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“Dead Man’s Liver” — A Jump Tale

COLLECTED, RETOLD, AND ARRANGED FOR PERFORMANCE BY TIM JENNINGS

[*Author’s Note: When I perform this tale, I usually begin with the following introduction.*]

I was doing a show for a bunch of middle school kids, I think 7th graders in Manchester, VT, around 1985, and I asked them a question I sometimes ask, “Has anybody here ever had somebody—not a professional like me, or a teacher or librarian, just somebody in your regular life—had somebody like that tell you a story, out of their head, without a book?”

I got the usual kinds of answers: my father told me about when he was in the army, my grandmother told me about my mother when she was little, a babysitter told me “Rumpelstiltskin.” Then one kid raised his hand and said, “My uncle told me one; we were sitting out by the fire at deer camp, and it was called ‘Johnny Got My Liver.’”

Well, that did sound like one I might like.

So I said, “What was it about?”

He said, “It’s the kind of story you can’t say what it’s about, you just have to tell it.”

I thought that was a pretty sophisticated answer for a kid, and I got even more interested. I said, “Listen, this show’s going to be over in awhile, then I have 15 minutes before the next group comes in, so do you think you could stay behind and tell me the story?”

He said, “I don’t know. I’d have to ask my teacher.”

I said, “Where’s your teacher?”

He said, “I don’t know.”

I said, “What about after school?”

He said, “I have to catch a bus.”

I said, “Is there a late bus?”

He said, “Well, yeah, ... but...”

I didn’t blame him. Why would he want to stick around and wait for the late bus? I said, “Do you think he made it up, or do you think he heard it somewhere?”



Tim Jennings at work. Photo by Terry J. Allen.

The kid was positive, “Oh, I think he heard it somewhere!”

Now I was feeling desperate. That almost never happens—never happened to me before this one—where you run into somebody who heard a tale from somebody who heard it from somebody else. I needed to hear that story, and there didn’t seem to be any way of getting it. The whole show came to a grinding halt. I was looking at him, he was looking at me, everybody was looking at us, we were frozen, it was like a bad dream—I actually have nightmares like that—and then the kid sitting next to him gave him a little jab with his elbow and said, “Get up there and tell it.”

This was not necessarily a good idea. Wonderful in a workshop, to be sure, but very risky in a performance. I was feeling goofy enough to say, “Yeah! Yeah, come on up here and tell it.”

[As I begin the story, I pretend to be the boy, sitting down, beginning very shyly, gathering confidence as the story gathers steam. I didn’t always do it that way, but have found it to be the most effective way. The storytellers’ name for this kind of story is “jump tale.” The trick of it is to build up suspense and then jump and shout very suddenly. Ideally, your audience will jump too, and then talk and laugh loudly for about 15 seconds.]

Dead Man’s Liver

So, there was this kid, see. And his mom sent him to the store to buy some liver. And he didn’t even like no liver. So she gave him 75 cents, but on the way to the store, he passed by another store. And there were video game sounds coming out. And it was just like those video game sounds *reeeeached* out through that door, and grabbed the kid by the change in his pocket, pulled him through the door and snaked down into his pocket, and grabbed the quarter and swallowed it down—GLUCK!—(you know the sound they make)—GLUCK!

And he played his first game, and he did lousy! Lost all three guys, *bam bam bam*, like that. Woulda done better if he’d kept his hands offa the buttons.

“I can’t leave now,” he says, “not after a game like that.”

And he played his second quarter, and he done great. Extra boards, extra guys, stuff coming down at him he’d never even heard about. Put his name on after.

“Geez,” he said, “I can’t leave now, not after a game like that.” (That’s how they get you.)

So he played his last quarter, and it didn’t matter how good he done, he didn’t have no money.

So he went to the grocer for the liver, but the grocer said, “NO!” He said, “You don’t give me no money, I don’t give you no liver.”

“But I’ll get in trouble!”

“Nothin’ new for you,” says the grocer. Grocer knew this kid.

Actually, most people in town knew this kid.

[I find that bit funny. You may get a smile or even a small laugh, if you make room for it.]

So, he left, and on the way out the door, he grabbed a plastic bag off the roll, stuffed it in his pocket.

And on the way home, he happened to pass by... an open coffin. With nobody around.

[This is a kind of joke, again. See if you can get an audience reaction here.]

He said to himself, what I need is... some liver!

[Look in coffin. Wait for audience reaction. Back before I started pretending to be the kid while telling the story, some folks got weirded out by my enthusiasm here. Why was a theoretical grown-up acting like that? But you have to be enthusiastic, or it doesn’t work at all. And for a junior high kid to relish the icky parts of the story—well, there’s nothing weird about that—in fact, it’s funny.]

What I got here, is... some liver!

[Wait for audience reaction.]



And he took out his knife... and he...

[With great enjoyment. As I narrate, I pretend to take out a penknife, hold it pointing down in my fist, and make a big circle with it. Don't try to be realistic; it'll work against the laugh.]

CUT OUT THE GUY'S LIVER!

[No good trying to soft peddle this one. You want your audience to go "EUUUUUUUUUUUUU!" If they're too uncomfortable, I'll prompt them like an old-time preacher, "Can I get an 'Euu?'"]

And he put it in his plastic bag, and tied it up with a twisty, and took it home to his mother, AND SHE TOOK IT!
(Audience: "EUUUUUUUUUUUUU!")

[If you enjoy the audience's reaction and let them know it's okay, more and more people will join in on the Euuuuuuuu! chorus.]

And she floured it, and she fried it, and THEY ALL ATE IT!
(Audience: "EUUUUUUUUUUUUU!")

And they all agreed: **IT WAS THE BEST LIVER THEY EVER HAD IN THEIR LIVES!**
(Audience: "EUUUUUUUUUUUUU!")

[Pause now to let the audience know you're getting ready for the next part.]

That night, the kid was in bed and he heard... a noise... outside.

[The whole point of this story is to make the audience jump. Get quiet, take a pause, then without giving any tip-off, suddenly shout and lunge. Use your whole body, including your face; get big; stamp your foot to add volume. Try not to "telegraph" it. It should be like a great move in basketball, hockey, or boxing: sudden and devastating. This is just the first one; the big one comes at the end. If that one goes well, you'll see people moving back from you, almost like a wave. Some of them may give out a yelp. It doesn't always work, especially on your first attempts. Even Mark Twain found it an aggravating thing to manage sometimes. Experience will help you get better.]

"RRRRRRRRR!"

[If people have been laughing and going "uuuuuuu" and such, they're a little easier to get—they're on your rhythm. It's easier to "get" people who are younger than you, but make sure they're up for it. It's mean to scare little kids who don't want to be scared.]

"RRRRRRRRRRRRRR!! JOHNNY GOT MY LIVER."

—Kid's name... was Johnny.

"RRRRRRRRRRR!"

"RRRRRRRRRRR! JOHNNY GOT MY LIVER!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Well he wasn't gonna stay in bed—not this kid—not with that going on—so he got up went over to the window, pushed his face against the glass.

[A little hands and face on the glass mime goes well here.]

Bright moonlit night; he could see clear as day; there was nothin' to see; there was nobody out there.

Whew! he says, bad dream, I can go back to bed.

Went back to bed, lay down. And why he hadn't seen it, *it was on the front porch, under the porch roof.*

“JOHNNY GOT MY LIVER!!!!!!!!!!!!”

He heard the screen door open...

[Hand out to one side, from elbow.]

He heard the kitchen door open...

[Other hand out to the side.]

Heard'em both

[CLAP!]

Slam back together like that.

Heard it coming across the kitchen, underneath his bedroom floor.

[Pointing at the floor.]

“JOHNNY GOT MY LIVER!!!!!!!!!!!!”

Kid yells, “Pop!”

[These aren't jumps, they're setups for the humor of the kid's responses. Alternate rapidly between the monster and the boy. The boy is in his bed upstairs, holding the covers under his chin. The monster shouts up through the ceiling, shaking his fist.]

“JOHNNY GOT MY LIVER!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“Pop! Cut it out!”

“JOHNNY GOT MY LIVER!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“You don't fool me, Pop!”

“JOHNNY GOT MY LIVER!!!!!!!!!!!!”

“I AIN'T SCARED!” *[Very frightened, of course.]*

[Start bringing the volume down. No more jumps til the end.]

Heard it comin' up the steps...

“Johnny GOT my... Johnny GOT my... ”

Heard it coming across the hall

“Got my LIVER... Got my LIVER... ”

[Most jump stories are about a Horrible Thing that gets closer and closer and closer until it's finally too close. This thing is now getting too close. Very quiet now.]

Heard it stop outside his bedroom door. *[Point to the door]*

Saw the doorknob turn. *[Little turning move with your hand]*

Saw the door begin to *swiiiiiiing* open...

He pulled the covers over his head.

[Mime the cover move. Leave hands up there, white-knuckled. From now on, everything builds the tension. There are a couple more laughs, but they should bring little relief.]

Heard it coming across the room

[Very quietly] **“Johnny got my liver...”**



Heard it stop [*still under the covers*] at the head of his bed.

“Johnny got my liver...”

[*Tense, fearful narrative voice; show the boy’s fingers opening; show the edge of the covers moving down.*]

Felt it...

take the covers...

out of his hands...

and pull them down across his face.

—He closed his eyes.

[*Close eyes. Get small laugh.*]

Felt it...

[*Briefly change to showing the monster. Lean over the boy—slightly to one side, and down.*]

leeeeeeean over him

Felt its...

breath on his cheek!

[*Come back up. Narrate straight to audience. Touch cheek.*]

Smelt...

the “*formaldeebyde!*”

[*Get this laugh, if you can. Then, wait for a moment. Now the Horrible Thing is way too close. There are a limited number of people you want that close—next to your bed, where you can smell them—and this is not one of them!*]

Heard it say

[*Go back to showing the Monster again. Lean over the bed. Speak quietly, but intensely. Now almost everybody knows you’re going to try to make a jump. This makes it easier and harder—easier because they’re tense, harder because they’re on guard.*]

“Johnny...

[*Pause. By getting quiet, you make them lean forward, that’s helpful. And by looking down and to the side, you are being reassuring—oh no, you’re saying, I’m not after you, I’m after this boy up here on the stage.*]

“Johnny...

[*Pause. You have to get the pause just right. Mark Twain said, about another jump tale, that the final pause was the most troublesome and aggravating thing you will undertake in your life. Now, git’em!*]

“GIMME MY LIVER!”

[*If you try some of my suggestions, and, above all, do your best to have fun with this thing, there’s an excellent chance it’ll work—Tim Jennings*]



Tim Jennings in performance. Photo by Terry J. Allen.

Video

See *Tim Jennings and Leanne Ponder* online at: “**The Water of Life**”—an entertaining Mexican folk tale about death and poverty, a contemporary variant of Grimm 044 Godfather Death, collected by Joseph Sobol in a Chicago ESL class.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EWWUDKObajs>

“**Jackal’s Pond**”—A timeless fable from India. You can see Jennings elicit an “Eu” from the live, mixed-age audience.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mYRMPZpY5bM>

Tim Jennings has been telling folktales for a living since 1980. Recordings of live performances made with his wife, Leanne Ponder, have received American Library Association and Parents’ Choice Foundation awards. Tim and Leanne live in Montpelier, VT, with a feisty little dog and a marmalade cat. Their website is www.folktale.net. Photo courtesy of the author.



Submission Guidelines for *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore*

Voices: The Journal of New York Folklore is a membership magazine of the New York Folklore Society (www.nyfolklore.org).

The New York Folklore Society is a nonprofit, statewide organization dedicated to furthering cultural equity and cross-cultural understanding through programs that nurture folk cultural expressions within communities where they originate, share these traditions across cultural boundaries, and enhance the understanding and appreciation of folk culture. Through *Voices* the society communicates with professional folklorists and members of related fields, traditional artists, and a general public interested in folklore.

Voices is dedicated to publishing the content of folklore in the words and images of its creators and practitioners. The journal publishes research-based articles, written in an accessible style, on topics related to traditional art and life. It also features stories, interviews, reminiscences, essays, folk poetry and music, photographs, and artwork drawn from people in all parts of New York State. Columns on subjects such as photography, sound and video recording, legal and ethical issues, and the nature of traditional art and life appear in each issue.

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Feature articles. Articles published in *Voices* represent original contributions to folklore studies. Although *Voices* emphasizes the folklore of New York State, the editor welcomes articles based on the folklore of any area of the world. Articles on the theory, methodology, and geography of folklore are also welcome, as are purely descriptive articles in the ethnography of folklore. In addition, *Voices* provides a home for “orphan” tales, narratives, and songs, whose contributors are urged to provide contextual information.

Authors are encouraged to include short personal reminiscences, anecdotes, isolated tales, narratives, songs, and other material that relates to and enhances their main article.

Typically feature articles range from 1,000 to 4,000 words and up to 6,000 words at the editor’s discretion.

Reviews and review essays. Books, recordings, films, videos, exhibitions, concerts, and the like are selected for review in *Voices* for their relevance to folklore studies or the folklore of New York State and their potential interest to a wide audience. Persons wishing to review recently published material should contact the editor. Unsolicited reviews and proposals for reviews will be evaluated by the editor and by outside referees where appropriate. Follow the bibliographic style in a current issue of *Voices*.

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The journal follows *The Chicago Manual of Style*. Consult *Webster’s Third International Dictionary* for questions of spelling, meaning, and usage, and avoid gender-specific terminology.

Footnotes. Endnotes and footnotes should be avoided; incorporate such information into the text. Ancillary information may be submitted as a sidebar.

Bibliographic citations. For citations of text from outside sources, use the author-date style described in *The Chicago Manual of Style*.

Language. All material must be submitted in English. Foreign-language terms (transliterated, where appropriate, into the Roman alphabet) should be italicized and followed by a concise parenthetical English gloss; the author bears responsibility for the correct spelling and orthographics of non-English words. British spellings should be Americanized.

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Materials are acknowledged upon receipt. The editor and two anonymous readers review manuscripts submitted as articles. The review process takes several weeks.

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Submission Deadlines

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