

SPOTLIGHT ON LOCAL ARTISTS

Selections from *People Are Funny*

By Marci Daniels

Abstract: *People Are Funny* is a collection of short stories drawn from the lives of everyday folk. Each day, life is fascinating, mythical in many ways. “Shoes,” “Falling,” “Forgotten,” “Firecrackers,” and “Keep Your Eyes Open” take the quotidian and expose seemingly folkloric realities found within the normalcy of life.

Shoes

The child has no shoes. She will always have no shoes in this story. Her nose is running. She has a jacket on, but it’s not a heavy one, not as heavy as it should be for this time of year. I know he’s thinking about the coat he bought her, the heavy winter coat he’s imagining I left off of her in a fit of negligence. He’s not remembering that it was over a year ago that he bought that coat. He hasn’t noticed that she’s doubled in size since then. It won’t do for me to remind him of this fact just now, since he’s handing me a bag of groceries, food to get us through the next week or two until my husband gets his paycheck from his new job. “You should take her to the doctor,” he says, nodding toward the child, toward the trails of snot coating and crusting her upper lip. “No money,” I chant. He knows this song. He pulls out his wallet, hands me four bills, three twenties and a ten. “Take her to see a doctor.” He doesn’t know yet, but will find out, that my husband will use some of this money for beer. When he finds this out, and that I do not take her to see a doctor—I buy cough syrup and pay the light bill instead—I will become trapped in my father’s story, a story about an irresponsible mother, an alcoholic father, and a child who has no shoes.

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Falling

We remembered the song: ...when the bough breaks the cradle will...

It did.

Fall.

We looked at each other in shock and heard the footsteps coming back from the room

they had just disappeared to. The baby's scream yelled at us until the mommy rescued it. Rescued it from all those straps and turned to us. Her eyes made us wrap up tighter and press into the corner. The mommy cuddled the baby and touched the baby everywhere. Her foot kicked the basinet out of the way and she walked into the other room, the room with the TV. We sat there until our knees hurt from crouching. We stood up together, quietly, and skittered across the yellow and brown floor to the edge of the TV room carpet, little dark faces peeking in. The mommy was on the couch, still touching the baby all over, then rocking it, then touching it. We scooted back out, holding hands, and snuck to our room at the back of the trailer. We went to our dollies, dollies that looked like the baby, and rocked them and touched them. And rocked them.

I honestly can't remember if it was you or me who couldn't wait, who couldn't resist the kicking bouncing of that blue-socked chubby pink foot. I don't remember if it was an accident.

Forgotten

There were times when she would forget about us, but I have no memory of any of them. Do you?

M. told me we would be waiting there and watching out the top window. We would watch for the red spot we knew would turn into the red pickup and beige camper as it followed the road that wrapped around the mountain that brought her from whatever job or house she was coming from to get us. But she wouldn't show and all of the red spots we'd see would not turn into her red truck with the beige camper.

Why have I forgotten these times?

I remember so vividly when she didn't forget to come get us. When the red spot we were watching followed the road that circled the mountain and then turned right by the church with the field where we played softball the one summer that we played softball. It followed that road all the way up toward us where it went under the ski resort and then disappeared in the scrub oak trees that hid her from our view and we wondered if we had been mistaken and if it wasn't her but some other red spot that would turn off at the street that was hiding in all of those trees, but the red spot did come out of the trees and was still on the road that would bring her to us and now it was close enough for us to see that it was a small red pickup and it did have a beige camper on it and we were confident enough to step away from the window and scramble to put on our coats and stuff our overnight bags which we had resisted packing and run downstairs and out the basement into the long driveway so that when she pulled up she would know--she just had to know--how happy we were to see her.

Do you think she ever knew?

Firecrackers

Far as I know, no one has ever gotten her own sister pregnant, but when she was sixteen and we all found out she was, I blamed myself. It was the firecrackers. When my sister was four and I was six, the babysitter and I would throw firecrackers at the bedroom wall to scare my sister and make her cry. I don't remember if it was my idea or Tony's, the babysitter, but it was probably mine. Tony was not pretty, girls named Tony are never pretty. They are the opposite of girls named Lisa, which was the name of the pretty girl who lived across the street from us and who also sometimes babysat my sister and me. Lisa was pretty and thin and had green eyes and hair that feathered like Blair's from "The Facts of Life", but we preferred Tony with her badly cut, not curly but poofy dark hair and her big squishy thighs and arms that she packed into knee-length cut-off black jean shorts and faded concert tees. Tony had a big nice doughy face and lived in one those houses that when you stepped inside the first thing you noticed is that it smelled a lot like cheese. Now that I think of it, it was probably the brothers that made it stink like that. Tony had four, all older. We only went to her house once. She always came to ours and we loved her because she would really get down and play with us. She would dance with us in the unfinished basement. She taught us how to modify Barbie's clothes so she was more punk rock, and she knew how the Barbie and Ken and Barbie's ugly best friend—the one who was missing a head—plot line was supposed to go. She liked me better than my sister, but everyone did because my sister was the hard kid but Tony was mostly nice to both of us. At bedtime though, Tony would put my sister in bed and turn the lights off for pitch darkness so I wouldn't be seen when I snuck into my sister's room while Tony sang Culture Club's "Karma Chameleon," which was my signal to throw the Snap Pop firecrackers against the wall. The noise and the gunpowder smell and the flashes would be followed by my sister's wail and then sniffles, while Tony would comfort her and pretend she hadn't seen or heard what was upsetting to my sister. My sister never told on us. I still don't know if it's because at the time she actually believed Tony, or if she just didn't want to get us in trouble. More likely she'd just forgotten it by morning. Even more likely that she'd forgotten it because that was the beginning of the loud year between our parents. My sister was probably still too young to understand that something was ending, and anyway by the time our parents would come home and pay Tony for watching us, and by the time the bickering between them escalated to yelling and to slamming doors, and by the time things, not Snap Pops, were hitting the walls my sister would be fast asleep, exhausted from crying because of the firecrackers.

Keep Your Eyes Open

You sit in the cold room of the mortuary trying not to be bothered by the scene of your friend, the widow, caressing the plasticine skin of a face, also your friend, now alien in its un-quickenened non-responsiveness. But you are watching. You leave comfort to the widow's mother, even now resting her hand on that shuddering back. It occurs to you

to wonder how many times that hand has been placed just on that spot of your friend's back. Hundreds? Could that hand distill information from those quakes that your eyes would never be able to perceive? Which convulsions were for anger, for shared moments that would now not be had, for the jokes no one else would ever find funny or understand. Was it a giving hand, one that provided support, a talisman that offset the blows just sustained and the ones still to come. Does the hand hope to be all of those things? And even if it was all of those things would that be enough? You watch the hand and the way it doesn't move, or rather, the way it does move but how those movements are in perfect sync with the quaking of the back so that in that alternate world of back and hand there is stillness. You see this and you decide that it must be enough. In the inadequate way that things that can never be sufficient must be enough, it will be. That back will eventually stop quaking and the pressure of the hand in it's together stillness with back will have been one factor that made it possible.

Your watching will have been another.