

# Lalla, Chuckachucka

*by* Matt Briggs

My mother wouldn't get out of bed except to take a bath, or go out to sit under the cedar in our back yard to take in the sun.

I owned a pair of blue jeans that fit really well. Our family has odd shaped bodies so that store-bought clothes, as a rule, never fit. We are too poor of a people and too disorganized of a clan to modify these clothes to fit our bodies. We've become accustomed to wearing ill-fitting clothes. Jeans often constrict our thighs and hang loose at the waist. Pants of all kinds tend to become inexplicably longer at the bottom until they drape over the ends of our toes.

My favorite jeans accidentally fit through some manufacturing mishaps. But the button came off. The button worried loose in the clothes dryer, and jangled among the cache of dimes, video game tokens, mollusk shells, and the single marble that managed to always find itself in the laundry. My mother made an attempt to sew the button. A week later the string unraveled and the button fell while I played wall ball. I collected the button and hoped my zipper would hold until the end of the day.

My mother was fastidiously clean. She always wore freshly laundered pajamas. She brushed her long hair in the room where she slept and, when awake, read thick novels set in the remote past. Reading made her drowsy, and she would return to sleep. So, mostly she slept. But this meant when she did wake, it might be anytime of the day. In the middle of the night I could hear her wandering the house. I thought she was checking to make sure the window were locked, but in the morning the windows might be open and the heat might be off, and the kitchen filled with the neighborhood cats. They were buddies of our cat, an affable rag doll who was huge and made up for the fact that he couldn't win a fight by becoming friendly with the cats. They ate the cat food from the tin dish on the torn linoleum in the kitchen and lazily jumped to the window sill when I opened my cereal box. They made their way from the porch banister into the

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thickets of wild bushes growing in the margin of our yard. My mother slept in the room where she slept. My father slept in the bed he used to sleep in with my mother. I hurried through the house to close the windows and get the fire started in the living room. We had a fireplace for our heat in those days. The aluminum tap was chilly as I drew water for my tea. While I waited for the kettle to boil, I dressed in my poorly fitting clothes.

My mother was sick, my father told me. He said she had a malingering illness. It wasn't contagious he said, at least not in the way that a cold or the flu is contagious. I knew what he meant. She never appeared anxious or even unduly sad, but a kind of hopelessness drifted through our house and we all felt that existence or, nonexistence for that matter, did not matter.

Because most people are so concerned with significance in their lives they are under the illusion they are somehow different than everyone else. For them difference is meaning. I realized this in listening to the manic pressure in my classmates' voices as they told stories of going to the store, picking out a kitten at the animal shelter, watching a movie, collecting a dead sister from the morgue, or playing wall ball. They clung to the impact of these events like shipwrecked sailors who had never learned to swim and the sea was full of squid, sharks, and more dangerous fish.

My family struggled to keep the tin cans and advertising circulars from filling the garbage can and falling on the floor. We struggled to keep the clutter from accumulating on the coffee table, the bookshelves, and the table of family photographs and knick-knacks. I didn't understand why my parents slept in separate beds. But I gathered from what my father said, my mother never slept and she was never awake and my father needed to sleep when he slept and wake when he woke to go to his job. My mother on the other hand occupied a limbo between being awake and being asleep, between an anxious dream about not falling asleep, and the luxurious lethargy of lying in bed with nothing to do except rub her feet between the freshly laundered linen.

My mother had worked in a bank when she had a job. In those days I had yet to start school. My father worked nights then as a bus driver, and he took me to see her sometimes. There were rainbow-flavored lollipops in the lobby of the bank in an immense clay bowl. My mother had her own desk in the lobby and wore a gray skirt and fish net stockings. After she finished talking to an elderly lady crossed her legs while she met with my father and me. The netting spread across her legs like a monotone chessboard. I sat in the chair where an elderly lady had sat. My feet didn't even reach over the seat edge; I was short in those days. I sucked on the lollipop, circles of color, while my father talked to my mother. She didn't smile when she was at work, but looked like she was always trying to remember where something was lost. This struck me an appropriate demeanor for someone who worked with money. I went to school and then one day my mother couldn't get up to work because she hadn't slept. We became acclimated to her change. Autumn arrived and in the milky light and cool air, the heat and brightness of summer seemed improbable. My mother nether slept nor woke nor left the house.

We had trips to the doctor for some time and they said kept saying she was okay. They gave her pills and the pills sometime made her worse. One set of pills left her dirty, and haggard and only able to sit in her chair. It was during this time she found herself in the guest bedroom. My mother's sister sometimes came. She was much younger, a college student. She wore sweaters and blue jeans and always arrived with a backpack filled with solitary activities. My aunt nodded her head. "I need to help," she said. "She would do the same for me."

It didn't occur to me at that the time that my mother was an adult that could be left alone. In the night while we slept, she got up to strange things, and it was a notion to my father, my aunt, and me that bizarre actions would be possible if we left my mother completely alone. As it was, at night the furniture might find itself in a different position. One night she woke and arranged all of the books by size, the largest the bottom right of the bookcase and the

smallest at the top left of the bookshelf. "I couldn't sleep and I found ordering the books distracting," she said.

My aunt's visits didn't happen often.

Away from the house in the middle of the day, a Saturday, in the cool fall air with the leaves beginning to fall, my father and I didn't know what to do with ourselves. In the past, weekends had been a function of chores. We would have to go to the hardware store, or the garage. But now we went to a park with a farm and a lake and sat under the fir boughs until the feeling of our house drifted away and we killed time not wanting to get back but finally dragging ourselves back.

When we returned, my aunt was pale and now looked like my mother. Although whatever it was that my mother had was not contagious, it seemed that it influenced people in the way that the moon influenced the ocean or a light with a reddish film made everything look red. My aunt said she was glad to help out sometimes and she got in her car and drove away and didn't come back for several weeks. Until she came back, my father and I could only do what we always did.

The next time she came back, we went fishing in a lake in a peat bog in the hills. I had never been fishing before. My father brought two fishing poles. We drove right there and then hiked along the dirt trail. The ground was red from iron deposits in the hills. The trees had been planted and grew in great number of silvery columns, nearly uniformly distant from each other and the same size. Massive power cables hung over the trail dipping down from the arms of one metal frame tower to the next. The wind hummed in the wires. The dust smelled like iron, a little like blood, and finally we sat ourselves on some snags at the edge of the boggy lake. Other fisherman were there as well working their own portion of the lake with fly reels. But it was nearly silent. "Why is it so quiet?" I asked my father after we had our gear set up and he whispered instruction to me in how to cast the reel. I had a tiny mosquito shaped tuft and hook at the end of my line.

My voice sounded across the lake and came back as an echo, a warped inverted sound that only vaguely resembled the syllables I'd made. My immediate desire was to make the noise again, but I could see from my father's expression he did not want me to disturb the near silence of the lake.

He didn't explain, and left me to wonder why hardly anyone made a noise. There were noises at the lake while fishing. There was the sound of wind as it suddenly jumped and blustered across the lake leaving choppy waves. There was the soft *slap slap slap* of the black waves on the silver logs. Occasionally other fishers spoke. The sound of their voices came apart on the surface of the lake. I couldn't tell if I heard echoes or their actual voices. The sounds came from the ground or the air above me. I heard words among the choppy, sometimes human noises. Words such as *the, aha, mop, ha ha ha*. Occasionally I heard a low whisper, *it's all right*.

"Did you say that?"

"Quiet," my father, said

*It's all right.*

"Did you say that?"

My father caught a fish then. It seemed his fishing pole would come apart. A flash of green and silver appeared in the water in front of us and then there was nothing except the darkness of the boggy lake. At last he pulled from the lake a fish that was more smell than meat. Fresh the fish smell was like rainwater rather than the odor of an old tuna can. My father held the fish like a club and then smashed the head against a log. He placed it into a plastic grocery bag and hung it in the cool water. I examined it. Its eyes were tiny bullseyes of color: gray, brown, rust. I wanted my own fish.

*It's all right.*

"Did you say that?"

Keep quiet," my father said.

Voices came across the lake and out of the trees. *Mop, lalla, chuckachucka*. The people fishing at other spots on the lake were involved in obscure activities. They squatted or sat with their rod listing to one side. They didn't appear to be fishing at all.

I cast and reeled the fly back in at a slow pace following the gestures my father had demonstrated. He caught another one. I kept waiting and thinking it would be impossible to catch anything in a place where I could not hear, could not understand what I was seeing or hearing or smelling.

At last we had to get back to relieve my aunt. I hadn't caught anything, but I wasn't disappointed. I had been to the lake. My father had fish. We arrived at the house with our fish. My aunt had her bag ready. She said she would call and got into her car and drove away. We looked through the house but could not hear or see my mother. There was evidence of her industry. In her room, a book sat face down on the chair. A cup of tea left on the floor of the hallway was warm enough to leave a rising wisp of steam. The clothes dryer rattled with its cache of nickels, abalone, and buttons. We found her out back in clean pajamas. She drank a cup of tea and sat under the cedar tree in the back. She looked up at us.

I held the fish for her to look at. She sighed.

My father cleaned the fish. He cut their stomachs from the bottom of their heads to the tip of their tails and used his thumbnail to remove the loose coils of intestines, the purple and yellow sacks of organs until there was just the filleted fish meat, head, and skeleton. He cut the heads off, and in doing this, their eyes came off. He placed the four discs on the windowsill next to the petrified avocado pit and Chia Pet clay shell. The eyes glittered like globs of jam.

When the dryer stopped, I removed the clothes, placed them in an empty cardboard box, and took the box to my room. My jeans had lost their button again. I couldn't find it in the lint trap among the shells and coins.

While we ate the fish for dinner, I tried to tell my mother about the lake in the peat bog. I could hear the voices of the other people fishing in the lake, I said. Even if they whispered I could hear their voices. But all I could make were noises. Someone said *lalla, chuckachucka*.

"They didn't," my father said. He said this like he knew what *lalla, chuckachucka* meant and it didn't mean something good.

"No?" I asked, "What did they say?"

"It's all right," my mother said.

"Did you say that?" I asked

My mother said, "I have never said *lalla, chuckachucka* until this very moment."

My mother collected our plates and rinsed them off. "Buttons," she said. The fish eyes had dried out on the windowsill and now were like wooden discs with bullseyes on them. She took them and left for her room. I washed the dishes, dried them and put them into their places. After she returned with my jeans she said, "I'm tired." She kissed us goodnight before she went to sleep.

