

WHAT'S SO FUNNY?

An original text by Monique Polak

I adjust the mic. The guy before me was way taller. Pretty much every guy my age is way taller than me.

I look out into the audience, focusing on the two first rows. I've seen professional comedians do this a zillion times, so I know I need to work quickly. Choose my targets. There! I got them!

The spotlight lands on me, which is my cue to begin.

"Hey you," I say, pointing to a girl in the second row. She looks up, giving me a shy smile. She obviously hasn't been to too many comedy shows. "You have really nice glowy skin...." I tell her. The girl looks surprised. Then I add, "between all those pimples."

The girl covers her face with her hands.

"Didn't anyone ever tell you kids with acne shouldn't touch their faces?" I ask her.

There's some uncomfortable laughter, mostly from the back of the school auditorium.

I move on to my next target, a boy sitting in the middle of the front row. He's wearing an Ariana Grande T-shirt. When our eyes meet, he crosses his arms over his chest. "Too late!" I tell him. "I already know you're an Ariana Grande superfan. What'd you do, steal your sister's T-shirt?"

This time, nobody laughs.

Not one single person.

I look out at the audience. "Haven't you guys ever heard of Don Rickles? Don Rickles was the king of insult comedy!"

I hear someone clear their throat. It's Ms. Lemieux, my English teacher, the faculty representative who helps organize our school's monthly variety show. She pops up from her seat. "Raymond," she says, "That's enough for today."

I'm not handsome. I'm not a good student. I'm not athletic. I'm not musical. And I'm definitely not tall. There's only one thing that has ever made me stand out – I'm funny.

At least that's what I used to think.

Until this afternoon when I did my first-ever stand-up routine. Until I officially became A Flop. A Dud. A Disaster.

When I get to our locker, Ricky is already there. He taps my shoulder. I'm glad he doesn't mention the talent show. It's only when we're walking home from school that he asks, "Who's Don Rickles anyway?"

Don Rickles is my comedic hero. He pretty much invented heckling. He even had his own sitcom in the 1970s. Whenever I watch Don Rickles on youtube, I laugh so hard I cry.

Ms. Lemieux wants to talk to me. At least *she* knows who Don Rickles is. Only she's not a fan. "Insult comedy is out of style," she tells me. "And you're going to have to apologize to those two students you insulted yesterday."

"But I was only joking," I tell her.

Ms. Lemieux shakes her head. "I didn't laugh," she says.

"Ouch," I tell her, "that hurt."

Ms. Lemieux explains that she's arranged for the two students to come to her office at the end of last period so that I can apologize in person. "And, Raymond," she warns as I'm leaving her office, "don't try turning it into a joke."

I bet no one ever made Don Rickles apologize to anybody he heckled. Don Rickles was a superstar millionaire. If he was still alive, I wonder what he'd think of what Ms. Lemieux said – that insult comedy is out of style.

The two students are waiting outside Ms. Lemieux's office. "Uh, hi," I say. Then I drop my voice and add, "Look, I'm sorry about the stuff I said yesterday. But I was only joking."

Ms. Lemieux has joined us. “Raymond,” she says. “Let me teach you something about how apologies work. They never include the word *But*.”

“But...” I say before I can stop myself.

The girl laughs.

There is something about the sound of that laugh that makes me feel better than I have felt since ... well... yesterday.

So I try apologizing again. “It’ll probably come out better if I know your names,” I tell them.

The girl’s name is Ariana. “Like Ariana Grande?” I can’t help asking.

“Yup,” she says.

The boy flinches. I guess he still feels bad about how I heckled him. Maybe that’s why today he’s wearing an all-black T-shirt. His name is Pierre-Luc.

I take a deep breath. “Look,” I say to the two of them, “Ariana and Pierre-Luc, I’m sorry about the stuff I said yesterday. I’m sorry for hurting your feelings.”

“It’s not easy having acne,” Ariana says. “None of the creams I use are helping.”

“I love Ariana Grande,” Pierre-Luc adds.

I end up walking to my locker with Ariana. It turns she’s cousins with Ricky’s neighbour. And she’s going to her cousin’s house after school. So the three of us – Ricky, Ariana and me -- walk home together.

We talk about our favourite comedy movies of all time. I already know Ricky’s favourite: *Men in Black*. Ariana’s is *Mean Girls*. I decide it’s better not to mention *Don Rickles*.

“You know what I think is really funny?” Ariana says when we get to her cousin’s.

“What?” I’m surprised by how much I want to know the answer.

“People who can laugh at themselves. They’re the funniest.”

That gives me the idea for my new comedy routine. Ms. Lemieux is surprised that I want to sign up for the next variety show. “Surprised in a good way,” she says, “because in a similar

situation, other kids might have given up on their dream to become a stand-up comedian. You did humiliate yourself, Raymond.”

“Thanks,” I tell her, “for reminding me.”

“There is one thing though,” Ms. Lemieux says, “this time, you’re going to have to run your routine by me before performance day.”

“I bet no one ever made Don Rickles do that.”

Ms. Lemieux doesn’t laugh. Instead she says, “Maybe someone should have.”

I lower the mic, then I pause, and lower it again. When I lower it a third time, the audience laughs.

“Don’t worry, guys,” I say, “Ms. Lemieux vetted the following routine. And no animals were harmed during its production.”

I get some laughter for that crack too, but not as much as I got for lowering the mic three times.

“So I’ve decided to quit heckling other kids. I thought I’d try heckling myself instead....” I step away from the mic, and pretend to be looking at the person who is standing there.

“You’re fourteen?” I say to my invisible self. “Weren’t you supposed to have a growth spurt by now?”

I hear laughter, and even some hooting.

“Is it true you’re obsessed with some dead comedian no one here ever heard of?”

More laughter.

“I heard you called him king of insult comedy. You know what they call you, kid? King of the apology! Apparently you’ve been getting a ton of practice!”

Even more laughter. I’m laughing too.

I look out at the audience. There’s Ariana sitting in the same place she was sitting when I heckled her. She gives me a thumbs up. That thumbs up makes me feel about three inches taller.