

WHEN EAST MARRIES WEST

That's OK. I thought it was the horse

By THOMAS DILLON

Here's a joke I once read in a worn volume of rib ticklers. A bit off color, but my ribs loved it.

Question: How does a blind parachutist know when he's approaching ground? Answer: His leash goes slack.

The lines stuck and I soon carried them home to my wife, my very English-capable wife, who taught me anew that humor has a hard time leaping cultures. Somehow the meaning always gets lost and our conversation soon becomes a joke in itself -- one invariably on me.

"Wanna hear a joke?"

She eyed me. "Not another fart joke?"

See? Already my timing was off.

"When have I ever told you a fart joke?"

"One day," she began, "The queen of England was entertaining the president of the United States."

"Oh." My face turned red. It had taken me two hours to talk out that little story, quite a time to pass about gas.

"How does it go again? 'The queen took the president on a tour of her castle grounds . . .'"

"Forget it. I've got a better one." So I told her about the blind parachutist.

She giggled, paused, straightened her face and announced -- "I don't get it."

"Leash," I said. "The guy had a dog with him. A seeing-eye dog."

"In the first place," she asked, "Why would a visually impaired person ever want to leap from a plane?"

"That's not the point."

"Rather than take the risk, he might as well open his window and stand in the breeze. A window is much safer than a parachute."

"Granted. But the dog?"

"Just like I don't see why the queen would take the president to view her stables. He's seen a horse before."

"Forget farts for a moment and focus on the dog." Words I should never have said.

I saw her blink and think. "Did I miss something? Did the dog fart?"

"No. The dog dies."

More blinking and thinking. "I *did* miss something!"

"The dog is on the leash."

"Oh!" She laughed. And then said, "But I still don't get it."

My ribs went flat. "Let's stop. It's not funny anymore."

"Why would a blind man take his dog on a plane. It doesn't make sense."

"It's a joke, OK? It doesn't have to make sense."

"You mean the dog dies needlessly? Its life is wasted?"

So I did what I know never works. I tried to explain.

"The man can't see, see? He needs the dog to get around. So when he parachutes from the plane, he still has the dog on its leash. It's jerked up when his chute opens and then hits ground seconds before the man."

Her eyes misted. "That's the cruelest thing I've ever heard. The man should be jailed."

"No, it's absurd. The goofiness makes it funny."

"How can you find entertainment in the death of a dog?"

"It's a joke!"

"Or maybe," she said, "It's a 'man' thing. For when the horse farts, of course the queen would be embarrassed. A horse fart is nothing to laugh about. Especially in front of the president."

"Listen," I told her. "No real blind fellow would take his seeing eye dog sky diving. It's fiction."

"The queen of England is real. The president is real. Horse farts are real."

I concede those points. "But it's dark humor. You have dark humor in Japan. I know you do."

"But no Japanese would kill a dog for fun."

"Nobody killed the dog for fun!"

"I would hardly call it an accident. Not like the horse fart. That was an accident all the way. The queen felt compelled to speak. Who wouldn't?"

"The dog didn't really die because the dog isn't real."

"Then why tell the story?"

"Because," I gasped. "It's a joke!"

"Well, it's not funny. Here's how it should go -- 'A visually impaired gentleman wanted to experience sky diving, but knew it was dangerous, so he just opened his window and stood there in the breeze with his dog.' There. That's better."

"But it's not funny."

"A blind gentleman standing in his window with his dog and pretending to parachute is not funny?"

"It's ridiculous."

"The goofiness makes it funny."

"No, it doesn't."

"Yes, it does."

"No, and having the queen only show photos of horses is not funny either."

"Yes it is."

"The entire joke relies on the punch line. You can't leave it out."

"What punch line? The dog is dead."

I shake her to align her joke track with mine.

"We're back on the queen joke. You have to employ the punch line. Otherwise it doesn't work."

"So you prefer to have the queen embarrassed out of her mind!"

"I could care less about the queen!"

"I know. You have no heart. The queen's largest horse farts like a grape bomb --"

"A cherry bomb!"

" -- and she is naturally embarrassed. She has to say something. So to avoid all that, she should only show photos. That's funny enough."

"It needs the punch line!"

"What punch line? The queen says, 'Oh I'm sorry,' What's funny about that?"

"That not it."

Blinking. "It's not?"

"No."

"Gimme a hint. Is the dog involved?"

"You don't remember, do you?"

"About the dog?"

"About the horse!"

"I'm sure the president gave a delicate response."

"Which was?"

"I think," she says, "It's funnier to imagine it."

So I end by imagining to laugh -- at a punch line that is delivered above.

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