

THE
FUN
TIMES
BRIGADE

a novel



LINDSAY
ZIER-VOGEL

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Book*hug Press
Toronto 2025

FIRST EDITION

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: The fun times brigade / Lindsay Zier-Vogel.

Names: Zier-Vogel, Lindsay, author.

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20240524330 | Canadiana (ebook) 2024052649X

ISBN 9781771669412 (softcover)

ISBN 9781771669429 (EPUB)

Subjects: LCGFT: Novels.

Classification: LCC PS8649.I47 F86 2025 | DDC C813/.6—dc23

The production of this book was made possible through the generous assistance of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. Book*hug Press also acknowledges the support of the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund and the Government of Ontario through the Ontario Book Publishing Tax Credit and the Ontario Book Fund.

Funded by the
Government
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Canada



Canada Council
for the Arts

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PART ONE

SPRING IS A BLUR THIS YEAR—AMY SEES PURPLE crocuses from Alice’s bedroom window during those hazy first few days, but her nipples hurt too much to register what they are. The air smells different, though, when Max opens the window—it has lost its metallic edge and is looser, greener.

One morning after a particularly awful night, the tree outside their bedroom window has tiny green leaves that have never known wind or punishing rain. And she sees forsythia during a shuffle up the street, but then her organs feel like they’re going to fall out of her body, so she turns around and shuffles home.

Until this year, Amy was always on tour in April and May, so she’s used to a patchwork of spring—cherry blossoms in Vancouver, snow flurries in Regina, tulips in Ottawa, blizzards in Fredericton. But this spring, she sees all the flowers bloom—the snowdrops, the crocuses, the daffodils that rise up with bright yellow trumpets, their wide-open faces almost too brave to bear. The allium grows as the tulip petals fall, their towering

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stalks higher than the fence, their onion-like buds ready to burst for days. When they do, they are like fireworks caught and held, and perfectly purple. Amy cuts them and brings them inside—spherical explosions on the dining-room table that she can see from her breastfeeding corner on the couch. She needs to remember that there is more to the world than Netflix-fuelled cluster-feeding, and the strange half-awake, half-asleep state of her life.

Alice is four weeks old, her head rounder and less cone-shaped than it was when she was first born, her eyes that deep newborn blue that everyone says will change. She kicks away invisible ninjas and conducts orchestras with her tiny hands. She fights sleep and loves milk and hates baths. Her fingernails are daggers even after Amy bites them, swallowing those tiny half-moons instead of spitting them out.

Like lightning, Amy has become someone's mom, and it's still a shock that she and Alice are separate, though they are and they aren't. When Alice falls asleep on Amy, their heartbeats pressed against each other's, they are back to being a single entity, but Alice has her own lungs, her own voice, her own will that she asserts in the middle of the night.

It's pitch black and Alice won't stop screaming. It's gas probably, or the whole mixing up day and night thing that's been going on for way longer than Amy ever thought possible. Amy bounces up and down, holding Alice's swaddled body against her chest, wondering if her stitches have fully dissolved. She's so tired—cobbling together an hour, two hours of sleep in a row. She doesn't know what time it is—she made Max hide the clocks in the bedroom. Her body knows it's only been an hour since she was up last, and she doesn't need bright red numbers taunting her at 3:00 a.m., 4:00 a.m., 5:00 a.m.

Amy bounces and sways. *Maybe singing will lull Alice back into not-screaming*, she thinks. She's spent most of her adult life singing kids' songs—touring, recording, performing on TV, but her mind is blank. She has no songs, nothing.

Eventually, she sings the only thing that comes to her—the Sleep Country Canada jingle. She sings it on a loop, again and again while Alice screams. They bounce, Amy sings, and eventually the pitch of Alice's crying isn't quite as dire. She whimpers. Her eyes close. She's almost asleep and Amy whisper-sings the jingle again. Alice is sleeping, her tiny red face scrunched up against Amy's shoulder.

Amy lowers herself carefully into the glider—a beautiful, fancy glider that looked so much nicer than all the other old-lady gliders in the store—but it is so uncomfortable. She regrets buying it, but she didn't know about stitches then, about separated abs, about how awful it would be to not sleep for four weeks and counting—

Amy sits, too upright to sleep, Alice a tight muslin chrysalis on her chest, and the songs come flooding back. “Baby Beluga” and “Itsy Bitsy Spider.” *Out came the sun and dried up all the rain.* She wills herself to remember them for when Alice wakes up.

“What did you do today?” Max asks Amy when he gets home from work. He reaches for Alice.

The answer is nothing. The day was a hamster wheel of nursing and diaper changes and swapping out damp breast pads and trying to get Alice to sleep. Hours bled into each other as Amy and Alice swayed and bounced and paced and Amy kept trying to get up the energy to leave the house.

Today was one of Max's research days—he's a math professor, and does the impenetrable kind of math, though he wouldn't call

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it that. Pure math he'd call it—geometric topology. “Like, maps?” Amy asked on one of their early dates. But it wasn't maps—he studied topological quantum field theory, invariants of manifolds, homotopical algebra, and moduli spaces, Amy learned, not that she knows what any of those words mean—and today, he got to sit in his silent office and follow a thought, any thought, to its end. No one needed to be fed, or burped, or convinced to nap. Amy envies him for his research days, but she's envious of his teaching days, too, when he gets to stand in front of a classroom of students, and go for lunch with colleagues, and drink coffee with his PhD candidates. A whole day of interacting with people who love what he loves; a whole day of being out of the house.

Amy can't remember the last time she left the house. Tomorrow, she promises herself. Tomorrow, she will leave the house. She walks upstairs, while Max murmurs to Alice about his meeting with the Dean. It's a relief to not be the only adult in the house, but her arms are hollow without Alice in them.

When she wakes up the next morning, Amy remembers her promise, and during Alice's morning nap, she pulls out the wrap they got as a shower gift. It's a long, grey piece of fabric and it seems impossible that it'll hold a baby. But she wants to become one of the moms she'd see when she was pregnant, walking into the coffee shop and ordering cappuccinos with babies strapped to them. She opens up her laptop and finds a YouTube video and follows along, wrapping the fabric around her belly, and over her shoulders. She makes an X in the front, an X in the back, but it's not right. She tries again and again, and she's tangled in fabric when Alice wakes up, yowling and hungry. Amy pulls at the knots and yanks the grey fabric over her head, then sits back in her corner of the couch and nurses Alice, cursing the mom who made it look so easy in the YouTube video.

“We have to leave the house,” Amy tells Alice, but Alice screams when Amy tries to put her in her stroller, and Amy can’t handle trying the wrap again, so they stay inside, and Amy cries as quietly as she can while Alice falls back to sleep on her. *Tomorrow*, she tells herself, as she starts the second season of *Schitt’s Creek*. She’ll leave the house tomorrow.

After Max leaves for work the following morning, Amy wraps the fabric around and over, around and over, a criss-cross at the front, a criss-cross at the back. She doesn’t let herself hesitate. Alice starts crying when Amy shoves one leg, then the other, through the diagonal fabric, but she does it. Almost. It’s too loose. She puts Alice back down on the couch and starts again.

“One more time,” she says as Alice kicks and cries.

And this time, it works. Alice’s little legs are in, bum lower than her knees. Amy can rest her lips on the top of her head. She bounces to get Alice to stop crying. “See? Look at us!”

Amy takes a picture in front of the mirror and sends it to her best friend, Julie. *I think we did it!*

It’s almost nine and the sun is warm on her face. Squirrels dash across the sidewalk, and a FedEx guy carries boxes to a neighbour’s front door, and a toddler walks past her drunkenly pushing a wagon. The mom smiles at Amy and Amy smiles back. She presses her lips to Alice’s head and beams—she’s finally one of them, a capital-M Mom.

She turns onto Bloor with Alice tight against her chest, but the traffic is loud and there are so many cars, and six dogs with a dog walker, and a man on a bike who shouldn’t be on the sidewalk, his basket clinking with empties. The coffee shop is still a block away, but it’s too much. Too loud and too busy and Alice hasn’t gotten her vaccines yet and Amy keeps imagining a car jumping the curb and slamming into them, pinning them

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against the window glass of the nail salon. She turns around and rushes back up the street, trying to breathe.

Amy opens the gate to the backyard. It's quiet back here. Alice is safe. There are violets blooming on the lawn. Their neighbour's lilac has just burst into bloom. Amy sits on the patio chair and tries not to feel like a failure.

She sends Julie a selfie with the lilacs in the background. *Tried to make it to the coffee shop, but ended up here*, she writes.

Gorg, you two! Julie writes back. *Enjoy that sun!*

The tulips and daffodils are long gone, but the peony bush Max planted from his grandmother's backyard a few years ago is growing taller. Amy closes her eyes and reminds herself that the goal was to get outside and here she is, outside. She looks at the photo of her and Alice again. She did it. They did it. She can get coffee another day.

Amy opens the notes app on her phone and types: *Potential spring song.*

Leaf green

A line of sparrows (guest flute? Clarinet??)

Violets as polka dots

Ants and peonies

She tries humming something, then realizes it's the tune of "Puddle Jumping."

Sunhats and sunscreen (title?)

Strawberries and

Amy stares at the screen trying to think of another s-word.

A snail named Simon?

Alice wiggles in the wrap and starts whimpering, so Amy stands and starts to sway. She glances at the list on her phone and tries to will it into a song. She hasn't written anything new since she got pregnant with Alice. She hasn't touched her guitar, or even her ukulele, in months. For the first time in over a decade, she doesn't have a Fun Times Brigade show coming

up, or a recording session, or songs to write for a new album. Instead, it's just Alice, every day.

"This baby will be the greatest song you'll ever write," someone wrote in a card at her baby shower. It seemed beautiful when Amy was still pregnant, but now it feels stupid. Alice isn't a song, she's a baby. A crying, pooping, burping, nursing, crying baby.

Alice starts ratcheting up and Amy starts bouncing more vigorously, wondering if the neighbours can hear. "Shh, shh, shh," she says, bouncing Alice up and down pats her back.

"Blue met Yellow and they gave a high-five. They did a little dance and they did a little jive," Amy sings. "The Crayon Song" is The Fun Times Brigade's biggest hit.

Alice keeps screaming.

"Crayons, crayons. Dancing, twirling, skating, swirling, all the colours are unfurling."

Alice shrieks against her chest.

"Yellow met Red and they gave a high-five. They did a little dance and they did a little jive." Alice starts gulping and Amy keeps bouncing, keeps singing.

Eventually, Alice's eyes begin to close again. "And just like that Yellow and Red looked around and said . . . Orange."

The Crayon Song strikes again! Amy texts Fran. *Just got Alice from full scream to asleep before Purple!*

Amy waits to see the little bubbles of Fran writing back, but nothing. She sways with Alice and wonders if Alice will let her sit down.

She copies the text and sends it to Max and Julie.

Way to go, superstar mama, Julie writes back right away.

Nice one, Max writes back and Amy tries not to think about the hours before Max gets home unfurling impossibly in front of her.

I've got chicken marinating. I'll grill kebabs when I'm home, Max has written. Still nothing from Fran.

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Amy opens the notes app again. She used to be able to sit down and churn out lyrics, whipping out a song in an hour, sometimes less, but now she's stuck bouncing and swaying in her backyard, unable to even walk down to Bloor to get herself a coffee. She doesn't know who she is without a guitar in her hands. She doesn't know who she is without an audience waiting for an encore.

Alice wakes up and starts to fuss again. Amy untangles her from the fabric wrap and unclips her bra, trying to get Alice to latch.

Alice is enough, Amy tells herself, turning her phone off. She doesn't need music right now. She has everything she needs right here.