

WE'RE LOOKING FOR THE SMOKING PUN

Another Roundup of Wordplay in Quotidian Situations

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Every day, the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* features an amusing or quirky story.

On November 1, 2018, the column focused on a group of Russian trolls who were fans of a game show on Comedy Central. The program, *@midnight with Chris Hardwick* (2013-17), posed challenges involving punny variations on a specific premise. Some of the tweeted entries were pretty good. For example, invited to devise titles of movies with a wealth theme, their submissions included *The Empire Strikes Oil* and *Something's Yacht to Give*.

Why did they do it? No one knows, but the article suggests that the trolls had goals. Professionally (so to speak), they generated social-media posts to influence U.S. public opinion. Thus, they may have been attempting to learn about American culture and polish their English and humor skills. From my perspective, this peculiar tale simply demonstrates the universal appeal of wordplay. (Many of these videos are on YouTube; search #HashtagWars.)

Once again, it's time for a "perfect swarm" of puns that I managed to deploy in real-life situations. At the time, I thought they were original. Of course, clever people abound. Insofar as it was possible to locate antecedents via Google, I acknowledged that I was anticipated, and in cases of documented originality, supplied credit and attributions. See the notes at end of this article.

- At my neighborhood bank, an employee began to explain how to use a new type of ATM. But I was already familiar with the devices. Politely interrupting, I quipped: "Like a dentist, I know the drill."
- A V.I.P. told me he could be reached directly via his organization's website. Not so. As I later complained: "All my messages were answered by minions with opinions."
- I'm an avid theatergoer, but dislike so-called "interactive" productions in which performers venture into the audience to chat up, manhandle, or otherwise embarrass hapless patrons. Hence my battle cry: "Build the fourth wall!"
- Like almost everyone, I occasionally quote from memory. In an attempt at full disclosure, I puckishly add: "That's probably not verbatim, but it's the gist—with a twist."
- In a follow-up e-mail, the sender referred to his earlier messages, necessitating a hunt and this report: "Like Theseus, I found the thread."
- Now that marijuana is legal, it has found its way into cuisine, spawning recipes ranging from lasagna to jerk chicken. One might expect to see a cookbook titled *Pot in Every Pot*.

- I invited a friend to a concert, but didn't receive a reply in time. Gamely, I offered the printed program as a "consternation prize."
- At my gym, a TV in the lounge usually blasts a news channel. In this day and age, when everyone carries a mobile device and headphones, it's especially inexcusable to irritate others in a public setting. On one occasion, I asked if it would be OK to mute the audio, archly noting: "I'm a member of the silent minority."
- The protein bars called RXBAR are a favorite snack. In October 2017, the company was acquired by Kellogg for \$600 million. So the founder instantly became a "cereal entrepreneur."
- Commenting on a new book at the request of the author, I noted that certain religious fundamentalists perceive everything in terms of a dichotomy of good and evil. This phenomenon, I suggested, might inspire a film: *Manichean from Heaven*.
- Offered compensation for a debt via online funds transfer, I waived the small sum, dubbing the gesture a "PayPal dispensation."
- And speaking of the pope: Like many people, I was surprised when he expressed a tolerant view of homosexuality. Perhaps he really meant to say: "Who am I to budge?"
- A remark I encountered was so candid that it must have been written with a blunt instrument.
- Witnessing an individual's pronounced lack of curiosity, I observed that he makes G.W. Bush look like G.W. Carver.
- I live in Manhattan. When a friend on the West Coast sent me an issue of *The New Yorker* via postal mail, I expressed gratitude, but advised that she could have spared herself the expense and trouble, adding: "It's like carrying coals to new hassle."
- In a similar geographical incident, I characterized New York City's real-estate situation to an out-of-towner: "Multimillion-dollar apartments here are a dime a dozen."
- For a friend who follows certain industry crises and kerfuffles, I routinely clip hard-copy newspaper articles on the subject. But when such reports became so frequent that the task proved onerous, I had to cut back. "This isn't everything," I said, "but it's enough to give you a handle on the scandal."
- Last year, a routine update of my iPhone automatically installed a "Measure App." At an Apple store, a techie explained that it gauges the size of objects. I riposted: "Will it take the measure of one's life, philosophically?"

And finally: Making reservations for a ritzy benefit, I opted for lower-priced tickets for the performance alone, minus the catered banquet. Then the organization's officials, perhaps because of no-shows, offered a comp upgrade to the full event, including the dinner. I promptly informed my companion: "We've just been moved higher on the food chain."

CREDITS AND CONFESSIONS: Smoking pun (title): Numerous variations are online. Minions: a video-game reviewer's blog. Gist: A stage play with this title was performed in India in 2017. Pot: Several citations, though not re cooking. Silent minority: thousands of matches. Budge: In the lyrics of a 2017 song by Kevin Gates, a rapper. New hassle: Title of a Washington State pollution report. Dime: NBC news report title. And multiple links for drill, consternation, cereal, PayPal, scandal.