

XAVIER TOBY

MINING

**My Own  
Business**

U W  
A P  
UWA PUBLISHING

First published in 2013 by  
UWA Publishing  
Crawley, Western Australia 6009  
www.uwap.uwa.edu.au

UWAP is an imprint of UWA Publishing,  
a division of The University of Western Australia



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National Library of Australia  
Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

9781742585529 (pbk.)

Toby, Xavier, author  
Mining my own business / Xavier Toby

ISBN: 9781742585529 (paperback)

Toby, Xavier—Humour  
Mineral industries—Australia—Anecdotes  
Mineral industries—Australia—Humour  
Mines and mineral resources—Australia—Anecdotes  
Mines and mineral resources—Australia—Humour  
Miners—Australia—Anecdotes  
Miners—Australia—Humour  
Australian wit and humor—21st century

622.0994

Cover image by David Collins Photography  
Cover design by Xou Creative  
Typeset by J & M Typesetting  
Printed by Lightning Source

*For Debra and Julian Toby*  
*– I could not have wished for better parents*

# Contents

Dispatch	Page
1 The light at the end of the tunnel . . . . .	1
2 My name's not Matthew. . . . .	6
3 Eight sneezes gets you one big what? . . . . .	13
4 Beware miners bearing gifts. . . . .	18
5 What do you get when you cross miners with alcohol? . . . . .	28
6 Mate, we're going to have to let you go . . . . .	43
7 Not that there's anything wrong with that . . . . .	52
8 The wheels on the bus . . . . .	59
9 Table for one . . . . .	69
10 Safety comes first, second and third . . . . .	76
11 Nose-deep in some sort of porn . . . . .	89
12 That's not how you drive a manual . . . . .	97
13 It's a star, not a planet. . . . .	103
14 Don't leave your boss on the tarmac. . . . .	110
15 Super Dad saves the day . . . . .	118
16 Welcome to Mars. . . . .	122
17 A proper minefield. . . . .	133
18 Exploiting a French girl on a bus . . . . .	139
19 Hi ho, Hi ho. It's back to the mine we go . . . . .	146
20 Same sludge, different day . . . . .	153
21 When it rains, it pours . . . . .	167
22 How to avoid being pigeonholed . . . . .	176

23	The curse of Jerome . . . . .	186
24	Our pretend engineer. . . . .	205
25	My anecdote's bigger than your anecdote . . . . .	216
26	I like to watch. And eat . . . . .	232
27	Jerome's flying return. . . . .	241
28	A nation of moderation . . . . .	252
29	Every cloud has a silver mining . . . . .	258

Dispatch No 1 – day 0

## **The light at the end of the tunnel**

So, I need a job. After maxing out two credit cards and my overdraft to pay for the past few comedy and fringe festivals where I've performed, I'm completely broke. For a few weeks I continually dropped in on friends around dinnertime, did gigs for food instead of beer, and wasted days wandering around the supermarket wishing I could afford instant noodles, and hoping that they'd put the black bananas on super special. Then I moved back in with my parents.

Not that comedy isn't a job – it's actually four, but all of them with no wages. As a comedian who produces his own shows I'm a publicist, producer, flyerer and writer. On good nights, I'm also a comedian.

And the past year of festivals hasn't been a complete disaster. In comparison to other comedians, my shows were a runaway mediocre success. Plenty of people have told me how well

I'm doing just to continually get audiences, that I'm a good-sometimes-great performer, and that it's well worth sticking at it. Only problem is, there's this massive mountain of debt that says 'NO WAY, SOCIETY HATES YOU, THIS SHIT COSTS MONEY, HOW DARE YOU FOLLOW YOUR DREAMS, GET A JOB YOU LOSER'.

So, as well as attempting to continue with my artistic career, I now have one more job. For a year I'll be an admin assistant on a mining site in outback Australia. To protect the privacy of the mine, and everyone who works there, and keep my job at least until I've paid off the aforementioned debts, that's all I'm saying. So I'll be working three weeks on, one week off, and using that week to continue with the comedy.

Another reason I'm not giving away many details is I don't want to piss off the people who run the mine. They have a lot of money. Like, heaps. Like imagine all the money you can. All the money that will fit inside your mind. Squeeze it in there. As much as possible. Then times that by ten. That's what these people spend on a weekend. When they're staying in.

One more good reason for not telling you where I'm going is that I don't properly know. I know the state, but that's it. Leading up to my departure, people keep asking me where I'm going and every time I honestly reply, 'I'm not sure.' I've been busy and, more importantly, I don't really care.

It's the middle of nowhere, turn left and then some. It's going to be very hot, and very dirty, with a lot of very big but not very environmentally friendly holes in the ground. How do I feel about that? Not great, but maybe by writing about

it and living it, I'll at least develop a better informed opinion on the whole thing. And afterwards, I'll need extra bags to carry all my money.

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A month, then a week, then a day before I'm due to leave, I still have no details of what I'll actually be doing. I've bought some steelcapped work boots though. Worn them for a day, and now I have blisters the size of golf balls. Well, not quite. Maybe angry marbles.

I don't have any high-visibility shirts, and only two pairs of jeans. The uniform is long pants and a long-sleeved high-vis shirt, every single day. So I don't know what I'm doing, where I'm going, and I don't have enough or any of the right clothes. Basically, if I ever manage to make it to the right place, and I manage to borrow a shirt so I'm allowed in, a week from now I'm going to smell terrible.

It's a fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) mine, reached via a QantasLink plane, and I leave on a Wednesday. This plane actually has propellers, which is a surprise as I thought they'd all been phased out sometime around World War II.

When we land, it's like we've crashed, but that is really just the full force of the tyres hitting the tarmac, as felt in my seat situated over the landing gear, and separated from it by a sheet of aluminium only slightly thicker than a budget roll of foil. Really, it's quite safe and I'm a wimp. But who isn't a bit scared of flying? If we were meant to fly, we'd have wings. Still, it beats sitting on a bus. Statistically speaking, it's also



a whole lot safer, and by ‘statistically’ I mean ‘who cares? It’s still a tiny plane’.

From the airport, there are two buses to the two separate accommodation sites. My name is on the list for one. My name is on a list! I’m in the right place!

Halfway there, the driver stops. Apparently my name is on the other list too. So I’m transferred to the second bus, via a complicated and awkward procedure with lots of list-checking and ticking that could be straight out of a boring spy film, where the spies have been replaced with overly tattooed men all up past their bedtime and blaming me. At that accommodation site, my name is not on a list. So I get a lift from a very nice older gentleman in the appropriate high-vis to the other accommodation. Confused? I am, and worried I’ll be sleeping in the desert, which is exactly all there is for 100 km in every direction.

At the other accommodation site, a New Zealand bloke, still buzzing from his purchase of Big Day Out tickets, turns down The Offspring’s ‘Self Esteem’ long enough to give me a room key. Lovely bloke. Cracking song too. Reminds me of my teenage angst, which I now realise was just extreme sexual frustration, and my current angst at having put everything on the line to follow my dream of being a writer/comedian, apparently doing quite well for two years, and still ending up here.

The accommodation resembles a caravan without windows and slightly smaller. Or half a corrugated iron shipping container crammed with an air conditioner, bed, table, television and toilet. Certainly not spacious, but far better than a backpacker hostel. But so is a bed of nails. Really, it’s

not too bad and the food's great. As much free fresh fruit, salad and meat as you can swallow, with a hot buffet every morning and evening, and desserts available 24 hours a day. According to those who've been here a while, after your first three-week stint, it's highly unlikely that you'll still fit into your pants.

Up at 6 am tomorrow, for an induction at 7. If I sleep through my alarm, that'll be awkward. Nobody's allowed in late, and you need to sit through an induction in order to be permitted onto the mining site. There's only one each week, and being stuck out here unable to work, even though I don't know what I'm doing, I'm no good to anyone. If I miss it, I'll probably be fired, sent home and made to pay for all my flights. That's just what I need. More debt. I probably should go into banking next, because at least in banking, nobody seems to give a stuff about debt.

So far everyone I've met seems nice, but they remind me of the men you find in a nightclub after 2 am. Big, rough and friendly enough, but possibly on the verge of violence, especially against me, the sole guy in a Hawaiian shirt – my attempt at high-vis until I have a proper shirt.

Also in keeping with the 2 am nightclub analogy, there is a small proportion of women out here, a few of them as rough as the men, and most with more tats. If there's any picking up, I reckon it could go either way. Some of these women could easily lift the men, and I just hope no-one of either sex corners me. The whole place has a bit of a jail vibe about it, and I wonder if I should skip sleeping, and stay up all night fashioning my toothbrush into a shiv. You know, to protect the sanctity of my bumhole.

Dispatch No 2 – days 1 to 2

## **My name's not Matthew**

Up at 5.30 am, as I don't want to be late for the induction. Starts at 7, but I need to be there at 6.45 to have my photo taken. Considering it's only a ten-minute walk, I've got plenty of time. I'm also exhausted. Last night at 10 pm I watched an episode of *Game of Thrones* before bed. Four episodes later, it was 2 am and I'd finished season two.

I reset my alarm for 6 and drift back to sleep. Then I'm up before my alarm, it's a whole lot lighter, and I realise I've set it for 6 pm, not 6 am, and it's now 6.40. After a stop by the mess hall for some fruit – there's always time for a quick banana – I set off across to the main accommodation site and the training room for my site induction. I look over the piece of paper I've been given that details the date, time and location of the induction. It's still 7 am, it's still today, and if I miss the start, there's still no late admittance and I'll get sent home.

There are signs for reception, accommodation blocks, toilet blocks, buses, the gym, medical centre, the dining room, meeting rooms, carpark and the wet mess (which is the bar and games room, not where they film pornos... Maybe that happens after the bar closes, and maybe tonight I'll make my shiv).

No sign for the induction room. Now if they needed one sign, you think that'd be it. If somebody needs directions, it's the person who's just arrived and hasn't been told anything, because they haven't yet been *inducted*.

So I ask a girl. It's not that I choose a girl out of all the people around; there's nobody else. The buses leave for the worksite at 6 am, and keeping with gender stereotypes, the women do the cleaning while the men do the mining.

The lovely young New Zealand lass says, 'Nice shirt bro.' I'm still in my Hawaiian shirt.

'Thanks! Do you know where the induction room is?' It's 6.56 am.

'Not sure. I think it's next to the gym. Where I'm going.' Smart move, bulking up to fight off the fellas.

'I did it months ago,' she says. 'It was like my twentieth one.'

I'm suddenly worried that it's really difficult, and she's failed it nineteen times.

But she continues, 'Every job, it's basically the same shit. How many have you done?'

Oh I get it. This is her twentieth jobsite. That seems like a lot, she doesn't look that old.

'I know what you mean,' I reply. Not wanting to give away that this is my first induction since I was an engineer, over a

decade ago, and that I'm a little bit excited about something she obviously finds mundane. I also don't want to let on that I'm a complete newbie. She's not that big but looks tough, and I don't want to get beaten up by a girl on my first day.

We reach the gym and I say, 'Thanks for your help, I'm Xavier by the way.'

So far people on the mining site have been so friendly that it borders on aggressive, and I've quickly learnt that after a conversation, the done thing is to introduce yourself.

She has a traditional New Zealand name that I instantly forget, and know I can't pronounce anyway. It sounds really nice, but I'm a bit bogan when it comes to tricky words. That is, I can't say 'em. Sometimes when onstage doing the comedy thing, I actually stress so much about saying them properly that I overthink it and get them completely wrong.

She goes into the gym, and the induction room doesn't seem to be anywhere nearby. It's 6.58. I spot a guy about 100 m away. Easy to spot because of his huge gut covered by a high-vis shirt so large that it looks more like a sail. He walks me to the induction room. His name is Gary. It's 7.01.

I'm allowed to stay, but have to return next week to have my photo taken for a swipe card that there isn't yet anywhere to swipe. At the moment they've got this awesome security system where every time you leave or enter the campsite or mining site, a security guard asks for your last name, and then writes it down on a piece of paper. Cop that, terrorists! Airport security has nothing on this place. And considering that you can only get here via a charter flight that's booked by your employer, I don't imagine they get many blow-ins.

The induction is all about safety first (pun intended), then

an environmental session, and then a break and I think to myself that we're nearly done. Then it's safety again – for another three hours. It feels like a promotional session for Nuscon, the project management company running the job; however, there have been over one hundred days since an LTI (lost time incident).

At times the safety stuff does seem over the top, but with that long since any significant accident and thousands of workers onsite, well that's a fair effort. Especially considering what mining sites used to be like, and what mining sites run by the same company overseas probably still are like. I suspect that companies care a lot about safety in First World countries, because it's cheaper than paying compensation and rehabilitation. Which sounds like a good thing, but consider the reverse. These companies also operate in countries where life is cheap, so the same standards most likely don't apply.

So the induction finishes with safety, and more safety, and then a long section on fatigue during which I nearly fall asleep.

The different presenters are all engaging and well-spoken; they've obviously had some public speaking training, and likely honed their particular section over hundreds of similar sessions. The whole thing feels like it's been crafted by a marketing team to keep at least a loose grip on your attention, convey information, and tick a whole lot of legal boxes. It could've definitely done with more jokes, but as we're repeatedly told, 'Safety's no joke.'

In the six months since this mine opened, there has only been one LTI. That was when the snake handler was bitten

by one. According to the presenter, it was an unavoidable incident since, ‘He’d had the training. He was the expert.’

Or maybe he was just shit at his job. I still don’t know what my job is, but surely a large part of catching snakes is learning how not to be bitten by them.

During the induction, each instructor leads us through the answers to the quiz questions for their section. So we all pass, and although I still have no idea what I’m doing, at least I’m now legally allowed to do it.

My direct supervisor, Jonno, arrives to pick me up two hours after the induction finishes. He’s also the onsite manager for the company I’m working for, JRT Projects. After a fifteen-minute drive, it’s 3 pm when I finally arrive at the mining site, and it’s somehow even hotter out here. At security we’re stopped, and after the girl takes down our names she nods at me and asks, ‘Where’s that bloke’s high-vis?’

I’m shattered. So the Hawaiian shirt really isn’t sufficient? ‘He’s just going to pick it up,’ Jonno replies.

Into the office, one of JRT’s two onsite demountables, and I meet Jerome, who introduces himself as the ‘JRT Projects Office Manager’, and leads me to a shelf of shirts. Along with the logo of Debitel, the head contractor, each also comes with a name.

Debitel manages all construction on the site where I’m stationed. In the hierarchy of things they sit below Nuscon, the overall project managers, and above JRT Projects.

So do I want to be Steven, Rick, Graham, Matthew, Matthew or David? Well only Graham and the larger Matthew’s shirts are the right size, so that’s who I’ll be until my shirts arrive, and for today I decide to be Matthew.

Jonno introduces me to a few of the guys.

Robbo says, 'Nice to meet you Matthew.'

'My name's not Matthew.'

'Is now,' he replies, and everyone within earshot pisses themselves.

Heckled on my first day, before I've even started work. I can't wait until they find out I'm a comedian.

For two hours I look up stuff on the internet and wait for someone to give me something to do, and then it's 5 pm and knock-off time.

Maybe tomorrow I'll find out what I'm supposed to be doing. I don't even know how much I'm being paid, but it feels rude to ask what sort of money I'm getting for working here, before I've actually done any.

---

The next morning I do the safety induction specific to JRT Projects. Since I'm the only person being inducted, it's one on one with Donk, JRT's onsite safety officer.

Donk starts slowly going through the induction, getting me to initial each page after we've read it together. Until, under 'position description', I fill in 'admin'.

'You're only admin?' he asks.

I nod.

'Just initial the pages, then. Nobody's going to give a shit if you've read them.'

Afterwards I fill out a bunch more forms that are all very similar to those I've filled out several times before: at the



induction yesterday, when I applied for this job, after I got the job, and just before I left to come out here. Then I waste the rest of the afternoon doing what I think my work might look like, because I'm still waiting for some.

I also help Jerome connect to the scanner, resize some columns in Excel, spellcheck a Word document, open a packet of sugar, and then I realise that Jerome is an idiot. Maybe my job is to be Jerome's carer?

Just before 5 pm Jonno appears for the first time that day, and after Jerome has left, he explains some of what I'll be doing.

'Most of this is stuff that Jerome's done already or used to do, but he's stuffed it all up so badly that I don't want him anywhere near any of it,' Jonno says.

Dispatch No 3 – days 3 to 6

## **Eight sneezes gets you one big what?**

Day three and I'm up at 5, on the bus at 6, and at the worksite by 6.25 for the 6.30 am briefing. Well I think that's right, but it's only my second morning onsite and it's been hard to see the time, or anything, as I've spent both mornings sneezing uncontrollably.

I'm allergic to dust, and mines are very dusty. I've been told repeatedly there's nothing out here, so nothing to be allergic to, but with nothing always comes dust.

Usually in the outback there's not much dust, as our planet has this genius plan for controlling it called 'nature'. However, after you pull up, chop up and burn up all that pesky environment, you're left with lots of dust. Or if you're me, dust, snot, tears and sneezing fits.

The morning briefing involves the one hundred odd guys and eight even girls working at the site, one of four currently

in action at this mine. Six different supervisors take turns telling everyone what their crew will be doing, which is always exactly what they were doing yesterday. One supervisor even says, 'If you're doing something different, well you should already know about it.'

There's also the obligatory daily safety message. It's delivered with an oomph of emphasis; on the first day I thought it must be safety day, but today I realise it's the same 'oomph' every day.

I wonder if all that repetition may render it meaningless, but with only one warning given for minor indiscretions before being kicked off the site forever, and a strict no-tolerance policy for breaking a range of other rules, it seems that it's actually the threat of losing a ridiculously well-paid job that keeps everyone 'safe'. I don't know, maybe it's the combination of both that works, or maybe it's all the high-vis.

At that first briefing I'm informed that it's been exactly 137 days since the last LTI, and then it's time for stretches. Each morning the one hundred odd men and eight lucky ladies are led into the carpark, where some plucky soul takes us through a quick stretching routine.

Apparently the stretching leader is picked at random, so each morning I'm now terrified that my name will be called. It's been stressing me out so much that last night I had trouble sleeping. I've got plenty of comedy material, but my stretching material is incredibly limited, and I certainly don't want to make a dick of myself in front of these guys so early into my stint.

With men like this first impressions don't just last, they brand you forever...well at least until the end of the job.

Hence I'm pretty happy with 'Matt'. It's better than some of the other nicknames I've heard. Such as 'Nuts', 'Helmet', 'Worm' and 'Jacka'. Maybe 'Matt' is also a joke about genitals, and I just haven't figured it out yet.

You might think someone who tries to make a living on stage is fine with public attention, and for the most part I am. Alcohol helps, and so does repetition and practice. When I walk on stage, I know most of what I'm going to say, and through practice I'm usually quick enough to deal with hecklers, and make jokes off the cuff about random happenings.

Then when it's done, I'm free to leave, which is by far the most important point. If it goes terribly, I run away. If it goes well, I run away. Either way, I don't have to spend the next year seeing each audience member every day. Hence my fear of stretching.

While the person who leads the stretching can apparently be picked at random, it has so far been led by one of the workplace safety representatives. From what I can tell, there are about four different contractors and each has their own safety rep. On day three, it's the turn of ours to lead the stretching.

I later find out that his nickname 'Donk' is short for donkey, and I hope he's not keeping the metaphor going from the earlier nickname list. If he is, well why keep bringing that up, even ironically?

A large sporadic circle forms in the carpark, Donk stubs out his cigarette and steps into the centre. Seeing around a hundred rough men covered in dust and a variety of tattoos, beer guts, facial hair and high-vis doing star jumps is immensely entertaining. I'm trying so hard to suppress giggles, which

aren't manly at all, that during a knee stretch I fall over. Also every morning we do the touching our toes stretch, and about a quarter of the men squeeze a fart onto whoever's behind them. Nothing's funnier than a fart.

Next it's time for JRT Projects to do their own briefing, which is the real briefing, as opposed to the big pretend briefing involving everyone that happened twenty minutes ago. Our briefing is in the smoking area. Two thirds of the men light up from packets featuring either the face, lungs, body, nails or teeth of a smoker who died at age thirty-four. Which is probably very close to the average age of the workers here.

At this briefing on day four, I'm officially introduced and told I'll be doing something called contracts admin. While everyone is still focussed on me, I'm seized by a mammoth sneezing fit. When I get to four a few start counting, at eight everyone has joined in, and when I finish at sixteen, the thirty blokes in our crew all cheer and Jonno, our company's onsite manager and my direct boss, is trying very badly not to laugh. By laughing.

'Double orgasm, we have a winner!' someone calls out.

I laugh as well. Having been picked on all through high school, those six years of torture taught me that if you try to defend yourself, you make it worse by a factor of around fifty. I'm also grateful that I've already acquired 'Matty', which stuck despite 'Double' or 'Orgasm' being way funnier.

Day five for me is clean high-vis shirt day, and I change from 'Matthew' to 'Graham'. Nobody notices, and over the previous three days I've evolved from Matthew, to Matty, to

Matt. In two days I expect to be referred to by 'M' or just a grunt.

At the end of day six I'm still not clear on what I'm supposed to be doing out here. Someone must know, and hopefully they don't keep it a secret for too much longer. On my payslip it's going to be called work, but at the moment it's playing out like an extremely disappointing holiday.

Dispatch No 4 – days 7 to 8

## **Beware miners bearing gifts**

We work three weeks on, one week off and Wednesday is changeover. A quarter of our crew flies out, and is replaced the next day by a quarter returning from their week away. This time the returning crew includes Dale, the assistant project manager. Big jolly gut, handlebar moustache and he doesn't walk, he swaggers; and while Dale is never in a rush, he does get shit done.

And he tells it like it is. If you're useless, he'll say, 'Mate, you're fucking useless.'

If he's unsure about what you're doing or why, he'll say, 'Mate, what the fuck do you think you're doing? You're useless.'

If he thinks you should go for a beer with him after work, he'll say, 'Hey useless fuck. Beer when we're done mate?'

Every conversation includes 'useless', 'mate' and 'fuck'. Depending on the situation they can be insults, compliments

or greetings. It's the same as the way Smurfs use the word 'smurf', footballers use 'obviously' and Rugby League players just point at stuff.

---

Thursday morning at the main pre-work briefing, involving the usual hundred odd guys and eight over-ogled girls, when it's Dale's turn to explain what our crew will be doing, he says, 'Yep, that.'

The overall project manager, Roy, who works for Nuscon, replies, 'Dale, anything you want to add to that?'

'Mate I just flew in. Right now my crew knows, I don't, and they're not useless. Fuck.'

At our crew's private briefing, Dale says. 'Right, who doesn't know what they're doing? Well get to it.'

The Guru pipes up. 'Shouldn't we at least go through it?'

'So you don't know?' Dale asks.

The Guru glares at Dale. 'No, that's not what I'm saying.'

'Sounds like it,' Dale says and swaggers past him mumbling, 'Useless fuck. Maaaaaate.'

The Guru is a specialist contractor here from another company to oversee the installation of a piece of kit that his company has designed and supplied. Our manager Jonno nicknamed him the Guru because he seems to have only the slightest clue what he's doing.

On my first day Jonno told me, 'Try not to ask that bloke anything. I reckon he's only here because all the engineers are on holidays. Poor bloke's probably just a storeman.'



Every time he's called the Guru he walks a bit taller, and everyone else smiles, and then piles a bit more shit on him. Such as:

'Hey Guru, which way does this screw turn?'

'This fitting. Where does it fit?'

'This stainless steel has a stain. Can we still use it?'

Back at the morning briefing, the crew are panicking. One of them yells, 'You've got to say something Dale. We haven't finished our smokes.'

'Hey, the comedian should do a bit,' someone else says.

They can't mean me. I haven't told anyone I'm a comedian. So why are they all looking at me? It feels like I've just been asked to lead the morning stretching, but much, much worse.

There are several things that make for a bad gig. Before getting on stage I always check for them. It's become such a habit that now, around any group, I'm always subconsciously ticking them off, evaluating what sort of audience they'll be, and how conducive the surroundings are to comedy.

The morning briefing is about as bad as it gets. No microphone or stage or alcohol. Everyone is in a rubbish mood, since there's a full day of work ahead, and the temperature is predicted to reach forty degrees: a bonus negative, since they all know I'll be sitting in air conditioning all day. I've been keeping to myself, so haven't built up a rapport with anyone, and although I have an engineering degree, I've been asking a few stupid questions because I've been away from it for a decade. So at the moment I probably have about the same amount of respect as the Guru.

And the biggest negative of this horrendous situation?

They're all staring at me, expecting to laugh. The first laugh is always the hardest. The audience is looking at you, and they haven't decided whether or not you're funny, and you're looking at them, wondering whether or not they're a shit audience. To me, that first laugh often sounds more like a sigh of relief.

So these men are expecting to laugh, but they don't trust me to make them laugh, so they aren't ready to laugh. They're primed for heckling and they've been working together for months, so whatever they yell out is going to get a bigger laugh than whatever I say, no matter how funny I am, and how unfunny they are.

My only option is to pick on someone. Take down a potential heckler, before anyone heckles, but don't pick anyone quick-witted. Pick someone weak, who everyone else is already used to laughing at. In a normal comedy club situation, I'd never do this. It's mean, and I don't want to do it here. I look at the apprentices, there's no easier target, and realise that while all these thoughts had been ricocheting around my head, I've now waited too long to say anything. Another comedy rule is that for something to be funny, it has to be said quickly. A pause is as bad as a stutter. A mediocre line or retort can get a huge laugh as long as it's short and quick, while a long-winded bit delivered after a long pause, no matter how clever, is very rarely funny.

I'm staring at them, they're still staring at me, and I'm actually staring at twelve months of hell, because I know that if the first thing that comes out of my mouth doesn't get a laugh, and it likely won't even if it's hilarious, these men will never let me forget it.

From the conversations I've overheard, they look on comedians as magicians entrusted with the secret of the funny, like it's an ancient language, and see themselves as tradies who didn't get through school and, 'Don't know no good jokes.'

The problem is, they're funny as hell. The back and forth that goes on during the day, the little throwaway lines, the practical jokes, it's all hilarious. Remember that guy in high school who was medium smart but never did any work? Who was the first to get laid and always cracked the funniest jokes? Who either dropped out or was thrown out? That's most tradesmen.

Since I'm the comedian they feel inferior to me, while secretly believing they're superior and whatever I say, they'll think, 'I could've done better than that. I should be the comedian. Not this dickhead.'

All this time, they're still staring.

'Come on comedian. Give us a bit,' someone says.

'You're a comedian?' says someone else.

'Yeah he is,' comes the reply.

Then I see an escape: 'And it's obviously going well, which is why I'm here.'

Self-deprecation. Every comedian's best friend. There's a slight murmur that the most optimistic would call a giggle, and I diffuse the whole situation by going up to Dale and saying, 'We really need to sort out this paperwork. There's a bunch of timesheets that were supposed to go off yesterday, and a big stack of confined-space permits you need to sign...'

Many of these guys can't go three seconds without some stimulation, and they'd been waiting for a joke for nearly thirty. So as soon as I start speaking to Dale, they go back

to picking on each other, and I realise another huge comedy problem: these men terrify me.

They're the guys that picked on me at high school. Not the actual guys, they're all dead, squashed by their huge overweight wives in their sleep, or dismembered by their feral, psychotic children. That's the way it is in my head anyway... I'm still pretty angry about high school.

If you're terrified of your audience, they can smell it. To be funny, you've got to be relaxed. That way, even if you're not funny straight up, the audience stays with you, trusting that you'll be funny soon. Otherwise, why are you so relaxed? Walk on stage and look even a tiny bit nervous and you can be as funny as you like, but the audience is expecting you not to be, so will react accordingly. Usually that's by not laughing, sometimes it's heckling, worst of all they just pity or ignore you until you go away.

I may've diffused the comedy bomb at the morning briefing, but I know it'll come up again. And again. And again, until they get a joke out of me. Although I've decided not to tell anyone I'm a comedian, I'd resolved before arriving not to lie about it, so I've known it was going to come up sooner or later. I was just hoping it would be much later. Like when you know your hot girlfriend is going to dump you, it always happens much sooner than you wish it did. Well that's what happens to me anyway.

Dale follows me into the office. 'Mate,' he says. 'Can you handle chili, or are you a useless fuck?'

'Don't mind it.'

'Try a bit of this then.' He offers me what I assume is food. It looks like a bit of bark that has been used to scoop up the

shit of a dog with some serious intestinal issues.

‘What is it?’

‘Chili beef jerky. Try some.’

I know if I show any weakness, I’ll be mauled. I grab the strip, tear off a mouthful and chow down.

He smiles, ‘You’re only supposed to have a tiny bit.’

I didn’t know that, but I have a high tolerance for chili, and I know if I keep it down he’ll be impressed. I chew, and chew, and chew. It’s very chewy. He stares, and stares, and stares. I chew. He stares. I’ve never had beef jerky before, and this is tough. It doesn’t taste like anything, and I’m not completely convinced that it isn’t bark covered in dogshit.

I swallow and grin. ‘Not bad.’

He screws up his nose and walks out, obviously disappointed.

It’s hot, but not too bad, and I sit down to work. Then I start sweating. Most people know, but often forget, that chili-heat takes a few moments to come on, and because of this, it’s a common trap to have a few mouthfuls more than you can handle.

Based on how I’m suddenly feeling, I shouldn’t have had any. My tongue is on fire. My mouth is on fire. I can’t feel my lips. My ear starts twitching, which has never happened before, and my leg starts trembling, which has, but only when I’m in extreme pain. I’m seeing two of everything, it feels like my insides are melting and I’m trapped in clothes that are too tight. I try going outside, then inside, then outside, but nothing helps.

I dash to the crib room (onsite dining area) for water. Which I drink. And drink. And drink. But it does nothing. Back in the office and using my fingernails, I try scrapping

the hot off my tongue, out of my mouth, off my lips. I need it out, but it's pointless. Dale comes in.

'How are you feeling?'

I don't look up from the garbage I'm typing quickly into a word document. Rows and rows of adklfhajslf kjhasdkfjashlfksahdjfl.

'Fine,' I say. 'And you?'

My face is numb, and I hope I'm not slurring my words.

He frowns and leaves. I've won and after half an hour of agony, the fire finally starts to subside. Then the real sickness begins. I've got a pretty strong stomach, but it's doing backflips. Chili hasn't done this to me before.

Now, if you're offended by graphic bodily functions, stop reading right now.

I bend over, lean back, stand up and gingerly step around the office. Lie on the floor, cover my face, try stretching. I try my body in every position I can, but nothing stops the pain getting worse and worse. I go to the toilet and try to vomit and shit, something to get this devil substance out of me, but nothing. I burp and fart, and after each expulsion I think, 'That's fixed it,' but it's barely a moment of relief.

Recently in China I ate some dodgy corn. It quickly went through me and an hour later I was fine. This is so many times worse. I attempt some work but the screen is a blur, I start shaking and tears are pouring out of me. This. Really. Hurts. It feels like I'm about to explode outwards from the stomach, like a big overripe zit of blood and guts and bile.

What if this isn't regular food poisoning but proper poisoning? Exactly how long has that jerky been sitting in

his office, in a drawer, in the heat, fermenting and breeding killer bugs?

This is getting hospital bad and if it keeps getting worse, I'll have to tell someone. Into the toilet, I try again, but nothing doing at either end. That morning we were informed that it has been 142 days since the last LTI. I really don't want chili beef jerky to break that streak, that'd be even more embarrassing than the snake handler who got bitten by a snake. I barely got away with all that sneezing, so there's no way I'll get away with this.

I place a double plastic bag next to me on the desk as I feel I'm constantly about to vomit, but the bile keeps retreating down my throat, only to rise again. All I can do is sip water and hope.

Dale returns, stares hard, and asks me a menial question.

Drawing together every skerrick of my remaining composure I calmly say, 'It'll be done in a couple of hours. Lunchtime at the latest. Got any more of that jerky?'

He laughs, shakes his head and leaves. I'm amazed he hasn't noticed that I'm about to disintegrate.

Into the toilet again, and this time I vomit. All water and jerky. All mashed up, it looks like I've eaten a steak, or several dog turds. I throw up again and again and again. Then another new pain, as each time after vomiting, remnants of chili bile charges back down, lighting up my throat and nose with a scorching trail of pain. Think wasabi times heaps. Which brings on a sneezing fit. Seventeen to twenty sneezes, each one a blast of chili across sensitive sinus tissue, already battered by days of dust, and the tears become full-on weeping. Vomiting, sneezing, coughing and weeping.

Then I feel a little better, and it occurs to me that the beef jerky had reacted so badly because there was nothing else in my stomach. I drink some milk. Twenty minutes later I very tentatively attempt some work. Tomorrow is an RDO (rostered day off). We get one every two weeks, so tomorrow I can rest. All I have to do is get through today. Two hours later more milk and biscuits, and for afternoon tea a two-day-old cinnamon donut. Maybe not the wisest choice, but microwaved cinnamon donuts are delicious, and I can't bear to throw it out. It all stays down.

At the end of the day Dale says, 'Hey useless fuck. Coming for a beer?'

I'm still feeling chili beef jerky queasy, but I have to go. Refusing to drink with these men is up there with screwing one of their sisters, and then not marrying her. After the sneezing and pressure to do some comedy, I don't want any more attention.

Later that night I discover that on Dale's first day back after his week off, he'd subjected three others to the chili beef jerky of death. One guy's tongue swelled up and he was rendered speechless, another guy was still pale and trembling at the pub that night, and one girl was reduced to rocking in a corner for over an hour, while constantly sipping at two litres of milk.

With all the stringent occupational health and safety regulations, and the penalties for breaking them, I have to respect Dale for how he's discovered a way to seriously injure people, all well within the rules.