



## STEVE CARELL

[ACTOR]

“I MOVED TO CHICAGO AND NOT NEW YORK OR L.A. BECAUSE I WANTED TO WORK. I WASN’T READY TO BE SHOWCASED OR DISCOVERED... I’D HAVE BEEN BLOWN OUT OF THE WATER IF I WENT TO NEW YORK OR LOS ANGELES.”

Things that require a leap of faith:

*Improv*

*Marriage*

**T**here’s a Protestant comfort to be taken from the success story of Steve Carell. The idea of “making it” in Hollywood can be alienating to the common person for any number of reasons, but perhaps the most alienating aspect of all is that now more than ever, the metrics of success are baffling, bordering on inconceivable. They are one of those ethereal sequences of floating numbers film directors put in movies about math.

But Carell’s equation is mercifully simple: a young man identified something he loved to do, recognized it as a sort of talent, then worked at it very hard for a pretty long time. He was rewarded incrementally at first, joining the touring company at Chicago’s *Second City*, eventually moving into critically lauded roles on *The Dana Carvey Show* and *The Daily Show*. Then, in 2005, there was his unforgettable face on the poster for *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, haloed with sunshine and staring

all twinkly eyed into the middle distance, somewhere between the portrait of a communist leader and a boy in his fourth-grade school photo. And while his blockbuster turn as Michael Scott on seven seasons of *The Office* might have won him a Golden Globe and a legion of prime-time fans, his ascent remained conspicuously unflashy, devoid of scandal or sensation, just a steady chug to the top, where the stars live.

In the opening scene of his most recent film, *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, Carell’s character is told by his wife (played by Julianne Moore), as they are driving home from a romantic dinner, that she has slept with someone else. The guilt of Moore’s admission takes hold and gains momentum, until she’s helplessly blabbing the gory details of the transgression as Carell begs her to stop talking and turns gray with heartbreak. Then suddenly, with only the lightest of warnings, Carell opens the passenger-side door and tumbles neatly out of the speeding car

onto the pavement. The thought I had when I saw this was not, Oh, god! but, Of course! That seems to be Carell's most impressive playing card: his knack for making the utterly absurd choice seem like it's the only reasonable option in the world.

I met with Carell in his office on the Warner Bros. lot in Burbank, California. We talked for nearly two hours, and during that time he was unhurried, generous, and so humble that he rambled self-consciously whenever faced with a question that broached why he's so good at what he does. When we were done talking, he motioned to the coffee table between us and at the dozen glass containers filled with various chocolates and Red Vines and said, "Please, take some candy!" I chose a few Reese's peanut butter cups. Concerned, he then apologized for not being in the position to offer me a lottery scratcher, which he sometimes keeps in their own special jar, next to the candy.

—Kathryn Borel

## I. CRYING DAD

THE BELIEVER: *Crazy, Stupid, Love* made me cry a lot. Every time your eyes moistened, I cried real tears. At first I wondered, Is it his face that's doing this to me? His tragic eyes? But I think that it's maybe also because you played a father, and seeing a father cry is one of the saddest things.

STEVE CARELL: I get that. The father, I think, traditionally, has been such a rock and such an immovable... [laughs] rock-sort-of object. I only witnessed my father crying twice in my life.

BLVR: When?

SC: Well, I witnessed one and heard about another. The one I heard about was recounted by my mom. When my parents dropped me off at college, at Denison, they were completely supportive and excited. I got all set up in my room, then my mom called and said that as they drove off campus she looked over and there were tears in my father's eyes. That really touched me, because for my entire life he represented strength and stoicism.

BLVR: That was when strength and stoicism were the hallmarks of being a good father.

SC: That's what my dad personified.

BLVR: Was your dad English?

SC: No, Italian. Our name used to be *Caroselli*, from "wild horses." [Laughs] We're fleeing from our heritage.

BLVR: So when did you actually witness your father crying?

SC: I had a dog for eleven years: Stewart, a golden retriever. He had cancer. I was living out here, in Los Angeles, and I was married. Annie, my daughter, was a baby. I'd brought Stewart back to Massachusetts, and my dad came with me when I had to take him to be put to sleep. Again, he was very strong and supportive, but when I looked up as I was holding Stewart's body, he cried.

BLVR: Do you think he was uncomfortable crying?

SC: No, I just don't think it was part of his makeup to be very emotional. He was taught, growing up, that that's just the way a man is. You're less free with your emotions, which is why it's more impactful to see a father figure cry.

BLVR: So when you chose theater, which is one of the most demonstrative career choices you can make, what did he think?

SC: My parents were both very supportive. I was planning on going to law school, and I was stuck because I couldn't figure out what to put in the essay on my law-school application. My parents sat me down and said, "Well, what do you want to do?" They wanted to make sure I took possession of my life, which was pretty progressive, especially coming from the era they came from. They were Depression-era kids—and it helped that I was the youngest—but I think so much of the raising of their kids and their lives was predicated on making do with what you have and living within your limits. It was very structured, you know—you learn something and then you go off and do that thing. But they were the opposite. They said, "Follow your heart. It's your life. You have to do what

makes you happy and it's no one else's life, it's certainly not ours, so don't do something you think *we* want you to do, because that's not going to make you happy."

BLVR: That's still a pretty rare stance.

SC: It is. That's usually what your crazy aunt tells you.

BLVR: Or your high-school art teacher.

SC: "Come over here and let me whisper something to you!" But to be validated and given permission to follow that instinct is rare. And I'm sure they were concerned. But, my god, I got *super* lucky.

## II. MIDDLE-AGED GUY ON A BIKE

BLVR: Do you think it was luck? The lag time between your graduating from college and being able to quit your job as a waiter to become a full-time actor was almost four years.

SC: Which is pretty good! I set small goals for myself. When I moved to Chicago my goal was to get into Second City.

BLVR: Did that happen immediately?

SC: No. I waited tables and did plays. I moved to Chicago in 1985, and in 1988 I got cast in the Second City touring company. I never had to supplement my income again.

BLVR: You also taught improv. What kind of teacher were you?

SC: Lazy. I was a lazy teacher. Keep in mind, you can teach certain elements of improvisation and people can become better at it, but I don't know if it's a skill that can be taught from scratch. It's like any art. [*Pause*] Do I want to compare it to art? [*Longer pause*] Yeah, I guess it's an art. You can take a drawing class and get better if you're not so great, but I think you have to have something inside you. And I could tell there were people in my class who had that thing...

BLVR: What is that thing? Curiosity?

SC: Not exactly. I think it's the ability to listen. A lot of people would come in and think that it was a class to learn how to make jokes and be funny. Some people came in thinking it was a comedy class. But that's not what Second City did, or what I was trying to teach. And there's nothing more boring than watching two people get up onstage and improvise "funny."

BLVR: That's just selective monologing.

SC: It is. It's two people who have predetermined what they're going to say, and if it doesn't fit into whatever they're improvising, they'll try to work it in somehow. And that's something else—that's not improv. But the ones who were willing to go up there with a clear mind, maybe with a character or an attitude or the seed of an idea, and let it go, those people were the most natural at it.

BLVR: There's a generosity to that kind of performance. It's not like stand-up comedy; improv is not about the self, it's about the scene. That makes me wonder about the differences between those who come from a stand-up background and those who come from an improv background, who go on to become actors. Do you think improvisers make more empathetic actors?

SC: I think it's just a different style. I see both of them as tools rather than end products. In a lot of ways, I see improvisation as a way of learning about acting, or a type of training to be an actor. As an end product, it's sometimes pretty dicey to be an improviser. We were lucky at Second City because we had an audience that was versed as to what improv was.

BLVR: Are improv audiences more forgiving?

SC: Definitely in Chicago. Second City has been around for fifty years. People come in and they know what to expect. They'll forgive you. Sometimes you go out and you do an improv scene that bombs, but the audience is still there for the next one and hasn't lost hope. They know the percentage for success is very slim. I think it's a

great means to an end to learn how to listen, how to not get ahead of yourself when you're in a scene. And thinking about the structure of the scene—the beginning, middle, and end—that can help you as a writer. If you're doing a five-minute scene, you need to get to what it's about right away. Tina Fey is an excellent writer, for example. She was a great improviser for the same reason. When she was in a scene, she'd get to the nut of what it was about. But improv is not something that I think can be marketed.

BLVR: But aspiring comic actors and writers will spend thousands of dollars on Second City courses.

SC: Yeah, and you see a lot of that nowadays. But those people are using it as a springboard or a showcase to be seen, because that's how so-and-so might have done it. I remember seeing Second City when I was in college and all I thought was, Man, that looks like fun. That's why I moved to Chicago and not New York or L.A., because I wanted to *work*. I wasn't ready to be showcased or discovered. I wanted to learn. And I thought the competition would be a bit different. I'd have been blown out of the water if I went to New York or Los Angeles.

BLVR: That attitude mirrors your career trajectory. It goes back to what you were saying about how the DNA of improv is to not get ahead of yourself, and that scenes require a collective humanity rather than a "Look at me!" attitude. But that works against personal ambition, it seems. And yet you must have had ambition to end up where you are now. How do you explain that dichotomy?

SC: A lot of it was luck, honestly. I would watch people like Stephen Colbert and Amy Sedaris, and they were always funny and inventive and smart and interesting. And *always* making strong choices. And they were good actors! I thought, These guys are going to be stars. These people are going to explode. I thought that about a lot of people in Second City. Some of them did explode and some of them didn't. And those that didn't don't seem bitter about it. I went to a fiftieth reunion of Second City and was so surprised at the warmth of everybody.

BLVR: Why were you surprised?

SC: Because you don't know how egos are going to change things. I mean, some people within that world were bitter. Like any gathering of creative people, it can get heated, although I didn't experience that part of it. There were people I knew who were curmudgeonly, but when I went back they were washed over with this warmth because of what Second City represented. It was such an incubator and a safe place, creatively. You could try anything and it was OK. You weren't being scrutinized, you weren't being judged. It was all a big, fun experiment. Even the people who walked away feeling like they didn't get their due came back, and there was a real sense of community. It was lovely.

BLVR: Have you experienced that sense of safety since then?

#### MICROINTERVIEW WITH CHRISTOPHER OWENS, PART IV

THE BELIEVER: What's the most valuable advice you've received from another musician?

CHRISTOPHER OWENS: It'd probably be from a biography I've read. I've read some pretty good rock bios. I just read the Keith Richards memoir, and that was pretty great. I read a lot of those, and I do learn from them. But you know what's a really good piece of advice that stuck with me when I first started? The first line of that song that Stuart Murdoch from Belle and Sebastian sings [*singing*]: "Oh, get me away from here I'm dying / play me a song to set me free / nobody writes them like they used to / so it may as well be me." That was a big deal for me when I heard that song. The beginning part is kind of tragic and desperate, but when he sings, "Nobody writes them like they used to / so it may as well be me," I'd listen to that and relate to it so much. It made me want to write songs. ★

SC: I got really lucky because *The Office* was that way, and *The Daily Show* was that way—where you just feel protected. Oh, and *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*! We didn't know what we were doing. It wasn't until that first preview that we got any sense that it would work. Our production was shut down the first week because the executives were watching dailies and they got scared. They thought it looked weird. They thought my character looked creepy—the way he was riding around on a bike—a middle-aged guy who's riding around on a bike! Even though they liked the script, they got jittery. They saw bits and pieces and called Judd [Apatow] and me in and said, "This looks *weird*." But we stuck to what we knew it could be, and ultimately they saw what we did.

### III. UNLOADING THE DISHWASHER

BLVR: Leaps of faith seem to be a motif here, with you.

SC: Totally.

BLVR: Do you believe in soul mates?

SC: I do.

BLVR: Do you think your wife came prepackaged as your soul mate, or do you think she eased into the role?

SC: I get asked a lot about my relationship with Nancy. People say, "You've been married sixteen years, *how is that even possible?* That's *crazy!*" Which to *me* sounds crazy, like anyone who's been married sixteen years is an anomaly, like it's *implausible* to be married for that long, that two people could coexist for sixteen years, like I should be wearing a huge badge...

BLVR: A huge badge that says, I LOVE MY WIFE, I CAN'T HELP MYSELF!

SC: Yeah, people ask, "What is the secret to the success of your marriage?" I was talking to Nancy about this the other night, how we've managed to make it work, but I think ultimately it's just marrying the right person. It's

getting lucky enough when you're young and stupid. Let's face it, you know someone at that point a tiny, *tiny* fraction of the amount you're going to eventually know them. So yeah, it's a leap of faith on both sides. And I took the leap of faith with the right person.

BLVR: Do you think the key is just to talk about everything, even if it's painful?

SC: Well, it's harder when you have kids, because they become the focus. And you have to remember to focus on each other to keep everything balanced. But there's more to communicating than talking. There's laughing, too. Someone was asking me, "What is your grandest romantic gesture?" and I think the best romantic gestures are the tiny ones.

BLVR: Like showing mercy for your partner.

SC: Yes. And it's remembering to notice your partner.

BLVR: Did you have a little gesture that you did this week?

SC: I emptied the dishwasher when I woke up this morning. She hates emptying it. And she sets up the coffee pot for me every morning so that it's ready and timed out.

BLVR: Whenever I was dating the wrong men, I'd picture my life as a little house and those men would be up on my roof having a tailgate party, ruining the structural integrity of my little house. Now that I'm in a good relationship, it feels like I have another supporting beam.

SC: It's empowering! I felt so empowered when I got married. I was thirty-three and she was twenty-nine and I felt like, Ah, it's the two of us now! Someone's got my back and I've got hers. You just feel like you're stronger. I loved it. I still do.

BLVR: But the title *soul mates* can be burdensome. It can feel crippling if you don't have the belief that it'll happen to you. Do your kids believe in the idea?

SC: I hope my kids look at us and think, My parents love and respect each other. If that's all they get, that's plenty. To put labels on things, like "My wife is my soul mate," sounds romantic, and I believe it, but it's such a personal idea, I don't feel like I would ever want to be too demonstrative. I don't go around in interviews and say [*seductive European voice*], "I'd like you to meet my soul mate... Nancy Carell." My wife would vomit.

#### IV. HAVING NO WOUND

BLVR: You wrapped seven seasons of *The Office* in the spring. When you were walking off the studio lot in Van Nuys toward your car, what was the overwhelming feeling you had?

SC: It's one of those experiences that you rehearse in your mind. For the last year I've known I'd be moving on, and I rehearsed it. I had all these different scenarios of how I would feel, and then it ended up being sort of a blur. I shot my last scene—they call it a series wrap—and then they ushered me next door to where they'd set up a party. I didn't want to do that thing where I walked through the set one more time or lingered. I'd been sort of doing that in bits and pieces for the last several months. I gave a couple of gifts to my hair-and-makeup people and my wardrobe assistants—some little Tiffany bracelets. They were the last people who were there. I gave them a kiss goodbye. Then I drove off the lot honking my horn, making as much noise as possible.

BLVR: Were you relieved or joyous?

SC: It was bittersweet. These are my friends. That part of it was very difficult to leave, knowing that I won't be seeing them every day. I saw them every day for seven years. That part was tough. Honestly, the hardest part was the following week, when I was home and I hadn't processed a lot of things. Because when you're on set, you're just trying to do the acting side, and not so much the goodbye. At the party they did these tributes, and all the actors compiled a yearbook for me—it has photographs and mementos from all of the writers and producers. The next week I sorted through a lot of that stuff and it was really moving.

BLVR: Were you a "dad who cried" in that moment?

SC: I was. When I watched Paul Lieberstein—who's the executive producer—give his tribute, I had to stop because he was choked up. That got me going. Everyone was so generous with their comments.

BLVR: Did anyone say anything that was surprising about the kind of person you are?

SC: It was *all* surprising. I don't like being the center of attention. It's embarrassing to me. Even at my wedding I was like, "Here's Nancy." And some people find that odd, because what I do is so public. But I don't like it. It's different when you're playing a character onstage or on TV than it is being yourself and being out there. I tend to be fairly shy, and a little more reserved than people expect me to be. So this was wonderful but also extremely painful for me, because I get so embarrassed. I've never had a party thrown for me. So to look around at a couple hundred people and realize that the party was to commemorate me leaving and all eyes were on me and all the nice things were being said about me... it was a lot to absorb. It's a great group of people.

BLVR: It showed. There was a specific kind of chemistry between the actors on *The Office*.

SC: A lot of the credit goes to [the creator] Greg Daniels. The people he chose to work together really cared for each other. He picked people based as much on their talent as on their humanity.

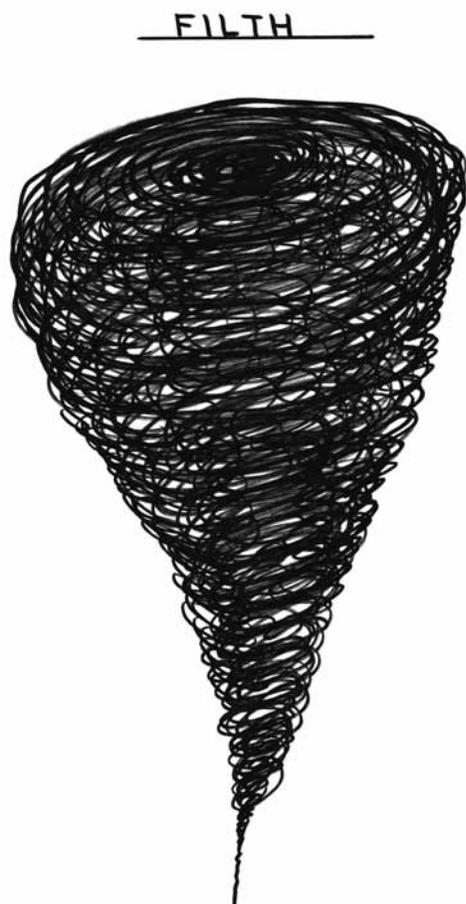
BLVR: Do you have to work to keep that humanity as your career continues to grow?

SC: I don't get out much. That's part of it. Most of our friends are people I've worked with, or families from where my kids go to school. I'm not a big Hollywood party player. But even in terms of navigating the business, you learn fairly quickly where people stand and what makes them tick. And I think I'm a good judge of people's character. If they don't exhibit the kind of character I want to work with, then I don't work with them,

which is a luxury. To be able to say that I would prefer to work with a talented, nice person is a nice luxury to have.

BLVR: There's a Judd Apatow quote about you. He talks about how with a performer, you look for the wound. And with you, he said that there is no wound, and maybe that's your wound. Where do you think you pull from most for material? Do you pull from pain, observation, joy...?

SC: I try to do things that would make me laugh. But I don't think I understand it well enough to talk about it. The thing that I'm always trying to do, no matter how broad or ridiculous the character, is to find something about him that is grounded and believable. Because if



you don't believe there's an actual human being there, then it's not funny. Human behavior is funny. If you take away the human, it's just a thing trying to make you laugh. And that's not funny.

BLVR: What was the grounded element in the character you played in *Anchorman*, the weatherman with an IQ of forty-eight, who enjoys ice cream and a nice pair of slacks?

SC: In terms of that movie, all those characters were just ridiculous. That's like *Airplane!* None of those characters had any heart. That movie was devoid of any sentimentality.

BLVR: But there was a dearness about him.

SC: Sure, but that comes from *him* believing that he's a real person. I like it when a character in a movie doesn't know they're in a movie. Peter Sellers could play an extremely broad character, but you always got a sense that there was a guy there. It wasn't Peter Sellers trying to make you laugh. There was no winking; you never saw the actor just being silly to try and get a laugh. It was a character trying desperately not to look like an idiot, and failing. And that, to me, is hilarious.

BLVR: Right, because it's never funny to see a character succeed. It's only funny when they fail. In real life, do you ever use comedy to escape from pain, or to transfigure pain? With your kids, or your wife?

SC: Sure, but you have to be careful with kids because you don't want to start making a funny face when they've had a bad day at school. There may be something deeper at play. You can't solve it with just lightening the mood. I try to be watchful of that. We have a lot of fun. We play and make each other laugh a lot at home. But it's not the wacky comedy house, because, first and foremost, we're parents. We're not performing for our kids, and we're very aware of that.

BLVR: Do you have Carell pocket jokes, little jokes that define the micro-community of your family?

SC: I started a saying that my kids think is really funny that they play along with. I don't know when it started but I say [*laughs, then gets serious and does a declarative, news-announcer voice*], "We're the Carells," and then my son says, "And we're pretty cool." [*Laughs for a while*] I just love the disclaimer that we're "pretty cool." Not even that we're cool...

BLVR: That you're cool with a caveat.

SC: Self-effacingly cool.

BLVR: Like, the Carells are not going to be the life of the party...

SC: No, but we'll get invited!

BLVR: Your kids sound like they get it.

SC: They totally get it. They're both very attuned. Kids just soak it up. They get irony! And that's a pretty complicated concept for a six- or a nine-year-old. They're both really sly.

BLVR: Do you have any boundaries in your own comedy because you have kids? Charles Grodin says he won't say anything more controversial than "Get that dog off the bed." Are there places you won't go?

SC: I don't know yet. It's a case-by-case basis. I'm pretty aware of the line. It's my own moral barometer. I don't judge other people for pressing buttons. I'll try things that are pushing the limits, but I have my own very specific line. It's nothing I can define, I just know it when I feel it. When I first started working on *The Daily Show* I was very aware of mocking people who didn't deserve to be mocked, and I had a long conversation with Stephen Colbert about it, because it's a horrible thing to do. Especially early on in the show when people didn't know what it was about and what our agenda was, I had a real moral dilemma about that. My fix was to become more idiotic or laughable than the people I was interviewing, to take the impetus off them. I tried to celebrate the people I was talking to, while at the same

time mocking the newsmagazine format and myself. That's how I made it comfortable. Some of these people were just very innocent, quirky characters. The Klinton convention was a perfect example. Everyone thought, Oh, these people will be so much fun to mock! But they could not have been kinder to each other. They were doing something they loved to do and not harming anyone. To get metaphysical, they were just putting good vibes out into the world. Who am I to poke fun at that? Poking fun is one thing. That's different from making a mockery of a human being.

BLVR: Out of all the characters you've played, which has the most humanity?

SC: That's hard for me to judge. I try to infuse some of that into everything I do. When we got the first draft of *Crazy, Stupid, Love*, one thing I was adamant about was: Here is a couple that is having problems, and I wanted there to be equity in their relationship. When there's a problem in a relationship, it's almost always a mutual problem. It almost always goes both ways. I said, "You need to see where *he* is lacking. Sure, his wife has an affair, but there are reasons behind that as well." No one is the villain. It isn't a matter of determining who is more in the right or wrong. They both have to meet and see why they are wrong, together.

## V. ENTERING THE CANON

BLVR: This might sound nuts, but have you ever studied what it is about your face that works so well in conjunction with the type of comedian you are?

SC: [*Laughs*] Why, yes, all the time. I took face-studying lessons when I was going for my doctorate in face-studying. [*Laughs*] If I start deconstructing my face or what I'm doing, I think I'm in jeopardy of becoming way too self-aware. I never want to go to the mirror and start practicing expressions. You don't practice them in real life—you just respond to things. To practice how you would look if someone ran over your foot is silly. If your character finds out his wife slept with someone, do you go to the mirror and practice what that would look

like? [Pause] That being said, technically there are things that *do* help. The more movies I've done, the more I've learned about angles and eye lines and all of those things that are very helpful in a practical sense.

BLVR: What angle would work best if your wife slept with somebody else?

SC: For example, if you're doing a scene and someone is off-camera, they will try to move, generally speaking, really close to the lens if they're behind the camera, so your eyes are not too far away from the camera, because the camera wants to pick up what's going on with your face and your eyes. When I was on *The Daily Show* I'd watch myself to see if what I was actually doing looked like a news guy. A news guy has a look and a demeanor and an attitude. When they're reading a prompter, where do they look? Stephen Colbert and I would do this thing called "Even Stephen," and we didn't know where we were supposed to look—at each other, at the cameras, should we cheat, looking from the prompter and then at each other? What the camera is picking up always looks different from what's happening in the studio. I would sort of watch or study that. But in terms of performance, no. You shouldn't overwork it. My friend did a movie with Meryl Streep. They had done a take a number of times and when they asked her if she wanted to do another take she said, "No, at this point it's just hamburger." Like, it might have been filet at one point but now it's hamburger and we're not going to turn the hamburger back into filet.

BLVR: Are you writing now?

SC: I'm planning on writing. In about three weeks I'm doing a movie called *Seeking a Friend for the End of the World*. It's a script I read and couldn't stop thinking about. I'll do that and then, speaking of Meryl Streep, I'm doing a movie with her. It sounds really weird to say that.

BLVR: That's serious business, doing a movie with Meryl Streep. That ain't comedy, that's the canon.

SC: I can't wait! She's a big deal. But she doesn't carry

herself like she's a big deal. She's very unassuming and sweet. I was very nervous when I met her.

BLVR: How do you manifest your nervousness?

SC: I get very quiet because I don't want to say or do anything stupid or inappropriate.

BLVR: What do you want to write?

SC: I want to write a comedy. I haven't written anything since *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*.

BLVR: Do you have an idea?

SC: Yes.

BLVR: Can you tell me it?

SC: No. I haven't even told the studio yet!

BLVR: Do you want to write something with your wife?

SC: I do! She doesn't have a lot of confidence in her writing, but she's a very good writer. Just because she hasn't done it on a grand scale, she seems to think she's not capable of doing it, but I strongly disagree.

BLVR: The philosopher Wittgenstein wrote that the most serious and profound questions could only be discussed in the form of jokes. Do you believe that's true?

SC: I think humor has a way of opening discussions and has a way of defusing situations... Wait, what's the quote again?

BLVR: "The most serious and profound questions can only be discussed in the form of jokes."

SC: Hm. [Laughs] No! What a load of hogwash. I proclaim... that that's just bullshit! What does that guy know? [Still laughing, in faux-British accent] "Oh, I've had an epiphany! And everyone will agree with what I've just proclaimed!" ★