

Senseless

By Ivy Hughes

“And where do you think it went little man?” The street performer who was dressed like a mime or prisoner depending on which part of the world the Covent Garden crowd was familiar with, extended a gloved hand to an 11-year-old. The kid glared at him, but when the striped nuisance persisted, the boy turned his head. Embarrassed, the crowd quickly dispersed, women searching their handbags for phantom lists, men pulling up their pants and looking to the sky to avoid meeting the performer’s accusatory gaze as they slunk away.

Julie pursed her lips and ran her hand over the three bumps on the underside of her elbow. Each was the size of a glue gun insert and nearly as fat. Her skin continued expanding but was no longer red. Her body was adjusting. She guessed it would be another three weeks before she could reclaim her father’s spot on the street. He’d been dead for a year, but there was a credo and even if there wasn’t, Julie didn’t think it would be too difficult to succeed the idiot before her, who was as skilled as a five-year-old birthday party magician.

It was the middle of July. Tourists and the people paid to serve and entertain them were the only ones crazed enough to press through the square. Knowing this, Julie brought her own bistro set and placed it in front of Punch & Judy’s, a three-story restaurant that wasn’t an “eclectic taste of London” as promised by guidebooks, but a hot, sticky, over-priced hot box with plaster acoustics and urine air.

Julie twisted her face, which looked like a sculptor’s leftovers, the smooth spaces between hard pinched, doughy lumps rising into uncomfortable edges, a chiaroscuro best worn by a nun or a priest, people the public are forced to look at but are ashamed to judge. Unfortunately, this atrocity was underscored by buckteeth and strawberry blonde hair, a color best outgrown by the time children cut teeth. If someone was forced to compliment Julie’s looks – a relative, perhaps – they mentioned her pallor. Aside from the fact that it stretched over the rigid caverns of her features, it was fine.

At 23, Julie had the body of a middle-aged beer drinking man. Her breasts didn’t swell from her chest, but burst through her skin at odd angles that led to her knees. Her stomach rose from her flat bum like a goiter from a neck. Bloated. Hard. Unattractive.

Julie accepted her ugliness the way one would a heart condition or terminal illness. It was part of her. She didn't have the financial means or shallow character to fix it. Instead, she focused on things she could do like read, show up to work on time and assume her father's act.

"What do you think?"

Julie smelled milk, lemon and paint. Lloyd. She soured. "Are you serious?"

"I mean come on. That guy's under a lot of pressure." Lloyd hovered over Julie, accidentally knocking her arm with his knee. She pulled away.

"Listen," she turned to him. "I know you're trying to get a rise out of me, but no one – not even you – could honestly pretend to take this guy seriously." She crossed her arms and squeezed the end of her nose between her forefinger and thumb. "Jesus."

"Not everyone's perfect."

"Who said anything about perfect? How about competent?"

"Ha!" While on duty, the living statue of King Arthur spoke with his throat, not his mouth. He thrust his arms in front of Julie's face, careful to keep his wrists straight so as not to crack the Zsa Zsa Gabor gold mate paint he'd sprayed himself with two-and-one-half hours before. Because weather conditions were good – cloudy, dry – he would last for three more hours.

"He should know that such a stupid trick is inappropriate and humiliating!" Julie popped the lid on a can of gingerroot soda. She bought the soda in bulk twice a month from the Jamaican store down her street. She first tasted it when she was six. Her father brought it home after working the street overjoyed that someone had dropped it in his money box, exposing his young family to culinary treats they would never otherwise experience.

When Julie was upset she closed her mouth and imagined breathing through her ears. She hoped this would keep her nostrils from flaring, but it just made her look like a drowning hippopotamus. That's what she looked like. A pissed off water elephant.

Julie felt Lloyd's eyes on her, laughing. She didn't want anyone laughing at her the way the press laughed at her father. She was putting herself through physical torture to create a new caliber of clever street performance that would replace the slapstick.

Lloyd's energy faded. His face collapsed. "I'm sorry Jules. Missing your dad?"

Julie nodded. Lloyd gently turned her wrist and rubbed the inside of her elbow. "Hey, I forgot about these. Looks like they're going along well." When he placed his fingers on the two raised canals, she pulled away.

"Don't touch them."

"Sorry."

"They'll be ready in two months."

"That's cool." Several months before, when Julie told Lloyd about the tubes, which would create a string of half-inch ravines in her arm, her explanation for them was stoic, rational. She was adding personality to a trend popular among African and South American tribes and American teenagers. She'd simply chosen a different body part to stretch. There was nothing abnormal about an international trend.

And, when the holes were big enough, she would create a game of catch, something that would entice the baseball obsessed Americans wandering through Covent Garden. She would throw something in the air and make it disappear into her skin. Brilliant street performance.

"I think I know what I might put in the tubes."

"Go on then."

"Maltesers. I'm going to throw and catch Maltesers."

"Hm." Lloyd examined the tiny cracks breaking up the paint on his arms. "Maltesers?"

"You've never had a Malteser?" Julie flared. Lloyd was a great friend when he wasn't obtuse.

No child save for the poor bastards living in the city's East End went without tasting those small, common, chocolate covered honeycomb balls.

"Of course I have. I'm sorry, I must be stupid. What's your plan?"

“I’m going to give the crowd Malteasers — you know, engage them in the act — have them toss them in the air so I can catch them with my arm and make them disappear. Eventually, I should be able to catch two at a time.”

“Have you thought about —“

“ — Each tube will hold three which means at least six people will get to throw one.”

Lloyd wondered what Julie’s father, a man whose dedication to a unicycle, ukulele and two African grays, a traditionalist in the truest sense of the word when it came to simplistic gimmickry, would think of his daughter’s desperate attachment to revenge in the form of mutilation and fanciful ideals.

“That’s not what I was going to ask but good to know.” Resigned, Lloyd said, “I need to get back to work. I’m cracking.”

“No! Don’t leave. I want to hear what you have to say.”

“I’m just a poor, uneducated, uncultured city boy. Hell, I’ve never even had a sip of Jamaican gingerroot soda.” He paused. Julie reddened, embarrassed by her thoughtlessness. “But I’m not sure they have Maltesers in America. They might not know what they are.”

Lloyd was delicate in his wording. He knew Julie wanted laughter, but she was new to the streets. She didn’t understand a crowd’s inability to differentiate between the heart-wrenching snickering that entombs the soul and the joyous chuckling that nears nothingness.

Julie had been struggling to understand the dichotomy of laughter since her father’s death. A year before, Julie’s father had been hit and killed by a Segway, one of those standup, eco-friendly, two-wheeled scooters popular among yuppies and tourists cruising “green” cities.

Tired, weighed down by the moneybox and stage props that carried his day, Julie’s dad cut through a narrow side street on his way home from work. An American tourist pushing his Segway’s 20 mile an hour speed limit hit a raised cobblestone, flipping the Segway and ramming the wheels into her father’s sternum killing him instantly.

Her father's death turned Julie's world cruel. The morning after his death, each tabloid ran a story about the poor street performer slaughtered by a Segway. The vicious headlines included such things as "Uneven Segway Crushes Clown," "Cobblestone Calamity Cracks Clown" and "Clown Has His Last Laugh."

Julie's father wasn't a clown. He was a street performer and a person who made, in Julie's starry-eyed estimation, hundreds of thousands of people laugh at his clever antics.

Her hand the only outlet for her grief, Julie wrote dozens of emails to tabloid editors and writers chiding them for misrepresenting her father and his work. Several of the tabloids published a portion of Julie's letter — without her consent — furthering her angst. Because Julie didn't understand the subjectiveness of humor, she failed to understand why her exaltation of the "great man and talent" that was her father made her father look more foolish than before.

Lloyd knew that no matter how hard Julie tried, she would fail to avenge her father until she understood that successful street performers understood the nature of their appeal was granting the public permission to stare at an oddity. What they did with it simply didn't matter.

"If I can't do the Maltesers, what kind of candy should I catch? Or should it be something else? Not a candy at all. What about like...what are those disgusting things they're eating over there these days?" Julie thought for a minute. "Soy beans."

"Soy beans?"

"Americans eat roasted ones before working out or something like that. I guess they're full of protein."

"Aren't most Americans fat?"

"The ones that come here have money and juicers."

"Stick with the Maltesers. Tell them it's a European thing. They'll eat that up."

"You think?"

"I think."

Julie and Lloyd turned their attention back to the stage. Two months. She would be ready in two months.

“People like idiots, too. It’s their way.” Julie prepared for her first performance while the crowd laughed at the moron with a faux mullet and moustache play with his pocket flap. So what if he looked like Joe Dirt, that embarrassing character from some American movie? He wasn’t funny. Or good. He just had a mullet and a moustache.

Julie wore blue jeans, an “I Love London” t-shirt for the tourists and tennis shoes. She hadn’t done anything to her face – there was nothing to do — and believed her carved arms would be costume enough. When she approached the stage, she awkwardly bobbed her head at the crowd Joe Dirt built. Her father always said entertainment was nothing more than speed networking. Julie had exactly 10 seconds to get the crowd to trust and like her.

Julie’s arms went numb as they did when she was nervous. She shook her wrists all the way to the microphone resting in Joe Dirt’s travel wagon, eyes fixed on the gray swaths of time smudged across the building behind her, avoiding the audience she wanted to forget. As Julie grabbed for the microphone, Joe Dirt whisked his wagon away, leaving her half bent, paralyzed and without communication. Even though she’d seen her father perform a hundred times, she’d forgotten performers don’t share resources or laughs.

Eyes on the ground, crowd surrounding her, Julie’s soft voice failed to capitalize on the buzz of Joe Dirt. When the crowd realized they would have to make an effort to be entertained, they dropped off. Pity, boredom and curiosity encouraged a few onlookers who gradually turned their backs on her lethargic presentation.

Tears suffocated Julie’s throat as she scrambled to ready her only prop — her elbow. Pulling the box of Maltesers from her pocket, she looked at the crowd. Two ugly bastards — the first with a brow bone of an Australopithecus, the second with a hand in his marginally exposed crack —waited, slack jawed, for her to begin.

Julie didn’t even think to pass the Maltesers to the crowd of two, instead throwing them about herself, the nerves amalgamating in her shoulder creating an out-of-control springboard for the launch. The first Malteaser shot through the air with the force of a cannon ball. Neither man saw where it landed.

The second toss was so paltry it dribbled to the ground before nuzzling Julie’s shoe. Julie tried several more times but the little brown balls bounced off her arm like

paintballs on a mattress. Before long, Julie looked like she was standing in a pile of deer droppings. The most miraculous thing about her performance being that she brought an element of nature to the cityscape.

A few people joined the two degenerates watching Julie, finding it difficult to ignore a woman flailing her arms about in a public square, each one rising in fits and starts as if she were being sporadically attacked by a taser gun. The wayward Maltesers caught the attention of the pigeons, which flapped at Julie in their erratic way, looking for spaces between her jolting arms and legs where they could peck the Malteasers. This – a madwoman surrounded by small pieces of chocolate jerking about while pigeons feasted at her feet – drew laughter from a crowd oblivious to Julie’s plight, her humiliation and the holes in her arms.

Although the audience, which had grown in size, clapped when Julie left the stage, she was humiliated and walked as quickly as she could to Lloyd who stood next to a post office box on the corner in all his golden glory wooing crowds with his ability to stand still and not flake beneath a hot summer sun. She waited for him to take a break and when he did, offered him a piece of pity.

“They laughed at me.”

“Well done!”

“Hardly.” Julie pushed her fists into her swelling eyes.

“But you made them laugh.”

“They laughed *at* me, not because of me.” Julie heaved an exhale, the wide-eyed outline of her broad belly button pushing against the thin fabric of her cheap t-shirt.

“That’s performance. If you’re lucky, 20 percent laugh and of those 20 percent, one percent think you’re funny. That’s life. As long as they’re laughing, what does it really matter? Do you think your father did it for the crowd? No. He did it for himself. He wouldn’t have made it otherwise. He believed in what he was doing and it made him feel good. That’s why he was good. You don’t need standout if you know where you stand.”

Lloyd wiped at Julie’s tears with his fingers, they gold smears highlighting the sorrow carved in her cheeks.

Embarrassed because she'd let her father down and allowed a friend to see her cry, Julie walked home and melted into a tea and hot bath. There was nothing she could do to resolve a stupid public.

Later that night, Julie thought about the last time she'd seen her father perform. She was 20 and unbeknownst to her, only had two years left with him. Fleeing the soul crushing theater of her mother, who was destroying her father, Julie moved into a small flat on the south side of the city. She hadn't seen her father perform for months, so one day after work, she took a train to Covent Garden.

The show was at its climax. Her father was standing on the seat of his unicycle strumming the Queen's song on his ukulele as the parrots flew around his head, yelling insults to the audience, which was more invested in returning texts, phone calls and taking photos for their Facebook pages than they were in his act. The crowd thinned before he finished, a group of children playing not it.

After taking a bow and thanking the crowd, Julie's dad did something she'd never seen him do. He picked up the hat sitting before his stage and held it out to the remaining crowd. He jiggled the felt prop around turned backs until he had no one left to harass. When he saw his daughter, he tried, but failed to shake the desperation from his eyes.

Until the evening of her own failed performance, Julie told herself she stopped watching her father because she'd moved too far away. She validated this excuse by voicing it to her father, who patted her head, handed her a gingerroot soda and said he understood. As Julie thought of her father, his death and the holes in her arm, she reasoned she'd chosen the wrong ambition. Laughter was laughter. Like tears, joy and all other emotions, it isn't meant to make everyone feel good all the time. Sometimes you give, sometimes you receive, sometimes you sacrifice.

The next morning, Julie ordered the very model of Segway that plowed down her father. She used the two weeks before its arrival to improve her piecemeal act. She started with simple improvements, like remembering to bring a microphone and initiate a relationship with the crowd. Getting the crowd to laugh with her when the Malteasers sprung from her arms only to land on the cobblestones was hard, but not as difficult as smiling when she realized some were laughing at her.

The Segway was zippy and easy to incorporate into the act. The crowd loved it. Gradually Julie became more comfortable with the attention, satisfied that the

temporary opinions tucked beneath the bobbing heads of Chinese tour groups were not as meaningful as the indent of laughter they received while watching her.