That Reminds Me of a Funny Story

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A Memoir, How-To, and Compendium of Yankee Humor

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For Levi Silver, who loves stories

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Stories to read and share.

Instruction in yankee-speak.

Real names and locations (when I can recall them).

Attribution when possible. Stories come to us from all directions. Some seem to live in the ethers. Some seem to rise from the earth itself. Those are the best ones.

PART I
Why Tell Stories

At a storytelling course for seniors, one of the participants, Jane Ramsay, said we'd met before. She said, "I told you the one about the Cockermouth River."

Knock me over with a feather. It must be a decade since I first heard that story. And I've probably told it 300 times. Here's Jane, in the flesh, back in my life just as I am back in hers—for the eight weeks of this course anyhow. What goes around comes back to you.

This time around Jane filled in a few details. The story about the Cockermouth came to her from Neil Davis, an elderly man chock-full of stories. She had the presence of mind as a young woman to listen and remember and pass on Neil's stories.

He was a memorable character. One day, she said, he made a point of admiring her umbrelli, that's what he called it. He asked where she got it, how much it cost, and would she get him one just like it. She said she would.

Not long afterward, she got a call. "Don't get me that umbrelli," Neil said.

"Why not?"

"I might die," he said. "If I die with that umbrelli, I'll have to figure out who to leave it to."

Neil did die eventually, without the burden of having to figure out who would inherit his umbrelli. But his stories live on.

Scaly Buggahs

Neil Davis via Jane Ramsay

The Cockermouth River runs through Hebron into Newfound Lake. Years ago, according to locals, the salmon ran so heavy up the Cockermouth in the spring that you could practically walk across the river on their backs. They were running upstream to spawn. It's illegal to fish during spawning season. Wouldn't be fair. The salmon have their minds on other things.

One day, Nancy—out back of her house hanging laundry—heard gunshots down by the river. When you hear gunshots in some parts of the country, you go the other way. But around here, in those days, when you heard gunshots, you headed out to investigate. *What the heck's going on? It ain't deer season.*

Nancy dropped her laundry basket and walked cross-country through the field and woods. On the bank of the river, she found her neighbor, Charlie, sitting cross-legged with his .22 across his knees. "What you doing?" she asked.

"Shootin' muskrats."

Nancy looked. Beyond Charlie in the ferns she spotted five large salmon all laid out, not looking too lively.

"Muskrats, huh."

"Yup," Charlie said. "Scaly buggahs, ain't they?" ~

For the last twenty-five years, give or take, I've travelled town-to-town telling stories. Wherever I go, people tell me stories. I write them down in my little book and tell them in the next town. It's a total racket. Sometimes they find their way into published books—a dozen so far. It's my mission to preserve as many stories as I can. They are precious and ephemeral. They teach us about ourselves. They reflect our culture. They connect us.

There are a few different versions of "Scaly Buggahs," so I'm convinced it has a lot of truth to it. Most stories do. What the heck, all stories have some truth to them. In this case, at some point a lawbreaker got caught shooting fish. In one version, Nancy is a game warden and poor Charlie gets nabbed, loses his fishing license (if he had one), and has to pay a fine. In most versions, Charlie doesn't say "scaly buggahs," he says, "scaly bastids." I've softened that for younger audiences and churchgoers.

Sometimes the softer version is as funny as the off-color one. Buggahs

versus bastids seems like a draw to me. Other times, the off-color word is more effective. Dick Wakefield has a treasure trove of Fodd Boody stories. Fodd was a hermit up Moultonborough way. The off-color version of "Fodd Boody's Tall Mother" is, to my ear, the funniest. Though when I tell it to kids or in churches, I'm apt to change one word.

If you were to compare my current telling to Dick's version from a few years back, they'd be different. That's the way it is with stories. They evolve teller to teller, telling to telling, though the kernel—the heart of the story—remains the same.

Fodd Boody's given name was Forrest, but everybody called him Fodd. At a Ladies' Tea at Geneva Point Farm, now a conference center, a Moultonborough native said when she was little, her mother would scold her by saying, "Now you're acting just like Fodd Boody."

In other words, don't act like Fodd Boody unless you are Fodd Boody.

Fodd Boody's Tall Mother

Dick Wakefield (sort of)

Fodd Boody was a hermit. Lived in the woods all by himself. Once in a blue moon he'd walk into town, do some work for ready money at Geneva Point Farm, buy provisions, and disappear again.

Fodd always wore a broad-brimmed straw hat, overalls, and a tattered flannel shirt. His gray beard reached his belly button. His toes poked out through his shoes. At the general store, a new kid was clerking. Fodd lays his purchases on the counter to be added up and bagged. The kid looks the old man over and says, kinda sassy, "Hey, Mistah, what stands between you and a damned fool?"

Fodd says, "At the moment, it's a counter."

Fodd was a tall man, but it was said he inherited his height from his mother. Fella says, "Fodd, exactly how tall was your mother?"

Fodd looks the fella over. He looks him up and down. He says, "Stand on that chair."

Fella stands on the chair. Fodd looks the fella up and down. He grabs a thick phone book. He says, "Stand on this phone book on the chair." The fella does. Fodd looks him up and down. He says, "Stand on your tippy toes and reach as high as you can with your right arm." The fella does.

"Ayuh," Fodd says, "you could just about touch the dear old lady's ass." ~

Note to irritated grammarians: This story begins in the past tense and moves into the present tense between these two lines: "At the general store, a new kid was clerking. Fodd lays his purchases on the counter to be added up and bagged." One of the traditions of yankee storytelling is to move from past (what was) to present (what is). The story is remembered and so begins in the past, but when the action starts, the present tense zooms in. Two rules of thumb: past tense is more believable; present tense is more immediate. A teller tries to balance the two without confusing the listener.

Ayuh: Exclamation. Informal. Accent on the first syllable, or the second, or both. An all-purpose New England expletive. I don't use it much, but my father did some, and my grandparents certainly did. It can express approval, disapproval, surprise, dismay, or concern. It can mean yes, no, or maybe. Variations include—ayum (skeptical) or ayup (in agreement).

"Town meetin's Tuesday."
"Ayuh." (Yes it is; I'm aware of it.)
"You going?"
"Ayum." (Don't know, don't really want to, probably should.)
"Town meetin' ain't what it used to be."
"Ayup." (Yes, it ain't.)

As for "the dear old lady's ass," you can substitute other words, but "bum," "butt," "derriere," "rump," "rear," "tush," or "sit-down" lack the panache of "ass." I like the French "fesses," but not everybody speaks French even a little bit. Case in point, our French friend Béatrice instructed her American kindergarten class to sit on their "fesses." They thought she was telling them to sit on their faces. The obedient little mites tried, but they just weren't limber enough.

For me, "Hey, Mistah, what stands between you and a damned fool" will always be associated with Fodd Boody, though it is a classic yankee humor setup, like "How do you get to Millinocket?" Answer: "You can't get theyah from heeyah," or "Don't you move a goddamn inch." These two wry comebacks were made famous by Marshall Dodge and Bob Bryan, but I'm pretty sure they'd been part of the canon for decades before the first Bert & I record dropped in 1958. "You can't get theyah from heeyah" can, no doubt, be traced to the first time somebody from away asked a Maine-ah for directions and the Maine-ah decided to have some fun.

"Ayuh," said the Maine-ah, "You could take Mountain Road up as far

as the red bahn, well, the cawnuh where the red bahn used to be. . . . No, that's a dead end. What you should do, probly, is take the left a quartah mile before you get to the cawnuh where the red bahn used to be. . . . No, that won't work. Bridge went out in the big stawm of nineteen aught eight and the town's too damn cheap to replace it. Your best bet is to head back toward the highway, cross over onto the River Road and where it splits. . . . No, that'll take you into the gulf and this time of ye-ah, the gulf is nawthin' but a mud hole. . . ."

However long the story goes, however many twists and turns it takes, the punch line is always, "Come to think of it, you can't get theyah from heeyah," as existential a theorem as there ever were.

Maine-ah: Noun. Someone from the state of Maine. In yankee-speak, the "r" is often dropped at the ends of words or in the middle. Corner becomes cawnuh, barn becomes bahn, year becomes ye-ah, storm becomes stawm. Because yankees are frugal, we hate to waste those dropped "r's," so they're apt, in some dialects, to turn up in unexpected places, especially at the ends of words ending in "a." The name Maria becomes Marier, banana is bananer, algebra is algebrer, and so on.

Dodge and Bryan didn't invent yankee humor, but they respected it, interpreted it, and popularized it. These two young Ivy Leaguers collected stories from the old-timers, the clam diggers, lobster fishermen, and islanders of Down East Maine. They mastered the dialect and delivery. They sold a ton of records. As a kid, I listened to Bert & I along with the hymns of Tennessee Ernie Ford and the Irish ballads of Burl Ives—my mother's favorites. I wouldn't be telling stories today if it weren't for Bert & I. Come to think of it, those hymns were stories set to music ("The Little Brown Church") as were the ballads of Burl Ives ("Nell Flaherty's Drake"). I can recite every one of them to this day.

It's likely I paid more attention to the stories told in the family because of Bert & I, which proved that homey stories in the yankee vernacular were worth saving and passing on. A rhyme passed down through the family goes: Old Rob, Young Rob, Rob's Rob and Curly Bob. Those were four of my relations, all named Robert and all living in the same town. The rhyme helped distinguish one from another.

Another one goes:

Emma, Tamar, Etta, Scott
Rosa, Mollie, May and Dot
And Dot was Ned
But Ned didn't rhyme.

Those are the names of my great-great aunts and uncles in the Ford (pronounced Foe-uhd) family. Cousin Sheree found a family story in a clipping from a magazine, probably *Yankee.* The source—author unnamed—is *The History of Slab City—Grafton, NH*. It's about George Nelson Ford, our Great-Great-Grandfather, dad to the aunts and uncles of the rhyme. What a find!

Great-Great-Grampa George Ford's Story from a Book

One day, George Ford, a farmer who lived on the edge of the valley, came to my father's with a sow to mate with his boar. Father asked him "why he came here" [*sic*] when George Dean, a near neighbor, had a boar. His reply was, "By Goddy, Jeff, if George Dean had the last boar and I had the last sow, there would be no more pigs." ~

This story and those rhymes link the generations. This is our family. Some of us are stubborn to the core just like Great-Great-Grampa George.

When my dad said that a person's "brains rattled around like a BB in a box car," I wrote the expression down in a notebook of funny sayings—just like the notebook I keep today, little things people say that are worth remembering. At six years old, I was already a collector. In that same notebook I wrote my first poem:

April showers
Bring May flowers
And now that it's May
Happy Mother's Day.

I read it out loud at a family party and received my first applause.

More than fifty years later, I drove my dad to the hospital for his final stay. "Last trip," he told my mother when we bundled all that was left of him into the car. He'd been saying it all morning, she said—"last trip, last trip, last trip." Our first stop was at the cancer wing to check in with

his oncologist. The nurses knew Dad well from chemo sessions and welcomed him warmly. The doctor took one look at him and said he needed to be admitted right away. On his way to the elevator in the requisite wheelchair, Dad regaled us with a poem from childhood:

The boy stood on the burning deck
His feet all full of blisters
He had no britches of his own
So he had to wear his sister's.

Then he said with exaggerated dignity: "Some applause might be in order." We applauded. Dad took a bow.