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A Funny Story

UnCLE Lindsay leaned forward in his big brown armchair. “That reminds me of a funny story,” he chuckled.

The two children, sprawled on velveteen cushions, looked up at him, their faces pale in the bright afternoon sunlight.

“What’s a funny story?” asked Deirdre.

“Hey now!” exclaimed Uncle Lindsay, rearing back in surprise. “Don’t tell me you kids have never heard of funny stories!”

“Sure we have,” said Orson.

“We just want to hear you define it,” explained Deirdre.

“It’s probably more interesting than the story itself,” added Orson.

“I don’t know about that,” said Uncle Lindsay. “Well, a funny story is one that makes people laugh.”

“I’ve seen people laugh,” said Orson. “They look hideous.”

“I’ll say,” agreed Deirdre. “They open their mouths, and show their teeth, and make a horrible braying sound.”

“Like a jackass,” added Orson.

“Exactly,” said Deirdre.

“I’ve never actually seen a jackass,” Orson admitted, “but I’ve seen pictures of them in videos and cartoons.”

“Hideous,” Deirdre said with a shudder.

“Why would anyone do that?” asked Orson, staring up at Uncle Lindsay with his cold hazel eyes.

Uncle Lindsay shifted in his armchair. “It makes them feel good,” he explained, with a nervous chuckle.

“How does looking hideous make you feel good?” asked Deirdre.

“Well, many funny stories are about someone doing something stupid,” said Uncle Lindsay. “The listener feels superior to the stupid person, and that makes him feel good.”

“I don’t get it,” said Orson.

“Well, let me give you an example,” said Uncle Lindsay. “It seems there was a blackout at the revival meeting.”

“Is this the story you were going to tell us?” asked Deirdre.

“No, it’s just an example. It seems there was a blackout at the revival meeting. Hundreds

were stuck for two hours on the escalator.”

Orson shrugged. “That sounds plausible,” he said. “Religious zealots aren’t very bright, and probably wouldn’t realize that they could just walk up or down the escalator, without waiting for the electricity.”

“I could see that,” added Deirdre.

“Exactly,” Uncle Lindsay chuckled. “So, the listener feels superior to them, and expresses his pleasure in laughter.”

“I feel superior to the zealots,” said Deirdre, “but also to people who look like a jackass.”

“I feel superior to you, Uncle Lindsay,” said Orson.

“I don’t like funny stories,” said Deirdre, wrinkling her nose.

“Me neither,” said Orson, shaking his head.

“Aren’t there other kinds of stories?” asked Deirdre.

“Why, certainly,” said Uncle Lindsay. “Stories can evoke many emotions. There are sad stories, for example, that make people cry.”

“People look stupid when they cry,” said Deirdre. “All the tears and snot.”

“Do people really enjoy that?” Orson asked.

“Well, sometimes,” Uncle Lindsay replied.

“I feel superior to them,” said Orson.

“I don’t think I’d like those stories, either,” said Deirdre.

“And there are suspense stories,” said Uncle Lindsay.

“What’s that?” asked Deirdre.

“Well, those are stories that withhold information, so the listener feels anxious and frustrated,” Uncle Lindsay explained.

“Why would anyone want that?” asked Orson.

“They find it exciting,” said Uncle Lindsay.

“And why does withholding information make them anxious and frustrated?” asked Deirdre.

“They want to know what happens next,” explained Uncle Lindsay.

“Couldn’t they just ask?” asked Orson.

“I suppose so,” said Uncle Lindsay. “But then they couldn’t enjoy the suspense.”

“And why do they care, when the story isn’t true?” asked Deirdre.

“They pretend to,” said Uncle Lindsay, “so they can feel anxious and frustrated.”

“That’s sick,” pronounced Orson.

“What else you got?” asked Deirdre.

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“Well, there are also erotic stories,” said Uncle Lindsay.

“What’s that?” asked Deirdre.

“Those are stories that describe sexual activity, and make the listeners want to masturbate,” said Uncle Lindsay.

“What’s that?” asked Orson.

“Well, that’s when people play with their genitals,” Uncle Lindsay explained, somewhat nervously.

“Oh, that!” exclaimed Orson. “I do it all the time. I just call it by a less clinical name.”

“We don’t need to know that,” said Uncle Lindsay.

“People look stupid when they play with their junk,” said Deirdre.

“Not me,” objected Orson. “I look like a Greek god.”

“That’s quite enough,” said Uncle Lindsay.

“Let’s hear one of those,” suggested Orson.

“No,” Uncle Lindsay said firmly. “Would you like to hear the funny story?”

“Why not,” shrugged Deirdre.

“All right,” said Uncle Lindsay. He leaned forward in his chair. “It seems there was a blackout at the political convention. Hundreds

were stuck for two hours on the escalator.”

“That’s the same story as before,” objected Deirdre.

“No, that was about a revival meeting,” said Uncle Lindsay. “This is a political convention.”

“Same thing, in this country,” said Deirdre, with another shrug.

“It’s still plausible,” mused Orson. “I could see that.”

“It doesn’t make me laugh, though,” said Deirdre.

“I have no emotional response to it at all,” said Orson.

“What made you think of it to begin with?” asked Deirdre.

“I don’t remember,” admitted Uncle Lindsay.

“Just as well,” remarked Orson.