Bean's Parade

story of the month

By Richard W. Jennings, the author of Orwell's Luck
"The Master of Middle American Whimsy"

As any popular singer will tell you, the most difficult song to sing is the Star Spangled Banner. Not only are the words hard to remember, the broadly spread notes are a serious challenge. Compared to writing it, accomplished comparatively easily by Frances Scott Key, to expect a nation of off-key, untrained vocalists to sing it is an end devoutly to be wished.

Yet somehow we manage to muck through, generally at the beginning of most sporting events, proof that this is a nation of people who, when called upon, are willing to do their best.

Imagine, then, Aubrey's surprise when she was awakened one Monday morning at sunrise on a day off from school by a near-perfect performance of the national anthem.

Rising from bed in her faded Care Bears pajamas, she placed her fingertips on her Levalor blinds and observed a short parade of neighbors marching down Cheery Street.

Her backyard neighbor and fifth grade classmate Bean was in the lead dressed as Uncle Sam. He was not performing an instrument, but instead carried a plastic jarful of Doctors Foster and Smith dried chicken fillets sealed with a bright red top. This apparently was necessary because Bean was followed by the primary musicians: his three little brown dachshunds, Sophie, Owen and Jozie.

Aubrey knew that Bean had been training them to sing in order to win the Nobel Prize in Science, but the last time she witnessed a performance she was unimpressed. This time, however, was different. Each one took a part, ate a chicken treat, and continued as well as anyone has ever done.

Last in line was Bean's father wearing stilts, costumed as a lanky but still portly Benjamin Franklin, and playing banjo. Running up and down beside the troupe was Bean's mother, a nice-looking brown-haired woman who carried a digital movie camera capturing the scene for posterity and presumably the Nobel Prize committee. As it turned out, her effort was not needed, for the film truck from Channel Nine was also following the parade recording the unusual event for lucky viewers of the evening news in a small town in upstate

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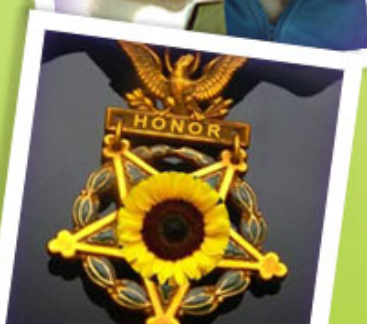

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Wisconsin.

Aubrey was impressed.

The achievement didn't make Bean any less peculiar as a person but it strongly suggested to Aubrey that Bean could accomplish what he'd set out to do.

Few fifth-graders measure up to that, Aubrey thought.

Certainly not Aubrey. Her greatest success to date had been to raise an octopus named Sandy who spent most of her time eating hermit crabs and hiding in an underwater cave.

Quickly Aubrey changed into street clothes and ran outside to join the parade. Soon, other kids in the neighborhood joined her, some carrying musical instruments for which they'd taken no more than a year of lessons. Wallace, struggling with a bass drum, provided a contribution that was quite unhelpful to the dogs. Tiffany added nothing of consequence with a violin. Only Ross with his trumpet seemed to know what he was doing. Nevertheless, it was a fine way for a neighborhood to come together on a special occasion.

"Good job, Bean," Aubrey told her backyard neighbor as Mrs. Magee distributed fresh, steaming blueberry muffins, most of which were consumed by the crew from Channel Nine. "You're doing something important here today although the world will little note nor long remember."

"Thank you," Bean replied, "But history will be the ultimate judge."

"If you mean dog history," Aubrey answered, "I don't disagree."

Two hours later, there was a knock at Aubrey's door. Her mother, Anne, answered, where she was greeted by the team from Channel Nine inquiring about the girl who said, "The world will little note nor long remember."

That was Aubrey, of course.

"Aubrey," her mother called. "It's for you."

"We filmed you this morning in today's parade," a young, crew cut producer said to the diminutive fifth-grader holding her orange cat against her chest. "Our network has asked us to ask you a few questions. Is that okay with you?"

"It all depends," Aubrey answered. "What are the questions about?"

"Singing pets," the producer replied. "Is this the first time you've ever seen vocal pets?"

"Well," Aubrey answered politely, "I have a talking cat

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named Porchie, but she doesn't speak to the media. If you know anything about cats, you know you can't tell them what to do. Dogs are different. They obviously enjoy being bossed around, especially Bean's dogs."

The interview wound up that evening with footage from the parade on the NBC Nightly News, a nationwide broadcast. Calls came in from "Oprah," the Jim Lehrer News Hour," National Public Radio, Create, Animal Planet and Tavis Smiley.

Bean and his dachshunds were invited to the White House in Washington, DC, where they met the President and Bo, the President's daughters' Portuguese Water Dog, a gift to the First Family from the late Senator Kennedy of Massachusetts.

Bo was especially fond of Owen, the only male of Bean's threesome. They hung out like pals throughout the ceremony, engaging in a private canine conversation.

The President of the United States gave Bean the Presidential National Good Sport Award and shook his hand while in the Rose Garden cameras clicked and whirred and hummed.

Then suddenly it was over, and Bean, his mother, his father, Owen, Sophie, and Jozie were flying back to Wisconsin.

Later, it was reported on "Entertainment Tonight" by an Irish-looking woman with movie star looks that Bo had begun to sing words from the famous George M. Cohan song, "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy," specifically "I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy, Yankee Doodle Do or Die. A real live nephew of my Uncle Sam, born on the Fourth of July. I've got a Yankee Doodle Sweetheart, she's my Yankee Doodle joy. Yankee Doodle came to London just to ride the ponies. I am a Yankee Doodle boy."

My gosh, Bean," Aubrey said. "You've really started something."

"I don't know," Bean replied. "The words are extremely repetitious and it's all in the same octave. What Owen, Sophie and Jozie did was light years ahead of that. Besides, the story is greatly exaggerated just because the dog has connections."

So will Bean win the Nobel Prize?

I hope so, thought Audrey. But it frequently comes down to politics. Whatever happens, he still has three swell dogs. That's the important thing. Even Porchie agrees with that and he's not especially fond of dogs.

POSTSCRIPT: As is consistent with the behavior of grown-ups, Bean was not awarded the Nobel Prize in Science.

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Instead, the award went to the President's two daughters, Sasha and Malia, who, according to the judges, had trained their dog to sing about two great nations on two distant continents, outdistancing a song about simply one performed by three. Understandably, Bean was bitter, a grudge he will carry for the rest of his life. To make up for his disappointment, Mrs. Bastianich, their fifth-grade teacher, arranged for him to receive the Sunflower Middle School Medal of Honor.

Aubrey concluded that having a caring teacher is more important than accolades from foreign strangers, the money notwithstanding.

Visit the Kids' Learning Center here!
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