

The Comedian

by D. J. Ortiz

"Do you know what the dinosaur said to the chicken?" Emilio asked.

The young children who were gathered around him looked shy. They also looked embarrassed. They were silent as stones. I felt some tension in the air. I'm Emilio's sister, and I know he wants to be a comedian.

"Oh, come on, take a guess!" he pleaded.

"What did the dinosaur say?" one little girl said.

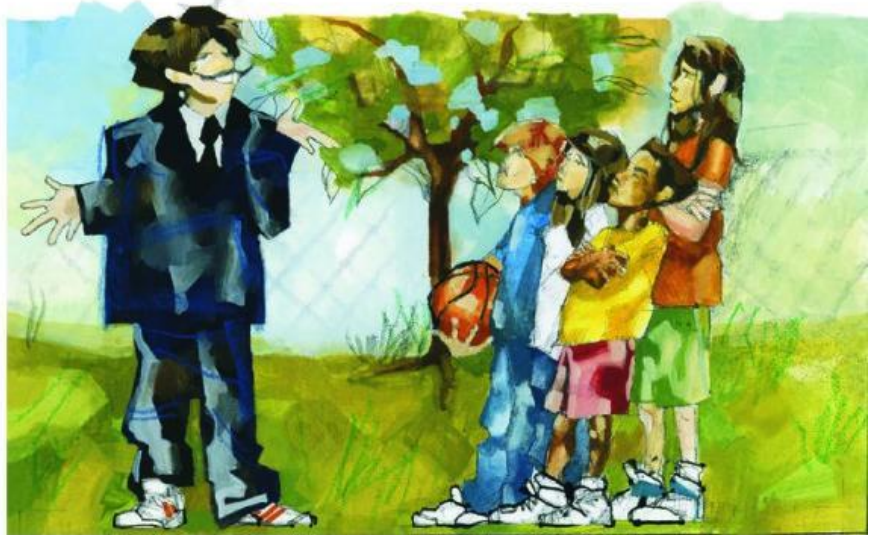
"You look like dinner to me!" Emilio said. He laughed.

The three children simply stared at him. They began drifting away, heading for other parts of the playground.

"Did I say something wrong?" Emilio asked me.

I stared at his costume. His hair was covered with a black wig, and he wore a mustache, a big suit, and a tie.

"I think I can answer your question," I told him.



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READ & RESPOND

Author's Craft

Why do you think the author started this story with a joke?

"Well?" Emilio said.

"Do you really want to become a comedian?"

"You know that I do. Too bad I can't even make a group of second graders laugh. I stink worse than a skunk convention," Emilio said.

"You're not that bad," I said. "I could give you some pointers—that is, if you'll listen to me."

"I'm listening, with all twelve ears."

"You don't have twelve ears," I said.

"Ha, ha, ha!" Emilio laughed. "I meant twelve years!"

"Stop right there," I said. "You have a tendency to laugh at your own jokes. Rule number one is no laughing at your own jokes."

"Why not?" asked Emilio, clearly puzzled.

I sighed and shook my head. "If the joke is funny, other people will laugh. No one will laugh just because you do."



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Theme

What is Emilio's problem?

"All right," Emilio said, "that's rule number one. What's rule number two?"

As patiently as possible, I said, "You have to start with the basics. You need to get your own material. Think of a theme or a story, and then use it to tell several jokes."

"What kind of theme do you mean?" he asked.

"Use your imagination," I replied. I suggested that he choose something ordinary, like dogs or baseball. I also said he could write about something as common as a watch or time. "The important thing," I said, "is to think up something that anyone can relate to."

Emilio seemed to be listening to me, and he went right to work. The next day he was ready with his new material. He said, "This new routine is going to make you laugh hysterically."



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Theme

Why is it important for a comedian to think of things that people can relate to?



I waited patiently. I was ready to give him credit for his new material.

Emilio said, “Do you know the difference between a ship captain and a jeweler? The ship captain watches the sea, and the jeweler sees the watch. Do you know why the guy got rid of his watchdog? Because the dog couldn’t tell time. The same guy threw his alarm clock out the window just to see time fly.”

I just sat there without a trace of a smile on my face. I couldn’t pretend his jokes were funny. If anything, I felt a bit annoyed. “I think those are the worst jokes I’ve ever heard,” I said. “Did you really make those up?”

Emilio said, “I did what you said. I looked on the Internet. I found these jokes about a watch and a dog and telling time. You said I should do a theme.”

“The best comedians don’t use other people’s jokes,” I said. “They make them up!”

READ & RESPOND

Theme

What does Emilio mean when he says his jokes have a “theme”?

"Oh, never mind," Emilio said. "I'm never going to be a comedian. I was no good at soccer. I can't spell very well. Let's face it, I'm the worst card in the pack."

I gave him a pat on the back. "No, you're not. I'm sure you will be successful. By the time I get through with you, you'll be the joker. You'll have people in stitches."

Emilio groaned, and I added, "What you need to do is make jokes about some aspect of your own life. You could tell about going to school or taking a family vacation. Or you could tell about the people you know. Think of your favorite comedians. They all make jokes about people they know."

"Okay, okay," Emilio said with more enthusiasm. "There's no lack of material in my life. I've got more material than a dress factory!"

"You're funnier when you don't try so hard," I said. "Get at it and write, big brother." To my surprise, he did.

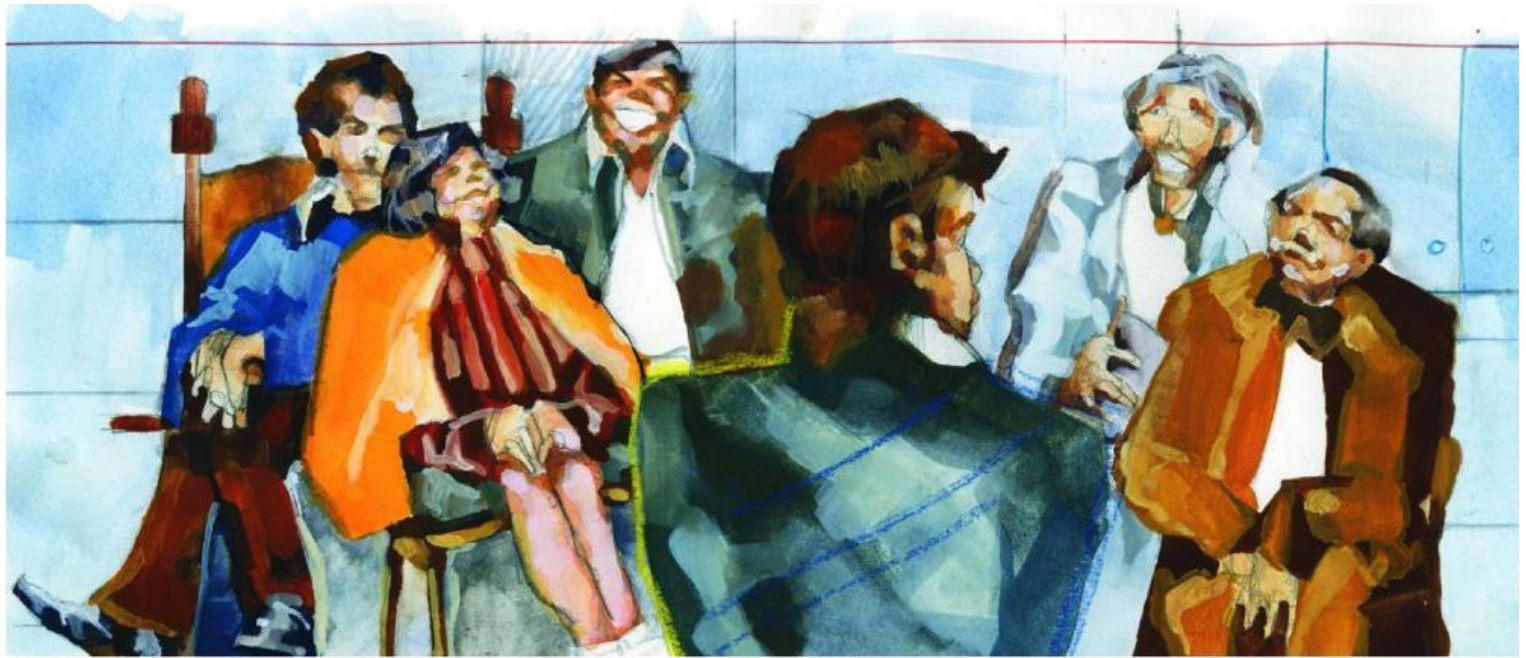


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READ & RESPOND

Author's Craft

How does the author show how Emilio feels at this point in the story? Give at least two examples from the text.



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A few days later, Emilio had a routine ready. He tried out his new jokes on me. Maybe I didn't laugh, but I did smile. "Not bad," I said. "You have a few days to practice before my birthday party on Sunday."

"You think I'm ready for that?" he asked.

"The real question is, are we ready for you?" I said.

Everybody came on Sunday—aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins. After dinner, I said, "I'd like to present Emilio, the Joker!" The family clapped politely.

Emilio cleared his throat. "I decided to become a comedian," he said, "because I'm not good at much else. I'm terrible at school. I was really happy that my last report card was terrible."

"Why were you happy?" I called out.

"Because at least Mom and Dad knew it was mine," Emilio said. Dad let out a guffaw, and I heard some laughter.

READ & RESPOND

Theme

Explain Emilio's first joke and why it makes his family laugh.

Emilio said, "My parents think I should be like my relatives, but I'm not so sure. Take Uncle Luis. He makes those great pickles. Everyone loves them. So what? Why is a pickle such a big dill?" Uncle Luis let out a hoot.

Everyone laughed. "Good one," said Mom.

"I really wanted to be a good speller," Emilio said. "I tried everything. I wrote my spelling words over and over. I sang them in the shower. Finally, I swallowed a dictionary."

"How did it taste?" Uncle Luis asked.

"Educational," Emilio said. "My sister kept asking me if it helped, but I didn't say a thing. She wasn't getting a word out of me."

The family was genuinely impressed. Everyone clapped and laughed. Maybe there was hope for my brother after all.



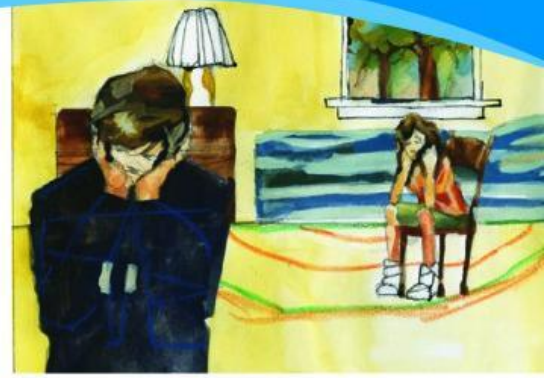
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READ & RESPOND

Author's Craft

How does the author show that Emilio's family likes his comedy routine? Give at least two examples.

Reread and Respond



1 Who is Emilio's first audience in the story?

Hint

For a clue, see page 2.

2 When Emilio's sister says, "You're funnier when you don't try so hard," is she stating a fact or an opinion? How can you tell?

Hint

Remember, an opinion is what someone thinks or believes.

3 How has Emilio changed during the story?

Hint

Clues can be found on all pages.

4 How do people react to Emilio's jokes at the beginning of the story? How do they react to his jokes at the end of the story?

Hint

For clues, see pages 2 and 8.