



# Stories for the Train

Tales on the go

0:14:00

## Mishaps Can Really Happen

By Jac Slim

*“Mishaps can happen any time. any place, and to YOU. Take Ron Schultz for example. He was doing just fine, renting out properties in Decatur, Missouri and having a nice, comfortable time. Then one day he learns at that in one property, his renters had become sick from lead poisoning from old plumbing come loose. He got sued big time and had to sell half his estate to cover damages and both sets of legal costs. Now had Ron taken out personal liability insurance with Sun Associated he would have been covered and not had to pay one red cent. Don’t let life’s mishaps catch you out. Don’t forget: with Sun Associated, every day’s a sunny day.”*

Harding Bigbee often read that copy and other such triumphs to himself with not a little pride. It hadn’t happened quite like that of course, but this was the land of the free, the US had prevailed over the Axis powers and the land was booming under Eisenhower. As a freelancer, Sun Associated cut him a lot of slack in terms of copy as there was no comeback on them. The ads in the Readers Digest went under the heading “Harding Bigbee says:” with an inset of him sporting one of his trademark spotted bow ties.

Trouble was he’d dried up on mishaps. He’d had gas explosions, cleaning chemical injuries, falling off ladders, vacuum cleaner injuries

*(“With Sun Associated health cover, you won’t get sucked into disaster.”)* However, Sun Associated had rejected his latest effort as being too improbable. He read the brilliant copy to himself:

*“You never know what’s around the corner. In Sam Terraneo’s case, he didn’t know what was round every corner of his house in lovely Owosso, Michigan: peeping at him, sniffing around for food and leaving puddles of urine everywhere. Yessir! A plague of rats so bad those pernicky environmental agency people condemned his whole place; that’s after they’d torn up the floorboards, all the skirting and damaged the plaster looking for the critters. Now had Sam got the fully comprehensive home plan from Sun Associated - and maybe stopped leaving food around – he’d still have a roof over his head. Don’t let the pests pester you. Get on the phone (toll free) to Sun Associated.”*

He remembered with distaste the tense discussion with Sun’s commissioning editor, Chas Probert.

‘Harding man, it’s too unbelievable: a house having so many rats the EA condemn it ... in Michigan?’

‘Look there are lots of places that have the odd rat or two and where there are two rats, there are loads more coming your way.’

‘I’m sorry Harding but we’re moving away from publication advertising to TV. That’s where it’s at. We’re getting feedback that the response to “Harding Bigbee says:” is falling off big time.’

‘But TV ads are so ephemeral you can only get the simplest of messages across. There’s nothing like a superbly crafted story to get the punters reaching for their cheque books.’

'I'm afraid the decision has been taken. These days, it's images and strap lines that sell - not stories ... however well-crafted. Look, there's a place here on our slogan team if you want.'

'I don't want,' Harding shuddered. 'I'm a creative writer not a jingle merchant!'

Harding gazed at his car port occupied by his beat-up 1948 Dodge Delux with the "Vote Dewey" sticker irremovably stuck to its rear. So I'm getting as outdated as my car, am I? Well, we'll see how improbable a plague of rats really is.



'Rats make good, intelligent pets,' said Truman Müller while cleaning out the lizard cages. 'They'll eat any left overs but stick to fruit and meal worms. Don't get two bucks or you're in trouble.'

'I want a buck and a doe.'

'Good, they're sociable pets but you'll need a bigger cage eventually, and they need to be let out for a run around daily. They're very clean but you will need lice powder.'

'I'll take 3 cages please, er ... for other pets.'

After several visits to such establishments, Harding Bigbee was set up.



He had seen the house on his way into Athens for a bi-weekly trim of his hair and moustache. He could have used the local barber in Chauncey but Georgio made his bald patch smaller and his tache sharper and more clipped. On the outside, the house seemed to be maintained but shabby and old fashioned. The white paint of the weatherboarding was tired. He'd never spotted anyone outside and guessed it belonged to the children of a deceased parent who

couldn't agree what to do with it. He stopped outside the property, got out with what would appear to be a suitcase full of samples, walked up to the front door and knocked quietly. There were high, overgrown shrubs between the drive and the neighbouring house, he wandered round the building until he found the external brick steps leading to the basement. The window there looked forcible – ideal.

Harding had set up his farm in the outbuilding where Eleanor had done her sculpting. He couldn't bear to think of his estranged wife making more money from her outlandish, incomprehensibly abstract figures than he did out of his creative genius. He'd show her and those liberal creeps she hung around with. His own family had been supporters of the Grand Ole Party through thick and thin. Why, wasn't he named after President Harding from his native Buckeye state. He was worried what influence those people might be having on his two daughters. Still Senator McCarthy was sorting out those types.

Harding was hosing out his outbuilding after the rats had enjoyed their exercise time when a young lady in a track suit appeared at the end of his drive. He walked quickly to intercept her.

'Hallo I'm your new neighbour, Christina - people call me Tina. I just moved here from New York State.'

This was a bad time for an introductory chat about what they did, where they were from originally and all the other get-to-know-you stuff. What was worse, was he was aware that one of the rats had affectionally found his way up the trouser leg of what it assumed must be its father. It wasn't a gun in his trouser pocket and he wasn't pleased to see her. However, Tina was a pretty girl and he couldn't resist a few words of introduction.

‘Well Tina, you’ll be pleased to know that you have Harding Bigbee as a near neighbour and if you have been anywhere near the world of ad copyrighting, you’d have heard of me.’ He gestured with the hose. ‘However, as you can see, I’m a bit busy at the present time. Perhaps I could invite you over for a cup of tea and accompanying refreshment on some other occasion?’ During this little speech, he was fidgeting; trying, in schoolboy parlance, to prevent the amorous rat from scoring more than 5 out of 10.

‘Well, I suppose...’

‘Perhaps a fortnight on Wednesday? Then I will have completed my pressing project. Clients are so demanding don’t you think so? Then I will let you into the neighbourhood’s little secrets just so you won’t make any faux pas.’

‘That’s real kind of you, Harding. I’ll look forward to it. Till then...’ She recommenced her run back to her place about 4 houses down.

Harding walked back into the garage clutching the leg of his chequered pants tight to prevent deeper ingress. He slammed the door, pulled down his pants and extracted the sexually precocious rodent.



After a week of touring the pet shops, Harding resolved that he had sufficient rats to qualify as an infestation. As a flash-light might attract attention, he chose the next moonlit night to put his plan into action. Dressed in overalls and a plain baseball cap, he placed 3 cages in the trunk of a rented van and drove off. He coasted quietly into the house’s drive behind the shrubs, got out of the van and went to the basement window whose rotten wood levered open without

complaint. He poured some food through the window and followed that with the squirming contents of each cage.

Having lived solely by the pen. He hadn't gone through such exertions since compulsory physical education in 12<sup>th</sup> grade. He leaned against the rental van to let his breathing and his pulse calm down. But both quickly rose again as he heard the snapping of twigs in the back yard.

'Anthony... An-thon-eee!'

He nearly flipped. There in a powder pink dressing gown and slippers was an old lady shining her torch into the shrubs, from the neighbouring property.

The lady became aware of Harding. 'Have you seen my cat sir? You can't miss him, he's a big ginger tom. He usually don't go out of a night,'

Harding hadn't seen the dratted cat but could guess what might have piqued his interest. He grabbed the street map from his glove compartment. 'No I've seen no cats. I've just pulled in here to study my whereabouts. I'm on a call-out and seem to have got lost.

There followed a garbled explanation from the old girl about how to reach Morrisville which, had he followed it, would have landed him in Columbus. After thanking her and expressing the hope she would find "An-thon-ee", he drove off; the tight feeling in his head draining away. All he had to do now was let nature take its course.

When he got back, he lit a fire in the outdoor brazier and burnt the overalls and the cap. Although it was a warm night, he found himself shivering.



It was tea time, Wednesday afternoon. The sun was shining in through the back porch. Harding had taken down his mother's best china from the cupboard and got out the fish paste and Heinz sandwich spread. He had donned his seersucker jacket over a light blue linen shirt. He looked at himself approvingly in the glass. Should he change into his most voluminous paisley bow tie to top off this sartorial masterpiece? But then the Mozart 21 chimes of his door bell rang so he decided to stick with his favourite burgundy number with the big white spots – he invariably went for this one.

Over the feast that Harding had prepared, he was giving Tina the benefit of his extensive knowledge of who to avoid and who was, at any rate, half-way reasonable in Chauncey, Athens County.

'The Goodchilds of Birge Drive will want to press themselves upon you. My advice is to politely steer clear. They're brazen nose parkers and serial social climbers.'

'But Betty seems so nice and friendly.'

'Take my advice, once you let them into your close circle, they'll be pestering you to come to this and that, support this and that; it will never stop. Of course, they may have hounded me so because I'm a little bit of a celebrity in the world of advertising.'

'The Newtons think they're avant-garde and go about in the most ridiculous attire. It's alright I suppose for her to wear a backless dress at functions but his see-through shirts, oh dear!

'... as for the Daltons of Birge Drive. They are such inveterate gossips. What they don't know they make up. I think that's a terrible trait. In fact, I would steer clear of Birge Drive altogether.'

‘Difficult to do that as it leads out onto the road to Athens. Anyway, I’m new here, I need someone to tell me what’s going down. Like that terrible event over in Armitage.’

Harding choked on a piece of spam. After coughing into his napkin for a not so brief interval, he managed to enquire what event at Armitage.

‘Well according to Maybelline Dalton, this old lady had a heart attack after finding rats in her kitchen. The police have questioned the pest control company that checked her place over only two weeks prior.’

‘I...I’m sure it’s nothing. The locals have nothing to talk about here; everything gets blown out of proportion.’

‘Well, everyone was talking about it at the Stores this morning.’ Tina giggled. ‘O’Malley said that it was a good job it was rats not chickens or we would be suspecting fowl play – wasn’t that naughty of him?’

After Tina had left, thanking him for both the tea and the information, he sat down in his armchair, gripped the arms and, looking at the ceiling, began to think of all the ways in which the death could be traced back to his door or in any way ascribed to him. There were all the pet shops he had visited but why would anyone suspect that rats had been deliberately introduced into the property? There was the broken basement window perhaps he ought to get rid of his crowbar. What about the cat owner? She hadn’t shone the flash-light directly at him and he didn’t think she could give a coherent tale of the encounter. What about the van? Plain white rental: unless she memorised the registration plates, he was OK. Wasn’t he?



Harding spent the next few days glued to the radio, desperate for any news about “The Curious Death of Amy Hauser” as the local station styled it. He only learned that the ambitious young District Attorney, Mike Lozowski had pledged to get to the bottom of why, two weeks after a reputable pest control company had given the place a clean bill of health, rats had been found running around and even inside of Amy.

‘Rumour is they were feasting on her.’ said Maybelline, wide eyed, when Harding bumped into her in the stores. The television high in the corner at the end of the counter was tuned to the local station and a group were watching it.

‘Well you can’t believe everything you read and you certainly can’t give rumour any credence.’

‘Ah, she had eighty years behind her,’ said O’Malley. If I were a rat I’d go for some-tin younger and more curvy.’ O’Malley had come over from Ireland to work. He and the abandoned workings were a residue of the exhausted strip mine near Chauncey. He could be found, if anyone wanted, to be propped up against the bar of the stores during the day and against the bar of the Star diner in the evenings. If anybody had heard anything, O’Malley would have.

‘A couple of officers were in here the other day for a soda. Said that D.A. Lozowski has the bit between his teeth alright’

“He said that there were new developments”, said Maybelline.

‘Ah de DA’s always got new developments but never any outcomes,’ O’Malley nodded sagely.

Harding was still watching the TV, suddenly DA Lozowski appeared. ‘Quiet everybody,’ he shouted.

People turned. Mr Bigbee of Jacob Street never raised his voice. What was going on? All along the soda fountain bar they turned on their swivel stools to the TV that he was staring at.

*“In answer to your question, Jayne, we don’t think it was negligence or bad faith on behalf of Potters Pest Control. They’re a state-wide outfit with an impeccable record. Potters have put up a reward of \$5,000 dollars for anyone giving information that leads to the resolution of this case. In addition, we’re working with someone who might give us important information. I would also like the public to call in if anyone saw a white van -possibly a Ford - in the vicinity of Armitage in the early morning of ...”*

‘Who-hoo foive tousand green ones – that’ll get the loonies phonin in.’ said O’Malley. ‘I might have a theory or two meself.’

Harding walked back home wandering what he could do to divert the police off any trail leading to him. Did he clean the van well enough before returning it? He hadn’t made the mistake of hiring it for just 24 hours - he needed to find a reason for the hire. What had he said to the hiring company? Removal of unwanted furniture but of course no-one would have seen him at the dump. He realised that any rash attempt to wipe out any trace that might implicate him would attract attention so he concentrated on what he could do in his own space, obsessively cleaning the outbuilding and searching and sniffing its dark corners for any trace or smell of rat.



Harding was sitting at his typewriter when the police knocked at his door. He had been trying to summon up another story but the mess he’d gotten himself into surpassed any disaster solvable by insurance. To see the police car outside was almost a relief. He just about restrained himself for being at the door when the knock came

but he didn't exactly saunter up to it. Come on he urged himself, we've been over and over what we're going to say.

'Good morning sir,' a gravelly, worn-out voice. 'I am Deputy Jabez Fletcher of the Athens County Sheriff's Office and this is Police Officer Sherri Whipman. We would like to talk to you about a recent incident, may we come in?'

'Certainly,' said Harding and with a gracious sweep of his arm beckoned them into his back room where it was darker. He sat in the corner affording the most shadow to his face.

Deputy Fletcher was red faced and pot-bellied and slumped wearily into a chair facing Harding. Officer Whipman perched herself on a piano stool and got out her note book.

'This is a routine visit in connection with the death of an elderly lady in Armitage,' said Fletcher warming to what to him was a pointless task.

'May I use the rest room Mr Bigbee?' tweeted Whipman.

'Turn right outside the door, two doors down on the left,' said Harding. He noticed Fletcher's irritation at having his speech interrupted by his junior. Fletcher decided it would be no loss if he continued without her.

'Are you acquainted in any way with Mrs Amy Hauser of Creek Road, Armitage?'

'No, I'm not - other than what I've been hearing about the poor old soul on the radio.'

'... and, in particular did you know that Mrs Hauser had a heart ailment?'

'Again, I have no such knowledge of Mrs Hauser.'

At this moment Whipman rushed back into the room and resumed her perch taking out her notebook.

‘Police Officer Whipman, Mr Bigbee has denied any acquaintance with Amy Hauser.’ growled Fletcher and Whipman dutifully jotted that down.

‘Now, Mr Bigbee we have a witness who recalls seeing a white panel-van parked outside Mrs Hauser’s property three days before she died of a heart attack. We are trying to clear up why that van was there and who was the driver. We have been checking all the owners and hirers of white panel-vans. Can you confirm that you hired a van between the 15th and 22<sup>nd</sup> September?’

‘Yes I did. I was clearing out my outbuilding,’ said Harding wondering how accurate a description of the van the elderly neighbour had managed to give the police. Two or three days was rather vague.

‘Can you remember what you were doing in the early morning of 18th September?’

‘I expect I was asleep officer. I sleep soundly at nights.’

‘OK that’s enough for now at least, thank you for your help, Mr Bigbee,’ Deputy Fletcher heaved himself with effort from the armchair and looked for Harding to show them out.

‘Nice bow-tie, Mr Bigbee,’ chirruped officer Whipman on the way out.

Jabez Fletcher rolled his bloodshot eyes at her. This hunt for a white van was a fool’s errand, the DA should be concentrating on the victim’s family – follow the money. It wasn’t rocket science.

Harding watched them drive off. He would need to explain their visit down the stores. He might as well tell the truth – they were

checking up on all white vans. No doubt O'Malley would have something wry to say on that. It looked as if the storm had passed

- just as long as the old dame didn't remember that the guy wore a burgundy bow tie with the big white spots that he had omitted to remove that night.

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