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creative writing
workshops

The longer and more carefully we look at a funny story,
the sadder it becomes.

by Penny Jones

Uncle Harry told us many funny stories about his life. One he told us was about having to go to the toilet over an open pit.

He had to do this as a young man and many years later, he described in detail what happened. "This latrine required an aptitude for acrobatics", he said gaily. "It was not conducive to sitting."

"A long wooden pole was fixed along the length of the cesspool. I learnt to squat astride the pole with my behind hanging precariously over the abyss with my toes barely touching the encircling wooden platform. At first, I held on to the pole with both hands, but later, I became more daring and hung over the drop "free hand". But I always took good care. The slightest wobble was enough to make me quickly grab hold of the pole to steady my balance or else I would have performed an involuntary backward somersault into the pit below."

"One experienced the atavistic fear of falling," he said, as if this was the worst thing about it.

He jokingly boasted that he was approaching mastery of his technique.

He had plenty of time to practice.

There are other funny stories in his tale.

The young man and his father walked from Poland back to Czechoslovakia where they came from. The Germans were in flight from the Russian army and the war was not yet over. Prisoners on the road home were not always welcomed by people from the towns and villages they passed through. Others though were kind, fed them and gave them a bed for the night.

The pair had to scale the Tatra mountains to cross the border. There was snow on the ground. The father walked supported by a stick as his shoes were coming apart and he was limping badly.

As darkness fell they heard shots. Were they the target? The old man drew a circle in the snow and stepped inside. Perhaps some ancient memory of the power of magic compelled him, a defenceless father, unable to protect his son. He invited the young man to join him. The young man refused.

He no longer believed in magic, or God.