

UP TO SNUFF

Writer's Corner

By Sarah Holloway

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: Thursday, 21 May 2009, Arts, Section B

I learned about snuff the summer I was 10 in June of 1938. I was spending two weeks with my cousin Mitzie and Arlene on my Aunt Mary's west Florida tobacco farm.



Everything about the farm was different from home. We got our water from a bucket on the kitchen table, sipping it from a cold, enamel dipper. Kerosene lamps were lighted when the summer dusk, filled with insect sounds and the intermittent flares of fireflies, closed out the last rays of sunshine.

At night we bathed in small basins of water poured from a china pitcher. The soft glow of the lamp made funny shadows on the wall, and we giggled as we washed first out faces and then our dirty feet.

Amy came once a week to help Aunt Mary wash and iron. She was inky black, short, fat and as open and friendly as a month-old puppy. We were allowed to walk a short distance down the dirt road to visit Amy, which was a big adventure. She lived in a tiny, unpainted shack with a soot-blackened fireplace and walls covered with faded newspapers. She smelled of smoke, sweat, tobacco and some strong scent that she bought at Woolworths.

Her lower lip was always full of snuff, which gave her speech a slight impediment and her chin a permanent pouched-out appearance. She spat brown streams of liquid as a sort of punctuation to her lisping speech.

Amy's snuff tin was green, two and a half inches high, decorated with a white tube rose and born the enticing label.

"Tube Rose Scotch Sweet Snuff." She kept it on a window sill in the kitchen. We longed to try Amy's snuff as we longed for chocolate ice cream sodas with whipped cream and a cherry on top, or to see the Saturday movie matinee with Gene Autry and the Lone Ranger.

One morning when Amy was outside stirring clothes over a fire in a black pot, Arlene, the oldest, drifted through the kitchen and snatched the snuff. We raced down a hill into the cavernous, pungent tobacco barn and sank into a dusty corner.

"Let me try it," Mitzie said, grabbing for the can.

“No! I got it – leave it alone,” Alene snarled. She held the can high until Mitzie gave up. Then she pulled her lower lip outward with her left hand and shook snuff into it with her right. Her eyes immediately filled with tears, and her face twisted into an explosion of sneezing, coughing frenzy.

Undeterred by Arlene’s distress, Mitzie seized the snuff tin, and we eagerly pulled out lips and poured in the brown powder. We only needed one taste of the fiery stuff to realize that snuff wasn’t sweet at all.

After spitting and sputtering for long moments, we expelled the worst of it, but we could still taste it hours later. Arlene crept back to the kitchen and quietly replaced the tin on the window sill. If Amy noticed it diminished state, she never said.

“Writer’s Corner” accepts any family-friendly poetry, essays or narratives of 700 words or fewer from local writers. To submit materials for possible publication, e-mail arts@herald-citizen.com or send to Herald-Citizen, c/o Arts Editor, 1300 Neal Street, Cookeville, TN 38501. The editor reserves the right to edit or refuse submittals.

<http://www.ajlambert.com>

HARVEY’S HONESTY REFRESHING

By Sarah Holloway

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN: Sunday, 18 April 2004

Harvey would make a poor poker player. He’d never be able to disguise his hand. If he had an ace-high full house, he’d probably jump three feet in the air and let out a series of joyful yips.



It doesn’t take a lot to make Harvey jump three feet in the air in any case. The arrival of any visiting friend or family member turns him into a whirling dervish of welcoming madness, wagging his whole body, leaping and lapping and making a total fool of himself, while all the humans are screaming, “Down, down! Off! Down Harvey!”

All to no avail.

I’m still trying to teach him manners but restraining his manic enthusiasm is like trying to fill a sieve with sand.

He wouldn’t make a good politician either, deception or ‘spinning’ the facts of life being no part of his psyche. If he consumes something that sits uneasily on his tummy, he simply throws it up as we watch and then stares at us blandly.

There’s no pretending someone else left the mess on the carpet. He obviously feels better now that he did it, and as often as not, looks around playfully for his ball.

He still hasn't learned that hug, noisy trucks aren't adversaries he's likely to win battle with and he continues to lunge at them, barking fiercely and drawing surprised, amused glances from passing truck drivers. Sometimes, if a large dog is on a leash across the street or penned safely in a yard, Harvey challenges them in the same manner but if he meets one face to face, he wraps the leash around my feet in seconds trying to escape, tail, and ears down, eyes pleading, "Help!"

We are both early risers, and he greets each new day with the same bright-eyed relish, watching alertly for his morning Milk-Bone, studying my every move to scope out what I'm up to that might benefit him, such as a dropping toast crumb or a bit of scrambled egg.

He never 'wakes up on the wrong side of the bed' or slumps into a pit of despair. He falls abruptly to the floor, when tired, and stretches full out, as instantly relaxed as a lizard on a sunny rock.

I wish he were as good at obedience as he is at communicating his every want and need. He whines in a high-pitched squeal, punctuated by brief, frustrated barks, when he can't recover his ball or toy from under a piece of furniture and persists until someone retrieves it for him.

His favorite game is fetching the ball. Forcing whoever is stretched comfortably in a recliner to pick it up and throw it consumes a part of every day, mostly in the evening when scooping up and throwing a wet, slobbery ball is the last thing anyone wants to do.

He drops the ball at my feet and assumes a stance, tail and ears up, body taut, feet braced, eyes locked like a laser beam on the ball. When he's ignored, he adds a squeal, glances up, and resumes his hypnotic gaze at the ball.

There's no peace until it's thrown. Then he mutters a sound like "arrrrrr!" and streaks joyfully away to retrieve it and start the game again.

His next favorite game is to hold the ball and his chew-hide in his mouth and dare us to take them. He crams the things in his mouth and stands at my knee, ears back, tail up and wagging, waiting for my hand to make a move toward his mouth.

Then he demonstrates a wide range of growls, depending on how fast and how close my hand come to touching his possessions. The game is not to bite the hand that feeds him but to demonstrate his power to protect what's his. There are boundaries to this game, and I'm not inclined to break them. Harvey's little teeth are very sharp.

Harvey is a handful, but he's totally guileless, as transparent as a newly-cleaned windowpane, as predictable as the sunrise and filled to overflowing with unconditional love.

In these uncertain days when all of our activities are overlaid with ominous threats and unnerving events beyond our control, these traits are more than a saving grace. They make him indispensable. There's no way we could live without him!

<http://www.ajlambert.com>