

The next two stories in this MEMPHIS WRITING series can be read as parables about what happens to our home-grown talent: we turn them into turkeys and then gobble them up or we fleece them as we would a big dumb bear. Memphis may have ruined or run off more first-rate musicians, writers, actors, painters, and innovators than any other town in the land.

The demise of Memphis as a music capital has been well documented. The trail out of town of the rest of its best heads and bodies is little known and remembered, if at all, by the friends and relatives left behind.

A catalog of unkindnesses to Memphis writers might include these – no publishing of fiction in our two daily papers and our one city-image magazine; no public or private money to support local book-length works or collections of local writers; no official encouragement from city officials, arts patrons, or educational institutions; and almost total local ignorance of the talents of Memphians who have been nationally published and admired.

We are tempted to cast New York as the villain, because for a good fifty years it has been telling us what to read, wear, see, buy, think, and feel. Its control over the publishing industry has been complete and its command of the electronic media companies (that now control the publishing industry) is becoming just as complete. The result is that almost nothing coming out of a Southern town like Memphis gets published unless it confirms the New Yorker's prejudices about the decadent, bigoted, grotesque place the New Yorker has already imagined the South to be.

But saying 'Screw New York!' may be too easy. Many of us still feel deep down we haven't made it until we've made it in New York – at Random House, the Museum of Modern Art, in a Broadway or off-Broadway theatre, or on the pages of ESQUIRE magazine. Memphians who have received raves in those places – writer Shelby Foote, photographer Bill Eggleston, painter Carroll Cloar, actress Barbara Cason, and John Fergus Ryan, for example – are at least brought belatedly to the attention of the local folks. New York may have been created, not only for bankrolling the books, exhibitions, musicals, and beautiful magazines we won't pay for ourselves, but for certifying quality for us provincials who can't trust our own perceptions.

Here is one of those who has made it – and stayed in Memphis. His two Christmas stories are probably being offered in September because that's the kind of stories John Fergus Ryan writes.

– David Bowman / Series Editor

TWO CHRISTMAS STORIES / JOHN FERGUS RYAN

the turkey who was Up on GENESIS

The sound of someone Turning a mattress in the attic awoke Sherbert Chowders from a Christmas Eve nap in the living room.

Shortly after, his wife appeared on the attic stairs.

'Reola' he asked, 'whatever would take you up to the attic on a cold day like this?'

'I was making you up a bed' she said. 'Sherbert, as a Provider, you

are Less than. Here it is Christmas Eve and we have nothing of which to make a Christmas dinner. I'm giving you a Few minutes to go out and bring back something Traditional on which we can Feast, or else I'm putting you Away,' she said, nodding toward the attic.

Sherbert Chowders worked for the county Zoo. The pay was Poor but he was able to bring Home a lot of food which made up for it. Nothing that was put Out for the animals to eat was safe from Sherbert. He brought home Duck food, stale bread, hay, peanuts and Lots of used wax paper drinking cups, Colored with whatever had been In them.

When Sherbert brought home the animals' food, they Went without and in Time starved to death. When they Did, he would bring Them home.

His family was the only one in all of Gypsy Nits, Georgia that Once in a while Ate lion meat for lunch.

Lately, Sherbert had been put to selling Tickets for the Rides, and, there, the only thing he could bring home was little children, who could be Traced and were Not welcome.

The Chowders' larder, truly, Was empty.

'I shall go down to the millpond at once, and trap a Snate of Grivlets, which will be more than enough to provide a Christmas repast' said Sherbert. 'I shall take Sherbie Junior with me to String the Hammers.'

'You leave Sherbie Junior alone! He's down at the highway, Having his fun' said Reola.

Sherbie Junior was forty-eight years old and was Simple. He weighed three hundred and six pounds and his thighs Rubbed together. They had to be Greased daily, else they would take Fire from the friction.

He spent his time at the crossroads near his house, Weaving in and out of traffic on a tricycle. It thrilled him so much he would Wee Wee on himself.

'Very well' said Sherbert, 'I shall leave him to his Own.'

'I mean business about you and the attic' said Reola. 'If you don't bring home something good, it's Up you go! I've already cleared it with Brother Brumlow.'

At the moment, Brother Brumlow was in the neighborhood, calling on Lillian the Sorceress.

'Open up, witch, for I am here on Pastoral business!' said Brother Brumlow to Lillian when he saw her peering through the window.

Such a Tone was necessary because Lillian laughed at him in public and told it Around that he had Nothing but an eye for fat, Fresh boys.

Sometimes she went further and put it Out that he was Weak in Deuteronomy.

'Maybe so' he would counter at such times, 'but I am Up on GENESIS!'

'What do you want, Showfolks?' asked Lillian of the Divine at her door.

'I am herewith ordering you to stop Raising the dead' he said, 'for Such is my line of work.'

'But I can really do it' said Lillian.

'None the less, it is I who have the Degree in it' he said. 'Further, in the future, you will Tithe your witchings!'

'Tithe? Why?'

'I plan to purchase the sawmill and will need the Help. If you hesitate, I shall bring Down a wrath on you!'

'What is the reason for your greedy behavior?' asked Lillian.

'I am full of a substance Known as the Christmas Spirit' said Brother Brumlow.

'Such is not All you are Full of!' said Lillian, waving her Wand at him, causing him to be Transformed into a fifty-one pound Butterball turkey, complete with corn crib and pen.

As Lillian stood in her yard, looking at the turkey, Sherbert Chowders passed, downcast, his Grivlet snare empty.

He was going Home to the Attic.

'Oh Mr Chowders' she called, 'come here and take home this Fat turkey for your Christmas dinner.'

Chowders looked at the turkey then back to Lillian.

'Who is it?' he asked.

It was Such a happy Christmas for the Chowders. There was Turkey for a week and on New Years Day, Sherbie Junior was installed as Pastor in the place of the missing Brumlow.

He was a Natural for it because he always spoke in Tongues; the ladies of the church found his pawings a Novelty and when it came to fat, Fresh boys, the Reverend Sherbie Junior was content to pinch Himself.

Fred the Christmas bear

Christmas Eve in a large city on the Eastern coast of the United States.

Irving Shekel, once a society orchestra leader, now a burglar, stood in front of a mirror in his bedroom, arranging his bow tie to Look like a butterfly. A black silk opera hat, a black evening cape and a balsa wood walking stick were on a chair nearby.

Irving had fantasies in which he was Someone else.

He picked up a pink, sugar water rosebud, which had Come on his birthday cake, placed it in his lapel buttonhole and Imagined he was a famous doctor in research, who had described Gaston's Staggers for the Journals and would probably go on to Control it. In his field, he was known, but there were still a few laymen out West who could not Place him and he hated them for it.

He hoped the bears would Get them.

Now dressed for the evening, he went downstairs to the Christmas tree, a decorated simulacrum of Spun Glass, bamboo and aluminum, standing beside a fireplace in which colored Presto-Logs blazed cheerfully.

A pint jar of Tupelo honey, with a tag reading 'to Fred, at Christmastide' lay, among other gifts, under the tree.

Shekel's wife reclined on a sofa. She had Gaston's Staggers and was eating candy to relieve the symptoms.

'Oh, so you know something about Gaston's Staggers' she said, Reading his mind when she saw him. 'I feel terrible and the paper's talking Snow. Can't you Give me a lozenge, Doctor?'

'I'm sorry' said Shekel. 'I realize you are sick, but you must respect the fact that I do not make housecalls.'

'Showfolks!' she screeched from her sickbed as her husband walked out the door. 'I hope the bears Get you!'

Outside, in the dark, Shekel went about his business. He was Sticky-fingered and Looked it as he walked the streets of the quarter, Flourishing his balsa wood stick. He carried a Caged otter, for Use in case there was Trouble, and a cotton gunny sack for hauling Away his Take.

He had been stealing in the same neighborhood for years but because he wore a black silk opera hat the police never arrested him. They did not Bother people who Looked prosperous.

By midnight, he had stolen some scented candles (Jasmine), a quantity of chalk ends from a school room and a few used pocket combs made of Edible rubber, and he started home, the cotton gunny sack

Thrown over his shoulder.

His wife, feeling better, was raveling a piece of yard goods and rolling the thread up in a ball. 'You had a long distance call' she said. 'Some Gaston's Staggers laymen want you to come out West and Operate.'

'Then they can Place me! But it's too late. I've already called Out the bears.'

'Well, you've made a mess, then' said his wife, as she looked Over the night's haul. 'You'd better head West and see if you can't straighten it out.'

She took up a candle and started nibbling.

'What Flavor is this?' she asked. 'Gardenia?'

'Floral mint, but it's the Pocket combs you can Eat. You're right. I've got to head West. If they sent for me, I guess there's a ticket waiting at the railroad station.'

'More'n likely' said his wife, who had married Young.

'I'm gone, but when I get back, I'm going to take up Mime. Then, if there's nothing out there to steal, I can always Act like there is.'

His wife watched from the window as he walked to the corner, stole an automobile and headed for the railroad station. The snow, of which the paper Talked, had begun to fall.

'He blundered, then, stealing that car' said his wife to herself. 'He forgot to wear his High hat. It was bound to happen, sooner or later, though. Oh, well.'

She walked to a hall door, unlocked it and a large male bear came out, went into the kitchen, sat down at the table and took Up knife and fork.

He had been locked in the closet for twelve years and was let Out only when Mr Shekel was Away.

At such times, Mrs Shekel would Vex the bear until it Hugged her then she would Giggle and Pass Out.

'Nothing to eat but a few candles and a little chalk, Fred, unless you Favor edible rubber' she said. She was From south Georgia, deep down, near Waycross.

The bear grunted.

'Things changed around here tonight. The Fool's in jail by now, so you and I can be Open about it from now on. We're going to need money, though. Lot's of it.'

The bear ate a candle.

'How'd you like to be one of those Fancy Trick Bears? Here, try on this High hat.'

For answer, the bear ate the chalk, the rest of the candles, Mrs Shekel and two Thonet Bent Wood Chairs for which the Shekels had

once Refused a thousand dollars.

After a while, the police came and Looked around. Things were Obvious, but the bear was still wearing the High hat, so they apologized and Left.

The two policemen stood outside, letting the snow fall on them.

'High hat, or no' said one, 'we can't let him get away with what he done!'

'You're right' said the other.

They went back to the apartment, knocked, entered, bought the pint of honey from the bear, paid for it with a Five, short-changed him two dollars and Left.

The two policemen stood outside, letting the snow fall on them.

'It don't seem right, Fleecin' a Dumb animal' said one.

The other turned to him and smiled warmly.

'Have you forgot? It's Christmas!'

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John Fergus Ryan began writing short fiction about 1948 but it was not until 1965 that his first story was published. Since then he has had over forty short stories published in such magazines as ATLANTIC MONTHLY, PENTHOUSE, EVERGREEN REVIEW in this country and MAYFAIR in London.

His work has also been translated and published in France and Germany and in 1972 his story 'American Christmas' was read over the Canadian Broadcasting System.

Ryan has also written personality profiles for ESQUIRE and COUNTRY MUSIC magazine as well as having worked

for various newspapers, among them THE ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT, VARIETY, STARS AND STRIPES in Tokyo and the Memphis PRESS-SCIMITAR.

He has also profiled such American institutions as Holiday Inn University (EVERGREEN REVIEW, Oct. 1970), Gerald L. K. Smith (ESQUIRE, Aug. 1968), and Hee Haw (COUNTRY MUSIC, Sept. 1973).

John and Carla Ryan have lived in Memphis for the past twenty years and have three children, John B., Carla, and Andrew.

MAYFAIR has called John Fergus Ryan 'the funniest writer in the world.'