

RATKINZ

by Daniel Arthur

The Hamster brothers were born in a Ham town whose most famous citizen was an old dog that was shot for being a chicken thief. The story became a legend, then a movie, because a famous lawyer proved the dog was innocent. A statue of the dog is in Hamton Square. It was strange to the brothers that no Hamster statue was there. They vowed one day to outdo the dog, without getting killed. The dog had actually done nothing. So it seemed reasonable that if a Hamster or two did anything at all, the event had statuesque possibilities.

Arty was a quiet little Ham who enjoyed big picture books. At the age of four, he decided to become a cartoonist but didn't want to wait until he grew up. So his dad taught him how to draw and bought him a sketch pad and a pencil pouch, which he carried everywhere. His favorite activity was sitting on the green grass in the shade of his white house under a blue sky and yellow sun drawing pictures of pretty purple flowers and red birds in the back yard.

“Lernin ta draw iz lernin ta see,” his Ham dad said.

His father liked to get him out of the yard on the weekends. They played ball at the park, went swimming at the old rock quarry, and visited the historical monuments around the area to sketch and talk. Sitting under the famous statue in the town square, Arty asked his dad, “How kum dat dog iz mo famus dan Hamstuz?”

“Dat lawyer told a good story. We still remember it an tell it too. Yoo kin tell a story an maybe get yer own statue, after ya lern yer alfabet.”

“I no da Alfa Bat.” Arty said. “A Ba Da... E Fe Ge He... I Ji Ki Li Mi Ni...
O Po Wo So To... U Vu Wu Yu Zu.”

“Wow, furry good, son. Now lets lern how ta draw dat Alfa Bat.” They sat together and drew pictures of every sound the Alfa Bat could make.

Arty’s father, Burton, was from Hamlin, on the other side of the pond. He had met Arty’s mother, Margret, at a dance while stationed at the air base nearby. He was a Goony Bird pilot, not as cool as flying Night Hawks but any heroic experience brought adoration from young Hams. Margret was a Hamshire Princess but her family had considerable Squirrel ancestry. She believed her Lucille Ball charm came from the Squirrel side of her family and was grateful that Arty possessed those attributes of her rodential heritage, rather than the more verminesque characteristics of his father’s kin, bubbling up in his little brother.

“Rat in da famly tree,” his dad would say. “Nutin we kin do ‘bout dat.”

The younger Hamster was called Smiley because he dressed like the famous cowboy, Smiley Burnett. He wore a big floppy hat that covered his eyes unless he tilted it way back on his head. Around his neck was a baggy yellow bandana, tied so it could be quickly pulled up over his nose. A wide black belt with empty brass bullet casings held a holster on each hip which contained either a silver cap pistol or an orange squirt gun, depending upon the particular mission.

Smiley was most often engaged in sneaking around looking for bad guys. His favorite victim was his Aunt Alletta, a Lemming that lived two doors down. She wasn’t really a bad guy but he loved the way she screamed, and she loved the attention. When

she least expected it, he would leap out from behind a bush or a chair or the bathtub and yell in his loudest voice, “STIKUMUP!” She would then scream like the long wrong note of an elephant trunk and dash away.

His best memory is of the time he startled her while gardening in the back yard. She did her scream, grabbed her flab, galloped across the yard and splashed loudly into the pond. It was the funniest thing he had ever seen. As he rolled on the lawn laughing, she emerged from the water and sloshed back to the house, pointing at him and saying, “Yur a Bad Ham, BAAAD. I’m tellin’ yur mom ‘bout dis.” Then she laughed and gave him ice cream.

When word of this got out, the behavior spread to a number of his friends who began referring to themselves as ‘The Burnett Gang’ but their moms just called them ‘The Smileys’. They were continually telling Aunt Alletta to stop encouraging them, especially with ice cream. But she was an unusual single-minded Lemming, with no children and no inclination to prepare them for the future.

Arty, Smiley, Margret and Burton lived just two blocks from the Hamster Garden. Most of the animals that played there were Hamsters but other animals also gathered at the place. They were all referred to as Hams since they lived in one little Ham burg or another. Officially they could be called “Hamburgers,” which the little Hams routinely liked to call each other, among other things.

“Yo, Ham!”

“Mo, Ham!”

“Ham n Cheez.”

“Ham Burger.”

“Cheez Burger.”
“Cheez Sneez.”
“Burger Booger.”
“Yum!”
“Yum!”

The Ham moms saw no humor in this and had no idea where this foolishness came from. So they hired a Garden Director, Ms. Ferretfuss, to plan a variety of games to help everybody learn to get along, and to change any behaviors that might be deemed “unhamly.” The little Hams, however, usually preferred to make up their own games, without regard for parental or Ferretfussial approval.

Posey Possum liked to pretend she had just died. She learned this from her 97-year-old GranGran who was in the local nursing home and had been dying for twenty years. Whenever Posey was bored or had a conflict she would gasp and fall to the ground then push a cloth flower up between the buttons in her blouse, causing it to appear to grow from her chest, eventually blooming into a “Possum Blossom,” as she called it.

Smiley and the other Burnetts were overjoyed at this response to their attacks. Their daily game was to target potential victims that might replicate Posey’s Possum performance or Aunt Alletta’s spectacular splashing. When Smiley discovered that Mo Porkly went home every evening and wallowed in a pig pen with his family, he decided it would be enjoyable to provide Mo mud during the day, perhaps at lunch or recess.

While the Smileys pondered such possibilities, Ms. Ferretfuss was busy planning alternatives to potential Squirrely and Ratty behaviors. Teaching the Hams how to read was the most important activity in her plan. “Less Mess, Much QUIET!” was her

motto, shouting from a big sign on the front of her desk. She wrote cards and stapled them to trees and bushes all around the Garden, promoting engagement in non-activity. “Con Tem Plate,” one would offer. “What are you NOT doing?” another asked. “Wonder!” made everybody stop and wonder where the Wonder was.

Arty understood what Ms. Ferretfuss and the moms were trying to do. He had not been so Squirrely after his accident. Nobody liked to talk about it in front him because he almost ended up like his cousin, RoadKill. He had never even met his cousin but every mom told the story as an example of what could happen when you were Squirreling around. Now they were telling his story. In Arty’s case he wasn’t even Squirreling. He was just sitting in the backyard drawing, as usual. He felt bad because his mom saw the whole thing. She always kept an eye on him from the kitchen. It was through that window that she watched him get up to retrieve a ball that had bounced over the neighbor’s back fence. Arty didn’t get to the ball until it had rolled into the street where he was immediately hit by a car. The screech of the tires and screams of his mother ripped through the yards and into the houses all around. Everyone froze and silently looked around to see what happened. The only movement was Margret running toward the gray car, standing still as a tombstone on the gray street. Then everybody else ran toward it. A herd of Hams soon surrounded the vehicle but dared not look under it.

Beneath the car, Arty was dazed and looking at things he had never before imagined and would never forget. Metal pipes twisted around metal boxes held in place by metal bolts, some rusty, some covered with dark goo. Heat and noise were blowing down on him. Big metal poles connected to wheels that had tires on them. He had never

been so close to a tire before except for his swing. He looked around at all four. It was a strange view that he imagined few Hamsters ever got to see. Lying in a street, under a car, looking up at concrete curbs with green grass growing over them. Beyond were trees and houses, and dozens of hairy Hamster legs running toward him.

A face appeared. “AAARTY, are you okay?” the face pleaded, prayed. He looked at the contorted crying face, not quite recognizing it. The face called his name again, more softly. He recognized his mother. “I’m okay, mom,” he said slowly. Then he crawled out past the muffler and pulled himself up on the rear bumper where he was swept into his mom’s soft arms and wet face. He never wanted to see her face look like that again.

Margret and Arty were grateful and content with common little everyday things after that. She couldn’t gaze out the kitchen window without reliving the scene. It was both her greatest terror and greatest miracle. For several days Arty sat in the grass by the flowers and replayed the scene over and over in his mind, looking at it from different angles. He had almost died a pointless death, like that old dog. No, like his cousin. There was a story, but no statue of RoadKill in Hamton Square.

Strolling in the Garden, observing Smiley and the gang on maneuvers, Arty stopped to read a new sign that Ms. Ferretfuss had tacked to a tree. “Leave Your Tale Behind.” The first thought he had was of the statue. A dog tale. The next thought was something his father had said to him many times.

“Looks lak ya gotta tale growin on yer hed. Jest rat it out, son.”

Things his dad said to him never quite made sense, especially when his dad was smiling. He would always say that particular thing when Arty was deep in thought. The saying would interrupt his thought and when he looked up, his dad was smiling, with a little gleam in his eye. His little brother had that same little smile and that same little gleam. In fact, the hairs on the back of his neck could almost feel that smile right now. He turned to see it.

“Yo, Art.”
“Get Smart.”
“Smart Fart.”
“Broken Hart.”
“Fart Dart.”
“Shoppin Kart.”
“Tater Chips.”
“Duzint Rime.”
“Nutter Time.”

Smiley’s smile lingered in the air until Smiley’s smell dissolved it. Then all three were gone. Things seem to make sense in threes, even if you can’t see them. A new awareness made Arty cringe. He understood what his father had meant. Like his brother, he was a Ratkin. There was nothing he could do about it but rat it out. So he sat down under the tree and wrote down the story he had on his mind. Then he placed it on a stump, neatly printed a sign and hung it on the bush next to it.

“In Joy Wee Ding.”