

COMFORT OF A LAUGH TRACK

Written by

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Dedicated to my mom

INT. THEATER STAGE - (???)

POP! A SPOTLIGHT bursts to life, revealing a theatre curtain with cursive letters reading: "The Comfort of a Laugh Track".

Suddenly the curtains burst open. MAE (early 20s, messy-pretty) stumbles out like she's been shoved.

ANGLE ON: The front of the stage. A lone, sad mic stands at attention, illuminated. Beyond it: a dark void where an audience should be. Mae squints at the light, hesitantly stepping downstage, each footstep making a faint squeak.

MAE
Uh... hello?

SCREECH! The mic howls with feedback. Mae recoils, The faint sound of disembodied giggles float out from the dark.

MAE (CONT'D)
Alright, so, uh... hi. I'm Mae. I'm a comedian. Which basically means instead of going to therapy like a normal, functional adult, I get onstage and overshare like the attention whore I am.

The faceless audience laughs. Mae warms to it. She paces a little, talking with her hands now.

MAE (CONT'D)
I always feel embarrassed saying I'm a comic-it feels like admitting I'm lazy. Think about it, it's the only job where the worse your life is going, the better you're doing at work!

A bigger burst of laughter. Something sparks behind Mae's eyes. She straightens, and launches into her set

MAE (CONT'D)
That's part of why I love comedy. Because when you can laugh at something? It stops being bigger than you. It stops owning you.

CUT TO:

INT. LIVING ROOM - DAY (FLASHBACK)

A little Mae(7) lies belly-down in front of an old boxy TV, feet kicking in the air, smiling ear to ear. A black and white sitcom flickers on screen as the laugh track swells.

MAE (V.O.)
Growing up, my house was always filled with laughter.

Slowly, we hear MUFFLED YELLING under the sitcom. The camera PULLS BACK: Behind Mae, her parents are SCREAMING, various objects hurled across the room.

MAE (V.O.)
 Not mine. Not anyone actually
 living there. Just Dick Van Dyke,
 serving up a helping of canned
 laughter. And I ate that shit up.
 Artificially sweetened joy pumped
 full of corny life lessons and well
 groomed men in cardigans.

ON TV: A sitcom character delivers a zinger. Laugh track
 BLARES. Mae grins wide and scoots closer.

MAE (V.O.)
 Life didn't have to hurt, because
 if Dorothy Zbornak threw out a
 cutting one-liner and the laugh
 track kicked in, it meant
 everything was okay. And that's
 when it hit me-

THUNK! Suddenly, a stray airborne beer bottle nails Mae in
 the back of the head.

HARD CUT TO:

EXT. PARKING LOT-EVENING (FLASHBACK)

Mae, 16, sits on the curb, foot tapping, chain-smoking a
 cheap cigarette.

MAE (V.O.)
 People can't laugh at you, if
 you're already laughing at
 yourself.

Mae checks her watch. No car in sight. Instead, around the
 corner strolls up SONNY, (golden retriever energy, childhood
 best friend) with hands stuffed in his pockets.

SONNY
 Still here?

Mae shrugs and takes a long drag.

MAE
 Nah, left hours ago you're
 hallucinating from heatstroke.

SONNY
 Ah right, well let me know when I
 start foaming at the mouth, Freud.
 (beat)
 You know that shit'll kill you,
 right?

MAE
 So will being a little bitch yet
 here you are.

Sonny lunges suddenly, trying to snatch the cigarette. Mae
 jumps back-ZAP!Sonny YELPS and stumbles back only to see Mae
 holding up her phone with a taser app flashing on the screen.

SONNY
 (staggering, laughing)
 Oh my god thats so fucking dumb-
 how old are you?

MAE
 Be nice I'm workshopping it! Also
 I'll have you know, comedy works in
 threes. I zap you two more times,
 then it's funny.

SONNY
 Sounds more like OCD to me.

MAE
 Call it what you want. 'Long as I
 get to taze you again.

ZAP! Mae "tazes" him again giggling maniacally. Sonny's grin shifts, something softens in his eyes.

SONNY
 (playfully soft)
 You're weird, you know that?

MAE
 What, don't all your friends
 electrocute you?

SONNY
 (shaking head)
 No it's just-despite everything,
 you're still so... fun. You make
 things not suck even when
 everything, y'know, sucks. That's
 kinda incredible.

Beat. The cicadas fill in the silence as they gaze at one another. Mae shrugs animatedly, deflecting the moment.

MAE
 Life's dumb. You either cry about
 it, or you make it dumber. You know
 you can spray plastic flowers with
 any perfume.

SONNY
 I don't get it?

MAE
 Meh, you will. Just give it two
 more times.

She lunges with another taser attack—Sonny yelps and chases after her. They cackle, it's warm. Real.

MAE (V.O.)
 I learned how to make people laugh
 right after my dad left. Maybe I
 thought... If I was funny enough, the
 next person wouldn't.

INT. THEATER STAGE - (???)

Mae stands in the soft glow of the spotlight, a small smile playing on her face, lost briefly in the memory.

MAE
Like everyone, I had big plans.
Y'know, Netflix special, book deal,
maybe even—God help me—a podcast.

The laugh track ripples out.

INT. COMEDY CLUB - BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

Years later an older more put together Mae paces backstage. We hear the crowd muffled on the other side of the curtain.

MAE (V.O.)
I thought all I had to do was not
bomb. I mean, comedy's easy, right?

Mae steps onto the small, low-lit stage. The mic sits in wait. Mae grabs it like it might betray her.

MAE
I'm Mae, and I'm a comedian. Which
is embarrassing cuz I'm basically
admitting I'm lazy!

Crickets. The audience stares. Mae persists, faltering.

MAE (CONT'D)
I just get up here and confess the
most humiliating shit: 'If I don't
shut the window three times, my
family dies! I've got a drinking
problem that doubles as a party
trick!' then everyone claps!

No one claps. One cough. Someone clinks a glass. Mae cringes.

ANGLE ON: Sonny, now a little older too, sitting in the crowd
— smiling way too hard. Supportive. Painfully so.

MAE (V.O.)
But life's funny that way. It
always has something different in
store for you than you planned.
That "something" usually being
straight-up garbage.

HARD CUT TO:

EXT. COMEDY CLUB - BACK ALLEY - NIGHT

SLAM! A trashbag's chucked into a dumpster. Mae stands beside it, lighting a cigarette. The employee who tossed the bag gives her a pitying look before heading back inside. Just then, Sonny strolls up, hands in pockets. Mae quickly snubs out her cigarette like she's hiding contraband.

SONNY
(encouraging, lying badly)
You were great!

MAE
(shooting him a look)
Thank you, thank you. I'm truly,
the people's comic.

SONNY
Okay it was a *little* humbling- but
that audience totally sucked, I
mean not even a pity laugh?

MAE
Pffft well sorry to disappoint you
tonight. Not all my sets feel like
a funeral, I swear.

SONNY
You could never disappoint me. You
still manage to astound me every
day.

Mae freezes slightly. Her cheeks flush red as she fidgets.

MAE
(deflecting)
Pffft whatever corny ass, you
driving me home or what?

CUT TO:

INT. MAE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

CLUNK-CLUNK-CLUNK - fumbling with keys. The door SWINGS open.
Mae and Sonny tumble in, laughing (as per usual).

Mae looks up and freezes. Her smile drops. Inside, her
pristine apartment- the window is open. The curtains flutter
slightly in the night air.

MAE
(quiet, rattled)
I...I never leave that window open?

Sonny looks over and back at Mae, sensing her discomfort.

SONNY
Maybe you just forgot? It happens.
Everybody's got blind spots. I'm
sure it's nothing.

MAE
I don't forget things like that I-
(trying to shrug it off)
N-no you're right. It's nothing...
Right?

SONNY
Right!

HARD CUT TO:

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY:

DR. BROWN (60s, a human cardboard cutout) stands across from Mae.

DR. BROWN
(flatly)
You have brain cancer.

Mae sits stiffly on the crinkling paper of the exam table. She blinks once. Twice.

MAE
...What?

Dr. Brown consults a chart with the empathy of a DMV worker.

DR. BROWN
Glioblastoma. Aggressive, rapid
decline likely. Poor survival rate.

Mae stares, she opens her mouth to speak - something desperate, something human - but out tumbles:

MAE
(grinning through panic)
Wow. Your wife must love you in
bed. Real master of foreplay.

DR. BROWN
(stonefaced)
I don't have a wife.

The joke dies an awkward, gasping death.

MAE
(clearing throat)
...R-Right. Well-how much has it
spread?

DR. BROWN
Don't know. Need to run some tests.

MAE
Okay- how long will the tests take?

DR. BROWN
Don't know.

MAE
H-how long do I have to live then?

DR. BROWN
Don't know.

MAE (V.O.)
If you'd asked me which one of us
had a brain tumor, I'd have picked
him given how little he knew about
what the fuck was going on.

Mae stares blankly at the floor, fighting back the tears welling up in her eyes.

MAE (V.O. (CONT'D))
 And worst of all? Now I had to
 figure out how to tell everyone.
 Without making it sound as goddamn
 catastrophic as he did.

INT. MAE'S APARTMENT - LATER

Mae slides a CD into an old player. "Nothing's Gonna Change My World" hums through the speakers. *Ping!* Mae checks her phone - a message from Sonny:

"Hey! How did your appointment go?"

A flicker of guilt crosses Mae's face. She pockets the phone.

MAE (V.O.)
 There's something inherently comic
 about how far things can go wrong.
 The exaggeration. The sheer
 statistical unlikelihood. If it was
 a movie, you'd call it unrealistic.
 Too on-the-nose. Melodramatic.

Mae notices the window ajar. She sighs, crosses the room, shuts it. Clack. We linger on the tree outside. A single leaf drifts down.

MAE (V.O.)
 But in real life? It's just
 Tuesday.

MATCH CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - DAY - MONTAGE

The same tree - now orange with fall. Mae walks beneath it, scarf wrapped tight.

MAE (V.O.)
 Comedy and tragedy are inseparable.
 Like peanut butter and jelly. We
 laugh when someone slips because
 the body betraying itself is wrong.

MONTAGE:

- Mae among other patients hunched in a chemo chair, IV in, scribbling joke ideas into a notepad.

- Mae scrolls a forum r/welcometodeath. Suddenly a text from Sonny: **Hang out soon? :)** Mae stares, then locks the screen.

- Mae vomiting into a toilet. She looks up into the mirror - jazz hands!

MAE (V.O.)
 The laugh's an emotional seatbelt,
 snapping us back into place. If
 it's funny, maybe its not so sad.

INT. COMEDY CLUB- NIGHT

Mae stands on stage at the comedy club, mid-set holding her chemo notepad. She squints and sees Sonny in the crowd, grinning, waving. She smiles back.

MAE

As a comedian I get to just come up here and say the worst things that have happened to me-

Mae pauses, her grip tightens on the notepad.

MAE (CONT'D)

-and... I used to think all this terrible shit happening meant I was cursed. But now I'm thinking - maybe it just means, I'm good material. I mean, life's a joke.

(beat)

And the punchline is cancer.

Uneasy murmurs in the audience; Sonny shifts in his seat.

MAE (CONT'D)

I know what you're thinking, "Ooh, edgy bit." But no-no... Stage four. Not to brag, but I skipped the first three. Always been an overachiever, baby!

Scattered awkward chuckles from the audience

MAE (CONT'D)

I know, I know people get uncomfortable when you joke about the "c- word". No- not that one. That one gets you kicked off stage.

Bigger laughs, the audience is getting comfortable.

MAE (CONT'D)

But I mean come on guys-I'm only gonna be terminal once. Might as well get some mileage out of it! I mean, come on -I've been smoking since I was 14-I signed up for that sexy noir cancer, not this shit!

The audience cackles loud, accepting

MAE (CONT'D)

But really you gotta look on the bright side. It's as they say: *"the good thing about plastic flowers is you can spray 'em with any kind of perfume."* Goodnight everybody!

The audience roars. Mae beams as the applause envelopes her.

INT. COMEDY CLUB - BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

People trickle backstage, flocking to Mae spouting performative praise before chortling as they scamper off. Suddenly, a familiar voice from behind.

SONNY (O.S.)
You have cancer?

Mae spins. It's Sonny. Face open. Crushed. Mae's heart sinks.

MAE
(awkward, deflecting)
Tada! Tough act to follow, huh?

SONNY
(cutting through)
Why didn't you tell me?

Mae opens her mouth. Closes it. Shrugs.

MAE
I dunno. How do you tell someone that? "Heyyy, I'm dyin' ... womp womp."

Sonny looks at her, really looks at her.

SONNY
Mae...What's going to- I... I...

Mae flinches, dodging the incoming sincerity.

MAE:
Sonny please I don't want a pity party. Just try to have fun with this! Medical anomaly ask me anything! Like- did you know my pubes were the first thing to go?

SONNY
You already started losing hair?!

MAE
Mhm! I'm boutta be BALD, motherfucker. You'll be callin' me Mr. Clean!

Sonny stares, then relents. He half-smirks, a deep sadness still lingering in his eyes.

MAE (V.O.)
When you're dying, the world doesn't stop. You just take a backseat in your own life. Then one day, you look in the mirror, don't recognize the eyes staring back, and ask yourself: When did I become a ghost?

EXT. CITY STREET - DAY- MONTAGE

Bare branches. The last leaves tumble down. Mae scratches her head - clumps of hair come loose in her fingers. A canned studio audience howls with laughter.

MONTAGE:

- Mae shaves her head into a mohawk. She forces a laugh in the mirror.

- A standup clip on her phone: "Cancer Girl 🤔💀 #FYP" - 500K likes. Mae smiles - hollow, eyes flat.

- Mae in chemo again. Snow flurries outside. She hunches over a trashcan, retching. The chairs beside her all sit empty.

EXT. MAE'S APARTMENT - DAY

MAE (V.O.)
I thought dying would be much more straightforward. Make the most of your time left, happy memories, bla-bla... But it's so complicated.

Sonny approaches, juggling a mess of clumsily wrapped gifts. He goes to knock but the door creaks open at his touch.

INT. MAE'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

The smell hits him first. Rotten food. Dirty laundry. Stale air. The place is wrecked—curtains drawn, trash mountains everywhere. On the couch: Mae, scrolling idly on her phone.

SONNY
(staggered)
Mae...? Why haven't you been answering my ca-jesus!

Mae shoots her head up, eyes bloodshot and face pale.

MAE
(slurring)
Sonnyyy! I'm popular now! People wanna GIVE me MONEY!

She cackles, coughing midway. Sonny sniffs—his face scrunches.

SONNY
Have you been drinking?! Mae you might as well mainline bleach!

MAE
Cool, pass me some then.

Mae rolls over revealing a battered carton of cigarettes. Sonny's eyes flare. He snatches the carton and hurls it at the wall

SONNY
What the fuck is wrong with you?!

MAE
Bro calm down—I'm gonna die anyway.

SONNY
That doesn't mean you need to speed
it up?!

MAE
(sharper now)
What's your deal?! I thought you'd
be happy for me!

SONNY
Happy? How can I be happy when
you're making me sit here and watch
you kill yourself?!

Without thinking, Sonny grabs a trash bag, furiously tossing
garbage and bottles inside.

SONNY (CONT'D)
Fuck this. You don't get a say
anymore. You lost that when you
stopped giving a shit about
yourself.

MAE
HEY! It's MY body. MY life. My
fucking funeral! My parents
couldn't control me, some virgin
doctor can't, and you sure as hell
won't!

SONNY
You are being so unfair right now.
Do you even hear yourself?!

MAE
Oh boo hoo! YOU'RE NOT THE ONE
FUCKING DYING!

The words hit the air like a gunshot. Sonny breaks.

SONNY
(deadly sincere)
Don't I get to mourn? Don't I get
to be sad that the girl I'm in love
with is going to die?!

Mae flinches—eyes wide, like he just slapped her.

SONNY (CONT'D)
You know god forbid anyone try to
actually be vulnerable with you.
Why can't you take anything
seriously?! Would you really rather
die behind a joke than let anyone
actually see you?!

Mae's lip trembles. Her chest heaves. She rips off the wig —

MAE
(breaking)
BECAUSE LOOK AT ME! I'M A FUCKING
JOKE!

Mae's bald scalp glistens under the dim light. Her skin, translucent, dark circles under eyes. A hollow ghost. Sonny stares, stricken. Mae laughs – a sharp, bitter bark.

MAE (CONT'D)

(wry)
I look like Gollum if he got into meth.

(beat)
I can't even look in the mirror without wanting to puke.

(beat)
You wanna know why my place looks like this? Because I can't stand leaving the house anymore. Nobody can look me in the eyes without giving me this pathetic pitiful look- I might as well already be dead!

Mae forces a brittle smile. Sonny steps forward, soft and desperate.

SONNY

Mae... please...I'm here for you so please just be real with me. Just this once. No jokes. Just you.

Mae's breathing is ragged. Her eyes tighten, for a moment wanting to give in... A flicker-

CUT TO: DARK
VOID STAGE.

The phantom audience's laugh flickers on the edges of her mind. Mae stiffens. The old instinct wins.

MAE

(cruel, mocking)
Aww poor Sonny. Still obsessed with me even on my deathbed. Maybe find a real hobby?

Sonny reels. Tears glint in his eyes. He gives her a long, unreadable look. A final, heartbroken nod. Without another word, Sonny turns and walks to the door. Mae laughs after him, too loud, too fake.

MAE (CONT'D)

Oh come on! That was funny! Don't be such a baby!

SLAM. The door rattles shut.

Mae's laughter dies in her throat, crumpling into sobs. She sinks to her knees amidst the garbage, body wracked with grief as sickening canned laughter swells.

INT. COMEDY CLUB - LATER

Mae stands alone under a too-bright spotlight on stage, mic in hand. She scans the invisible crowd. No Sonny.

MAE
 My mom used to say, "God never gives you more than you can handle." Which is a wild thing to say to a 10-year-old.

Scattered laughter.

MAE (CONT'D)
 But hey, she can't say I didn't listen. Life handed me brain cancer, and I said, "Ok, guess this is my set now!" And yes it is terminal, thank you for noticing. And also yes, if you don't laugh, you're an asshole.

Louder laughter. Echoing now.

MAE (CONT'D)
 Also, cancer? Incredible weight-loss plan. I lost twenty pounds – and now instead of people calling me hot, they call me brave. Which I'm pretty sure is just polite for "you look tired."

Laughter swells – bellowing, surreal. Mae blinks, wobbles slightly. She tightens her grip on the mic stand.

MAE (CONT'D)
 M-my friends have been supportive. One of them offered to start a GoFundMe for my funeral. Not after I die – now. Like it's a concert and they need early bird tickets-

The laughter peaks, grotesque, no longer human. A canned laugh track takes over, distorted and looping. The stage spins around her. The crowd melts into a blur of color and sound. Sonny's seat still empty. She blinks hard. A sob threatens. When suddenly– SILENCE.

Then...

Clap. Clap. Clap.

INT. THEATER STAGE - (???)

A vast void. The house lights never rise. Mae's head shoots up as she looks out over rows of dark seats. From the shadows, a single figure stands: Sonny. He claps slowly.

Clap. Clap. Clap. Clap. The clapping mutates, rhythm shifting– *BEEP. BEEP. BEEP.*

MATCH CUT TO:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

A heart monitor pulses in the gloom. A sitcom plays on the corner TV – canned laughter wheezes from the speakers.

Mae lies unconscious in a hospital bed. Pale. Still. Muted voices drift from the hallway.

DR. BROWN (O.S.)
 ...collapsed on stage...
 inevitable...

Sonny sits beside her, blotchy-faced, eyes raw. He clutches Mae's limp hand.

INT. THEATER STAGE -(???)

Mae looks out into the audience and smiles, a tear rolls down her cheek.

MAE
 You've all been a wonderful audience. I'll try to leave you with a smile, after all, I'm a performer. And the biggest joke of all...is that this-right here-is how my life flashes before my eyes.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - NIGHT

Sonny sobs- but the laugh track from the TV cuts through the grief. He looks up. On the hospital TV: A middle-aged sitcom dad, arms full of far too many tacky plastic flowers.

SITCOM DAD
 You can't just wait for real ones to bloom, kid. Sometimes you gotta grab the fake ones... spray 'em with perfume. Good things are hard to come by so maybe by pretendin' maybe- just maybe, it makes someone's day a lil brighter!

Canned laughter. Canned applause. Sonny freezes. He looks up, tears caught mid-fall.

MAE (V.O.)
 So thank you. For laughing with me, even when it's not funny anymore, and helping me feel a little less alone.

It clicks in Sonny's eyes. The flowers, the perfume, the tragic absurdity of it all. It comes in threes. He turns back to Mae, pale and still, her body lying there in perfect quiet. And, despite it all, he can't help but laugh.

MAE (V.O.)
 Goodnight everybody.

END