



TALES FROM THE CRIP

John Callahan speaks from beyond the grave.

Shit, I thought locking up my truck, I'm late as hell. I thought of a cartoon in Callahan's illustrated biography, *Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far On Foot*. The cartoon depicted a man in a suit and tie speeding down the sidewalk with a briefcase, screaming, "Out of the way, you son-of-a-bitch, I'm a busy man!" I was as nervous as Astor's pet beaver.

As I stalked up the hill toward his apartment I thought of excuses. I had car trouble. The traffic was terrible. Dog ate my homework. No. Don't try to be funny in the presence of a guy who wrote gags like: Death, replete with cowl and scythe, seated at a desk presses the intercom and says, "Miss Jenkins, please die." But what if he had no sense of humor? What if he were one of those guys who, funny on paper, was like Pol Pot in person? Add to this that in the back of my head (he was paralyzed in an automobile accident in 1972) was an image of giant blipping life-support systems and something that looked like a cross between a sea anemone and the inside of a stereo speaker sitting motionless in a chair. Put this all together and you've got a general idea of my mental state prior to arriving at my destination.

I pushed the buzzer at Callahan's pleasant brick apartment house in Northwest Portland. I looked around. No access ramp. What does he do, levitate in? A woman's voice answered.

"Yes?"

"Curt Hopkins. I'm here for the interview."

Great. Probably his attendant. What if they're doing something private? I was assaulted by an image from the autobiography where Callahan sends his attendant, usually some booze-addled sociopath, to answer the door wearing translucent rubber gloves smeared with Vaseline and feces—to ward off the unwanted. I felt unwanted.

I navigated the corridors and stairs and entered a long, battleship grey hallway that smelled of fabric softener. Callahan's door was at the end of the hall, near the back door and the access ramp. It was, in fact, a great deal like apartments I had lived in: a large, orderly basement studio with a desk, a TV and VCR, and hospital bed. His attendant, a dark, beautiful woman in a velvet skirt, made me hot chocolate and she and Callahan made arrangements to meet later. As she was leaving she gave him a resounding kiss on the lips. Wow. My kind of attendance.

Callahan is a large man with bright red hair and an open face. When I met him he was wearing a stylish purple blazer, black shirt, a grass skirt, and red pumps. Just kidding. He was wearing jeans.

I sat on the sofa drinking the hot chocolate as we talked for a while about nothing in particular. Pulling my paraphernalia out of my bag, I heard a meow and looked over my shoulder to the ground-level

window. A large reddish cat.

"Let Stanley in, would you?"

Stanley all but fell into my lap.

"What's this?" I pointed to the hard, red sleeve around the cat's right front leg.

"A cast. He broke his leg."

"How?"

"Car accident."

Curt: I was telling people at work, I'm going to go interview Callahan, the guy who does the cartoons, and one of my co-workers at the bakery I work at said, "Oh yeah, I used to read his stuff and I would roar, and then I would feel like shit, until I found out that he was paralyzed, and then it was OK." But you have said, "I reserve the right to draw up gags about any group or individual, especially about self-righteous assholes who presume to defend the disabled. But if I weren't disabled I'd find some other offensive subject matter." Is it funny because you're paralyzed? If I drew them would they be as funny?

Callahan: I think it's ridiculous that I should have a license to draw about the handicapped. Why should I? It's just ridiculous. I mean, anybody should draw anything they can take responsibility for. It's almost funnier if someone able-bodied draws about a handicapped person. People write these awful, angry letters: "Callahan should be crucified for making fun of our courageous friends, the handicapped." Someday I'm going to reveal that I'm not really handicapped at all.

Q: When Phillip Roth first started writing novels in the fifties, the Jewish community reacted strongly against him because he was self-critical. They thought he was perpetuating stereotypes. Do you get the same thing from handicapped people?

A: No. Opposite. The absolute opposite. I've only gotten one angry letter that I've seen printed somewhere in a paper from a handicapped person. I seem to be more accepted by the handicapped people, even praised by them for what I do. Because the handicapped experience is that everyone walks on eggshells around you. Philip Roth is funny. He's a tremendous mentor to me and a great personality. I love his work. I think that *Portnoy's Complaint* is the funniest book ever written. But I also spent my entire childhood jacking off with my sister's bra strap around my head. You know, just as Philip Roth did. So we've got a lot in common.

Q: Are people biased in their relations with you because you're paralyzed? What form does that take? Condescension?

BY CURT HOPKINS

Cartoons from *Digesting the Child Within* (Quill/William Morrow) © 1991 John Callahan

CHUCK FINALLY GETS IN TOUCH WITH A FEELING



"I think the politically correct are the funniest, most absurd group of assholes that ever crawled out from under a rock."

A: People don't take you seriously. People ask if you've got any pencils to sell. For instance I had a date yesterday and she said, "I'd like to be honest with you. I was really nervous before I met you. I was thinking, 'Now he's handicapped, that means his eyesight isn't very good.'" And then she says, "No wait a minute, how can that be?" And she started to question herself. So you put up with shit like that.

You meet them and you think maybe you're better educated, you may be more witty, you may be deeper, and you may be more powerful in the world. But the assumption is usually the other way around. You may be a fuckface and they may be superior to you. But it is good to have an excuse to shit your pants in public.

Q: You definitely need that. . . . I used to go shoot pool at this place called The Pad in Eugene. There would be guys in there in wheelchairs. I think they had been in Vietnam and they were tough fuckers, real assholes. They'd play pool and they would fuckin' run over your feet.

A: I know handicapped people who'd pull a gun and blow your brains out if you looked at them cross-eyed. But you've got to understand people stare at you like you're the Elephant Man.

Q: I like that cartoon you did about the elevator where everybody's turning away. Other times they're trying to find the way in but it's always the wrong way, like "I got an uncle whose legs were cut off."

A: Yeah, they're trying, with maim stories, to relate to you and endear themselves to you. It happens all the time. It's tantamount to somebody saying to a black guy, "I know a guy who's black. I got a friend who's black. I got a friend who's paralyzed." I would like to have a shirt that says "You wouldn't understand. It's a crippled thing."

Q: Bakhtin, the Russian literary theorist, talks about how comedy takes things—gods, for instance, the sacred—and brings them into the realm of criticism. Once you laugh at something, you can ask, "Is it a god or is it not a god?" Should it be worshipped or not? That's what some of your cartoons do with all kinds of different topics. They bring things down to a point where they become fair game intellectually.

A: I agree with that. What the fuck should be sacred? I hold back on certain things; you can't cut your throat by drawing about everything. But anything's as good as another thing for a cartoon, and the more loaded the subject is the funnier it's going to be, a lot of the time. To me it isn't so much the cartoon sometimes that's funny, but just the fact that so many people are going to get mad about it, and it's going to start shit up. That's what cracks me up. I can barely draw—I can barely hold a pen—because I'm laughing so hard sometimes when I think of the reaction I'll get when I draw an abortion cartoon, for instance, or an Affirmative Action cartoon. I don't necessarily even subscribe to my own point of view, politically, in a cartoon. The cartoon may be loaded for the conservative or loaded for the liberal side. I don't necessarily give a fuck one way or

another.

I did one recently—the pregnant woman at the abortion clinic saying, "Please make it snappy, I've got an anti-death-penalty rally to get to downtown." People say "Don't draw that, it's too loaded an issue." Well, why the hell is that? Can't it be discussed? Isn't there a true irony in the cartoon? I mean, it's not an irony that's, say, true blue and you can stand behind. I just think it's an interesting idea and I throw it out there for people to like or dislike. As long as people read it, I don't give a shit if they hang me in effigy.

Q: It seems people are extremely concerned with authorial intent. To the exclusion sometimes of the issue itself.

A: I think that's ridiculous. And I think people that think that way are stupid and they're naive. Secondly, I think that people that write these angry letters like the one that wrote the angry letter last week in *Willamette Week* who called up for an apology, what are they talking about an apology? How the hell do they expect an apology because I have a differing opinion from them? It's childish, it's ridiculous. A group of Hell's Angels aren't going to fucking get an apology out of me. I demand an apology from her because she's an idiot. So there we go. People are fucked up. I'm just as fucked up as anybody else, but I would never write back and demand an apology. You can demand anything you fucking want in the world. You can die of asphyxiation trying to fucking wait for the apology too. I get so many letters from self-righteous jerk-offs. The biggest thing you get is from people who are defending handicapped people. Let the handicapped people who've got the injury write for themselves. What the fuck does someone who's not handicapped know about being handicapped? They don't know jack shit. They might as well be jacking off in the henhouse. So what the fuck are they writing for, you know? Do they know what they're talking about? Fuck, no.

Q: This new-found political liberalism is so intent on protecting the victim that it seems to be a new version of the white man's burden. And then conversely, everybody wants to be a victim, because if you're a victim, or associated with one, then you aren't liable for your own situation.

A: People in this country nowadays all choose a little minority group they can belong to and they'll point the finger at everybody else, saying "We demand our rights." There's no sense of the country as a whole. This minority, that minority, be politically correct, don't call 'em that, be careful you don't say this, say that. Politically correct people are exactly the same as Jerry Falwell's people, the Moral Majority. The minute you say you are something, you're not. If you say you're moral, then you're not moral. If you say you're politically correct, you're not politically correct. Politically correct is an oxymoron. There's no such thing as politically correct. There's a million sides to an issue. Jesus Christ was black, Aunt Jemima was white, you've got to rewrite history. What a bunch of shit that all is—fuck it, you know? Columbus was wearing women's clothing. To me it's very funny. I don't take it seriously. I just laugh through my nose at



CALLAHAN

"Your order is not ready, nor will it ever be."

"I get so many letters from self-righteous jerk-offs. Let the handicapped people who've got the injury write for themselves."

it. It's a joke.

I did a cartoon coming out in the *L.A. Times* Sunday called "The Politically Correct Meet the Anatomically Correct." It's sick, kind of sexual. But it makes my point. I think the politically correct are the funniest, most absurd group of assholes that ever crawled out from under a rock.

Q: Do you get more shit from the left?

A: I play both sides of the fence. I make fun of George Bush, Dan Quayle, I make fun of warmongers. I don't have any special side I'm on. But I do get more letters from the left. They're less tolerant.

Q: I have to ask how you make a living in this country, being so ironic, so satirical.

A: I'm not afraid. I don't give a fuck. This trying to paint a picture where everybody looks good in history? The Indians wearing tuxedos, the cavalry was wearing tuxedos, everybody had an equal hand in creating this wonderful world we live in. Bunch of shit. *Everybody* spent some time in the barrel—the blacks, the Jews, the Irish. At the turn of the century, my people, the Irish, couldn't get a fucking job. I'm not walking around saying, "Hey, pay us some blood and guilt money, because I'm Irish, you know, my forefathers suffered." What the fuck? Everybody's been fucked. It's called *Life*. You have to take responsibility. You have to grow up. I'm writing a book called *The Big Baby Hospital*, where I make fun of some of this shit. Satire. Satire is a very active, healthy, virile thing.

We live in a country now where you don't have to learn the very language. In Northern California, the Chinese have decided that the very signs, the traffic signs and city signs, should be bilingual. Now what kind of horseshit's that? Why don't they fucking come to this country and learn the language like everybody else? It makes it easier the world around. Why don't they just have a sign that's written in a thousand different languages, and a thousand different dialects, so everybody's suited? We live in a country where the kids in Miami have to salute a Cuban flag and an American flag. What kind of a shit's that? America pisses in its own dinner plate. I'm not really a conservative, but I think it's a country that pisses in its own plate. It's become so petty, selfish, and divided against itself that it won't survive. I didn't expect it to anyway. But I'm riding the wave now and I'm happy when it's high.

Q: There's a renaissance of cartooning and comicking in the Northwest. Lynda Barry and Matt Groening are here, people like Michael Dougan and Peter Bagge and Dan Clowes. What's your relationship to them? What do you think of their work?

A: I think they're great. I really like their work. Matt Groening and Lynda Barry have unique voices. They're not afraid to talk. They have true, well-developed voices. I admire them.

Q: You grow up reading the Sunday comics and you get used to that being the standard.

A: I've got one in today's *Willamette Week* that I really like. It's a picture of a guy standing there pensively on the street, thinking, "I

think, therefore I'm co-dependent." You capitalize on your experience. I'm living in times where self-help is a big thing. The newest thing I'm looking at is the Men's Movement, because I think it's funnier than hell. I can understand the backlash that men are having against feminism, because I think feminists are arrogant and chauvinistic. And they are bitter and angry, I think, mainly because they didn't get a date in the ninth grade. The tension between the sexes always kills me. I think it's funny.

I have become less cryptic and less involved with dusty old gags and become more on the edge of what's current, what's happening now with life in this culture. I think it's more fun that way. It's not something I've tried to do. So once in a while I throw out a political cartoon—conservative, liberal, or something socio-economic. But I don't try to teach anybody anything. People think, "Well, you try to get some point across or teach somebody." To me I'm drawing, just for me. And I secretly think it's funny if people take a strong reaction to it one way or another. I don't mean to teach anybody.

Q: That is a conception that people have. "No no no, see what he's trying to do is point out this or that or this or that." And I think, yeah, it could very well be, but my first concern is whether it's funny or not.

A: My job is to be funny and entertaining. Shocking even. As long as your heart is beating fast, I'm happy. One way or another. But my job isn't to preach. "What did you really mean when you drew this shit gag with the flies? Were you really commenting on the fall of western civilization?" I didn't mean anything but just to be funny, you know? Entertain myself and my friends. I draw them for a group of friends, really.

Q: That group of friends has gotten relatively large since you wrote your autobiography, *Don't Worry, He Won't Get Far on Foot*.

A: My cartoons are all over the place. Everything from the *Miami Herald* to *San Francisco Chronicle* to the *San Diego Union* to the *Seattle Times* to the *L.A. Times* and there are a lot of magazines—*Harper's*, *Utne Reader*.

Q: You have such an individual style. How did it develop?

A: It's real visceral, it just comes up from the deepest part of me and I don't really know how or why I do it. It's just my deep feeling about how I feel people should look. It's just self-expression, you know? I think the people look kind of demented, as I think most people are.

Q: I thought it was really interesting how, in the first part of your book, you talked about having, incongruously enough, a set of Russian classics that you shut yourself in with and read.

A: Those Russian classics are just like Bergman—the epitome of heaviness. But they're almost tongue-in-cheek. Look at Dostoevsky. The axe murderer, Raskolnikov? This guy's so extreme and so fucked up. To me it was humorous. Never mind all the existential stuff at the beginning of a book like that. I just think it's funny. What does Philip Roth say? He's an adolescent jacking off in the bathroom in



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Portnoy’s Complaint. Before he comes out of the bathroom he spends several hours checking his shoes, shoelaces, his pants, to make sure he has no sperm on him. He calls himself the Raskolnikov of jacking off. I think that’s really funny because Raskolnikov of course spent hours checking for blood after he’d murdered his landlady. *Hours.*

So everything’s so extreme. I like anything that has to do with the extreme, with angst or suffering or intensity in life. It’s great for cartoons. My subjects are all very intense—religion, politics, disease. My cartoons have to do with being paralyzed or crippled—sick in some way. The real mild things in life I’m not interested in. I never draw, you know, diet gags. To me, death is a funny topic. And the whole Russian novel is just staring at the wall thinking about death. That’s *funny*. Those guys must’ve had their tongue in their cheeks when they wrote those books.

Q: Nobody could be that seriously, sincerely deep.

A: Naah. It’s only death.

Q: Have you ever been censored? Has an editor ever looked at a cartoon and said “We just can’t run this”?

A: Yeah, I’ve had that. Last week they turned me down at *Willamette Week*. I had a pussy joke. A giant woman is lying on her back with her legs spread. She’s huge like Godzilla. There are all these little men down there waving at the woman, and the title of the cartoon is “Wave at the pussy.” It’s like a carnival sideshow, just “Wave at the pussy.” It’s very funny but they refused to run it because it’s so graphic.

In the *Willamette Week* about a month ago there was an article about someone named Carolyn Gage or something. She’s a feminist playwright. She hates men and throughout the article she was saying “I hate all men.”

Q: I saw that article. I had to read it twice. It was like a car crash on the freeway. People are repelled but they stop anyway, against their will, to look. I had to go back and stare some more at this extreme psyche.

A: Where does she come from? How could she hate all men? It’s absurd for a woman to hate all men. . . . How could she get any tube steak? Quote me on that, for sure.

Q: I promise you. . . . You said you’re working on a book now. Is that a cartoon book?

A: Yeah, a cartoon book. Oh, I’m doing a film now, my first animated film. I’m doing all the drawing, I’m doing harmonica music in the background. It’s called *How Much is that Window in the Doggie?* A window falls from the air, sticks in the dog, kills the dog, and that’s the end of the film. It’s just a sixty-second film. I’m pretty happy with it.

Q: Last night I was reading *Don’t Worry*. I was just going to read a chapter or two but wound up finishing the whole book before going to bed. There would be some funny thing that’d keep me going, or I’d want to find out about what was going to happen next in your

career, or there would be some passage about recovering from the accident that would be so grim that I would want to get to something happier. So the whole book just leads the reader right through it.

A: It’s been sold as a movie option to William Hurt.

Q: And who would play you?

A: William Hurt.

Q: Your drawings are evocative. They do the trick in a way that other drawings couldn’t. I wonder why that is; why the way you draw works for what you’re doing.

A: I’m not a real good draftsman but I’m real good at expressions. I’m not a very good artist but I’m good at being a minimalist, having just the right look to knock you when I want to.

Q: There’s that cartoon you did about your dad giving you haircuts. It’s the most sinister cartoon. He’s looking around the corner at you and your little brother, both of you with X’s where presumably your ears had been. There’s something peculiar about his eyes and his teeth. All of a sudden there’s this character, all of a sudden there’s a human character emerging from a very non-realistic drawing.

A: Yeah, well there’s really strong feelings in these cartoons. As a kid my father, back in the late fifties and early sixties, scalped us fucking alive. He was a jerk, an Army fuckface. He came back and took out his anal-retentive shit out on his kids’ hair. Rather than go to a shooting gallery or beat up a fucking dog. Why does he have to fuck our haircuts up and make us look like walking assholes with glasses, right at the point of adolescence? You’re trying to look cool, you know, and you’re walking to school with your head shaved like the side of a fucking shark.

Q: It seems to me that especially in your narrative pieces, like “The Lighter Side of Being Paralyzed for Life” and “I Think I Was an Alcoholic,” there’s as much a concern for the evocative image as for the comedic.

A: I think it’s unusual for a cartoonist to make a point of a gag, or to make the center of humor something that’s poignant or sad or touching. I have thought, “Now what am I doing here?” This isn’t funny. I’m doing something here that’s sad, almost tragic, or sweet. Then I was happy when I did it. I haven’t seen cartoonists do that too much. There are so many different kind of cartoons, you can do whatever you want, but I’d never done it. Those narrative pieces are fun. I think they’d make good animated films. They’re story boards, all loaded and ready to go. All somebody has to do is get a slave to animate them. I hate doing the animation myself. I fuckin’ hate drawing them, you know? It takes one tiny change after another to make the animation. The way I do it is I just use the ol’ Callahan method of don’t-give-a-fuck whatever turns out. The worse the better with my drawing style. It’s unwieldy and awkward and out of time and it’s still funny, thank god. But *Fantasia* it’s not.

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