We Interrupt This Childhood for a Test

Once upon a summertime

Just a dream from yesterday,

A boy and his magic golden flute

Heard a boat from off the bay

"Come and play with me, Jimmy

Come and play with me.

And I will take you on a trip

Far across the sea…"

I ensconced myself like any Saturday morning; fort build of TV trays and blankets, bowl of Frankenberry, pillow and blanket, to watch the animated fantasy unfold on our big, enormous 19” black and white portable TV. The lilting lines of the opening of H.R. Puff-n-stuff cheerfully invited me to come play in a land where the worst thing to worry about was the latest machinations of Puff’s arch-nemesis, Witchiepoo, which, of course, would be undone in no less than one hour with four breaks for sponsorship.

But the boat belonged to a kooky old witch

Who had in mind the flute to snitch.

From her Broom-Broom in the sky

She watched her plans materialize.

She waved her wand!

The beautiful boat was gone!

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep!

*Not now! Not when Puffnstuff is just getting started!*

It was the Emergency Broadcast System. It seemed to break in right in the middle of my favorite shows. As soon as that obnoxious sound stopped, the announcer would say, “This is a test of the Emergency Broadcast System. Had this been an actual emergency, you would have been informed where to tune in your area for news and official information. The FCC, in cooperation with local broadcasters have designed this system to keep you informed in an actual emergency. We now return you to your regularly scheduled programming.” Then the show would pick up as if I had been watching it the whole time and I would have to try to figure out what had happened in the meantime or wait for a rerun of that episode to see what I had missed.

The skies grew dark …

The sea grew rough …

And the boat sailed on and on and on and on and on and on…

But that February morning in 1971, the announcer said, in an almost artificial calmness, that we were instructed the to tune to AM 1190 WOWO in Ft. Wayne to receive the official news of a national emergency. My dad, who had been getting his coaching things ready for that day’s Little League game, came into the living room just in time to hear the repeat and the announcement that regular programming would be suspended until the crisis was over.

“What’s suspended mean?”

“Your shows won’t be on…” He said absently as he made his way back to the kitchen to switch on the radio on top of the refrigerator.

“But Da-ad! Why! I’ll miss…”

“Not now…We gotta find out what’s going on…”

*….received authentication of a national emergency from the FCC. If you are listening from outside the Ft Wayne area, please tune to your local station broadcasting official information. Please do not call the radio station….*

But Pufnstuff was watching too

And knew exactly what to do

Dad stumbled to the black phone on the wall in the kitchen and dialed numbers with shaking hands. I had never seen my dad like this. Unsure, uncertain, scared. I knew by the tone of his voice when his brother answered the phone who he was calling and this was something big.

“Yeah?...Okay then…yeah, I remember…No, I understand, you got stuff you have to deal with…thanks...bye…love you too.”

Something else I had never seen: my father pale from fear. The blood had drained from his face as he spoke to my uncle. He weakly hung up the phone.

“Doug?…” He said weakly, coming down to my level, “you remember a couple of weeks ago when Uncle Monty came home from his Guard weekend?”

“Yeah! He had all that neat stuff…Does he need it all back?” a note of fear in my voice as I had not yet gotten to show off all the cool stuff he had given me to my friend next door.

“Dee, don’t…” My mom had come in from the other room. My dad pointed to the radio, repeating the available information about the national emergency. She listened and fell silent.

“No, I don’t think he will. But do you remember what he said about an attack?”

“You mean before Grandma told him that wasn’t anything to talk about around me and he’d give me nightmares?...Sorta, but I didn’t really understand it. She pushed me out of the room before I could ask anything…”

“Dee! We need to go to the basement…”

“Won’t help. Not sure I understand it either, but that’s not important now. He said our best bet was to go out on the porch and look toward the Air Force Base in Peru when the initial blast hit.” He pause gathering himself to say what he was about to say to his son. “He said that way we’d be vaporized” He sounded strange.

“What’s vaporized?

“It means we won’t have to deal with what comes afterward”

“Dee?”

“What’s ‘afterwards’?”

“Let’s go…” Solemnly, he led us out to the front porch we had just added a few weeks before. I had “helped” to pour the concrete foundation and busied myself with fitting my hand into the imprint I had made to see if I had grown any yet. I looked up at my parents.

“See, it’s still the same size. I’m NEVER gonna get big!” I was furious. Mom was crying.

“Look that way, Doug…” We stared in the direction of the setting sun, but it was mid-morning. I couldn’t figure out what my parents were looking at. It had to be important to drag us all out here on a Saturday morning, and to su-suspend, my new word, my shows. And scary…my dad was…afraid. I didn’t think that was possible.

He saw the witch's boat attack

And as the boy was fighting back

*“…any of the staff of the WOWO newsroom who may be listening, please come to the newsroom immediately…..*

He called his rescue racer crew

As often they'd rehearsed

And off to save the boy they flew

But who would get there first?

Beeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeep!

The EBS signal again. The announcer was saying something about a mistake, the crisis wasn’t a crisis and that the last few moments had been tense ones in the station. They would now resume their regularly scheduled programming. Mom and Dad hugged me up, crying even more. I had no clue why. I struggled free from the protective parental cocoon with “Does that mean I can watch my shows now?”

“Yeah, D.O. Go on in…”

“Now so close… You’ll ruin your eyes.”

I scampered off to my installment in front of the television. Some years later, I learned from my uncle that someone at an Air Force base in California had hit the wrong button when it was time for the EBS test and had sent out terror instead of a test. Things were complicated by the fact that when radio and television stations had opened the envelopes containing the “authentication codes” they could not find the word “hatefulness” on the list. One operator in Texas was in a near state of hysterics when he opened the envelope and found it empty. It took forty-five minutes for the mistake to be discovered out a correction, a very long forty five minutes for the adults in the world of a seven year old. Now, from the perspective of a father, I can feel my dad’s impotent rage. His family was about to die and he was powerless to stop it. All he could provide was the quickest end, the one that caused them the least suffering. Over the next nine years, the same emotions would play out again and again as my father died by inches from Hodgkin’s disease, or the chemo and radiation weapons his doctors used against it. Like that day, I retreated to a shelter of my own making, stories.

Today, I wonder how many people were crawling out of backyard bomb shelters, kissing and hugging in relief that the crisis was over. Such were the days of the Cold War. Oblivious to the crisis I retreated to the shelter of the blanket covered TV Tray. By the time I had resumed my position and the program was restored, the episode was ending. Predictably, the hero had foiled the machinations of the villainess. The boy and his precious golden flute were still safe, at least until next week.

But now the boy had washed ashore

Puf arrived to save the day

Which made the witch so mad and sore

She shook her first and screamed away.

H.R. Pufnstuff,

Who's your friend when things get rough?

H.R. Pufnstuff

Can't do a little cause he can't do enough.