

## **This Land: Reno**

Sometimes you just cannot help but grin when the guy who's been a royal pain in the butt gets his comeuppance. You shouldn't delight in his misery, but you do. Like when the idiot who has been recklessly cutting into lanes back and forth without signaling is spotted down the road pulled over by the police with their blinking blue lights. Like when the French wine experts select in a blind tasting Californian wines as better than the French wines. Or like when the stridently anti-abortion congressman gets his mistress pregnant and presses her to get an abortion. Wicked glee it is indeed. Shouldn't smile but you do.

This malicious joy is what lurks behind lots of our jokes. Comeuppance jokes. Like when the ridge runner from the hills outwits the flatlander who thinks he's so smart. Like when the farmer baits the salesman with his daughter's charms and farmer ends up with a new car. Comeuppance jokes. Get even jokes. The wry smile from the oppressed over the oppressor. The underdog over the moronic self-anointed alpha.

It is speculated that this is one reason there are and have been so many witty Jewish comedians: Sid Caesar, Jon Stewart, Mel Brooks, Gilda Rador, Allan Sherman, Fanny Brice, Joan Rivers, Carl Reiner, George Burns. Given centuries of abuse by the majority, humor was one delicious and subversive way the Jews could get one over on the goyim. The book, "Born to Kvetch," mentions how Jewish prisoners of the Nazi's would, whenever they could, be sneaky and clever and insulting without the guards ever knowing it, what the author contends is the usual Jewish tactic of 'powerless subterfuge.' Truth be told, it is a similar story of what lies behind lyrics of African-American spirituals.

Yes, Woody Guthrie wrote hundreds of songs about tragedies, disaster, injustice. Woody sang his Columbia River songs, his western classics, his New York songs, his children's songs, his war songs, his organizing songs, his dust bowl ballads. But Woody's motto also was: "Take it easy, but take it." Woody could tell a good joke and sing a fun song. And he could spin a good yarn and tell a good joke and get the hicks in the hall laughing and slapping their knees. "You go tell, them, Woody. We ain't so stupid as they might think. We may be broke, we may have lost the farm, we may have dirty hands full of calluses, but we know what's right and what ain't."

I had the advantage of a veteran pastor telling me when I was interviewed for my first call as a pastor that if I were smart I really should shut up for a year and listen. Get to know the folks first; even then you're assumptions likely will be wrong.

There is the difference between stupid and ignorant. I may do a great funeral but I'm terrible at other things, like how to install a garbage disposal, like figuring out Sirius in my wife's car. That doesn't make me stupid, just ignorant. Stupid is when you refuse to admit what you don't know or when you think you know everything. I've also seen a lot of really smart people do

really dumb things. Say, what do you think will happen if we smash some atoms? High IQ's don't impress me much.

Take Woody's song "Philadelphia Lawyer." It's slang for a sharpie. The song takes place in the rough and rowdy town of Reno. Cow town then. Gambling, beer halls, a good time had by some. Not by all. Here comes this Philadelphia Lawyer. Easterner. Wealthy. Full of himself. So much so that he begins sparking with this young gal, let's call her Polly. Him thinking he's the rooster in the hen house. Sincere? Probably not. You've seen the type: the dominion type. Them who think they own others, they who use others to get what they want, grab whatever they want.

Sill, Polly, well, she enjoys the attention. Mr. Philadelphia Lawyer is romantic and his slicked back hair probably smells nice and he has soft hands from paperwork rather than leather and barbed wire. Perhaps he baits her with promises of a new life that will take Polly away from working the farm married to this cowpoke named Bill. The tale gets juicier when you hear she's known nicer things before Reno.

Who can guess how women feel and think about these things? I've been confused for years by them. .

Well, Philadelphia Lawyer may be good with smooth talk but Cowboy know his way around a six-shooter. Cowboys have other codes to live by.

I can hear Woody grinning. Nah, it's probably a good belly laugh:

*Way out in Reno, Nevada,  
Where romance blooms and fades,  
A great Philadelphia lawyer  
Was in love with a Hollywood maid.*

*"Come, love, and we'll go ramblin'  
Down where the lights are so bright.  
I'll win you a divorce from your husband,  
And we can get married tonight."*

*Wild Bill was a gun-totin' cowboy,  
Ten notches were carved in his gun.  
And all the boys around Reno  
Left Wild Bill's maiden alone.*

*One night when Bill was returning  
From ridin' the range in the cold,*

*He dreamed of his Hollywood sweetheart,  
Her love was as lasting as gold.*

*As he drew near her window,  
Two shadows he saw on the shade;  
'Twas the great Philadelphia lawyer  
Makin' love to Bill's Hollywood maid.*

*The night was as still as the desert,  
The moon hangin' high overhead.  
Bill listened awhile through the window,  
He could hear ev'ry word that he said:*

*"Your hands are so pretty and lovely,  
Your form's so rare and divine.  
Come go with me to the city  
And leave this wild cowboy behind."*

*Now tonight back in old Pennsylvania,  
Among those beautiful pines,  
There's one less Philadelphia lawyer  
In old Philadelphia tonight.*

### **Coda: It's big.**

It really is big.

It really is.

Our daughter's roommate at the American Academy of Dramatic Arts in Manhattan arrived from her home outside Cambridge, England. Fiona is her name. Our Penelope and roommate Fiona hit it off immediately. Fiona was all excited about living in Manhattan right near Madison Square Garden. New York City is excitement enough but Fiona was even more trilled and giddy about traveling about the United States and soaking the adventure of it all in.

It took Fiona no time at all to suggest that she and Penelope travel about. Said Fiona: "This is so great to be here. How about we take the weekend off and go to Florida?"

Many folks from Europe just don't get it. How can they when it is quicker to drive from Edinburgh, Scotland, to London, England, than it is to cross Pennsylvania (I have done both, even navigating the roundabouts in England with my wife reminding me to keep turning left)?

How can they get it when Fiona's family would drive to the south of France for a weekend getaway?

It's big.

Folks in Wyoming own ranches the size of Manhattan. Our shared Superior Great Lake is larger than England. It took me over eleven hours to drive across Montana and even then I came up short. The next day I turned a curve on Route 2 (the Great Northern) and there in front of me loomed rising from the high desert a sky high fence-line that was draped in clouds, otherwise known as the Rockies.

It's big. And if it is not desolate and deserted, it is crowded and crazy.

We are big. From sea to shining sea.