

Why You Are Here is a collection of fifteen contemporary short stories by Todd Walton set in the town of Mercy on the far north coast of California; stories of friendship, emotional honesty, generosity, compassion, and love.

Why You Are Here: and other stories

By Todd Walton

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Todd Walton

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Published by Under the Table Books 2022

Print ISBN: 979-8-88531-088-8

Ebook ISBN: 979-8-88531-089-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Walton, Todd

Why You Are Here and other stories

by Todd Walton

Mendocino: Under the Table Books [2022]

Literature, short stories, American

Library of Congress Control Number: 2022904928

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Cover Design by Todd Engel.

Under the Table Books

P.O. Box 366

Mendocino CA 95460

Printed on acid-free paper.

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Author's Note

Each story in this collection may be enjoyed as a stand-alone creation. However, if you, dear reader, partake of these stories in the order they are presented, you will have an experience akin to reading a novel. The stories herein are set in the town of Mercy on the far north coast of California. Several of the characters appear in multiple stories, and your knowing of them will deepen as you progress through the collection.

Fear of Funny

“What if you knew you were supposed to be something,” says the boy to the psychologist, “but you also knew if you *were* that you would get punished?”

“That would be a difficult situation to be in,” says the psychologist, a specialist in troubled adolescents.

“You can say *that* again,” says the boy, who is eleven and often makes the psychologist laugh, though the psychologist tries not to.

*

“He’s just so *funny*,” says the psychologist to *his* psychologist. “And he catches me off guard and I laugh before I can stop myself.”

“Why not laugh?” asks the psychologist’s psychologist. “He probably *wants* you to laugh.”

“Yes, he does, and that’s the problem,” says the psychologist, laughing just thinking about the boy. “That’s what made his parents send him to me.”

“I’m confused,” says the psychologist’s psychologist. “They don’t want him to have a sense of humor?”

“Not at school. You see, the other kids love him because he’s so funny and that infuriates his teachers.”

“Oh. He’s disruptive and talks out of turn?”

“No. He only speaks when he’s called on or to give a report in front of the class, and then he’s apparently hysterically funny.”

“I don’t see why this is a problem.”

“As I understand the situation, this wasn’t a *big* problem until he got to Eighth Grade. Now his teachers feel his humor eclipses their power to such an extent his classmates defer to him instead of to them, so they won’t have him in their classes. He’s been kicked out of three schools.”

“This is preposterous,” says the psychologist’s psychologist. “If he’s not doing anything wrong, why shouldn’t he be funny? Is he a good student?”

“Brilliant. He’s skipped two grades and could easily skip another.”

“Are we talking about private or public schools?”

“Both.”

“And what do his parents want *you* to do?”

“Help him not be so funny.”

“Are you serious?”

“This is not uncommon, someone using humor as an emotional crutch.”

“Do you think that’s what he’s doing?”

“Not really, but his parents are desperate. His father wants to send him to a military academy, and his mother doesn’t. Would you see him and give me your opinion about how I might proceed?”

“Yes, I’d love to see him.”

*

The boy enters the office of the psychologist's psychologist, gazes around the room, sits in the armchair opposite the psychologist's psychologist and says, "Don't tell me. You're a psychologist."

The psychologist's psychologist laughs, not just because it's a funny opening line, but because the boy's timing and delivery are flawless.

"So good to laugh," says the psychologist's psychologist. "Thank you for that. And by the way, please call me Joe."

"You're welcome, Joe" says the boy, smiling. "I'm Zack. What brings you here today?"

"Your other psychologist asked me to meet with you," says Joe, laughing at how convincing Zack is as a psychologist. "He thought if I spoke to you, I might be able to see how to help him help you."

"Help him help me do *what*?" asks Zack, frowning. "Not be funny?"

"No," says Joe, shaking his head. "Help you navigate this strange society we find ourselves in, schools with teachers threatened by your sense of humor, a father who wants to send you to a military academy. That kind of thing."

"I can't help being funny," says Zack, shrugging. "It's my delivery. I say *hello* to people and they laugh. And

when I *don't* say anything, people find that funny, too.” He arches an eyebrow. “You doubt me? Watch.”

He falls silent and Joe bursts out laughing.

*

Zack’s parents sit in two armchairs in Joe’s office facing Joe in his armchair, and Joe knows before either of them speaks that Zack’s mom Gloria is the funny one, Zack’s father Frank not so much.

“Thank you for coming to see me,” says Joe, smiling at Zack’s parents. “This session, by the way, is gratis. I’m intrigued by your son’s situation and want to help you without bankrupting you.”

Gloria laughs and Frank says, “Nonsense. We’re happy to pay you. We want to get to the bottom of this.”

“Well,” says Joe, noting the relational dynamics and sense of humor differences between Gloria and Frank, “I’ve met with Zack twice and I think he’s marvelous. Yes, we had some good laughs, but we also had serious discussions about his situation.”

“He really likes you,” says Zack’s mother, smiling gratefully at Joe.

“Good to hear,” says Joe, nodding. “So... what I want to discuss with you is what you want for your son. What kind of life you’d like him to have.”

“We want him to be happy,” says Gloria, her eyes filling with tears.

“To succeed,” says Frank, nodding.

“By succeed you mean...”

“Not be a problem at school,” says Frank, grimly. “Go to a good college, have a good career, wife, kids. The whole nine yards.”

“Do you see *him* as the problem at school, or do you see his teachers as the problem?” asks Joe, trying to deliver this line as neutrally as possible.

“Him,” says Frank, without a moment’s hesitation.

“His teachers,” says Gloria, sighing. “And *they’re* not going to change.”

“Why do you think Zack is the problem, Frank?”

“He does this on purpose,” says Frank, clenching his fists. “He does it to make them feel stupid because they don’t understand why everyone thinks he’s so funny, and it pisses them off.”

“Your son doesn’t strike me as someone who would intentionally want to piss people off,” says Joe, mildly. “He strikes me as inherently kind.”

“He is,” says Gloria, nodding in agreement with Joe’s assessment of Zack. “He’s just a natural comedian, like my father.”

“Your father who barely makes a living,” says Frank, disdainfully. “He may make everybody laugh, but he sells shoes.”

“He makes a fine living,” says Gloria, glaring at Frank. “And my father doesn’t just sell shoes, he sells *lots* of shoes. And my mother is a *legal* secretary. They do just fine.”

“Would you say Zack identifies with your father, Gloria?” asks Joe, not surprised by the emotional chasm between Gloria and Frank, having been forewarned of this by Zack.

“Not particularly,” says Gloria, shaking her head. “Everyone in my family is funny. Zack just happens to be *very* funny.”

“Getting kicked out of school is not very funny,” says Frank, subsiding. “I’m worried about him. What kind of future will he have if he can’t make it in school?”

“I would be worried, too, Frank,” says Joe, nodding sympathetically, “if Zack were my child.”

Frank looks at Joe as if seeing him for the first time. “Thank you,” he says quietly. “I can hardly sleep worrying about him.”

“The challenge,” says Joe, looking into Frank’s anxious eyes, “is to make your son feel you’re on his side, which, of course, you are, while at the same time helping him make whatever changes he needs to make to surmount these difficulties.”

Frank frowns. “You mean... tell him it’s okay to be funny? But...”

“I mean letting him know you love him for who he is and not for what other people think about him.” Joe looks from Frank to Gloria and back to Frank. “When we’re kids we figure out how to survive as best we can. And the most important thing parents can do for their children is to thoroughly love them and let them *know* you love them.”

*

Zack comes to the microphone and waits for the thunderous applause to die down, the theatre packed to the rafters with his fans. He is twenty-seven, recently married for the first time, his stand-up career having propelled him into a successful movie career. He takes the microphone from the stand and brings the shiny silver thing to within a few inches of his lips.

“So when I was eleven my parents sent me to a shrink because I got kicked out of three schools for being funny.”

The audience howls with laughter. They know this story backwards and forwards, yet no matter how many times Zack does this routine, he brings the house down.

“Yeah, no kidding. The teacher would call on me and ask, ‘Zack, who wrote the *Declaration of Independence*?’ And I would say, ‘The comedy team of Jefferson, Franklin, and Adams,’ and the class would laugh and when the laughter died down the teacher

would say, ‘Why did you call them a comedy team? Was that necessary?’ And I would say, ‘Maybe not necessary, but it got the laugh.’ And the class would laugh again.”

The audience laughs about the class laughing at Zack for being funny. The audience loves Zack. He can say almost anything and they’ll laugh, though the favorite parts of his routines for most people are when he gets serious, *really* serious, and talks about painful things that need to be talked about but most of the time are not.

“So my shrink was baffled by me, and after a couple sessions sent me to *his* shrink,” says Zack, holding for another laugh. “Kind of like Obi Wan Kenobi sending Luke Skywalker to Yoda and telling Yoda, ‘The force is not with this kid. Maybe you can help him get with it.’”

Big laughs.

“Though I can assure you my shrink’s shrink was much more than a therapist. You know what he was?”

Hundreds of people in the audience reply, “A compassionate human being!”

Zack nods in agreement and walks across the stage to sit in a big comfy armchair. “And after he and I had some good laughs together, he arranged to meet with my parents, otherwise known as Mother Teresa and Attila the Hun.”

Huge laughs.

“My father, you see, was siding with my outraged teachers, and my mother was on my side. My father wanted to send me to a military academy to break me of my terrible habit of being funny, and my mother wanted me to skip high school and go directly to Harvard, though Harvard had yet to be informed of her wishes and *I* had yet to develop pubic hair.”

Big laughs.

“So you can imagine what *I* imagined would go on in that first session with Yoda, Mother Teresa, and Attila.”

Laughter.

“But by golly, the force must have been with them,” says Zack, getting up from his chair and returning the microphone to the mike stand, “because when my parents came home from that session, my father asked me to go on a walk with him, which stunned me because he and I were not close.” He pauses. “Not yet.”

The audience falls so silent you can hear a pin drop.

“We walked down to the river, my father and I, to the place where we used to go fishing together when I was little and wasn’t so funny yet. And my father cleared his throat and made a series of faces so hilarious I had a *very* hard time not laughing, but I *didn’t* laugh because I could sense this was maybe the hardest thing my father had ever done in his life. Then he said, ‘Zack, I’m worried about you. I’m worried about how your life might turn out if you don’t make it

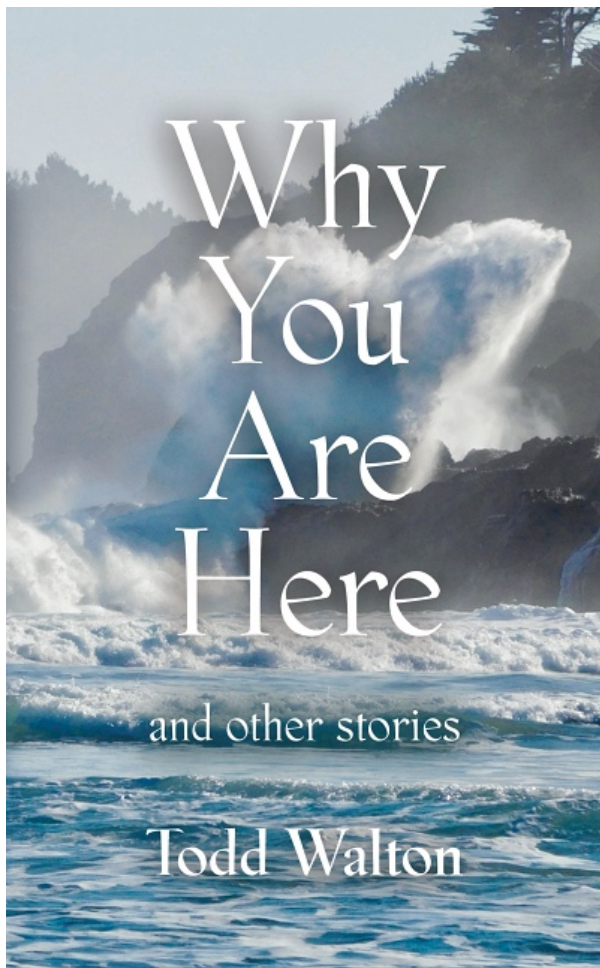
through high school and go to college. And I think maybe you're worried, too. But here's what I want you to know. We'll get through this together. I'll help you any way I can. I want you to be happy.' And then he took the deepest breath he ever took in his life, I'm sure, and said, 'I love you.'"

Long pause.

"And that, as my shrink's shrink knew it would, did the trick. I went back to school and was still the funniest kid in every class I ever had, except for Trigonometry. The funniest kid in Trigonometry was Angus Dorfmeier who always, and I mean *always*, farted audibly during tests, and we all *lived* for those moments, I assure you. And for some reason my being funny no longer infuriated my teachers, and lo and behold I made it through high school and eventually got a degree in Psychology, and now I'm here with you. And believe you me, it doesn't get any better than this."

Now the audience rises to applaud him, and Zack hears in their applause his father saying *I want you to be happy. I love you.*





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