

The Funny Guy

BY R.L. STINE

In elementary school, I was a funny guy.

I loved to interrupt the teacher, crack a joke, and make everyone laugh. I spent most of my time trying to make my friends laugh. I watched comedians on TV and memorized what they said. I thought I was a comedian, too.

I loved jokes that were a little insulting:

"Is that your face, or did you forget to take out the garbage?"

"Why don't you turn your teeth around and bite yourself?"

"Ten? Is that your age or your IQ?"

Some kids laughed at my jokes. Some kids just thought I was weird.

My parents were always telling me to "be serious." But that didn't stop me from hanging carrots from my nose at

the dinner table and crying, "Look! I'm a walrus!"

There were three guys in my fourth-grade class who didn't think I was funny at all. They gave me a lot of trouble. It was like a war between us.

Well . . . it wasn't much of a war. You know the way a cat will torture a mouse before killing it? That's more the way it was. I was the mouse, of course.

Their names were Pete, Ronnie, and McKay. Pete was the biggest, the meanest, and the leader. He lived a few houses down from mine.

There were always signs in his front yard to elect his father as town sheriff. I thought the first criminal his father should arrest was Pete. Pete was only nine—like me—but he was already a really bad dude.

Ronnie was a skinny weasel of a kid. He wasn't too bright. He did whatever Pete said.

McKay was the smart one. He was always giving me embarrassed looks. Like he was sorry about what the three of them were doing to me.

The problem I had with these three guys started by accident. I bumped into Pete in the lunch line one day, and I made him spill macaroni on his T-shirt.

If only I'd kept my big mouth shut. But I had to be funny. I said, "Are you going to eat that or wear it?"

He didn't laugh at my joke. In fact, I think he growled. He took a gob of macaroni and slapped it onto my forehead.

"Needs more cheese," I said.

Why didn't I shut up?

After school, Pete, Ronnie, and McKay were waiting for me at the bus stop. I tried to squeeze past them and climb onto the bus. But Pete stuck his foot out and tripped me.

My lunch box hit the sidewalk hard, and I fell on top of it.

The three guys had big grins on their faces as I scrambled onto the bus. Later, I took my thermos out of the lunch box, and it made a jingly sound. The glass inside had broken into chunks.

The war had begun.

Pete and his buddies never did anything to me at school. I was safe there because they didn't want to get in trouble.

After school was when they made my life miserable. I took the bus home every afternoon. It was about a fifteen-minute ride. And every afternoon when I got off the bus, the three of them were waiting for me.

At first, they just chased me. My house was two blocks from the bus stop. They chased after me, waving their fists and calling me "Chicken" and other names. I never ran so fast in my life.

After a while, they got bored with just chasing me. So they started chasing me and then knocking me down. They'd shove me to the ground and run off laughing.

Getting knocked down every day was no fun. But I didn't tell my parents. I knew my parents would call their parents. Or call the school. And then Pete, Ronnie, and

McKay would become even bigger enemies.

Soon, they began to chase me, punch me a few times, *then* knock me down. It was getting bad. I had such a terrible feeling of total panic every afternoon.

Of course, at the age of nine, I had no way of knowing how much that dreadful feeling of panic would help me in later life. These days, when I sit down to write a scary book, I can think back . . . remember that feeling of terror . . . and use that feeling in my stories.

I felt helpless. I couldn't tell my parents. And I couldn't fight back. I was outnumbered three to one, and they were tougher than me.

It had to end sometime. And it did on a gray, chilly October evening.

I came home late on the bus after band practice. I prayed that Pete and his pals wouldn't still be waiting. But there they were, leaning against a hedge across from the bus stop.

This time, they didn't chase me. Ronnie and McKay grabbed me and started to pull me down the block. Pete led the way. They didn't say a word.

"Where are we going, guys?" I said. "Isn't it past your bedtime?"

We crossed the street. Ronnie and McKay gripped me so tightly, my shoulders ached. My heart began to pound.

"Let's talk this over," I said. "I'll use small words so you can understand."

My jokes weren't going over. Big surprise.

They dragged me up a gravel driveway. The tall, gray house at the top of the drive was nearly hidden in the shadows of trees. But I recognized it.

Mr. Hartman's house.

Mr. Hartman was an old man who had died two weeks before. But neighbors said they could still hear him screaming. They said they heard frightening howls and shrieks coming from his house late at night.

Everyone knew the house was haunted. It was even written up in the newspaper. The police warned people to stay away until they figured out where those horrible cries were coming from.

Even the lawn cutters refused to mow his lawn. The grass was halfway up to my knees.

Low clouds covered the sun. It grew dark as night. The front windows of the house were solid black.

Pete and Ronnie gave me a hard push onto the front stoop. "Wh-what do you want?" I stammered. "Why did you bring me here?"

"Go inside," Pete growled. "Go say hi to Mr. Hartman."

"He's waiting for you in there," Ronnie added.

I felt my throat tighten. I started to choke. "No, please—" I started.

They shoved me to the door. "You really think the house is haunted?" McKay asked.

I nodded. For once, I didn't make a joke. "Yes. Everyone knows Mr. Hartman's ghost is in there."

"Well, go shake hands with him," Pete said. "Ask him why he screams every night."

"How long do I have to stay in there?" I asked in a trembling voice.

"All night," Pete said. "We'll come get you in the morning."

"No. Please—" I begged.

Ronnie pushed open the front door, and they shoved me inside. I staggered a few steps. The front door slammed hard behind me. The sound made me jump.

The house was damp and hot and had a sour smell. Kind of like spoiled milk. I blinked, waiting for my eyes to adjust to the darkness.

I took a deep breath. Yes, I was really afraid. Maybe there wasn't a screaming ghost in here. But I didn't like standing inside a dead man's house in the dark.

What should I do?

What should I do about these three guys who were on my case every day?

I glanced around the room, thinking hard. Too dark to see anything. It was all a brown-black blur.

A few minutes went by. I felt a trickle of sweat roll down my cheek.

Heart pounding, I moved to the front window. And then I let out a scream. A high, shrill scream that rang off the walls.

I brought my face close to the glass. And screamed again. A frantic, frightened shriek.

"Help me!" I wailed. "Please—help me!"

I could see Pete, Ronnie, and McKay on the lawn. They froze and their eyes bulged when they heard my screams.

"*Help!*" I shouted. "It's *got* me! Ohhh, help me!"

I saw them take a few steps back.

"It *hurts!*" I wailed. "It *hurts! Help me! It really hurts!*"

Squinting through the window, I saw them take off running. Gravel flew up from the driveway as the three of them thundered to the street. They turned and disappeared into the darkness.

I took a moment to catch my breath. My throat felt sore from shrieking. But I had a wide grin on my face.

No. I hadn't seen a ghost. Nothing had grabbed me in the dark.

My screams were just a joke. I was a funny guy, remember. And a good screamer. A talent I had just discovered.

Sometimes a funny trick or a joke will help you a lot. The next afternoon, the three boys weren't waiting for me at the bus stop. They never waited for me there again.

I saw them in school. Sometimes they nodded at me or muttered "Hi." But we never really talked. We definitely never talked about the haunted house.

I've been a funny guy ever since. But I'm not sure I could still scream so well.

I leave the screams for the stories I write.

SURVIVAL