

shambles



a short story by

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Author's Note:

Shambles was one of my entries in National Public Radio's occasional feature, "Three Minute Fiction," in which they invite listeners to submit an original, unpublished story of 600 or fewer words which is "not inappropriate" and fulfills a condition set by that Round's author-judge. *Shambles* was entered into Round Six, concluded April 3, 2011. In each of this round's stories, one character had to tell a joke and one character had to cry.

SHAMBLES



E. G. Fabricant

"And, back in three...two...one..."

The tinny, overwrought theme blared, again. The "YELL REAL LOUD!" sign flashed. The floor director wind-milled the audience into a cheering frenzy, paused, and stabbed a finger toward center stage.

"Heeeey, Booooyz'n'Guuurlz," Hank the announcer intoned. "Whoooo's...yerrrr...beeeest FRIEND?"

Dozens of tiny throats exploded in unison. "SHAAAAM-BULLS THE CLOWN! YAYYYY!"

Spinning and flashing like a spastic kaleidoscope, the star slid to his marks and, with a flourish, assumed his signature stance, feet splayed and arms akimbo. He took a beat and cocked his head.

"A-yuk! Heeeey, kids! What tiiiime is it?" He cupped an ear.

"IT'S HOKEY-JOKEY TIME! YAAAAAY!"

"Thaaaat's right!" He hunched into a conspiratorial crouch. "D'ya know why you should never, EVER keep an elephant in the refrigerator?"

“WHYYYY?”

Shambles leaped at them and flung his arms wide.
“Cause heeee’ll leave footprints in the JELL-OH!”

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

The closing theme erupted and the floor director began his digital countdown. Grinning and waving maniacally, Shambles exited stage left. Hank took the mike.

“Heeee’s SHAMBLES, Boooyz’n’Gurlz! Tune in again tomorrow, and don’t forget: MAC ATTACK mac’n’cheez, the brain food that feels good all over! Bye-bye for now!”

Shambles rounded the last flat’s edge and dropped his hands to his knees, gasping. “Jeezus! Bum me a Marlboro, willya, Marty? That oughtta hold the little bas—“

“Sid!” Marty glared, chopped at his own throat, and nodded sideways toward a back corner.

Slight and round-eyed, she edged into the light. She was well-groomed, but her coat and pinafore reflected wear. “Hullo, Mister Shambles. I’m Missy,” she said, extending a tentative hand. “I watch you every day.”

Sid disappeared into his cheery alter ego and absorbed her hand into his. “Weeeell! A-yuk! Helloooo, Missy—pleezedtameatcha!” He glanced around. “Is your Mommy here?”

“No—I came on the bus, to see your show and...talk to you.” Her eyes darkened.

“Well—Shambles is always happy to talk to a fan. What can I do for you today?”

“I want you to be my Daddy.”

Sid caught an expletive in his throat and forced

Shambles to look concerned. “Um—you don’t have a Daddy, now?”

“He went away before I could remember. Mommy has two jobs and says she doesn’t have time. I stay by myself after school.” Missy’s lip trembled. “Me and her—we need a Daddy.”

Beneath the greasepaint, Sid flushed. “Weeeell, Missy; Shambles can do many good things for his boys and girls, but—“

“But, you’re magic. You said so. You make things appear all the time; today you made real flowers.”

“Weeeell, little Missy, there’s just so much—“

Her little fists white by her sides, Missy’s eyes spilled tears. “You said. You SAID!”

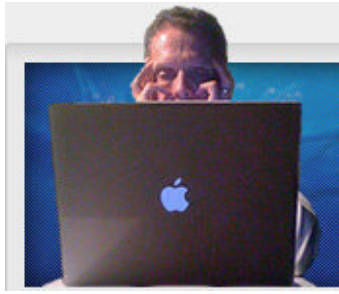
Sid knelt, his pocked and parti-colored face close to hers. “Look, kid. Life’s tough all over. I had a Mommy and a little girl like you once, and that didn’t work out so well, either. Had a couple more Mommies after that, too. They always wanted more than I could give, so guess what? I made ‘em disappear—all of ‘em. Now look at me. I’m just a dumb-ass TV clown, paying alimony and killing brain cells. Okay? Happy now?”

Missy wailed, and her tears came in rivers.

Sid stood and lurched backward, his eyes searching. “Marty—come get this kid outta here! Somebody call Social Services or something—anybody? Helloooo?”

Nobody saw the knife.





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