

Playing Pretend

by Joey Delgado

"Can I get apple juice and milk?"

"Yes."

"And a chocolate shake?"

"Will you finish all that and your food?"

"Probably not."

"Still yes. Get whatever you want."

The waitress took the order. Along with the three beverages, Natalie ordered scrambled eggs with cheese, bacon, and oatmeal with brown sugar and cream. A lot of food for a seven year old. The girl amused our waitress. "She is so cute. Yours?"

"My sister's."

"He's my uncle not my daddy."

"Well, you are so cute. I'll be right back with all those drinks."

The waitress hurried off. Natalie folded and unfolded her napkin.

"The waitress is nice, huh?"

"I guess."

She worked the napkin until the creases were clearly defined, using her thumbnail to strengthen the folds.

"What if you found out the waitress was sick? Really sick. Would you feel bad for her?"

"I don't know her. Why would I feel bad for her?"

"Because you know what it feels like to be sick. You've been sick before, right?"

"Yes." She ripped the napkin along the creases.

"Did you like how that felt?"

"What? No."

"But you liked having your mom worry about you and bring you things to make you feel better, right?"

"Yes. She makes pretty good chicken noodle soup."

"Yes, she does. But what about other people? What did other people say when they found out your were sick? Your friends, your mom's friends, your teacher? What did they say to you?"

Natalie pantomimed a pouty face.

"They made this face and they said, 'Poor baby,' 'poor little thing.'"

"I want you to do something. We're gonna play a game. When the waitress brings your shake, I want you to pretend you have a tummy ache and say you don't feel well."

"Why?"

"Just do it. It's a game. If you do it, I'll buy you whatever you want from Target."

"Whatever I want?"

"I swear."

She suddenly became anxious for the waitress to return, looking in the direction of the kitchen, the hallway leading to the bathroom.

"Here she comes."

The waitress set the drinks on the table; milk, apple juice, chocolate shake.

"Here you go, cutie. And here's your coffee, sir."

"Thanks."

"My stomach really hurts." She doubled over in the booth. "It really hurts."

"Oh no, you poor thing. Do you need the bathroom?"

Natalie popped up smiling. "No, I'm fine."

"Sorry about that." I was doing a poor job of trying not to look amused.

"Geez, you scared me. You're a little actress. She's a little actress."

The waitress left, smiling but confused.

"Well?"

"Well what?"

"She felt bad for you. You, a stranger."

"Isn't she supposed to? I'm a kid."

"Fair point." I looked around the restaurant. There was a family sitting at a table near the center of the dining room. A toddler was in a high chair next to his mother who was helping him with his food.

“Okay, what if that baby fell out of the high chair and started crying. Would you feel bad for the baby?”

Natalie, who was pouring milk into the chocolate shake, looked over at the baby. She snorted. “Fell how? Like this?” She pinwheeled her arms and made the scared faces of a baby falling in slow motion, flopping in slow motion once the fall was complete. She started laughing.

I laughed, too.

“Yeah, like that. Would you feel bad?”

“I don't know. Probably, but people falling makes me laugh.”

I smiled. “Me too. That's a bad example.” I tore a couple of packets of artificial sweetener and poured them in my coffee. “Hand me one of those creamers, kiddo.”

“These?”

“Yes.” She took a mini-cup of creamer out of the ceramic bowl and rolled it my direction. The lip of the creamer cup caused it to swerve and roll back toward her side of the table.

“Sorry.” She picked it up and handed it to me.

“What if I was sick? Really sick. Would you feel bad for me?”

“Yes. We wouldn't be able to have Uncle David days o' fun anymore.”

“That's true. Okay, what about if Aunt Julia got sick? Really sick. Would you feel bad?”

“Well...”

“It's okay.”

“Why are you asking me all these questions? Is someone sick?”

“Are you worried about that?”

“Not really.”

“Your mom wanted me to talk to you.”

“Why?”

“Did your mom's friend come over crying the other day?”

“Yes. Her son has looky mia.”

“Leukemia.”

“Yes, that. He's dying.”

"And you saw a picture on her phone when she showed it to your mom."

Natalie smiled. "I couldn't help it. He was baldheaded. He looked like Casper. I couldn't help but laugh." She chuckled

I chuckled with her. Her mom also told me the story about when their dog, Lollipop, died last month. The dog was old, my sister had it for almost sixteen years, and it died right on the living room floor when the family was watching television. Natalie wouldn't stop laughing when the dying dog let out a fart. When her mom told her to stop laughing she said, "Why? It's a stupid dog."

"But it made your mom mad."

"Oh yeah, she got so mad."

"Do you know why?"

"She said it's tragic what's happening to that boy."

"Do you think it's tragic?"

"Ugggghhhh. No, I don't know the little boy."

"Can I tell you a secret?"

"Okay."

"I don't think it's tragic either."

"Duh, you don't know the boy, either."

"I know the boy. Me and your mom have been to parties at his mom's house. I've met the boy a few times."

"And you don't feel bad that he's dying?"

"Not really."

"Hm." She looked relieved. Sometime during our conversation, the waitress brought the food and hurried away. Something told me she found my niece less cute than before. Natalie stirred brown sugar into her oatmeal.

"But you know what I do?"

"What?"

"I pretend. I pretend to feel bad. I say things like, 'I am so sorry,' or 'Please let me know if there is anything I can do.'"

"You do?"

"Sure! When your mom's dog Lollipop died, she called me crying. I said, 'Oh my God, sis, I am so sorry,' but really I didn't care. I hated that dog. He did nothing but jump all over me and shed."

"Why do you pretend?"

"Because people will treat you better. It makes getting things you want from people a lot easier."

She nodded and ate a spoonful of oatmeal.

"Let's make a deal."

"What?"

"On Uncle David days, if you tell me a time during the week when you pretended, I'll buy you something from Target."

"Like what?"

"Like, say, if someone at school looks sad, or falls down, or whatever, you pretend to be interested and concerned."

She considered the proposition.

"And I can get anything from Target."

"Anything."

"Deal."

We ate in silence for a few minutes. Natalie pushed scrambled eggs around her plate.

"Uncle David?"

"Hm."

"Would you feel bad if I got really, really sick?"

"And looked all Casper?"

We laughed. "Yeah, that sick. Would you feel bad?"

"Well, you and I are a lot alike. What do *you* think?"

