

Winding Trails: by Al Hobart

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Birthday Gift

A long time ago I discovered that a good laugh acts as a sort of tonic, both physiological and mental. I mean the kind of laughter that bubbles up spontaneously from the very depths of one's being.

I don't know whether it's a special gift or a common trait, but I've found that when there is apparently nothing in the world worth laughing at, and no matter how glum or under-the-weather I may feel, I can always, by reaching back somewhere in the past, come up with something that is sure to make me laugh outright, or at least give a healthy, husky chuckle.

As a rule I abhor jokes, of either the written, spoken, or practical variety, rarely being exposed to one that is clever enough to elicit genuine laughter. But in my memory I have cataloged a list of incidents I have experienced or observed at one time or another that evoke instant merriment whenever they are called to mind, or otherwise jostled into the light of my consciousness.

One of these occurred to me out of the blue this morning when I inadvertently dislodged a mixing bowl from its precarious perch on the top shelf of the cupboard. It hit the floor with a resounding thud, but, instead of shattering, it bounced and skittered across the floor and came to rest, unharmed, under the cookstove.

This bowl happened to be made of tough plastic, but the ones it brought to mind with its alarming performance were made of crockery—and thereby hangs a tale of minor tragedy, the recollection of which has given me many a wholesome laugh.

Johnny, an old buddy, and I on a day some years ago up in Washington, dutifully decided it would be a nice brotherly and friendly gesture if we'd buy his young widowed sister-in-law a nice gift for her impending birthday. After weighty consideration we concluded that a set of swanky mixing bowls, appropriately colored to match the culinary decor, would look right nice in the little widow's kitchen, and would quite likely please her no end.

So, with the heavy celeration disposed of, we agreed that when Johnny drove over to our twin city of Centralia that afternoon to see our boss, he could shop around and see what the merchants over there had to offer in the way of high-class mixing bowls.

The most discriminating housewife could not have done a better job of shopping than did our young bowl-hunting

hero. Like a true detective he snooped around among the numerous stores till he ran across just what our inspired dream had revealed—a beautiful set of crockery bowls, a nest of half a dozen of them, ranging from about the size of an outsized coffee cup to that of a battle helmet.

With utmost care he bore the beautifully but flimsily wrapped package down to the car and, with a degree of thoughtlessness that was always ludicrously typical of our Johnny, daintily placed our fragile treasure, without benefit of supporting packages, on the cushion of the back seat.

Without doubt you have already dug out the kernel of this sad account, and have begun smiling through your incipient tears—but I'm having so much fun, I want to go on with the story.

The 4-mile drive back to Chehalis was uneventful. Back in town and breezing happily along up Chehalis Avenue, no doubt dreamily visualizing the rapturous demonstration our gift would touch off; he was just about to enter an intersection when the light changed.

Condition of the light car's brakes was A-1, and Johnny's reflexes left nothing to be desired. The instant the changing signal caught his attention his foot came down on the brake pedal with enough force to crush a thunder-egg.

The car stopped on a dime, but the package of bowls went for the jackpot. It hit the back of the front seat like a cannonball and crashed to the floor, where it tangled with a bumper jack and its assorted hardware companions, creating a sound-effect comparable to that produced by driving through a plate-glass window at full throttle.

When I sifted through the resulting rubble later, I found two of the bowls reasonably intact, having suffered only the severe shock of seeing the rest of the family wiped out, plus a few non-critical rim nicks. They now have a spot of their own on the safe end of the third shelf in my rough-lumber kitchen corner, where they seem to be enjoying the cosmopolitan company one would expect to find in a bachelor's dish cupboard.

I don't remember what we finally turned up with at Wanda's birthday party, nor with what emotional display it was received, if any. But whatever it was, and however welcomed, it's doubtful if it could have given her anything like the lasting pleasure and intermittent merriment that Johnny and I have derived from the memory of the explosive demise of the beautiful gift of crockery that was never delivered.

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