

## Funny Bone

Ben had become extremely proficient at doing several different things with one arm. He could button-up his nice shirts. He could type twenty words per minute, which he was happy to inform you was only about ten words per minute less than the average two-handed person. Yes, Ben had been rather attached to his left arm; however, once he found it missing, there were days when Ben wasn't so sure if he ever really *needed* two arms. It wasn't as if Ben felt that he was missing out. Sure, he couldn't start a round of applause or drive a stick-shift, but he'd never really done either of those things when he had had two arms.

He had even become a magnificent gift wrapper. For example, the gift for his niece was defiantly one of the best wrapped gifts in the stack of birthday gifts. His corners were perfectly creased and the purple and pink ribbon at the top had two-inch curls cascading over the edges.

Granted, as much as Ben had adapted to the loss of his arm there were things he tried to avoid now; particularly social events with new people.

No, it wasn't as if Ben had any *real* social anxiety. Large crowds didn't leave him feeling tight in the chest, and he even enjoyed making small talk in the line at Starbucks. Ben just dreaded social situations with strangers where he'd have to engage in *extended* small talk. Take today for instance: his niece's fourth birthday party.

The children were fine. When they asked about his missing arm with their unapologetic and naive bluntness, Ben would always reply that he hadn't eaten enough vegetables when he was young. The result of which was his arm just falling off one day. There were a few children who were extremely skeptical, but for the most part, children tended to become avid vegetable consumers after their encounter with Ben.

Nope. It was the adults, or parents today, that Ben dreaded meeting. At first, everyone would be polite and not-so-casually glance at his missing arm, no one was ever as subtle as they thought they were. At the beginning, the conversation would be normal chit-chat. People would ask what he did for a living. (He was a manager of an outdoors apparel store that also featured the kind of accessories one would need for camping on the side of a mountain, or say, cannoning down rives chock full of hippos in South Africa.) They would all discuss the weather or insert some commonality here. (Today, it was of course the children and how they knew the birthday girl). Inevitably a brave soul would speak up.

"So Ben, may I ask how you lost your arm?"

There were days where Ben just wanted to say, "No, you may not" and walk away. But that was not in Ben's nature.

There were other times when Ben fancied saying that he had lost it to an alligator while attempting to retrieve a golf ball from a lake (but he didn't golf), or that he had lost it in a bad motorcycle accident (but he didn't drive a motorcycle). He sometimes even considered telling people he had to saw it off with his pocket knife while he was rock climbing because it became stuck.

However, in the end, Ben always settled for the truth.

"I was attacked by a Hippopotamus." (He never called it a hippo anymore Ben had too much respect for the animal.)

The reaction was always the same. They would gaze at him with baffled expressions painted across their middle-America faces and then burst out laughing. Because really, who loses their arm to a hippopotamus?

Ben did.

The part that came next, that was really the crux of why he hated social events. Eventually Ben would have to say, “No, I really lost my arm to a hippopotamus. It attacked my canoe when I was in South Africa. It was about four years ago – before I moved here.”

The laughter would always sputter to an abrupt stop in a matter of seconds, and an awkward silence would take its place. Ben didn’t mind the laughter so much; it was that feeling people got after the laughter had died away. That embarrassed flush that would creep up their necks, and that slightly mortified glance they’d cast one another. He hated being the cause of that guilty-awkward feeling. The one that settled in just before the stiff apologies (because Miss Manners never prepared anyone for how to recover from *that* particular social faux pas). That embarrassment that came when they assumed that they had offended Ben by laughing. Before he knew it, the parents of his niece’s friends had wandered away. People tended to avoid the things that make them uncomfortable, and even if Ben assured them it happened all the time, Ben tended to become one of those things.

Ben stood sandwiched between his brother-in-law and the wall as his sister bounced around and took pictures of her daughter blowing out the candles while everyone sang. Before the cake, but after the candles, the gifts were to be passed to the birthday girl.

“And here’s one from Uncle Ben!” His sister exclaimed.

“I wrapped that myself,” he said under his breath to a parent near him. He gave her a wink and a grin as her features were colored with surprise.

Ben delighted seeing his niece’s face light up as she tore the wrapping paper off the square box.

Her thrilled squeals filled the stunned silence left behind as the parents all saw what Ben had given his only niece.

Hungry Hungry Hippos.

Ben might have lost his left arm, but not his sense of humor.