



RITA BERNSTEIN

Readers Write LAUGHTER

I SEE US CLEARLY IN MY MEMORY — ten teenage girls walking down the sidewalk after school in 1955: black-and-white saddle oxfords, plaid skirts with sugarstarched crinolines beneath them, prim white shirts cinched by belts at the waist. We shriek with laughter.

What did we find so funny? Sometimes we would have to stop and clamp our legs together to keep from peeing our pants. One time Mary's bladder gave way, and she crumpled to the ground and rolled about in autumn leaves as we pointed and cackled. Then we formed a tight

ring around her and made our way to the nearest girl's house so Mary could change underwear.

Forty-five years later, I am going to my high-school reunion. I've arranged to stay with my best friend from those times. We have not seen one another in twenty years.

When we meet, it's obvious we have become very different people. I am fatter and often wear Salvation Army bargains, whereas she is sleek and carries Gucci bags. She's into Florida vacations, George W. Bush, and pedigreed English

setters. I voted for Al Gore, own three mutts saved from the streets, and think staying home is the best vacation. She lives in a big house with white walls and rococo furniture. My house is simple adobe with mismatched furnishings and brightly painted walls. This visit is going to be a disaster.

We hug hello, and she gives me the eye. (Later she will confess: "You looked so haggard." I'll tell her that *haggard* is a rude word to use to describe a friend, even if it's true.)

I tour the house and put my bags in

the bedroom. We are polite and dance around each other's differences with carefully chosen words. Then she asks if I'd like to take a drive to see the old sights. Anxious to get out of that stuffy white environment, I grab my purse from the bed, only to find its zipper has somehow woven itself into the bedspread. I must look ridiculous trying to free my purse, because my friend snorts. She reaches for the trapped purse, and our fingers touch. We both pull at the purse, causing the bedspread to jump up and down.

"It wants to stay here," I tell her, and we giggle wildly.

Hysterical, we both fall onto the bed, my purse between us. My friend puts out her hand, and I take it. Our hands are warm.

*Ann Garcia
Las Vegas, New Mexico*

MY PARENTS NEVER LAUGHED ABOUT anything. In elementary school I used to memorize jokes on the playground and recite them at dinner to lighten the mood: "Knock, knock. Who's there? Amos. Amos who? A mosquito just bit me." My brothers and sister laughed. My parents wanted to know where I'd learned the jokes and threatened to call the teacher and complain.

My sister and I shared the same bed, and at night we would talk about things that made us laugh — such as how the boys at our Catholic school would walk like penguins behind the nuns. Eventually our father would yell up the stairs for us to quiet down.

Our father was a marine who believed in discipline and hard work. He thought only fools found anything to laugh about and said that telling jokes was a waste of time. We knew from experience that, if he had to put down his beer can and bang his way up the stairs, we would be sore for days. We put pillows over our heads and stuffed the corners of the pillowcases into our mouths to muffle our laughter. We didn't get caught very often, but when we did, neither of us laughed for weeks afterward.

Our mother said we shouldn't laugh during Lent because Jesus was about to die, and that was no laughing matter. I spent weeks going through the Stations of the

Cross at church and feeling guilty that I still wanted to eat candy after school. My sister and I were Girl Scouts, and Lent coincided with our cookie sale. I always stole a box of mint cookies from our supply and stashed them in the basement, worrying about hell each time I ate one.

As teenagers, my sister and I would whisper and giggle about boys and read forbidden magazines about Hollywood love affairs. If we were too loud, our father would ask us what was so damn funny. Beer can in hand, he would interrogate us about boys and what we had done with them. Had we been alone with a boy? Where had we gone?

My sister and I would deny all knowledge of boys. We'd tell him the magazine belonged to a friend of ours. Even so, our mother would ban us from talking on the telephone and make us come straight home after school. We would have to recite the rosary out loud with her every night until she decided our hearts were right with the Lord.

I don't know why, but somehow I became like my parents. One day I found myself angry when my friends laughed at a joke. I thought to myself, *What jerks. They think everything is funny.*

When my granddaughter tells me a knock-knock joke, I watch her laugh. I watch her watch me for a reaction. I want to laugh and cry at the same time.

*Carole U.
Franklin, Tennessee*

SNAPSHOTS OF ME AS A CHILD SHOW a somber, depressed little boy in stiff, awkward poses. "There's nothing as delightful as a child's laughter," my mother used to say. Then she'd revile me for never laughing.

I wanted to please her, so I studied other people's laughter. Apparently it was involuntary, like coughing. I practiced laughing alone in my room, but if I made these sounds in public, people looked at me oddly, perhaps because I wasn't smiling. My mother wasn't fooled, either, and

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Feel free to submit your work under "Name Withheld" if it allows you to be more honest, but be sure to include your mailing address so we can give you a complimentary six-month subscription if we use your work, as a way of saying thanks. Occasionally we will choose not to publish an author's name, or will use only a first name and last initial. While we don't question the truthfulness of the writing, we must be sensitive to considerations of libel or invasion of privacy. If you've already changed the names of the people involved, please say so.

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UPCOMING TOPICS	DEADLINE	PUBLICATION DATE
Second Chances	December 1	May 2004
Lessons	January 1	June 2004
Stepfamilies	February 1	July 2004
Hard Work	March 1	August 2004
Fitting In	April 1	September 2004
Weddings	May 1	October 2004

denounced me as a phony.

When I was six, my mother sent me to summer camp for two months. It was my first encounter with large numbers of children my own age. The other boys laughed a lot, and I tried to join in at the proper times, and to smile when I made the sounds, but sometimes I forgot.

Then one day a boy named James showed me his book of *Pogo* comic strips. James and I read several pages, and I began to feel unfamiliar sensations in my chest and belly. I was afraid I was going to throw up. I started making involuntary noises. Worried, I tried to stifle them, but I couldn't. I was helpless with laughter.

Name Withheld

IN COLLEGE I VOLUNTEERED TO WORK for a semester at a hospice for the poor in Katmandu, Nepal. The hospice building was a long cinder-block bunker lined with beds: men on the left and women on the right. The only light came from a half dozen small windows with metal gratings instead of glass.

I began each day by scrubbing the concrete floor with a towel and a bucket of water and detergent, the smell of which burned my nostrils. I would shuffle along the corridor on hands and knees while the clanging chorus of a Hindi pop song blared from a radio. My knees ground against the cement. My fingers turned to pale, watery prunes. I felt a little light-headed and wondered whether the detergent fumes were toxic.

If I paused and looked down the hall, I'd see Muni Krishna, the paraplegic, staring back at me, smiling. His teeth glowed, large and square below a thick white mustache. Muni's head was shaved, leaving a gray stubble that peeked out from under a yellow wool hat. Every morning, after I'd cleaned the floor and the bedpans, I walked over to Muni, picked him up, and cradled him in my arms, feeling the bones of his spine and ribs. Like a strange creature with two heads, we waddled down the hall, out of the cool darkness of the ward and into a sun-soaked patch of earth beside the road. There Muni would sit for the rest of the day, watching merchants selling fried vegetables and bread, and children

playing soccer with empty plastic bottles.

I think Muni's laughter started from embarrassment, the awkwardness of being picked up and carried like a small child by a complete stranger not half his age. Since I spoke so little Nepali, and he spoke no English, I couldn't ask why he laughed. But his laughter soon lost its embarrassed quality and flowed easily. It became our greeting to each other. It meant, "Yes, go ahead and pick me up." When his laughter was absent, it meant I was picking him up wrong, or that he had forgotten the cup and spoon he kept by his side.

I have one photograph of Muni and myself: it shows a small old man with furrowed brown skin and a wide grin, huddled in the embrace of a gangly boy-man, both of them smiling. The photo was taken by my roommate Whit, who was teaching English in Nepal. He'd come to visit me on my last day at the hospice, and as I was carrying Muni out the door, Whit said something to Muni in Nepali. Muni grinned, and Whit snapped the picture.

Afterward Whit translated for Muni and me. The old man and I smiled and laughed like friends who had met on the street after years apart. But when Whit told Muni I was leaving, the smile left Muni's face. He looked at me and then looked away.

Once every few years, I dig through my stack of photos from Nepal and look at the picture of Muni and me. I try to remember his laugh.

*Karl Steyaert
St. Paul, Minnesota*

MY SALESMAN FATHER WAS AWAY A lot when I was a child. His territory included virtually all of the Southeastern United States. When he was home, he would grumpily catch up on yardwork.

One Sunday my father was trimming the box hedges in the front yard with a pair of yellow-handled shears. I was riding my bike, which was used, fenderless, and too big for me. Having recently perfected my riding skills, I rode up and down the street, picking up speed and confidence. Hoping my father would admire my newfound skill, I came barreling down the

street toward our driveway.

I remember the moment I lost control of my bike. The front wheel caught the edge of the driveway, and I went soaring over the handlebars. My chin skidded across the asphalt.

When I looked up, I saw my shirtless father standing by the hedge, shears at his side, staring at me. And then he laughed.

Catching himself, he said abruptly, "Get in the house and let your mother have a look at you." But he never came over to help or console me.

I was too stunned to cry. I did have the presence of mind, however, to pick up my bike and wheel it around to the garage, for fear that my father would scold me if I left it in the driveway.

A year or two later we moved from that place, thanks to my mother's constant petitioning. My father's traveling decreased, and his disposition softened. I never asked him why he'd laughed that day, and if I pursued it now, I'm sure he wouldn't remember.

I have many fond memories of childhood. But a few years ago, when a therapist asked me to share a childhood memory, any memory, it was this one that popped into my head: of my father laughing at me when I was down.

*Kathleen C.
Culver City, California*

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