

Dither

For Apa-V #34

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I had this friend...

Hm. When this topic was selected, I thought yeah, that's a good one. Should be easy to select some friend from the past; I've got almost 6 decade's worth to work from. Though not, perhaps, as many friends—recent or old, close or at least better than just an acquaintance—over all that time as one might expect. I've not been all that gregarious. Still, if I were to actually start counting, even just closer ones, I think I might have to take off my

shoes...

However, selecting one to write about is not so easy. I've been trying to think of some incident worth telling that involved such a friend, and there doesn't seem to have been anything that fits the description. Most people that I've accounted my friends I've done so because we could sit around and laugh and talk unselfconsciously and share thoughts and ideas and even hopes and dreams. But we never did all that much that was remarkable out of context.

With the one major exception, I suppose, being Joy-Lynd, with whom I've shared all that and lots more, but then one goes from dearth to a plethora of topics and incidents and occasions. And my relationship with her crosses the line, fuzzy though that may be, from friendship to love, so while she is, indeed, the best friend I now have in all the world, I'm not sure it's appropriate to base an essay with this topic on that.

And the same argument goes for my siblings and parents. I count myself very lucky to have been raised in a family that got along splendidly for the most part—never any lasting schisms, at any rate. And we shared much together from time to time, though since my parents have gone, my sister Elinor and my brother Hale and I have all taken our lives into different paths. July 29th would have been my father's 101st birthday; Hale mentioned it to me that afternoon during our first visit together in 10 years.

For somewhat different reasons, I'm not sure it's appropriate for me to write about Arnie and Joyce, who have been better friends to me than

I to them, especially in recent years. And what incidents or occasions could I think of, worthy of writing about, that one or both of them may not have already covered with greater eloquence and elan than I could ever muster?

The phrase, "I had this friend," implies past tense.

Well...

I had this friend when I was growing up in Texas. Georgie McKay wasn't my best friend in those years, but I guess probably he was the second kid I met after we moved to College Station in 1944. I met his older brother Billy first.

I turned seven shortly after we arrived and moved into our house on Grove Street and Montclair Avenue. Across Grove was a vacant lot and then a two-story house set well back—there was a long driveway to it from Montclair. There were exterior stairs to the upper story, so, in retrospect, I believe there were two apartments in the building. I'm not sure which the McKays lived in—I never went over there. Billy and Georgie always came to our house. It seems their mother drank a lot, and their father was either long gone or was rarely home; I think it was the latter, because I seem to remember fighting taking place over there.

This was my first and extremely peripheral contact with this kind of unhappy family situation—at least, insofar as a I was aware. I'm not sure I ever really met Mrs. McKay face to face (insofar as a kid is ever face to face with a non-family adult) in the first three or four years we lived there. I have a dim

recollection of an angry (only my later adult awareness would apply the word "bitter") blonde woman, sharp-faced but perhaps attractive at one time, but this comes mainly from later on.

Billy, a year older than I, was the local tow-headed trouble-maker; a charmer who got his way far more often than he should—a classic con man in the making, assuming he lived long enough. Georgie, a really plain little redhead, a year or two younger than I, was forever crying and I assume the perennial victim for Billy.

Billy was in one or two of my classes at school—I'd skipped the first grade, back in Arizona, and was among older kids for the rest of my school days in Texas. I remember little about how he was in school—I don't think he was a "bad kid" in class all that much; nor in fact actually remember him as bad. I just remember that my folks seemed to think he was a bad influence, and all that stuff above, about trouble-maker and con-man, I got from them and other adults. I certainly didn't have that kind of insight about him then, and I suppose I was taken in by him because I'd always rather liked him and even looked up to him. No wonder they were worried.

On the other hand, I believe he was the first school kid I ever heard express a contrary opinion to a teacher. It was in a rare music appreciation class, and the teacher had played Aaron Copeland's "Appalachian Spring" for us. It was just boring stuff to me—I'd not yet come to appreciate much of any kind of "classical" music—and I'd probably spent the time drawing in my notebook or something. But when it was over and the teacher asked us what we thought of it, Billy piped up with "I don't call that music!" I don't remember what her reaction was to it or what the other kids had to say; I just remember the consternation his chutzpah gave me at the time.

Once my folks chided me for trading him a water pistol and a fly-casting reel for some books and a game. They thought I'd been taken

in. I thought I'd made an even deal. Dad, a fisherman, was disappointed with me about the reel, which I understood (though I had another one), but I really was happy to get the books. One of them, which I wish I had today, was an old book of magician's tricks. I admit, I don't recall the others or the game...

But Billy disappeared somewhere along the line, amidst rumors that he'd gotten into trouble and/or had run away, and I never saw or heard from him again.

Looking back, I don't really remember too much about how Georgie and I got along together initially. It seems like he was pretty much of a tagalong to our group. I had a couple of kids that hung out with me at any one time, though different ones at different times—Jon Ray Perryman, Bill Little, Mickey Williamson, Michael Luther, John Price, and, in the later years, Jack Smith. I suspect I was more callous about him than I'd like to think, now, because I have frequent memories of him running home crying, and my having a curious mixed feeling of both sorrow and satisfaction. Guilt? I don't remember about that.

Something changed one summer. He and his mother were away on vacation, and it turned out they'd gone to Chicago, because one morning, as we were listening to Don McNeil's Breakfast Club (as we always did), there was Georgie McKay talking to Don! I didn't really recognize his voice—it could have been any kid—but that was his name and that was our town he was talking about! Wow. My friend was a celebrity! (See how quickly our attitudes turn...)

I've forgotten the sequence of events, now, but somewhere in there, after he and his mother were away for some indefinite period of time, they returned, moving into a newly built house across Montclair from us. (This was the postwar period when the building boom had really struck. Several new houses had been built on our block, on the next street down from Grove, and there were developments growing in various areas of

town.) Mr. McKay was by now gone for good, no one seemed to know where Billy was, and I actually go to go over to the McKay's house to play or even stay the night with Georgie sometimes when his mother was away. It's possible that it was about this time when he became George instead of Georgie. We were no longer preteens, now, though I beat him and most of my other friends to puberty...

He was still a bit of a wimp, I suppose, but he plainly liked me a lot and, whether this fed my ego or what, I liked him a lot better, too. This is where it stood, however, when my father had to retire for health reasons, and my parents decided it was time to return to their origins in New England.

George and I quickly lost touch after we moved. I don't even remember if we tried to write each other. I more or less kept in touch with Jack Smith, and with John Price for a while, but I was no better correspondent then than I am now, and after a while it was rare to hear anything from College Station.

So the years passed. It was in the early 60s and my brother Hale and I were sharing an apartment in Staten Island when I heard from George again. It was a letter, written in a most childish scrawl, noting that he would be coming to New York and rather tentatively proposing we get together while he was in town. We made the appropriate arrangements, and met.

He was still a classic redhead, short in stature but filled out in bulk—not fat, but not a weight lifter either, just chunky. He had one of the most beautiful radio voices I've ever heard in an acquaintance. And he'd become an alcoholic, though I didn't pick up on this until later on in the evening. Not so much from the fact that he was drinking—Hale and I both were not loathe to partake of alcohol in those days—but from his tales of his exploits while under the influence, some of them harrowing just to listen to.

He was working at the Library of Congress then—in what capacity I don't recall. Nothing

major, I have to assume, but still, at the time, that sounded really prestigious to me. Some of the stories he told made me wonder how he kept his job there, and it's quite possible that he didn't for long.

I think he stayed with us for the time he was there before returning to Washington. He came into town two or three times over the next year or so, one of them—I think the last—for New Year's Eve. He and Hale and I had dinner at the Top of the Sixes restaurant on that occasion—memorable to me because that was the one time I ever had frogs legs. I don't really remember how good or bad they were, though, having stunned my senses with a vodka gibson or two before they arrived on our table.

I must acknowledge that he was becoming a less and less desirable adjunct to our circle of acquaintances as time went by. It was almost like the days when he used to tag along with us kids. I still wanted to like him, but while he was tolerable to start with on each visit, it was more and more difficult to stay appreciative of his presence through the period he was in town. In what ways did he annoy us? I may have blanked the specifics from my mind—it's 30 years plus, now—but I associate it with his drinking. Not that he stayed drunk.... exactly. Just—obnoxious.

When I moved into Manhattan, leaving Hale with his new girlfriend Gail (now his wife) in Staten Island, I got a couple more letters from George, forwarded to my new address from the old one, and I'm afraid I rather deliberately never replied to them. To this day, I'm not sure if I really feel guilty about that.

I never heard from, or about, him again.

I suppose it really depends on what you call a friend. I wasn't all that good a friend to him, I'm afraid, but I don't know that I could really have done better by him.

I had this friend...

