Rocket Girl

Until I got to college, no one knew that I could put my entire fist in my mouth. Small towns and small schools are no place for revealing that kind of talent, but in college there were kids who also came from small places. At parties they'd shout and cheer while I disabused them of their skepticism.

"There's no way a normal human can do that."

"You'd have to unlock your jaw, like a shark or something."

"Your mouth is freakishly big."

"Your fist is weirdly small."

I have a wide face, a "Slavic" face my mother would say; the edges of my mouth extend a half inch beyond either side of my nostrils. "I don't know what side of the

family you got that from," she said. "Maybe you got your maw from your dad's aunt. She had opinions bigger than her brain."

I was funny, in a practical way. In grade twelve my friends and I rolled the English teacher's VW Bug onto its roof in the school parking lot. She came out at 3:30, saw the Beetle on its back, called us "fuckerbums", and demanded immediate repair to the roof. We told her it was part of our group's class presentation on Kafka's short story The Metamorphosis. In woodworking class I made a gun rack for my father, who was an avowed pacifist, and told him that I might join the army after graduation. I bought surplus army clothing and wore it around the house for a week.

In my second year of college I met a woman on a blind date. She said she'd wear a red blouse so I could identify her. I arrived ten minutes late and scanned the bar, spotting two women wearing black. Another woman sat at a table in the corner with a red scarf draped around her neck, but she looked too attractive. The scarfed woman frequently glanced at me where I sat at the bar drinking a beer and when the interval between looks had narrowed to ten seconds she waved me over.

"Are you looking for a girl in red?" she asked, as if I were a small boy who'd lost his mother in a store.

"You said you'd be wearing a red blouse."

"A diversion. I had to see what you looked like before I committed."

During dinner she misused common expressions and words. I thought she was having a mini stroke, or had cheated her way into school.

"I saw Jaws last weekend," she announced. "Talk about nerve raking!"

“Yeah. Not sure I saw that ending coming,” I said. “What a practical joke that’d be, right? Putting an oxygen tank in a shark’s mouth.”

“Yes. Good one. Maybe you can dress up as a shark for Halloween and I’ll be the oxygen tank.”

We both studied mathematics. She planned to become an actuary and I had no career plans so I switched into her classes and declared the same major.

“God, what a platitude of problems I’m having with differential calculus,” she said at lunch on our third-week anniversary.

“OK, can I tell you something?” I asked.

She nodded.

“I think you should take an English class. You’re struggling with words.”

She laughed, ejecting grilled cheese sandwich from her mouth onto my plate.

“I was waiting for you to notice. It’s a joke, dummy. I wanted to see if you’d tolerate my ‘language difficulties’, or think I was just a math nerd who didn’t read.”

“Ah. Good one” We clearly shared a proclivity for foolishness.

“Do you read Mad magazine?”” I asked her.

“Of course. I used to watch Laugh-In when I was a kid, too. And I loved the Carol Burnett Show.”

“Yeah, I’m a fan.”

“Best prank ever is War of The Worlds,” she said.

“Orson Welles?” I asked.

“Yes. I’d love to pull the cotton over peoples’ eyes.”

In our last year of college we got together with some friends of hers who studied art and we constructed statues of Lenin, Mussolini, and Genghis Khan, and placed them near the building harbouring the history and political science departments. It took three weeks for students to figure out who the statues represented and then another week for a petition to circulate demanding the figures be removed.

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We married, got jobs as actuaries at competing insurance companies. I updated risk tables for specific demographic groups, like the 80-plus-years men who tried to delay their imminent deaths with newly acquired and desperate habits, like swimming and lawn bowling. We bought a house, started acquiring possessions, and calmed the pace of our practical jokes, practically eliminating them from our social and professional circles that overlapped in a Venn-diagram. We remained frivolous and fun with one another, though. She bought a lawn mower for my birthday (our New Mexico yard has no grass) and I got her cross-country skis for her thirtieth birthday, giving them to her in January in a small ceremony beside our bubbling backyard pool. We shopped together for a fifth anniversary gift and purchased matching Birkenstocks that we wore to a Summer of Love themed party.

We excelled at work and made decent money, but we were bored at being adults.

“We need to do something big,” my wife said.

“Quit and move out east?” I asked.

“No, let’s have a kid.” She smiled, the way she did when she mangled language.

“Ha ha. Not funny. And not clever.” Actuarial work was destroying her funny bone.

“No, really. We’d make great parents and we might as well do it before the chance passes. You know the math as well as I do.”

A friend of ours got a dog and it cramped his style. I feared that a kid would do the same to us.

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Our daughter Annie was born in a heat wave in March. The scalding river rock on the front yard and sizzling red gravel on the driveway shook the air above our cars and around the front door; the house looked like it sat on a Martian plain. I imagined us living on the red planet, our Martian garage filled with mowers and skis and golf clubs, as useless to us there as they were here on Earth. And then I had an idea for what I figured might be the greatest prank ever. I explained it to my wife.

“This is awesome. You are the best husband ever. Annie will love it.”

I made solo trips to the hardware store to buy plywood, sheet metal, metal duct tape, a blow torch and small propane tank, and six rolls of aluminium foil. My wife did the sewing (we had a sewing machine in the garage from Christmas a few years ago), learning from books she got out of the library.

After a week the stage was ready. We put the uniform and wool cap on Annie and drove to the mountains an hour away. I’d marked the route into the crash site with small strips of red plastic tied to tree branches. My wife carried Annie in a basket and couldn’t

stop talking about how young and happy she felt. “This might be better than Orson,” she said.

“Let’s see how it plays out. We won’t know for years,” I cautioned her. I took photos of us walking through the woods, careful to keep the red plastic ties out of the shot, until we got to the crash site.

On the top of a small rise, in a clearing not much bigger than our backyard pool, I’d assembled a twenty foot long model of a crushed rocket ship. The nose of the ship crumpled into the forest floor. I scarred the underbelly of the ship with a low flame from the blow torch. I bent the four fins attached to the circumference of the ship and tore the top corner away from each one to show the desperate strain of the ship’s entry into Earth’s atmosphere. At the rear of the rocket I painted a circular insignia that looked a lot like the Nike swoosh and my wife sewed the same insignia onto a patch on Annie’s cap.

“Put her on the ground and I’ll take photos,” I said.

Our daughter slept through the script: alien offspring stunned by a forced landing on a strange planet, her alien parents perishing in the crash. I took shots of my wife walking towards the ship, my wife looking into the wreckage and finding a blanket under the tail section, my wife unwrapping the blanket to reveal what looked like a human baby, me pointing a finger at the wool cap and then at the rocket ship, us burying the rocket under pine boughs.

When we got home we printed the photos and placed them in a hope chest, along with the uniform and the wool cap. We waited thirteen years for the prank to unravel.

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Annie was an easy child. Until she turned ten and demanded a little democracy in the family (she insisted that we vote on assigning chores) our biggest issue with her was finding outfits to coordinate with her orange-red hair. My wife thought the colour green made Annie look like a leprechaun. At six years of age Annie asked us why her hair didn't match ours and we gave her a lecture about recessive genes and how one of us carried it and we had a one-in-four chance of our kid getting red hair.

"So if you had four kids, one of them would get it?" Annie asked. "But I'm an only child. That doesn't make sense."

I assured her that it would when she was older and knew more math.

"I want to wear pants like Randi does," Annie demanded. "And a red sweatshirt."

Annie and Randi. They'd been friends since grade one. Annie and Randi really bonded, polymer strength bonding, as if they'd gone through some traumatic event only they understood, a trauma requiring 24/7 commiseration, weekly sleepovers at Randi's, and trips with Randi's family to their cottage. Randi's dad was a psychiatrist and her mother volunteered at an outreach facility for mental health, predisposing them to magnifying pre-teen angst into some sort of DSM malady.

"Randi's dad says that human fear is not from this planet," Annie told us at dinner a few weeks ago. Annie had stopped eating meat, arguing that killing and eating animals was exactly the same as if aliens invaded earth and consumed humans. "Aliens will be much smarter than us, like we are to cows, but we wouldn't want aliens eating us, right?'"

“Aren’t plants alive?” I asked. “And dumber than us?” I picked up a spear of broccoli and made it dance around my plate begging for mercy, a small green man with one thick leg and a broccoli brain.

“There are people who think you can survive just on air. And dirt,” she said.

“Well you wouldn’t want to be invited to their dinner party,” I said, chomping the head off the broccoli.

“Broccolis are from the earth,” Annie said. “Randi only eats yellow vegetables. They’re better for her advanced digestive system.”

When Randi’s family came by the following weekend to pick up Annie for a cottage trip, I decided talk up Nick, her dad. Over the years we’d said hello when we dropped off or picked up kids, talked about weather reports and school events. Randi always came to the door with her father and pushed past me like a dog eager to get out of the rain.

“Good morning Nick,” I said. “Nice day for a drive to the cottage.”

I waved at his car, a solid Volvo.

“Nothing to fear when you drive that,” I said. “Safest car on the road made by aliens.”

“What?” Nick looked over my shoulder into the house, waiting for the kids to return."

“Swedes. Foreigners, right. Their culture is so different than ours it’s like they’re aliens.”

Annie and Randi squeezed between me and the doorframe and shared the weight of Annie’s oversized bag, hopping together in a three-legged race to the car.

“Do you think aliens are real Nick?”

“Swedes are real.”

“I guess that answers it then.”

Nick smiled and said they’d be back in three days and I could call the cottage if I needed anything.

“No I should be good. I’m not worried. Nothing to fear with you guys looking after her.”

Annie didn’t look back as the Volvo drove away, not even when my wife ran out to wave at the departing family.

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“I’m going to live with Randi’s family.”

Annie had been home from the weekend cottage trip for all of fifteen minutes when she announced this.

My wife replied first.

“Ha ha. OK, you can wear whatever you want and do one less chore. I’m guessing this is brinksmanship.”

My turn for parental wisdom.

“Good one. I should have used that joke on my parents too. Especially when they made me eat vegetables.”

Annie unzipped her duffel and dumped its contents onto the kitchen floor.

“I want to live with a family that understands me.”

Annie kicked a wool cap, smaller than a tea cozy, at her mother's feet, and fanned a dozen photos on the tile floor, like she was a blackjack dealer.

"What? How did you get those?" My wife snatched the hat from the floor and held it to her face. The insignia that she'd sewn onto it thirteen years ago was still perfect, even the small burn mark I'd applied with a lighter hadn't changed. And the photos looked fresh; we'd used a top-notch shop to print them.

"I know that I'm from another planet. You stole me. Randi's dad thinks I should live with them. He says I can't trust you."

I loved being a father. When she was three years old I'd balance Annie on my right hand and hold her in the air, like a waiter carrying a silver tray, and fly her through the living room. In the playground Annie flew down the biggest slide and into my arms. She trusted me. And I loved the pranks—the tooth fairy, Santa Clause, the Easter Bunny—that opened mine and my wife's heart.

"Nick is a bit kooky, you know," I said. People who studied psychology were messed up.

"He's probably a fan of Orson Welles," my wife added.

"I know the War of the Worlds story, " Annie said. "Randi's dad says that Orson Welles was really an alien who tried to warn humans by writing that story."

My wife looked at me and silently mouthed WTF.

"Honey," she said to Annie. "Randi's dad is just fooling around. He's a joker, like your dad and me." My wife confessed, explaining that we were caught up in the moment of being young parents who still wanted to have fun. We'd forgotten about the rocket ship and never meant to actually go through with the prank.

We grounded Annie for two weeks. She sulked and kept mostly to her room. I researched cults and how to deprogram their victims and my wife destroyed the photos and costume. On the tenth day of Annie's captivity I decided to visit Nick and have a word. I parked behind his Volvo, patting its metal doors as I passed. The front porch had a mat with the NASA emblem. Nick came to the door before I'd even rung the bell or knocked.

"Hey Nick. Just a friendly visit to clear up a few things with Annie."

Nick pushed between me and the door frame, closing it behind him and standing off to my left.

"Annie's a great kid," he said. "She deserves to know her origin."

I smiled and dried my palms along my pants.

"It was joke, you know. My wife and I are pretty funny people."

"Nothing funny about human ignorance," Nick said. "Annie would be better with us. We're the same."

Was this guy putting me on? Did Annie put him up to this?

"I know about the crash," he said. "The photos. The insignia is the one we used a thousand years ago when we arrived."

"That's good Nick. OK, you guys win, I admit your prank is better than ours."

Nick placed his hand on my shoulder.

"You can finally admit the truth," he said.

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My wife got me at the end of our driveway just as I pulled in with the car.

“Nick called. He said that you were violent?”

“Nick grabbed me.”

“How? Did he threaten you?”

Annie was looking down at us from her bedroom window. She’d used a marker to create the Nike-swoosh on the glass. Maybe she was sending a signal to the mother-ship.

“I threw my fist into his mouth. I might have knocked out a few teeth.”

My wife teared up a little.

“It’s not fun anymore, is it?,” she said.

I didn’t know what to tell her.

“It’s a platitude of problems. We’ll get through it.” I waited for a smile but my wife frowned and walked into the house.

Annie held up her wool cap against her window and pointed to the sky. I smiled and waved. She put the cap on and waved back. The kid was definitely ours.