

Laughsplaining, or,

My Entire Nonfiction Essay, but Every Time I Laugh When I'm Scared It Gets More Scholarly

In my mind's eye, I can still see myself discovering the notification on a Sunday afternoon. My innocent, youthful head was far away in the clouds, but the siren-like blue light from my phone called me back to earth. I held the phone in my hand and let that alien technology scan me. It unlocked, silently and swiftly. Instagram opened on the screen.

There stood my poor little book blog, earnestly created but largely ignored, alone in its little pocket of the internet where no one can hear you scream. Imagine then my surprise, when, unannounced and unbidden, a stranger appeared as my newly christened follower.

This dark and mysterious interloper?

He called himself SugerDadday60.

I'm going to ask you to go back and reread that.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, but I doubt that you saw it correctly. To fully experience the delight that ensued, I'm going to need you to understand that his username wasn't SugarDaddy60, nor was it SugerDadday60. It was SugerDadday60. Yes, I agree, this was even better than any of us could have anticipated.

Even then, I laughed out loud in surprise and glee. My jaw dropped. What had a 19-year-old midwestern Mormon girl done to deserve such a windfall?

I remember staring at the username, unable to tear myself from the fascination of it all, the arrival of this man, this myth, this legend.

Even as I reveled in it, my inner mom friend, that innately over-protective part of me, was losing her mind. This wasn't normal. I was pleased with the absurdity, but I was merely little Simba, not yet a Lion King, laughing in the face of danger before the hyenas appeared.¹ My inner mom friend begged me to ignore the notification, to block him before things got out of hand. But my good humor would not be abated; I had to know who SugerDadday60 was.

¹ Ferguson, *Disney's The Lion King*.

And here's what I found. You'll be surprised to hear that SugerDadday60 was *not* a fellow reader interested in my book reviews. He was "looking for a sugar baby to take care of her needs, rents and pay her a weekly allowance."² \$5,000, dear reader. Weekly. Via Paypal, no less. And, blessed day of days, this bald, beer-bellied, 60-something suger dadday also supported broke college students.

He didn't realize all of the free publicity he'd get when he followed a writer.

Before you start thinking ill of the man, he meant what he said—the posts were his proof. Advertised over and over again, in white-on black text, was his calling card: "sugar baby dm". If his age and his beard hadn't frightened me off yet, his lack of grammar should have. But each piece of incriminating material was more fuel on the fire of my amusement. Some of the other photos were wads of cash in a wallet so thick it would be impossible to close; still more were Paypal screenshots of an account with upwards of \$60,000.

My smile waned as I found one picture, blurry and faceless, of one of SugerDadday60's existing sugar babies, cash in hand. She wore a dirty, skimpy top and looked anything but glamorous.

Before I continue, I should tell you something about myself. When I turned twelve and asked my mother to tell me about the birds and the bees, I was told that there were birds and there were bees. To young me, this was the carte-blanche of ignorance. I didn't have to understand sex, so I didn't want to. At least, until I started having nightmares about sexual assault. I remember telling my friends, at the ripe old age of 14, that I would rather die than suffer at the hands of a rapist. Clearly, a cheerful little girl.

To review, the book blogger tickled pink by a man that embodied her deepest disgust was somehow the same woman who had gone to bed the night before and prayed for dreams free of sexual predators. What made me laugh? And what ingrained the memory so deeply in me?

Because things become less scary when we understand them, I scoured the internet for answers. And here's what I know: Sometimes I laugh when I should be scared. Sometimes you do, too. But I'll bet you knew that.

² I'm so sorry but even CMOS didn't know how to cite this.

But, do you understand how deeply, stereotypically human it is to laugh at fear? Because even Disney originally storyboarded Scar and other characters laughing as they plummeted to their death.³ I'm willing to bet you didn't know *that*—if only because I, as a Mormon, am unique in using my knowledge of Disney characters as a crutch in conversation.

Scientists aren't sure what causes nervous laughter or fear laughter, nor do they know why it's so ubiquitous among us *Homo sapiens*. They do know that macaque monkeys laugh or smile when they feel threatened; it's their way of admitting fear and avoiding conflict.⁴ Something about macaques wants everyone to know that they know that something is wrong. I've heard that their laugh is somewhat reminiscent of a chainsaw.

Maybe that's two things we have in common, because, as it turns out, some of the same chemicals that emit the human flight or fight response are also involved in our positive responses. It's possible for our brains to just get confused and cope with fear by pretending it's glee.⁵

I can recall rehearsing for a scene in a musical. (Is it too Mormon of me to admit it was *Beauty and the Beast*?) I was to be lifted up by four “wolves” and then “escape”. The choreography went to the beat. Two grab my arms. Two grab my feet. All pull up. All pull down. All pull up. All let go.

The first time we rehearsed it, that last part was taken a little too literally, and I was sent flying into our choreography mirror, music stand, and piano. There was yelling and crashing and people asking me if I was okay. I couldn't stop laughing. I was laughing so hysterically that I couldn't even answer them.

The bruise I got that day lasted about a month and a half.

Is that why I laughed at SugerDaddy60? It seems I may have been the macaque, confused and desperate at the fear I was emoting, instinctually seeking for some way to make that fear known. Was SugerDaddy60 merely the wall that I was freefalling into? Or was he the wolf launching me?

³ KingScar06, “Lion King - Alternate Ending.”

⁴ Green, “Why Do We Laugh.”

⁵ “How Can Fear Be Terrifying.”

Science may never know. See, I am part of the confusing generation that insists on taking things lightly, on memeing Donald Trump and global warming and the coronavirus. Oh we youths, aren't we a funny, inexplicable lot?

Except as it turns out, we youths are a merely average lot—yes, the baby boomers were right all along. People have been cracking jokes in crises for all of recorded history. Kilroy Was Here, that pervasive doodle from World War II, is considered to be the world's first viral meme.⁶ The soldiers in the Civil War pranked so much that it came to be called the age of impractical joking.⁷ It was only during the Bubonic plague that satire about the Catholic church began to emerge.⁸

Even in the Holocaust, there were reports of a boy laughing on his way to the death chambers. Furious soldiers demanded to know why he laughed. He replied, “You are bringing me my death, and for this I'm supposed to wait in line?”⁹

That one boy was pulled out of line, and his life was saved.

See, dictators can't abide humor in the face of fear. So much so that standing up to dictators has come to be known by a new term: laughtivism.¹⁰ In the Middle East, in Africa, and, of course, in the United States, nonviolent protestors are using witty satire to dispel fear, build confidence, and make themselves cooler than their opposition. And it works. In Serbia, a small student activist group called Otpor simply put a barrel with dictator Milosevic's face on it and left a baseball bat nearby. People naturally came in droves to take their swing at the hated man. But police couldn't find the culprits to arrest. What did they do? They arrested the barrel.¹¹

Fast forward, and Otpor grew to 70,000 members and provoked a national movement that culminated in the deposition of Milosevic.¹²

⁶ Al-Heeti, “Coronavirus Memes Help World Cope.”

⁷ Al-Heeti, “Coronavirus Memes Help World Cope.”

⁸ Williams, “It's Okay to Find Humor.”

⁹ Ostrower, “Humor as a Defense Mechanism,” 191.

¹⁰ Popovic and Mladen, “Why Dictators Don't Like Jokes.”

¹¹ Popovic and Mladen, “Why Dictators Don't Like Jokes.”

¹² Kurtz, “Otpor Struggle for Democracy,” 2.

Admittedly, SugerDadday60 has not oppressed me. He didn't even DM me. He probably didn't know that the life he was paying his sexual objects to live is the kind of thing that keeps me up at night.

But I laughed anyway. And I submit to my critics that Freud considered humor the most mature defensive mechanism,¹³ meaning my therapist can suck it. Psychologists today suggest that the ability to laugh at something that formerly traumatized us is a sign of psychological healing. So if you're laughing already when you're scared, you're telling yourself you will overcome.¹⁴ Laughter becomes a weapon and a battle cry.

Still, I have to wonder, would I cope with laughter if the story *was* less benign? What if SugerDadday60 asked me to join his harem and verbally abused me if I took a hard pass? What if he just started sending pictures of his unmentionables? It happens every day. I recently considered lighting my phone on fire after learning that 16% of sexts are sent unsolicited, to completely random numbers.¹⁵ So yeah, what if SugerDadday60, like much of the internet, was just a little less sweet? Could I still laugh?

Some women could. Some women *do*. And they are the real heroes of this story. I remember starting college in Utah and finding the glorious Provo Guys Am I Right Instagram page, which posted telling screenshots of the "nice guys" on dating apps—guys who can switch from pleading for attention to insulting a women's virtue at the drop of the hat. Unfortunately, after years of flack from the aforementioned Provo Guys, @provoguysamiright is now gone.

Yet, my hopes and dreams live on in countless other accounts. Instagram's @instagranniepants illustrates naked comics of the men who message her and posts their reactions. @byefelipe posts the unwanted DMs themselves. Even on Facebook, the place Boomers walk in where Millenials fear to tread, has accounts like Sexism! As Seen on Facebook, which compiles endless series of sexist memes. The list goes on,¹⁶ women who use laughter as a weapon against near-constant harassments. My heroes.

¹³ Ostrower, "Humor as a Defense Mechanism," 185.

¹⁴ Lickerman, "Why We Laugh."

¹⁵ Lee, "Here's How Much Sexting Increased."

¹⁶ Weiss, "8 Creative Ways."

Is it offensive? Is it irreverent? Some men think so. But so did Milosevic, and I wasn't flattered to be instastalked by a guy named SugerDaddy60, either.

Yet, no more than six hours from his introduction, SugerDaddy60 was just . . . gone. I thought maybe he blocked me, but by obsessively checking from other accounts, I learned that Instagram must have deemed him harmful enough to delete his account. To be honest, I was sad.

Like the women before me, I learned there is something transcendently laughable about seeing a man lay his ego bare in his desperation for love. Something in me mourned, not for the loss of SugerDaddy60, but for the ability to reclaim the experience as a joke, to make laughter my "weapon and battle cry."

Did I win? Did I become the hero to SugerDaddy60's villain by ignoring his advances? Was laughter the scythe with which I reaped SugerDaddy60's sinful soul? Nah. He's probably still out there with a new account and a new name. Even if he's gone for good, he wasn't the only online predator. There might even be—dare I say it?—a SugerDaddy61. So I didn't win anything. I just outlasted him. But I laughed while doing it.

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