweater. Jim, as you would expect, didn't quite see the logic in that. So it became a quest.

Bill would look at Jim's sweater and sigh. I'd explain that Jim had ruined Bill's life. This would go on for a while and Jim would try to change the subject.

"It's been nice out lately." His twitching was making the couch fart across the floor.

"Perfect sweater weather, wouldn't you say, Bill?" Bill would look longingly at the sweater.

"Want to order a pizza?"

"I don't know Jim, you might get some on your sweater." God forbid that he ask to watch Cosby. That would have sent Bill into a fit.

After a few minutes of this Jim, a man who advises many business's on the proper care and feeding of their multi-million dollar companies jumped up, ran around in circles, ripped the sweater off his back, tossed it to Bill and begged that we leave him alone. Mission accomplished.

You see Jim is what we call in the business a SAP. That means Stupid As Possible. I'd only known Jim for a couple of months when I found out that he was paranoid. He walked into my office with a pair of Beatle boots on. You know the shoes I mean. Pointy toes, rounded heels, ankle high shoes made of that real imitation fake plastic. The kind of shoes that died with the Dave Clark 5.

"Nice shoes." I said.

"What's wrong with my shoes?" Now you tell me, did I say anything was wrong with his shoes? No, of course not. I was complementing him on his fine retro 60's look. Yeah, sure.

"Nothing, but that is an excellent tie."

One day Jim wanted to see a radio station in action. (Why does everyone walk out of there depressed because it wasn't like 'WKRP In Cincinnati'?) After months of hounding me, and a personal invitation from the afternoon DJ, I took him in.

While there I had everyone in the station stop by and check out his Beatle boots. One producer said that the shoes put her in the mind of Hullabaloo. I think she was fired shortly after that.

If you think I'm too hard on Jim, tough. Go read Winnie The Pooh. This stuff isn't that much of a shock. Think about it for a second. If you knew me, and knowing how I am, if I made an off hand mention of your shoes you'd either 1) Tell me to shut up and threaten to straighten out my nose. When I'd remind you that my nose is straight, you'd explain that could be fixed also. Or 2) Laugh knowingly and get away from me as fast as you could.

Jim, as you have seen, comes in as unarmed as Dan Quayle at a press conference. Like the day he came into my office and I said, only thinking of his benefit,

"Gee Jim, you look a little green around the gills today."

"What do you mean? I feel fine."

"Hey, I could be wrong." Let me give you some pointers on dealing with the paranoid amongst you. Never tell them that you think something is wrong. Allude to the possibility and watch the fun explode.

Right now Jim is checking himself for fever, lumps, doing the home hernia test, everything. My boss walks in, Jim takes his hands off his nuts, and I ask if he thinks Jim looks a little under the weather. When my boss nods Jim says that of course he'd agree. OK, that may be true.

At that moment a person walks into the office that Jim has never seen before and I ask Jim if he'll take this total strangers' opinion. And you thought that only magicians and swindlers on the street used skills. Come on, get up to speed.

"He does look pale." That's it, Jim's dialing 911 and asking for a cold compress. The down side is that it takes me two days to convince Jim that he doesn't have leprosy. But I had to point out that his skin was getting a little dry. . .

So, you still think I'm a bad guy? I'm taking advantage of the plodding? Don't give me your holier than thou crap. You're still reading, ain't ya? It's kind of a kettle black thing going on here, huh?

Later that day we were in Jim's house. Pretty amazing that he lets me in, isn't it? He used to work for one of those big time truck rental companies and they would give him things with the company logo on it. Bill, you met him earlier, collects things with company logos on it. Like sweaters. So, walking around the house I see a phone in the shape of a number 1 and know that Bill would love it.

"Jim," I call through the house. "I'm stealing this phone." Here is where I think I'm on safe ground. I told him that I was stealing it, so in reality I'm just borrowing it with the intent of never returning it. Reality, as Robin Williams said, what a concept.

"No," Jim reaches for the phone and trips over a tape on 'How To Start Your First Business With Only The Lint From Your Dryer As Collateral.' I think I'll borrow that. I've been having some lint problems lately. "I like that phone."



"Tough." I think I explained that well. "Let's go, I want to get home and use my new phone." Jim wanders off and picks up the stuff he's looking for. I don't know what it is, looking for shit is a hobby for him. One day he spent an hour looking for something that he didn't even own.

I sit on the couch and take the phone out of my pocket. It's not plugged in anywhere but I figure that it'll drive Jim crazy if I talk into it. So I do.

"As soon as I find it we can hit the road." Jim says moving his secret stash of pornographic magazines that he keeps hidden from Eddie. (That was a lie. I just added it because when Eddie reads this, even with this disclaimer, she'll believe that Jim has porno stashed around the house. It'll be a fun evening for all involved.)

"Hold on a second," I say into the phone. "Jim wants to talk to me. Hurry up, Jim, I'm on the phone."

"Oh sorry." Jim looks apologetic. Then he figures that it's his house and I should pay attention to him. "Hang up the phone. What am I saying? It's not even plugged in." How could you not live to pick on someone like that?

As planned, I take the phone into the car and get an idea. I'll make a call.

"What are you doing?" Jim asks trying to watch his driving and make sure that I don't do anything that he'll be sorry for later.

"I have to ask you a question, so I'm going to call you on my new phone." So I dial. "Oh, it's your answering machine." I wait the twenty seconds and then say, "Hi Jim, I had to ask you a question, but look, here you are right next to me. I'll talk to you in a second." I hang up.

"You're nuts," Jim states his opinion. Oh, I'm nuts? At least I have all my clothes. "But wouldn't it be weird if that showed up on the machine?" I just nod. I hadn't thought of that, but what a great idea.

During that evening, we were working on a project and were apart for exactly one minute when Jim went to the bathroom. Now what did I do boys and girls? You bet your ass.

Jim is one of these people who has to check his answering machine 800 times a day. He once got a message from a girl he used to date that got fired from her job. She worked at a sperm bank. I asked how you could get fired from a sperm bank,

"Was she sampling the product in the back room?"

His back is to me when he gets my message. His hair starts doing the Don King Dance as he spins around totally without the aid of a swivel chair.

"How? What? When?"

"What's the problem?" Keeping a straight face right about now is pretty tough. Especially with that Don King thing going on.

"The message. Car."

"Huh?" He starts to regain control of his hair and asks how that message got on the machine. "Twilight Zone, I guess." He just stares at me and moves to the far end of the office. But, I digress.

Jim and Ed make the conscious decision to stand extremely close to the huge stack of speakers that this club owns. Now let me explain some basic acoustics to you. The closer you stand to the 20 foot high stack of speakers, the more potential damage you do to your hearing. Everyone got that? For some reason, Jim and Ed didn't quite make this correlation.

"Wow," Jim says coming to the back of the room where the intelligent people (or people who have done this for so long they can't hear anyway) stand. "My ears are ringing."

"Oh, no." I gently touch his shoulder. "Is it a high pitched hum or a long constant ring?" Jim looks at me knowing that one of these is bad. He's going to make his choice gently. But it doesn't matter. Whatever he says, I'm going to say that it's the one that means irreversible hearing damage. You've always got to be on your toes.

One night this guy auditioned to sing a commercial that I was producing. After listening to him I asked, "Have you ever taken singing lessons?" He perks up and says yes, that he's studied with the great and ingrate. "You wasted your money." I said and called the next contestant, asked the same question and received no for an answer. To which I responded, "It shows." I'm like the Eagle Scout of abuse. Always prepared. But, I digress.

We're supposed to meet a couple of friends at a comedy club across town, so we pile into Ed's car. If you've never been in a car with people with tinnitus, I highly recommend it. The only thing they can hear is when you whisper that they're deaf, ridiculous assholes. They never miss that.

We get to the comedy club and everyone is waiting for us. Peter and his wife Darlene told me that they are going to have another kid.

After telling their first child, the two of them thought it would be a good idea to trade Darlene in for a younger and prettier model. And the first born adds, "With one really big breast so the baby won't have any problems during dinner."

Another friend, John, brought his mother-in-law. She didn't say much during the show. As a matter of fact, she slept through most of it. So, I stole her wallet. No, just a joke, I had John do it.

The show starts and, as is a general rule with comedy, it's funny. Kind of a Zen thing, wouldn't you say? The only thing that gets in the way of it being an all time classic show is Eddie.

During the show she'd lean over to me time and time again and ask,

"What'd he say?" I felt like I was living in the middle of a Miracle Ear commercial.

"Vinegarette." I'd respond.

After the show it was discovered that Jim was hungry. You'd guess it was a major problem by the way Eddie forced fed him Ju-Ju Bees. Fortunately, there was a roast beef place opened at this hour of the night. We entered the way too bright establishment and I, with my degree in restaurant ordering, placed my order and stepped back.

Jim and Ed, on the other hand, must be new to the concept. They studied the back lit board like it was the meaning of existence. After the counter person reminded them that closing was in three hours, Ed made the decision.

"I want a handle-a-burger." I swear that's exactly what she said. Now, you may not believe me, but I'll bring in the counter person to verify.

"Yep, that's what she said." Question me will ya?

At this moment I figured that I was safer in the car so I told them that I'd be there with a cookbook just to see what's exactly in a handle-a-burger. Just as I thought, it doesn't exist. Must be one of those Northwestern delicacies. Mark that down as one more reason not to visit Arizona. I put on my dark sunglasses (I wanted to catch a nap and not be rude OK, I wanted to be tragically hip. There, you caught me. Feel better?) and lean back to give the radio a listen. I'm sitting in the car, experiencing the first silence of the evening, when a cop raps on the door.

"You're in a bus stop." He says in his most threatening voice. It reminded me of Deputy Dawg. "Move this car." Now where did this guy come from? Busses haven't been running for a few hours, I don't think we're going to snarl the downtown traffic of one. Besides, why doesn't he go across the street and pinch the guy pissing in a mail box. Guess he doesn't want to get his shoes wet.

"The guy will be back in a minute, he's in the roast beef place." I see the cop look into the restaurant and lick his lips.

"I don't care," he plainly states knowing that the sight of his uniform is driving the fear of the law down my spine. Yeah, donut crumbs on one's stomach has always frightened me. "Move this vehicle."

"The guy's almost done. He'll be right out."

"Just move the car. I can give you a ticket." Ha, it's not my car. Why in the world would I care if Jim got a ticket? Thinking that was a dumb thing to say, I said,

"So? It's not my car." Thank you, snappy comebacks are my speciality.

"Just move this car." Obviously he doesn't want to give Jim the ticket. He's probably just having a sugar rush and needs to talk to someone.

"I can't." I'm pretty bored and I do like the song that's on the radio.

"What do you mean you can't? The keys are right in the ignition." I guess this is the kind of thing you learn in cop school. Pointing out the blatant.

"I can't."

"Why?"

"I'm blind." As the cop stood there perplexed, they never covered this in cop school, Jim and Ed arrived and drove me home. Ticketless.