

## The Anatomy of Laughter

*Please note this extract excludes a forward, in which it is introduced that the speaker is narrating these events to their child; their Little One.*

Outside, the riot is brewing.

Doesn't matter we're separated by two sets of doors and a craft table. We're in the heart of the building but they're not far off. Gathering by the entry. Brewing in the corridor. All giggles, screams, and jitters.

Children. Gross.

And I know that's gotta hit you on some level, there's got to be an extent to which you take that personally, but not all the sanitiser in Dettol's vast oceans could keep that many hands clean. You're just one person, one kid. This is a mob. An army. A riot brewing. I can track where your fingers have been. I can try. But right now, outside this change room, through to the playroom, and past the glass double doors to the hospital corridor, I can't see where all those fingers have been, and the longer I'm stuck in this quasi-job interview, the larger the knee-high crowd swells, each new addition adding another ten grubby fingers to the mix and another two nostrils in which to stick them.

'So you always wanted to work with kids?' Locks asks.

'Yep.'

Locks – not his real name, but so-called for the fringe covering one of his eyes – will be my guide on this two-day trial. He has an easy smile and gets dressed with practiced ease, a salaryman off to pitch a product he knows is good. Cowboy boots. Sheriff badge. Ten-gallon hat. Worn like a

uniform, not a costume. And crowned on top, his Alien hat, a blue circlet with the charity's logo in the centre. It's looped over his ten-gallon hat like a ring over a finger. Married to the job, indeed.

'Always wanted to,' I say, to emphasise just how passionate I am. I don't think he's noticed the kid's voices, bubbling up from the crack beneath the locker room door with increased virulence as more children gather impatiently out in the corridor, decibels increasing in intensity like the slow turn of a thumbscrew. It's getting harder to keep my face from screwing up just the same. Is my eyebrow twitching?

Locks doesn't notice, hands me my outfit for the day. Newbies don't get costumes. Just a bright blue nylon shirt, the word "volunteer" printed on the back in all caps. He takes out the centrepiece – another Alien hat, same as his. Holds out like a crown. The weird ceremony of the moment making me slip as I take it, and he doesn't flinch, but I see him notice. I put it on. I don't start levitating. It's a hat.

'They told you the backstory?' he asks.

'Yep.'

'You know it?'

'Got it.'

It's hardly hire-me levels of enthusiasm, but the real answer is *yes, I know the backstory, they've been emailing me twice a day since I passed the interview, half of which have been requests for me to donate and I'm starting to wonder if employees don't actually get paid, they just pass the same day's wage back and forth between themselves and the company.*

*Would make for a hell of a tax claim.*

'We'll keep things simple,' Locks says, tying up his boots. 'Short stay, then on to the rest of level two. Nothing too intense. Any triggers?'

And I picture your face and think of the swarm waiting outside.

'No.'

I've come this far. I just need to get through today, and the day after that. Finish the trial.

It'll be easier then.

Promise.

He nods, a small gesture writ large by the brim of his hat. 'You're not technically an Alien yet. I'll call you Lieutenant. It's your first day on Earth. If things get tricky, just say you're having trouble adjusting to gravity and call a time out. If it's bad, I'll bring you back here, to the Launch Pad.'

This playroom, home base back here, is called the Launch Pad. Got it.

So far, Locks has been cool and calm, has the demeanour of someone you'd expect could slide seamlessly into a conversation about shot types in a Kurosawa film. But something in him changes, normalises, and I don't see that projection anymore. He's dropped the game. His double denim doesn't look like a uniform, it looks like a costume. For the first time, I notice strands of grey in his otherwise black fringe.

'I know it's... strange,' he says, 'but some of the kids out there... they really believe it. It means something. You need to respect that.'

And that cynical yak-yaking in my head wants me to talk about cease and desist letters from Disney, but I don't. I let that pass. I have the sensation of someone being handed a very important set of keys. And it makes me wonder how a shallow story can carry that weight.

'Of course,' I say. And I can do this. I can get through today.

It's enough for Locks. He tilts his hat to me and kicks one of his heels against the ground.

'Make believe and make them believe,' he says. 'There's no difference.'

And he's not wearing spurs but damn if I can't hear them clink against the floor all the same.

He gestures for me to open the door, and it's only now I realise the riot has quietened, like they've dispersed. I turn the handle. Crack the door open. Just as the front doors to the playroom slide apart and the first wave enters. They run like half-height Black Friday shoppers, screaming across the room to claim their favourite toy, game station, chair at the craft table. There's something operatic about it, parents behind the mass, arms out, yelling at their kids to stop yelling, running after them to stop them running—

I slam the door shut.

'I don't like kids.'

Locks steps back, stops. Mouth opens, mouth closes.

'What?'

'I don't like kids.'

And the cowboy play is dropped again, he's just a man in a costume wondering how the hell I made it this far through recruitment. I stand there, hand on the handle, not so much out of any desire to try again, but a need to stop Locks from opening it himself. My head's buzzing. At what I've just said. At whether I actually mean that. And that you, my Little One, have heard it, that this is how it unravels. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

I'm sorry.

\*

*End of extract*