

## What Are You Laughing At?

People say it all sorts of ways. Courageous. Special. Priceless. We know what they mean. We know our kids aren't perfect. Three of them already. The twins with Downs. The youngest with some kind of Palsy/Autism cocktail.

It's nobody's fault. We know that. We love our kids more than anything. We know they're going to need us forever and realize we can't be there forever: a devastating math that sets our children against the world's kindness.

We don't blame anybody. You get used to it. You stop listening. Or you hear what you want to hear. You find

empathy where there's judgment. Feel compassion when people send you a freak-show vibe.

During PTA meetings, people act like your kids aren't really in the school. Nobody wants to hear your opinions. Your conversations belong in a different room. Different group of people. It wears on you. Because you're involved, right? You gotta be involved. Show them the love any human deserves. Even when they don't know you're there.

The youngest one? He just goes catatonic, days at a time. Sometimes forgets who we are. You get used to it. But the twins? They're just love. Just two souls thrumming with love, and they take care of their little brother. It's beautiful. More beautiful than anything I can imagine. And to see them all grow up together? That's love. That's what the word means.

And so when Tom McDonald kept talking like we weren't in the room? Just talking over me? Over my wife? Because my wife? She's sad sometimes. Hurting, you know? Gets worried about the future or the past or whatever. Even talks like it's her fault when things get bad. Like maybe she's broken inside. And so when Tom said what he said? I burned. But we just moved on. We just forgot.

But then I saw him at Sears with his kid. And his kid did one of those things with his hand, you know? Bent his wrist and banged a limp hand against his chest again and again. He was telling some story about picking on other kids or something, and then Tom laughed. Really laughed. And so I went over to him, and I said "What are you laughing at, Tom?" And he said, "Oh it's just my boy telling a story." And I said, "Sounds like it was funny," and he said something like "Yeah I suspect you don't get many stories from your kids."

I stepped back, breathed, and moved on that time, too.

But the next time I saw Tom, we were both alone. Late night supermarket stuff.

"Finally making your escape, huh?" he called across the parking lot, cart full of beer. "Fuck you, Tom," I said. "Better not," said Tom, "world's got enough retards as it is." And that was the last anyone ever heard from Tom McDonald. I guess I'd busted his eye socket, cracked some of his skull back into his brain. Little shards got stuck in there and stayed. Caused some hemorrhaging or whatever.

And so when I go to visit him in the hospital, nobody knows who I am. I say I'm an old friend. And Tom? He doesn't know any different. Kind of smiles when I come in. And my wife? She thinks I go out of guilt. And I let her think that, you know. But the truth is? It's my favorite part of the week.

I go in and I sit there and I look at what I've done.

Justice. This is what it looks like.

His son will be nicer.

Forever.

Watching his braindead father know nothing about anything and having to summon up love for this creature on the bed? Justice. A kindness in the world.

I'm not sure how my wife would react. But I don't think she'd mind because that night? After I did what I did and I told her about it? She was silent for a minute while her eyes got watery. Then she hugged me.

And a little later, when I thought she was going to bed, she came back out of our room wearing a lacey black negligee and telling me she was ready to try again.

And so sometimes, in his hospital room, I'll tell Tom about that night. About how my wife glowed in that sexy

lingerie. About how we baked a cake together afterward and then ate it warm and gooey with ice cream before loving again our favorite way, her breasts bouncing off my face as we thrust our rhythms into the future.

It might not be accurate, but I tell Tom our next child will only exist because I'd smashed his face through a car window. Because I'd kicked him and kicked him and kicked him and then driven home.