

Stories

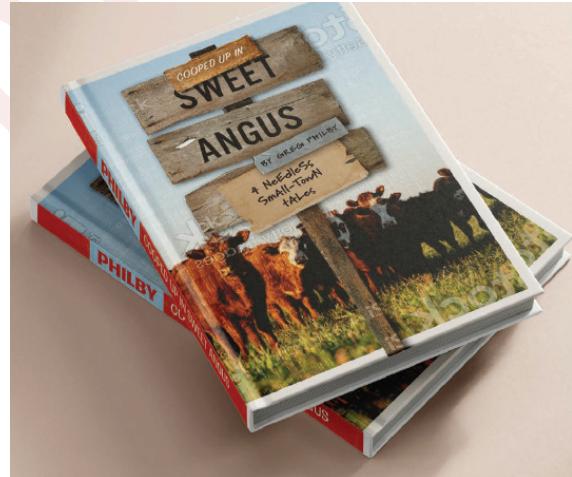
I describe these humorous albeit painful stories as a small-town Midwest take on Wooster and Jeeves-style episodes: well-meaning characters who can't help but get in their own way. A simple small thing can easily blossom into an insanely out-of-control situation in this fertile ground. And ya, it sure does...

Each "short story" is typically 6 to 8 chapters and about 50 pages, so there is ample time for much to unravel.

A few examples of stories in the series:

The Crime that Almost Happened
Farmer Dick's Exploding Chickens
The Ladies' Mournology Club
Orville's Ashes
For the Love of Pea Salad
Nuts in the Belfry
Farmer Dick's Killer Pigeon
Horace Sells His Pants

About 20 stories in all. Assuming they quit doing silly things and I can get on to other projects.



Excerpts

A few paragraphs to give you a taste of life in Sweet Angus.

From FARMER DICK'S EXPLODING CHICKENS

...The first to blow up was Ramona Poultry.

This was discovered the morning after the horrendous chicken incident when Mabel Grumley stopped by to return a colander she'd borrowed, just in case it was infected with plague. The storm had broken open, and Mabel trudged in a slow straight-down drizzle of rain to the Poultry front door. Since she was wearing protective rubber gloves, she could not knock loudly and it was some time before Harry Poultry opened the door, possibly because he could not hear her or probably because he did.

He stood there reluctantly. Mabel stood before him like a multicolored swollen sponge. The rain sliced down, spattering. It pinged off the colander.

“This is Ramona’s.” She held the colander out. “Is Ramona?..”

“She’s not here,” he said.

“Not here?” She asked it suspiciously.

“No.”

Harry was about to say that she decided this morning, for chicken-plague-avoiding reasons, to visit her sister in Hardley for a few days. But he was not sure he wished to engage in that long of a conversation. Plus, the rain was misting onto his slippers.

“She’s gone,” he said again. He held his hand out for the colander.

“Oh my Lord! She’s *gone*?!!” Mabel began to back away. “Because of... Was it because of the plague?”

“Yes.”

“I *knew* it!! I knew it would be her. She has never been a healthy one. I mean, she has looked a little sickly for years, and starting to put on the pounds too. You could tell by looking at her she was ready to go.”

She leaned closer, curiosity outweighing fear.

“So was it, you know...” she asked. “Was it a big blast? You know, like a *Boom!* Or was it more of a *Poof*?”

Harry threw his hands up in frustration. He was ready for the conversation to be done and the tips of his slippers were now quite drenched. “I don’t know,” he said. “A *Poof*. Whatever.” He put a hand out for the colander.

Mabel nearly handed the colander to him, then snatched it back to her rain-slicked chest.

“Well, if she’s gone, she really doesn’t need this back right away then, does she?” She gave a quick smile, clutched the colander tightly, and turned to hurry to the safety of her home as fast as she could. But not so fast that she didn’t have time first to spread the news that Ramona blew up from the plague and she was gone in a *Poof*!

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From THE LADIES' MOURNOLOGY CLUB

... Waiting for people to die when you want them to is a frustrating thing. It is an especial challenge in a small town, such as Sweet Angus, in which your prospects for probable deceased are quite limited. The Ladies' Mournology Club began tailing Horace Hamperstead around town, shadowing his movements, asking him of his health and cutting his food into larger bite-sizes than normal, as he was among the most likely to go. Grandpa Beam had his followers too.

But days went by, a week or two even, with no positive results.

Although it was disheartening waiting for the dawdling grim reaper to get on with it, the plus side was that it gave the Mournology Club members more time to fine-tune the roll-out of their business. They would start at no-charge, providing a few free samples of their work. In this manner, once the townsfolk had their eyes opened to professional grieving, they could stick the stiff with mourning money. The dollars of death were about to flow...

So it was that the ladies felt a beautiful burst of joy when it was announced that Whisk's sister had passed away and would be memorialized in the Sweet Angus church.

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From HORACE SELLS HIS PANTS

... It began when old Horace Hamperstead walked down main street of Sweet Angus without pants. He wore a perfectly acceptable hat, an old brown fedora that he often wore to church, tilted jauntily on his old gray head. He had a blue denim shirt that fit his shoulders nicely though was too big and billowy for the rest of his frail frame. He wore his favorite brown house slippers and a fresh pair of black socks. But between the socks and the denim was a mortifying expanse of nakedness.

Down the street he went, upheld, it seemed, by badly underbaked breadsticks. The shirt tail flapped scantily, just shy of revealing an optical trauma that could never be rinsed from one's eyes. In this fashion, he doddered by the bank and sauntered past the Do Drop Inn. He casually ribaled his way to the Flutterbee Hardware Store, where he opened the door. The bells jingled, and the pants-less Horace went in. Mason Flutterbee, proprietor of the store, was astride his story-telling stool, unreeling a Cousin Samuel tale to a small collection of townsfolk.

“So Cousin Samuel, he poured a little bit of that love potion right into the goat's water bowl, thinking it'd be ...”

Horace wandered through the group of men in unabashed humanity, shifted a metal chair just so, then settled down on it, his bare pasty legs dangling from the denim. Nobody dared look his direction, yet nobody could stop themselves from it. The train wreck of nudity on the metal chair was too much to ignore.

“So he... he....” Mason tried to continue. The frayed toothpick wobbled in his mouth. He took it out. His words were stuck in his throat. Cousin Samuel refused to emerge into a room so overly exposed with Horace.

Horace shifted. He crossed his legs. The shirt rode uncomfortably high. The room fell into a morbidity of shock.

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From CURSE OF THE HOLIDAY HORSEMEN

...“And that,” said Mason, “was how the llama got the baseball out of the cookie jar.”

“I thought it was an emu,” said Jimmy DeVinny. “Wasn’t it supposed to be an emu?” Metal chairs clacked and squeaked as the group got ready to leave.

“No, that’s Version 3,” said Buddy. “This is Version 5. Version 5 has got the llama. Llamas got longer necks, you see, that way he could reach to the top shelf.”

The men stood up.

“Emus got long necks too,” said Jimmy.

“Not as long as a llama neck.”

“They’re pretty long.”

“Well they’re long enough for Version 3, because they only need to reach to the cookie jar on the countertop. But for Version 5, the cookie jar is up on the top shelf. You gotta have a llama to reach the top shelf.”

“Well the emu could’ve just stepped up on a step stool. Then he could’ve reached it.”

“There wasn’t any step stool.”

“Coulda been.”

“There wasn’t. If there was a step stool, it’d have been in the story...”

“Doesn’t mean it wasn’t there. That’s what good stories do. They leave stuff out.”

“Couldn’t have been an emu anyway. The llama had to reach over the stove. You don’t want an emu reaching over the stove. It’d catch fire.”

“Emus don’t catch fire that easy.”

“They do if they’re reaching over the stove.”

“I ain’t ever seen that happen.”

“Yeah they light up pretty quick. You don’t want them over the stove. That’s why this version had to have a llama.”

“Llamas can catch fire too.”

“Not as easy as an emu.”

They went out the door, still debating the flammability and literary distinctions between a llama and an emu.

From NUTS IN THE BELFRY

... The resonance in Pastor Paul's voice was powerful as Deuteronomy. It commanded. It boomed. It rasped like a horde of locusts. It was, perhaps, the most apostolic sound he'd ever emitted. It may have been partially due to the night before, when he had been at a loss as to what to do for a sermon and had polished off a bottle or so of wine in search of inspiration and instead had awakened this morning with a headache and a voice nearly an octave lower than usual and with the huskiness of a field of corn. It might have been due to that. It might also *not* have been due to that, but simply the lord invoking him with auditory power, knowing how fervently he had prayed for a sermon idea between swigs of Chablis. The lord works in mysterious ways. Perhaps even via a very holy hangover.

Regardless of the cause, which Pastor Paul decided was not something to be dwelled upon, his voice resonated. He resonated through the welcome, and through the joys and concerns. He resonated through the first scripture reading. Every word rumbled like thunder and lay thick as summer heat. He felt as though god was speaking through him like a hollow wine bottle.

“and I beseech you therefore, brethren...”

He looked upon his flock, proudly listening to his voice as it sailed off like a mighty yacht across the sleepy sea of congregation. No, like an ark... An ark of rhetoric... An ark of reverential rhetoric... It was then he saw a hand raised in pew 6. His stomach knotted, despite the unstoppability of his words. The hand waved demonstratively to get his attention.

“Yes?...” he regrettably said into the microphone. Dang, but even a regrettably muttered “yes” still sounded mighty fine when blessed with baritone hangover.

“What does beseech mean?,” said Harrison Greenbuckle. “Normally, you’re a little hard to understand and I don’t listen too close, but today I can hear you really good!”

Pastor Paul froze. Clearly his newfound ecclesiastic elocution had a downside. People were actually listening to the words.

Beseech. It was a good question. Beseech was clearly a favorite term of the lord and Pastor Paul had uttered it readily through the years, but in all honesty, he had not stopped to ponder its meaning. And now, the question lay before him like a huge stone before his grave with all the eyes of the congregation upon him, seeking revelation.

“Well,” he said, “beseech is, you know, like *seeching*. Only moreso.” He looked to the heavens to see if they might grumble with disappointment in him. He looked to Harrison to see if he might accept it. Both were blank as plaster. Which, truth be told, was not far afield from normalcy.

As he talked, his voice seemed to falter in its resonating confidence, underlined with a strange growly churr sound, as though the gears of his vocal chords were running low on oil and beginning to grind.

“The lord, um, the lord...”

“Churrrrrr...” came the sound.

He stopped.

There was silence.

“Beseech is a word that...”

“*Churrrr...*” it came again.

At first he feared the sound was coming from within him. But then, it seemed, it was descending from above. This actually concerned him even more. The lord himself, it appeared, was indeed admonishing Pastor Paul’s lack of holy vocabulary.

He paused, wondering what to do. Perhaps it was best to answer with silence. Perhaps it was best to let lost souls find their own way. It was a tactic he had used often when faced with a difficult question.

But then the sound came again on its own, without Pastor Paul’s husky voice draping over it.

“*Churrr....*”

It was a rattling growl. And it was definitely coming from the rafters of the church. All eyes lifted heavenward...

“Hear that?” somebody said. “Something’s in the attic.”

“Sounds alive.”

“From up above...” someone said. “It’s from up above.”

“You mean like a bird?”

“No, I mean higher.”

“An airplane?”

“Why would there be an airplane in the church attic? I mean higher, like..... god.”

“God is higher than airplanes?”

“Of course he is.”

“But I thought god was on the clouds. Airplanes go higher than the clouds. That means airplanes would be higher up.”

“God is higher! It says so in the bible.”

“They don’t say how high airplanes are in the bible. So an airplane could still be higher.”

“Can’t be god anyway. Ain’t he too big for an attic?”

“He’s not that big. He could fit in it.”

“Depends on the attic, I think.”...

It was no longer about Pastor Paul’s husky, resonating Sunday morning voice. There was something else resonating inside the church, and it wasn’t human.