

December, 2010

*God bless you and greetings, each and everyone and Merry Christmas!  
During this holiday season, we shall all have Figgie pudding and a story.  
First, make Figgie pudding. Now, for our story:*



On December 26<sup>th</sup>, 1960, Big Chaz and Miss Sarah loaded their four boys in the family car and made the iconic “to grandmother’s house we go!” trip up highway 41 to Nashville. We drove to visit Jenny P. and Pappy, my mother’s parents. There, in an unassuming arts and crafts bungalow, two of us received one of the all-time scariest items on earth.

These sinister devices were invented late in the 15<sup>th</sup> century by a German watchmaker named, of all things, Claus.

As David (five) and Bill (four) tore into the package, Jim and I looked at one another with a conspiratorial smirk. I remember feeling a sense of perverse glee knowing that my baby brothers would soon learn the secret of the colorful metal box with the mysterious crank. Jim and I had both been initiated into that explosive weasel’s domain and had some delicious moments of anticipation as our siblings fiddled with the box asking, “What is it?”

“Here” I offered smoothly, “just turn this,” demonstrating the all-important clockwise direction as I placed one of their pudgy little-boy hands on the crank.

Aunt Harriet’s gift was a beauty. A ten-inch cube with a Ringling Brothers’ circus motif; circus wagons, trapeze artists, the human cannonball, and

the horse and acrobat were depicted on three sides. On the fourth side was the ring leader pointing to the lion tamer before a packed house of circus goers. On the top, innocently portrayed, was a smiling, benevolent clown.

“Uh, oh,” Jim warned, flashing his possum grin as the fateful tune began. *All---a-round---the cobbler’s bench, the mon-key chased the wea-sel, the mon-key thought ‘twas all in fun...* When that melody starts, every graduate from Jack-in-the-box-school knows what is coming. When we see someone turning the fateful crank for the first time, we anticipate the pop! but it always scares our pants off too.

There, on the floor, amidst all the glorious detritus of Christmas sat innocent David and Bill, nearing the abyss. Jim and I, sitting near them on the floor, could barely contain our excitement as that silly monkey once again missed the seriousness of his behavior,

*The monkey thought ‘twas all in fun.*

Shows just how wrong a monkey can be.

The familiar melody and cautionary tale of the foolish monkey and the terrorized weasel ended with what is easily the most frightening event in any Christmas. The original box Claus made for a nobleman in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century released the Jack which was initially not a clown, but a leering devil.

Had Lucifer himself leaped from the box beneath our maternal grandparents’ festive tree, my brothers and I could not have been more startled. Technology had advanced to the point where Jack popped out at random times

during the song. The pop! happened in the middle of the word, “monkey” at the peak of our nervous anticipation of our younger brothers’ betrayal.

*The mon-key POP!*

“Oh!” Jim and I cried, thrown back in surprise at the unexpected appearance of Jack. We smacked our heads on the wooden seat of Aunt Harriet’s rocking chair in spontaneous salute to our brothers’ rite of passage.

“Eeek!” said Aunt Harriet, rocking backwards to avoid Jack.

David and Bill shrieked, “Ahhheee!” in horrified harmony. The foot-tall, spring-loaded clown leaped into their faces from the secret trap door of the diabolical mechanical box. Bouncing to their feet like midget acrobats, they shot screaming through the Christmas paper and open boxes spilling out hand-knit scarves with matching mittens, a baseball glove, an empty Zippo lighter box, a new fluffy pink robe with matching slippers, a gift subscription to *National Geographic*, a fancy cigar box with Montecristo on the lid, and a copy of the 1961 *Farmer’s Almanac*.

Their flight careened through the over-laden Christmas tree and launched ornaments in every direction as its boughs sprang back. Colorful orbs and delicate glass curios shattered onto the couch, the hardwood floor, and on Quizzy the temperamental Siamese cat.

The cat’s first jump for safety landed her in the large, pedestal ash tray next to Pappy’s chair. A scorch from the five-dollar Christmas cigar lit by Aunt Harriet’s Christmas Zippo ignited the cat’s escape. The room smelled like cigars, cinnamon, and smoking cat hair.

Quizzy's second leap knocked over the heavy brass stand of the ashtray smashing its thick, amber glass dish brimming with butts and ashes into the coffee table's pristine assortment of Christmas cookies, pastries, and coffee cups.

The glowing coal of the cigar landed in Pappy's lap.

A not-so-benevolent clown bouncing on his spring seemed to gloat at the chaotic aftermath of the familiar end to his ancient tale. David and Bill burst crying through the swinging door into my grandmother's kitchen.

"What have you done?" my mother's voice queried from over my shoulder.

Pappy creaked to his feet, enthusiastically brushing the flaming embers of his fine cigar off his pleated wool trousers.

"Dat blame!" came the familial pejorative from my father. This situation elicited another fine "Dat blame it!" as he helped my aged grandfather and kicked at the arching and spitting Siamese.

The look in the singed cat's blue eyes and the rake of her flattened ears spoke volumes. With a rumble, Quizzy warned the urchins who had invaded her domain that a thrashing was coming.

She was rushing at Jim and me like a lioness after two hapless wildebeests. We cowered, having been thrashed by her before. Quizzy did not abide foolishness.

"What have you done?" came the eternal question from my pregnant mother, entering the scene carrying the squalling four-year-old Bill in one arm and towing David behind, clinging to her skirt.

Quizzy, launched by my father's wing tip, raced toward the safety of the kitchen, timing her flight so the swinging door caught her by the tail, evoking the horror-movie screech that only cats can make.

"Meeyeeooow!"

This disquieting cat cry alerted my grandmother, Jenny Pearl "What in the world?" she said, joining the skirmish wiping her hands on her full-length apron. Jenny P. had blue hair and round, gold-rimmed glasses. She was almost five feet tall and stout. My grandmother held a nineteenth-century-parenting perspective. She wrote the rules in her house. She interpreted, "children should be seen and not heard," to mean "children had better behave or they will get a whuppin." This was a precept she shared with my father. At ten, I was able to see the top of my grandmother's head. But that dynamo marched in, set to straighten out the mess in her den.

Daddy had managed to put out our grandfather and was helping him back into his chair.

"Bob Darnell, what did you do?" my mother reiterated her question.

"I didn't do anything."

"Then why are your baby brothers crying?"

"They were scared by the Jack-in-the-box," answered Aunt Harriet, coming to my rescue.

"They like to tore down the house!" laughed Pappy. Now that he was no longer on fire, the humor of the situation was growing on him.

“That blasted thing scared me too,” said Daddy, slapping his leg and breaking into loud, pealing laughter.

Aunt Harriet hiccupped, “I guess I should have gotten them something a little less exci-hi-ting!” That set Daddy off again. He looked up toward heaven, as if seeking relief from his hilarity, and I saw tears squeaking out the corners of his eyes. The adults held their sides, rubbed their faces, and roared.

Aunt Harriet rose from her rocking chair, shoved the clown back into his festive circus box, slammed the lid and escorted the offending mechanism into her bedroom. We could hear her laughing from the back of the house.

My father lit another cigar for Pappy. Giggling, Aunt Harriet returned to join us in cleaning up the ash-and-glass-strewn Christmas celebration. Jim and I carried wrapping paper while the adults wiped and swept and snickered. Finally, as we all sat down to cups of coffee and boiled custard, a distinctive tune floated out from Aunt Harriet’s bedroom:

*All around the cobbler’s bench...*

“Where are David and Bill?” Mama asked, looking wide-eyed over her coffee cup.

*The monkey chased the weasel...*

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***As the world celebrates the birth of Jesus Christ, we wish you health and prosperity now and in the coming year.***

***I look forward to seeing you soon,***

Robert N. Darnell, C.Ac., D.C., Ph.D.