

# HOOKY

*"So this is where I find you! How do you expect to become a real boy?...You're comin' home with me right this minute!"*

*Jiminy Cricket*

"A juvenile delinquent, that's what Buddy is."

All the mothers at *The Little Playhouse* seemed to agree—only problem, he was only three.

Buddy was forever being punished, banished from our fellowship for some onerous misdeed, while the rest of us three-year-olds sat crossed-legged in a circle and sang,

*Come to the Playhouse and we'll have fun  
Boys and girls together, joy for everyone...  
Playhouse, Little Playhouse, the house that was built  
with love.*

I'm not sure Buddy felt much love or joy, especially the day he threw up in his own shirt as he sat in a doll's bed, atoning for his latest criminal act. He had been sent there by Mrs. Mann who had already lost hope for him. I think my mother had, too.

Buddy was in our carpool. He lived right down the street from Cindy Upshire, known as Cindy "Downshire" by my brothers, and around the corner from Becky Flint. I remember well the day that Buddy slipped out of the car when we got to Jimmy Barber's house. While Mother paused to chat with Mrs. Barber, Buddy jumped out the door on the other side of the car. A few moments later, Mother tucked herself in behind the wheel, so as not to wrinkle her skirt, and began to count,

"One, two, three, four, five...whoops, no five. Who's missing?" she said.

Before anyone could tattle, she stepped out of the car and locked her eyes on Buddy. He danced around with fingers in his ears and a "neh, neh, neh, neh, neh" grin. My mother was neither amused nor flustered. I had never seen her lose control in my five long years, and this was not to be the day.

"Buddy, get back in the car," she said, her voice even and low.

"No!"

We surveyed one another with sideways glances. *Who was she kidding?*

"Buddy, we are leaving now. Get in the car." She marched toward the back of the station wagon.

Buddy circled ahead of her, slinging another challenge over his shoulder, "No!"

My mother was quick to recognize the imminent game of "Mulberry Bush." She turned, paused to breathe deeply, walked unremarkably to her open door, slid behind the wheel, smoothed her skirt yet again, checked her lipstick in the rearview mirror, and began to back up.

At first, Buddy thought she was only toying with him. He took off down the street, glancing occasionally over his shoulder, intending to enjoy her exasperation. He was disappointed. Soon he could hear the change of gears and squeaking tires as she set off towards *The Little Playhouse*, eyes and hands firmly fixed. The last we saw of him as we turned our heads, all together, was an open mouth and dropped jaw, reflecting our own.

I guess Jimmy's mom rounded up Buddy and hauled him home. Later in the day his mother called, desperate and pleading, "*What can I do with him?*"

I'm sure she thought wise advice was forthcoming from a mother of four boys. Mother, however, cool like dry ice, responded, "If you don't know how to control your own three-year-old son, don't ask me."

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So why my mother ever let me go over and play with Buddy that morning before kindergarten, I'll never know. Perhaps it was part of her method of training me for adulthood; allowing me to make wise, independent choices. I was five, after all. Or perhaps she was due at her Sewing Club, where no one ever sewed.

For my part, there had been no better offers, and perhaps Buddy represented that tiny piece of me that yearned to scream, "No!" instead of the obedient, "Yes, m-ma'am" that typically trembled from my tender lips. In any case, off I went to Buddy's house in

my saddle shoes, green and red plaid jumper, and double pony tails. I carried my *Pinocchio* board game under my arm.

The morning's activities draw a blank for me. They must have been pretty innocent because I seem to remember vividly all the trespasses in my life, a consequence of my mother's back-of-the-head eyes.

Around eleven o'clock, Buddy's mom packed us a sack lunch and sent us off to the park to share our PB & J's and chocolate chip cookies, and then head for Nichols Hills Elementary School. I still had the *Pinocchio* game in tow since I would walk home after the three o'clock bell.

All went well at first. We ate a few bites and then Buddy suggested the teeter totter. I was a bit reticent, since Buddy had not proven most trustworthy on this piece of equipment. Just the week before, he had devilishly let me down too fast, intentionally smashing into the red dirt of the schoolyard and sending me over the top of the handle on the opposite end where my forehead met the board with a *smack!* But I was a forgiving sort, still eager to give Buddy a chance. I climbed on the long end and up I went. He was a perfect gentleman.

It was nearing noon when I reminded Buddy that we had best pack up and be on our way so as to arrive at school before the tardy bell.

"Ah, neh. We've got plenty of time," he assured me. "Let's play *Pinocchio*. Let's just stay at the park and play *Pinocchio* all afternoon. We can head home when we hear the closing bell..." (We weren't more than four blocks from the school) "...and no one will ever know."

I don't know why I wasn't more shocked or morally outraged by this astonishing suggestion. It sounded fairly reasonable, and a lot more fun than painting stars or practicing the *Hokey Pokey* with kids who didn't know their left from their right.

I don't actually remember saying, "O.K.," but before I knew it, we had the board out of the box and, just like in the storybook, we were on the road somewhere between Gepetto's toy shop and the two hoodlums who intoxicated us with movies and candy and a trip to Pleasure Island. Of course, I wanted to become a real little boy, but I kept

drawing cards that said I had told a lie and my nose grew longer and longer and before I knew it, I was caged.

Hoping to draw a green card that would set me free, instead, I heard a faint voice above the giggles and "It's your turns." Maybe it was Jiminy Cricket, or maybe it was the bell that suddenly invaded the land of bad little boys and girls. My heart leapt like Jiminy out of my chest and my cheeks sizzled with shame. Maybe this wasn't such a great idea after all.

"Let's g-g- go," I said, my lower lip stuttering with remorse.

"Wimp! Scaredy cat! Sucker!" Buddy said, but my heart was beating too fast and too loud to hear. The seconds were ticking toward the tardy bell and I wanted to be in my classroom.

I hastened to pack away the cards and dice and little plastic *Pinocchio* pieces, despite the complaints and chiding and rolling eyes of Buddy.

But then it happened. It came across the rooftops, around a couple of corners, and through the trees.

*Brrrrring!*

The second bell. And I was playing hooky in the park with Buddy Carr. And I was only in kindergarten. I scrambled up, confused.

"It's too late," Buddy said, trying to tie his shoe. "We're already tardy. Let's just stay here. Let's see who can swing the highest. I'll race you. Last one there's a rotten egg!"

It was tempting. Why face all those glaring eyes and questions, the humiliation, and maybe...a whooping?

I'd had one once before when I knocked my mother's checkbook off the counter at TG & Y when she'd just begun to write the date. I have no idea why I did it. This overwhelming desire robbed me of all rational thought. I wasn't mad—or anything. The checkbook flew off the counter and slid across the linoleum tiles. The shock on the checker's face, echoing on my own, was excelled only by my mother's embarrassment. I knew immediately that I was in trouble, trouble unlike any I'd ever known before.

My mother didn't speak to me all the way home. She just let me twist in the clutches of voiceless terror. I suffered. I truly, repentantly, suffered.

When we got home, she told me to get out of the car. Then she offered me a choice: "Do you want me to spank you out here or inside?" she said, hairbrush in hand.

My four older brothers and their friends were playing football in the Hoffman's yard across the street. They would all see me.

"I don't care!" I fired. The words jettisoned through my clenched jaw from who knows where and why. I couldn't believe them myself.

"O.K., then pull down your pants."

I obeyed.

*Smack!*

I clenched tighter. "That didn't even hurt!" The words dashed defiantly from some hidden corner of my soul never before revealed.

*Smack! Smack!*

The dam broke. I ran screaming through the backdoor.

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The memory of that moment made my feet move. Buddy was on my heels, still trying to convince me to tarry 'til the three o'clock bell.

"C'mon, Sue Nell. You're no fun!"

I hesitated. I slowed further. The likely consequences chased each other, like headless chickens, around my own cerebral circuitry.

And then, with a sudden *Crack!*, my hesitation was broken by Jiminy's voice, "You must go to school."

I set off determinedly. To my surprise, Buddy followed.

We came around the corner and there it was: a red brick building with a white steeple. It had always been a place of fun for me; spring festivals, Little League games in the red Oklahoma dirt, an elephant slide in my classroom.

Now, it was the House of Dread.

And there *she* was, Miss Daisy, the school secretary. She had always been just like her name; a sweet smile, a helping hand, a pat on the head when I came seeking a band aid for my skinned knee.

But now, her chin—stiff. Her mouth—grim. Her eyes—narrowed. Someone had tipped her off.

I froze. Her eyes caught mine. I was trapped. Guilt and shame-ridden fear bit the back of my neck, clawed their way to my stomach, and turned my legs to pillars of salt.

Not Buddy's. He ran.

I looked at Miss Daisy. I swung my head around. I looked at Buddy. Looked at Miss Daisy. Buddy. Miss Daisy. Buddy. My moment of choice had come: to flee in the face of authority, to follow after Buddy whose backside receded defiantly through the flowerbed of a neighboring yard, to fly towards freedom...or to face the ones I feared.

Somewhere in that timeless moment, stretched by the "shoulds" and "shouldn't I's" of my inner debate, I saw the ears form on my friend as he trotted around the corner and out of sight.

I turned towards Miss Daisy. She was marching closer and closer. As her steps drew near, so did my dawn of adult understanding: the future with my captors held more freedom than Buddy's trail could ever promise.

I surrendered.