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Why We Never Did Hamlet

Ruthie Blunt's younger son, Kermit, flooded the American West with his semen and then drove his pick-up straight into a tree. The insurance check arrived October 1st. The name it bore was Ruthie's ex, the deceased's father.

Ruthie yelled at her ex on the phone. "I'm the one who paid the premiums."

"Kermit wanted me to have it," he explained.

Ruthie's older son, Axel, wouldn't lift a finger to help in the salon. He said he had a fragment of a bullet in his spine, and even if all he did was sweep the floor it might slip a certain way and cripple him for life. He sat on a couch and watched *Industry on Parade* at 3 o'clock most afternoons. Boon only had one TV channel, and *Industry on Parade*, a Peabody Award winning program according to the announcer, was what he had to be content with.

Ruthie's ex bought a Winnebago motor-home, and when he drove to visit national parks in the spring he took with him a woman, formerly from Texas, whose yellow hair was the same color as egg yolk. She was not tall enough to reach the Winnebago's pedals so Ruthie's ex strapped a block of wood to the accelerator. He called from Coeur d'Alene to say he and his girlfriend were having fun except the woman, whose name was Eleanor, had broken out in hives from eating pecans at a pancake house. He asked to speak to Axel, and when Axel took the phone his father yelled, "Get a job."

“Be careful in Yellowstone, daddy,” Axel told him. “Grizzlies kill when they smell menstrual blood.”

The call came when a guy who looked like an Italian stud had come to Ruthie’s to see if she could offer him a job. He had moved north from his home in California on the promise of a different job, one in a downtown salon. Ruthie’s salon was in her living room and not on one of Boon’s business streets. Talbot, the stud-looking guy who’d come to ask for work, wasn’t strong on logic. He tended to get emotional and not explain things well. From what he said, Ruthie gathered the downtown-salon owner expected Talbot not only to cut and highlight hair but to be on tap for bedroom favors, too. Talbot fluttered when he spoke about the shock of that. Fluttering was Talbot’s way of shaking off disturbing thoughts.

He also told Ruthie he was worried about his little brother, whom he’d had to leave in their rented room. The way he talked made Ruthie think his brother was a mere child, but it turned out to be quite different than that. Also, the guy wasn’t his brother.

What was good was that Talbot could do hair styling. He’d done his mother’s when he and Merlin—which was his brother’s name—still lived in California, before their mother bought her property in Omaha. On the basis of his hair-styling experience, Ruthie offered him a job, which delighted Talbot so much he thanked Ruthie with a hug, and to Axel, on the couch, he beamed a happy smile.

When Talbot brought his brother with him for his first day of work, the brother, Merlin, turned out to be not a child but a skinny man who wore tight jeans. Talbot plunked him down next to Axel on the couch. Side by side with Axel, Merlin watched the Peabody Award winning program and never said a word. He hardly spoke the whole day,

in fact, and after the shop closed and the brothers had gone home Axel told his mother he'd be damned if he'd baby sit that dummy one more day.

"It isn't babysitting if he's a grown-up man," his mother explained. "And besides, what is Talbot supposed to do? Coop his brother up all day in some tiny rented room?"

"His brother doesn't weigh more than two feathers so he could shove a roman candle up his ass and blow him out to space without a problem," Axel told her.

"You should stick a candle up your own ass and blow yourself into employment, Axel." Ruthie emphasized *employment* to show how serious she was.

What worked out good was that Merlin was perfectly happy to sweep the floor and empty ashtrays and run errands, although his driving skills left lots to be desired, and after a ding on the fender and a headlight out of whack Ruthie put her foot down and would no longer let him use her car.

Among the regulars at Ruthie's Kleen Cut Salon was a woman named Della Mayhew, shaped more or less like a spike, who worked as a reporter for the Boon Daily News. Talbot didn't do her hair, which Ruthie herself kept colored the same shade as an orange Popsicle, but he took over her shampooing, and in the midst of sudsing and rinsing he told her he had studied at the Pasadena Playhouse. Della said that she had been in all her college plays and they should start a drama group. She had already talked to other friends about her theater idea so when Talbot showed up at Boon's Civic Center two nights later a group of about six had gathered and already arranged the center's folding chairs in a loose semi-circle.

Talbot had brought Merlin in his skinny jeans, and Merlin was so shy he pressed himself against the wall as if he could push through and plunge like a dead weight into

the small-boat harbor, the waters of which ebbed and flowed through the piling on which the Civic Center sat. Talbot explained in his fluttering way that he and Merlin were like brothers although in technical terms they weren't actually related. Merlin's father had been either married to or the same-as-married-to Talbot's mother and had brought Merlin, then just a six-year-old, into their shared house. When the father's professional duties (taxidermy, Talbot said) called him to Anaconda, he left Merlin behind. Months of absence dragged into years, and Merlin grew up to think of Talbot, four years older than he, as the bigger brother who walked him to school and protected him from bullies and filled his bowl with Cheerios at breakfast and also made sure he learned to wash himself so that, in the olfactory sense, he was never offensive.

That long explanation preceded a reading, from a borrowed library book and one acting copy Della happened to possess of the Tennessee Williams' one-act called *The Long Stay Cut Short*, a reading all the participants agreed went so well they should look into rehearsing it for a performance at whatever place they could find to put it on. Talbot took the part of Archie Lee, and Della, who had once lived to Arizona, helped Dawn Nyquist, who had the role of Flora, work on her southern accent.

Talbot, in addition to acting, directed the play, but from one rehearsal to the next his blocking instructions changed. They became so contradictory the other actors never knew if they were to move stage left or right or sit down on a chair and just stay put. Talbot didn't want to hear about that problem. He'd just say, "We'll work it out," and go on to something new.

The group should probably have called itself The We'll-Work-It-Out Players because that's the way they put the play together. The actual name, though, was The

Boon Players, and enthusiasm for what they were doing brought the cast, night after night, to the chapel in the hospital, in which they had permission to rehearse. Della coached Dawn Nyquist over and over to say, “Quit suckin’ your teeth, Archie Lee,” and eventually getting her up to a point where she could report to Talbot Dawn was beginning to sound a little southern.

“Southern Norway, maybe,” Axel said. He had gotten off his mother’s couch to come see the performance, mainly because he knew Dawn would appear on stage in a skimpy outfit. This was on a Sunday afternoon, which was the only time the play would not be competing with basketball games played on the Civic Center’s court.

Boon got three inches of wet snow starting about five that evening, so the audience sat with their galoshes on and mittens and hats and scarves piled up beside their chairs. Not quite ideal conditions for a play about the south and all its sultry heat, a point Axel took pains to make after Dawn Nyquist had taken her bows and put her street clothes on again.

“Fuck you,” Della told him. She had hobbled on and off the stage as an older woman in the play. “What you don’t understand is the magic of theater, the way we mold reality to what we want reality to be through the power of our voices and the power of our bodies and the power of our conviction till what we say is truer than the snow and truer than the slush and truer than those god-damn black galoshes.”

She also told him Axel he should get a job, which made him remind her of the bullet in his spine before he went limping off to slosh home through the snow.

Merlin, in his thin jacket and his skinny jeans, had attended all our rehearsals and had never said anything. He made no comment about the performance either, but he was

very good about setting up the folding chairs and, afterwards, carrying them downstairs and putting them away.

The play the Players did next was *Look Homeward, Angel*, and people in the audience actually cried when the brother of the hero died in the second act.

“You did good,” Axel told everybody afterwards. The cast and all the backstage helpers had squeezed into the Lotus Room bar. Axel wasn’t in the cast nor was he a backstage helper, but he liked to be in bars when there was a chance a person might be buying rounds. He kept close to Merlin, like he was watching over him, and I heard him tell Talbot’s semi-brother he should get up on the stage and be an actor, too. He told Merlin he’d be good at it, which most people knew could not be true, because if Merlin was too shy to say a word even in the most familiar social settings, like sitting on a couch and watching *Industry on Parade*, he was never going to work up enough nerve to walk on stage and speak a line.

But as it turned out when the Players did *The Christmas Carol* after they did *Picnic*, in the second year of their existence, Talbot made Merlin play the boy who knows there’s still a fat goose left for Scrooge to buy. All Merlin had to say was, “Yes, sir. Hanging in the window,” or something else as short as that. Then he had to catch the coin Scrooge threw down to him and scamper off in the direction, supposedly, of the butcher shop.

In rehearsals Merlin said the words so softly Della, who had taken all the trouble to make a play out of Charles Dickens’ story, told Talbot he should just have his brother nod and not say anything. Talbot, though, said no. He told Della to trust him, and apparently he worked so hard with Merlin in their little rented room that when

performance time came and Merlin had to say his line he shouted it so joyfully you could hear the audience go *Ah*, like everyone really believed there was a goose and was happy to learn it still hung in the butcher's window. Then Merlin caught the coin Scrooge tossed and leaped in the air holding it over his head, which had never been rehearsed before or even discussed, but it made Merlin seem like somebody delighted to be part of this Christmas transformation. After that, he skipped his way offstage, and the audience actually applauded because he'd played his part so well.

In the Lotus Bar later, for the first time ever, Merlin sipped a beer, Rainier brand, while he listened to the father of the boy who'd had the part of Tiny Tim tell about a time in Gig Harbor when the city was so scared of polio it shut down all the movie houses. In the middle of that story Talbot came and took the beer out of Merlin's hand. He gave him a Coke instead. He didn't even say anything; he just did it, but everybody knew he didn't want Merlin drinking.

That brought up the question of what was Merlin's age. He could have been seventeen or he could have been twenty-five. No whiskers shadowed his cheeks, though he could have shaved them off so thoroughly no one could tell. The part of his undershirt that showed was always gray, not soiled gray so much as gray from age. He looked like someone young enough to still need reminding about his appearance.

A guy called Pauly had the part in *Picnic* of Howard, the guy who fools around with the spinster, whom Della played. Her acting was so good that after Pauly said, "Well," to try to weasel out of a commitment in their relationship and she answered quite sarcastically, "A well's a hole in the ground, Howard," you could hear this little ripple of laughter roll through the audience. They got it. They knew what kind of people they were

seeing up there on the stage in all their make-up and their costumes and under all those lights.

The group's performance, at last, was on a real stage. It wasn't the basketball gym at the Civic Center. Talbot had talked the Redmen's Lodge into letting the Players use their hall, which had a stage with curtains. Ellery Tinsel was the Redman Talbot talked to. Tinsel had a tourist business and was always thinking up new ideas for civic improvement. Maybe it was because he thought a lot about tourists that he came up with the idea for a play about the history of Boon. Della told him she could write one with no problem. She had confidence because she'd done so well at writing our version of *The Christmas Carol*. She said she'd take a look at what was colorful about the history of Boon and work the stuff she found into a play.

Ellery Tinsel said he'd help her with the research, and from him she got two magazine articles from 1926 that told about how hell-raising Boon had been. Even better were the stories Ruthie, while she was tinting Della's hair, told about whorehouse fights and bootleggers rowing through the piling of piers to unload their booze through trap doors under hotel kitchens.

His mother's stories were so good that Axel said the play would be a Peabody Award winner, which Talbot thought was a big compliment but which Ruthie knew was sarcasm so she told Axel to shut up.

The play Della came up with required two guys, at one point, to act drunk. All they had to do was sit at a table and say the stupid things. Talbot said that Merlin would be drunk number one, and no one contradicted him because he was the director and Merlin was his brother, or his sort-of brother, but everybody knew Merlin's part this time

would involve lots more than simply saying yes about a goose. They worried all through rehearsals, in which Merlin mostly mumbled and had a hard time remembering his lines. But Talbot kept after him, in the privacy at first of their rented room until Talbot got a better job. After that the rehearsals continued at a house they'd rented on South Narrows Road. The better job was selling advertisements for the newspaper. It was perfect because he and Della had time there to hammer out any problems with the play, including, probably, the suitability of skinny Merlin to be an on-stage drunk.

That concern didn't go away until the first performance, not in the Lotus Bar but in a bigger barroom which Ellery Tinsel got permission for the Players to use. Ellery even persuaded the bar's owner to tack together a tiny stage. At the first performance Merlin as drunk number one rolled on stage with his collar turned up and his tie askew and his hair standing almost on end. He looked like someone coming off a binge of maybe eighteen-thousand days, and every line he said made people laugh.

At the cast party Axel said to Merlin, "You'd be funnier if you were drunk for true."

Merlin that night slipped out from under Talbot's thumb. When it was time for the long drive to their South Narrows home, Peter, the guy who played the hero in the play, and Danny, who played the heroine's father, had to carry Merlin from the men's room, where he'd passed out in a stall. They laid him like a corpse across the back seat of Talbot's Mercury, and Talbot, who himself was what people call three sheets to the wind, maneuvered his way over all the twisty miles to home, with no sirens being sounded, fortunately. Next morning, everyone was phoning Della to say what a success her play had been, and Della told them in her most excited way, "Did you hear that applause?"

Because Della worked at the newspaper, she was the first to learn about the All-Alaska Drama Competition. A press release from the University of Alaska, which would be one of the competitors, said the competition would be held in Juneau, and it gave information about the application needed to participate. Della sent for the application and filled it out and mailed it before she told Talbot or anyone else.

“Are you crazy?” Talbot yelled as soon as he heard what she’d done.

The group was doing *The Diary of Anne Frank* for what it called their Spring Production. Just building the set was a killer because Talbot wanted to have a realistic-looking hiding place for those poor Jews in Amsterdam.

“How can we get a set that big to Juneau?” Talbot yelled.

“We’ll work it out,” Della told him. He was so upset he didn’t even know what he’d heard was Della poking fun at him.

With everybody working right up until past four p.m. the first day of performance, they managed to get the set hammered together and painted. The audience for that first performance was amazed, because when Mrs. Frank turned the faucet on in the hiding-place, real water came out. The guy named Pauly had helped rig it so it worked.

But that wasn’t the reason the play was a success. It was a success because it made people think about the suffering of innocents, and the terrible things the Nazis did, and the sadness of death, and all the more important things. They were made to think about those things because right at the center of the play there was this girl just blossoming into a woman saying she really believes that people are good at heart, which, when people heard Karen Sennet, who was our Anne, say it, some of them cried. That’s how good it was. It was beautiful.

So even after he had said going up to Juneau with the set would be crazy, Talbot agreed at the end, because of the success the players had with the play. They loaded the set on a truck that Danny, who was not only Anne's father in the play but the chief set builder as well, drove onto the ferry, and the ferry churned them north through the calm Inside Passage all the way to the capital of what was then a brand-new state.

Merlin waved goodbye from the ferry terminal until the ferry was so far up the channel nobody could see his skinny figure waving anymore. He had come to take Talbot's Mercury back home, and Talbot told him, when he handed over the keys, not to booze it up because there'd be trouble if he did. Merlin said he wouldn't even have to drive because he had groceries for the five days Talbot would be gone. Which, as far as it goes, was true, but what Merlin maybe didn't even know himself was that Axel would come driving out with a whole case of Old Milwaukee and in the stupor both of them got into there would be a fight.

In the meantime, in Juneau, in competition not just with the Juneau Community Players but with the almost professional group from the University of Alaska, and with the winners from the previous competition, a troupe that came from Whitehorse in the Yukon Territory, the Players had only one day to put up their set. That night they performed. And the same night they had to break the set down and truck it off so the stage could be ready for the next set crew the following day.

Danny fell off a ladder while he was tacking the set together, and everybody was afraid he would be too crippled to go on as the father in the play, but he strapped his sore back up and did it. He won the prize for best supporting actor, and the Boon Players also

carried off the prize for best set and shared the prize with the snooty University people for best play.

It was after that that Della started saying, “*Hamlet . . . Hamlet,*” all the time. But even when Talbot was telling her she was crazy, he must have been thinking it might be something the group should try. On the ferry ride back home he and she talked long into the night about what she would wear if she were to play Hamlet’s mother, Gertrude. Della said she could make the costume herself. She wanted to make it out of green velvet. She said it would fit her like a snakeskin, except she’d have a train like royal gowns of centuries ago that would swish behind her as she moved.

Maybe Talbot thought about what he might wear as Hamlet, but what he found when the group got home was an uproar. Merlin was in a big mess, which came about partly through Talbot’s own fault, because in his room, above his bed, he had taped up several pictures cut from body-builder magazines of guys with big muscles and almost nothing on. There were four or five of them. The wall was not completely covered with pictures of these body-building guys, but even those few were enough when Axel happened to see them.

He didn’t just ‘happen’ to see them. He snooped and looked. He did it after Merlin had passed out at the kitchen table, drooling onto the oilcloth.

Axel’s story was that he went looking for the bathroom but wandered into Talbot’s bedroom by mistake. A phony story because he’d been to the house two or three times and should have known where the bathroom was. He came back from his little exploration and spoke to Merlin even though it did not appear as if poor Merlin could hear him. He said, “Your brother must be queer,” and then he wobbled his way into the

living room to plunk down on the couch and stare at nothing, because there was no TV in the house, and Axel was the stupid kind of person who would rather stare at nothing than pick up a book and read. He had drunk as much as Merlin had so anything he tried to read would have been swimming anyway. He was in that stupefied state when Merlin came up behind him with a ketchup bottle and banged him on the head.

In the fight that followed, skinny Merlin got the worst of it. Axel punched him to the floor and followed up his punch with a kick that broke Merlin's two front teeth. When Axel saw the bloody stumps he dropped to his knees. "This is the worst thing I've ever done," he said.

Merlin, through his stumps of teeth, said, "So far," which might have been a joke, if Merlin were in the habit of making jokes, which he wasn't. Not that either Axel or Merlin was thinking about jokes or not-jokes at that stage in their altercation. Blood drips stained the front of Merlin's shirt. The kitchen table tilted because a leg had been snapped off. Even the toaster, which had been used as a weapon, had a dent the size of a peach pit in its side.

"Who's your dentist?" Axel asked.

Merlin didn't have a dentist, so Axel called his mom. "Bring him here," Ruthie said.

While she was cleaning Merlin up, and after she had called around to find out if anybody knew a dentist who might be available late at night, she got the whole story of the fight out of Axel, even the part about the body-building pictures and the word *queer*. Axel, when his mother pressed him about an apology, told her he had helped Merlin all

he could and had told him not exactly that he was sorry but that he had said kicking Merlin in the face was the worst thing he had ever done.

He ended his recitation by telling his mother Merlin had answered, "So far."

After that, both he and Ruthie stared at Merlin as if they thought he might make some sort of explanation about what *so far* meant, in case it was a prophecy about disasters yet to come in Axel's life.

Which is more or less what happened, although not right away. First Ruthie drove Merlin to a dentist who'd agreed to meet them at his office, even though it was four in the morning. The dentist dulled the pain. Eventually, he pulled the stumps and fitted Merlin with a handsome bridge. Ruthie paid for all that, but Talbot pulled up stakes anyway. It was the business about 'queer' that made him go. He took Merlin south with him, to California again, where he married a widow who owned a motel near Sacramento. Talbot became the step-father to four young children. Merlin fit into the new arrangement somehow, probably the way he fit in to every other arrangement in his life, like someone standing by in case of need, as if he had that label on him, as if he were a piece of furniture, or a skillet, or a clock that a person could use to replace one no longer working.

The worse effect was Axel's slow slide to despair. The 'So far' comment stuck with him, and he even seemed to court the very disasters he feared. He let a thumb he wounded on a fishing hook become infected. He totaled his mother's car. He told a woman he'd taken a fancy to he worked for the F.B.I., and she reported his lie to the police, who brought real F.B.I. agents down on his head.

He still lives with his mother. She made him learn hairdressing so he could help in the shop. He doesn't do any complicated work because of his missing left thumb. He does mostly shampooing and rinsing.

Della treks into Ruthie's salon every six weeks. She demands that Axel shampoo her, like Talbot did before. She seats herself in the shampoo chair as if it were a throne, and while Axel mutely works the suds and does all of the massaging, she tells him how she could have played the queen in the best play in the world, *Hamlet*, and all the reasons why she now never will.

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