

Short Fiction Archive

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In a rough way the short story writer is to the novelist as a cabinetmaker is to a house carpenter.”
– Annie Proulx

In 1997 I wrote my first short story. Without giving it away and spoiling it for the reader, I will just say that **The Epiphany** is my contribution to a long-standing theme in literature, one that has fascinated me all my life. As a first effort, I am pleased enough with it to present it here.

The Epiphany

“Well, well. I’m glad you finally decided to drop in and visit me,” said the stranger with a shadow of a smile.

Alan couldn’t speak, agape, and the book he was reading fell to the floor.

“Oh, come now. What are you doing here if you don’t intend to talk with me?”

“Where...where am I?” Alan asked mechanically.

“That’s not important. What matters is that you are finally here. You have been in the vicinity many times; and on a few occasions, you were right outside the door. Only now do you have the balls to come in.”

Alan looked around the room. He found nothing familiar. A rather plain table, an old chest of drawers, and a tacky red lamp placed on a battered trunk roughly positioned between them. *Fuck!*

They sat directly across from one another on a matching pair of threadbare, wing-backed chairs. At one time they sported an elegant paisley pattern, but that was obviously a long time ago. A single poster was taped to one of the nicotine-stained walls, but the inadequate lighting made it impossible to make out what it depicted; nor could he determine what was cluttering the table standing against the opposite wall. Nothing

special about the room, Alan observed, yet something about it was unaccountably nagging at him.

“Is there anyone else here with us?” Alan ventured.

“No, of course not”, came the reply. “This is a private conversation, as it must be. It could hardly be otherwise.”

Alan suddenly realized there were no windows or mirrors to be seen anywhere. He couldn't say what this meant, but it didn't seem right. He found it odd that he found this odd, which contributed further to the hollow feeling of fear that inhabited his torso.

“Never mind about the room. It matters not. We need to have a serious talk. You've come this far, so shall we get on with it?” He leaned slightly forward, and the lamp lit up one side of his face as he stared directly into Alan's eyes. “Well?”

Alan was completely unprepared for the man's glowing countenance, much less the penetrating eyes that shone forth from it, and it startled him. “Give me a moment,” he said with his eyes shut tight.

“I have all the time in the world.” But there was something impatient and urgent about the man's deportment that contradicted his statement.

Alan's eyes were open again, and he was transfixed. Unlike the room, the stranger was oddly familiar, but for the life of him he couldn't seem to put a name to the man or remember where or when they had met before. He sported an old, worn pair of jeans, a Metallica T-shirt, fashionably messy reddish-brown hair, a meticulous mustache, average build. Pretty nondescript really.

But those eyes! They were like eyes he had looked into a million times before, yet Alan couldn't identify him. Even when he spoke it was like a voice he knew, and knew very well, but he just couldn't place it. It was at once unsettling and terribly compelling.

“Do I know you?” he heard himself say.

“In a manner of speaking.”

“But...but from where?”

“Everywhere and nowhere.”

Alan didn't like it. “Are you trying to be funny?”

“Yes, I suppose I am. But I can't help it. It's in my nature, you see.”

Braver now: “Well, this is bloody hard to understand. I...I don't know what this is all about, I don't know who you are or why I'm here... And I don't know where I am or how I got here.” A broad grin was slowly overtaking the man's poker face, irritating Alan even more. “What does it all mean? I don't get it.” He was astonished by his own directness and volume.

The stranger permitted himself a guttural chuckle. “Okay, I apologize”, he said without a trace of contrition or sincerity. “You’re right. Okay. Now that you’re finally here we should get down to business. What do you want to talk about first?”

“What do *I* want to talk about? You brought *me* here, didn’t you? I mean...this was your idea, wasn’t it?”

“Oh no, Alan. I’ve been wanting to talk with you for some time now. I’ve even been expecting you. But, no, it was you who came to see me. It was entirely your decision, make no mistake about it.”

The sound of his own name coming from this man’s curiously sensual mouth was like a stab to his heart, and the fear was now creeping up the back of his neck. “How do you know my name?” he demanded.

“Well, now, that’s a long story. I’ve known your name for...at least as long as, well...as long as you’ve been thinking for yourself, I suppose.”

“What does that even mean? Who the hell are you, anyway?”

“It’s funny you should put it like that. I have gone by many a sobriquet over the years: Satan, Lucifer, The Prince of Darkness, Mephisto...but I have always liked the name Sam. So, please do me the service of calling me Sam. I am at your service,” he said, a cultured hand gesture his punctuation.

Alan gasped as the buzzing at the back of his neck burst into an intense wave of heat moving over his head. “You are the ...the Devil!?” he sputtered incredulously.

“Please...Sam...Call me Sam.”

Alan felt like he was going to pass out: “But...but...I don’t believe it! I...I can’t believe...I mean...I didn’t think...my God!”

“Now you flatter me!” came the sardonic reply.

Alan managed to get a quivering hand to the back of his head before slumping down in his chair and losing consciousness.

With a sudden splash of water in his face, Alan’s eyes flickered open to see Sam standing over him in mock concern. As he straightened himself up in his chair, he noticed Sam wasn’t holding a glass or anything else that might have held water.

Sam snickered as he sat back down. “I thought you were made of sterner stuff than that, Alan,” he said with a playful contempt.

Alan wiped the water from his face with his hands and rubbed his eyes before quickly looking up to see if Sam was still there. He was. “But how can this be?” he said aloud to himself, searching the room for an answer. Nothing.

“That”, Sam said, “shall become apparent as we talk.”

But it was already becoming apparent to Alan. Somehow, it was beginning to dawn on him that this extraordinary visitor was telling him the truth; and, strangely enough, he felt as certain about this as he had ever been about anything. It was bothersome and enthralling at once. Though the circumstances and the peculiar feelings that accompanied them did not partake of any reality he had ever known, Alan found that believing the man was who he claimed was becoming completely irresistible. It made no sense, and yet...

“But why does this place and...and you seem so familiar?”

Sam was growing visibly impatient. “It will not do for you to question everything or challenge the veracity of what I say. That will get us nowhere. Follow your instincts, Alan. This is very real.” Then his face twisted into a pretentious pucker. “Trust me.”

Alan’s fear was now overtaken by his fascination with what was happening. He was discovering that it was incredibly easy to suspend his former disbelief, and he studied Sam with an interest that was eclipsing his apprehension.

“Well?”

Alan decided to go with it: “Alright. Let’s just say you are who you say you are...”

Sam sat back, regaining his wry humour. “You know that I am.”

“Okay. You said earlier this was my idea. What did you mean by that?”

A satisfied smile came across Sam’s face. “Now we are getting somewhere!” he beamed mercurially. “It’s really very simple. You have come of age, and might I pay you the compliment of telling you that you are in very select company in this. To steal a phrase: ‘Many are called but few are chosen.’ You should be proud, Alan. It’s a real watershed!”

“Chosen? I thought you said this was my idea.”

“Oh, it was. But it amounts to the same thing really.”

Alan rolled his eyes. *Jesus.*

Sam ignored his reaction and continued. “You see, for some time now a special notion has been dwelling on the periphery of your thoughts. And only now has it progressed to the status of an idea. You are just about ready to make it a conviction, for you are beginning to seriously entertain this truth.”

“What truth would that be?” Alan was getting involved.

“Well, do you remember what you were doing just before you came to see me?”

Alan was surprised he could remember. “Sure. I was reading ‘Rebel

Angels' by Robertson Davies.”

“Yes”, Sam said with a twinkle; then, like a proud father: “Davies. He was on to me, that one.”

“I remember now. I was reading what he was saying about *bomari*. You know, the concoction that consists mainly of manure?”

“Yes, I know”, Sam said in a leading way. “And?”

“Gypsies or some such people used to use it to restore the moisture to old musical instruments to give them new life,” Alan said excitedly. “They’d take an old, dried out violin and pack horse shit tightly around it inside a container and leave it for an extended period of time, until the violin took up the moisture from the *bomari*. Then the instrument was as good as new; even better, actually.”

“Right. And it was at this point that you caught the theme of the book, hmm?...”

“Yes, of course! To live an authentic life, to be whole, one must accept and even embrace the darker side of life, the darker side of oneself!”

“Bravo!” Sam boomed triumphantly. “Many get wind of this idea, but not too many give it much serious consideration. But you. You put down that book, and you were about to decide to live your life in the light of this revelation when...”

“...when suddenly I found myself here”, Alan completed the thought.

Alan realized that he was leaning ahead and quite literally sitting on the edge of his seat. He sat back again and took a long, deep breath. He was becoming more at ease, but at the same time his mind was racing. There was so much he was suddenly eager to discuss. He thought: “So many questions to ask.”

“Go ahead. Ask me one of them”, Sam offered.

“I’ve only now...” Alan abruptly paused, realizing Sam had read his mind. He shook his head and pressed on, looking intently at a spot on the floor. “I’ve only now begun to accept this truth, but I’ve believed for a long time that you were not an actual individual – you know, more like the concept of evil or something. I thought your existence as a man was only a personification, yet here you are. I don’t understand.” He could hardly believe his nonchalance.

Sam nodded knowingly. “Both are true. But it all depends. Well, you’ll understand better when we’ve finished our little chat.”

“You sure don’t look like the devil, uh, Sam.”

“What did you expect? Red skin, horns, a tail, and pitchfork, I suppose. Really, Alan, you disappoint me.”

“No, I didn’t mean that. I meant, well, you know... Actually, I’m not sure what I meant. It’s just that you look so...so normal.”

“Yes, of course I do.”

“Aw, you know what I’m trying to say.”

“Look, Alan. You’ve got to get away from these artists’ conceptions of what I look like. They belong to an earlier time when the people needed something to help them get their mind around it somehow. What was the euphemism the Other One used to describe them? Stiff-necked people? Anyway, the church started it. They’ve been traducing me from the beginning. The more terrible they made me look the better they looked, I guess. But I’ve never liked those depictions. I’m not some kind of cartoon character. I’m much more versatile, and a lot more subtle.”

Alan felt a bit embarrassed. “I’m sorry. You’re right of course.”

“Of course.”

“Okay, let’s try something else then. Tell me about Hell. Have they gotten that right?”

Sam let out a disarming laugh. “Come now, Alan. I can’t give away all my secrets.” He paused for effect. “However, I will say this: if you continue with the same train of thought, you’ll pretty much figure it out. I mean, if you cast all issues in the light of your newfound insight, things will fall into place, stereotypes will fall away. But I’ve probably already said more than I should.”

Alan didn’t know when Sam had gotten up, but he was now slowly pacing back and forth behind his chair.

“Surely you don’t have to abide by any rules,” Alan said, fearing a sudden end to the encounter. “You can tell me anything,” he blurted desperately.

Sam continued pacing. “Oh, there are rules,” he asserted. “It has been this way since the beginning. You see, I am quite necessary to all this, to the whole setup, so we laid down some ground rules. It could hardly be otherwise.”

“We?...” He quickly decided to let that one go. “Okay. What rules?”

“Never mind!” Sam reproved.

“You were saying how subtle you were,” Alan said expectantly.

“Yes, of course. Look, you can’t go in for all that church nonsense about me being some kind of evil outsider. Such austerity!” Inexplicably, Sam was now smoking a cigarillo. He stopped pacing and looked directly at Alan. “They’re pedantic fools! They’re so...so...Procrustean!”

“Pro...pro-what?”

“I love that word!” he said with a contented charm, ignoring Alan’s ignorance of the word.

“Is anything they said about you true?” Alan asked.

“Not much, but some. Besides our friend Davies, there are a few who seemed to have been on the right track. John Fowles for instance. Goethe and his *Faust*; though I am growing quite tired of all the Devil-and-Daniel-Webster type take-offs. Terribly jejune.”

Alan tried to look like he agreed.

Sam sat down again, simpered somewhat, and continued: “Look, I’m not so bad. They make me out to be bad, but all that’s pretty much a fallacy. I’m the side nobody likes to talk about or even admit to. Where do you think your sense of humour comes from? There have been a great many who have figured it out, for all intents and purposes, but it is only now beginning to trickle down to the common man. We still have a long way to go.”

“So, the artists have it figured out. Is that what you’re saying?”

“The best of them do. But it’s not only the artists. The great scientists too. Take Carl Jung. Everybody talks about Freud. Sure. He opened the door. Quite admirable. But his star pupil, Jung – he’s the one who got it right.”

Alan was rapt.

“And how about Heraclitus? Twenty-five hundred years ago, Alan. Are you familiar with his principle of regulating opposites?”

“I know I read something about that recently...”

“Yes, of course you did. The principle that positive and negative, battling for supremacy, bring about equilibrium and harmony. Very clever stuff! Old Heraclitus was way ahead of his time.”

Alan liked what he was hearing. “Tell me more. Help me to understand you better,” he said with confidence.

Sam smiled knowingly, then turned serious. “Take Hitler. Everybody thinks I am particularly proud or fond of him. It’s not true at all.”

“You must be kidding.”

“No, really. I am not capable of feeling bad about anything. You know, I can’t mourn. But let me tell you, I can get bored. And this guy bores me to death. Just as much as a self-righteous, religious, do-good hypocrite bores me. They’re both too damned obvious! Subtlety, man, subtlety!”

“Okay. I think I see what you mean. You like to lie low and then creep up on people.”

“It’s more than that,” Sam insisted. “It’s where I come from...it’s where I live!”

“Go on.”

Sam took a long, slow pull from the cigarillo. It produced no new ash. "I'm part of who you are...a very necessary part."

"That's it?"

"Yes, that's it! That's everything!"

"So, you are not the source of evil? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes, yes. Of course I am. But it only gets to the extent of a Hitler when I have free reign. And where's the sport in that? It's just too bloody easy!"

Alan found it difficult to argue.

Sam went on. "I like the close game better. I like the fundamental issues. Sex, for example."

"What about it?" Alan leaned in.

"It's one of the great battlegrounds. He gives it to you, and I let you enjoy it."

"You make it sound so simple."

"But it is. You people make it complicated because you fight it. It's not just the cases of prurience or satyriasis or nymphomania that I'm involved with. I'm in on the ground floor, my boy. He makes it possible for you to have sex, but I make it possible for you to have apocalyptic sex, you know what I mean? Most of you still manage to find some way to feel guilty about it. That's a no-win situation. But when you accept me for what I am? It's game over."

"Accept you....for what you are..."

"Sure! It's like some religious people, you know? They pretend they can deny my existence. But that only helps my cause. It's pure enantiodromia."

"Huh?"

"Enantiodromia! Really, Alan. You must read more of Davies' stuff. Enantiodromia is a word he uses. It is the tendency of things when pushed to their extremes to become their opposite. I tell you, during the Middle Ages I never had it so good. Why do you think the more perspicacious ones called it the Dark Ages? Well, anyway, that whole 'ostensibly chaste man of God' thing wears thin after a while. It almost makes *me* sick! *Me!*"

An inquiring look: "Where do I come in?"

Sam sat upright and grinned approvingly. "That's much better! Now you're talking. You are one of a select number I have chosen to usher in the new age, Alan. Feel up to it?"

Alan flushed, suffused with expectation. "Me?"

"Well, to be more precise... actually, you chose me. No wait, I don't mean... You see, here's where it gets to be complicated. No matter."

“Okay, well, just tell me this much: What is this new age?”

“Good! Well, you know, I had my time playing the Evil One. And it was fun there for a while. But it gets old after a couple of centuries. But now? Finally! The times they are a-changing!”

“What do you mean?”

“You people are growing up. You are finally beginning to get away from the literalism that has plagued you for so long. That’s what got you all into religion, because you needed the literal, but it kept you into it long after it became redundant. You people were drunk on that shit! Couldn’t tell you anything remotely analogous and expect it to stick. But the metaphor. Yes... That’s where it begins to come clear. The metaphor...” He looked off into space and seemed to drift away.

“What about the metaphor, Sam?”

“What? Oh, yes! Oh, never mind about that. Just a little theory of mine. Nothing to be concerned about. Now, where was I? Oh, yes. Times are indeed changing. Terribly slow, mind you, but it is beginning to change.”

“Change. In what way?” Alan knew the answer but felt compelled to ask. “People are changing. They are finally beginning to see that both sides of man’s nature must be embraced. This very conversation proves it. Just remember one thing, Alan, if you remember nothing else: Contradiction is a lie. Paradox is truth.”

“I know this! Why it was just the other day, I was thinking...”

“I know. It has always been true,” Sam cut in. “But now you are starting to realize just how important this is...that it must be a way of life.” He paused. “Do you know anything about astrology, Alan?”

“I’ve never taken it too seriously, to be honest.”

“I know. The predictions about what’s going to happen to you personally, today? Arrant tripe! But astrology is remarkably insightful when it takes a more general approach. Like the song says: ‘This is the dawning of the Age of Aquarius’. The Age of Pisces has drawn to a close, and Aquarius is the sign of the reconciliation of opposites. It is the beginning of the next stage.”

Alan scratched his chin suspiciously. “But we’ve known this for some time now. Yin and yang, this sort of thing.”

“Ahh, very good, Alan. But how widespread has it been, really. Oh sure, it was fashionable there for a while, like in the sixties; but I’m talking about doing it for keeps! Only now are the people starting to drift away from orthodox dogma. They’re looking for a better way, and they’ll find it. It will be radical, and I will be left behind.”

“Oh, really?” Alan realized that now he knew what Sam was going

to say before he said it!

“Well, left behind in one sense. But that will be overcome. I shall reinvent myself!” he said, looking quite pleased with himself. “I’ll simply have to... what’s the common term for it?...take it up a notch. Yes, I’ll do that... with your help.”

“My help?”

“Sure! You and those like you. That’s what this conversation is all about. I’m getting a head start on Him. I am making preparations for the coming age. You won’t forget me now will you, Alan?”

“I am certain I’ll never forget you... not for as long as I live!”

“Even longer. But once again, I digress...”

Alan did a double take, then paused to return to what he was going to say. “So there really is no such thing as Evil, per se,” eyes opened wide.

“Not really. It’s more like a privation of Good. The subconscious... the unexamined life...the inauthentic life...”

“And what about Sin?”

“What of it? It’s not something to renounce, it must be embraced. It’s not something you’re doing wrong, as the church would have you believe. This is how they get their power and control – and how they maintain it. They convince you that you are terribly sinful, and the only solution is to come to them for redemption. But, no, sin is the acknowledgement of who you are; that you are flawed! Even He agrees with me on this one! Nevertheless, it will remain a matter of semantics for some time to come, I’m afraid.”

“Yes, I see it now! And once this is fully realized you will cease to exist, in your present form.”

“Yes, but don’t worry about me. I’ll be fine. Anyway, you’ve made an important beginning, my boy,” Sam said with an authoritative air. “You’re finally living up to your name. It means ‘harmony’, you know,” he said with an impish wink.

Then it hit Alan like a freight train! He felt a sudden rush sweep through his entire body. “Wait a minute! Now I recognize you ...”

At that moment, Sam, who had been standing against the bare wall, vanished before Alan’s eyes.

Alan turned away from the window overlooking the trash-strewn street below. He walked over to the bathroom and gave himself the once over in the cracked mirror hanging on the door. His hands were sweaty, and as he sat down in the old wing-backed chair, he wiped his hands in his Metallica T-shirt. “Yes, of course...harmony,” he whispered.

He relit a cigarillo and sat back to finish his book.

* * *

When I was just twelve years old, I renounced Christianity and all organized religion. Though born into the Anglican church, what Pierre Burton called “the comfortable pew, I was already filled with doubts and questions about God and religion, and I was disgusted with the questionable morality and hypocrisy of the Christian leaders I had seen and read about, inside and outside the church. Even so, later on as a young adult, I continued to try to reconcile my thoughts and feelings with Christianity.

Then I read *Cosmos* by Carl Sagan, his effort to provide a sweeping history of the universe which turns into an account of human history as a matter of course, and I was struck by his complete omission of Jesus Christ. Sagan clearly did not believe in an historical Jesus, and his confidence in this belief astounded me. I enrolled in university in pursuit of a degree in philosophy to chase down all the questions that occupied me, but also to prove for myself that God exists, and to determine whether there was a man named Jesus Christ who actually did walk the Earth and founded the Christianity. In my quest, I reread the Bible for the third time in my life and studied theology and Christology.

Ultimately, I became convinced that God does not exist, and all that I have seen and experienced in my life since has bolstered that conclusion. I also found that I could determine beyond any doubt that there was an historical Christ. But I remained intrigued with the figure of Jesus Christ as one of the most excellent examples of how to live one’s life, such that it didn’t matter if he actually existed or not. I believe that, like in mythology, the value lies in the stories and the characters. I also reached the conclusion that if Christianity was supposed to be based on the example and teachings of Jesus Christ, it was clear to me that the fathers of the early church, including Peter himself, had strayed from Christ’s principles; and, over time, they perverted those principles more and more.

After graduating with a Bachelor of Arts (with first class honours) in 1989, the next year I decided to write a play that contained my conclusions regarding Christ’s teachings, the stark difference between Christ and Christianity, and the hopelessly human reasons for it. **Beginnings: Human Nature and the Church of Jesus Christ** was the result, and I believe it achieved what I set out to do with it. As a lifelong fan of the theatre and Shakespeare, the fun in writing it was having a chance to “try on” the hat of a playwright, and in the employment of Shakespearean language.

Beginnings: Human Nature and the Church of Jesus Christ

(An Historical One-Act Play)

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Dramatis Personae

BARDISSIUS, a poor, common disciple of Christ.

JOANNA, one of three female disciples travelling on foot with Christ
and his followers.

MATTHIAS, one of a few aspiring apostles in the party.

SIMEON, cousin of Christ's apostle Bartholomew.

JESUS, of Nazareth.

JOHN, the apostle.

PETER, the apostle.

TWO SMALL CHILDREN

CASPIUS MARCUS, a Roman soldier.

CLAUDIUS SCIRRO, a Roman centurion.

JUDITH, a young believer.

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ACT I, Scene I

Setting: On the road to Jerusalem, near the town of Emmaus, on one side of a bend in the road. Both sides of the road are being used by Jesus and his disciples as a place to rest along the way...

Enter BARDISSIUS, JOANNA and MATTHIAS. (looking for places to sit)

MATTHIAS: If we do not rest long, we may reach Jerusalem before the night falls.

BARDISSIUS: But the festival is still two days hence, Matthias. What need you with Jerusalem this day? Stop here with us tonight.

MATTHIAS: We cannot tarry here. But you are very kind.

BARDISSIUS: Jesus and his people have stopped here before. What is troubling you?

MATTHIAS: (pacing) My Lord grows nervous, and he is short of patience. He is intent on entering Jerusalem upon this evening. I fear He is beset by much more than preparations for Passover. There is much to do tomorrow...

BARDISSIUS: Still more reason to rest for the balance of this day. I, too, have had cause to mark His temperament. There is a tired urgency His eyes betray. Many hours I have spent with Him, yet His very spirit at this time is clearly unsettled. I beg you, let him rest!

MATTHIAS: You have spent many hours with him, Bardissius?

BARDISSIUS: Oh yes. Here in Emmaus and once in Jerusalem. He always has time for us. Many nights, after most of you have succumbed to the fog of wine, He has sat up with us and shared a fire. I have never known such a man. Yet He makes me feel that He has something of all of us.

MATTHIAS: But I do not remember you. It is, for me, our first meeting.

BARDISSIUS: I am a poor, common man, my friend. I am often overlooked. But I am always there.

JOANNA: You speak my heart, dear Bardissius. (Matthias glares at her.)
It is this way for me as well. But my Lord forgets me not. He is different. Very different.

BARDISSIUS: You see it, don't you Joanna?

MATTHIAS starts toward JOANNA, but is interrupted; enter SIMEON. (frustrated, addressing MATTHIAS)

SIMEON: He speaks in riddles, Matthias. I understand only half of what He tells us!

MATTHIAS: (calmer) I know it is difficult, Simeon. But somehow, I feel it is important to understand it in just this way. I wish...

SIMEON: It confounds me so! I want so badly to know exactly what He means...to appreciate each and every word.

BARDISSIUS: I believe there to be more in His deeds than His words.

MATTHIAS: (to BARDISSIUS) His deeds do speak His words, that is clear. But there is more to it. There must be.

BARDISSIUS: What need have we for more?

MATTHIAS: I will speak again with John. He seems to get it.

SIMEON: John! Of course *he* gets it! Jesus spends more time with him than any of us.

MATTHIAS: (to himself) Don't say it again...

SIMEON: He loves John more than anyone!

MATTHIAS: Oy!

SIMEON: What is it about John that He finds so enthralling?

MATTHIAS: Well, to begin with, Simeon, John understands what Jesus is saying.

SIMEON: (sheepishly) You are right, Matthias. I am sorry.

JOANNA: You know, it's a lot like...

MATTHIAS: Who has spoken to you, woman!? Go find us water!

BARDISSIUS: We have plenty of water, Matthias. And it is you who should apologize now.

JOANNA: I am not common; nor have I tasted the bitter ort of poverty. But I am a woman, and there is no place for me to speak. No place where my voice will be heard, save for the teachings of my Lord Jesus.

MATTHIAS: What do you know of our Lord's teachings?

BARDISSIUS: Do you not see and hear how Jesus treats and speaks of women, Matthias? They are to partake as well, to be included, or none makes sense. If you do not know this, Matthias, you need a portion of the same understanding Simeon seeks.

JOANNA: As I was going to say, it's a lot like the stories we tell our children. The stories help us teach the children to learn the lessons of life as they grow.

SIMEON: And His parables are stories for men and women?

JOANNA: Yes, but the lesson is more difficult.

Enter JESUS, JOHN and PETER.

JESUS: You bear excellent witness, Joanna. But there is even more to a parable.

MATTHIAS: Tell us again, Lord, the meaning of speaking in parables.

JESUS: MATTHIAS, my brother, I speak in parables because there are two kinds of understanding among the people. The first kind thinks with pictures and sees only the pictures. The second kind of understanding also thinks with pictures, but then goes on to read the pictures and gain a deeper meaning. The parable allows both kinds of people to comprehend according to their understanding. It is so for all to understand.

SIMEON: Please explain, my Lord. How does one read a picture?

JESUS: Two men are walking across the land. One has lived all his life in the city, and the other living on the land. They both come to the edge of a desert. The city man knows the sand is hot, dry, and harder to walk upon, for he can see it. The other man, however, can do more than see the sand. His understanding of the land lets him read the sand and know what creatures have been there, where to look for water, and where to find food.

MATTHIAS: Now I understand, Christ, and the second man would be counted as wise.

JOHN: Yes, and therefore the proverbs of Solomon are deemed wisdom.

JESUS: Yes, John, but do not regard the other man as unwise. His is a different way. And mark you, his is the way that matters most of all.

SIMEON: So, it is better not to read the pictures?

JESUS: No, Simeon, but those who can read them must use it to help others. Those who cannot read them must strive for this greater understanding. Some will achieve it, while others will not. It is the effort which pleases my Father in heaven. Even the wise man will not enter the kingdom with insight alone. He must act on it. The knowledge must be shared to help both men, or it is of no account.

PETER: It is our charge to spread the Word of God, to teach this difficult simplicity.

JESUS: To be sure, my dear Peter. But take heed. There will come a time,

a great many years from now, when almost all the people will be able to do more than see the pictures, and it will still not be enough. The people will have the understanding to read these pictures, but they will be worshipping too many idols to use this understanding. At that time, as now, it will fall to the few to stir the many to read the pictures of this past, that all may win a future with God, on earth and in heaven. Even then there will be many who will refuse to understand, and many who will obscure the meaning in the name of greed and self-glorification. Then, as now, they have their reward.

SIMEON: Believe me, Lord, I am ever trying to hear the lessons in these parables, but more often their wisdom escapes the grasp of my comprehension.

JESUS: Be patient, brother. Give yourself time.

SIMEON: At these times I am as...as a sheep being led around and fed just enough to keep from starving. If I understood more, I could feast! I want to, my Lord, but oh, how I hunger!

JOHN: Now you have it, Simeon!

SIMEON: What is it I have?

JESUS: Let your heart and mind gaze upon the ways in which you resemble that sheep, and the ways in which you differ. This is the key to all parables. And remember, my Father's love for you is like the parable. Without Him you are like words without meaning. He alone can give you meaning. It falls to me to show you this, for telling you is not enough.

JOHN: It is as we spoke of, my brother. You are the Word. We must read the meaning of God's love in your life.

JESUS: Yes, John, but it is not given to all to understand it in this way. And we are all diminished if we fail to embrace the other way as the more important of the two. For the other way is the way of loving deeds, not of capacity for thought. One may learn both ways, yet where there is but one way it must be the way of love. For the Light is not the aim, but the shining of the Light. Faith

and love surpass all understanding and put into practice the words of truth in the service of God.

MATTHIAS: And what of the church, my Lord?

JESUS: What of it?

MATTHIAS: Is the church the instrument of these works done in the service of God?

JESUS: No, Matthias. (showing mild agitation) The very works themselves are church.

MATTHIAS: And the temple?

JESUS: Church is nothing more or less than the good deeds of true believers, plied with faith and love. It is not a place. To see the church as anything more or less is to fall back into that which we are striving to rise above.

JOANNA: This sounds like another parable, my Lord.

JESUS: Not exactly, but I use the same figurative language. Peter! (excitedly) As I have said many times before, you are the rock upon which I will build my church.

PETER: Yes, Rabbi. This You have said.

JESUS: But I am not going to build a temple of wood and stone upon you, for you are not a rock.

PETER: Yes...

JESUS: But you have great faith and love, do you not?

PETER: I do.

JESUS: And it is people like you who will come together and do the will of God. Please take heed of this, for it will help you after I am gone.

JOANNA: But where are You going, Lord?

JESUS: (downcast) There is so little time.

Enter TWO SMALL CHILDREN, running up to JESUS and grabbing him by the hands.

JESUS: (brighter) Yes, what is it, my children?

1ST CHILD: Oh, please, Jesus. Tell us another story.

2ND CHILD: Come back and tell us one more story before You go.

JESUS: Of course. Take me to your family that I may wish them well.

Exeunt JESUS, TWO CHILDREN, JOHN, and PETER.

MATTHIAS: Surely it is clearer to you now, Simeon.

SIMEON: Not now, Matthias; I must be alone to think. (wanders off by himself)

MATTHIAS: Good man.

JOANNA: Take care, friends! A Roman soldier approaches!

BARDISSIUS: Matthias, do you know where this road is leading?

MATTHIAS: Why, Jerusalem, of course. (BARDISSIUS faces audience and rolls eyes.)

CASPIUS MARCUS: You there! State your business and be quick!

MATTHIAS: I am Matthias. We are travelling to Jerusalem with Jesus of Nazareth (gestures to the other side of the road) for the Passover festival. We are tired and have stopped to rest.

CASPIUS MARCUS: This is the Jesus mob? No matter, you must keep moving on this road. There will be no stopping to

rest.

MATTHIAS: What can you tell us of Jerusalem? Have preparations for the festival begun?

CASPIUS MARCUS: I am not here to keep you informed. Besides, if I were you, I wouldn't be in such a hurry to get to the city.

SIMEON: What do you mean?

CASPIUS MARCUS: From what I hear, this Jesus has been causing trouble for far too long. Some very powerful people are getting angry.

MATTHIAS: Jesus knows best. He will know what to do.

CASPIUS MARCUS: Come on, move along. Wait! What is that woman doing here with you? (starts toward JOANNA)

MATTHIAS: (stepping in front of the soldier) She is also with Jesus.

CASPIUS MARCUS: (drawing a sword on MATTHIAS) You would do well to know your place. Anyway, what need has a rabbi for a whore?

MATTHIAS: It is better to inquire who needs a rabbi, not who a rabbi needs. This woman pursues the same truth as I, and Jesus the Christ is our teacher.

CASPIUS MARCUS: She has no business travelling with you. It is contrary to law.

MATTHIAS: Law? Whose law? A woman's position in the affairs of her people is not within the province of Roman law. And even Judaic law is being called into question. Speak only of which you know, sir.

CASPIUS MARCUS: I have no time for this sophistry. (replaces sword in scabbard) The solution to the problem you people have caused has already been forged. It

remains only to be executed. I, Caspius Marcus, look forward to when next we meet. I will take great pleasure in enforcing Roman law where you people are concerned. Heed these laws, or you will soon feel the particular wrath of this loyal Roman. You had best pray to your God to delay that meeting.

Exeunt CASPIUS MARCUS.

JOANNA: Thank you, Matthias.

MATTHIAS: I am ashamed of my earlier behavior, Joanna. And I am sorry. Please forgive me.

BARDISSIUS: (to himself) One can almost smell the future.

MATTHIAS: We are approaching a difficult, nay, dangerous situation.

BARDISSIUS: Do you know now, Matthias, where this road is leading?

MATTHIAS: Alas, I fear I do. We are threatened on all sides. The Romans. The high priests. The people themselves. What good can come of this?

Exeunt MATTHIAS, SIMEON, and JOANNA.

BARDISSIUS: (aside) I fear the fate of mortal men,
conflict, pain, to bitter end.
But more than all the fears I know,
this I fear - it must be so! (Exit)

* * *

ACT I, Scene II

Setting: A clearing on the outskirts of Jerusalem, on the third day after Jesus' crucifixion.

Enter BARDISSIUS, lost in thought, gloomy.

BARDISSIUS: It must be so, for here's the plan,
to sacrifice the blameless man.
Injustice giving eyes to flood.
All sinners washed in precious blood.

But should this give us cause to think,
when body eat and blood we drink?
There must be more than pointless loss,
What truth behind a battered cross?

It lurks inside the shadows' brood,
and underscores this living crude.
O perfect Savior, truth is thine.
But how am I to make it mine?

Great teachers by example lead.
But do we need this final deed?
It seems that all that's true must fall,
if there's to be any truth at all.
Still, I live the life for which You call.

MATTHIAS: (off-stage) Bardissius!

BARDISSIUS: Matthias, my friend!

Enter MATTHIAS, serious. (They embrace.)

MATTHIAS: Bardissius, have you seen Joanna?

BARDISSIUS: She is with Mary. They have gone to the tomb of our
Lord, to tend to it, and to pray.

MATTHIAS: Judith told me Joanna wishes to speak with me about
Simeon.

BARDISSIUS: Ah yes, Simeon. We have all been shrouded in the cloak
of mourning for two days, Matthias. But Simeon is not
faring well at all.

MATTHIAS: He has a delicate nature, of this there can be no doubt. We must speak with him. He must not feel he is alone.

BARDISSIUS: But he will not be consoled. He has become as a hermit. Even now I know not where he grieves.

MATTHIAS: Joanna will know. When is she to return?

BARDISSIUS: She did not say. She left at break of dawn. I expect it will not be soon.

Enter JOHN and PETER.

PETER: Peace be unto you, my brothers.

MATTHIAS: Peter. John.

BARDISSIUS: May peace also be yours. (all embrace)

JOHN: It is time for us all to begin the continuation of our Master's work. We would do well to meet this very evening in the upper room.

MATTHIAS: This evening?

JOHN: Peter and I will gather the other apostles. Go spread the word to our most faithful disciples. There are plans to be made and a great deal of work to be done.

BARDISSIUS: But John, we are yet grieving His passing. Our brother Simeon cannot reconcile the loss.

PETER: We will help him. We must all help each other.

JOHN: We all carry the widow's burden; and no one more than Peter, my own brother, James, and I. It is not easy. But we have a church to enact.

PETER: And our Lord bid us to do so.

MATTHIAS: Indeed, it was His dying wish. And now He is gone.

PETER: Nay, His living wish!

JOHN: Alas, Peter, these men have not the faith to lift themselves. For it is clear that this day does not hold the same joyous expectation for them as for you and me.

BARDISSIUS: This day? Of what do you speak?

Enter SIMEON, sobbing, throwing himself under a tree.

MATTHIAS: Behold, he walks as sorrow itself.

All cross to rally around SIMEON.

PETER: Simeon, my friend, take heart. All is not lost. Our future is at hand!

SIMEON: O cruel Fortune, thou foul and fickle object! To take our Savior from us, plucked from our very hearts, and slain before the common horde!

JOHN: Do not despair, Simeon.

MATTHIAS: We are here, my friend. (grabbing Simeon's shoulder) You must not torment yourself.

SIMEON: (pulling away) O Matthias, you will find more worthy disciples than I. I am a simple man who loves Jesus. But I am condemned to a life of futile thought. How I have laboured to understand His lessons, but to no avail. And now my Teacher has been taken. Now I shall never have the chance to gain the understanding I crave.

MATTHIAS: We are to help each other understand, Simeon. I will help you. We will all help you.

PETER: Indeed. Do you not believe the teaching of our Lord Jesus?

SIMEON: Every word, and even those I cannot grasp!

PETER: And are His words any less true because He is not with us?

SIMEON: No. They will always be true.

PETER: Well then, suffer these words to comfort you now. He told us
He would be crucified, did he not?

SIMEON: He did.

PETER: And has He not also said that He would rise again?

SIMEON: Yes, but I thought this to be another parable I was unable to
understand.

BARDISSIUS: Rise again? He has said this?

JOHN: Yes. This He has told the twelve. He will rise on the third day.
This very day!

SIMEON: My Savior is coming back?

PETER: He will visit us again, to show Himself to us, and to give us what
we need to carry on in His name.

JOHN: Hope! Victory over death itself! We have naught to fear!

BARDISSIUS: Praise God! When are we to behold this miracle? Where?

MATTHIAS: Patience, my friend. He said He would come again. We
must wait for him to reveal Himself to us.

PETER: Yes, Matthias. Remember we are building a new church. Not
one of stone and mortar, but one of love. For He has taught you
that your body is the temple. The law is not carved into stone as
before but written in your heart. We all have a part to play in the
church of Christ, and faith and love must be our guiding
principles.

JOHN: You speak it well, Peter. For three long years we have walked

together with Him, listened to Him teach, watched Him move among the people. And we talked with Him of many things. We have borne witness to many miracles, and now we await the miracle of His glorious resurrection. Even so, He wants us to know that the greatest miracle of all is love; love's joy, love's pain and sacrifice, love's treasure, love's goal. To this we must hold fast.

MATTHIAS: It falls to us to spread this message.

PETER: Yes, but our Lord forbade us to force understanding on others or ourselves. (looks to SIMEON) We must simply hold up His perfect example and live by it ourselves. One cannot be made to believe; one must come to believe. Otherwise, we are condemned to repeat an old and tired mistake.

SIMEON: I will try to do as you say ... as He said.

BARDISSIUS: I, too, am a simple man, Simeon. But I am beginning to learn the wisdom of action; deeds that reflect our Lord's teachings, teachings that require not the subtlety of fine argument, but they are for all to know and understand. Yet I have found these very deeds have helped to deepen my understanding of His words. I return tomorrow to my family and friends in Emmaus. Come with me, Simeon. We will learn together.

SIMEON: This I will do. Thank you, brother. Thank you all.

JOHN: Yes, go tell the news in every corner of this world. There is no place unworthy of hearing it.

PETER: Even now, our brother Matthew prepares notes to write of our Lord. With time, all will hear the news.

Enter CASPIUS MARCUS, drunk, with bottle in hand.

CASPIUS MARCUS: Aha! (staggers toward them)

MATTHIAS: We are in peril, my friends!

CASPIUS MARCUS: You there! I know you! Clearly, you do not value your life. I intend to keep my promise to you.
(discards bottle, draws sword)

MATTHIAS: Yes, it is I.

JOHN: Blessed are they that are persecuted in the name of Jesus Christ!

CASPIUS MARCUS: Jesus Christ? Ha! Surely a public execution is sufficient to show that he is not a god of any kind. He is mortal, and it is over.

PETER: On the contrary, this very execution distinguishes Him as the very Son of the living God. No. It is just beginning.

CASPIUS MARCUS: Ha! Misguided fools! There is legislation before the council which will permit us to deal with people like you...you radical Jews.

JOHN: But we are not Jews. We are born again in Christ.

CASPIUS MARCUS: You cannot change your birth, fool! You are what you are.

MATTHIAS: We have not changed our birth, sir. We have been born anew. We offer the kingdom of heaven to Jews and Gentiles alike, even Roman soldiers.

CASPIUS MARCUS: I spit on your offer.

PETER: Remember our Lord's words, Matthias: Do not cast your pearls before swine.

CASPIUS MARCUS: Swine?! You will die first for that insult! (starts toward PETER, brandishing the sword.)

Enter CLAUDIUS SCIRRO.

CLAUDIUS SCIRRO: Caspius! Wait!

CASPIUS MARCUS: Centurion! (he burps)

CLAUDIUS SCIRRO: What is this? What are you doing?

CASPIUS MARCUS: They are troublemakers, Centurion. They are members of the Jesus cult. I am carrying out the new laws with relish.

CLAUDIUS SCIRRO: Put away your sword, Caspius.

CASPIUS MARCUS: But Centurion...

CLAUDIUS SCIRRO: Silence! You are obviously drunk, and you are a disgrace to your uniform. Return to your barracks, or I will be forced to report this shameful indiscretion.

CASPIUS MARCUS: (disappointedly returning sword to scabbard) Yes, Centurion.

CLAUDIUS SCIRRO: (drawing sword) It will be my pleasure to deal with them in my own way.

CASPIUS MARCUS: (smiling devilishly) Yes, Centurion.

Exeunt CASPIUS MARCUS, with evil laughter.

PETER: Whatever your intentions, centurion, we remain unmoved. Jesus is our Savior.

CLAUDIUS SCIRRO: (returning sword to scabbard) Fear not. He is my Savior also.

BARDISSIUS: Praise be to God!

SIMEON: You, a centurion, are a disciple of our Lord?

CLAUDIUS SCIRRO: I am. My name is Claudius Scirro. Some time ago my servant fell gravely ill. Jesus healed him without ever meeting with him.

PETER: I remember Jesus speaking of you. Capernaum?

CLAUDIUS SCIRRO: Yes. (all embrace)

JOHN: I, too, heard Him speak of you. He marveled at your faith,
Claudius.

CLAUDIUS SCIRRO: Before I heard Him preaching in Capernaum, my life was like that of a lost soul. I am a respected centurion with power and prestige, yet nothing in my life could fill the emptiness. But when I listened, really listened to Him, He spoke as one who shares my very heart. He knows my pain. When my beloved servant fell ill, I just knew Jesus was the only one who could help him.

BARDISSIUS: If you are assigned to Capernaum, how have we been so fortunate to have you here with us today?

CLAUDIUS SCIRRO: Five divisions from outside Jerusalem have been temporarily reassigned here to deal with the large crowds coming to the city for Passover.

SIMEON: But if you believe in our Lord Jesus, why do you remain a centurion?

CLAUDIUS SCIRRO: Caspius is right about one thing. The law will be less tolerant in the future. So, I feel I can help the cause better as a centurion.

MATTHIAS: You have succeeded in proving this to us today.

CLAUDIUS SCIRRO: There are more of us in the army than you might think, and in some are in influential government positions. Our Lord speaks to everyone.

JOHN: Yes, Claudius, but it is not everyone who listens to His words. Nevertheless, we must give as many as we can the opportunity.

CLAUDIUS SCIRRO: Beware of the powers that be, brother. And from what I hear, you have as much to fear from the high priests as you do from the Romans.

JOHN: Yes, this has never been clearer.

PETER: Be that as it may, it shall not stop the growth of the church of Jesus Christ.

CLAUDIUS SCIRRO: Be careful, my friend. It may be necessary to avoid aggravating the authorities, whomever they may be...at least for a while.

PETER: We will not be reckless, but we must not let anything prevent the good news from being heard. We will live the way He showed us, pray as He showed us, and we will tell everyone of His perfect example.

JOHN: He will be with us in spirit.

Enter JUDITH, very excited.

JUDITH: Peter! John! (short of breath from running)

PETER: What has you so afraid, Judith?

JUDITH: Come!... Come quickly!

MATTHIAS: What is it, Judith?

JUDITH: Joanna ... she has just returned from the tomb ... Mary is still there!

JOHN: Yes...

JUDITH: He is gone, John!

PETER: Who is gone?

JUDITH: The rock has been rolled away from the tomb! My Lord's body has been taken away!

MATTHIAS: Who has taken His body?

JOHN: No! He has not been taken. He is risen! It has happened!

PETER: Make haste! We must see the tomb!

Exeunt all but BARDISSIUS.

BARDISSIUS: (in prayer) My Lord, what will become of us?
Will Fortune give this church a chance?
This starting point is fraught with risk.
Cruelty, greed, intolerance.
(he looks to exited friends)
Help us. Dear God, help us. Amen. (Exit.)

* * *

As mentioned earlier, the essence of the short story is concentration on a single idea and/or spirit, which is also the joy of short story writing. As Edgar Allen Poe said: “A short story must have a single mood and every sentence must build towards it.” Written just a couple of years ago in 2020, **The Terrible Tale of Billy Boland** focusses on a tight set of specific traits in the story’s titular character and runs with it, taking them to their logical, shocking, and at times comical conclusion. I actually made myself laugh out loud several times while I was writing it.

The Terrible Tale of Billy Boland

Nice to meet you, sir!... My pleasure, I’m sure...

So, look. Why don’t I just tell you the whole damned story, okay? Not just what happened. You need to know what led up to it, right? Some background and shit for whatever happens next. I’m not sure how much of it will be relevant, but it might fill in a few blanks, and I know it’ll be helpful to you from this point on. Couldn’t hurt, hey?

And all the big-time journalists are here looking for the scoop on what went down, from provincial and national news outlets. A shocking major crime like this one makes for a shocking major news story, I suppose. Now, as I told you on the phone, I know you're only a freelancer, but I'm giving this interview to you instead of one of them. As I'm sure you can imagine just by looking at me, I am always rooting for the underdog. So, you can go ahead and turn that on whenever you like...

So, about me. My name is Jason Shepherd. I'm seventeen years old, and I was –

Oh, yes, I know. Everybody is here because of Billy and what happened. But, you see, I know Billy Boland better than anyone. I know him *very* well, and I can tell you what no one else can; stuff nobody else knows, which you're going to need if you want to write a better story than anyone else. You're talking to the right person here. Trust me. Okay? Okay then.

So... So, like Billy, I grew up here in St. John's, on this weather-beaten old rock in the unforgiving North Atlantic...

Pretty rugged, isn't it though?... Yeah, but it does have its charms.

Anyway, after graduating from high school last year, and even more so since, I've been feeling a bit weather-beaten and unforgiven myself – and now this! But the first six years or so of dealing with this bloody disability has been brutal, man. Brutal. I can tell you one thing, though – those years would have been a whole lot worse for me, and seemed much longer, if it wasn't for Billy Boland. He made all the difference... Well, he did in *my* life, anyway.

I was only ten when *this* happened to me. Just walking around with the boys from the neighbourhood we had moved into over summer break, heading for the first day at my new school. We were carrying on, joking and laughing, until an innocent push down an embankment completely changed the trajectory and quality of my life forever. The shove sent me into a forward roll, and I just went with it; exaggerating it for the boys, you know, hamming it up to make them laugh even more. But the second flip head over arse brought my lower back down hard on a protruding rock, smashing two lower vertebrae, and paralyzing the lower half of my

body for life. So, I don't need much encouragement to get down on myself.

But then...then there's Billy Boland.

He was my best childhood friend. The best friend I ever had, for that matter. William Michael Mason Boland. That's what his mother used to call him whenever he screwed up and she was mad at him, which was pretty much all the time. He's a big Catholic fella from Bond Street, and I'm what his parents jokingly called "that greasy little Black Protestant from Gower Street", which ran parallel to Bond and a block closer to the harbour.

But it didn't matter where we lived, that we were born into different families, different religions, or that we couldn't be more different from each other in terms of personality and intellect. It didn't even matter that we didn't really like each other all that much, as strange as that sounds. I guess you could say Billy and I were running parallel too somehow. It's hard to describe or explain; easier to tell you some of what happened, you know, hit the high points; and easier for you to understand. Let's just say Billy and I have, or should I say had, a unique rapport.

In any event, our relationship began on the day I finally showed up at the new school after recovering from the accident. The guys I thought would end up being my school friends, the ones I met over the summer after we moved, turned out to be anything but. I was treated like a pariah from the moment I rolled into the schoolyard in this wheelchair, and that became set in stone later that morning when Billy stepped up and stepped in to defend me during first recess.

A few kids were making fun of my chair as we were coming out of the building onto the playground. A couple of them were jamming things into the spokes, and one kid was poking the point of his pencil into my shin to see if I could feel anything. Billy suddenly showed up as if from out of nowhere. He snatched the kid's pencil and sent them all away with the growl of a grown man, his fists clenched like two big hambones. And I won't even tell you about his eyes... *Jesus!*

After they all scurried off, Billy got behind me and pushed me over to a corner of the yard away from everybody else. He positioned us with our backs to them all. We didn't speak a word for five whole minutes, just

watching the traffic drive by through the chain-link fence, with Billy leaning against my chair chewing on a toothpick. Then he wheeled me back inside just before the bell rang, before everybody started crowding in. From that morning on, though we had yet to even speak to each other, Billy and I were each other's only friend, in school and out. The pencil and that stupid kid's ballcap are probably still somewhere up on the roof of the school.

And that's how we started. Billy, the oversized, unkempt kid who stood out from the crowd, mostly because nobody wanted to stand next to him. Me, the geeky, crippled kid nobody gave themselves a chance to get to know, mostly because they couldn't get past the damned chair. Yeah, we must have looked a pretty pair! You know, it was like Billy and me against the world. But thrown together like that, I guess we couldn't help forging something special between us.

So, yeah. It was him coming to my defense that day that got me started hanging out with Billy. But I had no idea just how unusual a character my hero would turn out to be, or how the few years of friendship we shared would affect me so profoundly. I was just going with the flow that morning, you know. As for why Billy decided to take up for me, and with me? That was something we never did discuss. But I suspect he knew from painful personal experience how hard it was for a guy like him to strike up a friendship with another boy on the first day. I guess it looked like there was a good chance I had the same problem. So, backing me seemed like a good way for him, and us, to get out in front of all that right from the start of the school year.

Regardless of how we got together back then, and as interesting as all that is, we soon discovered that our relationship turned on one simple, mutually beneficial arrangement – I was Billy's one and only confessor, who always took what he said in complete confidence; and in return, he would tell me absolutely everything he thought or did that could be considered interesting, off the wall, or just plain crazy.

Now, I know it sounds like I got the shitty end of the stick in that deal. But you don't know Billy, or how he talked and behaved, and you've never had Billy regale you with an anecdote about his latest encounter. And from the time we made our deal, it seemed like he felt under pressure to come up with good stuff to keep his side of the bargain. He had an

awful lot to tell too, believe me; and plenty to confess. Enough to last me a lifetime. And when I think of –

...oh, sure. No problem. I'll just step out this way for a smoke. Just come and let me know when you're finished your call... No, no. Please take all the time you need. No worries. I'm good.

~*~*~

Okay, well, that gave me a chance to get a few thoughts together... Is that on again now?... Okay.

So... Right. So, you could say we had a real symbiosis going – him with his audacious ways and unvarnished expressions; me with my loyal and confidential fascination. But it wasn't long before it felt like Billy couldn't be Billy *without* having a confessor. It was almost like if he didn't have anybody to tell about the things he did, he wouldn't have been able to do them. Maybe he didn't get like that until after we met; and maybe that makes me an accomplice to his diabolical deeds. He never talked about his past at all, so I really don't know. But it doesn't matter anyway. I didn't care about that then. But I can tell you, I don't feel the same way about any of that now.

You see, the thing of it is, as time went on, Billy's daring became more and more risky. It was like he was compelled to make each incident more outlandish than the one before, just so he'd have an even wilder tale to tell me than he did the time before. I'm convinced of it! Increasingly his behaviour, and therefore his verbal reports back to me, became more alarming and hazardous with each successive act. So, it's no wonder he ended up...

Well... I guess I should have known something bad would happen. But I was so caught up in the excitement and the entertainment it provided me, you know? And there was nothing all that exciting or entertaining going on anywhere else in my life, that's for sure.

Look. It's simple. Billy would share his innermost thoughts and feelings as a backdrop for a story about his latest adventure, always after the fact – they were the only times he ever talked about his feelings.

Meanwhile, his trusty secret confidant served as a live flesh-and-blood receptacle for his...his truth, I suppose you'd call it, for want of a better word. He needed me to take it in, to complete the thing for him somehow. And, I must say, I did get caught up in the spell of his storytelling. Enough to mercifully, albeit temporarily, help me escape my own personal hell.

All I can say is: Billy Boland has a real gift for getting into the worst kind of trouble, a gift for getting away with whatever he did, and a gift for telling me about it after it was done. And he loved every minute of it! Shit, there might even be a book in this for me some day... Hmm... But I suppose I'd better wait to see how this all plays out first, hey?... Yeah.

Now. Okay. I'm going to give you some examples of things he did and show you how they escalated. But first let me try to give you a better idea of the kind of guy Billy is...was...whatever. Okay?

For openers, there was nothing conventional at all about Billy Boland. Like I told you, he was born Catholic, but his parents never practiced Catholicism or went to church or anything like that. When it came time to enrol him in school, they put him in the mainstream secular school system, checking the 'United' box as their religion on the enrolment form. Billy said they told him they did it to make sure he got a well-rounded education. But as far as he was concerned, that was a steaming pile of bullshit. He told me the real reason was because they didn't want to be bothered with all the Catholic crap, especially when it came to attending frequent, detailed meetings to consult about Billy's academic performance, which was always abysmal. He said they knew the secular system never connected what happened in the schools to the students' families' churches, and the only thing well-rounded about his family was his old man's beer gut.

Yeah, Billy is no scholar, that's for sure. He was in the same grade when we first met, but two years older than me, having failed two grades already. On the years he didn't pass, it bothered me more than it bothered him, simply because it didn't bother him at all. I mean, he couldn't possibly care less if he tried. You just couldn't count on him to react to anything the way you expected him to, or the way somebody else would. On the years he did pass, he only barely scraped by; and one year I'm sure he was pushed ahead because the poor teacher just couldn't bear the thought of spending another year with him in her classroom.

And this is another way we are completely different. Unlike Billy, who has no stomach at all for classrooms and rules, I like learning stuff. I like to have things in an orderly fashion, and I've always loved reading books about things I was interested in. They started calling me gifted in grade seven. But aside from not having to study and having no problem acing all my tests, it has never felt much like a gift to me. It's just another way for the other kids to see me as a freak, and another excuse to avoid spending time with me.

Anyway, as I was saying, Billy never talked much about what his life was like before we met. Even so, from the way he told his stories, and especially from the examples he used to explain them, I could tell he was a born opportunist. Since I've known him, opportunism has been an undeniable compulsion for Billy, and it has all the earmarks of a full-blown addiction. He goes through life constantly on the lookout for freebies, serendipities, and windfalls of any kind; unexpected opportunities to get something for nothing, no matter how big or small. He's like a junkie about it. And if he thinks he has a line on something he has a chance of getting, and ends up losing it, he is inconsolable. Whatever it is, he just can't seem to help himself.

Now here's where it starts to get *really* interesting. I don't remember exactly when it started, but at some point, getting free stuff, getting away with taking things, and avoiding having to pay for things wasn't enough for him. Certainly not enough if he was going to keep upping the ante with every scenario and story. So, eventually, Billy started trying to get away with doing things that were wrong or inappropriate instead, particularly if he could be elsewhere by the time it sank in with the victim or anyone else. The way Billy is wired up, this was an entirely natural progression for him. The trouble was, he was ramping up his deeds to shoot for more dangerous objectives without dialing down his passion for achieving them, and without considering the higher risk involved in the slightest. He was utterly incapable of it.

Like one time during summer holidays, he told me that the week before he'd had a chat with a heavy-set deaf woman he found sitting alone at a bus stop downtown. Billy didn't know sign language, but while they were waiting, she managed to get across that she was born deaf, but then as a pre-schooler she somehow completely lost her sense of smell too.

Not two seconds later, without even thinking, he bent over slightly to give her a sympathetic smile, as he promptly summoned up the most bellicose blast of flatulence ever cut loose on a city street – a long, loud tuba-like report that turned the heads of two businessmen standing on the corner a good thirty or forty yards away! Can you believe it?

Yeah, I know, it's hilarious!... And you should hear *him* telling the story! I was just a kid myself at the time, so what he said and the comical way he said it, gave me a great belly laugh that day. I guess you had to be there and know Billy to get the full effect. Looking back at it now, though, all I can see is poor Billy's plaintive face after finishing the story that day, his brow tightly knit and eyes shifting from side to side for eavesdroppers. He grabbed both my shoulders and loudly whispered in my face: "I had to, Jay! You know?!...I...I just had to!" You would swear he was pleading guilty to some murderous crime of passion...and I'm pretty sure he had bologna that day for lunch.

That was the first indication I had that there was something ominous coming. I remember feeling it in my stomach. But I didn't recognize what it was until much later...until it was too late.

Occasionally, Billy would have one of his...his episodes when I was with him, simply because once the idea for one occurred to him, he just couldn't wait or pass it up. I liked when that happened, but it meant I'd have to miss out on the story. Anyway, one time we were having lunch in the food court at the mall, and we were sitting next to a French-Canadian couple who were obviously arguing about something in French. The guy's voice was pleasant enough, but the woman spoke with a terribly irritating whine, and she finished every single sentence with a distracting up-tone, like it was a question instead of a statement. I could see that everyone sitting within earshot were all experiencing the same annoyance from her loud and grating way of speaking. Then, after she delivered an exceptionally long and annoying speech to the guy, punctuated with those maddening up-tones, Billy gave me a quick wink and leaned over to within a couple of feet of the man's face:

"Pardon moi."

"Oui?" the man looked up and asked innocently.

Billy looked him straight in the eye, and in the sweetest voice he could muster calmly asked: “I was just wondering, monsieur. Does your woman’s voice sound as fucking aggravating to you in French as it sounds to all of us?”

Apparently, the guy was bilingual. And in the ambulance on the way to the hospital, Billy was smiling so broadly through the blood and broken teeth, and his eyes were lit up as bright as a child’s on Christmas morning, you’d think he had won the lottery or something...

Oh, yeah!... Priceless!...

– Huh?...Oh...sure. Actually, I’m getting a little peckish myself, and I need to make a call anyway. Meet you back here in an hour then? Good.

~*~*~

Enjoy your lunch?... Yeah, it’s always good down there. You might want to try their wings next time. Wicked...

So. I guess now you’d like me to get down to business, right? What was going on with Billy leading up to last weekend, you know... Yeah, that’s what I thought. I could easily give you a few more dozen examples of his exploits over the years, but I think you have the gist...

Okay, so, as of last Wednesday, I knew Billy’s next escapade was going to be a big deal because it had been more than a month since his last undertaking, which was quite shocking in itself. Too much time between always makes him squirrely. Well...I should say more squirrely than usual.

On Thursday he told me that around three in the morning, the night before, he had broken into a big furniture truck behind one of the buildings on lower Empire Avenue and hotwired it. I didn’t know he could do that, but it didn’t surprise me. He said he had his eye on the truck for some time. Anyway, before anyone could find out it was stolen, he drove it downtown and brought it right to the top of Springdale Street – one of the steepest, longest, and straightest hills in the downtown area. He told

me he wanted it to do more than just roll down the hill and gradually pick up speed, so he brought along a cement block for the gas pedal.

It was at this point I realized I had already heard the story on the CBC Radio that morning. It was Billy! I tried to get a chance to tell him what I heard, about how the truck winged the tail end of a car coming through the intersection on New Gower Street; and that if it had been just a second slower it would have been hit broadsides on the driver's side, and God knows what would have happened to the four people inside. But Billy was already in full flight with his story, and I knew there was no stopping him until he was done. I mean, this was his big thing. There was nothing he did better.

He told me he had the truck stopped at the top of Springdale pointing down, but on level ground, and he put her in neutral. He said he had been down there a couple of nights before to size it all up, and to time the traffic lights on New Gower. He said he needed to figure out exactly when to send the truck down Springdale so that it would be passing through the intersection and crossing New Gower when the Springdale light was red! I mean, *fuck!* He was trying to make sure the truck hit something! And when he figured the time was just right, he threw the cement block on the gas pedal, and slapped her in drive as he was jumping out.

“Fuck, Jay!” he said, pissed off and delighted all at once. “I almost wiped out that fuckin’ car completely! I was only off by about half a second. Goddammit!” I took a step back, amazed by his callousness. Then, suddenly, he looked like someone who had decided to make the best of it and said: “Well, at least I obliterated that crappy little Crown cabstand after it went through the intersection— she almost made it all the way to Water Street!”

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. It was like he was only talking about a dinkie we were playing with, and the lives of the people in that car didn't matter to him at all! It sounded more like he was sorry he hadn't killed any of them!

Well...I did my best to appear as if I was as entertained by his story as I usually was, but it wasn't easy; and judging by the look on his face I don't think I succeeded. We had never had a serious difference of opinion

before, so this was unfamiliar territory for us, and I wasn't going to challenge him on it. You don't want to get on Billy Boland's bad side, let me tell ya!

But this was far too serious to let slide... I mean, I had to say something, right? So, I braced myself for his reaction, and just when he turned away from me, I asked him if he cared at all about the people in the car. Well, the dead, vacant look in his eyes when he turned around, and the coarse chuckle he let out when he turned away again without saying a word, was...I mean, fuck! It gave me a chill like nothing ever had before, and I think my heart may have missed a beat. And it was more than the way he looked and his evil laugh. It made me look back and review the years we spent together, seeing him and all the things he did in a whole new light. Now I could see what I had missed before – my best and only friend is not just a particularly odd fella; he had evolved into a bloody sociopath, for God sakes!

Oh, yeah. It was like hitting a brick wall. After six or seven years of being so tight with Billy, suddenly it felt like I needed to protect people from him somehow. It also brought me face to face with the differences between Billy and me, and just how great those differences were. It was clear that it would only be a matter of time before something terrible happened and innocent people got injured or killed. I didn't know it would only be a few days later.

Okay, so then Billy called me Saturday afternoon. But he didn't –

Oh!... Hang on...Jason here...yes, one moment, please.

I'm sorry, man, but I really have to take this. Okay? I'll just be a few minutes...

~*~*~

Okay. I apologize... Now, where was I? Oh, yes...

Billy called on Saturday afternoon, and he didn't sound the same at all. I started thinking he was probably pissed about my questioning what he did downtown the last time we talked. But after we chatted for a while,

I began to feel that it must be something else. He didn't sound distracted or anything. Just the opposite. In fact, I had never heard him sound so focused. He was all business, you know; and after I hung up, it struck me that there wasn't a trace of humour in him the whole time we talked. He wasn't a joke teller or a punster or anything like that, but he was typically good for a couple of snide comments or a bit of wry sarcasm about something or other whenever we conversed. There was nothing of the kind in that call.

We talked about a couple of things; you know, safe topics. After our last conversation, I think we were just being careful with each other. But before he ended it, he told me he was calling to tell me that he would be busy all day and night on Sunday, and he would call me sometime later on Monday. In other words, he didn't want me to bother him for the rest of the weekend.

Right away I knew there was something worrisome on the go that I didn't know about. There was definitely something amiss, but there was no way to know what, and he didn't sound like he was in the mood for any more of my questions. We just weren't the same with each other; like we had crossed a line of some kind and couldn't go back. There was something wrong, and whatever it was, he didn't want to tell me anything about it until Monday. There was nothing I could do.

So, after a strangely tense weekend, Monday morning I was listening to the news during breakfast, waiting for Billy to call, when a story came on about an early morning explosion and fire on Bond Street, just before sunrise. Without waiting to hear the rest of the report, I dropped my fork, ran outside and up around the corner. Sure enough, it was Billy's parents' place! The house and the one attached were both destroyed, now just one smoking pile of black rubble. As I'm sure you can imagine, I was gobsmacked.

There was a small neighbourhood crowd milling about, all sighs and speculations, gawking and pointing; and I spotted one of the guys from my school in among them. It was Grant Lawlor, the boy who pushed me down the embankment that fateful day. I had never said anything to him or anybody in school about it; never blamed him in any way. Even so, whenever he saw me, he would look down and away from me with guilt. But not this time. An explosion and a fire in our neighbourhood

trumped all that, and it was Billy Boland's house, after all. Grant ran up to me the moment he recognized I was there, eager to tell me what he knew, details that were probably in the rest of the news story I didn't wait to hear.

Apparently, a big explosion went off somewhere inside the house just after four-thirty in the morning, and during the ensuing fire at least four smaller blasts went off, one at a time, each one in a different part of the house. This made it impossible for the firefighters to get near the property right away, not knowing when and if another one would go off while they were battling it. All they could do was keep the fire from jumping to any of the nearby houses. The periodic explosions accelerated the process and both homes burned to the ground in no time.

Grant said he heard that they didn't know yet who might have been home at the time, but it was reasonable to assume everybody in both houses were home asleep that early on a Monday morning. If so, that would be Billy, his parents, and the two female boarders – Korean students attending Memorial; and the elderly couple who lived in the other house. It was so utterly destroyed that, for the life of me, I couldn't see how they would ever be able to recover any of the bodies from what was left.

By the end of the day Monday, the investigative authorities had reached their preliminary conclusions. They determined that, tragically, the elderly couple were indeed home and asleep in bed at the time. They perished, of course; and they were only able to recover a few charred parts of their corpses. They also learned that Billy's parents and the students were at home and in bed as well, and all four had lost their lives, either from the initial explosion or the fire. Due to their proximity to the explosions and the intensity of the fire, they found only traces of their bodies. However, they couldn't yet be sure if Billy had been home at the time or not. Given the multiple explosions and their distribution throughout the house, they were certain there was foul play involved.

Well, all they had to do was ask me! Without knowing anything the investigators had found out, I could have told them that Billy wasn't home when it happened, and that he was responsible – most definitely. Everything that happened on the scene pointed straight to him, even before you know what I know. But I know it was him. I don't know what

he used to make the bombs, but those explosions were set and timed to go off just the way they did. It was all clearly designed to do the maximum damage as fast as possible, leaving nothing to recover. It complicated things for the firefighters, and it gave him the time he needed to get far away before anybody would think to even look for him. Billy Boland was far from perfect, but it was already beginning to look like he may have pulled off the perfect crime.

I can't help feeling a bit guilty myself, you know, about the role I played in it all, even if it was only tangential. But I've been thinking about it over the couple of days since, and I can't think of one thing I could have said to Billy or anyone else that could have prevented or minimized it. All I can do now is try to help in any way I can. That's why I called you, told you who I was, and set up this interview. And I'm going down to the cop shop later today to offer my services. I have some news for them...

Anyway, that was early Monday morning. Now it's Thursday and there's a province-wide warrant out for the capture and arrest of Billy Boland for arson and six homicides. As you know, he's still at large. And you know what? They'd better make that warrant national or international in scope, though I doubt it would make any difference now. They don't have one sweet clue where he is or where to look for him, and they're not going to find him either.

How do I know? Well, you'll be surprised and happy to know you're getting an even deeper scoop of this story than you or I thought. That call I took earlier? It was from Billy himself!... Oh yeah! How juicy is that!... No shit. He was calling from a payphone somewhere in the States. I didn't ask where because he wouldn't tell me anyway. And even if I gave the cops my cell today to work on, by the time they figure out where that payphone is, he'd be long gone.

He didn't say what his ultimate destination was, and he may not even know yet himself. But if I know Billy Boland, he'll be going through the States and even farther south. But nobody knows for sure, and that's just how he designed it. He was just calling to gloat and say goodbye....

Yes, I know, it's crazy!... Yeah... Well, he had to tell me all about his final caper, or it just wouldn't be the same, right? As always, it isn't finished for him until he does that, so he simply had to call me.

Oh, and one other thing. Get this! He says a Quinlan Brothers eighteen-wheeler, hauling a load of frozen crabmeat to the eastern seaboard from Newfoundland, was reported missing yesterday along with the driver. It was last seen crossing the New Brunswick border heading into Maine. Billy said he paid the guy handsomely – half up front, half on arrival – to pick him up after midnight Sunday night on his way out of town, then let him pass the whole trip to Massachusetts hidden in the sleeper until they got inside the States...

Oh, no!... It gets better!... Or I guess I should say worse...

Okay...That truck driver didn't get the money, and he never made it out of Maine. Billy...*Damn!* He told me they will eventually find the truck and driver at the bottom of a small ravine this side of Portland. He had a used car he bought online, ready for pick up in Portland, so he said he was all set after that. He didn't say what he was going to do from there, but I think it's safe to assume he has it all worked out.

I don't think he knows I'm going to tell the cops everything, or spill my guts to a reporter, and at this point he probably doesn't much care. But I think he was short on details after Portland just to be on the safe side. Then he wished me well and hung up. He won't be back this way again, man...

I'll never forget him. Don't see how I ever could... But right now, I could really use a drink! Join me for one to wrap it up before you go?... Good... There's a pub just around the corner on George Street, and they never ask me for an ID... This way.

Anyway, man. I'll bet dollars to donuts that you won't be forgetting Mr. Billy Boland anytime soon either... No, I didn't think so.

* * *

Jeff R. Kelland