

# How to Tell a Joke in Three Easy Steps

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The process server stood on Eliot's doorstep, clutching the manila envelope like a valentine he was nervous to give.

"Don't worry," Eliot assured him. "Not gonna make this difficult. You had nothing to do with it."

The server nodded, wary but relieved, offering a pen with the papers.

When Eliot went to sign, the pen scratched dry across the page. No ink. He tried again, pressing harder, leaving only an indentation. He looked up with a smile, desperate. *Timing's everything in comedy.* "So, this means it all goes away, right? And we live happily ever after?"

The process server just pulled out another pen.

*Wrong pen, wrong timing, wrong audience.* The setup was perfect; execution, not so much. As Eliot signed, he wondered if, perhaps, timing was secondary to delivery.

Later, at the kitchen table, Eliot read through the documents. "DISSOLUTION OF MARRIAGE." Dissolution: like sugar stirred into water until it disappeared. Such pessimistic diction for what had once felt solid, permanent.

*STEP 1: Set the Stage! Start with a premise that draws your audience in...*

He'd arrived twenty minutes early to their first date to savor the anticipation. All day he'd felt it building. Google searches during his lunch break ("first date conversation starters"), a stop at Banana Republic to buy a blazer he probably couldn't afford. None of it mattered. He was a live wire, stripped raw — crackling with possibility.

The bar was a typical Lower East Side joint. Dim in that calculated way. All Edison bulbs and exposed brick. Super-

storm Sandy had just blown through the city, and everything still felt waterlogged, uncertain. The smell of soggy leaves had seeped into everything. The IPA he ordered was hoppy and complex — material he could riff on if needed, the difference between cascade and centennial hops.

He pulled out a book, *Love in the Time of Cholera*, bookmarked with an invitation to a friend's wedding two months out. Already he was imagining waltzing in with her. *This is Clara*, he'd say — her name rolling off his tongue like those Spanish R's.

He tried to distract himself by reading, his eyes flicking over typeface, but the words refused to cohere into meaning. Like trying to hold water in cupped hands.

Then, she walked in.

*STEP 2: Build the Tension! Raise the stakes to keep them hooked...*

From across the bar, he watched — admired — the way she moved through the crowd, her brown hair catching the amber light. She shed her oversized winter coat, revealing a simple sweater, jeans. A careless style that suggested beauty was beside the point. She'd done her makeup without obsessing — hint of eyeliner, lips their natural color.

"Eliot?"

"That's me," he blurted, hopping to his feet, bumbling his bookmark. Clara offered a tight-lipped smile as he dove to retrieve the wedding invitation.

Part of him wished she'd have crouched down, too; their hands meeting on the cream cardstock. *What's this?* She'd ask, and he'd explain about the wedding, and she'd say wasn't it funny how they'd just met, and here was this invitation, like the universe winking.

But instead, she slid into the booth, plucking the cocktail menu from between salt and pepper shakers.

"Jesus," she squinted at the menu. "Twelve dollars for

well whiskey?”

He surfaced from under the table, invitation in hand; blazer twisted awkwardly. Her attention remained fixed on the laminated menu, like it was the most fascinating thing in the room.

*STEP 3: Deliver the Punchline! Land it with confidence, even if — especially if — it's not what they expect...*

It took three rounds of drinks before she noticed the book. “*Love in the Time of Cholera*,” she smirked, “What are you? Some sort of a romantic?”

She cocked her head, a Cheshire grin spreading across her face. The bar was playing music: Gotye, the verse from the woman’s perspective. It all built to a crescendo: he knew the next two hours, the next two months, the next two years balanced on his answer.

“Guilty,” he shrugged, unsure what facial expression to make.

After a long, tense beat her face creased in a smile that he found immaculate. “That’s either going to be a problem or it isn’t.”

Caught up in his own excitement, he rambled about the book, how Florentino Ariza waited fifty-one years for Fermina Daza, until —

“Know what I remember about that book?” It sounded like a dare. “How she smells his shit on their honeymoon and realizes she doesn’t love him. Márquez,” She snorted, sharp and bright. A gleeful heckler. “He knew what was up.” She tore a strip from her cocktail napkin as she said it, the bar’s name —*Slipper Room*— ripping clean in half.

He felt something tighten in his chest but pushed through it. This was just her humor he told himself, Dark and smart. He liked that about her already.

“You’re even funnier than your texts,” he said, hoping it came off as a compliment.

She studied him, then reached across the table, grabbing his collar and pulling him forward. He knocked over his beer, IPA spreading in a golden flood, soaking Márquez, the invitation, everything to come.

“Shit —” he started, but she was already kissing him, deep and urgent. He tasted the whiskey sour on her tongue, felt her teeth graze his bottom lip. Somehow both tender and violent.

When she pulled away, he sat there stunned. The taste of her twelve-dollar whiskey burned in his mouth and a thought swirling in his head: THIS IS THE GIRL I’M GOING TO MARRY!

At his kitchen table, Eliot put the papers down. The callback had finally arrived.