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DOUBLE DUTCH AND DIE LAUGHING

Sold to Collier's Magazine. I was told by a Calif. writer friend that the story had been passed around at a writer's conference as a typical "biter, bitten" story, but never quite believed the yarn.

Please remove my name

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DOUBLE DUTCH AND DIE LAUGHING

When Evie Blaine's folks moved into Picket Rock, Kansas from Bartlesville, Oklahoma, Evie was in the Fourth Grade, and all legs.

Cassie Fike, who always compared people to animals, said, "She looks like a katydid." Cassie was turning rope and Evie was jumping high water, flinging her long legs out and lifting her knees high, so that her waist supporters showed.

Cassie said Miss Breedlove, the Intermediate teacher, who bobbled her head when she walked, looked like a mule. Bert Ellis, who had white eyelashes, looked to her like a kangaroo.

"She's got nice curls," I said of Evie, which was envy as much as admiration. I had always wanted curls the worst way instead of my Indian-straight stuff. But there was

something different and a little strange about the way Evie wore her hair, too. She wore a wide ribbon bow on the very top of her head and fastened it with a gold-colored clasp, which was a funny place for a bow. She had long curls like tight-coiled springs that hung down her back. My own two looped braids, tied generally with tired bows, reminded Cassie of a hound's ears.

"You look just like a brown hound, Melissa." Cassie tossed her own squared-off Dutch bob. "Miz Blaine does up that kid's hair every night on rags and rollers. I couldn't sleep on all that junk." Cassie trimmed her own bangs and they came out all whickerjawed. Cassie didn't really care about anything much, clothes <u>or</u> hair.

The Fikes were hill people come in from Arkansas. The menfolk came to work on the county road when it was graveled, and they all stayed over, to hire out as hay and harvest hands. Cassie was a born inciter. The thing she liked best to do was to stir up trouble. She had a voice like a seven-year locust and when she started yelling, "Cheater, Cheater!" at a ball game, she'd get everybody yelling, and then fighting as like as not. Her favorite pastime was to get two girls pulling hair over something and then root for both sides to keep them at it.

Evie Blaine's mother, a dumpy little woman with thick ankles and a bent nose, walked to school with Evie that first day and stood on the steps talking to Miss Breedlove and

looking across at Evie, who was jumping rope. "She looks like a parrot," Cassie said. "She had her face lifted and the wrinkles filled with wax. She don't dare go out in hot weather."

"How do you know that?"

"I dassent tell." You couldn't pin Cassie down.

Evie resembled her mother some, but not much. She was almost as tall and she had the same kind of big eyes and wide apart teeth, except without the gold in front. She was skinny instead of plump and her nose was straight and a little pointed.

"Watch Mama's girl miss," Cassie said. She jerked the rope taut and flopped Evie's skirt above her drawers and yelled, "Hot Pepper!" But Evie didn't miss," She just started jumping hot with that set smile that was like a mask on her face. When Cassie took up the second rope and yelled to her turning partner, "Double Dutch!" the rope hissed against the hard packed earth and Evie changed like a flash and kept up. Cassie couldn't, no way, make her miss.

"Girls!" Miss Breedlove shouted. "Girls!" and started toward them. Double Dutch was prohibited. Once when she herself was young, she told us, a girl was jumping Double Dutch and her eyeball popped right out onto her cheek. Cassie would have loved that.

Miss Breedlove went to ring the bell and Evie's Mama called to Evie, who left off jumping and went obediently, but dragged her sandal toe, I noticed, as she walked. When

Mrs. Blaine started fussing with Evie's hair, Evie drew back and then ran to get in line. The way we did was mark time to the beat of the take-up triangle and then space out and march inside. The last I saw of Mrs. Blaine, she still stood waiting with her eyes on Evie and that anxious, doting look on her face.

Evie settled into school routine at Picket Rock as any one of us. We tolerated her as we would have tolerated any stranger, but she didn't interest us much. In the first place she couldn't do a lot of things we thought important because, her mother had told Miss Breedlove, she was subject to nose bleed, which was true. Evie was fast enough at games like drop-the-handkerchief and blackman. But when it came to tougher stuff like tug-of-war and iron-bar, she'd get a nose bleed and have to go inside and sit at her desk. Or she'd have to go home to her mother.

Evie was slightly better than good at most curricular subjects, except for arithmetic. She rarely missed a word when we stood up and spelled for headmarks and she read a grade or two ahead. But when it came to decimal long division at the blackboard, she couldn't do a problem without dotting with her chalk, a practice that drove Miss Breedlove crazy. Evie was well-behaved in school, but she was anything but "teacher's pet," a name reserved for apple-polishers.

If there was one place Evie really did excel, it was in the subject set aside as "penmanship," for which we carried personal copybooks. Evie was a natural-born artist

at muscular movement, a revolutionary practice known as the Palmer Method that had replaced Spencerian, a change my mother thought disastrous and tried to get outlawed in the State of Kansas. Evie's running ovals and her push-and-pulls stayed between the boundary lines, and it was her copybook that traveled to the county fair for the winning Picket Rock exhibit.

Evie had the nicest clothes. She wore a different dress almost every day, instead of one each week-about, and her ribbons matched the dress. Some of these were plaid, and others striped or plain, and some were changeable taffets when it came in fashion. Evie's bows had four, or six loops. I reported this at home. A lot of good it did me.

"That's nice," my mother said. But take if Mrs. Blaine had three to do for in place of just the one she couldn't find the time to do that fussing."

Evie's fancy dresses didn't bother Cassie any. "Who gives a whoop?" she asked. Cassie wore her black alpaca skirt week after week and month by month until it stood alone, and the fronts of her galatea middies were stained from food and tree bark and from crawling through the culverts where she kept her secret caches, like the sticks of chalk she stole from school for writing on the sidewalks.

Cassie didn't give a rap for Evie's writing either, or for anybody's reading. Cassie's own pronouncing when we stood and read aloud doubled up the classroom. But she could skin cat after cat and turn a triple somersault, and do three

cart-wheels running, and shinny up a tree that didn't have a limb a giraffe could reach.

For all I envied all of these and we were cronies of a sort, I was always a little afraid of Cassie. You couldn't trust her with a jumping rope any more than you could trust her with a confidence. You might be jumping regular and she would suddenly start turning hot and slap you red across the anklebones. Or she would sneak behind you when you were on the swing and pull it out from under you. She did that once to Lucy and Lucy fell and spat a tooth out. If Cassie thought she'd put one over on you she'd double up and die.

Evie's Mama kept on coming. Other mothers customarily visited only for special programs. Once she asked the teacher not to let Evie sit in a draft because Evie had a head cold. And once when Evie'd had a dose of castor oil her mother came to ask that Evie be allowed to leave the room without a hand up. Evie was always different when her mother was around. She'd sit with a book and chew on her fingernails, which had gone down to the quick, or she'd get out her tablet and make fast ovals.

It was Cassie who ferreted out the secret about Evie's top bow, I don't know how. The news went through the room like mumps or measles. "Evie's fontanel has never healed over," Cassie confided. "Her Mama told Miss Breedlove that we must never touch it." Cassie's pale eyes glowed. "I've just found out about it."

"I don't know what you mean," I said.

"Melissa Bainum, you're a dummy. I mean she's got a soft spot in the middle of her topknot. Every baby's born with one. But mostly they harden over. And Evie's never did."

Cassie went on to say, "You dassent touch it."

Of course I knew, from having younger sisters. But I'd never heard of one that didn't crust over, and I couldn't see why Cassie seemed so excited. Everyone, almost, had something wrong. Zeke Hamblet had a hare-lip and Lucy Tinker had a birthmark shaped like a mouse, because, Cassie said, her mother had been scared by a mouse before Lucy was born. Cassie herself had warts, before she stole her Aunt's dishrag and buried it behind the abattoir. As soon as the dishrag rotted, Cassie said, the warts disappeared. This story wasn't true, I happened to know. Cassie herself had burned away her warts with caustic. You could see the scar marks.

"If you touch a soft spot before it heals over" Cassie explained, "a baby will die, or grow up addled."

I was beginning to see what Cassie was driving at, and it scared me. "Would Evie die?" I asked.

Cassie shrugged. "Who knows?" She caught a glimpse of Laura Summers, and darted off to spread the news further.

"Does Evie Know you know?" I asked, when Cassie came back.

"Sure," Cassie said. "She was right there when

Mrs. Blaine told me. Evie and I were rough housing and Evie's Mama warned me. Evie and I were rough housing and Evie's Mama warned me. Let's us just do it, to see what will happen."

"You wouldn't dare," I gasped. But, knowing Cassie, I couldn't be positive.

We always had arithmetic first of a morning because Miss Breedlove thought we needed a fresh morning mind for figures. I got out my book and started to work. But all I could think about was Evie's soft spot, and the fact that she might die if Cassie touched it.

Evie sat several seats ahead of me. She was working, too, with her lower lip pinched between her teeth. But Cassie wasn't working. She was making spitballs from her tablet paper. A greenhead fly bumped against Cassie's desk and she reached out and stabbed it with her pen nib, and then held up her hand, "I left my book to home," she told Miss Breedlove. "Can I sit with Melissa and look at hers?"

Miss Breedlove frowned and hesitated. I hoped she'd say, "No." Cassie always got you laughing by saying something smarty. Or she might jab you in the leg with her sharpened pencil point, so that you'd let out a squawk before you could stop yourself. But Miss Breedlove finally nodded.

"Now I know just where it is," Cassie whispered. "It's underneath that great big bow. That's why she wears it."

"How can you know that?"

"I figured it out for myself." Cassie had brought

her Big Chief tablet and she began to write out figures. "The bow is probably Mrs. Blaine's idea. That's why she makes it so big."

When school was dismissed by the tap of the bell, after we had all marched out, Evie went back inside, as though she had forgotten something.

"Let's wait for Evie," Cassie said. "We can't leave poor Evie."

That wasn't like Cassie. She never waited for anyone. But now she stood in the road and marked her initials in the dust with the brass toes of her shoes and watched the schoolhouse door. When Evie showed up, you could see Cassie stiffen. Evie stopped for a minute and then came on slowly, keeping her eyes on Cassie.

"All right, Evie," Cassie said, when Miss Breedlove had gone back inside. Her voice was soft but filled with determination. "Let's have a look now."

Evie seemed to read Cassie's mind. Her eyes got bigger, but she didn't answer. She stopped and watched Cassie's approach the way a bird will watch a snake, as though hypnotized. When Cassie was still about ten feet distant, Evie got hold of herself and started running.

When Evie broke into a run, Cassie broke, too. She flexed her elbows and doubled up her fists and yelled, "Stop! Evie! Stop!" her voice itself a whiplash.

But Evie didn't stop. She peeled into Cassie's

path, and sprinted. Both girls were fast. Cassie was faster on the turns but Evie's legs were longer. On a straightway she probably could have outdistanced Cassie, had she chosen the straightaway. Or she could have run back up the walk to Miss Breedlove and safety or down the hill to her Mama.

She did none of these. She caught hold of trees or posts as though she were playing a game of tag and swung around and took a new tack. She wore her customary, fixed smile, that was just showing teeth, and her eyes were the size and shape of butter chips.

Cassie yelled, this time at us, "Stop Evie!" To this day it fills me with chagrin that I did nothing to save Evie. I knew what was in Cassie's mind and I didn't want to see Evie dead. But I stood and watched without a lifted finger. Lucy Tinker squawked and squealed but made no move, either. The boys left off their leapfrog and came to see what all the ruckus was about. But none of us did anything to stop Cassie from murdering Evie.

I said in silence, "Go home, Evie. Please go home." Loretta wailed, "Why don't she just go home?" But Evie went and made her big mistake. She circled like a boomerang and crossed the style behind the old stone house, where she was trapped among the moonflowers, like any spent rabbit. Cassie tore her way through tangled trumpet creeper and blocked the only egress. We followed up and over, cowardly but curious.

For a time, Evie fought. She wasn't as stout

as Cassie but her long arms and legs gave her an advantage. She lifted up a foot and planted it in Cassie's stomach. Cassie went briefly over backward, both surprised and winded. But all the Fikes did at home was fight, fight, and Cassie knew some tricks. She flipped herself over as soon as she could breathe again, and caught Evie's ankles. Evie went down like any cut cornstalk and pulled at her skirt because the boys were watching. Cassie's and Evie's faces were almost together, as though they meant to kiss.

Evie looked around at all the rest of us, in a ghoulish circle, and it was as though she addressed us every one and spat on us all. "Go ahead," she said. "I don't give a damn."

No one spoke or moved.

"You don't have to hold me," she told Cassie fiercely. "I don't mean to run again."

Cassie got up, cautiously, Evie's hair was full of stems and seeds and her new red dress was ripped from neck to placket. She pulled her ribbon off and ducked her head. "Go on. Feel," she challenged. The words were more command than just permission, or even invitation. And they were directed straight at Cassie, but meant us, too.

"I can't," Cassie mumbled. "I don't want to."

Evie's voice was rich with scorn. "I dare you to," she said. "I double dare you."

Cassie turned away.

"Scaredy cat," Evie taunted. "Cat in a rat's hat!" She sounded bold and daring. She sat with her feet apart. "I can't stay here all night." She spoke, again, to the rest of us, but looked straight at Cassie;who stood with fists clenched and head down. Bert Ellis, who had no fear of anything, went first, and then the rest; just the way the folks at a funeral will walk along a casket. Loretta went slowly, as though against her better judgment. She leaned to touch Evie's head, but lightly. "It's like a bird," she whispered. "It's like a little bird."

I went last, even more reluctantly, but not wanting to be left out. I touched the spot barely, with just my fingertips. Loretta was right. It was like a bird, a small, warm fluttering bird.

Evie got up and brushed herself off, and fastened an undone button. She opened the gold clasp with her wide-apart teeth and pinned the bow back, a little crooked. Walking with her head held high and a little to one side, she marched up the style, and over, as if to martial music. We followed, sheepish.

From the school verandah, Miss Breedlove called, "Go home!" her voice sharp and cranky. Evie's bag and pail lay where they had fallen when she cast them. She picked them up and wiped them with her dresstail. I looked around for Cassie.

Cassie was halfway down the hill. Her shoulders

were bent and she was hunching along like a shikepoke. She was moving fast, as though anxious to get away. She had a defeated look, as though she had lost a battle instead of winning one.