The Joke's on You

Whitney Thomas Dooley

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It was a fine Wednesday to take off from the office at noon and get in eighteen holes. Sam Minor was very nearly drunk with the pleasure of an unexpected holiday as he stood on the first tee with his foursome. Hal and Wilbur both teed up and drove their usual 200 to 225 yards straight down the middle. Sam's sense of well being was heightened by the indication that everyone was going to play well enough to genuinely enjoy the afternoon. He stood, gently swaying back and forth from the balls of his feet to his heels and gloried in the crisp sweetness of the new Spring air. The sunlight had that shiny new penny quality that comes only on those fresh days of early spring when winter's passing has left the air cool enough to be invigorating. Enjoying the weather too, jays and robins flew about the pines that bordered the fairway and added their excited voices to the idyllic picture that Sam was enjoying. Sam's meditations were broken by Charlie Lake, his next door neighbor.

"Hey, Sam, old buddy, let's get this show on the road. What do you say? Here, lemme tee you up. Try out this new ball Titleist just came out with. I'm sold on 'em and you will be too when you hit it. Here it is, Sam, step up and stroke it down the fairway."

During his spiel, Charlie had bent over, his back to Sam. Now he turned and faced him, grinning broadly. Midway between the blue markers was a brilliant white golf ball sitting snugly atop a red tee. A nagging doubt began to grow in the back of Sam's mind but as it was such a beautiful day, and he felt so good, he shoved it back and let it stay there.

"New ball from Titleist, eh? Well, I'll just powder it a good one and see how it does."

Charlie kept grinning, Sam addressed the ball, set his mind, began a smooth backswing, then came through with all the force his six foot frame could muster. The clubhead cut through the air in a mighty arc, connected with the ball....and stopped dead. Charlie's new Titleist ball was cast iron securely welded to a two feet steel tee. A sledge hammer couldn't have moved it. Charlie was now openly laughing.

"G-GOODDAMNIT CH-CH-CHARLIE!" Sam chattered as his frame vibrated. "I SH-SHOULD'VE KNO-KNOWN!"

Charlie was now convulsed with laughter, rolling about on
the tee like a spastic fetus. After his teeth quit chattering, Sam made no more mention of Charlie's practical joke. He was too good natured to allow bad humor on his part spoil everyone's game. But he played atrociously and had a miserable time despite the lovely weather.

Sam and Charlie lived opposite one another in the Edgewood subdivision. Both held management positions in nearby Atlanta. Both enjoyed the usual trappings of middle class American life: two cars, color televisions, and vacations in Florida. In keeping with his bourgeois existence, Sam had the common avocations. He was a tolerable golfer and belonged to the nearby Silver Pines Country Club. Once or twice a year he'd pack up his shotgun and do some deer hunting.

Charlie belonged to the Silver Pines too, but past that his hobbies deviated considerably from the norm. Unlike most men who devoted their spare time to sports or stamps or even the fine art of relaxing, Charlie had spent most of his leisure time since his sixteenth birthday perfecting the art (if it can be called that) of the practical joke. In a spare room dubbed his "workshop", he had the most extensive private collection of practical joke paraphernalia in the Southeast. On shelves that lined the room and in various labeled drawers, he kept a variety of ready made jokes. There were: electric buzzers; false doorbells that stung anyone trusting enough to press them; pooh-pooh cushions; plastic ice cubes with all sorts of unsavory creatures embedded in them; pounds of rubber hors d'oeuvres; a veritable pantry of plastic foodstuffs, from olives to hamburgers; and a collection of semi-poisonous gum and candy. He had more substances to discolor, burn, and putrify the human mouth than could have been found in an Elizabethan apothecary. But this was small time stuff to Charlie. He preferred to construct his pranks from scratch, according to an elaborate plot. Often the punch line of one of Charlie's escapades wouldn't come until a week after he'd begun it. Besides no one who knew him would touch any refreshments at a party he attended. Nor would anyone, under any circumstances, ring his doorbell.

Like any addicted practical joker, Charlie was totally insensible as to how far he could push his victims. He simply could not see the distinction between harmless fun and open harassment. Thus, he collected many black eyes and the lasting enmity of most of his neighbors. He had changed subdivisions twice because of petitions drawn by irate neighbors who failed to see the humor in his endless pranks. It wasn't really the neighbors who made him move, although they did provide a plausible excuse. Charlie was looking for someone, a person that all practical jokers look for even though they may not be aware of it. For the obsessed practical joker is a parasite looking for a host -- the host being a good natured soul who will bear the pranks without punching the jokester out.

Edgewood had at first seemed like the other places he had lived. The man two doors down had not been impressed by the playmate playing cards with his wife's face superimposed on the nude. He'd nearly killed Charlie at Sam's poker game. The folks on either side of his house hadn't thought much of their pink lawns either. But with Sam, Charlie knew he'd found a home. Sam bore Charlie's pranks with the patience of Job. Week after week, Charlie pulled prank after prank. Sam would grit his teeth, compose himself, and try to pretend it was nothing. Sam had a precise sense of social order. He believed men should mold their lives around a code that best helped them survive in the environment they found themselves in. Thus, as a member of a complex and populous civilization, violent reactions were deplorable to him. He was determined not to lower himself to the level of a primitive culture by caving Charlie's face in.

Good things don't last forever, as Charlie found out after he'd been living across the street from Sam about a year. He had done so many things to Minor's car that when it wouldn't start, Sam simply walked across the street and asked what was wrong with it without even raising the hood. Weird creatures on the lawn and ugly things inside ice cubes no longer received even a raised eyebrow in the Minor household. Sam and his family had developed an immunity to practical jokes. Now, just as a practical joker must have a victim, he must, above all, have a reaction from the victim. The Minors' growing apathy towards his jokes began to prey on Charlie's mind. He became subject to periods of deep depression and would occasionally drift off into deep thought in the middle of a conversation. He totally abandoned his conventional ready made pranks and began to work on more elaborate plots. But even then he continued to receive the same indifferent response from the Minors. Hell, they hadn't even fallen for the fake newspaper he'd had printed up that named Sam as the principal suspect in a bank robbery. The damn thing had cost fifty bucks, too. Soon his preoccupation with devising a practical joke that would shake up the Minors began to occupy most of his waking hours. Even when he was fulfilling his duties as vice-president of an advertising firm, his thoughts were seldom diverted from his hobby by business.

He was musing about his problem one Monday morning as he was in conference with a prospective client, Mr. Thurwood Brown, president of the Atomic Sound Corporation. Atomic Sound was a new company that manufactured sound and lighting systems for touring rock and roll bands. Brown was an energetic young executive who intended to move his firm into prominence in a field already dominated by major companies. Such ambition was not impressed with Charlie's dreamlike lethargy.

Brown cleared his throat irritably, "Now, as I was saying, Mr. Lake, my firm needs nothing less than an explosive sales campaign, something that will create interest in professional circles as well as be fresh enough to be considered hip by music fans. Mr. Lake, are you listening? Mr. Lake?"

"Huh, whaa—oh yes, yes, Mr. Brown. Now where were we?"
Brown's mouth became a hard line. "I need a dynamic sales approach but I suppose I'll have to look elsewhere for it," he said, rising.

"Oh no, Mr. Brown. Please, wait just a moment. I must apologize for my inattention. I've been plagued by personal problems lately, but please give me a few moments and I'm sure
we can come up with something suitable." Charlie flashed his most winning smile and pulled a legal pad from his desk drawer.

Brown sat back with a slightly resigned air and resumed his dialogue. Lake began idly scrawling the word "atomic" on his pad as he made a half-hearted attempt to pay attention to his client's needs. Brown's voice soon rose to the top of the room and remained there as a disconsolate buzz that lacked the force to make itself heard. Charlie was drawing a mushroom cloud when a flash of inspiration brighter than the originator of that cloud struck him.

"I've got it, I've got it, I've got it!" Charlie screamed leaping up from his chair and dancing wildly around the room.

Brown stared at him in slack-jawed amazement. "What the hell is wrong with you?" he blurted out. "Whatever it is I hope it's not catching," he added.

"Oh no, Mr. Brown, you misunderstand. I've got the solution to my--uhh your problem." "Are you going to sit down and tell me about it or should I put on a sweat suit so I can jog around the room with you?" Brown replied dryly.

"Terribly sorry about that little outburst, Mr. Brown, but I was just caught up in the elation of a moment of creativity. I believe I have an idea that will net you a million dollars worth of free publicity, as well as establish the name of your equipment as the most effective sound reproduction gear in the world."

Brown was interested.

"What I propose is to use your equipment to simulate an atomic bomb blast complete with the flash of a fireball provided by one of your light sets, a hot blast of wind, and the thunderous roar provided by your fabulous sound gear."

Brown was not interested.

"Hear me out, Mr. Brown, this will not be so trite a project as to call a press conference and say how our equipment can imitate and project sound. No, no, no, we are going to be subtle, artful in this enterprise. Unannounced, we are going to convince a group of people -- say the residents of a fairly secluded subdivision or apartment complex -- that a nuclear attack has occurred not more than fifty miles away. Think of the headlines! Sober, upright, responsible citizens fooled. Their testimony to the press will be a monumental tribute to the efficiency of your equipment. Think of the slogans and jingles we can milk out of one publicity stunt, things like "Atomic Sound"; "P.A. with the force of the Atom"; or "Atomic Bomb powerful - Atomic Sound". Why, this will be the greatest coup in the history of advertising." "Eason, your job is to make a detailed study of the topography of the target area and determine the best place for the equipment to be set up. Davis, you will be the immediate coordinator of this project, reporting directly to me. As the success of this plan relies on secrecy let me assure you that if word of this leaks out beforehand, I shall have all of your jobs. That is all, gentlemen. Good luck."

The next two weeks were a flurry of activity in Charlie's department as his men performed their tasks with quiet efficiency. D-day arrived and everything was in readiness. The people of Edgewood knew what a nuclear explosion looked like, as Campbell and Williams had done their work the day before. Disguised as a construction crew, Charlie and his men brought in two trailer trucks of equipment and set it up on a ridge that ran along southwest border of Edgewood. Charlie watched his men set up the gear, then synchronized his watch with theirs, and went down to his house so that he could enjoy Sam Minor's reaction to the fullest.

It was a pleasant summer's evening and lots of people were sitting in lawn chairs in their yards. Children were playing up and down the street, enjoying the last light of dusk that is so perfect for hide and seek games. Charlie chain-smoked cigarettes as he peered out his window and watched the Minors playing on their front steps. Just as the last light faded away into a clear starry night and the Minors rose to go into their house, Charlie's men went into action. A blinding flash of light that grew brighter and brighter, almost to the limit of human endurance, froze them in their tracks. It subsided to a dull red glow on the horizon. Then the wind and sound came, an ear-splitting wall of sound and air.

Brown wavered. Sensing indecision, Charlie pressed on. His winning smile, obvious enthusiasm, and the expertise of twenty years as a master salesman brought Brown around to Charlie's point of view. Lake had not achieved his position as vice-president by luck. He knew how to sell an idea. Brown left a signed contract with Charlie and took away a feeling of winning smile, obvious enthusiasm, and the expertise of twenty years which is to compile information about the physical characteristics of atomic explosions. You will then write and have printed a booklet that supposedly advertises fallout shelters. The booklet must begin with as vivid a description of a nuclear blast as you can manage. Then you are to enter the target area posing as salesmen and see that every household gets a booklet as well as a verbal description of an explosion from you. I don't want our stunt ruined because these people might not know what a far off nuclear explosion looks like."

"Alexander, finding some shortwave transmitting gear that will override all the radios and televisions in the house is your job. And work up an imitation of a disc jockey who's just realized the world has ended and is talking about it. What you say on the air will be the clincher of this stunt."

"Shiffman and Thompson, your task will be to assemble the equipment provided by Mr. Brown in such a way as to accurately simulate a nuclear explosion at a distance of fifty miles from the target area. You'll have to locate some Hollywood wind machines in addition to the Atomic Sound stuff, since the shock wave of a nuclear blast is characterized by a strong wind as well as a lot of noise."

"Charlie became nearly hysterical as he watched Sam try to cover his wife and child with his body. He watched Sam rush them into the house and turned his attention to the radio to hear Alexander's imitation of a panic-stricken disc jockey. After ten or fifteen minutes he decided to go across the street to see the reaction first hand. Just as he started for the door, the bell rang. It was Sam, ashen faced and obviously in a state of shock.

"Don't say anything, Charlie," he said as he came in. Charlie bit his tongue to keep from laughing and tried to look serious as he listened. "You realize what's happened, don't you, Charlie? It's the end of the old world and the beginning of a new. We who've survived have a great responsibility to this planet. What we do now will determine if our species will survive and what sort of world we will live in. We dare not make a mistake or this bloody thing will happen again. You see, we have to choose the sort of man who will help build a new, clean society. We can't allow a bad apple to send us back down the road we came on. I'm sorry, Charlie, but our new society can't afford someone like you. We've got to have useful, mature people, and you just don't measure up. I don't like what I've got to do, but it's my duty to our race." "Charlie managed to get out "Wait a minute" before three slugs from Sam's 38 snub nose cut him off for good.