

## Beautiful Baby

There's never been any question in my mind. I was a beautiful baby.

As a young man I was a smart-ass with a rather formal demeanor that would not dissolve into a friendly face until I got to know you. I had a look of innocence and authority that allowed me to get away with stupid pranks, like ripping off my coat, tie and shirt to reveal a Superman T-shirt during a marketing goals presentation I gave at a company meeting in my early twenties.

And before I ever began a career, I played little tricks in high school and college just to get a laugh. My favorite involved my baby pictures. With a straight face I'd show one or more of my photos to people at various events where humans normally exchange small talk ... wedding receptions, backyard parties and even the occasional funeral if things got boring enough. I chose an unsuspecting person, always a woman because I'd never say this to a guy. I began by saying with all seriousness, "You know, I was a beautiful baby. My mother told me she entered my photo in baby contests."

I would hand over my baby picture. In fact, I was an ugly baby.

I happened one afternoon to pick on a young woman I knew only slightly from seeing her around the college campus from time to time. She would eventually become my wife, but that winter day as I sat down across from her at a large oak library table my major intent was just to get her to talk to me.

She didn't look up while I removed my jacket, sat down and arranged my books and notes.

I let a few minutes pass before I spoke.

"You know," I said, "I was a beautiful baby. My mother entered my picture in numerous contests."

She looked up at me, glanced behind her as if I was hopefully speaking to someone else, stared back at me for a half second and quickly lowered her eyes back to her books. She didn't speak. She ignored me.

After a few moments, I pulled out my favorite baby photo, passed it across the table and waited for her response. The baby in the photo was really me. And I was really ugly. Or so everyone told me. Actually, I thought I was kind of cute, but admittedly not very cuddly. In the snapshot I was well past six months of age and as bald and chinless as a white zucchini. There was a remnant of drool on my chin, probably just wiped away by Mom before she took the shot. The girl glanced at the photo, but pointedly did not touch it.

I waited for some kind of verbal response. It was not forthcoming. From previous victims of this ruse I knew her reaction might be anything. Some folks surprised me. A lady pastor at a funeral once turned away from me and began a conversation with the corpse. But most often I'd get a laugh, or a quick darting of the eyes my way as if to ask if I was serious. Not often there were hollow words of admiration and fawning smiles worthy of an acting award. In any case, the ice would be broken and I might find a new conversation partner with a sense of humor. Or not.

This girl had done no more than glance my way with raised eyebrows suggesting I was crazy. I stayed quiet and bided my time, occasionally looking up from my reading to secretly admire her hair, her nose, whatever. Finally she tilted her head up at me and asked if I knew what time it was. She made no attempt to hide her wrist watch,

"You know," I said, ignoring her attempt to take me off my path, "I always wondered who took the photo."

"Why?" she said. "Did you want to get even with them?"

"I had thought," I said, "my father was the only person in our house who knew how to use a camera in 1943. But my Dad thought of himself as an artistic photographer and shot everything at weird cockeyed angles. This picture was just a straight snap shot."

The girl looked up at me again. I could see the beginning of a smile. Only the beginning.

“So,” she said, “your mother didn’t want the photo any worse than it had to be and shot the picture herself.”

“Yes,” I said. “But when I asked her *why* she took the photo, she said she knew I’d grow up very handsome and this would prove a person could start anywhere.”

She brought the photo closer to her with one finger and stared down at it with a furrowed brow. Then she looked up at me, a sparkle in her blue eyes.

“When do you plan to start?” she said.

When I look back to my younger days, I often wonder why I thought I was funny. In business I found few people who thought my jokes humorous and most believed I was just being silly. Probably a few had the insight to see my attempts at humor as no more than a plea for anyone to notice me.

There’s always something going on when we look deeper. We often use humor to hide something or hide ourselves.

The joke may be a veiled revelation of feelings we want to express in a straightforward manner but for some reason cannot. In the library that afternoon, I wanted to say, “Let me take you home to my nest and we’ll stay there forever.” But of course I couldn’t. My humor covered up a desire on my part that would have been inappropriate to express in our first meeting

Humor can sometimes hide a plea for help, but probably more often we’re asking for approval.

Perhaps most pressing as a young man was my concern over what others thought of me. Now that I’m older, I care far less. Whether I’m worthy of anyone’s praise is for other people to worry about. I don’t need to know what people think of me unless they are carrying a weapon.

Because I wanted to be likeable in my youth, I often gilded the hard things that needed to be said with humor, thus diluting the truth. It was not easy to tell someone they were making a mistake, for example, when I was too interested in whether they liked me. If I told you what you wanted to hear, because I cared more about what you thought of me than my desire to help you, then I became a caretaker for your issues. Your dilemma had been yours, but when I sugar-

coated it, I became a kind of co-conspirator for a problem neither of us needed.

Had I persisted in the use of humor to help us put off a direct approach to disputes, for example, I would not have maintained very many honest relationships. I would not have said to my siblings things that needed to be said. Or corrected a co-worker in the few instances over a lifetime of employment when it was honestly necessary and did some good. Or admitted a fault or an offense for which my spouse rightfully held me accountable. Or neglected to tell any of those people I loved them.

I have found it better to spend more time worrying about the welfare of others rather than engage in a guessing game about what they think of me. And what they may think of me is, in the final analysis, of no consequence to me at this point.

I eventually grew some hair. Not a lot, but enough to keep my brains warm and thinking. However, I never trust a decision I’ve made in January. I depend upon the girl from the library to lend some sanity to my life.

To be honest, Mom never entered me in a Beautiful Baby Contest. You probably guessed that, or thought her less than sensible. But years ago as a joke I posed as a proud mother and sent my baby pictures in to a few contests. Only one person ever responded. He was from a local business association and we were acquainted. Robert’s letter said he’d been given my application and my baby’s photo for extra-special handling.

“What a striking baby you had!” he wrote. “You must have been terrifically grateful. That it didn’t bite you. Did you keep it?”

*copyright 2016 by David Griffin*

**The Windswept Press  
Murrells Inlet, SC**

[www.windsweptpress.com](http://www.windsweptpress.com)