

Irony

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Don't think, but look.

—Ludwig Wittgenstein

A twenty-seven-year-old from Hamilton, New Zealand, walks up to a food truck in what appears to be a parking lot somewhere in Auckland. He has a camera. He asks the people working the truck if they want to go bowling with him. They look at each other. One of the women says something like “what?” and then something like “kind of, yeah.” They call over the manager. He asks the manager the same thing. The manager says he’s busy, he hasn’t slept. The guy says no problem, take a nap, give me your number, tell me when you’re ready. They exchange numbers. He goes to the bowling alley at the time they agreed on. All of them show up. They bring

a friend. They go bowling. That's the whole video. There is no twist, no prank, no reveal, no second layer. A stranger asked some strangers to go bowling and then they went bowling. The video has been watched by hundreds of thousands of people.

His name is Herman Jagpal and his project is called Daily Rejection. He set out to be rejected by a stranger every single day of 2025. The premise is in the name: the goal is the rejection, the no, the awkwardness of having asked for something you had no reason to expect. The discovery, which keeps repeating itself across hundreds of videos without ever becoming less surprising, is that people mostly say yes. They say yes to bowling. They say yes to swapping outfits. They say yes to matching tattoos. They say yes to letting him cook his own steak in their restaurant kitchen. They say yes to giving him a free billboard, which a media company in Auckland actually did on day 200, and the resulting video was watched ten million times. His mantra, which he repeats in interviews with the earnest conviction of a person who has tested it empirically and found it to be true, is: "It's always a no unless you ask."

This is a type of content. It exists within a landscape of other types of content that share certain features with it and differ on others. The landscape is vast and blurry

and its borders are not well-defined, as is the case with all interesting landscapes. There are genres adjacent to it that overlap at the edges and genres that seem to be about something completely different but that turn out, on closer inspection, to be testing the same hypothesis from a different angle. The hypothesis, which is shared across the entire region, is that human beings are prosocial by nature, that most of the barriers between strangers are artificial, and that the thing standing between isolation and connection is almost always just the willingness to initiate.



Street interviews are the closest neighbor. Someone with a microphone approaches strangers and asks them questions—deep questions, absurd questions, personal questions, financial questions. “What’s the most important thing you’ve learned?” “How much do you make?” “What would you tell your younger self?” The format is simple to the point of being elemental: one person, one question, a string of strangers answering it, edited together. It works because people are interesting when you ask them something real and point a camera at them. The answers are sometimes profound, sometimes boring, sometimes devastating, and the cu-

mulative effect of watching twenty strangers answer the same question is a strange feeling of being connected to the species in a way that scrolling past curated content never provides.

The “talking to strangers” genre does not have a name, exactly, because naming it would make it sound like a gimmick, and the whole point is that it’s not a gimmick. It’s just what happens when someone decides to treat the people around them as people rather than as background. The content is whatever emerges from that decision.

Pickup artistry sits at a weird and instructive angle to all of this. The classic PUA movement—the Mystery Method, the Neil Strauss era, the forum culture of the mid-2000s—was built on the exact same foundational insight that rejection therapy is built on: that approaching strangers is a learnable skill, that the fear of rejection is the primary obstacle to getting what you want, and that this fear can be overcome through systematic practice. “Approach anxiety” was the central concept, and the entire training infrastructure—the boot camps, the field reports, the in-field coaching—was essentially rejection therapy with a specific goal attached. You go up to someone you don’t know. You say something.

You deal with whatever happens next. The mechanics are identical.

The conventional critique is that PUA instrumentalized the interaction, that the stranger wasn't a person to connect with but a target to convert, that the whole framework was adversarial even when it pretended not to be, full of manipulation tactics and psychological leverage and the underlying assumption that human interaction is a game you can win if you know the right moves. And this critique is not wrong in many specific cases. But the genre-level version of it—the version that says pickup artistry is manipulative as a category, that the whole enterprise is contaminated, that every person who ever studied it was a predator—is doing something dishonest, which is using the worst instances to characterize the whole, and thereby making invisible the much larger number of guys who got into it because they were genuinely lonely, genuinely unable to talk to people, genuinely suffering from social isolation, and who found in the community a framework for action that their own lives had not provided.

The moralizing lens treats it as if there exists some pristine, authentic mode of social interaction that these people are corrupting. And there doesn't. All of interaction is manipulation, in the sense that the word "ma-

nipulation” becomes meaningless when applied universally. Language is manipulation. Clothing is manipulation. Smiling at someone is manipulation if you want to call it that. Every person who has ever tried to make a good impression on anyone has done the same thing that a PUA student does when he learns to make eye contact and ask open-ended questions. He’s just being more explicit and systematic about it. The system being hacked is a system that already contains manipulation in every direction, and to single out one set of participants as uniquely transgressive requires a theory of social purity that does not survive contact with reality.



First Amendment auditing is another fascinating node in the network. Auditors walk into public buildings—post offices, courthouses, police stations, DMVs—with cameras, assert their legal right to film, and document what happens when institutional authority tries to stop them. The content is built on confrontation. The auditor wants to be challenged, because the challenge is the content. When a security guard or a cop tells them to stop filming or asks them to leave, that’s the money shot: the moment when the gap between what is legally permit-

ted and what institutional power will tolerate becomes visible.

The standard critique is that auditors are provocateurs, that they're manufacturing confrontations for content, that they walk in looking for a fight and then act surprised when they find one. And yes, they are looking for a fight. That is the entire premise. But the fact that they are looking for a fight does not invalidate what they find, because what they find is that public servants routinely don't know the laws they're supposed to enforce, that institutions reflexively resist transparency, and that the mere act of doing something unusual in a public space—holding a camera, standing still, filming a building—is enough to trigger an authoritarian response from people who have been given a small amount of power. The confrontation is not coming from the auditor. The auditor is creating the conditions under which the confrontation reveals itself, which is what journalists have always done. An investigative reporter who calls a company pretending to be a customer is doing the same thing. The auditor's camera is a probe, and the system's reaction to the probe is the data.

There is something that connects all of these genres—rejection therapy, street interviews, PUA, auditing, charity content, busking, the “yes man” format, couch-

surfing content—that is worth naming even though naming it will inevitably reduce it. They are all, in their different ways, testing the permeability of social boundaries. They are all asking: what happens when you do the thing nobody does? What happens when you approach the stranger, ask the question, make the request, assert the right, offer the gift, perform uninvited? And the answer, across the entire landscape, with varying degrees of nuance, is: mostly something good happens, or at least something human happens, something that is better than the nothing that would have happened if nobody had tried.

The reason this content is popular now—and it is enormously popular, Herman Jagpal has over a million followers just from being willing to talk to strangers—probably has something to do with how atomized daily life has become. The videos depict something that feels increasingly rare: unscripted, unmediated, face-to-face interaction with no algorithmic intermediary. Watching someone ask a stranger to go bowling is compelling in 2026 in a way it might not have been in 1996, because in 1996 you could just go bowling with strangers. That was called going out. The content documents something that used to be ordinary and now feels extraordinary, which is the most damning commentary on where

we are and also the most hopeful, because the strangers still say yes.



Now here is where it gets interesting, or at least where the question that has been hovering over everything finally lands. Because there is a way of looking at all of the above that is immediately available to anyone who has spent time in the take economy, the critique economy, the irony economy, and that way of looking at it goes roughly like this: “Yes, but is it exploitative?”

Is PUA manipulative? Is charity content performative? Is auditing provocative? Is the guy asking strangers to go bowling secretly building a brand? Is the mukbang creator glorifying unhealthy eating? Is the street interviewer commodifying intimacy? Is the couchsurfer exploiting hospitality? Is the busker occupying public space without consent?

These questions are always available. They are infinitely available. You can apply them to literally any human activity and produce a result that sounds like insight. Employment—is it exploitative? Sex work—is it exploitative? Marriage—is it exploitative? Parenthood? Friendship? Teaching? Making dinner for someone? At some level of abstraction, every human relationship

involves asymmetries of power and information and desire, and you can always frame those asymmetries as exploitation if that's the lens you've chosen. The question is whether the framing tells you anything useful about the specific thing you're looking at. And the answer, almost always, is that it doesn't. It tells you that the person doing the framing owns a hammer and has been trained to see nails.

This is the difference between critique and suspicion. Critique looks at a thing and tries to understand what it is and how it works. Suspicion looks at a thing and tries to find what's wrong with it. Somewhere along the way—and the “somewhere” is not that hard to locate, it's roughly the Frankfurt School through Foucault through the cultural studies departments of the 1990s through the internet of the 2010s—suspicion became the default intellectual posture for encountering anything. If you describe something without immediately identifying its failure modes, you seem naive. You seem like you haven't done the work. You seem like you're being taken in. The only safe position is the critical one, and the critical position is always the same: I see through this.

But the suspicious posture is itself a form of laziness, because it requires no engagement with the spe-

cific. You don't have to watch the mukbang. You don't have to listen to the interview. You don't have to follow the trades from paperclip to house. You just need to identify the genre and apply the template. Mukbang: glorifies consumption. PUA: objectifies women. Auditing: provocative narcissism. Charity content: poverty tourism. The template does all the work. The individual instance—the specific video, the specific creator, the specific interaction between specific human beings—never needs to be encountered at all.



There is a mukbang video on YouTube, not a particularly famous one, in which a woman named Tammy and her cousin Gem eat Big Macs in a truck in a parking lot in Dallas, Texas. It's about twenty-one minutes long. Before a bite of food is eaten, Tammy reads an Adam & Eve sponsorship with the cadence of a hardware store employee running through the lumber aisle. She announces that she is a businesswoman. Gem, who has been grinning in the passenger seat like a man who was told a joke thirty seconds ago and is still processing it, says "Wow" with genuine reverence, as though the name Adam & Eve carries the weight of a mention in Forbes.

This is Tammy's tenth Big Mac. She knows the number. She has kept count. She has had nine Big Macs in her entire life. This is not the number of a person who hates Big Macs, nor the number of a person who loves them. It is the number of a person who has a relationship with the Big Mac. A discrete, trackable relationship. Each one a chapter.

Tammy had a stand-up comedy show the night before. It was sold out. She did well. Someone in the audience threw a twenty-dollar bill on stage. The bill now lives in her hand at a McDonald's drive-thru. In under twenty-four hours, the money has traveled from an audience member's wallet to a stage floor to Tammy's pocket to a drive-thru window. This is the entire economic life cycle of a working comedian compressed into a single lunch.

Gem recently got a raise at the Dollar General. He can't quite remember the amount. "It was like an eight-cent raise or something, wasn't it?" Then he corrects himself with quiet dignity: "It was a ten-cent raise, actually. Yeah." Tammy tells the camera: "We're proud of him." She says it as a declaration of fact, not to Gem but about Gem while Gem is sitting right there. Gem says, "But thank you, honey. I sure appreciate that." The raise, annualized at forty hours a week,

equals two hundred and eight dollars a year before taxes, or roughly 1.73 Big Mac meals per month at current Dallas prices. The video holds both trajectories simultaneously—Tammy selling out shows and having money thrown at her, Gem getting a ten-cent raise at a discount store—without commentary, without moral, without the slightest hint that anyone should feel bad about any of it. They are cousins in a truck. The class gap between them is real and the warmth between them is also real and the video sees no contradiction, because there is no contradiction.

“Gotta love food. Who don’t love food, Gem?”

“I know. Some people don’t.”

Gem says this with genuine puzzlement, as though the existence of people who do not love food is a cosmological mystery he has not yet resolved.

Tammy’s complete theory of Gem, arrived at over what is evidently a lifetime of observation: “Sometimes you say the dumbest shit I’ve ever heard in my life. And then sometimes you’re a genius.” Gem credits Granny. He hangs around Granny a lot. Granny is the source of everything Gem has—the wisdom and the nonsense alike.

The Big Mac arrives. They inspect it. One slice of cheese instead of two. Gem says “That’s a sin” with the

gravity of a theologian. Tammy wants to put mayo on her Big Mac. She won't allow it. "I love mayonnaise," she says, "but not on a Big Mac. Let's don't be stupid." This is an act of love. She is protecting Gem's experience of his own food. She loves mayo enough to know it doesn't belong here. Gem concedes without resistance.

They eat. Tammy moans. Gem moans. The sounds are involuntary—the sounds of food actually working on a body. "Listen," Tammy says, "I got my pussy ate last night and I wasn't moaning like this." Gem dissolves. He does not speak for several seconds. The truck is parked in a shopping center lot in Dallas. There is a Big Mac in his hand.

Gem's burger breaks in half. Tammy asks how you fuck up a burger. Gem says, "Well, the burger fucked me." He identifies himself not as the agent of the burger's destruction but as its victim. The burger had its own agenda. He examines the wreckage and finds the meat and cheese still intact: "Oh, but I look at that meat and cheese though. Hell yes."

They shoot the thumbnail. Tammy directs Gem's face with the intensity of a portrait photographer. The tongue is the asset. He does it twice. She picks take two. Then Gem mentions Grindr and Tammy drops "this motherfucker trends on Grindr" with absolute zero fric-

tion, no pause, no awkwardness, no performance of acceptance, and Gem confirms he's number one, and they move on. This is what genuine family acceptance looks like: it is boring. It is unremarkable. It barely registers as a topic before they're back to eating.

At one point Tammy says she wishes Crystal could be here. Crystal is a friend, or family, or both. She couldn't make it. She has cellulitis on her fupa. This information is delivered with the same casual matter-of-factness as every other piece of information in the video. There is no embarrassment, no euphemism, no lowered voice. Crystal has a medical condition in a specific location and that's why she's not eating Big Macs in Dallas right now. Tammy and Gem both address her directly through the camera: "Hey Crystal, we love you." "We love you, honey." And then, without a breath: "This is some good shit."

The camera is not a barrier. The camera is a telephone. They are talking to a real absent person through a YouTube video because that is how their family communicates.

The last line of the video, the last thing either of them says, is Gem saying: "I'm about to drop this fry in your truck and I don't want to do that." Not a sign-off. Not a call to action. Not "like and subscribe." Just a man,

a fry, and a truck he doesn't want to dirty. The stakes have shrunk from twenty dollars to ten cents to a single french fry. The video has found its final unit of value.



Now. Is mukbang a good genre or a bad genre?

If your answer to this question is anything other than “that’s a stupid question,” you have not been paying attention. The question is exactly as stupid as “is music a good genre or a bad genre” or “is cinema a good genre or a bad genre” or “is writing a good genre or a bad genre.” The genre is a container. The contents vary. You can find a mukbang that is exploitative and degrading and you can find a mukbang that is a twenty-one-minute piece of art about class and family and food and love, and neither of them tells you anything about the other, and neither of them tells you anything about mukbang as a category, because the category is just a filing system and filing systems do not have moral properties.

You could extend this to almost anything. Pornography—is it good or bad? Pop music—is it good or bad? ASMR, true crime, reality television, video games, romance novels, country music, horror movies, fan fiction? Every one of these is a genre that some signif-

icant portion of the population has decided to judge at the genre level, and every one of these judgments functions as a machine for not looking at things. The judgment saves you the trouble of engaging with any specific instance because you already know what you think about the whole category. Pop music is formulaic, until a pop song comes along that is undeniably a work of art by any standard, and then the person who holds the genre-level view has to either pretend it doesn't exist or reclassify it as "not really pop." The genre judgment cannot accommodate excellence within the genre, so it excludes it by definition.

The only genre where the genre-level judgment arguably sticks is something like a snuff film, where the production process necessarily involves killing someone, and even there you might hesitate for a second, because someone could probably construct a hypothetical that complicates it. But the point is that you have to reach for something that extreme—where the format itself requires a murder—to find a case where the container is the problem rather than the contents. For everything else, and everything else is essentially everything, you have to look at the specific thing.



The irony problem, if that's what we're going to call it, is not really a problem about irony. It's a problem about looking. Or rather, it's a problem about not looking, about all the ways we have developed to avoid looking at things directly and instead looking at our own looking, or at the category the thing belongs to, or at the theoretical framework that tells us what to think about the category, or at the cultural discourse surrounding the framework, and so on, each layer of mediation adding another degree of distance between us and the thing until the thing itself has disappeared entirely and all that remains is the discourse about the discourse about the discourse.

David Foster Wallace understood this better than almost anyone and could not escape it. His essay "E Unibus Pluram," written in 1993, is essentially a fifty-page diagnosis of the exact condition being described here: television taught an entire generation to be ironic, irony became the water everyone swam in, and the result was a culture that could not be sincere without simultaneously signaling its awareness that sincerity was a pose. The essay is brilliant. It identifies the problem with extraordinary precision. It even identifies the solution, which Wallace describes as the next generation of literary rebels—the "anti-rebels," he calls them—who

would “risk the yawn, the rolled eyes, the cool smile, the nudged ribs” and “treat plain old untrendy human troubles and emotions in U.S. life with reverence and conviction.” He saw the exit. He drew a map to the exit. He taped the map to the wall of the burning building.

And then he wrote *Infinite Jest*, which is the most elaborate, structurally ingenious, self-aware, footnoted, recursive, and formally brilliant exploration of the irony problem ever produced in American literature, and which is also, in its very elaborateness and structural ingenuity and self-awareness and recursion, the most sophisticated possible version of the problem rather than the solution to it. You cannot write your way out of the trap of writing about the trap. The book knows this. Wallace knew this. The knowledge is built into the text at every level, and the fact that it’s built in is precisely what makes it part of the trap rather than an escape from it.

The sincere parts of *Infinite Jest* are in there. The AA meetings, the halfway house conversations, the moments of genuine human desperation and recovery. They are some of the best pages Wallace ever wrote. But you have to machete through a thousand pages of structural apparatus to reach them, and by the time you get there you are not sure whether you are feeling the

thing or feeling clever for having found the thing. That uncertainty is not a bug. It is the subject of the book. It is also why the book cannot solve what it is about.

Wallace was early Wittgenstein.



This analogy requires some explanation but it is, I think, the most precise way to frame what happened to Wallace and to the entire intellectual tradition he belonged to.

Ludwig Wittgenstein published the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in 1921. It is a short, crystalline, architecturally perfect work of logic that attempts to map the relationship between language and reality through a series of numbered propositions. The project is to identify the logical structure that language and the world share, to draw the boundary between what can be said and what can only be shown, and to demonstrate that most of the problems of philosophy are not problems at all but confusions arising from the misuse of language. The book is beautiful. It is also, by Wittgenstein's own later judgment, almost entirely wrong—not in its details but in its fundamental assumption, which is that the relationship between language and reality is a problem that requires a formal solution.

Twenty years later, Wittgenstein came back and wrote the *Philosophical Investigations*, which dismantles everything the *Tractatus* was trying to do. The core move of the later work is devastatingly simple: instead of theorizing about how language must work, Wittgenstein says, look at how language actually works. Look at how people actually talk to each other. Look at the games they play with words, the contexts in which sentences mean things, the way meaning is produced not by logical structure but by use, by practice, by the forms of life within which language operates. “Don’t think, but look.” The fly is already out of the bottle. It was never in the bottle. The bottle was an artifact of doing philosophy, not an artifact of language. The problems of philosophy are, in his famous phrase, bumps that the intellect got from running up against the limits of language. The bumps were self-inflicted.

Wallace is the *Tractatus*. He built an enormous, brilliant, architecturally perfect attempt to solve the problem of irony from inside the problem of irony. He theorized about sincerity. He analyzed the trap. He mapped its structure with extraordinary care. He produced the most detailed and accurate description of the fly-bottle ever written. And he could not get the fly out, because

getting the fly out required not a better map of the bottle but the recognition that the bottle was the map.

He died before he could become the *Investigations*. He died in the middle of *The Pale King*, which, from what survives of it, was maybe starting to move in that direction. It's about boredom. It's about attention. It's about the ordinary. It's about IRS agents doing paperwork. There are passages that feel like a writer trying to let go of the apparatus, trying to just look at things without theorizing about looking. But it's still so heavily mediated, still so formally self-conscious, still so Wallace, that you can't tell whether it was going to break through or just produce a subtler, quieter version of the same recursive loop. We don't know. He ran out of time.



The saddest part of the analogy is that late Wittgenstein did not need to become a different person. He just needed to let go of a particular conviction about what the work was supposed to look like. The capacity for the *Investigations* was always inside the person who wrote the *Tractatus*—you can see it in the *Tractatus* itself, in the famous final proposition, “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent,” which is already a gesture toward what would later become the whole project: the

recognition that the interesting stuff is in the showing, not in the saying. He just had to stop believing that the hard way was the only legitimate way.

And you look at Wallace and you think: the capacity to just write simply and directly about people was obviously in there. The AA sections prove it. The lobster essay proves it. Some of the nonfiction proves it. But he couldn't let go of the apparatus, because the apparatus was his identity. The footnotes and the recursion and the self-awareness about the self-awareness—that was what made him David Foster Wallace, and to let go of it would have felt like becoming no one.

Which is maybe the saddest version of the irony trap. Not that you can't escape it intellectually, but that you can't escape it personally, because it has become who you are. Your entire sense of your own value is bound up in being the person who sees through things, and to stop seeing through things feels like a kind of death, even though what's on the other side of it is just life.



Meanwhile, in a truck in Dallas, Tammy says “we’re proud of him” about Gem’s ten-cent raise and she has already solved the problem.

She solved it by not knowing there was a problem. Or rather—she probably knows, she’s not stupid, she’s a working comedian who understands irony and performance and audience and craft as well as anyone—but she doesn’t care. She’s not trying to be post-ironic or new-sincere or authentically anything. She’s just talking to her cousin and eating a Big Mac and telling her audience she loves them and asking people to message her about what they bought from Adam & Eve. The sincerity isn’t a stance. It’s just what’s left when you don’t bother putting the wrappers on.

And this is what stand-up comedy has always understood that literary postmodernism couldn’t figure out. A comedian gets on stage and tells you a story about their life and the story is shaped and crafted and timed and exaggerated and it’s also true. Not factually true in every detail—the details get moved around, the timing gets compressed, the punchline gets sharpened—but true in the sense that it comes from a real place and the audience can feel that it comes from a real place. The craft doesn’t destroy the authenticity. The craft is how the authenticity gets transmitted. Without the craft you’re just a person mumbling about your day. With the craft you’re a person making a room full of strangers

feel something through a shaped version of something real.

Tammy calling herself a businesswoman from a McDonald's drive-thru is a joke and it's also completely true. She has a sponsor. She has a code. She's making money. She is a businesswoman. The joke works because of the gap between the word and the setting, but it also works because she means it. If she didn't mean it the joke would be hollow. If she weren't also playing it up the sincerity would just be a statement and not funny. You need both. The irony and the sincerity are not layers you peel away from each other to find the real one underneath. They're the same layer. They're fused. This is not a contradiction. This is just how people talk.

The intellectuals made this so much harder than it needed to be by treating authenticity and performance as opposites that had to be resolved dialectically. They built a framework in which if something is performed it can't be authentic and if it's authentic it can't be performed, and then they spent fifty years trying to escape a trap they constructed for themselves. Meanwhile every comedian, every musician, every preacher, every good teacher, every person who has ever told a funny story at a dinner party has been doing the thing

effortlessly—being real and being crafted at the same time. It's not a philosophical problem. It's just talking.



Richard Rorty, who spent a career trying to dismantle the pretensions of philosophy from inside philosophy, has a useful formulation here, which is that the interesting question is never “what is the true nature of X” but rather “what is X good for.” Applied to irony: the question is not “is irony authentic or inauthentic, sincere or insincere, liberating or imprisoning.” The question is “what does irony do in this specific situation and is that a thing worth doing.” Sometimes the answer is yes. A comedian being ironic about their own life is using irony to create a space in which difficult truths can be said without the weight of their difficulty crushing the room. That's useful. That's good. An auditor being provocative about his legal rights is using provocation to reveal institutional failures that would otherwise remain invisible. That's useful too.

The problem is not irony. The problem is irony as a default. The problem is the reflexive application of critical distance to everything, the assumption that the smart response to any phenomenon is to identify its hidden contradictions and unstated assumptions and

potential for exploitation, the belief that to be caught caring about something without first establishing your awareness of all the ways it could be problematic is to be caught being stupid.

This default produces a specific kind of person: someone who has opinions about things instead of experiences of things. Someone who can tell you what's wrong with every genre of content but has never sat in a parking lot eating a Big Mac with their cousin. Someone whose relationship to culture is entirely mediated by takes, by positions, by the performance of discernment. The suspicious posture becomes a lifestyle, and the lifestyle has a specific aesthetic—the raised eyebrow, the knowing tone, the “well, actually”—and the aesthetic becomes an identity, and the identity becomes a prison, because once you've built your entire sense of self around seeing through things, you cannot stop seeing through things without feeling like you've lost yourself.

The Tammy solution, if we can call it that, is not to stop being ironic. Tammy is plenty ironic. She's a comedian. She knows exactly what she's doing when she pitches sex toys from a drive-thru lane. The solution is to not care whether you're being ironic or sincere, because the distinction was never as meaningful as the

theorists made it seem. When Tammy says “I’m a businesswoman” she is being ironic and sincere simultaneously and neither quality detracts from the other and neither is the “real” one underneath. She’s just talking. The registers blur. They have always blurred. The only people who thought they didn’t blur were people who had spent too much time thinking about blurring.



Herman Jagpal walks up to strangers and asks them to do things. Tammy parks a truck and eats a burger with her cousin. Auditors walk into post offices with cameras. Street interviewers ask personal questions. PUA students practice making conversation. Charity creators give away money. Buskers play music on sidewalks. All of them are doing essentially the same thing, which is going outside and interacting with other human beings and seeing what happens, and all of them are doing it in a culture that has increasingly decided that the safe thing to do is to stay inside—literally or figuratively, physically or psychologically—behind the screen, behind the take, behind the critical distance that protects you from the embarrassment of having tried something that might not work.

The content is popular because it shows people doing the thing everyone is afraid to do, which is not bowling or eating or filming or asking, but simply initiating contact with another person without knowing how it will go. The videos are a permission structure. Not because anyone says “you should do this too”—nobody says that—but because seeing it done over and over normalizes it. You watch enough of Herman Jagpal asking strangers to go bowling and at some point you start thinking that you could ask a stranger something too, and maybe they would say yes, and maybe you would end up doing something together that neither of you planned, and maybe that would be better than whatever you were going to do alone.



There is something that happens when you look at a thing directly, without the wrappers, without the genre-level judgment, without the critical apparatus, without the preemptive identification of failure modes, without the suspicion. What happens is that you see it. That’s all. You just see it. Two people in a truck eating Big Macs. A guy walking up to a food truck asking if they want to go bowling. A woman holding up a twenty-dollar bill that someone threw at her on a stage, saying

“this is our lunch.” A man who can’t remember if his raise was eight cents or ten.

You see it and it does something to you that takes and opinions and critical frameworks cannot do, which is that it makes you feel a specific way about a specific thing. Not a category of things. Not a genre. Not a discourse. A thing. This particular video, these particular people, this particular truck on this particular day in this particular parking lot. The feeling is not transferable. It does not generalize. It is not a position you can hold or a take you can have. It’s just the feeling of having paid attention to something that deserved attention, and the quiet recognition that most things deserve more attention than we give them, and that the attention itself—the looking, the listening, the willingness to sit with a thing long enough to see what’s actually in it—is the whole game. There is no level above it. There is no meta-position from which the attention itself can be critiqued. Or rather there is, of course there is, you can always add another layer, but the layer doesn’t get you anywhere the attention hadn’t already gotten you, and usually it gets you somewhere worse.

The fly was always out of the bottle. People have always been talking to each other and eating together and throwing money at performers and going bowl-

ing with strangers. The irony didn't change any of that. The takes didn't change it. The critical theory didn't change it. The decades of postmodern self-consciousness didn't change it. Underneath all of it, always, the whole time, there was a guy named Gem who got a ten-cent raise and a woman named Tammy who was proud of him, and they were going to eat Big Macs together regardless of what anyone thought about the genre they were doing it in. The wrappers were always removable. The thing was always underneath. You just had to be willing to look at it, which is the easiest and the hardest thing in the world, because it requires you to give up the one thing the irony was protecting you from, which is the risk of caring about something that might not care back, which is the risk of being a person, which is not actually a risk at all but simply the condition of being alive, and you were always already doing it, and there was never any escape from it, and the escape was never the point.

