

“There Is No Use Crying Over Spilt Milk”:
Overcoming Traumatic Experience Through Comedy

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Abstract

This capstone project consists of a short story called “There Is No Use Crying Over Spilt Milk” and its analysis. Both parts are dedicated to the exploration of methods of overcoming trauma through humor and irony. The creative writing part of the project is a story about a girl who experienced trauma and released the tension by means of comedy. The author utilizes the release theory of humor and the concept of the ordinary hero to demonstrate the universality of people's exposure to trauma and their habitual tendency to cancel out their sadness by making use of comedy as an alternative solution to the problem.

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There Is No Use Crying Over Spilt Milk

“Why do birds come back?” he asks.

The question at first sounds as the one people ask to give the answer, to impress, to

teach a lesson. I don't know why birds come back. I raise my right brow in an "ok, tell me" gesture but he shrugs his shoulders and delivers the most annoying "I don't know" I've ever heard. He asks me to find out why birds come back and come back with an answer. I add another bullet point to my to-do list which consists of all the things I need to do before the next visit to my dad's temporary residence. He jokingly calls it a health resort. I do not share his optimism.

"I get up at 7 o'clock every day, I lay in bed all day, what else can a man wish for? I am following a daily regimen, I finally have one! Don't worry about me. Everything is great!"

His "everything is great!" fills up the 'two by three' visitation room with abnormally high ceilings and a small window with bars on it. The window looks southeast, so no daylight shows through at 5 pm. I appreciate his attempts to convince me that "everything is great!", but prison is a prison. "A-" for effort, though.

Adulting for me is like some sort of a quest I am desperately trying to go through by arranging my life in order. On the days I visit my dad, I follow a special schedule. Right after my "Literature and Film of the Postcolonial World" class, which ends at 2 pm, I order an outrageously overpriced taxi to the pre-trial detention center, eat my lunch inside the car for multi-tasking purposes, arrive at the destination at 2:45 pm, run to the prison's reception desk, apologizing 50 times to other visitors along the way absolutely insincerely for making my way through their unenthusiastic bodies, fill out the visitor's form, and submit it to the prison manager lady who writes down my name on the list. I am the last, as per usual.

Then I proceed with hating the world for 90 minutes straight while waiting for my turn to get in the visitors' room. I hate the obnoxiously blue gates that divide me from the prison, the lady at the reception desk, the ongoing, never-ending repair work at the prison, the sounds of other visitors' voices, the guards smoking outside the prison entrance door, and the

guards inside the prison building as well, the lady that is responsible for inspecting my entire body as if I'm planning to smuggle something inside, my dad for putting me through the humiliating experience that is this inspection, and finally, God. I hate him the most.

“Are you even up there?” I ask, and the only response I get is a silence that is suffocating enough to make me not dare to ask again.

At 4:30 pm sharp, I stop. My turn comes, I enter the building, go through the inspection, and pass through three different halls before I finally get inside the corridor, which contains 8 doors with 8 different prisoners. I proceed to door number eight. My dad smiles when he sees me, kisses me on my forehead, and asks how his favorite child is doing. The favorite child is not me, it's my little brother - Ilyas. The visit usually lasts for forty minutes, twenty of which I spend crying, and the other twenty - trying to calm down. To say that I succeed in the latter activity is clearly an overstatement. Dad tells me he doesn't like to see me crying, I tell him that I don't like to see him in jail.

“Bye, Dad,” I say as I get up from the uncomfortable stool, squeezing a piece of paper and a pen in my right hand, while the left hand is busy inertly waving. A sense of shame appears as I remember thinking how uncomfortable the stool was and it doesn't leave until I reach the exit of the pre-trial detention center.

By the time I come home, the clock strikes 6 pm. In total, I spend four hours three times a week tasting the bitter reality that smells like dust, dries my skin, dehydrates my organism, empties my tear tank (and my stomach), and destabilizes me emotionally.

The only beam of light at the end of the tunnel that is my mom greets me at home, making my existence less tragic. She thinks I'm too much of a drama queen and that I should worry less about things I can't control. In an attempt to lift my mood, she offers me an opportunity to tell her how bad my day was and how tired I am. She never interrupts me. Not out of politeness really, but rather out of a strong desire to memorize every detail by heart.

And guess what? The only thing I can tell her is that “everything is great!”. I tell her that he looks healthy, that he is in a surprisingly good mood, and that his good mood annoys me a lot.

Sometimes it feels like I am the only sad person in this family, and something is clearly wrong either with me or with all of them. Dad and I have this unspoken agreement that we should never - under no circumstances - upset mom. As a result, I exaggerate to varying degrees about the postcard-perfect view I see from the window of the visitors’ room, about dad still being unwaveringly confident in his rightness, about me doing well at school. Since she and I have decided that I should become my dad’s public defender, she cannot visit him. She had not seen him for one hundred days straight before the first trial took place on September 16th.

Family dinners are a lot different with dad being in jail. They always feel like a rehearsal before the real dinner which never actually takes place. We are complacently following the new status quo since none of us has come up with a better idea of maintaining normal family dynamics.

I ask mom if she knows why dad is doing what he’s doing. “Maybe he is trying to help us reduce our family expenses by living at the expense of state taxes. Otherwise, I don’t understand his motives!” she says in an attempt to cheer me up. I laugh because that is the only thing left for me to do in these circumstances.

The other day, when I asked my dad the same question, his reply was: “Don’t worry about me, docha. Now you have two cars, you should learn how to drive at least one of them.” I still haven’t. Cars scare me. I still cannot comprehend the fact that people voluntarily agree to let other people control vehicles that can potentially kill a lot of human beings. I am not afraid to be killed; I am afraid I am going to be the one responsible for some sort of disaster. Partially, that is why my superstitious mom always tells me to leave the house with

my right foot first because it allegedly protects me from misfortunes and bad luck. I wonder if my dad put his right foot first when he left our house on the day of his arrest. If not, then my mom has a solid reason to believe that God exists.

I go to my room, close the door, and try to come up with a plan for the weekend. I have a long to-do list of things and a short amount of time to complete all of them. Instead of dedicating my weekends to running errands, I decide to accept an invitation from my friends and go to the movies. It is Friday after all. The last time I went to see a movie was around six months ago when my friend Aizhan and I went to see some cheesy comedy that was definitely not worth the money we paid. Right before the movie started, they showed a trailer of the musical *Aladdin* that was supposed to come out soon. Aizhan loves musicals. I remember that she told me that when she was a kid, she and her sister used to play princesses and she was always Jasmine, while her sister played Ariel. The only thing I could say in response is that I was always Raphael from *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. I wish I could have been a Disney princess, though. It never occurred to me that I could be one. None of them really resonated with me. Maybe, except for one - Merida. She also has three little brothers and complicated relationships with her parents.

The concept of family is indeed complicated. What is a normal family? By definition “normal” means “conforming to a standard; usual, typical, or expected” (“Normal”).

It is expected that your parents be married.

It is expected that you have close relationships with them.

It is expected that you have siblings as well.

It is expected that you go on vacation together once or twice a year.

It is expected that you celebrate birthdays and holidays together.

But what if I have only ever met one normal family in my life? And it's not mine.

My parents are not even married, to begin with. Apparently, normal was not an option

for them. My friends do not have normal families either, so I never really feel alienated. Almost all of my friends' parents are divorced. And as a result, almost all of them have severe trust and commitment issues. As one of them once said: "If your parents didn't break your heart before any boy had the chance to, did you even live?" I appreciate them being as dramatic as I am.

Before leaving for the movies I decide to check off at least one bullet point from my to-do list.

"Hey, Siri, why do birds come back?" I yell at my phone as distinctly as possible. By the way, I have changed Siri's voice to a male one right after I started taking the "Literature and Film of the Postcolonial World" class where I have learned a great deal about the British colonies and hundreds of years of oppression towards the people of color. Having a virtual male British assistant is my type of silent protest against colonialism. My friend Aliya, who is an intersectional feminist, on the other hand, did not change her Siri for the sole reason that "men cannot be trusted," even virtual ones. I appreciate her honesty.

"I found this on the Web..." he replies with a British accent and forwards me an article written by Mark Pokras, an Associate Professor of Environmental and Population Health. The article basically states that birds come back north because of the scarcity of resources. I am not going to lie; I expected a much more profound answer.

I pick up my coat, kiss my mom on the forehead, and leave the house with my right foot first. Just in case.

Five pages later I think I should finally introduce myself while it's not too late.

My name is Roza which almost in any language stands for the flower - a rose. It couldn't get any more clichéd than that, you could think, but unfortunately, it did.

You see, my dad, a father of six, decided a long time ago that he would only name his daughters, and that is why I became his project number two (after my elder sister), where he

could exercise his creativity and potentially annoy his daughters with his name choices for the rest of their lives.

I have oh-so-many reasons to hate that name, I don't even know where to start.

The logic behind that decision is pretty straight-forward: my aunt's (who is my mom's only sister) name is Roza; my mom's closest best friend's (who then became my grandmother) name is Roza. So, my dad decided that it would be funny if there were three Rozas in their lives as if two were not enough; because "three roses make a bouquet!" he would say to me. "You get it, right? It's funny!"

Very funny, indeed. Do you know what makes it even funnier? The fact that my dad cannot pronounce the Russian letter "r". He screws up my name! And the cherry on top of this ironic cake is the fact that I am allergic to flowers. To pollen, to be precise. Which, simply put, is the same thing.

I tried looking after cacti as a compromise but it turns out I am a terrible plant parent as well. My life is practically a joke, and that's all thanks to my dad who continues to surprise me with his unconventional ways of living. A true legend.

What else can I tell about myself? I am ashamed to admit this but I used to like MTV's *Room Raiders* a lot growing up. It was one of the reality TV classics where three young and considered-attractive-by-Western-standards individuals have their rooms inspected by another young and attractive person for the sake of determining who of the three is most compatible with the inspecting party. Reality TV as a genre never lets me down, it is always entertaining and perfect as a guilty pleasure! It's difficult to find a series that does reflect real life and does not in any way glamorize it since nothing is unscripted these days.

On June 7th of 2019, I finally got to experience what it was like to be on a reality show. Nine men from the police had the audacity to come to my parents' house with a search warrant (and a camera!) and ruin what-was-supposed-to-be-the-most-unforgettable-summer-

break-to-date. I mean, it, indeed, turned out to be unforgettable.

Did you know that authority figures have the power to come to anyone's house if they want to? Nine people came to inspect our house! Nine! One camera guy, two civilians as witnesses, three police officers, and three detectives.

I envy people who don't have a single bad bone in their bodies. Out of 206 bones in my body, exactly 200 are as bad as it can get. I consider myself a pretty good judge of character and I can assure you at the moment these people deserved all my rage. I think I might have cursed all of them and their families up to the seventh generation just to make sure they received my message that I was not happy about them invading our space.

It's funny actually how deeply outraged I was by how humiliating this whole invasion of privacy turned out to be, since little did I know that later down the road in around two weeks I would be strip-searched for the first of many times I was visiting my father in prison. A very humbling experience.

I have to give them credit, though, the apartment search itself perfectly set the tone for the rest of the summer.

Out of all the people in the room, the policemen were the ones who turned out to make a scene. If you have ever seen a dramatic arrest of a criminal in the movies, imagine that but in my house, and instead of a criminal the police arrest a 60-year-old man (who didn't even resist arrest in the first place) for expressing his political views on Facebook. Freedom of speech? Never heard of it. I wonder if they rewatch the tapes just for the fun of it.

As a result of the search, they took all of the electronic devices in our house for further inspection. They took the computers, laptops, and even the gaming tablet of my six-year-old brother.

A child was deprived of FIFA 19 and a father.

In the midst of chaos, I decided to join my father on his way to the Internal Affairs

Department in order to try and get my laptop back because I needed it for work. And for life — since it was the only source of entertainment I recognized. The world stopped making sense for a moment. It never went this far. I was not surprised per se when they arrested my father because it had already happened before; he was actively participating in the civil protests and these types of events usually end with people being detained. And usually, the police let these people go on the same day.

This time they did not wait for the event to take place. They came to prevent it.

What did surprise me is that since my father had not been in any way active in his oppositional endeavors in the past six months, their visit did not have a solid ground; it was basically a shot in the dark.

My father is a very passionate person, he devotes himself to a cause when he believes in it. But six months prior to the arrest, he had to reprioritize all of the aspects of his life when his mother fell sick and needed to be taken care of. My grandmother became his only priority. Later that year, my other grandmother fell sick, too, and my parents dedicated all of their time and effort into relieving the process of recovery for both of them. My parents themselves are pretty old, they retired and dedicated themselves to full-time parenting when my youngest brother was born. So, you can only imagine how old my grandmothers were, yet it never stopped them from being brutally honest and sarcastic. They were not regular grandmas; they were cool grandmas.

As you can imagine, that was the worst timing for the arrest. I doubt there's ever good timing, though.

Upon our arrival to the Internal Affairs Department, I went to talk to the Chief Police Officer. I was naive enough to think I could persuade him to give me back my laptop. It obviously did not work out because in real life we don't get what we want. What we do get is whatever we did not ask for. They told me that they wouldn't be able to return any of the

electronic devices until the investigation was over. And that's when it hit me that all of this mess was just the beginning.

My unsuccessful attempt to talk to the officer was followed up by my disastrous attempt to talk to my dad. The father-daughter relationship dynamics in our family is to some degree dysfunctional. Don't get me wrong, he's an incredible father — extremely supportive, kind, loving, and present. But also he's very individualistic. He's not a team player at all. And I always have to remind him that we are here too and everything he does affects us to the fullest. He cannot just expect us to comply with his plans. It's almost impossible to talk to him when he thinks that he knows better. I think that day we said things we shouldn't have said to each other. I didn't know at that time that our next conversation would only take place two weeks later.

I left the building in tears. Luckily, that police department was only a 10 minutes' walk away from our home. Luckily - because I would end up spending my entire summer either there talking to the investigators as my father's public defender or in the jail visiting my dad so it was nice not having to spend a significant portion of my time commuting. Little pleasures in life.

I was so exhausted when I came home, I immediately fell asleep. I needed to recharge and I wanted to escape. I woke up at around 9 pm to a text from a friend who wanted to know if I was interested in assisting him at the shooting of the promo for the upcoming exhibition he was working on. I agreed immediately because it was the perfect way to run away from my problems and dive into something creative. Ironically, the exhibition we were filming for was going to be held in memory of victims of political repression.

I literally couldn't make that up.

That morning marked my debut on the big screen, and the next morning I was helping with filming myself.

The next day I spent at a historical location — the 100-year-old house of the famous merchant Vasily Kubrin — exactly where the exhibition was going to take place. It was a five-hour shift I spent decorating the site, talking to the artists whose works were part of the exhibition, and helping my friend with setting up lights and cameras. It's funny how desperately I wanted to get distracted by work but the essence of my work turned out to be revolving around what I wanted to escape from. As if the universe was trying to tell me that I would never be able to escape. And unfortunately, it was right.

I came back home after the shift still feeling angry and abandoned. The only method that did not let me down yet was falling asleep, and that's what I did.

The keyword had been “yet”.

My mom woke me up. She was in tears. Her mother had died.

It was then that I wanted to take away all of the sorrow and pain she was going through but couldn't. I realized that at least I could take those hardships coming in the future.

It was then that I realized that he was gone when she needed him the most.

It was then that I realized that all I could give her was time to grieve properly over the loss of her mother.

My mom is the ever-present parent in our family. I'm sure that's probably true in most households, not only within the Kazakhstani context. It was difficult seeing the person that embodied equanimity losing the ground beneath their feet.

She left in just a couple of hours because the funeral was about to take place in a different city. We couldn't go with her because my brothers were too young to attend a funeral, and somebody had to stay with them.

And so, we were left without a father, a mother, or a sense of reality.

In the next 24 hours, reality was about to do a full 180, not only in our family but in the whole of Kazakhstan. Because tomorrow was Election Day.

Introduction

The Kazakhstani political climate has endured dramatic changes over the course of the past 18 months which affected the lives of ordinary citizens and caused political protests all around the country. During the summer of 2019, civil uprisings reached their peak, which also resulted in a record number of arrests of the civil activists. On top of the countless violations of human rights, Kazakhstan proved itself to be an authoritarian state that did not mind taking necessary measures in order to prevent democratic processes from happening.

The peak of the peaceful civil protests was reached around the Presidential Election Day, which took place on June 9 of 2019. One of the preventive measures that were taken by the Kazakhstani government included detaining civil activists prior to Election Day in order to mitigate the forthcoming revolt. The protest was about to take place because of the overall civil discontentment which occurred after the former president Nursultan Nazarbayev resigned from his position and announced that Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, the former Chairperson of the Senate of Kazakhstan, would take his post. The unconstitutional nature of

his actions caused a series of protests in which my father participated and, as a result, was detained on June 7, two days before Election Day.

Despite the fact that I was well-aware of my father's intentions and the righteousness of his actions, it was difficult for me to process the new state of affairs. Suddenly, I was expected to grow up and solve my new adult-sized problems. This capstone project encompasses my experience of becoming an adult in the most unusual circumstances and portrays my process of overcoming trauma by the means of humor and irony.

Humor as a Coping Mechanism

In his book *Comic Relief: A Comprehensive Philosophy of Humor* John Morreall explores the different ways of making use of humor as a coping mechanism. In the chapter, "Humor during the Holocaust," Morreall (2009) discusses three main benefits of humor when it comes to topics that may be somewhat sensitive to joke about. He states that the critical function of humor is to acknowledge the problem by making fun of it, and pointing it out through jokes (Morreall 119). Secondly, humor establishes conditions for solidarity to occur since people have the opportunity to laugh together at the situation or the oppressors (Morreall 119). The third function is to ensure that oppressed individuals utilize humor as a coping mechanism in order to overcome the tragedy without losing their minds (Morreall 119). In my capstone project, I attempt to demonstrate how the protagonist recovers from the traumatic experience of her dad being imprisoned while simultaneously trying to balance it out with her day-to-day life.

The protagonist makes fun of the circumstances she ends up living in by trying to distance herself from them and looking at her life from a different perspective. The purpose of it is to look at life through the "fake it till you make it" tactic. She behaves in a way as if the overall situation does not bother her anymore until it actually becomes so. She has not

reached that state yet, but this process allows her to take life one step at a time. For example, when she recalls her last time at the movies, she draws a parallel between herself and Princess Merida from the 2012 Disney/Pixar film *Brave*. In the Disney film, Merida resolves the conflict with her mother by spending more time with her and getting to know her from a different angle. The same thing happens to the protagonist, she is put in a situation where she needs to adapt to changes in her family dynamics. For example, she takes on the role of the public defender to prevent her mom from experiencing even more stress.

She makes fun of herself in order to demonstrate that the trauma she is experiencing is insignificant and does not have control over her. The logic behind her thought-process is to joke about traumatic things before somebody else does, to remind the people surrounding her that she is the one who is in control of the situation. The protagonist uses humor as a weapon against emotions as if there is a battle between her and the overwhelming nature of trauma. In order to prove her strength to others and to herself, she undermines the seriousness of the situation, but the drawback of such an attitude prevents her from grieving properly and overcoming the sadness entirely.

The protagonist allows herself to be genuine only when she is alone with her father. She lets herself be honest and vulnerable only with the person who does not demand from her to be strong and powerful. Only when she crosses the blue gates of the pre-trial detention center where nobody knows her or cares about her, on the outskirts of the city, at the place that is protected better than any other, she allows herself to experience emotional relief and not wear the armor of humor.

The over-exploitation of humor only emphasizes the insecurities of the protagonist, since trust issues do not let her be honest with other people because she regards emotions as weakness and therefore tries to come off as strong and independent. The limiting beliefs that she has do not let her overcome the trauma in a healthy way which is why it takes so long for

her to come to terms with her life.

Amy Carrell in her article "Historical Views of Humor" explores the phenomenon of humor and describes the evolution of its social nature through time. She points out three major branches of theories studying humor: incongruity theories, disparagement theories, and release/relief theories, and the latter theories "perceive humor and laughter as a release of the tensions and inhibitions generated by societal constraints" (Carrell 8). In the short story "There Is No Use Crying Over Spilt Milk," the liberating nature of humor allows the protagonist to release tension in the moment and move on with her life. For example, when she experiences overwhelming loss and trauma all within 48 hours, in which her father is arrested and her grandmother passed away, she utilizes humor to tackle one obstacle at a time since the events unfold rashly and she does not have time to physically process each trauma.

Moreover, the parents of the protagonist use the "fake it till you make it," too, by distracting her from the realia. For example, her father tells her that she does not need to worry about him because "everything is great!" and her mother jokes that "Maybe he is trying to help us reduce our family expenses by living at the expense of state taxes," in order to create a friendlier and more relaxed environment and, as a result, release the tension in the air.

The protagonist tackles each situation differently since she uses different humor styles for each situation. Brian D. Vivona, in his article, "Investigating Humor within a Context of Death and Tragedy: The Narratives of Contrasting Realities," indicates five different humor styles:

1. Affiliative — "to build social cohesion";
2. Self-enhancing — "to maintain a humorous perspective even in the face of stress";
3. Aggressive — "to criticize others";

4. Self-defeating — "to amuse others by saying funny things at one's own expense";
5. Self-deprecating — "to empower the user" (Vivona 3).

In this story, I use almost all of the types of humor, except for the affiliative type. Affiliative humor does not entirely fit into the story dynamics because it cannot be based on negative events. Self-enhancing humor, on the other hand, does the job very well because it helps set the tone of the narration. For example, when the protagonist comments on her father's attempts to comfort her by saying "A-" for effort, though", she emphasizes the absurdity of the situation but at the same time expresses willingness to get over the situation.

Self-defeating humor also fits into the story because it helps the reader build contrast between the protagonist and other people by witnessing her reaction to the situations. For example, when she comes to visit her father, he asks "how his favorite child is doing" and she lets the readers know that the question is not about her. The purpose of this comment is to provide the backstory to their previous relationship dynamics. Another example could be the incident at the movies, when she compares herself to Raphael, the most aggressive and ill-humored of the turtle brothers. The protagonist acknowledges the drawbacks of her personality by making fun of it and constantly referencing it.

For example, when one of her friends says "If your parents didn't break your heart before any boy had the chance to, did you even live?" they utilize self-deprecating humor in order to strengthen their bond by pointing out the experience that unites them. Self-deprecating humor helps the protagonist understand that she is not alone in her struggles, and people of the same age can relate to feeling the same way. The only example of the aggressive humor in the story is the "men cannot be trusted" remark made by her friend Aliya that is targeted to diminish men's reliability in an amusing way.

Concept of the Ordinary Hero

Lynn Gumb focuses on the positive aspect of trauma: healing and overcoming. She approaches trauma from a different perspective. In her article, Gumb redefines the concept of heroes in the context of trauma arguing that heroes do not necessarily have to be viewed “as being armed for great battles, suddenly developing super-strengths or engaging in physical risk, political debate, or motivated to change the world” (464). In my short story, there is a juxtaposition between the two main characters: a protagonist and her father. I demonstrate the way they cope with the difficulty of one of them being imprisoned, and how it affects another family member. The father is the classical hero who fights for his beliefs and values, which is why he is in prison, while his daughter is going through a difficult time accepting the mess that is her life. The daughter is the ordinary hero by the definition provided by Lynn Gumb: “in [her] everydayness, [she] achieve[s] an elevated status by eking out an existence altered yet undiminished by [her] trauma” (464). Gumb puts emphasis on the ordinary hero being able to maintain the life that she/he considers ordinary despite the fact that he endured a traumatic experience in the past.

Conclusion

This creative writing project underlines the efficiency of the use of humor in the process of overcoming trauma as comedy facilitates in releasing tension and providing equanimity. Comedy is a universal tool that helps break the trauma into pieces as it operates as a counteraction. All of the forms of humor make the trauma dissolve, not only in the moment but in retrospective as well. In this story, humor was not just a tool for the protagonist, but all of the actors utilized it as a means of defusing the situation. What makes it work is the fact that it happens unconsciously, as if we have all learned it from each other. Humor, of course, despite being effective, can only help so much, that is why the story is not

a comedy skit in its entirety.

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This project represents my own original work in accordance with Nazarbayev University's

Student Code of Conduct.

Signature: Roza Zhakhina