

THE COMEDY GAZELLE



ABOUT THE GAZELLE

When I first moved to Chicago, I was immediately struck by the level of talent in the scene. "Fuck, she's good," I thought as I watched Kristen Toomey annihilate a sold out Laugh Factory. *Why haven't I heard of her before?*

It's a question I come back to often, and a major problem here. The city's bursting with household-name-level talent, but unless you're in the midst of it, it can pass you by.

That's why I started The Comedy Gazelle – to bring outsiders into the heart of Chicago comedy, and to share knowledge that can hopefully make the scene that much stronger. It was also the pandemic and I had fuck else to do.

Thanks for your support.

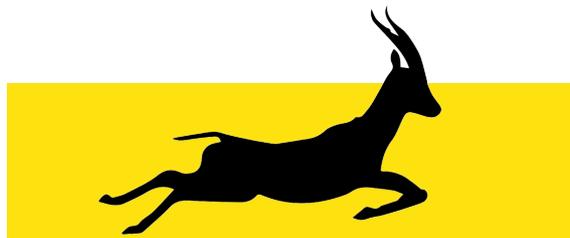
– Jerry

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INTERVIEW: NATE CRAIG

I first met Nate Craig (@natecraiglive) when I was running/dropping pizzas at The Comedy Bar. I was immediately drawn to his creative style, and when I heard he was recording his special at the Green Mill, I was excited to catch the show and reconnect. We talked set ups, establishing trust, staying present, and more.

So why did you choose the Green Mill? What thought process went into that?

I did Paper Machete, and I think that might be the best show in the country. Not only did I wanna do the Green Mill, but I wanted to do the stage behind the bar. I had never seen anyone do a special on a stage like that. I saw the footage; I'm really excited about how it came out. I just knew the bar could look so fucking cool for a special. At first the Green Mill was not an option; they wanted a lot of money and were talking to the production company. Then I was like, "Well, let me just try. I'll try to do this myself." I called them up and Dave Jemilo, the owner, was very responsive. I was like, "I wanted to call and let you know how much reverence I have for your venue. I did the poetry slam here when I was younger. I'm shooting my special and I just wanna reach out and tell you how great I think your Paper Machete show is. I think it's one of the best shows in the country, and I love the Green Mill." He was like, "Oh, yer da guy!" Then we just made it happen. And it just really came from how phenomenal I thought Paper Machete was as a show. I was like, "Wow, this is exactly where I want to tape."

Did All Things Comedy approach you about doing this, or how did that play out?

I pitched my last special to them and I shot it myself; it was real DIY and they gave me a distribution deal. They were happy with how it performed, and how it looked on the platform, and how it did on their socials. Also, I tour with Bill [Burr] sometimes, so they were like, "We wanna do your next special." Just beyond cool that opportunity. At this point in my career, I don't even have an agent. Any TV I've done, any touring I do, is all me. So more than anything, I'm just grateful for the opportunity.

How long have you been doing it?

I just realized I've been telling people 20 years for about three or four years now. I think my first time on stage was in '98. So 24 years now I think.



I was three years old. That's crazy.

Thanks for that. No, I'm kidding. Thanks for coming by the way. You were at the late show?

Yeah, it was great.

I was gonna say about the late show: I threw in a couple bits. I always try to have like three brand new bits for my tapings, cause I think it keeps the energy of the set fresh. It keeps me focused, and sometimes it doesn't hit, and sometimes it does, but it usually always makes the album better.

That's interesting. Sometimes I get sick of doing the same material, so I'll try something fresh and it'll completely bomb. Then I'm like, "Why the hell did I do that?"

But in the same sense, you can have bits that work really well initially, then they just stop working. I know a lot of comedians are familiar with that phenomenon. It has something to do with your comfort level, where your attitude towards the subject matter changes from when it was funny. And there's a freshness to it and a curiosity about it. Being too comfortable with some material is like kryptonite I guess.

Do you think it's almost like an expectation thing? Where you know people are gonna laugh, so you don't care as much?

Yeah, expectations are always a killer. Sometimes if you know a punchline works and it's something you really rely

on, you'll rush the setup and it won't work. It's cause you tried to cut corners and you didn't let the idea fully develop in front of the audience because it didn't have to develop in your mind. You were too familiar with it and you skipped over the process they needed to understand whatever the comedy was; you didn't give them the proper amount of time to identify with the context.

I tend to get in my head about set ups. "Is this too long? Is this too short? Is this clear enough?" Sometimes I feel like I'm paying more attention to the set up than the joke itself. Do you have any advice for having strong, clear setups?

For the sake of how a lot of people are writing now, when a tweet that I love doesn't work on stage and I think it should, and I try it several different ways and I'm just like, "Damn, why is this not working?" - I get to the point where I'm like in denial. I'm like, "I think they're missing this." It usually boils down to: I just have to communicate my honest opinion about something. I did this long bit about this dude with this leaf blower. That whole "I wasn't born in a coal mine, but I've roofed houses, I've painted houses, I've baled hay - I worked enough as a kid to know that driving a golf cart around a campsite with a leaf blower doesn't make you the backbone of the American economy." It's wordy and whatever, but I just had to clearly state my reasoning, and once I got them on the same page, then I'm able to do punchlines about the leaf blower in general. It's not rocket science, but it is a point of view thing. A one liner or two liner that might otherwise work structurally - somebody might get it to work, but if you're just a regular guy and your style is more conversational and you're not doing this absurd character, then you actually have to have the conversation, so that you're reestablishing your point of view. "I don't like leaf blowers, I don't like when people have an overinflated opinion of themselves, here's a cross section of those two things." But in order to communicate that second part, it's a little bit more legwork. When I first told it, it would just get silence because it was me judging this man and I didn't have the argument. Did I know how to work? Did I have to work out in the sun? Maybe this is work? I didn't explain the whole scenario that this is a

guy trying to burn time, essentially taking a shit on the clock. That's not the American worker that we need to protect necessarily with our own moral compasses as we sit here and consider this comedian's material.

Don't you think that's so interesting? How much tap dancing you need to do in order to get people to realize you're not a dick?

Yeah, but you do gotta earn it. You gotta earn their trust. Ever since the existence, or lack thereof, of cancel culture, so many comedians just sloppily blame people's sensibilities for their own inability to establish a trust. You have to establish a trust. Nobody knows you. Even if you're famous, a lot of the people encountering your live comedy don't know you and don't trust you to deal with certain things. It's a little extra and I understand it's boring when people make things about them and hold everybody hostage with their sensitivities, but at the same time, comedy's hard. It should be hard. You have to establish certain things with an audience, and that takes skill to do. I for one don't always get mad at a crowd when they make someone properly state their thesis. Also, a lot of comics, especially starting out, when they go up on a showcase show - the audience doesn't need you. There's someone coming up right after you. It's only gotten more difficult because people watch more comedy; they think they know comedy better. A lot of people are judging comedy based on how the room is responding. And a room can be dumb. A room can be angry. A room can be sensitive. A room can have its own set of hoops that it makes people jump through.

"YOU HAVE TO ESTABLISH A TRUST. NOBODY KNOWS YOU. EVEN IF YOU'RE FAMOUS, A LOT OF THE PEOPLE ENCOUNTERING YOUR LIVE COMEDY DON'T KNOW YOU AND DON'T TRUST YOU TO DEAL WITH CERTAIN THINGS."

Are you trying to figure out a room as you're performing, or are you like, "These are the jokes I'm doing. Sorry."

At this point, it's more the latter. If it's my show, it's my show for a reason. The club's asked me to come there, they like my style, and they want me to do my act. So you have way more leeway there and you also have more time. But if you have to establish yourself in 10 minutes and build an arc into a set in 10 minutes? To me that's more difficult. Some people are better suited for that and that's a really unique, awesome talent. Someone can just go up there and have a sense of humor that people can latch onto with next to no introduction. That's a skill I've always wanted to be able to have. Of all the different types of circumstances for comedy, that's been the one that's been hardest for me: to get them on board with me more quickly. I've gotten better at it as I've moved on in my career, but it still eludes me. That's why late night sets are so valuable. How do you show them who you are and make them want to experience the world with you for a couple minutes to the point where they let all their guard down and are soaking up everything you're throwing at them?

Over the years, what have you learned that's helped you with that?

A set never went as well as you thought it did, and it never went as bad as you thought it did. Just because they're not laughing doesn't mean they don't like you. And it definitely doesn't mean they're not listening. Oftentimes a quiet crowd is a crowd that's listening. If they're listening to you, you're doing something right. So how do you just go from being watchable to being funny and entertaining? If what you're saying is well written and you feel good as a person, a quiet room is not necessarily a bad room. It really oftentimes is what it takes to get to the point where you can start breaking

the tension and start blowing them up. If they're hooked into what you're talking about, sometimes it just takes a little bit of listening. You know that clock where you're like, "Oh, I should probably make this show go better now with some material I'm more confident in?" That clock has gotten longer in me, I guess.

Interesting.

There's like a 30 second timer, a 60 second timer, a five minute timer, whatever the timer is - where I'm like, "Alright, stop fucking around. These people are starting to make a decision that's going to affect this set for longer than I want to have to dig myself out of." That clock, to where I feel like I need to change what I'm doing, has gotten longer - if that makes any sense.

Yeah, definitely. Do you think that's just a stage comfortability thing?

Yeah, you're confident in your material and the more you work, the more material you make work, the more you're confident in the material and your ability to make it work. That all just comes with time and experience and the stage time everyone talks about that is so valuable.

Getting back to your special, one thing I noticed is that you have all these really creative scenarios that you're able to walk the audience through. How important is the specific word choice to you when you're doing a long, creative bit like that?

I think it's pretty important. I'll give you an example that I changed the night of the taping - I changed from how I had been doing it since the beginning, and it was probably one of the older bits in the hour. It's the bit about the silver alert and how I always wanted to be a grandpa until I got a silver alert. I'm going in that ranty kind of tirade of laugh lines that are not quite punchlines, but part of the bit that



bumps the laughter up, and it's me reacting to how on earth is it okay to nark me out to the fire department like that. "Did you even look for me? My brain shut down, I'm not on the loose. Go get your shithead cousins, a flashlight and a rope and get me back on the patio. You thought it was okay to call and text three counties? Now everybody I ever knew thinks I'm out there in my pajamas running into a curb like a glitch in a video game." It's a passing line in a longer kind of tirade, but what I was saying was: "Like a videogame with a glitch in it." It's literally just counting syllables. Those extra syllables took the air out of it. They had to listen to you finish the thought. "Glitch in a videogame" lets them sit with the image. The key is painting the right picture so that everybody sees the same thing at the same time. That's going to make a laugh louder: how consistently the analogy you draw resonates with the crowd. If they all see the same image in their head, that laugh is going to hit. Not like I'm talking about a bit that's gonna stand out in the special; it's just a line I fixed that night.

Did you do that consciously?

I think it just came out different. It wasn't anything I was really thinking about too much; there were other bits I cared more about. That silver alert bit is a dismount from a more successful bit and then a lead-in to the next bit which is the one I cared about more. It was a story about my grandpa at the end of his life when his brain stopped working, but he was still trying to go fuck some stripper. Like, how the fuck does that happen? That sounds terrifying. And so the whole setup is the silver alert thing and then I make it personal and switch to the design flaw that men are cursed with, which is our fucking balls, you know? It's a blessing and a curse.

You mentioned laugh lines versus punchlines. What're your expectations of your laugh lines? I'll get a little thrown if certain laugh lines don't hit the way they normally do. Does that bother you at all?

Sure, but not really. It helps getting paid, man. Then you're like, "I'm doing the job I was asked to come here to do." You can just be like, "I got brought here because the club saw that line work, and that's another line I think is just as good as those lines. I got brought here for this, so I've been trusted to create comedy and I believe in that bit." You gotta just stand by your own material. And if they don't laugh, don't flinch. Again, they could just be listening. They could have fucking chicken tenders in their face. There's a lot of reasons they might not explode like the comedy special you want every show to sound like. I get that. You wanna

crush, you wanna be the funniest person on every show, you want to be understood, you want to accomplish the task of stand up comedy. But I guess I stopped judging shows in the moment. It's not fair to your whole set. You're also judging a whole set based on how one line went when you still got a whole bunch more set to go.

How do you get over that? I'm very aware of how well every tiny little thing is doing.

Sure, I get it. I do it as well. I'm not gonna pretend like I've figured out how to not overthink things. Reps, dude. You've fixed enough sets, you've seen enough sets start off quiet and get really awesome. I've seen crowds completely zone out on someone at the same time. It's like hypnotism. It's like a check drop, but without the checks. But you also see enough check drops. Groupthink is real. If you say something really heavy, one of the responses a crowd can have is to all think about what that made them think of in their own lives. There can be moments where you're being totally entertaining, but you made them think about their own lives too hard and they went off into their own heads. There can be a lot of reasons a crowd isn't laughing at the volume you want them to laugh, and it's not necessarily a bad thing. I also don't take it so personal like I used to. That just comes from stage time. It really helps to stay present, too. Your only way out is to stay present, and if you're thinking about how you're being perceived, you're not staying present. You have to be present in the stuff you're saying, and if you're thinking about how you're being perceived, you're operating in two different timelines. That's a distraction. Your job is to communicate the material; it's not to get your fucking balls padded. If your ego is being affected and they see that, I think that subconsciously tells them that this is about you.

That's an interesting distinction. You can feel present in that you're aware of what's happening, but that doesn't necessarily mean you're actually present in the moment.

You want to hit the lines the way they work, but it's about the material. If you're in touch with the material, then theoretically it just comes out of you like a feeling. I hate to sound corny like that, but it just comes out of you. It's a trick to recreate it. The best working comedians I think are the ones that can recreate what it is that made something funny to them over and over, and make a crowd see it. But if and when they are affected by the crowd's reaction to them, you can see that. It reads.

Sometimes I feel like I'm just thinking about what the next line is and am not really enjoying the moment. Did you ever have that?

For sure, yeah. That's kind of what I was talking about before, when you're like, "This is going sort of okay; I want it to go better, just get to this next punchline; this bit does really well." Then, all of a sudden, you forget to set up the whole joke and then the punchline doesn't work. Well, dude, you were trying to walk through a stand up set like it was an obstacle course, as opposed to just being in the moment. Rediscover it. I've always said this – I said it on an album – my brain is way smarter than me. If I can just get out of the way, I'm gonna come up with funny shit anyway. The more I think about it, the more the comedy kind of drains out of it.

How do you get out of your own way? I feel very similar.

One thing that I feel like over the years has never served me very well – and it's different if you have an opening riff that you're writing on the fly – but if I'm thinking about my act, like the order of my jokes and stuff I've said a million times, that is dangerous to me. Because I'm already not in the moment. If I'm just in the moment and I try to only consider what's coming through my eyeballs at that very moment and I don't try to get ahead of myself and I don't try to plan too much; I've already done all the planning. That's all there. Trust the preparation, man. For me, I try not to focus on words. Visualizing is important, but once I'm in the room and

I'm right about to be announced, then it's like, "We're here." It's a little late to start designing. You already did all the work. Just trust it and let it flow.



What's going through your head when you're about to get on stage at the Green Mill?

I was trying to just put everything out of my head. It helps to get two cracks at it. My last special I only did one take, and that was fine; it went well and I was very happy with how that went, but it's way nicer to have two. "Just do what you've been doing." All Things Comedy wanted to make that special because of what I had done before that. It's all a process. I set it up for a reason. I was there for a reason. It's putting yourself in a position and working very hard to put yourself in that position. I think that speaks volumes and should probably alleviate a lot of doubt. And that goes for every job you get in comedy. If you're hosting a show, you were asked to host the show. Be the host of the show. Have confidence in that.

"ONCE I'M IN THE ROOM AND I'M RIGHT ABOUT TO BE ANNOUNCED, THEN IT'S LIKE, 'WE'RE HERE.' IT'S A LITTLE LATE TO START DESIGNING. YOU ALREADY DID ALL THE WORK. JUST TRUST IT AND LET IT FLOW."

You're there for a reason.

Yeah, if you're at a club to headline - boom - somebody brought you there for that. They didn't bring anybody else there. Know that. Be confident in that. Deliver your material accordingly. Special taping? Awesome. We set this up. Let's fuck. Go up there and do what you did when it crossed your mind you were ready to record an album or shoot a special. Deliver it with confidence and do the bits. Have fun with them. If you think they're good enough to be on your special, they should sure as hell be fun to do.

Was there anything you felt went particularly well, or wish went differently? How are you feeling now that it's done?

I'm excited to get it out. I don't know if it went any better than a lot of the warm up sets did over the last month or two. I felt like there was really good energy in the room. As far as any specific bits, I'll have to see how the final edit comes out. If the bits work well enough for me to think I should tape an album or a special, then the comedy bits work. It's really more about the throughline. I always cared about like, "What's the point?" I can get really bored if I watch somebody who's excellent at stand up comedy, but bad at making it about something. That's just me, but I like to talk a little about what's going on in the world. Otherwise, what are we doing? Just pointing at our own assholes? I hope I was coherent. I know my suit looked good. That's more important than anything. I know I accomplished Frank Sinatra mode.



IT'S HIGH TIME WE RE-THINK AIRPORT SECURITY

A RECOUNTING OF THE TIME MY FRIEND HAD TO WAIT IN THE CUSTOMS LINE FOR A WHILE AND IT RUINED A FUNNY BIT I HAD PLANNED

by Jeff Braun (@jeff_braun_)

Imagine this: you've just traveled abroad for a week and had the time of your life. It's time to head home so you pack your bags, take one last shot of Uncle Tommy's Tequila, and jump on the plane. Your flight is bumpy, there's a freaking kid crying a row behind you (hey, maybe someone should give that kid a shot of Uncle Tommy's Tequila! Totally kidding.), and to make matters worse Disney's *The BFG* was not available so you had to watch Disney's *Meet the Robinsons* instead. Finally, you land! You're about to breathe a sigh of relief when you're suddenly corralled into a never ending customs line where you have to wade through all of the bureaucratic bullshit. Sounds horrible, right?

Well, now imagine this: your friends ask you to pick them up from the airport. You agree and immediately start plotting one of the funniest bits ever done: you will dress up like a chauffeur, but instead of writing your friends' names on the little whiteboard thing, you're going to write "MR. and MRS. CUM". It's the perfect bit. You buy a little whiteboard from Target for \$8, take one last shot of Uncle Tommy's Tequila (again, totally kidding), and jump in the car to drive to the airport. You get there 20 minutes after they land, perfect timing - but wait, something is amiss. Only one of your friends got through the Customs line. You see, she had that global entry thing where you can skip the Customs line, but your other friend did not. So now, you're standing outside of O'Hare with "MR. and MRS. CUM" on your little whiteboard, which makes zero sense because only one of them is going to come out. So you quickly try and erase it to just say "MRS. CUM", but then you get nervous because there are a lot more children at the terminal than you were expecting, so you just erase the whole thing.

At this point, you're absolutely freaking out because now you have an empty little whiteboard thing and you have t-8 seconds until your friend comes out for you to write something funny on it. So you decide to write "MRS. KUHM". That way, if a parent came over to you angry that you had the word "CUM" on your little whiteboard, you could pretend that your friend's last name was legitimately "KUHM", which sounds like a last name someone could have. And then as your

friend is coming out, an Airport attendant starts yelling at you to move your car because you're double parked. Your friend laughs gently at your whole getup, but the joke doesn't really land because you're trying to talk to the airport attendant, so you can't fully embody the character. You both get in the car, drive to McDonald's to get a coffee, wait an hour for your other friend to get through Customs, and by the time you pick up your other friend, you don't even have the confidence to get out of the car to do the whole thing again. The bit is dead in the water - all because of the Patriot Act.



CHRISTMAS IN JULY

by Luke Ipsum (@lukeipsum), Andrew Shankland (@mrshowbusiness), Jeff Braun (@jeff_braun_)

SCROOGE: Bah Humbug, I love summer! What a beautiful day at the beach!

GHOST: OOooohhHHH, Scrooge! I'm the ghost of Christmas in July Past and I'm here to show you the error of your ways.

SCROOGE: What? I already did this 6 months ago! I'm a reformed man now!

GHOST: Hey, I just go where I'm told, take it up with the ghost of Christmas in July Scheduling! Prepare to see the error of your ways!

Scrooge spins in place.

SCROOGE: What - what is this? I see myself, I'm at a Barbecue. It's a lovely day.

GHOST: Look in that tree over there.

SCROOGE: Ok, I don't really see anything in the tree.

GHOST: Look closer.

SCROOGE: Ok, I see a squirrel. Its head is kind of twitching. It looks like there's something slightly wrong with it.

GHOST: Exactly!

Scrooge spins around and travels back to present day.

SCROOGE: Wait, what?

GHOST: Oooooo I'm the Ghost of Christmas in July Present! Take a look at your surroundings.

SCROOGE: Wait, can we talk about that last visit first - woh that's a dead bird!

GHOST: Yessss! How does it make you feel?

SCROOGE: Not good.

GHOST: Yes exactly, now pick it up.

SCROOGE: No, can't I get some sort of disease from that?

GHOST: Pick it up, give it mouth to mouth resuscitation that little guy might make it!

SCROOGE: It's missing half its body. I don't think it's gonna do anything.

GHOST: Scrooge, if you want to become a better man you have to care about nature - kiss the bird Scrooge!

SCROOGE: It smells so bad!

GHOST: Personal growth smells like that to some people

SCROOGE: Is this a lesson for me or the bird?

GHOST: Both, I'm killing two stones with one dead bird.

SCROOGE: Where did you find the bird?

GHOST: You believe I'm a ghost but you don't believe I can find a dead bird?

SCROOGE: Fair point, but I'm not kissing the dead bird.

GHOST: If you don't kiss the dead bird you're doomed to repeat your mistakes for all eternity!

Scrooge kisses the bird.

SCROOGE: Ok, I kissed it

Scrooge spins in place.

GHOST: Hello, I'm the Ghost of Christmas in July Future.

SCROOGE: Please don't make me do any weird shit with animals.

GHOST: Trust the process young padawan.

SCROOGE: You sound a lot like the other ghosts.

GHOST: Look at your surroundings!

SCROOGE: Ok, I'm at the cemetery.

GHOST: Look in front of you.

SCROOGE: Oh no, it's my grave! Oh god, the humanity!

GHOST: No, look a few feet beyond that.

SCROOGE: There's not really anything - wait, is that a yorkie taking a shit?

GHOST: Yes!

SCROOGE: I'm very confused about what the lesson of this one is.

GHOST: Get closer to the Yorkie taking a shit.

SCROOGE: No, the owner is right there and he's eyeing me!

GHOST: Ask the yorkie's owner if you can keep the poop for research.

SCROOGE: Why would I want the yorkie's poop for research?

GHOST: To look inside.

SCROOGE: Look inside myself?

GHOST: No! To look in the poop! You have to dissect it to see what's inside! Biology is the lesson.

SCROOGE: Surely there are better ways to teach me about biology than to take me to my grave to pick up some dog's shit.

GHOST: I don't tell you how to do your job! Now pick up the poop, tell the owner it's okay you're with the Ghost of Christmas Future in July, and he'll know what you're talking about.

SCROOGE: I don't think he'll know what any of that means.

GHOST: We're getting a little sidetracked here - less thinking, more poop grabbing.

SCROOGE: The yorkie is barking at me now

GHOST: Are you afraid of a little dog you fucking bitch? You little baby bitch.

SCROOGE: Alright, alright.

Scrooge grabs the poop.

SCROOGE: Ok I got the poop!

GHOST: Hey, sorry, Ghost of Christmas in July Scheduling here. Sorry about that, but all those ghosts you were just with were let go 15 years ago for putting raw meat at the water cooler at work. Everything you saw today was pretty off the books.

SCROOGE: So what's the moral? What did I learn?

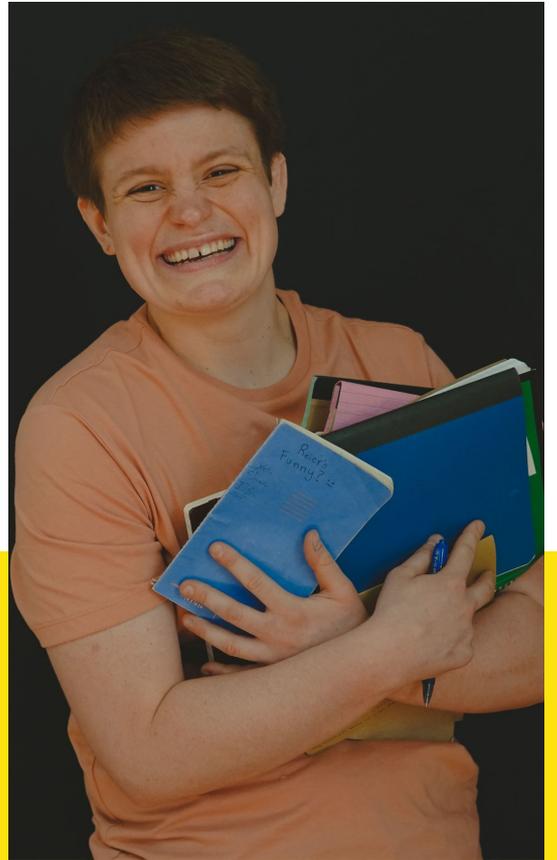
GHOST: The moral? When you schedule three ghosts to show up, make sure you double check whose email you're sending it to.

SCROOGE: Ok but what do I do with the poop?



PHOTOGRAPHY: GABRIEL ALVIZO

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