

GALLOWS HUMOR

Written by

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INT. STAGE - NIGHT

Black. A man (NICK) is breathing hard, almost frantic.

NICK
Hello? Is anyone there?

No answer. In the dark, Nick tries again, louder.

NICK (CONT'D)
Hello! Can anyone hear me?

There is an electronic hum, and a projector flickers to life.

STAGE

The projector illuminates a small stage.

Nick, 29, skinny and sweating in blue jeans and T-shirt, stands illuminated in the beam of the projector. Shackles chain his wrists to a microphone stand bolted to the floor.

He raises his hands to shield his eyes from the light.

The light from the projector begins to move.

Nick turns to see the image projected onto the blank wall behind him.

ON SCREEN

Projected twenty feet tall onto the wall is shaky cell phone video, with no audio, of a smoky nightclub, with a COMEDIAN up on stage. Nick, wearing the same clothes he is now, stands up from the audience and begins pointing at the Comedian.

With a BLAST of feedback, the audio from the video kicks on.

NICK
(on screen)
Fuck, man, I paid for comedy. Is anyone here going to deliver?

COMEDIAN
(on screen)
Well, if you'll--

NICK
(on screen)
Aww, that's not funny! Try harder.
Come on, be funny!

Nick picks up a plastic cup and throws it, hitting the Comedian in the chest and soaking him with beer.

The Comedian looks like he's about to burst into tears. He drops the microphone and rushes off the stage.

The video cuts out to a blue stand-by screen.

STAGE

Nick looks up at the blue on the wall, confused.

Above Nick, a single spot light turns on, bathing him in light. He blinks.

AUDIENCE

The house lights come up, just enough to see the vague shape of tables and chairs. There is only one person in the audience, HENRY, nothing but a dim outline.

HENRY

Good evening, I'm so glad you could join me!

NICK

What the hell are you talking about? Get me out of here!

HENRY

Oh, I can let you go, the night is just beginning. A night of truly incredible stand-up comedy.

STAGE

Nick jerks at the chains, but the mic stand is firmly bolted down. He tries to slide the chains up over the top, but they get stuck at the microphone.

NICK

Are you crazy? I'm not going to do stand up.

HENRY

But you know exactly what you're doing. It should be easy.

NICK

But why--

ON SCREEN

The projector flickers again, and the video of Nick standing up in the crowd and heckling the Comedian replays.

NICK
 (on screen)
 Come on, be funny!

The clip repeats, and Nick's heckle goes on and on, louder and louder.

NICK (CONT'D)
 (on screen)
 Come on, be funny! Come on, be fun--

The sound cuts out, but the video continues: Nick, standing and yelling.

STAGE

Nick is angry now. He whirls to face Henry.

NICK
 What is this, you psycho?

HENRY
 It's simple. It's a test. Most people like you-- the bullies, the assholes, the hecklers-- can dish it out, twenty-four seven all the time. But you can't take it.

NICK
 What does that have anything to do with me being kidnapped?

HENRY
 It's about you learning what it's like being on the receiving end. Ever done any stand up, Nick?

NICK
 No, why would I--

HENRY
 Well, today's your lucky day! We're going to see what you are capable of. You have five minutes to give me your best stand up comedy.

Nick rattles and pulls at his chains.

NICK
 What are you talking about, stand up? I'm not doing any--

He grabs the mic stand and shakes it, trying to pull it up from the stage, but it holds.

NICK (CONT'D)
Let me out of here!

AUDIENCE

Henry laughs, low and maniacal.

HENRY
It's actually up to you whether or
not I let you go.

NICK
You're the one who chained me up.
You kidnapped me. I'm pretty sure
it's up to you.

HENRY
Here's the deal. You perform five
minutes of quality stand up comedy.
If you're funny, I let you go. If
not, you die.

ON STAGE

Nick stares out at Henry in shock.

NICK
I what?

HENRY
You die. I'm not completely
heartless, though. I do give you
three chances.

The projector flashes, and a graphic of three Xs appears on
the wall behind

NICK
You're insane.

HENRY
Maybe, but you're the guy tied up.

Nick's eyes flick around the room as he tries to think.

NICK
Have I offended you? I didn't, I
mean, I didn't throw something at
you, did I?

HENRY
No. I just hate hecklers.

AUDIENCE

Henry claps his hands together.

HENRY (CONT'D)
So, are you ready to go? I want you
ready to go, because if I start the
clock, I can't stop it.

ON STAGE

Nick cannot believe what he is hearing.

NICK
Ready for what?

HENRY
And three--

NICK
No!

HENRY
Two--

NICK
Wait! Wait, wait, wait!

HENRY
One! Go!

Nick freezes, a deer in the spotlight. He opens his mouth,
closes it, opens it again, but no words come out.

AUDIENCE

Henry leans forward in his chair.

HENRY
Come on, Nick! Be funny!

Nick whispers something.

HENRY
You're going to have to speak up or
you have no chance of making it
through this.

Nick leans close to the microphone, whispering into it. It
comes through the speakers, but just barely.

NICK
A priest, a rabbi, a-a-and--

He stops and collects himself. He speaks into the microphone.

NICK

A priest, a rabbi, and a Buddhist monk walk into a bar. The bartender looks at them and goes 'hey, what is this, some kind of joke?'

An ear-splitting AIR HORN blares through the speakers.

Nick tries to cover his ears, but the chains around his wrists are too short.

The air horn cuts out suddenly, leaving Nick's panicked breathing as the loudest thing in the room.

AUDIENCE

Henry raises a single, triumphant finger into the air.

HENRY

Strike one!

ON SCREEN

The first X projected onto the wall lights up, blood red.

ON STAGE

Nick looks up at the X, his eyes widening.

NICK

But, I don't... I just don't--

HENRY

You don't what?

NICK

I don't do stand up. I don't know how--

Nick looks around the room, desperate for any kind of inspiration. He opens his mouth, closes it, takes a deep breath, and begins to speak very fast.

NICK

I don't stay at a bed and breakfast, because at the end of the day, you start to get hungry. Is that all--

AIR HORN. The second X turns blood red.

Nick flinches, but he stares out at Henry, his face set and his body tense, almost as if he was expecting it.

HENRY

It's not good to steal other people's jokes, Nick. You should be ashamed of yourself.

NICK

Come on, man, I don't know what you want from me. Just let me go. Please? I'll change, I swear.

HENRY

I believe you.

NICK

Then let me go. Please. I won't tell anyone what happened.

HENRY

You have one strike left.

Nick begins to hyperventilate.

NICK

I don't know what you want from me. Please, just let me go, let me go, please.

HENRY

Come on, Nick. Be funny.

A dark stain blooms on the front of Nick's pants. He's pissed himself. He doesn't seem to notice, and continues to beg for his life as a puddle begins to form at his feet.

NICK

I'll go. I'll go away. But I can't do this, please, just let me go.

HENRY

Nick, just be funny.

Nick begins to cry, fat tears falling down his face.

He grips the microphone, twisting it in his hands. His mouth opens, closes, opens, closes. Panic sets in, and his eyes say it all: He's got nothing.

AUDIENCE

Henry doesn't move.

HENRY (CONT'D)

Don't you have anything to say for yourself?

ON STAGE

Nick blurts out the first thing that comes to mind.

NICK

Have you ever shit your pants?

Nick stops, waiting for the air horn, but it doesn't come. He keeps talking, faster now.

NICK (CONT'D)

Shitting your pants. It's the worst feeling in the world. It's not like a fart where you can deny it. Everyone knows.

Nick stops. Still no air horn. He keeps going.

NICK (CONT'D)

I had the flu, right? But I also had a job interview. So I went to the drug store and got all the flu medicine I could get my hands on.

Nick starts talking faster and faster.

NICK (CONT'D)

I felt good going in. Things were going really well. But then I got this tickle in my nose and before I could stop myself I sneezed. I sneezed, right? And all of a sudden, my pants were full of shit.

He closes his eyes.

NICK (CONT'D)

The whole room smelled. I couldn't hide it so I just had to get out of there. I stood up, and the guy was staring at my chair. I look, and--

Nick shuts his eyes and starts to sob. He keeps talking.

NICK (CONT'D)

There was a huge stain on the chair. A smear on the seat. I had crapped all over this guy's furniture. We just looked at each other. And I left. I left. I couldn't say a word.

Nick stands with his eyes shut, his hands clutching the mic stand as he waits for the third and final strike.

AUDIENCE

Henry bursts out into laughter, high-pitched and hysterical.

ON STAGE

Nick looks up. It can't be... can it?

AUDIENCE

Henry gasps for air, choking on his laughter.

HENRY

Oh my god! Holy shit! I--

He laughs again.

ON STAGE

Nick straightens, his grip locked on the mic stand. Can it be

AUDIENCE

Henry's laughter devolves into chuckles.

HENRY

That was a good one. Really.

The house lights come up. The room is old and ruined. Nick sees Henry for the first time. He's a skinny, pale man, his cheeks flushed from laughing.

Henry stands and claps.

HENRY

I guess there's a first time for everything.

Henry rises from his seat and walks towards the stage.

ON STAGE

Henry steps up onto the stage and takes a large set of keys out of his pocket. Nick tries to get as far away from Henry as he can, but his chains are short.

HENRY

Is that true? You really shit your pants at a job interview? That's the funniest thing I've ever heard. Did you get the job?

Nick shakes his head "no."

HENRY
Would've been funnier if you did.

Henry chuckles and pulls Nick towards him by the chains. He unlocks the cuffs on Nick's wrists and let the chains fall. Henry points to the door at the back of the room.

HENRY
You're free to go.

Nick stands, his mouth open in shock.

HENRY
Get going. Unless you want to stay.

AUDIENCE

Nick jumps off the stage and runs to the door, weaving between tables and chairs. He slows as he approaches the door. He looks back at Henry.

ON STAGE

Henry waves him on.

HENRY (CONT'D)
It's unlocked. Don't worry.

AUDIENCE

Nick runs through the door, and it slams shut behind him.

ON STAGE

Henry stands alone on the stage, chuckling to himself.

HENRY (CONT'D)
Smear on the seat, oh my god.

THE END