

# What a Tease!

**I**'LL ADMIT IT: I'm a terrible tease. Just the other day, my wife and I were trudging back to the car after two hours of shopping-mall hell. Our arms were laden with bags, and our two kids were in tow. I could tell that my wife was in no mood for any funny business. That gave me an idea. As we approached our Honda, I turned to her and said, "I sure hope you still have the keys"—*even though I could feel them in my pocket*. I should be divorced, I got such a thrill seeing the little wave of panic spread over her face as she replied, "But I thought you had them." Then I smiled wickedly. Gotcha!

Am I a jerk, or what?

Jerk! Jerk! Jerk! I hear you say. And you may be right, but I like to think that I'm simply giving life a little kick in the pants. There is a frustrated revolutionary inside every prankster, and I will admit that when it comes to interpersonal behavior, I am a lot like Che Guevara. For me, a good deal of the pleasure of teasing lies in rearranging the universe for a second, turning what is into what is not. What could be better than to unseat someone with a single wry remark?

TO THE NAÏF, it may appear that teasing is just another kind of joshing, a mindless kidding-around, verbal horseplay, nothing serious. Such thinking does us teasers a terrible disservice, for teasing is nothing if not fiercely, almost fiendishly, calculated. Teasing is the attack dog of humor. It is criticism styled as comedy, merriment with a message. There in the parking lot, my little tease was my way of telling my wife to relax and stop fretting about whether we really were going to make it home from the mall. It made the point without my having to wage a big fight on the topic. Of course, it also kept her from being able to defend herself, since I was "just kidding."

Some of these terrorist attacks can be so covert, it is hard to find the message in them. A salesman I know teased his wife that the college chum they were going to visit was barely five feet tall and very sensitive about his lack of height. So the wife was very surprised to see a six-foot-eight giant answer the bell. "But I thought you were supposed to be short!" she exclaimed. My friend laughed uproariously. His wife couldn't help

*Reflections on the hazards of making a good joke at a bad time.*

By John Sedgwick

thinking *she* was the joke.

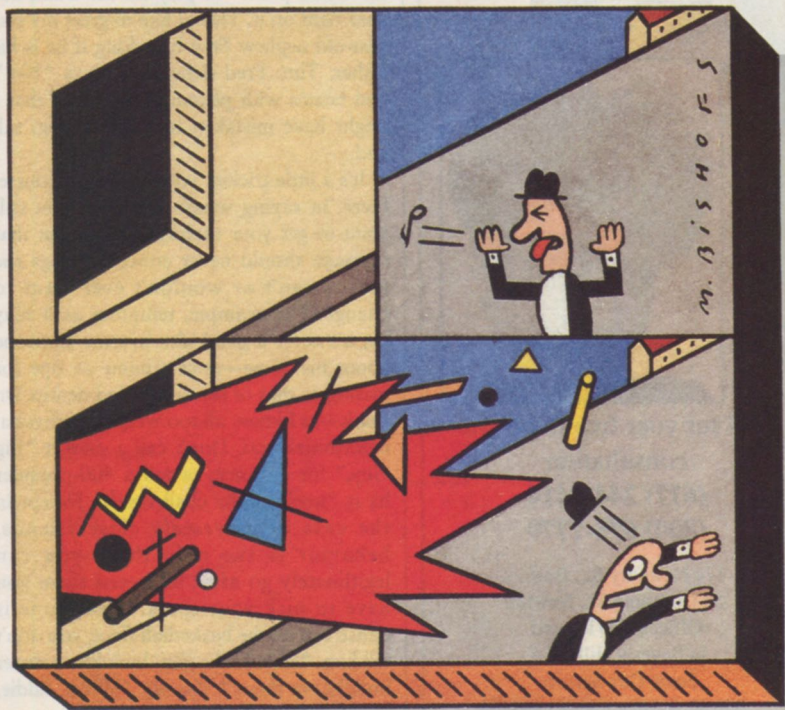
More unnervingly, a few months ago, I showed up a few minutes late to help out with a project at my daughter's school, and a neighbor called out to me, "Hey, John, glad you made it," in a slightly sneering tone that suggested a "finally" in there somewhere. It made my heart pound, but I still haven't decided whether it really was an accusation.

Maybe I'm being oversensitive. If I can dish it out, I should be able to take it. Laser-guided as it may be, teasing is still basically

kid stuff, something designed by God to allow small children to abuse one another without violence in playgrounds and cafeterias. All the same, that very nyaa-nyaa tone is no less devastating to adults—a fact worth pondering for a moment in an age when all of us are under orders from our shrinks to discover our Inner Child.

A bout of teasing reveals that little person mighty quickly—and makes it painfully clear that no one in his right mind would want an Inner Child clogging up his psyche for very long. The true Inner Child is a real sniveler, racked with insecurity, terrified that no one will ever like him because of his freckles or hand-me-down clothes or nickname or whatever.

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## Social Relations

Did someone mention nicknames? Not to burden this column with too much self-revelation, but I am convinced that my own Inner Child will never recover from the fact that my parents unwittingly gave me a nickname that subjected me to such relentless teasing through my teens that even now, years after the word has passed from general use, I cannot, in this public space, bring myself to repeat it. God, the agony of that one word. It stops my heart to think of it. I suspect that virtually everyone was saddled with some similar defect that other children—who have radar for such things—could exploit for their own merrymaking. That must be why, when it comes to teasing, we are a nation of weenies.

WHEN I TEASE, I try not to be a complete cad about it. There are certain rules about teasing that everyone should observe. The

than as a subtle way to convey criticism. It can also be a means of expressing affection, a kind of verbal tickling, a way of getting close without having to own up to some treacherous sentiment. But maybe that's a guy thing. I suspect it would never occur to a woman to greet her oldest and best friend by shouting out, "Hey, Pizzaface, I thought I smelled you around here someplace!" But guy pals do that all the time, and it never fails to bring a smile.

My father used to tell the story of a highborn lady who invited J. P. Morgan to tea with her family. Morgan had a schnozz the size of his bank account, and the lady in question was afraid that her 13-year-old son would make some unfortunate comment about it. Actually, the boy was able to carry on a pleasant conversation with Morgan without saying a single word about his doorknob. When Morgan was leaving, the

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first is, it's teasing only if it's not true. That's the whole point—to play off the truth, not land right on it. Thus, I like to greet my six-year-old nephew Fred by asking if he is his father, Tim. Fred delightedly says "No!" and beams with pleasure at the idea that I might have mistaken him for his big, tall dad.

It's a little trickier with adults, of course. Here, in saying what's not true, you still want to get your message across. But that message should never concern things the person can't or wouldn't ever want to change. For example, tempting as it may be, it's never a good idea to tease someone about his name—even a name as ripe for teasing as that of the South End dentist Dr. Bonk—as I know all too well. Skip physical deformities, too. Don't call a midget "Big Guy," for instance, or tell a 400-pounder he is "horizontally challenged." Except in the case of *extremely* close friends, behavior is the only thing you can legitimately go after, and even there you have to pick your spots. If someone is oafish out on the basketball floor, you don't tell him, "Hey, Eddie, you look like a water buffalo out there." You say, "Whoa, Eddie, where did you get those moves?"

But teasing has other, more benign, uses

woman could not have been more relieved. She blurted out, "It's been absolutely wonderful to see you, Mr. Nose."

The point is, if the hostess had been one of Morgan's male friends—from the club, say—that kind of remark might almost have been okay. One of my father's best friends had had a shiny bald pate since college; everyone called him "Domey."

Under her husband's influence, my friend Sasha has taken up affectionate teasing. But lately the results have been mixed. When an academic friend of hers called to announce that she had just been awarded her Ph.D., Sasha responded by teasing that she'd have to watch out once she became the doctor in the house—she'd heard of a number of marriages that had gone kaput over such things. Obeying the laws of teasing, Sasha had said it only because she was sure it was not true: she was confident that her friend's marriage was thriving. It so happened that it wasn't, and the conversation turned ugly. The friend accused Sasha of trying to undermine her just when she had achieved her greatest success. Both of them ended up in tears.

Maybe women should play things straight, and leave teasing to the experts. Isn't that right, Dogbreath? ■