



*They loved the little girl Bernadette with the big feet and
her endless, stumbling misadventures.*

PAUL GRINER

THE CARICATURIST'S DAUGHTER

Bernadette lay still in the blue light of morning, her face a shallow pool, resisting the ancient daily temptation to run her hand over her absent features. Coffee was brewing in the kitchen, so it wouldn't be long now; still, it was a pain to wait for her father to draw her face every morning before school, especially now that he was drinking again. But Bernadette had learned over time not to let her impatience show. If she did, he'd exaggerate her frowns, or make her head narrow and pointy with a wisp of smoke over it, and all day kids would make fun of her.

That had started early on. When she was four, she and her father were out for their nightly after-dinner walk, and Bernadette told her father she was going to run into the street.

No you won't he said. It's dangerous.

I'm going to, she said, standing on the soft green grass between street and sidewalk, tempted by the smooth gray ribbon unspooling before her that smelled of tar.

If you do, you'll regret it.

She touched her toe to the pavement and her father picked her up and carried her all the way home, ignoring her howls of sadness, her promises to never do it again, and in the morning she woke to the indignity of gigantic oversized clown feet, which made it impossible to run or ride her tricycle. In the end, she suffered through it for six months, even though she begged him every day to change them back.

And every day, he looked at her over the top of his glasses, pencil poised in his elegant left hand, and said, I want you to remember that lesson.

As she got older, she suspected he hadn't wanted to disappoint his

readers, since they told him in long letters that they loved the little girl Bernadette with the big feet and her endless, stumbling misadventures; he would read to her from them now and then, and every year at the anniversary of her toe-in-the-street debacle she had to put up with the clown feet for twenty-four hours.

It came not to bother her, as she learned to get her schoolwork done ahead of time and would simply call in sick; she could do a great imitation of her mother's English accent (which was occasional and never pronounced) though she began to wonder why she couldn't draw, not even a straight line with a ruler. What use was mimicry?

At seven, she'd thought it might even be dangerous, after she heard her parents having sex—though at the time she didn't know that's what it was—and asked at breakfast if they were all right.

Her father said, Why?

I heard you both last night, she said, and I thought you were sick. Then she imitated each of them moaning to perfection.

Her mother turned bright red and her father said, You know, your ears are too big.

Dad! she said, at the same time her mother said, Hugh! but he didn't listen to either of them and drew her as Dumbo. We all have things to learn, he told her when she stood in the door, sobbing and not wanting to go to school, and you've got to learn when not to listen.

That lasted a week, until she fell and scraped her knees during a windstorm and her mother put her foot down and told her father he had to stop.

But it carried over into his work. In addition to his caricatures he drew two weekly comic strips—*The Barking Dog* and *It's About Time*. In the first, a nice father had a feckless daughter Belinda, who found her ears growing each time she walked the dog (who barked endlessly and in every panel) and in the second, the girl Bernice was always late for school. In order to cure that, her father gave her an oversized paper watch that weighed down her arm.

At twelve, Bernadette got her first period, and she was irritable and bloated and had terrible cramps. Her mother made her tea with lots of sugar and kept her in bed with a hot water bottle, and her father asked from out in the hallway, as if she might be contagious, What's wrong?

She's like me, her mother said, pressing a cool washcloth to Bernadette's forehead.

Her father, smoothing his tie, said, How?

When it's soup, her mother said, using her favorite euphemism.

No kidding? her father said. God. The goddamn moon. How did I ever get so lucky? Dragon lady one and two, he said. He shook his head and turned around and said, It would have been easier if I'd had a son.

Which Bernadette thought was almost funny, because she'd always thought it would have been easier if she'd had a sister, or even a brother, someone else on whom her father could take out his frustrations.

All afternoon the house was filled with the sound of his pencil scratching over the page and Bernadette's head began to hurt, but she assumed it was just part of the fun stuff her body was doing to her; she was horrified the next morning when she awoke with grossly swollen feet covered in saddle shoes and enormous balloon-like hands in white gloves, but worst of all was when she discovered her dragon head in the mirror.

That was a figure he returned to one week out of every four for a year, until she learned to keep her mood swings to herself, no matter how pronounced.

But now he'd started drinking, and some mornings it was nearly impossible to get him to draw much of anything. Day after day she went off as a smiley face, and she was getting tired of it; without a nose she couldn't tell if she had on too much perfume until people started making comments in the hallways, and on the morning of her French oral final he forgot her mouth altogether.

Even the letter he wrote, explaining it, didn't stop her from getting detention, and in response, he began drawing caricatures of Berna-

dette's French teacher in *It's About Time*.

Her real name was Madame Aimée Hinault, but in the strip he called her Mademoiselle Ample Hindquarters, drew her with a gigantic ass, and mangled her English, in small degrees. She had trouble with certain sounds, the voiced dental fricatives especially (just like her father) and yet Mademoiselle A. Hindquarters loved one book above all others and talked about it ceaselessly: *I Am Third*, by Gale Sayers. Of course, since she struggled with "Th," whenever she spoke about the book she said, I am turd! which became her tagline, spoken at least once every day.

Madame Hinault was mortified, more by her newly giant rear end than by her problems with English, since her massive hindquarters were hard to cover up and trying to do so cost her a bundle in new clothes, but instead of being nice to Bernadette she grew meaner, and it seemed to drive her crazy that she couldn't get the smiley-faced Bernadette to frown. Eventually, Bernadette and her principal agreed she should switch to Spanish, where, it turned out, her teacher was worse — nearly deaf, he weighed over three hundred pounds and spent the morning dropping chips and popcorn on his sweated belly, the afternoon plucking crumbs from the wool, her entire class period sleeping — but she was smart enough not to say anything to her father. She didn't want the whole school to turn against her.

The fan letters kept arriving, by the hundreds and the thousands — her father had been voted the world's favorite cartoonist six years running (an honor he first campaigned for and now dreaded) — and he continued to read aloud from them, his gravelly baritone flooding with butterscotch as he repeated their praise, or turning bitter as old onions when those same fans asked what was next for Belinda and Bernice and Mrs. Ample Hindquarters.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow, he shouted, the quotation gladdening her mother, despite his yelling (she had some English blood, she said, though she was never very precise about it). But those

tomorrows did not make her father happy; the weight of them pouched his eyes and filled the pouches with liquid. The bourbon didn't help.

You don't help either, he said to her, when Bernadette pointed that out to him.

Me? What do *I* have to do with it?

He leaned toward her. He'd missed a patch on his cheek that morning, shaving, and the misaligned gray and black bristles looked like a mouthful of rotting teeth open and about to bite her. She resisted flinching.

Drawing you every day? he said. Your face? He stared at her, daring her to lower her eyes. She didn't.

He said, You think that's easy? You think that's *fun*? Even God had to do it only once. Then his voice calmed and he sat back and said, You'd be surprised how much a face weighs.

Which was strange to her, since her body had long felt weighted and heavy, stolid and imperturbable, whereas her face had always seemed as light as meringue. Perhaps that was because he had less and less power over her body as she aged. Her feet, yes, he could change those, and did, though she suspected that was due to his having done so when she was younger, yet the rest of it rarely seemed under his sway now, while he altered her face at will. She was just beginning to enjoy inhabiting her body (the times she didn't hate it), and for the first time, after his admission, it felt almost weightless.

This spurred her to recklessness the next morning when she came down to the kitchen to find it, once again, shiny with new things: famous oil paintings on the walls, a row of gleaming copper pots, huge ceramic bowls piled high with fruit (she especially loved the dusky pears). Her mother was putting away a new set of silverware and now they lay in their ordered ranks in the drawer, and yet both her parents seemed morose. Bernadette realized that these new things, which appeared at her father's behest, were the hinge on which her parents' marriage was based and that the hinge no longer worked.

You fill your lives with these new things, she said, but they don't

make you feel happy, do they? They don't make you feel less small.

Her mother and father blanched, which meant she'd struck home, and she felt good, even as anger overtook her father and she knew she was going to pay for it, good until she saw her mother's hurt face, which crushed her. But she forgot about both that day at lunch, because her own features were so small she had to break her lunch into crumbs to eat it, though when she thought about it later in study hall (where she'd put her books aside because it was too much of an effort to read with such tiny eyes) she realized that her miniature features only proved her point. They were small, small people. And someday, she would be bigger than them.

Sophomore year a day came when her father wouldn't get out of bed. Bernadette didn't understand why he was always so unhappy; if he drew things, they happened, and what could be better than that? So Bernadette banged two copper pots together over his head to wake him. He looked at her through one puffy eye, muttered something indecipherable into the pillow, and told her to leave him alone. She banged the pots together again before leaving, which felt gloriously transgressive, like sticking her tongue to metal pole outdoors on a cold winter's day, the pain to come worth the intense present pleasure. (Or so she told herself.)

After fifteen minutes he came downstairs, but he just sat at the breakfast table in his bathrobe, hair sticking up as if he'd been electrocuted, and wouldn't pick up his pencil. He looked as though he'd been assaulted while sleeping, and Bernadette thought, Old age is peeking over his horizon.

The night before, her mother had been to the bakery, and now there were doughnuts on the table, chocolate with rainbow sprinkles, Bernadette's favorite, and she really wanted one.

I want a doughnut, she said. One of the odd things about it was she could talk without a mouth and see without eyes, though only around the house. She'd never figured out how that worked, but right now she

didn't care; she wanted a doughnut and she needed a mouth to eat it.

Immediately, when his eyes went from her blank face to the doughnut and back, she wished she hadn't said a thing, hadn't clanged those pots together a second time, and as soon as he began drawing she felt her lips forming on her face and knew what he'd done without even looking.

You can't do this! she said, unable to keep her tongue from circling her thick, chocolate-frosted lips.

I already did, he said, and stomped back upstairs to bed.

Mom! she said, but her mother shook her head. She was looking rather vague these days and smelled kind of peaty, like whiskey. You know your father, she said, and lighted a cigarette, an old habit she'd begun again. I can't do anything with him once he's made up his mind, and besides. You look cute with a doughnut on your face. Not everyone could carry off that look.

So of course during homeroom, Brian Anderson, whom she'd had a crush on for three years (and who had failed to speak to her for the previous 1,147 days) said, Wow. That thing looks perfect for blowjobs, which made her burst into tears and run into the bathroom. Not even her best friend Cindy could get her to come out, and she got detention for a full week for missing all her classes. She felt especially bad that she almost liked that Brian had been cruel to her, because it meant she wasn't invisible.

The school had called, evidently, because her father was waiting for her when she came home, pencil at the ready, and before she even got a chance to speak he drew a big scarlet letter on the page, then a caricature of her around it, and she felt the D forming on her forehead.

It's not my fault, dad, she said, and burst into tears, and for the first time she could remember, her father seemed surprised.

What happened?

She told him, and he erased the D (a little roughly, she thought, since she felt her skin burning, but she didn't think it wise to tell him), turned the page on his drawing tablet, and said, Who was the boy?

She couldn't bear the thought of Brian Anderson being made to look freakish, so she said, Gordy Cooper, who was a dorky boy in her class about to move. That week, in fact, since his mother had accepted a new job in Chicago.

What's he look like? her father asked, This Cooper kid?

I don't know, she said, shrugging. Like a pear.

All night she felt guilty, but she was relieved when Gordy wasn't in school the next day, or the day after.

But really, she didn't have much time to think about him, because her father had changed her mouth completely. That morning at breakfast her mother was whispering to her father about it, and as usual he was stubborn. No way, Bernadette overheard him say. I'm giving her a mouth that no boy will ever think about sticking a cock in. When her mother continued to object, he said, Think how much she'll save on lipstick, and for some reason that quieted her.

For a year and a half Bernadette lived with it. And in some ways, it wasn't all bad: the fangs didn't really come together when she chewed, which was uncomfortable, so she ate less and lost fifteen pounds and fit into clothes she never could have worn before. Cindy, who suddenly seemed able to gain weight just by breathing, gave Bernadette all the clothes she was growing out of, and now boys looked at Bernadette in a different way, as long as they got past her lack of lips. The only really bad part was that Bernadette had to unfriend Gordy Cooper, because on his Facebook page his picture was pretty much the same as always except his head, which was now a pear, sometimes with a single serrated green leaf sprouting from the stem. It made her feel guilty to look at it.

When she finally got her lips back and lost the fangs, it was by mistake. She needed money to buy a new hair band and her allowance was in the bank and her paycheck from the ice cream store wasn't for another week, so she was fishing for quarters under the seat cushions in the study when she found her father's stash of *Playboys*.

That night at dinner her father had had a few scotches and she realized it might be dangerous to speak up, but she was tired of stuffing her anger.

Why are you always so unhappy? she said to her father.

He finished another scotch, rattled the ice cubes in the empty glass, and let out a long, theatrical sigh. Because I don't like to draw anymore.

Why not? she said. And if it's so bad, why do you do it?

He popped an ice cube in his mouth and sucked it for a long time while she waited for an answer. At last he said, Because the world exists to be drawn, and because you and your mother are expensive to maintain.

Having maneuvered him where she wanted, she said, Then draw me like this, and flipped open a *Playboy* to a picture of a brunette in jodhpurs with a pair of full breasts straining at her pink sweater.

Instead, the next morning he drew her with a big nose, long and pointed, like a sharpened broomstick.

Don't go sticking it in other people's business, he said, and sent her off. Her mother wasn't even coming out of her room any more, so Bernadette didn't bother asking for her help.

He'd forgotten her left hand, but because he gave her a normal mouth and teeth by mistake, she didn't complain, though it hurt when she closed her nose in her locker and she was red-faced for half an hour after Brian Anderson said, Wow, you look like the Pinocchio and prostitute joke. When others stopped to listen he said, Lie to me! Lie to me!

That doesn't make any sense, Brian, she said, not liking that he was the same mistake at seventeen that he had been at fourteen and fifteen and sixteen, liking less that she kept making it.

Who cares? he said. All I want is for you to lie to me!

With such a big nose, his cologne (which she'd never liked) smelled like a cleaning product, and she'd finally had enough, so she said, All right. Turn around and I will.

When he realized what she meant, he paled and pushed past her,

and she poked him in the back with her nose as he reached the corner, drawing laughs. It felt good not to let him get at her, and she wondered why she'd ever protected him in the first place, and vowed to tell her father about Gordy Cooper that afternoon when she got home.

All day her nose kept getting in her way—it was really hard to eat with—so she went to the library at lunch time and wandered through the stacks, pushing her nose against the spines of interesting books, eventually finding herself in front of the art section. At one point she stopped (she thought later it must have been fortuitous) because when she paid attention she was looking at the spine of a book on drawing caricatures; it took her several minutes, but she managed to pry it free with her nose and it dropped open on the floor to the very first page of instructions.

Why not? she decided, and got a paper and pencil and began to draw.

Start with the eyes, it said, not with the shape of the head, as that can be restrictive, and outline the nostrils with thick lines. It cautioned her to leave enough room below the nose for the mouth and to make the mouth lines thick (except for the bow of the top lip, which was to be very light) and offered tips on chins and cheeks and jaws, which were to be drawn in that order. The last sections showed her how to use squiggles, curves, and v's, and how to shade and exaggerate the obvious.

Brian had a widow's peak, so the first person she drew, and for an hour the only, was Brian with a dormer on top of his head, but no matter how many times she tried, erasing, re-drawing, shading lines lighter or darker, nothing happened to him as he sat across from her in History class, playing with his pen or snapping Cindy's bra. Still, she felt elated. Somehow, being forced to use her off hand—her right hand—made drawing easier. She drew Gordy Cooper as himself from memory, only with fewer freckles, on the off chance it would help.

For the rest of her classes she sat at her desk, ignoring Cindy's

looks (at first pleading, and then angry), drawing everyone she could, convinced she was doing a good job: Mr. Hortmueller's huge jaw, Mrs. Strathmore's droopy ear lobes, Ms. Villanueva's tiny hands. Nothing, even when she gave Ms. Villanueva two extra pinkies. On Madame Hinault's big rear end it seemed to work – the seat of her pants suddenly expanded – but when she erased it and redrew it twice the size, nothing changed; it must have been her father, busy in his office, which made sense. Two o'clock: he'd be up at last, rushing to beat the syndication deadline.

Finally she gave up and put the book away.

That night at dinner, her father looked terrible, and when her mother asked what was wrong, he rubbed his forehead like he was sanding it with his palm and said, I don't know. A terrible headache. All afternoon, my head seemed to get larger and smaller.

It's not a stroke, is it dear?

I don't think so. Just a headache. And with that he went up to bed.

In her room, Bernadette drew with the door open as the evening light faded to darkness and then brightened again, in the brilliant silver bloom of the moon. No matter whom she drew, she heard her father toss and turn. Big ears, a massive chin, a nose in the shape of a menorah. Once she went in to check on him after she'd altered a drawing of Brian Anderson and her father had huge clown feet, almost up to the ceiling, a flaccid face that sagged over the side of the bed.

Maybe it was just that she was young, she thought, and her power wasn't very general. Or maybe it was all she could ever hope for. Either way, it made her happy. She studied the last image – her father, older – turned out the light and went to bed.

In the morning, he was up surprisingly early.

I didn't want to stay in bed, he said.

Restless?

Headaches and bad dreams, he said. Most about the Barking Dog. I'd had enough of both of them. The skin on his face sagged, but it

could have just been the way he was leaning on his slender fingers, she told herself; it wasn't necessarily the power of her pencil, though his newly swarthy skin she attributed to a bit of amateurishness on her part in terms of cross-hatching. Too heavy; she'd have to use a lighter pencil next time round.

Bernadette made him breakfast, serving him tea instead of coffee. Dangerous, since he hadn't yet drawn her, yet she explained that it was supposed to increase blood flow through constricted vessels, which would relieve headaches, and he thanked her and quickly sketched her in. Almost normal, except for a vague patch on her jawline and a slightly lopsided left ear. She looked at herself in the mirror and thought, This'll do, especially when she smelled his lemony cologne and realized her nose worked perfectly.

The wind outside was enormous. Stoplights swung parallel to the ground, the speed limit sign banged on its metal pole, and all the windows rattled in their frames. Perhaps that kept him up too, she thought, though really she'd been so involved with her drawing that she hadn't heard a thing.

Her father left the house and began his long daily walk, to clear his head, he claimed, leaning into the wind, and immediately she took out paper and pencil and drew his slanting, surging figure, exactly as it appeared. He paused, flickered, and moved on, and then she erased his ears.

He dropped his hat and began frantically patting his head until his hands were pushed away by huge, flowering ears, ears bigger than Dumbo's, bigger than billboards. They billowed in the gusting wind, stretched taut as she drew them, lifted him up and sent him sailing away over all the houses, feet kicking as if he was swimming toward the low full moon. The goddamn moon, she thought. It was the last she ever saw of him. And of her mother, who, it turned out, existed only in her father's imagination and through the machinations of his pencil. Which, she decided, meant she was half a figment too, and that explained why she could exist (partially) without him.

After college, in his old notebooks and sketchpads, Bernadette sometimes drew her father wandering through various familiar neighborhoods, but when she went there herself she never found him. Everything else was exactly as she and he had drawn it, lemon trees and striped children, slanting houses, blocks of pastel apartments and expanses of purple lawn, even sprinklers with miniature rainbows on summer evenings complete with barking dogs chasing their own tails, but her father was present only in his absence, no matter how many times she sketched him in; she simply couldn't conjure him. Mademoiselle Ample Hindquarters remained amply rumped, Bernadette herself suffered through once-yearly gigantic feet, but her father wasn't even a shadow beneath an awning. And as a result, she couldn't recover her mother, either.

Eventually Bernadette began using her father's pencils (a little harder than she liked, a little darker) and his paper only to change her look from the one her father had left her (a different hairstyle, fuller lips, smaller or larger curves) and at first she loved sitting at the breakfast table and trying on one face after another, drawing herself from memory or from the mirror. If she forgot, she couldn't have her coffee, so her mouth always came first, and on Sundays, of course, she let herself go faceless until noon.

But finally the need for constant invention grew wearying, so she settled on a basic face that she altered when the mood took her or on special days or anniversaries. When she had a cold she made her nose a trumpet so all the neighbors would hear her blow it, when she had a date, she spent extra time on her eyes and lips, and in the middle of a bad or boring one, she'd go to the bathroom and take out a pencil and sketch paper and make her nose bigger or her eyes lopsided. One especially unendurable date (an hour's disquisition on salt and the body) caused her to draw her left ear in the shape of a salt cellar and to weigh down both wrists with enormous paper watches; it was a delicious pleasure to return to the table and watch her date struggle to understand what had happened. And when she really wanted to

tease, she'd use a much harder or darker pencil in the bathroom, as those dented the paper, giving her jawline odd contours, and darkened her skin.

On her father's birthday, she would alter her face to look like something he'd once drawn for her, the big ears the time she wasn't supposed to be listening, a can-opener chin the time she had trouble with a soda bottle, the various buttons that had been her nose. Brass, pewter, tortoiseshell, fabric, shell and bone. Most were round, though some were oval, a few rectangular or square, one was shaped like a parenthesis, and now and then she mixed in the single star or the maple leaf or the miniature silver squirrel. On her seventh date with the man she was falling in love with, she switched her circular ivory nose to an oval ceramic one, to see if he would notice. He did, and rubbed it with his thumb as soon as she sat back down, making her shiver. That night in bed she fell back on her old skill at mimicry, saying her name in his voice over and over again until she at last fell asleep.

And of course she had her work. Her best-selling strip became *The Adventures of Miss Minnie B*, whose heroine was forever in search of her lost family (she'd become separated from them in a time of great struggle, left purposely vague). Like all such strips, Bernadette realized, it depended on Miss Minnie's endless striving and never arriving: readers would remain interested in her only as long as she never got what she wanted.

So, both Bernadette and her heroine would go on endlessly searching, thanks to her father. That was all right, Bernadette decided one morning as she sketched Miss Minnie B sitting at the very same breakfast table she herself sat at with Ribeiro, her love, her life, sitting beside her. Miss Minnie's B's day-to-day life was a mirror in which to view both her unchangeable past and her uncertain future, a strange gift from the closest strangers of all, her parents. And each day she awoke wondering what it would bring. ■