

Funny Jo (Pussjo)

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The first time I met Funny Jo, he was twelve years old and I was ten. It was outside the firehouse of the rectory, where his mother was doing the baking. He stood there, barefoot in the drizzle, whittling a dry woodstick.

I went up to him. Stood still for a long time, looking at him. He said nothing. I said nothing.

"What are you making?" I finally asked.

He stopped the whittling, stood for a while, smiling, glancing at me.

"Shoe plug for my shoes," he answers, chuckling.

I look at his bare feet.

"Don't you have shoes then?" I ask – I feel a sort of strange chill drawing through my body.

"Oh, yes!" He chuckles again, moves his feet and curls his red toes on top of each others repeatedly. I stood there watching him for a long time, wondering. The time would never come when my father tolerated me going barefoot, and I always got new shoes when the old ones were worn out.

"What is your father's work?" I then ask.

Jo looks at me.

"Cobbler," he says. The eyes lively and mischievously shining.

I stand gaping, astonished. Son of a cobbler and yet no shoes!

"Then, can't your father make shoes for you?" Finally blurted out of me.

Funny Jo stands there, whittling again.

"He did a pair for me, when I arrived," he answers, giving me a quick glance.

"Where do you keep them, then?" I ask.

"I got them on." He is chuckling; Looks at me once again and starts laughing, a contagious, good, warm laughter. Laughs, stops and then starts laughing again, until I join in, and soon there is a happy laughter for us there, outside the firehouse, so much as Baking Marte opens the door and sticks her head outside.

"Fool", I say, half shy, working myself up to seriousness again.

The fool and the saying goes the same way", Funny Jo answers, laughing again. "What's all this noise about", Baking Marte shouts. "Will you drag your lousy skin back inside, you rascal!" She grabs Funny Jo by the arm and drags him inside.

"I better bring in the fire-wood!" he shouts, grabbing the little stick he was whittling. Then he quickly pops inside.

The mother smiles, but gets serious in a blink and looks at me with her brown, sparkling eyes.

"Get in you too – or I'll tell your pa," she says; she's standing in the doorway, staring. Slowly I get away from the firehouse, walking, looking back; 'cause I had great respect for Baking Marte.

But as I reached the front entrance room and turned a last time to look back, Funny Jo sat at the doorway inside the hallway, waving his naked feet, crouching his upper body.

"Buy my shoes off of me! He shouted after me. And I heard his good laughter all the way

through the house.

This was my first meeting with Funny Jo.

In the following time Funny Jo and I spent a lot of time together. Always he was the fair sunshine when we were playing; always were laughter and crazyness following in his barefoot tracks, and even despite of that, and what he made or made up, he gave me a deeper, warmer view of life than many a serious word from a grown mans mouth.

If someone ended up crying in the heat of the game, it often happened that Funny Jo came forward dragging a bucket of water or a pigs trough, which he put in front of the crying boy.

"Cry in 'it, boy, then you'll have it for lata'," he usually said, laughing his rolling laughter from his own statement. Thus that grief was passed. The crying one made a couple of involuntary chuckles in between, making a quick glance at Funny Jo, rubbing his eyes, resulting in broad strokes of tears all over the face, laughing again, then sprung up to get back at Funny Jo, who jumped to the ground, laughing, laying humble on the ground like a stricken puppy.

Hit Funny Jo for real! That was impossible. Because the fist was always met by a bright smile and a word so funny that it numbed off.

Flexible as a juniper twig and quick-witted and swift Funny Jo was one of the first to start a fight between us boys. But if he knocked someone to the ground, he was quick to throw himself to the ground, and kept laying there, whining and miserable, then stood up, limping away with an uneven walk. If he ended up below another boy, he always lay like he was dead, with closed eyes, so that the one on top didn't really know what to believe. Then, suddenly, he could open his eyes, big and laughing. "getóff now, you're destroying my noo clothes," he would usually say, laughing.

Poor Funny Jo! I have a memory of him up through the years of childhood wearing the same, gray and brown-mended, wornout coat, all up to the date he had his confirmation. But if some of us boys got angry during the game, which did happen all the time, and held up a fist to make a stroke, he most likely came up to the two, showing his own fist: "Hit me! Do you want to hit? You have no scythe!" he was yelling, and then he got off, hitting the air, seriously, worthy, across the field. – The sound of the scythe working through the grass, and the whetstone that sharpened the scythe when he stopped, he made with his mouth, and the sounds were so real that it always caught us and everyone watching compelled, listening to it. That was Funny Jo.

The year before Funny Jo's confirmation, He was working a lot at the sheriff's office. Then it happened that the sheriff, just as he was going to have a meeting with the Governor, had forgot his brand new uniform hat.

"Jo," the sheriff shouted. "Oh, get my new hat, the one with the golden string, but be careful."

Jo went off. Half an hour later a man came dragging a wheelbarrow down the Bergs road and stopped at the rectory. It was Funny Jo. And in the wheelbarrow the sheriffs new hat lay carefully wrapped. Jo braught the wheelbarrow with great severity up to the front porch.

"But, what in heavens, what kind of ride is this?" the sheriff asked.

Jo picked up the hat.

"The sheriff told me to be careful." He answered and handed him the hat.

Around them the laughter broke out.

"Yes you Jo, you Jo," the sheriff said, laughing too.

Then Jo went back up the Bergs road with the wheelbarrow; but as he got off sight of the rectory, he took his own, worn hat, put it in the wheelbarrow, wheeling carefully along. And the laugher from the priests farm waved after him as he went on.

In the confirmation hearing it was never a moment without Funny Jo's whimsical ideas, especially when the old Sexton had the hearings.

In front of Funny Jo sat a half old boy called Flea Ola. This Flea Ola had not got more than just enough of Gods gift called sense, and regarding the lessons learned, it was not much room for it in his strangely flattened head.

Jo, who had enough of both, thought it was nice to help him once in a while, when he was really stuck in the corner, especially when the Sexton regarded Flea Ola as his biggest despair. Because now it was his third year in hearings.

It was a Saturday morning. The Priest was visiting the Commission of the Poor, and the Sexton was set to do the hearing.

With his glasses pushed up to the forehead and his hands on the back, he stood before Flea Ola. Funny Jo sat small and smart beside.

"Well, Ola, can you tell me who went in to the Holy of Holies?"

"The High Priest," Flea Ola answered.

"Yes, that is correct, my boy." The Sexton happily tapped his shoulder. It was such a relief to get the right answer.

"Can you tell me, who kept house in the Sacred?"

Flea Ola stood staring into the air. He didn't know. The Sexton thought he needed some help.

"You told me that the High Priest was at the Holy of Holies; but where is the Priest staying?" The Sexton took a swing across the floor to give him some time.

Flea Ola stood silent, staring. Then Funny Jo quickly whisperes something to him and sits steady and devoutly as before.

"Well, my boy, where does the Priest stay?"

Flea Ola looks boldly up at the Sexton.

"In the Commission of the Poor," he says.

A releasing laughter goes through the schoolroom. Flea Ola stands, lost.

The Sexton draws a subtle smile.

"You!" he says, nodding at Funny Jo.

"In the Holy," Funny Jo answers, devoutly and in a singing voice.

"That is correct, my boy," the Sexton says and turns to Flea Ola again.

"Can you tell me, my dear Ola - of how many parts does the scripture concist of?"

Flea Ola is staring straight ahead.

"Of two parts," he answers.

"Correct. And which are those two parts?"

Funny Jo is whispering.

"The first and the second part."

"Quite right, yes - but don't they have other names?"

Flea Ola is muted. Then Funny Jo whispers again.

"One front part and one back part," Flea Ola says.

Same laughter as earlier.

Then the Sexton got angry.

"No, my dear Ola," he says.

"A little thinking is required before you give an answer!" he always falls into dialect

when upset.
Then he heard Funny Jo.

When the day for Funny Jo's confirmation came up, I was in the church. I saw him standing there pale, for the first time in new clothes. And there were no hope of getting a smile from him, neither that day nor the next.

"t'r ya gonna make fo'a livin, Jo?" Ola Johnsen, the farmboy asked him the third day, as he stood in his new clothes by the great hall.

"Being man," Funny Jo answers.

"Whe ya gonna serve?" Ola Johnsen continues to ask.

"Oh, I think, I go to th sheriff right away," Funny Jo answers – and now he laughs his well known rolling laughter.

Fifteen years old I left the Rendalen to go to school in Kristiania. But every summer since that time I have visited the valley, and often did I run into Funny Jo, which now had taken up his father's crafts.

The sixth year after I left the vally, I took my time to walk the fields and forests around my homestead, visiting the crofts and talking to earlier neighbours and people of the valley about the old days.

Well placed in the Ronningen, where Thousand Mikkell lived, I asked for Funny Jo.

Well, He was the same as back then, except that he recently lost his mother.

Easy Marte was dead. She caught pneumonia in the middle of the very summer, and there were no other who could do such a thing.

"Was is quick?" I asked.

"Yes, flamingly quick," Thousand Mikkell answered. "It'wa' all done 'n three days, yeah, she 's quick off, she Baking Marte," he added.

I asked him where I could see Funny Jo.

"Oh, nowadays he's gone to th' forests. He's living at 's ma's house."

I said goodbye to Thousand Mikkell and went up to Skreddertroen, from there crossing the fields and up to the small croft under the Enkegarden.

The old, skewed cabin was still there. I pushed the handle. It was locked. I looked into the dark window. It was empty.

Slowly I went uproad, bent above the Sveen and into the forest in the old, familiar neighbourhood. As I walk up the Grova, the farm road to the Harsjovollen, I see a man sitting on a woodstump by the road, with his head in his hands.

I slowly walk up to him. I have an idea of it being Funny Jo, and I don't want to make it worse. When I had come quite close, he's lifting his head, sees me, wants to get up, but keeps sitting, looking down.

"Good day, Jo!"

"Good day!" He has to look up, but then again falls back to his former position. I saw rivers of tears down his smooth, happy face, for the first time in my life.

I stood still for a while. He sat as before. It was quiet in the vast forest around us, it was high noon and a baking sun.

"I hear you lost your mother, Jo," I finally say.

He doesn't answer right away. Then one can hear, low-voiced and soar:

"Oh, yes, I had something to loose,me as well!"

Again silence.

"Did she suffer on her deathbed?" – I did almost not dare to speak loud in presence of his silent greaf.

"Oh, she saw 'arder times while she lived."

He sits, staring.

"So, where will you live now, Jo?" I ask, in purpose of leading the conversation into another path.

Jo gets up.

"Oh, in the whole of the village," he says, a hint of a smile lights up in the wet grayish face.

Then he leaves. Turns around, at a distance, stops, looks at me.

"Live well," he says.

"You too." I stay there, watching him walking away. In a while he stops again. Pulls off his coat, bends forward drying off his eyes with the whole coat and both hands. Then he takes the coat, twisting it, as you twist a wet towel, put it on again and starts running downhill.

I had to laugh at my spot on the top of the hill.

Even in his life's greatest greaf he had to do a smile!