

JANUARY 30, 2017

*Once, we Literarians were adventuresome little boys. How do we remember our guile before we turned into teenage terrorists — when we exuded curiosity and our parents or grandparents enjoyed our company?*

*This evening's budget recalls stories and vignettes from our own boyhoods. First, mine being from the Great Depression and World War Two. Then, Dick Hague's from the Cold War of the 50's. Finally, Tom Murphy's from the late 60's.*

### **Waiting for Benny**

My cousin Benjamin would never go upstairs by himself in our grandmother's house in Salt Lake City. On a hook in the dark stairway hall among winter coats hung a greenish-brown Halloween costume, a monkey suit. It buttoned up the back. Its arms and legs dangled down together with a long limp purple tail. Behind those thin red lips and green face, Benny was sure, were sharp teeth. And two beady black eyes stared out from the shadows thrown from the light bulb hanging by a cord. Benny just knew that the thing would jump out at him in a devil's dance. Even worse, from the day couch in the dining room when Benny saw the stairway door open, those monkey eyes were watching him. But when Uncle Harald took him upstairs past that monkey suit he wasn't scared at all.

Uncle Harald was fun. He was my mother's brother, with license to tell us ghost stories. He created black minstrel shows with puppets he made from pieces of wood, wire, paper and paste. He wrote plays; he played the piano, violin, and clarinet. He was a Scout Master.

One afternoon I went looking for Benny and found him on the couch in grandma's dining room under a quilt, quivering. "What's the matter?" I asked. It was too long ago to remember exactly what he told me. Apparently, a bunch of boy scouts had gone upstairs with Uncle Harald to the attic room at the top of the stairs where the scout troop often met. Benny wanted to join them, but the monkey suit stopped him cold. He said Uncle Harald was telling the scouts about the ghosts that lived in these stairs. And it scared him.

I tried to reassure Benny: "There aren't any ghosts in there. He's just having some fun." Suddenly, all at once it seemed, all those boy scouts came clomping

down the stairs and rushed past me and out the door. Benny jumped up from the couch and ran after them. Just then, something flashed by me so fast I had to look twice. It was the monkey suit from the stair well. Its legs were flying wildly and arms pumping and flapping loosely. What I noticed most was its purple tail. It stood out straight, stiff as a rod. The greenish face mask swung right to left. I made out a grim grin under its beady eyes. It caught up with Benny and ran passed him as the boys scattered like blown leaves. The apparition then took a sharp turn at the next street in the direction of Linden Avenue. Benny stumbled to a stop and turned back. When we reached grandma's house we found Uncle Harald there laughing his ass off. "Where did it go? he asked us."

### *Linden Avenue*

Linden Avenue dead-ended on Eighth East Street right across from Benny's house. Down Linden Avenue was old brown barn that smelled of stale rat farts. It's no longer there, but during the Depression a group of us boys from about six to eleven or twelve would gather in the loft to plot schemes and brag and argue. Next to the barn was a vacant lot where we dug tunnels and played war games. Bobby Watkins' house was on the other side of the lot. Up in our loft, Bobby told us about the "black lady." She was dressed all in black without feet and floated in his house from room to room. He saw her snatch a baby from its crib and disappeared with it. "She'd always come back," he said, "and sometimes with the baby." "I don't believe it," I said. "It's true!" Bobby insisted. "Cross my heart, hope to die." Bobby also swore he saw the devil go through a wall in his upstairs bedroom when he looked to see why his dog was barking. He told unbelievable stories that we halfway believed.

In the loft we had what anthropologists would call a primitive culture. "Who farted?" "Not me!" "He did it!" All boys' fart cultures at their their core were the same. By nature we were all guilty of communal farting and each culture had intricate cover-ups. If you denied too emphatically, you were obviously guilty. An unusually quiet kid no doubt was a stinky farter. A smirk was the surest admission against interest. The loudest accuser most certainly was the perpetrator. And a good loud fart let with panache was something to be proud of. In our fart culture, we could detect a culprits's guilt almost instantly. Swift punishment followed—a nuggie on the perps' arm or a knuckle rub applied by each kid in a huddle. Then back to business at hand. Girls wouldn't go near the place.

When summer came, every boy knew when to start digging tunnels in the vacant lot with secret rooms for planning wars or comparing dicks with a flashlight. "You do what with it?" "How many hairs do you have on your balls?" We eyed each others' nipples, too. Why did we have them? No girls were allowed in our tunnels, but we were curious. A few boys without sisters tried to coax them in to compare their tits with our nipples. But boys of our age didn't really want them in our caves or dens and still don't. Girls had no interest in our tribal customs, but they had their own. A gang of ten or eleven year-old girls once captured me and dragged me into a garage. They tied me up and tried to take my pants down, then took turns kissing me on the face. Ugh!

We had enterprises for making money, and I don't mean selling lemonade. I learned from *The Book of Knowledge* how to create a spontaneous combustion. If you dropped a little water on a chemical mixture containing carbon and strontium nitrate, it would burst into flame. This led Benny and me to put on magic shows. "I bet you a nickel I can start a fire with a drop of water!" A free-thinking English teacher let me conduct this experiment in her fourth grade. She had to put out the fire. There were tricks, pranks and cruelties in every season. At last, none too soon, testosterone poisoning overcame our innocent curiosity and it was time to leave this boyhood community.

As the War was ending, my parents gave me a football helmet and shoulder pads for Christmas. That meant I would soon be leaving the group. By summer, I wasn't quite big enough to play tackle with the older guys, so found other uses for the shoulder pads. We'd seen the movie *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* played by Charles Laughton as the gentle but grotesque Quasimodo and the gypsy Esmeralda played by Maureen O'Hara, in twelfth-century Paris. With some of my mother's makeup and cotton wads and wearing my shoulder pads with a pillow under a bathrobe, I could fix myself up to look like the hunchback and scare the hell out of my mother. My outside would look hideous, while my inner heart would remain full of kindness just like Quasimodo's when he rescued the gypsy girl from the gallows.

For my next move I talked Benny into asking around to see if anyone had seen a hunchback in the back alleys of our neighborhood at night. Benny embellished the story. "The hunchback is very poor." he'd whisper, "and creeps into the barn to sleep when nobody is around. He has no friends or family but he really has a kind heart. At night he comes out to find food and water. He goes

through garbage cans. And he might find some old blankets and rags to keep him warm.”

A half-block from the barn, down Linden Avenue, lived the poor Denys family with four kids. They were weird and a little slow, but not stupid. We didn’t shun them as we did enemy strays from another neighborhood. They belonged with us. We were no saints and teased them for awkwardness or sent them to play outfield with the girls to shag missed fly-balls.

One Saturday morning, we gathered to dig in the vacant lot next to the barn, professing a strategy of tunneling into the barn to spy on the hunchback. We’d be able to see him sleeping without waking him up, we explained to our recruits that included one of the young Denys boys. About noontime his brother Junior Denys passed by.

“What you diggin?” he asked his younger brother.

“Diggin’a tunnel.”

“You what?”

“A secret tunnel into the barn.”

“What for?”

“See the hunchback in there! Crawl in and see ‘im in the corner.”

“Wadaya need a tunnel for? They’ll never dig that far. It’s only talk. Why don’t you just go look in through the barn door? There ain’t no hunchback in there, anyhow. They’re just playin’ tricks on you!”

“He’d see me and come after me if I went in the door!”

“Come on home for lunch! Then we’ll come back and take a look. There ain’t no hunchback livin in there!”

I turned to my cousin. “Benny,” I said, “Here’s our chance for some real fun.” At home I took my gear into the bathroom and with special care started to turn into the hunchback again. I painted one eye red with lipstick and made it appear much lower than the other one with eyeliner markings and eye shadow. Cotton pads puffed out one cheek and one side of the upper lip.

Benny's next job was to coax Junior Denys and his little brother to the barn and help them through the sliding door to see if the hunchback is in there. I'd be waiting inside the barn in my outfit.

Soon I was in the barn getting bored when the door slid open a crack. "Come on!" Benny said. "I think he's under the loft. He sleeps there. Go see for yourselves. Don't make a sound!"

I crouched down under the loft and watched the Denys brothers help each other slide through the sliver of light. Grunting like Quasimodo, I began a slow sideway limp into the dim light. They froze. I cocked my head and with the one good eye looked up at them from the shadows. Before they could move, I sprang with a roar. Out of the barn they flew, down Linden Avenue, with friends close behind.

I loped after them, with Benny tagging along. We started to laugh so hard that we had to stop. Our stomachs hurt. To be honest, our fun at the Denys boys' expense had gone a bit too far. And we'd missed something else that had come out of the barn. Benny saw it first. He pulled at my arm and pointed. It was the monkey suit waiting on the other side of the parking grass. Like radar, its eye-beams scanned from side to side and fixed on Benny. A purple tail stood straight out behind, like a huge erection.

We laid on the grass ruminating and watching the white clouds constantly changing. Benny got up first, less with shame than resolve. He sauntered up to the monkey suit without emotion. Their eyes met for a moment before he moved around it and saw close-up its engorged purple tail. He stood still, astonished. Finally, he blurted out "Wow!" and walked on.

After that day I don't believe Benny ever visited the boys' loft again.