

LAUGHTER AND CAPRICE



“WHEN IS IT PROPER TO SPIT IN A MAN’S FACE?” CAPRICE asked her first-grade class.

As a student teacher, this was her first day handling the classroom alone. She knew it was risky to begin the morning with a joke—one about spitting, no less. But what better way to endear herself to the children than by evoking the forbidden?

“I know! I know!” Emma Lee Peterson raised her hand and jumped up and down. Her enthusiasm was contagious. In seconds, the whole class was jockeying for attention.

“Calm down! Let’s hear Emma Lee’s answer first,” Caprice said, suddenly nervous. How was she going to corral the beehive of energy that her joke had stirred?

But the children—who were still under the thumb of their regular teacher, the no-nonsense Mrs. Gregory—miraculously quieted. “OK, that’s better,” Caprice said, relieved. “Now Emma Lee, when is it proper to spit in a man’s face?”

Brushing back her thin raven bangs, the eager-to-please Emma Lee lifted her chin and said, “When he keeps beating up everybody in the house and you’re sick of it!”

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There was a collective hiccup; the class really *wanted* to laugh, but the punch line had nothing to do with boogers or gross food or kooky animals.

Three seconds sat between the new teacher and her students. Three seconds during which Caprice held an expression of delighted surprise while she coiled back into her own childhood. Back to when she, too, was a lanky seven-year-old, running home after school, wearing new pink tennis shoes with soles that lit up every time her feet pounded the sidewalk. Even though it was October in Michigan, she had abandoned her jacket on the playground to run home and show her mother her paper. The one with the bright gold star.

The lights in her shoes went dead as she hesitated on the front steps of the family bungalow. A muddy, blue Ford pick-up was in the driveway. That meant Mike was over.

“Hey, babe!” came her mother’s voice from the screen door. “Whatchu got there?”

Caprice’s heart warmed whenever her mother smiled, which was seldom. “Look!” Caprice said, offering the paper to her mother as a gift. “I got a gold star!”

The gift should have made her mother happy, but instead, fat tears erupted. “Oh, babe,” her mother wept. “You’re such a smart girl. So much smarter than me. I’ll bet you’re gonna be a teacher someday.”

Suddenly, Mike was on the porch yanking the paper from her mother’s hands. “I was talkin’ to you,” he said.

“Stay here.” Caprice’s mother kissed her on the cheek. “I’ll be right back.”

The door slammed. There was arguing and the sound of things breaking, while Caprice shivered on the front steps. She was afraid to go inside, and more afraid to run away and leave her mother in there alone. So she sat and counted to one hundred by tens, over and over.

Three seconds, and Caprice was back in the classroom with twenty children waiting for her to say something about Emma Lee’s

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joke. But she felt as helpless now as she had as a little girl quaking on the front steps.

“Nope,” she said, turning to the chalkboard, unable to face the trembling Emma Lee. “You can only spit in a man’s face when his mustache is on fire.”

Behind her back, Caprice could hear the riotous sound of children’s laughter.





QUEEN OF THE NILE



THEY WERE DRINKING AT THEIR USUAL TABLE AT THE rathskeller when someone asked C. Amelia King what the C in her name stood for.

Frankly, her first name was none of their business, she thought. Who ever asked that of F. Scott Fitzgerald or D. H. Lawrence? Rimming her whiskey glass with a manicured finger, Amelia winked.

A single, East Coast transplant to Chicago, Amelia carefully shielded her personal life from her business partners. She kept no pictures of her family on her desk. Her flirtations always walked the edge of good taste—a hint of lace, the scent of musk, stilettos and a glimpse of thigh. Six years into her career and her assets had landed her senior account executive with a Chicago ad agency. She'd learned that mystery was nearly as useful as her Stanford degrees.

Especially the mystery of her race. Whenever coworkers tried to categorize her, she pushed back on their assumptions to keep them off balance. At dinner at the Caucus Club, a client had once blushed with embarrassment after he ordered hummus, believing her to be Arab. Another time, a client just started speaking Spanish to her after a meeting. She replied in Japanese. Most often,

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people seemed content to err on the side of dusky whiteness—maybe Greek or Italian—allowing her to navigate firm politics more easily.

“Cynthia?” ventured Nate Drummond, who was even more boring than he was cautious. Amelia had often caught Nate gazing at her a bit too long, his pupils dilated like the mouth of a well. Was it her dark hint of Gypsy that made his imagination run wild?

Instead of scoffing at Nate’s guess, Amelia laughed good-naturedly, always careful not to show an edge. “Cynthia Amelia,” she said, rolling the name in her mouth to try it out. “That sounds awful. My mother hates me, but not that much.”

The whole table laughed as Amelia sucked on the Maraschino cherry she’d fished out of her Manhattan.

“Chloe!” someone else suggested.

“Nope,” she laughed, enjoying the game of Rumpelstiltskin. They’d never guess the moniker that had crowned four generations of Maryland women, going back to the first one to buy her own freedom.

Corinthia. For her family, the name was a source of pride. But for the only black child in her kindergarten class, it was already evident to C. Amelia that Corinthia was not a princess name. At the Sidwell Friends School, she corrected her third-grade teacher: “Call me Corey.” By the time she earned her joint MBA-JD at Stanford, she was C. Amelia.

“I’ve got it!” Nate rallied, emboldened by the game. He smiled crookedly and held up his Glencairn for a toast. “To our lovely Cleopatra.”

Cleopatra Amelia King. The table erupted. Amelia’s ecru complexion reddened. The men around the table wouldn’t stop laughing. Amelia glared at Nate. What was so fucking funny?

Collecting herself, she took the joke amiably, but her stomach felt like an anvil. She tried to talk herself out of being too sensitive. These

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guys were her friends—they'd been drinking buddies at the Rathskeller since they'd finished grad school.

“You mean like the Queen of the Nile?” another piped in, nearly doubled over.

As Nate threw an arm around Amelia, she tensed. “No, dumb ass,” he said, bringing his face so close to Amelia's that she closed her eyes. “Like Cleopatra Jones.”