

The Morning News

BLACK AND WHITE AND READ ALL OVER



Personal Essays

The Peril of Ceiling Fans

BY LOCKIE HUNTER

In South Carolina's beach country, not having air conditioning, nevermind fans, is these days downright strange. A personal memoir of worried grandmothers and infant decapitation.

We don't have ceiling fans in our South Carolina beach home. In fact I would wager that we are the only non-fanned home on Palm Boulevard. The reason is simple: possible baby decapitation.

"Mama Sligh, it's hot as Hades in here. Lawsy mercy, why don't we get some fans?" That was the refrain for more than 15 years in our island home. Mama Sligh was worried about many things. Baby decapitation by ceiling fan was just one picayune item in her worry repertoire. She prayed incessantly, as the Bible taught her, that no harm should befall any of her nine grandchildren. As such, I took ridiculous risks, knowing I had a prayer blanket I could cuddle up in after I hitchhiked on the back roads or went ocean swimming during a hurricane. We would see Mama Sligh's lips moving as she was watching the Channel 5 nightly news. Word of earthquake in California, famine in Ethiopia. We watched her pray, her hands worrying the hem of her dress or the plait of a grandchild. I had a direct prayer line to our Heavenly Father. All the Sligh grandbabies did.

* * *

A friend from high school, BD, once tried to stop a ceiling fan with his head. He was quite intoxicated at the time, but I had a feeling that he would try a stunt like this, alcohol-induced or no. *Aha!* I thought, anxiously awaiting the results. Was there a real possibility of decapitation? Or do ceiling fans only decapitate the small, vulnerable domes of babies? I visualized the blood from BD's hemorrhaging head wound spritzing around the room like in the Indiana Jones epic where a man gets caught in a jet's engine blades.

BD slurred orders. "Put 'er on real low, now."

The ceiling fan rotated slowly and BD climbed onto a wicker kitchen chair. He stuck his prematurely balding head up in the air. I watched as the fan made small thwacks on his forehead. With each successive thwack the fan slowed until at last it came to rest. BD stepped down, and we examined his brow. A few pink marks, some starting to swell.

"Now let's crank it on up!" BD said excitedly. The fan was now much closer to Indiana Jones speed. I could imagine the call to BD's mom. "Um, there's been a freak ceiling fan accident. Mrs. D."

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

A long time resident of the American South and of San Francisco, Lockie Hunter now lives in Boston where she is enrolled as an MFA student in the creative writing program at Emerson College. She is that girl on the beach with her nose stuck in a book and is currently working on a Southern novel in hopes of preserving the eccentricities of her family and the region. You can reach her at

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This time, a trickle of blood, carried by the fan, did fly off into the air. Still, it was not the blood-soaked scene I had envisioned.

"Shot of Crown!" someone suggested, bringing out the familiar purple velvet bag holding the liquor as several people helped BD climb off the wicker chair. (I am attending our 20th high school reunion this year. I don't expect BD to be in attendance.)

* * *

In the '70s we installed central air at the beach house. Nonetheless, the air could not keep up with the persistent Carolina sun, and I longed for a ceiling fan over the bed. Mama Sligh had taken to talking loudly to herself. Her prayers—no longer a personal monologue between Mama Sligh and her Lord and Savior—were a homily for all to hear.

"Lord please don't let Aimee die of the asthma," she appealed in bed. Aimee and I were the two non-marrieds, and as such did not rate our own bedrooms. We slept on cots in Mama Sligh's bedroom.

"Mama Sligh, are you talking to me?" said Aimee.

"What, baby? Why no, I'm not talking to anyone."

Her husband, Papa Sligh, used to say of her. "You're the craziest darn woman I ever knew." And this was before she boosted her silent prayers to a sound amplification of 10.

* * *

When I was in Mrs. Cunningham's fifth-grade English class, I wrote a paper entitled, "My Grandmother, an Angel in White." Mama Sligh was a nurse then, and the reference to white was a reference to her uniform. (In retrospect, most angels don white. One does not think of angels wearing, say, bright fuchsia.) Mama Sligh, the angel, had no vices that I knew of. She did not smoke. She routinely poured out our wine. She never said a bad word. There was one time that she used the word "simpy" to describe one of her daughters. She thought the word "silly" too strong. Additionally, her hair and clothes were flawless. Cleanliness next to Godliness. If one were to refer to the Oxford English Dictionary, one would expect to find a line drawing of her under the definition of "grandmother."

Mama Sligh did not sleep well. Her worry over her grandchildren kept her pacing the floors. I, too, did not sleep.

"You're going to wear a hole in this carpet you know?" I would tell her.

I would pat the spot beside me on the couch and she would sit close. Sometimes we would talk of the past, of my mom's childhood. But most often we would just sit. She would brush my hair. We'd listen to the early morning waves as they slapped the stilts under our house.

* * *

When Nicole Kidman's marriage to her shorter spouse Tom Cruise ended, Nicole was overheard to say, "I can wear heels now." A small consolation for losing a husband, for the dissolution of a marriage. High heels. At Mama Sligh's funeral last spring, she was outfitted in a powder blue dress. Her coiffure was utopian. She looked cottony and white and glowing as in life. She had become the angel of my story, permanently. As I looked

FROM THE ATTIC



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by Danny Gregory

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Sexual Mechanics

by Jessa Crispin

Librarians are asked all types of questions, but few must be experts on the clap. Jessa Crispin reports from a sex library, where pustules and excitable virgins are just another part of the job.

Little Indignities: A Beginner's Guide to New York

by Magdalen Powers

The American calendar starts in September with back-to-school specials and football games. For everyone new to New York this fall, Magdalen Powers offers a big, hearty welcome and a few tips for survival.

London Sprawling

by Jonathan Bell

The British capital is never empty, and only major television events can clear the streets. So why do movies and science fiction teem with vacant blocks? Does urbanism have room for emptiness anymore?



at this saint of a woman, my last grandparent, I could not help but think, "Now we can install ceiling fans at the beach house." My small consolation for losing Mama Sligh, for a world without this dear frenzied woman. A ceiling fan.

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