

Pickin' Up Paw Paws

By Linda Holderness

We moved into our new house in mid-December, one week before Christmas vacation. I argued I should wait until January to start my new school, but the next day my mother had me enrolled and fully ensconced in Mrs. Wilson's third-grade class.

Not much teaching went on that week, but I did learn a few of the social mores I would be expected to observe. Lucy, who I thought was adorable with her round face, freckles and Buster Brown haircut, seemed to be the monitor of third-grade etiquette, and she made it her business to set me straight right off: Don't play with Mary Helen Hartman because she has cooties.

THE OLDEST OF several children in a poor farming family, Mary Helen was not a pretty girl. With small, deep-set eyes, flat cheeks and jet-black hair cut unevenly and clipped to one side, her features lacked a pleasing symmetry. She was slightly bow-legged, which gave her gait a stomping effect. She wore only two or three faded dresses, which were dutifully rotated, and one homemade sweater that grew smaller on her as the years went by. Worse, Mary Helen was slow to learn. She didn't catch on to the simplest reading and arithmetic, and she would freeze in silence when Mrs.

Paw Paw Patch

Where, oh, where is pret-ty lit-tle Sus - sie, Where, oh, where is pret-ty lit-tle Sus - ie,

Where, oh, where is pret-ty lit-tle Sus - ie? Way down yon-der in the paw paw patch.

2. Come on boys, let's go find her...
Way down yonder in the paw paw patch.

3. Pickin' up paw paws, put 'em in your pocket...
Way down yonder in the paw paw patch.

(The names of Mary Helen Hartman, Joey Burke, Lucy and Mrs. Richardson have been altered.)

Wilson would ask her a question, which, out of kindness, was almost never.

I shamefully confess that in my eagerness to be accepted I stayed away from Mary Helen. My memory of her contains only two events, both seared in my brain.

IN THE EARLY spring of fourth grade the kids in my class ganged up on Mary Helen at recess. For some sad reason, Mary Helen was at the bottom of a stairwell that led to a basement under the school. One of the boys saw her there and got the idea to spit on her. He called everybody else over to spit on her, too, and virtually the entire class gathered around the railing, shouting and spitting. Not everyone spit, including me – though there’s no pride in saying that; mostly I didn’t get close enough – but everyone hooted and heckled. Mary Helen curled into a ball and cried.

(S)he went around the room, one by one, questioning each of us about our role in this terrible affair, making us all admit what we had done

After recess, she did a brave and smart thing: She told our teacher. When the class was seated, Mrs. Richardson repeated what Mary Helen said. She looked as if she were ready to cry, too.

Then she went around the room, one by one, questioning each of us about our role in this terrible affair, making us admit what we had done. I wished more than anything I could take back my involvement, but I had put peer acceptance ahead of decency, and when she got to me and asked if I had been one of the bullies, I had to say “yes.” It didn’t matter that I hadn’t spit.

The event must have been as painful to Mrs. Richardson as her face reflected because she wrote letters to each of our parents. I’m sure my mother wasn’t exceptional here, but she had a tender heart for disadvantaged people. I knew it would upset her to learn her daughter had joined a mob that hurt another child.

I told her the letter was coming before it arrived. I don’t remember her getting angry, but she did talk about equality and the goodness in everyone and caring about other people’s feelings.

I felt terrible for hurting Mary Helen, but that wasn’t enough to prompt me to befriend her. I regret to say she almost disappears from my memory after that until sixth grade.

THAT YEAR, WE got a new music teacher, a tall, thin, genteel woman named Mrs. Byrd, said to be related to the famous Byrds of Virginia. Mrs.

Byrd, toting her autoharp, came around maybe three times a week. She also directed the annual play – as the “seniors” of the school, we were expected to put on a year-end musical for the other classes and our parents.

I have forgotten the play’s storyline, but I do remember the program included mid-America folk tunes, like *Red River Valley*, *Wabash Cannonball* and *Sweet Betsy From Pike*. The highlight would be the *Paw Paw Patch*, with two students dancing solo while the rest of us shadowed them in the background.

EVERY CLASS, EVEN in elementary school, has a “most popular” kid. Ours was Joey Burke. We elected Joey to everything all the way through senior year: student council president, class presidents, team captains, homecoming king, emcee of school events, star of our class plays, “most popular boy” in our yearbook. All the girls had a crush on him; any day he smiled at one of us was a very good day.

I was never one of Joey’s favorites and so avoided investing much thought to him, but in sixth grade he did something that elevated his stature in my eyes for life.

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play were being cast,
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into the hall*

As the roles for the play were being cast, Mrs. Byrd pulled Joey into the hall. She bent over him and started whispering. Joey nodded once or twice but otherwise remained impassive. When they came back into the room, he averted his eyes from our curious stares.

We learned soon enough what that secret conversation was about: Mrs. Byrd had asked Joey to dance the lead in the *Paw Paw Patch*. We girls held our breaths waiting to hear which of us would be his lucky partner. Not a sound was made when the announcement came: Mary Helen Hartman.

I looked at Joey. Everyone knew about Mary Helen’s cooties, and it would not be easy to dance with her in front of the whole school. But Joey accepted the assignment valorously, and no one ever heard him make a snarky remark, then or later. Following his lead, we kept our thoughts to ourselves, too.

On the day of the performance, Mary Helen was outfitted in a prairie costume Mrs. Byrd had made for her, all gathers and lace and ribbons and topped with a wide-brimmed calico bonnet. I was certain it was the prettiest dress she had ever worn.

The dance came near the end, part of a rollicking finale. I was nervous for both of them: *Could Joey do this? Could Mary Helen?*

When the music began – *Where oh where is pretty little Susie? Way down yonder in the paw paw patch* – Joey and Mary Helen moved to

center stage, her hand firmly in his, and together they stepped and dipped and twirled, Joey attentive as Mary Helen spun in and out of his arms, her perfectly executed steps as light as a ballerina's.

When the pair took their bows, to substantial applause, I was riveted to Mary Helen's face beneath her lacy bonnet. She glowed – flushed cheeks, glistening eyes, a smile so broad it must have hurt. Mrs. Byrd gave her a big hug right on stage. My heart felt warm, too. For those few shining moments,

I was nervous for both of them: Could Joey do this? Could Mary Helen?

lonely Mary Helen Hartman was the most beautiful girl in the school.

THAT WAS THE last time I saw Mary Helen. She didn't follow us to junior high. In an era of scant resources for disadvantaged learners, she'd apparently reached the end of her education.

I want to think I, or some of my classmates, complimented Mary Helen after her performance, but I don't remember that any of us did. I've thought about her over the years, wondering how she fared, and I pray that in some corner of her heart there always resides a bit of the joy she knew when she nailed the *Paw Paw Patch*, dancing in the arms of the most popular boy in school.

As for Joey Burke, his easy celebrity didn't serve him so well after high school. He did complete college, but his life was marked by brief marriages, failed jobs and too much drinking. At our 30th class reunion, he came by himself, his beloved letter jacket barely reaching the sides of his belly. As much as he tried to reprise some of his old mystique, it didn't work. Sadly, having finally found a loving wife and step-daughter, he died in his 60s.

But he stood tall once – nobly reaching out his hand to validate the life of a burdened little girl.