

THE TROUBLE WITH TROUBLE (a tale from the American South)

Tell Me a Story by Amy Friedman and Meredith Johnson

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Once upon a time there was this fellow whose name was Trouble. Well, that wasn't exactly his name, but that's what folks called him because he always brought trouble to the town. No matter what happened, Trouble had to tell folks all about it. He could never keep a secret.

The minute he heard that Mary burned her pumpkin pies, he told all the folks he could find, and when Bobby lost his brother's fly rod, Trouble ran to town and told the fellows in the barbership, and soon everyone knew. When Joseph kicked his cow, Trouble passed the news. The trouble was, Trouble never told a lie. No, Trouble always told the truth, and that's why folks called him Trouble because no matter what story he passed along, no one could pretend it wasn't true. Trouble's stories caused a whole lot of trouble in town.

Sometimes the boys played marbles for pennies, but when Trouble saw them, he told their parents, and all the boys had trouble after that. "Trouble brings trouble," folks said. He told the congregation about Jimmy kissing Susie, and he told the teachers about Sally doing Martha's homework. He told everyone everyone else's business, and things got so bad, no one wanted to do anything for fear that everyone else in town would know before too long.

Well, one wintry day Trouble was walking down the road, and he came upon a skunk who happened to be peacefully napping on a tree stump. When that skunk saw Trouble coming, he sat right up on his haunches, and he said, "Hey there, Trouble. You know what? You talk too much."

Trouble jumped right off the ground when heard that. He looked to his right. He looked to his left. His mouth was hanging wide open, so wide his pipe fell into the snow. He turned and looked behind him, and up in the bare old branches of the apple trees. "My ears are playing tricks on me," he said. "Everyone knows skunks can't talk."

Trouble started walking down the road again, but just then that old skunk winked at poor old Trouble. "Hey, Trouble, didn't you hear me? I said you talk too much."

Well, you can imagine what Trouble did. His hair stood on end, and he turned and ran the whole mile back to town.

When he arrived in the town square, he saw the boys tossing their marbles, and Mary carrying pies into the church, and Joseph with his cow, and Sally and Martha walking to school. He saw everyone, and he began to talk so fast, no one could understand a word he said.

"Slow down, John" -- for that was Trouble's real name. "Slow down and tell us calmly what the trouble is this time."

"The skunk!" he cried. "The skunk down the road can talk, and he just talked to me and told me that I talk too much!"

"That's the truth," somebody whispered, and everyone laughed. "Now here's a story for you. Everyone knows skunks can't talk."

"It's the truth!" he cried. "Come on, I'll show you," so everyone followed him down the road. When they got to the place where the apple trees grew, John stopped and said, "There he is."

Sure enough that old skunk was sitting right where John had left him just a little while before. He looked like any ordinary skunk. Everyone leaned in real close and stared hard, but they couldn't see anything special about this skunk.

"Go on," John said to the creature. "Tell them what you told me."

That old skunk just sat and stared and didn't say a word, and pretty soon the people became angry. It was cold, and they had walked a long way, and now they felt like fools standing there, waiting for an ordinary skunk to talk.

"Trouble with you," the barber said to John, "is you ran out of true stories," and everyone nodded and began to laugh. The more they laughed, the more John blushed and stamped his feet, and swore up and down he was telling the truth.

Everyone turned away and walked back to town, but John just stood there staring at that skunk, wondering what was wrong with him.

When the others were out of sight, that old skunk sat up, and once again he winked, and said, "Didn't I tell you, son? You talk too much."

Now some people say that the trouble with Trouble was he let his imagination run wild. Others say he might have been telling the truth. But no matter what the truth of that tale is, that story fixed poor John. After that day, whenever he told a story, no one believed him.