

Robert Bly and the Monk In His Cell
and Last Trip to Cleveland



KLECKO / FINLEY



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Cleveland

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Dedicated with gratitude to Gwynne Evans

Almost a year ago to this day, my wife got mad and told me to get the hell out of our house. This utterance was issued with passion and phrases far too colorful to repeat.

After a 48-hour period of living out of a bakery truck, I was fortunate enough to land an apartment that was quiet and off St Paul's beaten path.

My new home has one bedroom and a kitchen with a tiled floor with a peculiar mark in the middle. If you take a couple of minutes to examine it closely, you might join me in the conclusion that there was no natural way for such a spot to be there.

The bathroom is nice and it's clean, but in my opinion, a noble bathroom doesn't give you anything peculiar to discuss.

The true pride of my unit has to be the wall-to-wall brown shag carpet that blankets the living room and bedroom. I'd be a liar if I suggested I had a deep knowledge of rugs and an understanding of thread counts. But I lived through the seventies and saw my mother pummel gaudy carpets just like mine with a huge plastic rake.

On the day I moved into this space, my friend Brutus, who specializes in severed relationships,

brought me a bottle of Maker's Mark bourbon, a 52-inch TV, and a box filled with Charles Bukowski books.

I gladly accepted the booze and books, but since my life had momentarily skidded off the tracks, I felt that a television the size of a movie screen might retard a pioneer's self-awareness. God only knows how easy it would be for me to avoid personal expansion if I spent my days in drunken squalor, watching continuous episodes of *The Rifleman*.

So Brutus took the TV away, but later that evening he swung back with a dusty radio – it was in fact labeled Super Radio -- and after plugging it in, he opened the bourbon and told me if I paid close attention, or got conveniently drunk around three a.m., I might get lucky and be able to tilt the antenna just so and hear covert conversations taking place in China. That radio hasn't been shut off since.

During this last year I've purposely lived in this small space with only a bed, coffee table, super radio and books. Nothing else. Not a single other inanimate object is allowed in my monastic cell. However during this time of self-awareness, I adopted an ideology anchored in this understanding – vanity is underrated and with this knowledge, my closets are filled with a wardrobe that would put many haberdasheries to shame.

Like most apartments, my unit has an assigned storage locker in the basement, and in it I keep an ironing board and the only material possession I cannot live without, my state-of-the-art, German engineered, Rowenta Promaster Iron.

I should state for the record that I have been alive for over half a century and during this stint, I have lived with a bouquet of women since I left my mother's womb. To be honest, I've been spoiled in many ways. The women that have surrounded me all loved me very much and took good care of me. Some might say that even though I have never been cash-rich, I've always been provided with the finest amenities. I hate to confess this, but it's easy for a 51-year-old man to take that for granted, but irony can be cruel. My "Come to Jesus" moment occurred when I realized I didn't have a clue how to iron my own dress shirt.

I lamented this plight on Facebook and my lady friends from across the planet tagged me with video instructions while bickering among one another over topics like the ratio of tap water to distilled, and the pros and cons of utilizing starch.

In the end, I did the thing that all men of intelligence do. I called my mother and asked her for advice. She said that revealing the secrets of ironing to one such as I would be like casting pearls before swine. If I was serious, I needed to go out and buy a Rowenta,

because apparently they can iron like no other iron can iron. Then I was instructed to stop by the following Sunday with a basket of dress shirts and an appetite for brunch.

After yogurt, fruit and several flutes of champagne, my mother took me into her basement where she had constructed a shrine to ironing equipped with every gadget an ironing mind could imagine.

Who knew how essential table height, hanger selection, buttoning patterns and flushing your water chamber could be? Once the tutorial started, I realized my mother was in a particular zone and ancillary conversation or clever quips wouldn't be appreciated from here on out.

When steam began gushing, my teacher began preaching her gospel.

"Assuming you understand what each button on this iron does -- and if you don't I'm sure there are instructions in the manual of your Rowenta's box -- you did save the box didn't you? You don't ever want to throw the box away because if you do, Target won't let you return it.

"But in my ironing program there's only one rule. Economy of motion, and for me, I take it as a personal challenge that I will be able to press each garment

faster than the last time I ironed, but -- and this is where it gets hard -- maybe it won't for you, but for me if I hang that shirt on the hanger and I notice even one tiny blemish, I unbutton it and place it back on the ironing board because I want it to be perfect. It has to be, at least for me." My mom paused after telling me this, and, though I couldn't be certain, I think she was beginning to feel shy that she had just told me something too intimate not only pertaining to ironing, but how she lived her life.

I smiled and reminded her maybe that's why she and I argue as much as we do, because we're the same, and then she hugged me and urged me to start ironing while she would stand by silently before issuing her critique.

The silence lasted seconds.

"No, no, no and no -- you're right to start with the collar, but are you serious, you're going to keep your plastic inserts in? Oh Jesus, tell me you take them out when you wash and dry?"

My admission of ignorance was conveyed with a dumbfounded look that, of course, fueled my mother's heart with complete joy.

"It's good that you came home, Danny, your mother will put you on the right course."

I must say, over the next couple of hours my mom cracked the whip and explained how she wasn't going to implement short cuts, but instead she was going to help me understand the nuances of linen maintenance.

She explained that ironing was almost like yoga for her. It helped her get grounded and gain confidence at times when her life lacked control, and then she went on to do her best to help me understand the energy involved in ironing, and how it simply put her in a tangible place where she felt she was at her best. Truth be told, I started to get it. I started to realize how a special magic occurs when you gently tug on seams and glide a hot iron across them. Sweet Jesus of Warsaw, is there anything sexier or more relevant than sliding into a crisp dress shirt that's still warm?

6/28/15

Like most Sundays, Super Radio woke me to the sound of a thundering church organ. To be honest, it's an obnoxious way to start the Sabbath, but there's this show called Pipe Dreams and it runs each week from six to eight, so for a guy that might be just a bit hung over, lying in a room void of clocks, these haunting tones can also double as a reference point to time.

At first I considered heading over to the gym to get a quick lift in, but when my cell began to ring, and the caller ID announced my first conversation of the day was going to be with Carol Connolly, I realized muscle would have to take a back seat to catty gossip.

When Connolly calls, one never knows how long the conversation is going to be. She's almost always loaded with primo information, but this morning she simply instructed me to pick her up for brunch, and she'd treat, but when you're a 51-year-old man who plays consort to a woman of royalty, there are only two steadfast rules.

The first is, she should never spend a dime. When a woman has spent eight decades volunteering and sharing her material resources within her community, to let her touch a single tab would be nothing less than savage.

The second rule is simple, if you're going to be in the presence of the tribe's matriarch, its only good form to dress like a Kennedy.

St Paul is a small large city so if you are in Carol's presence for even five minutes, chances are somebody interesting is going to see you are with a woman who has:

- Lived in California and New York

- Partied with Sinatra
- Raised money to engrave poems in the sidewalks of Capital City
- Had her work read by Oprah on national television
- Facilitated the most successful reading series in the Midwest for over 20 years

In laymen's terms, when you're kicking it with the Queen, it's almost impossible to be overdressed.

With that said I went to my wardrobe and since I've been into "Tone on Tone" lately, I put together a gray ensemble comprised of a French cuff shirt, tie and Stetson. Damn if I didn't look like a Republican Gangster.

After steering my chariot down the street and picking her up, I decided to go to Ward 6, which is kind of a hipster joint on the other side of the tracks. After stepping out onto a dirt parking lot, Carol smiled and told me that even though this place was less than ten miles from her home, she hadn't been in this neighborhood in 40 years.

When we walked in, a couple of the servers I knew greeted us, but it wasn't me they called by name.

“Carol Connolly, what brings you to our neck of the woods?”

Within minutes, French beignets were sent to our table with compliments from the chef.

For three decades I’ve made a living out of servicing bars, hotels and restaurants, and yet, scouts honor, Connolly knows more hospitality workers than anyone I’ve ever met, and when I say she knows the industry, I’m not just referring to the owners, she knows all the servers and the back of the house as well. One night when we were at the University Club, I was talking shop with the manager and Carol approached us smiling. After the manager left she suggested that if I were smart, I’d hang out with the bus boys because “They tell better stories.”

When our eggs benedict arrived Carol multitasked between eating and scanning notes in a small calendar.

“What are you doing Wednesday?” she asked. “If you are available, there is a film about Robert Bly showing.”

I smiled, nodded and chewed my eggs with gratitude.

6/30/15

Tuesday after work, I walked past my mailbox -- and remember I have one of those apartment mailboxes that have a slot-window on the door thing, right? It was jammed with mail. That surprised me, because when you pay bills online and lead a life of monastic solitude there simply isn't any reason to correspond with paper. I pulled the bundle out of the box, but I didn't examine it until I entered my kitchen.

After chucking the pizza and Internet supplements, I was left with three envelopes.

The first was an invitation from the Minnesota Timberwolves to buy season tickets. They seemed to think I'd be excited that they had selected some superstar with the first round pick in the NBA draft.

The second was from a distant relative who wanted to wish me a happy birthday, even though my birthday was still more than a week off. That made me smirk, but my smirk disappeared when I opened the final envelope.

In it was a lease renewal. My landlord wanted me to commit to another year at the cell.

I'll be the first to admit that living alone, living with absolutely nothing is pretty damn liberating and a guy can't help but feel a little bohemian in that kind of

environment. But one thing I'd been wondering about recently was how fine of a line there is between being Gandhi enlightened and becoming a social retard with nothing to show for himself. Nobody ever enters the world thinking they're going to die alone and get tossed into a potter's grave alongside Eleanor Rigby, do they?

As I thought about that for a bit, I began to realize I kind of wished my wife didn't hate me and then I began to wonder, how does one go about negotiating truce in a backwash of heartbreak and disappointment?

7/1/15

The first thing I did Wednesday when I got to work was check e-mails for complaints or prospective customers. I think I had somewhere around a dozen messages, but when I noticed one of them was from Carol Connolly -- let's just say the Bread Empire was put on hold.

Connolly reminded me that the Bly movie was playing tonight at someplace called the Trylon Microcinema. Then she went on to tell me how she was confused because this theater couldn't be more than five miles from her home, but she'd never heard of it.

I had to chuckle because I had never heard of it either. When other people don't have answers they

turn to Google. But when I have a question I just call the Poet Finley, especially if the topic is music or movies because his well of knowledge seems to run deeper than the Internet.

The nice thing about having Finley as a friend is that he writes websites for lawyers and more often than not, works out of his home. Though he won't admit it, I believe he welcomes my random queries.

As you might imagine, he not only knew the location, but the history of the place as well. From their brochure, the Trylon Microcinema shows retro films about UFOs, French gangsters and ninjas who speak in subtitles. The Trylon has been around for a while but most people don't know about it because it can only seats 50 people and is in an obscure pocket of a residential neighborhood with its back to the tracks.

So now Finley turns the tables and asks me questions about the Bly film. When I told him I didn't have any details he seemed curious so I told him that he should join Connolly and me and serve as our GPS. The day dragged on but when the time came to wash up and get ready, I was faced with a curious decision: what does one wear to a film about Robert Bly? From the sound of things, and I don't want to be disrespectful, but the Trylon seemed like a dump and I really didn't want my clothing to become compromised. Also, it was likely to be hot and stuffy. When I realized this a little

devil appeared on one shoulder and did its best to get me to break protocol.

The devil whispered:

“Go ahead, just toss on a pair of shorts and a polo shirt. For all you know, you three will only be the only people there.”

Then I remembered my rule about dressing like a Kennedy. That rule still applied. But devils can be tricky and the whispering continued.

“Those boys didn’t always go formal; just think of them on the Cape. They wore shorts and polo’s. You’ll look ridiculous wearing a tie in that hot, sweaty dump. On a night like this, even the Kennedys would choose function over fashion. Go with the shorts and polo.” I was almost swayed, but suddenly it occurred to me this devil was only partially right. Sure, Bobby might wear shorts and a polo, but Jack sure as hell wouldn’t. So I rebuked the unclean spirit and grabbed a pair of black pants, a white, French cuff shirt and a black paisley tie. Just as I was about to head out, I buffed my favorite cufflinks, inserted them and emerged into the world with bulletproof confidence.

OK, after swinging by to pick up the Poet Finley, I pulled into the Mountcalm Estates at the predetermined meeting time, six o’clock sharp. When

the chariot was parked in front of the appropriate condo, Finley graciously hopped into the back seat so Connolly could ride shotgun.

Tick-Tock goes the clock and Connolly is a no-show.

Six o'clock turns into seven after six and now I'm wondering if our current circumstance warrants a check-in call, but if there's one thing I've learned on Planet Earth, it's that women hate to be on the clock when they are improving on perfection in front of a mirror.

Tick-Tock goes the clock, and now it's ten after. The Poet Finley and I have spent this entire time communicating in silence, but now when I turn and look at him, he echoed my sentiments.

"Yeah, you got to call, now."

Eventually Carol picked up her phone and without issuing salutations, she apologized, scampered across the parking lot and buckled in before we sped across the mean streets of St Paul. Connolly and Finley exchanged pleasantries and after realizing their circles hadn't collided in a while the two of them caught up. At the conclusion of the personal banter everybody seemed excited to see the Bly movie and he became the new topic.

Capital Cities Poet Laureate started off.

“I remember being at some event, I don’t remember the venue, but we were somewhere in downtown Minneapolis. This was right after Bly was named Minnesota’s first State Poet Laureate. For the life of me I can’t remember what the event was. Isn’t it funny how you can forget an entire event, but remember that it was godawful boring? But, when it was finally over I walked over and congratulated him on being appointed Laureate of Minnesota and he said to me: ‘It seems like a lot of work. I don’t plan to do a damn thing!’”

Carol’s recollection seemed to bring her joy, but there were several moments where she paused at length and made me wonder if perhaps she was feeling a little bad, a little sad that such wonderful times could only been seen with the aid of a rearview mirror.

After catching her breath she continued our education:

“Of course Bly went on to do as much for poetry as anyone ever has. We really are lucky to have him here as often as we do. I’ve always been friendly with him, but I was much closer to Eugene McCarthy, and Gene adored Bly; many times when I was with Gene, Robert would tag along. During the Vietnam war the two of them held a poetry reading at a stadium in Boston, I’m not sure which one, but thousands of people showed up

to listen. Can you imagine thousands of people going to hear poets read?"

Then Carol turned around and asked Finley if he had ever worked with Bly.

"Sure, I knew Bly, like all the young poets did. He was a sort of a father to us and we all wanted his approval. He used to call me Irish, and once he looked at a poem I had written and he said to me, 'Irish if you want to become a poet you should stop sending your poems out, and just stick to prose for the next ten years!'"

Carol said that answer seemed very Bly-like, but then she asked Mike what he thought of the advice and if it was helpful.

"Well, I think it was good advice, for anyone. And I followed it. I stopped submitting poems and focused on writing sentences. I worked as news editor of the Worthington Daily Globe. In later years I ran into Robert several times, but my favorite story was at a writer's conference in Marshall. Bly was sitting in a bar wearing a serape, holding court to a group of guys with ponytails. Bly was at his best, telling amazing stories, tossing fireballs in all directions, until..."

A smile began to stretch across Finley's mug.

“...a teen-age girl walked up to the table and addressed Bly. It was his daughter. She couldn’t have been less impressed by the surroundings. In a matter of seconds Bly went from full stride to looking a little sheepish.”

Finley started laughing as he continued:

“Then the daughter says there are two pairs of cords at the Gap she wants to buy. Could she please have his MasterCard? There was an awkward pause while Robert pulled out a beaded coin purse that looked like it was made by Hopis. He handed her the credit card. You could see he loved his daughter but she had just made the mighty wizard look like an ordinary human being.”

As we pulled up to the theater, we picked our way through road construction. Dirt, boards and cable were everywhere, even at the entrance to the theater. I became concerned for Connolly because she’d taken a tumble on an unlevel sidewalk a couple summers prior and wound up in the hospital.

So I grabbed her purse, a purse that had to weigh more than her, and played the role of pack mule and ushered her into the show hall.

When we stepped in, the place didn’t look historic. It looked tired. At the concession stand I didn’t even see

a fountain soda dispenser. They were selling cans instead. Even roller derby has fountain dispensers, but I stashed my diva attitude because it appeared there was a mini-mob filing into the screening room.

The second I crossed the threshold, even with the dim lighting, I was amazed. The space was almost full and every person in attendance was an authentic Twin Cities literary blueblood. These people were Bly's crew and — we realized uncomfortably -- the showing wasn't an open event as we had thought, but a premiere for those whom Bly loved the most. It was by-invitation-only. Carol was invited, but Finley and I weren't.

Because we were the last people to arrive, we had to sit in the front row, off to the left. Before the lights went down, I looked back at the crowd and realized it was divine intervention and the love of Carol that had placed me in a room where something remarkable was about to take place.

I looked at the faces and realized I was twenty years younger than almost everyone. The women were dressed modestly in casual apparel, but the guys, I don't know if I've ever seen more gray ponytails, delicate bracelets and flounces in my life.

A man named Haydn Reiss stepped to the front of the theater, directly in front of me. Had I extended my arm, I would have touched the guy. The room became

quiet and a bright spotlight splashed him and as he squinted I noticed how crisp and well maintained his clothing was.

Haydn thanked all of us for coming and explained that he had included Bly in earlier pictures and felt there was no more to tell. But, one day he discovered footage he had forgotten about. Maybe he could put together a video Christmas card from the material. The more he studied the footage, the more he realized he had enough for a powerful feature-length documentary about Robert Bly, the man.

As he was saying this, I turned around again to see if Bly was in attendance, but I couldn't spot him, and before I knew it, the lights went down and everyone began clapping.

The film started off explaining Bly was the second son of an ambitious farmer, putting Robert in a precarious position because according to farm protocol, the oldest brother typically inherits the land and the work.

But after Robert served in the Second World War, instead of studying agriculture he went off to Harvard and pursued poetry instead.

Without knowing Bly or his family, my heart sank as I wondered what it had to be like for him going home

for the holidays. Can you imagine Christmas carols playing in the background while your brother and dad are discussing what it would take to make the mortgage payments if they didn't have a bumper crop? How does a younger brother contribute to that conversation, let alone help lift spirits when he's chosen poetry as a career path? I'm guessing if he brought up T. S. Eliot's use of line breaks he would be greeted with blank stares. I remembered when I was going to baking school. My grandfather didn't seem impressed with my vocational direction. He never came out and said it, but his silence indicated to me that working in a kitchen was women's work. On a rare visit to my apartment, I remember when I opened the door to greet him he noticed a big red Craftsman toolbox on my kitchen table and shot past me. I'll never forget the look of pride he had as he opened that box without asking, only to find my tools consisted of dough scrapers, pastry bags and fondant wheels. His smile vanished.

The film went on to say Bly never wrote about his father until he went into an assisted care facility. Men oftentimes try to be tough, but one thing is certain. Every young man wants his father's approval, but approval almost never comes without respect, and most fathers have trouble respecting what they don't understand.

When the film addressed the Men's Movement Bly had a hand in starting, I was intrigued by observations

made by Martin Sheen and Robbie Krieger, the drummer for the Doors. These guys were accomplished men and yet even after reaching the highest levels of success in their fields, they wanted to follow Bly. They wanted to plug into his confidence. I recalled a conversation with my friend Kim Ode. She's been a features writer for the Star Tribune for many years, and in that time she's traveled the world interviewing everyone from royalty to your neighbor next door.

I remember once when I asked her if she had an all-time favorite interview. She said she couldn't whittle it down to one, but maybe five and one of those five was an interview with Robert Bly in a cottage on Moose Lake. She said that she has never been as intimidated in her life. When I asked why, and if Robert had been inappropriate, she laughed and said nothing could be further from the truth. She said he was polite and charming, it's just that he had such a high level of confidence that she wasn't sure how to respond.

So as the film keeps rolling and as years span by in minutes it occurred to me how unusual Robert was in many ways. I think most people who have hung out with writers would agree that they tend to be introverted, but Bly is the opposite. As I watched the different stages of his life I realized that not only was he extroverted but he was a master of marketing.

Nobody knows better than Robert Bly that in the world of poetry, quality of content is subjective, but confidence is not.

Let me repeat that line, as Bly liked to say::

In the world of poetry, quality of content is subjective, but confidence is not.

In fact, Bly attained his highest level of commercial success when he did anything other than poetry.

For the first hour of the film I was hypnotized by the tribute it paid to this remarkable writer and man. But then something happened and I began to feel the energy shift. I began to feel as if I were at a funeral.

Slowly I looked behind at a bunch of old glowing faces and began to wonder if these people were silently lamenting that the man they were celebrating had no place left to lead them. Maybe they were realizing that when Arthur drifts into the mists of Avalon, he doesn't drift alone, Camelot is soon to follow. Nothing is sadder than the deposing of a king.

In nature and art one rule is certain. Rats eat dinosaur's eggs and dynasties end, all because vermin crave protein. And because of this competition, people in positions of prominence are not offered a red carpet for retreat.

Transition of power is awkward because even the noblest are subjected to humiliation if they don't pass the torch before it gets snatched. Realizing that Bly hadn't anointed a successor made me admire him all the more. He was going out on his own terms, clinging to that torch with a vice-like grip.

Soon after the movie concluded, the lights went up and after everyone applauded, we all waited to see what would happen next. Haydn Reiss made his way to the front and after thanking everyone for coming he began to get choked up to the point where I thought he was going to cry. His countenance mirrored what he succeeded expressing in his film. He loved Robert Bly.

As the event was about to conclude, somebody from the audience called out:

"Tell us an interesting story that happened during the filming process."

Haydn had a story ready:

"Robert won a prestigious award that was to be presented in New York and I flew out there to film the event. I got there early and the room was huge so we had to stretch cables through aisles of chairs, the setup was a logistical nightmare."

Then there was a brief pause and a big smile as Haydn continued:

“Well, you guys have been to these events. Robert was receiving the evening’s top honor which meant we had to sit through hours of bad poetry first.”

Everybody laughed.

“When he finally was called to the podium Robert explained to us that even though his time was coming towards an end, it was OK because that meant there would be many new beginnings. The sad thing for me was at some point in the evening my audio cable came unplugged and we lost sound. It was a tremendous moment and I wish I could have shared it with you, but in this industry you win some and lose some.”

Then the director exited. Remember, my companions and I are still in the front of the theater, which meant I needed to make sure the room was clear so I could navigate Connolly and her thousand-pound purse out to the sidewalk without stumbling.

When we got outside the sun was still high and all of us began squinting. Trucks were circulating and dust became tangled in the brightness. Most of our cinematic companions had vanished, but when my eyes finally adjusted to the light, the first person I saw was Garrison Keillor.

Seeing him increased my feeling of closure to the end of an era. Just earlier in the week I had heard he

was retiring and had named a successor, but tonight he just stood alone, kicking at a pile of dirt while making faces indicating he didn't want to be approached.

Before I had time to process any of that, Carol tugged my arm and I spun 90 degrees. Connolly seldom laughs, but to my surprise she started because standing 15 feet in front of us was the king himself. Robert Bly.

Even though the space between them was slight, the ground contained enough obstacles to offer mayhem so I quietly ushered my date to her friend. Bly was dressed immaculately in soft cottons. His wardrobe made him look like he knew all the coolest magicians in Peru. Several seconds passed as the two stared at each other. I felt awkward chaperoning two legends.

Connolly spoke first:

“Robert, I loved the film, I love you and I have always loved your work.”

Then commenced the most wonderful conversation I have ever witnessed, with nothing more than smiles and silence.

Without saying goodbye, Connolly released my arm and walked away. If I were a stellar consort, I would have bounced to her side and ushered her to the chariot with sure footing and style, but there I was, face to face with the greatest poet ever and I got to tell you,

I kinda froze and became overwhelmed, it was like stepping into the batter's box against Sandy Koufax.

For a brief moment, Bly gave me the once-over and I had the impression that he might have been wondering who I was, and if he had met me in the past. But while he wrestled with his memory I saw him smile as he turned his attention to the details of my wardrobe.

Seconds passed like hours as I tried to think of something important, or even relevant to say, but seriously, what's left to say? Instead I raised my arm, turned my sleeve and pointed to my cufflink and winked.

Bly smiled. And as he did, I was more than glad that I dressed like a Kennedy.

For the first time in a long time, I felt good. Good enough in fact that I decided I wanted to go home. Not to my monastic cell, but to my wife, and as I sped across the mean streets of St. Paul, dropping the Poets Connolly and Finley off at their respective homes, I thought to myself: If she could find it in her heart to love a man with no possessions, I had a lot to offer.

September 2015







Last Trip to Cleveland

*For Gerri and Dave, for John,
for Dianne and Jim, for Ken and Elaine,
David and Martha, Liz and Mary,
Chris and Rose, for Marty and Paul,
for Charles and the young poets of Cleveland
and for everybody*

At the lunch counter in Amherst, Ohio, I peer into the tool bag I brought along with me. I set my pill sorter on the table in front of me. It's a plastic green box with seven compartments that snap into place. Each compartment contains the pills I'm to take on that day of the week. The pill sorter keeps me from having to take 12 bulky pill bottles with me on the road.

Six of the seven compartments are empty. They had opened up in the bottom of the bag, and all the medications spilled out and are mixed in now with the batteries, spare change, and other assorted junk I keep in the bag. It would be a drag to locate all the spilled pills, identify them – hypertension, diabetes, anti-depressant, potassium, aspirin, Vitamin D – and put them back in order.

What can you do? I sigh.

I had packed the pills for a four-day trip to the Cleveland area, with my buddy Danny Klecko. I grew up in Amherst, 30 miles west of Cleveland, and I had begged my contacts in the area to invite me back for a homecoming sort of reading. I'm a poet, and I played a small role in the history of underground poetry in the Cleveland area back in the 1960s. Since I was still at it, years after other writers fell by the wayside, I figured that made me a witness to something epic. I presented myself as the old man from Minnesota who knew where the bodies of the beatnik past were buried.

We had come to shoot a few holes and blow people's minds. Klecko was dismayed in the trip down to realize I had brought no Dylan. How could we *be* Dylan –

assertive, confident, weirdly powerful – without his voice inside our heads?

We drove down on Saturday – a 13 hour tour. The reading would be two days later, Monday night. Which meant I had a day and a half to kill in a town I had not slept in for 50 years.

We stayed in the basement apartment of Gerri and Dave Rice. I have known Gerri since she was 4 and I was 7 – a brainy, willful, charismatic girl even then. She was a rare thing, pretty but not especially aware of it. She had a complicated expression, joy to be in the game, but also a shadow of sadness there, the idea that things don't always break right. I like her a lot.

Among other things she does, she designs fascinating living spaces. The house seems like it might be made of gingerbread. Every square inch has been thought out, then solved in some eccentric way. The space we were staying in included, among other things, three xylophones and 22 cuckoo clocks.

Some kid hits a high fly toward me in left field. It's 1959.

I look up and I am lost. I can't see the ball but I can see the near future. Teammates throwing their gloves in the dirt in disgust. Way to go out there, Finley.

I turn my back to the ball and stumble in the unmown grass. Poof -- I feel the ball landing in the hollow of the glove. A one-handed, back-to-the-plate catch.

I want to slow time down and tell everyone about each tick of the clock as I stood out there in the dying sunlight.

We get ice cream at Zimmerman's and I keep my mouth shut. But I am dying, dying to brag.

On the ride home, I announce to my dad and brother, "Boy I was as surprised as anyone by that catch!"

But no one wants to hear. I have worn people out with my consciousness.

All the way home I toss the game ball from one hand into the well-oiled pouch.

Sunday morning I wanted to make the rounds of meaningful places. I wanted to show Danny the key locations of my youth – where I lived, where I attended schools, the tiny downtown, the cemetery where my sister Kathy was buried when she was 15.

There was a problem with showing points of interest as if they were the Stations of the Cross. Every site is a mythological moment, in the grand story that is me. "Here on Woodhill Avenue is where a bully knocked me off my bike, age 11. That bully isn't living anymore."

It was embarrassing showing him the dramatic moments that could only matter to me. And really, what was there to see? The 2015 versions of my old places bore little resemblance to the places in my memory. The apple trees surrounding my house were cut down a half-century ago. Strangers stepped out of

my memorial places and got into their cars. Now was different from then. Let it go, Mike. Let it go.

But I needed my moment at all these places, to fix them in my mind. It was, stupidly, everything to me. Danny was a fine sport about it, but he sensed the fracture in time the same as me – a bridge of meaning only I could traipse over.

I could howl, beat my chest, pull tufts of grass from the lawn and hurl them at people. But it only mattered to me.

Marty Plato, Gerri's brother, had a bone to pick with me about my piece on his brother Paul, who died years ago of a kind of lung cancer.

"I didn't like what you said about Paul's cancer," he told me over beer.

Paul was my pal. We delivered newspapers together. We smoked Swisher Sweet cigars that we stole together. We dated together. We barfed together. In 1968, we met in LA and I drove him to his ship in Long Beach.

I wrote in my poem that Paul might have got sick from the hundreds of barrels of chemicals my stepdad had him truck across northern Ohio. I blamed Ohio for being so polluted.

I felt that Marty thought I had no standing, as a friend who had deserted the area 50 years earlier, to stick my head in and have an opinion about the cancer you could

actually see, like a red castle ring, smack dab on the skin of his chest.

Where did I get off making a pronouncement about their Paul? Who was I?

“Paul’s doctor told us the lesions were consistent with napalm poisoning,” Marty said.

I hadn’t thought of that. My old pal Paul, killed by Vietnam. God damn it.

Under the apple trees, 1959.

Our dad ordered Pat and me to mow the yard, but the mower was a self-driven one and it dragged us after it. We could not control the thing as it lunged forward, skidded over the fallen apples, swerving and sawing, scalloping the fallen apples with its blades, each apple crying out as it was split in half, and sprayed the slash around our ankles while we pushed.

Then the yellow jackets would sneak into our pant legs and sting us good. The rest of the time the machine never ran, and our dad would hike up his pants and prostrate himself on the slab peering up at the glass gas-ball, Emory board the sparkplug gap, and crank the cord.

But that mower was never going to stop. Patrick and I had broken it with our minds.

I parked the car by the old quarry. Klecko didn't know whether to stay in the car or follow me.

I talked about trees.

That's the thing that hits me hardest, I say. They cut down the orchard. They cut down the windbreaks. Every tree that towered over me as a kid is gone.

But look at this.

We stood atop the old quarry wall, traffic zipping just behind us.

Astonishingly, the old quarry – 1200 hundred feet long and 750 feet across – was gone.

How does a hole disappear?

In this case, it filled with water. Rainwater and spring water had filled the hole, so it was now a very cold, very deep, rectangular lake.

The trees that grew from the quarry floor were submerged.

We stood staring at this impossibility, Klecko and me, in the shade of a telephone pole, for about 20 seconds and moved on.

I always go to the graves. I'm not sure why. Though I loved my big sister Kathy, who died at 15 in 1961, I no longer know how to talk to her. I was old enough to be her grandfather now. I long ago stopped bemoaning the

eff-up of her dying from a visit to the dentist,
bemoaning that she never kissed a boy, never bounced
a baby on her knee.

Still she was my sweet sister, the person in my family I
felt closest to. She was kind and good, but so fragile.

I tell Gerri over coffee that I visited the grave, out at St.
Joe's cemetery on Middle Ridge Road. It was nice, I said,
but the grave is tipping over. None of the other graves
were tilting, but Kathy's was. It didn't mean anything, it
was just another imperfect thing, the Second Law of
Thermodynamics doing its magic, every mountain
eventually crumbling. I just didn't think it would happen
so fast – it's only sat on lumpy ground for 54 years.

Gerri says, "I have some gravel in the garage, and a
crowbar to lift the grave. I'll go out there today."

I washed dishes in my stepdad's restaurant for seven
years, starting at age 11.

It's by far the best job in a restaurant. The cooks are up
to their elbows in anguish, racing to meet their exacting
requirements. The waitstaff are scribbling salad orders.
The barkeep pretends to listen to stories, rinsing out the
last customer's glass. The coat check stares from her
darkened box.

But the dishwasher warms his blood at the wrists.
And it goes to his heart like wonderful liquor --
everyone yelling, but he doesn't hear.

The reading is at Mahall's, a bowling alley in Lakewood, just next door to Cleveland. Twenty lanes, ten on the ground floor and ten more below. I worried that the crack of the pins would overwhelm the reading, in a dingy, bombed out side room. But on this August day in 2015, not one ball is bowled. We have the place to ourselves.

At the reading, Mary Miller and her daughter Elizabeth sit right in front of me. They remind me of all the nights I spent in their parlor, wooing Liz's sister Julie, the girl I loved, but not very well.

She was seventeen, two years older than me, and there was nothing she didn't know. I was raised in a family of know-it-alls, but her knowledge was real, it was art and literature and beauty. I so wanted to impress her as worthy.

Julie was theatrical. When I was mad at her I told her she gushed. She could not laugh without putting her hand over her bosom. And she laughed like Sarah Bernhardt must have laughed. I learned about Sarah Bernhardt from her.

The night Julie and I kissed under the spreading catalpa tree – which took me three months to get around to – I broke away from her and laughed, and dashed away, skipping violently home, up and down the Park Avenue hill.

At Mahall's I looked out at strangers and old friends and read about falling out of my mother's car as she rounded a turn in Olmstead Falls in 1955.

The centrifugal force of my mom's hard left turn caused the car door to open. And out I tumbled. I remembered everything. I missed the rear wheel entirely, and rolled down the tall grass of the shoulder.

I encountered no obstacles along the way. In the poem, my mother raced down the slope to pick me up, castigating herself for several seconds before obtaining a promise from us kids that our dad need never know about this.

I looked out at my aunts in the dark room – Elaine and Irene. I repeated my mother's name to them, just them, the name they loved. Mary Mulligan Konik. Mary Mulligan Konik. I nodded at them when I said it. I looked every one of them in the eye.

I sit in the car at the curb out front of the house. What happened to the Chinese elm, I wonder, the one that stood atop the terrace? The one my dad said goodbye to me under.

The house is still there. The closest apple tree would have been about here. This is where the cars and pickup pulled up, late at night, headlights left on, and us kids gathered by the upstairs window.

Two men threw a thick rope and pulley over a branch and began to yank. A body rose up off the truck bed. In the bright headlights the blood looked black.

It was a deer. It had jumped in front of our mom's Chevy hours earlier, and totaled the car. There was my mother, weeping into a terrycloth towel. There was our landlord, Charley Thomas – why was he up in the middle of the night, sharpening his long butcher's knife on a brick?

Charley Thomas stepped forward, instrument in hand. He split the deer up the middle, went in with his hands, stabbed around, planted his hands around something, then pulled.

The deer's heart tumbled like a bag of groceries onto the black grass.

The half hour I spent talking to Julie in 2014, when she could no longer speak, and the tumor had grabbed all her brain, was torture to me.

But I had to talk to her because I felt like she had called me to life, made me feel almost as goddamn special as she thought I was.

You gave me everything, I said to her. You made me like myself. You were my best, good friend.

Good night, my darling, I whispered to her that afternoon, as the call came to an end, calling from my cubicle.

I'll see you on and on.

I led the people at Mahall's through an audience participation number.

Repeat after me, I said. HOW ... HOW GOOD ... HOW GOOD OF A GUY HOW GOOD OF A GUY WAS HE?

Then I finished for them: He worried that the flesh-eating bacteria were not getting enough.

I almost always do this piece. It gives people a chance to shout at a poetry reading.

It's nasty. And yet, it's about Jesus.

I drive Klecko through Lorain, which has been in steady decline for 50 years. The entire city is still. You don't even see immigrants now. That's how broke this city is.

First the Ford Plant closed down then US Steel -- 40,000 jobs, neutroned away.

We pass the boarded-up shopping center on East 28th Street in Lorain. This center, which once featured two busy grocery stores, a Kroger's and a Fisher-Fazio, shut down in the 1980s.

Store clerks used to battle to recover carts on the blacktopped lot. We called it the Miracle Mile as a joke -- there was no miracle in sight.

Eerily, they painted the whole structure orange, like it was radioactive.

Klecko is awed by the emptiness, and takes selfies amid the orange debris.

All that remains open is a corner shop: Family Dollar – Every Item \$0.89.

“Your family is amazing,” Klecko tells me. “Your town is amazing. Ohio is amazing.”

Klecko is of Polish extraction – but in Minnesota that doesn’t mean much. In Cleveland he can look up the street and down the street and see one Slav after another. Every Polack in Cleveland naturally knows things Klecko has to improvise on his own.

He is amazed at the flinty nature of my family. He loves the broken streets and tape-scarred windows. The screaming bridges of downtown Cleveland and the rusting hulks of the deserted steelyards move him.

“Coming to Cleveland was the coolest thing ever.”

I drive the first shift, to the Indiana border.

I had wanted to come to Cleveland like a hero who had left, done well, and perhaps perform some miracle cures.

Instead I found such a deep fondness. People remember my mom. They remember Dick and what a mighty and kind man he was.

And yes, they remember Pat and me, and our brother Brian, whom our mother, working three jobs during the

60s, fought to protect from Ohio. We were princes, set aside for better purposes.

I never set foot in the Ford plant or the steel plant or even the quarry, except to trespass.

People remember, and I remember.

And I have faith. I know, for instance, that Gerri made it out to the cemetery that day.

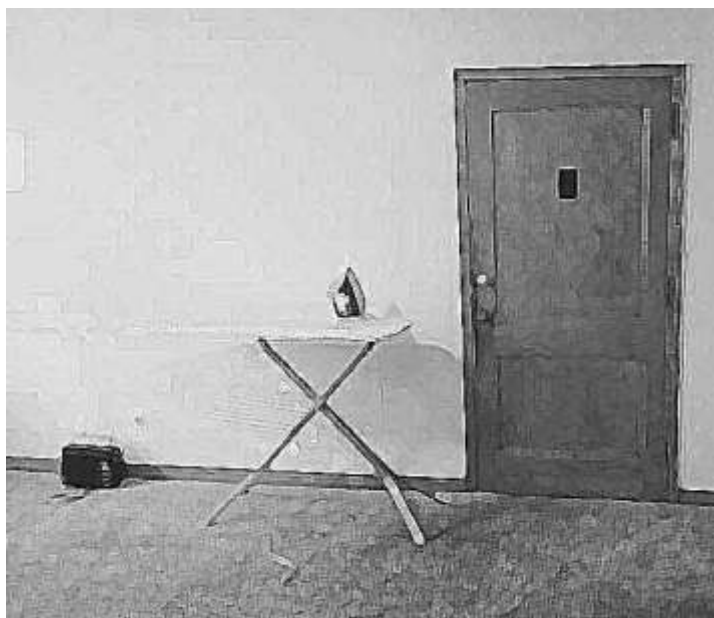
She dragged a bag of white stones with her.

This 105-pound woman used a crowbar to lift the 300-pound rose-colored stone, resting it on a cinderblock.

She filled in the uneven soil with stones. Then she lowered the grave back into place. And tested the job with the level.

I saw the look on her face when she promised it would be done. And I never doubted.





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by Danny Klecko and Mike Finley



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