

Horace

by James Lynn Smith

In consideration of survivors, some names in this story have been changed

My dad told me stories about his family when living in the rural piney woods near Morgantown, MS. I will relate these and subsequent events concerning his brother, Horace, as best as I can from memory. If I misrepresent, it likely won't matter because his brother's character was hard to believe in the first place.

My uncle Horace was born in 1915, the third boy in a family of seven siblings. From the beginning, everyone could tell he was different. His head was larger than average, his chest thicker, and he was prone to running away. When he reached school age, my dad, the oldest sibling, did his best in the mornings to get him on the school bus with other kids, but it was always an ordeal. Often Dad needed to search the surroundings for him. Eventually, Horace did get some elementary education, but kept disappearing from class. Maybe he had genetic traits in common with upstarts in Silicon Valley who drop out of college and go on to create tech empires. If so, Horace's genes were on steroids because he dropped out in the fourth grade. He was too impatient and independent to fit into any classroom environment. Any learning he did subsequent to the fourth grade was on his own.

Years of the Great Depression were hard on the family. Their mother, my paternal grandmother, became sickly and eventually died of "kidney poisoning" related to an unknown illness. This may be why there are no tales of Horace's activity or problems during this time. With full family responsibility falling on my

grandfather's broad shoulders, he did the best he could. Being poor, he owned little land for farming, so he collected tools and created a cottage industry turning ax handles on a lathe for a Chicago company. It was a profitable enterprise and, unlike his brother Horace, Dad had visions of going to college after graduating from high school.

Then tragedy struck in the tool shed. The emery wheel for a high speed grinder broke off and a chunk embedded itself in my grandfather's forehead. The nearby siblings came running and managed to get him in their old car, and my dad drove like a maniac along gravel roads to Columbia, where there was a county hospital.

Unfortunately, my grandfather died and hopes of college for Dad faded. He turned his attention toward trying to keep his siblings together. There was a welfare system in the state at that time, and someone explained to my dad how the family could be split up and be cared for by foster parents. He refused, thinking of problems with Horace and wanting to keep the family together or, at least, nearby. Friends and churchgoers in Morgantown opened their hearts and homes, letting the brothers and sisters stay with them.

The years flowed by and, one-by-one, the siblings married and began their own families. Horace, however, joined the US Navy and was sent to the South Pacific when World War II broke out.

Afterwards, he came back to the Gulf Coast region and married. It was not a happy union. Horace couldn't reconcile his independent nature with marriage, and he and his wife divorced. The best outcome of the union was a son, whom he loved unconditionally.

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This is the point where I don't need to rely on my dad's tales to continue this story. When about ten years of age, I came to know Uncle Horace quite well

myself. He was of average height and had a big, round head with squinty eyes resembling those of Roy Rogers, one of my favorite western heroes. His hair was black, thin, receding from his forehead, and always combed straight back. He also had a big chest and loved to pose. He would turn sideways and proudly display his physique, inhaling big gulps of air and pressing his forearm against his equally big belly. Much later, the lower anatomy became predominant, making his arms and legs look like sticks by comparison.

To make a living, he was a welder for union contract jobs in the oil and shipbuilding industries. He loved to work, always having a project when not away on a job. Without an education, his learning of the world was based on what he saw. His personality was somewhat of an enigma. His response to the question “How’re you doing, Uncle Horace?” was “Oh, I feel great. I love to get up early and feel the sun in my face.” I never heard him say anything negative. One would think he was always an upbeat person.

But Horace had a dark side, not evil, but plagued by creatures in his mind. My dad had a car dealership that included a service station and auto body shop. Horace would often come around when not on a paying job. Dad and two of his siblings, my Uncle Toxie and an aunt living in the Columbia area, noticed something was happening with their brother. Horace would make strange statements with unclear context and go silent. Sometimes he would suddenly jerk around, as if called, and nod.

A small trailer parked alongside my dad’s business property was Horace’s abode at this time. My dad grew concerned and approached the trailer to talk to Horace. Seeing him coming, Horace darted out the door and began walking away. Dad called for him to stop, but his appeal was ignored. Quickening his pace to intercept his brother didn’t help because Horace began trotting across a nearby field of tall broom sedge and shrubs. There was no doubt that something serious

was wrong, but try as he might, Dad was no match for Horace's pace.

"Horace, stop and talk to me," he called, but to no avail. My dad was older, soon tired, and had to stop, but he had an idea. He would feign a heart attack. He called out for help and yelled as if in pain. It worked.

Horace stopped, turned around and looked at his brother, down on his knees, hand across his chest. He rushed back and picked Dad up, draping him about his strong shoulders. After bringing my dad back to his business, Horace was tired enough to stop and hear appeals to explain what was disturbing him.

But there was no explanation, only silence, as if in a trance. Taken to my other uncle's house in Columbia, he was seated in a chair. Family crowded around him, offering food or minor comforts. He stared at the floor and said nothing.

Later, inquiring about his brother with others, Dad found out that Horace had approached a country minister in nearby Morgantown and discussed his desire to be a missionary to natives, perhaps in the South Pacific or Africa, who were ignorant of Christianity. He heard voices urging him to do so.

Probably knowing about Horace's reputation for starting things he would not finish, the minister said, "How do you know these voices aren't the devil talking?"

Subsequently, the "voices" told Horace not to talk at all.

After much ado, Horace was taken to the Mississippi State Hospital, informally called Whitfield because it was in an unincorporated community by that name. Whitfield had a long history of hosting a self-sufficient penal colony, becoming an asylum for the insane, and upgraded to a Hospital status in later years, treating mainly mental and drug related issues.

A psychiatrist examined Horace at length and finally had consultation with my dad. "Right now, your brother is in a different world from you. He doesn't see things the way you do. We refer to his condition as paranoid schizophrenia. Horace might be his usual self one time and later lapse into a state where he hears things

he doesn't recognize as coming from his own mind. He's pursued by things only he can see or hear. We need to keep him here for treatment and better assess his condition."

One might assume the next communication Dad would receive was from doctors at Whitfield, saying his brother had recovered enough that, with medication, he would be able to return and resume a normal life. That's not what happened. A phone call at night awakened Dad.

"Percy," Horace said, "I'm out and coming back on the Rebel. I need you to meet me at the train station in Foxworth."

"Horace, the hospital hasn't released you yet. How did you get out?"

"They had me on the third floor. I got out the window. Can't stay there, I'm okay."

How he managed to pay for a ticket is a mystery. Later, hearing the tale, I imagined my superman uncle had simply jumped from the third story window to the ground. The mystery of his mental condition intrigued my young imagination, and when playing "adventure" with neighboring kids, I would pretend to be Uncle Horace. He reminded me of Tarzan in that he was physically powerful and primitive in certain ways, but basically good.

Dad was in a dilemma, does he aid and abet a mentally disturbed man or call police, hoping there would be no violence? I heard him say, "That was the hardest decisions I ever made. I called the sheriff, a friend, and told him to meet Horace at the railway station in Foxworth. And I said, 'please don't use guns. He's a good man. But he needs to be taken back to Whitfield.'"

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Horace's next treatments included electro-shock therapy. After his "recovery," he was sent home with medications, and seemed to be as normal as he ever was. But, there were still shadows that fringed things he would say. For

example, he wanted a convenient way to travel to jobs without having to pull a camper or trailer, so he took a huge eight-foot long metal drum four feet across, cut it in half lengthwise, attached hinges, and put it on wheels. It looked like a cylindrical coffin behind his car.

He looked at me, then proudly at his work. “I can put my bunk in there at one end and my tools at the other. With a latch on the inside, nobody can get to me.”

True, his job put him in places where men of questionable merit might work next to him, but I was unaware his concern hinted at a residual paranoia.

By this time, my cousin Smitty, son of my other uncle in Columbia, and I had reached our teens and grew amused by Uncle Horace’s ways. In private we made jokes. We doubted he would actually sleep in his “can” in spite of his pride in cost-saving, blue collar engineering. It wasn’t long before he had lost interest and started another project.

My dad still found his brother perplexing. “He’s very imaginative and hard-working. It’s just that he doesn’t stay with things.”

In his jobs away, mostly in Louisiana and Texas, he would see things that started his wild imagination rolling. Once, he was interested in building and owning a park with miniature cars for kids. He even built such a car and showed it off. “I can put a two-horsepower motor in this and let kids ride all around the place.” Of course, he didn’t know anything about financing, inspections, managing personnel or the other issues of park business, public or private. But he was never one to let his lack of knowledge interfere with his imagination. That project lasted until those other issues surfaced, and he was off to something else.

Once, he became interested in building an innovative, low cost, cave-like dwelling from vegetation and heaped-up dirt. The notion of being self-sufficient was quite appealing to him. He had figured out how to devise a grillwork roof

made from boughs and branches, cover it with moss, and direct a source of water onto it for evaporative cooling. In his mind, it was an eco-smart, off-the-grid dwelling (although those phrases did not exist at the time). He did buy a little property near Morgantown and started on the project, but it also came to naught.

I remember once the subject of the opposite sex came up between me and Smitty. Uncle Horace overheard and ventured an opinion. “Boys, all that old sex stuff is just your imagination. I don’t need it or that thing you do it with. I can pee through any kind of hole.” He suppressed a grin. Smitty and I figured he would never marry again, a man completely soured by his first go-around.

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Occasionally Horace would pick up his pubescent son, Travis, from Gulfport, where the boy’s mother lived, and bring him to Columbia. Being hip teenagers, Smitty and I thought Travis strange. Like his dad, he had a big head, but less rounded, with a face like an inverted top. He had lots of stiff, black hair and the biggest set of ears I ever saw on a kid. In a strong wind gust, no telling where he might end up. And Travis didn’t talk. Timid, maybe. Weird, definitely—to us, anyhow. He had a perpetual, shy grin on his face.

Horace would interpret for him. He’d ask Travis, “Did you like your breakfast?”

Not a word. An eyelid might flicker.

His dad would look back at us with a secretive smile. “He liked it. He’s not dumb, just saves talk for when something’s more important.”

I’m not sure I ever heard an utterance from Travis. Maybe he never *had* an important thought, or felt the world was too dense to understand him. Whatever the answer, he was still Horace’s pride and joy.

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Uncle Horace figured out natural law through his personal logic. “Like

metals attract each other ‘cause they’re the same material. So if you put a piece of gold on a dowsing rod, it will draw to any gold around. You hide a gold watch in the field, and I can find it.” He demonstrated gold dowsing with two bent coat hanger wires and tiny gold “smearings” covered with tape on the ends. Lack of ever discovering the mother lode did not dissuade him from the efforts.

He was always searching for treasure of some kind, whether a fixer-upper foreign car, gold coins, or a Spanish canon beneath the waters of a Louisiana bayou. He liked kids and took Travis and my cousin Smitty camping with him on several of his searching adventures. When his passion for discovery became tiring, the compulsion to invent gave him focus.

For my dad’s business, he built the winch and boom apparatus and made a wrecker by welding it to the bed of a large truck. It was a superb job and worked out well. When older, I used it to pick up wrecks on local roads.

Not all projects Horace did for my dad worked out, however. For example, Dad wanted to add to the size of his business lot, but, because it was in a swampy area, that meant expensive hauling of tons of dirt and gravel. Horace was sure he had the answer. He would build a boat with a motor and dredge attached. Placed in the pond formed by previous excavation for the original lot soil, it would turn a mechanism against the muddy bottom to loosen soil. A large, proximal tube would suck up the muddy sludge under the water and pump it through a big flexible pipe onto the back of the lot. The water would run off and the mud would dry out, contributing to the size of the lot. Horace saw this process take place on the coast, where sand was dredged from far out in the water and pumped upon the beach to compensate for tidal erosion. His personal logic reasoned that if it worked for sand, it would for mud. But churned up *sand* easily comes off the dredging tool and enters a pipe without sticking, clogging and causing the pump engine to choke down to a screeching halt. Not so with mud.

The last I saw of this project was a broken dredging apparatus attached to the “boat”—a half-beached wooden raft with a cover over it. Smitty and I made up satirical rhymes to describe his unfinished creations.

Another of my uncle’s inspirations almost became a family legend. Uncle Horace’s personal logic addressed the goal of avoiding high cost and impatient fidgeting in a dentist’s waiting room: My uncle would become his own dentist.

Horace had worked with Bondo, a trade name for a two-part epoxy product used to fill dents in automobile fenders. Seeing how well it worked for that purpose, he thought about such a compound for tooth fillings. A similar dental product is used today, but it did not exist then. Here he was ahead of his time and wanted to put epoxy in a cavity in one of his molars. Horace wasn’t concerned about sealing in decay bacteria; he had survived the South Pacific and swamps around Slidell, LA, where there were enough mosquitoes to hijack a semi. He had also eaten stuff around campfires that had been dropped and brushed off by hand. He wasn’t dead or plagued with malaria, so there was no concern about decay germs. If they caused a tooth to collapse, he could just add more Bondo. One morning, with mirrors, cotton swabs, toothpicks and wooden strips, “Dr. Horace” went to my Dad’s auto body shop, where employees JD and Lawrence worked.

JD told me the story. “I thought he was plumb crazy, but I gave him the Bondo and saw him lay out stuff he had with him to mix the two parts. He opened his mouth and shoved a bit into a cavity way back. After scraping off the extra, he turned and smiled real big, like he’d just done heart surgery.”

JD didn’t know the word “exothermic,” which is heat liberated by a chemical reaction. But he described it well. “Bondo gets hot when it’s hardenin’”. In a minute, Horace’s eyes got real big and he started hoppin’ around like his pants was on fire. Then he took off like a rocket for the hosepipe. He turned it on full blast and spent several minutes floodin’ his mouth to cool that tooth. Me and

Lawrence could hardly help ourselves, practically fallin' on the ground laughin'. Afterwards we tried to ask him what it was like, but we'd bust out laughin', and he'd look away. He didn't come around for a week after that."

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Against all odds, Horace did marry again. I'd like to say his wife helped him, but neither she nor his local brothers, Dad and Toxie, could convince him to stay on his medicine. Sometimes, she would slip medication into his orange juice. I once asked my uncle Toxie what Horace was taking, and he said "Haldol. It helps him stop twitching his mouth." I later found this to be an antipsychotic to treat both schizophrenia and tics characteristic of Tourette syndrome.

On occasions, Horace would suspect his wife of witchcraft. He has said, "She gets together with that old mother of hers, and they conjure up stuff."

I suspect that, whatever her persuasion, she was able to ignite his paranoia, and I wondered why she would. Was he off his medicine, and, because she feared his behavior would become violent, she encouraged his suspicion of her special powers? Or was it all a misinterpretation in his head, part of the same schizoid tendencies that made him unexpectedly drop out of sight when younger?

My mother told me of an incident when he came by one day, parked by the curb, and ran in. Confused and panicky, he tried to lock himself in a bedroom.

She knocked on the door and asked, "Horace is that your wife Nancy out in the truck? Let's invite her to come in out of the heat."

"No, don't do that," he said, excitedly. "She's the devil. It's dangerous to be around her."

Despite his episodes, his wife was apparently able to deal with it for a while. Eventually, they went their different ways. It is unknown if they bothered with a divorce. I was away at universities for my education and completely lost touch. My aunt, now in her nineties, said she thinks he eventually had a stroke, and his

youngest brother put him in a VA hospital on the Gulf Coast. There he spent his last days.

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In probing for silver linings in Horace's life, I found more questions than answers. How, despite his lack of education, did he learn to write well enough to get by? How did he manage to be a *functional* schizophrenic and make a living? Were his statements affirming his "joy of living" the end or beginning of an episode? Did he understand people's reaction to his disturbed states and try to protect them by self-censoring?

A few things seem clear. His basic personality included a strong, creative current. He was never one to say, "I can't." Perhaps, wealthy, educated parents could have helped him channel his mind in more beneficial directions. Despite his impatience and need for solitude, he truly cared about people. I recall that he wished to be a missionary, cared about my dad when he feigned a heart attack, alerted my mother to danger when he thought his wife was the devil, and spent time with his son and nephew Smitty. These are all indications of a good man who lived life surprisingly well, considering the insidious challenges in his mind.

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