

ALWAYS A NEW WORLD

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THE OLD FOLKS home was a place where people evaporated in mind and body. I went there twice a month, partly to boil away guilt and partly to face mortality head on. There was a fellow there who sometimes caused me pain—Billy Seymour, a Shuswap Indian from Dead Man's Creek, pronounced by the locals "Debman's Creek." Billy was ninety-six, deaf, toothless, and loud, and the pain I often felt in his presence, a baffled, diffuse misery in my intestines, came not so much from what he said or did, but from what he had become.

Billy lived in a single room with his wife, Mary, who warned me not to believe a word he said because he was senile and couldn't be trusted to get things right. All the while she talked, Billy grinned lustfully at her from his wheelchair. The two of them had grown up together in the backwoods of British Columbia, and had known each other all their lives. Mary had borne and buried three of his children, and according to Billy, had never given him a day's rest. As he told me this, Mary looked up from her knitting, made a squawking duck with her fingers and thumb. "Talk, talk, talk," she said.

Personally, I enjoyed the litter of Billy's talk—the steelhead that got away, the women who didn't, the eagle he saw on the mountain, the gold nugget he found in a stream. Everything in his life was boldly colored, and if he lied more times than not, it didn't seem to matter. Lying for him was just another way to tell the truth.

"Jesus, Billy," I said to him on one of his more lucid days. "You can pull on a thing, and pull on a thing, and pull on a thing, until it's something else entirely."

"Ohhh, you know, Fadr?" Billy said, grinning so I knew it was a lie. "That's someting the white man taught us how to do."

Most of the time, Billy meandered into old hunting tales, always climbing to the brink of some disaster. If it wasn't a bear, it was a wolf. And even though his memory had grayed sometime after 1935, the

stories he had told over and over since the first days of the twentieth Century were as bright as color television.

When Billy told a story, he was a high wire walker, a human fly, balancing between perfect recall and amnesia. Sometimes, he'd lose the thread of his tale, lose it utterly, forget where he was and who he was talking to, stop, squint at the world as if everything he saw around him was suddenly new, then start again. He generally found his way back, though, in spite of his deafness and his confusion. He must have been so used to his own lies that he didn't need to hear himself speak any more than a mule needed directions to tread a circle.

When I first met Billy, I was in the collar, looking like a priest, which is hard for me because I don't often feel that way. I feel like myself and am startled when someone who doesn't know my name calls me "Father" and wants to buy me lunch. But somehow as I sat with Billy in his room, with the dusty tv in the corner near the washbasin, the glass rosary pinned to the wall above, the fiery painting of the Sacred Heart over the bed near the window, the yellow sun pooling on the sheets, and the smell of alcohol and old age, I felt a great calm settle on me, a sense of homeliness and peace. At ninety-six, I suppose, Billy had earned the right to instant friendship.

On one visit, I leaned over him as he sat in his wheelchair beside the washbasin, his breath the odor of wet shit, his face caught in the sunlight, the skin delicate, corrugated and broken, pocked in places where the brittle surface had torn open into rankling sores. It seemed that he had three times more skin than was needed to cover his body. The unused portion hung off him in pleats, from great wide folds under his eyes and jowls to dainty penknife strokes crosshatched into his cheeks. His head drooped near his chest, and I watched silently as his right ear, soft with age, the lobe hanging down to his neck, rose and fell with his breathing. I prodded him, called his name until he stirred, squinted into my face, alarmed. Then he noticed the collar and relaxed.

"Ohhh, Fadr," he said, shaking his head. I turned a chair backwards and sat beside him, in the middle of the room between him and his wife so that I could see them both. Billy was wedged into his wheelchair with pillows, his translucent arms showing red and blue veins, with round dark spots like cancers on his hands. "I was a bad man, Fadr. A real bad man. I was drinkin' and I was doin' real bad tings. Sometimes I was even sleepin' with the real bad women and everyting."

Billy's wife Mary laughed. She tsked him. "Don't you believe it, Fadr. He's a big fibber."

Billy grinned as if he had heard what she said. He grinned, proud of himself.

"I used to be gamblin' and drinkin' most ever night, you know."

"A fibber."

"Did I tell you bout the bear I got me a few years back?"

Mary reached over from her chair by the window and touched his arm. "Fadr, don't let him tell you about the bear. He'll go on and on."

"Well, that bear, he was maybe eighteen hand at the shoulder. Big as a horse, Fadr. Biggest grizzly I ever seen. I tracked him, maybe three, maybe four days, eh? In the snow, Fadr. He was smart—circled round, nearly got me, too, but I kept on him. Yes sir, Fadr. I did. It was almost winter and he was lookin' for a place to bed down, eh? Oh, it was a bad winter. A real bad one. We had snow up over the windows. Well, I knew with winter comin', that bear, he was lookin' for a place, eh? and I knew he'd found one cause I seen his tracks. He'd been sniffin' round a old log with the roots of a tree hangin' over. He'd been cozy in there so I knew he'd be back. That's right, Fadr. He'd be real cozy in the winter, so I waited for him over to one side, down the hill in the bush, and I brought me some rye whiskey to keep warm. So I sat in the bush, maybe two days, maybe three, and drank that rye whiskey and said my *rosry*, Fadr. I prayed to Jesus and Mary to send that there bear along, eh?, so I could shoot him, feed my family, eh? Just like Fadr Le *Jeune* told me, eh . . .?"

At that, Billy reached his hand out and pointed at something in the forest around him. The bed where the old log lay covered with snow was just under the point where the Sacred Heart picture was nailed to the wall. The snow, still falling, filled the room, covered the bed and the floor where the sun had shifted to the wood parquet. I felt the snow and the cold clear through my light clerical shirt.

"That's when I seen him," Billy said. "A shadow in the trees. Real quiet. He was sniffin' round that old log, picked up my scent even after maybe two, maybe three days. Then he was movin' round, sniffin' first up by the poplar near the top of the hill, then back down the trail. He knew I was there somewhere about. He was a big one, Fadr. And smart, too. He raised up on his hind legs, sniffin', his nose stuck in the air. He raised up, got wind of me, and started toward the bushes where I was hidin', eh? I aimed my rifle and I pulled the trigger . . ."

At that moment, the nurse came in, a young woman, crisp, brunette, with precise fingers, very Canadian, and with that hint of a Scottish brogue that only an American like myself could detect. She took Billy's pulse. Grinning, he reached around to try to pat her behind, and she deftly slipped aside, out of reach.

"Now, Billy. Don't be naughty," she said.

Billy grinned up at her, and then his eyes fogged over. By the time the nurse had left, they cleared, shiny and alert again, and he glanced around the room, afraid, as if he had never seen the place before. Everything was new to him, unfamiliar, the walls, the rosary, the Sacred Heart, the smell of alcohol and old age. The world was full of strangers. He stared at me, blinked twice in desperation.

"Who the *hell* are you?" he said, looking straight at me.

That moment hung empty between us. Mary rocked her chair in the corner of the room; her feet tapped the floor. Yellow sunlight bathed Billy's face. His red and blue hand paused, fastened in the air. Outside, rainbird sprinklers, awakened, swept water across the lawn. A hummingbird flew up the window, hovered. The universe was held in suspense while Billy blinked himself back into the dream, the dream that comes with memory and the belief that the world as we know it is real. The universe tilted, while Billy and I waited in suspense and wondered which way it would fall. It was as if all the colors changed places, all the shapes dissolved and reformed, all the electrons spun at ninety degrees. I didn't want to move for fear I might disturb the change, interrupt the flow so the galaxies would never slip back into shape.

Mary's breathing whistled through her nose. The hummingbird buzzed against the window. It seemed impossible to me that the earth could be called into question so completely. Waves of strangeness poured out of Billy, boiled across the room, until the white walls and the sunlight and the rosary and Billy and Mary and the mountains and all the stars in heaven had become infinitely new and fearful. I hadn't forgotten as had Billy, but only remembered something I had long tried to forget. Nothing has to be the way it is. The universe twists, spins, runs on, a holy fire. God speaks to Moses, to Billy, and to Mary Seymour from the center of the flames. Taking courage, I leaned forward and whispered.

"I'm Father, Billy," I said. "Father." Billy blinked again.

"Ohhh, *Faadr*. It's good to see you, *Fadr*. You know, I been a bad man, *Fadr*. A real bad man. I been drinkin' and gamblin' and sleepin' with the real bad women, *Fadr*."

"I know, Billy. What about the bear?"

"You know, *Fadr*, I once got me this big bear."

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Senility puzzles me. Like most people, I'm a closet dualist. I like to think of myself as an eternal spirit who has an accidental association with matter. The body can fall to rack and ruin, but the flame of the

soul burns on. Yet in the face of senility, all my cozy warm ideas are questioned. Where do memories go? Is there hope of their return? So much of what I call myself is wrapped in my own peculiar memories. The thought of senility is frightening, not because it's an unhappy state—Billy was happy—or because it is a precursor of death. You don't need to be senile to die. Senility seems to kill the memories which glue a life together, so the real world becomes indistinguishable from the dream.

At times, I have thought that the loss of memory would be like Sheol—an empty blank nonexistence. How can I know who I am, or where I am, how can I live a *life* without all the thousand stories that help me make sense of this world? Without memories, I have no home in a world that shifts, changes, flashes like sparkles on a lake.

In my work, I have known many people like Billy. There is a mystery in them all. I have seen sudden reversals of personality, as if old skin were peeling off to reveal a new face. This can be a terrible thing to see.

I knew a man, a bishop, who was a saint, once. Everyone said so. He lived poor, gave away most everything he had, bought his shoes at St. Vincent de Paul's, and drove a rust-infested old Chevrolet to work, even though he made good money. At seventy, he was stricken with Alzheimer's Disease, and took up cursing. Within two years, he had become violent and had to be put away.

I knew another man, a priest, who had the reputation of being one of the toughest pastors in the diocese. In his time, he grew old and slipped into a frothy dream. Sometimes he thinks the people on tv are real. Other times, he swears Mt. St. Helens is exploding right outside his window. But he's not afraid. He laughs, tells people all about it.

"Just go outside and look for yourself," he says. "It's on fire."

If told no, Frank, that was a long time ago, in another part of the state, he insists, shakes his head, tightens his lips. He cannot be dissuaded.

"No, no," he says. "Just go outside and look." Then he laughs.

Nothing that is hidden will remain hidden. All will come to light. The glue that holds the world together slowly melts.

What happens when the memories are gone? In Billy's mind, did the universe quit being and then start up again, all within the time it took for a nurse to feel his pulse? Each new universe seemed so utterly new to him.

There is a point of saturation, where newness is more terrifying than death.

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When Billy Seymour died, I was there. I presided at the funeral three days later. It took place out at Dead Man's Creek, on the Reservation. All of us—Mary Seymour, old old Aunt Annie in her red kerchief, the Peters' boys, Ed and J.T., who leaned on their shovels and looked glum, the little Seymour girl, black haired and pretty, with two kids of her own hanging on, and Vincent the bellringer, who wasn't family but who had become an institution on the Reservation by ringing the church bell at every funeral for the last forty-five years. All of us, and a few dozen others gathered around the hole in the ground and stared at the coffin. No one wanted to start, not even me, one of the only two all-fired-up-in-a-hurry white men in the bunch.

On the Reservation, they bury the body themselves. They dig the hole, lower the coffin inside, and fill in the dirt. Everybody turns out. Most of them don't go to church. A few don't like missionaries. Quite a few don't like white people out of general principles. But they all show up for funerals. In the church, they line up to say goodbye—they hug the body, sometimes even kiss it on the mouth, which drives the funeral director insane. I approve of that. I feel sorry for funeral directors; it's not an easy job, but anything which will drive one insane I approve of. I see it as a revolutionary act, a clenched fist raised at death, like firing a twenty-one gun salute or rattling a fetish bag at the demons to scare them away. I think people should rebel, especially at things they can do nothing about. They did that at Dead Man's Creek, and I nodded at them while the funeral director, another white man with a digital watch, fretted.

Ed and J.T. and a few other men filled in the hole over Billy. Two women started the rosary. When we were done, a few others sang a hymn, an old one from the St. Basil's hymn book. I never heard it before; it sounded antique. There are pockets in the world where people remember everything.

When the grave was filled, we waited around for someone to say a few words. My part was finished; I had said the prayers, given my sermon about the love of God and the Angels, all of which I believed in more fiercely than ever before. At this point, the words would have to rise up from them, to put the cap on the day, to let Billy go. Even as their priest, I could be there for years and still, at times, be a stranger. Vincent was often the one who said the words. He was the bell ringer after all.

"The world is goin' crazy," he said. "Everbody's crazy."

No one moved. They never looked him in the eye when he spoke, but they listened. You felt the change, a shift in attention, a sudden indrawing of breath. They stared at the dirt, at their feet, at the plastic flowers which never die. They heard.

"No one listens to the old people anymore."