

Backward, Edward, Forward

by Nick Cody

A character should have a name, but this one does not yet. He is moving fast, feet pounding a descent down the stairs and echoing his loud, panicked heart. When we catch up to him outside he is on the verge of tears. There, in fact, crying. He holds a note in his right hand, sullyng it with sweat. From this position, we can't read it, and besides he won't sit still. He is thinking, 'Bus or run?', and decides to run. It's two miles to his office. One wonders if he sees the cars, meaning the individual automobiles, or has his state of mind reduced the scene to one, blurry, collective hum of traffic? He almost certainly doesn't see the boy ahead, standing on the street corner at the convenience store, sandwiched between his mom and the Popsicle freezer. The mom is not attractive. I mean, not attractive in his eyes. But the boy definitely notices him. Between the hoot of an accelerating motorbike hauling pizza and the blare of a bus's horn, we hear the boy saying, "Mom, I want some ice..." and freezing when he catches sight of the racing, anguished man in tears.

The note. It is yellow, the size of an index card, and was posted on the side of his personal computer until about eight minutes ago. It was peeled off, read, reread, crumpled and then unfolded. After that, the creases were fingered again and again to no avail. It would never be smooth again.

He goes another block, a block and a half, and then backpedals looking for a bus. He won't take a taxi. It's only about 18 more blocks to the Writer's Center, virtually in a straight line, and he has always felt embarrassed asking cabs for short rides. Coincidentally, just a few moments later, bus 36 converges at the Dutch Avenue bus stop with the man holding a yellow note. He is also wearing a suit. Kind of a fancy blue one. The note has been in and out of his jacket's side pocket several times already. He has stopped crying and boarded the bus. When he takes his seat and retrieves the pocketed yellow note once more, we finally discover his name.

Plenty of sunlight through the bus window, and stillness at the red light, so the writing is easily visible. It reads, "Ed, fixed your PC, managed to save some files but most of the HD had to be wiped. Let's meet soon to discuss bones in the boudoir. (Signed) Bill."

His first three reactions upon reading it in his apartment about a quarter of an hour ago involved the following, in this order: a frowning disappointment (irreparable loss of files, loss of writing, loss of music, movies, stuff), and then a grin and chuckle over goofy old Bill's silly phrase, and finally, nausea when he thought more deeply about the possible implications of it all. At that very moment, when he stood brooding over the meaning of "bones in the boudoir", his thumb had moved and revealed a crude drawing in the lower-right corner of the note, a minimalist cock-and-balls, a sketch that no doubt related to the cryptic phrase. Then the nausea swirled in his guts the way a sink full of vomit churns when the drain is unclogged.

Ed thinks, 'Bill was always saying stupid things. He was a good guy, just goofy. (By "good", he means harmless.) Was this simply one more of his failed attempts at wit? If so, why suggest a meeting?' No, Ed knew, or thought he knew, exactly what Bill had referred to in the note. Boudoir! It doesn't even match its most likely referent: skeletons in the closet. Typical of

Bill. Bill, Bill, suspenders, beer gut, glasses, pockmarked face and a goofy disposition. Did he say he had grandchildren or was it that he was old enough to be a grandpa? The truth is, Ed didn't really know him. But by repeating his name, his actions, his appearance, Ed hoped as one condemned that his insight could provide some transparency, some humanity to the hooded executioner.

Being certain about WHAT Bill wanted to discuss, the next question became WHY? Blackmail? Extortion? Dear god, Ed thinks, I hope he isn't looking for some kind of pervy camaraderie. What else then, Bible banging? Wait a second, wasn't Bill a Christian? I think so! Oh no, what if he suggests with a wink and a nod that a poor sinner like me would be welcome among the congregation EVERY Sunday? What if he wants me to join a READING GROUP with the first text being *Mere Christianity*? What if I ride the elevator past the 3rd Floor, up to the top and fling myself from the roof? What if seven storeys weren't enough? This hypothetical, hysterical line of thought did not cease until the bus stopped at the corner of Dutch and Hedone Street, the very location of the Writer's Center where Bill and Ed share an office.

In the building's glass front he catches sight of himself (more precisely, of his reflection) and blanches. His self-loathing is double: he somehow sees more than just the details of his appearance, like the slight sag of jowls, expanded waistline, monkish alopecia), but also into the shriveled state of his soul. His word, not mine. And if he wasn't in such a hurry here, I have no doubt that he would agree: it's a word that requires some editing. "Being" is a better fit; so too is "self".

Where is he now? This place is so noisy. I thought writers liked peace and quiet. Well, it's anything but meditative. Raucous more like it! Did you hear that? Techno beats from a headset, oh please. There he is, waiting at the elevators. A calmness has stilled him. His head is full of bravado and cliché. He thinks, 'I'm bringing a knife to a gunfight. So be it. Bring it on, Bill.'

Once in the elevator, in an effort to preserve his sangfroid, he closes his eyes and keeps them shut. It is relevant here to mention that he's not bad looking when he sleeps. Head profiled on the navy blue pillow, brow light and without creases. He usually sleeps well. Perhaps it's due to the fact that his nightmares are mostly mild, negotiable. Zombie chases, useless jelly legs, the occasional shark attack, all remnants of childhood nights watching *Jaws*, *Halloween*, and other titles that frequently elude his efforts to recall them. Most of us would agree that any adult who points to *Alien* and *The Exorcist* when citing the most horrific moments of his childhood should be considered to have had a relatively happy and fortunate one.

It's true: he HAS talked ad nauseam to friends and even mere acquaintances about the trials of unrequited love. But who hasn't felt those pangs! He's talked and talked and talked, filling each friend or listener up to their maximum capacity, right up to the brim, before moving on to the next receiver. He is forty-five and has never been in love. What is love? On this topic, he employs a dichotomy, "longing and reciprocity", which while stilted, is more or less an accurate distinction between desire and mutual care. He says about his single life: "I'm not exactly fucked, but I'm BECOMING fucked, and I'm not getting any younger." Suddenly, in his late thirties, he stopped talking about it. He had developed a secret taste, or I could say a taste for a secret thing, and the intensity of the satisfaction it provided him only mirrored his ever-increasing hopelessness.

Now he is outside his office. Fingering his keys, head bowed, he feels that when he opens the door, a vortex will draw him down to the nadir. But Bill isn't in. He has left a note on Ed's sparse and computer-free desk, another yellow note, and this one reads: "Stepped out for a samich, should be back by 1. (Signed) Mr. Mustard."

Typical of Bill. No drawing this time. There usually is. Behold, here comes a memory, from wherever memories come from, sparked by the signature. It involves a server, his favorite bar, and the music usually played there, music which never varied from its either/or: Bob Dylan or jazz. The bartender was an old pro, a gruff son of a bitch who merely grinned when someone requested a song to be played. The CD-changer was his domain and while passersby were free to admire the airs, there was strictly no trespassing. Except that time, that one time, when the new waitress—a boisterous blonde who smoked rolled cigarettes and wore her hair in a bob—cajoled bartender Tim on a slow night, "I'd do ANYTHING to hear some different music." He put in the White Album. To the regulars there, the quid pro quo was splattered all over the wall.

To a sex addict, her figure was pure cocaine. And then there was the habit she had, whenever lost in thought, which brought her tongue gliding along her upper lip. When Ed asked others about her, others who may have been "in the know", word had it that she was not only sexually liberated but also quite adventurous. Of course she knew he wanted her, who didn't? But one late afternoon, during a dead time and maybe she was slightly hungover as well, she revealed with candor that though she was rejecting him, she was helplessly willing to sleep with almost anyone else. Ed said, "Ouch."

She paused and looked at him, really LOOKED at him. Then, after driving the nose of her lit cigarette into the ashtray, she said, "You're a good-looking guy. I know tons of girls who would fall for you. Find a good girl. I'm going through a bad girl phase now. If I'm not careful, I could become a slut."

He said, "But if you become a slut, in the future I will get to brag about never having slept with you." The force of his logic brought her hand slapping across his face. Was that six years ago?

There is a click from the door. Enter entropy. Bill lopes in with a white sandwich bag, wearing a sheepish grin and his obligatory suspenders. Denim ones today. He talks while walking past Ed to his desk, "Give me a minute to eat, will you? I'm ravished."

Ed wonders: what's it going to be? He can't size up the situation. An inquisition or a chummy conversation about sports and pornography? He still doesn't have a strategy. Wait for Bill to speak first then parry? Nod and listen, size up the offense, and then counterthrust ad hoc? Bill looks at him with a mouthful of food and non-accusatory eyes. As much from the quality of Bill's glance as from the need to unburden himself, Ed feels compelled to drop all defenses and offer up a genuine, soul-searing mea culpa. He is sick of his life, sick of his addiction, sick of the manacles he has forged for himself. He sees Bill snowball the white bag and wrapper and then toss it ten feet into the small office garbage can. Score! Arms raised in triumph are brought to rest on his office chair. Thumbs snapping his suspenders.

Bill speaks first. "Sorry about your hard drive. I tried to salvage what I could..." His voice trails off and he looks away. It's hard to read his face. Ed sits opposite him, facing him but unable to really face him, looking down at his hands and still trying to smooth the crinkles from the yellow note. It's his turn to speak, "Bill, I really appreciate you helping me out and dropping it off at my place. You should know, I'm fairly positive there was nothing illegal..."

Bill interrupts, "Oh, I know that, Ed. You don't have to... I could tell from the websites, the browsing history and the files. It's normal stuff." A slight pause and strain afflicted his last sentence.

They talk about the sheer volume of it all: the smut that was on his PC, the billion images on the internet, the vids, the vast jungle empire uploaded and downloaded every day. It's mostly Ed talking and Bill nodding. He knows now why Ed refused to install a PC at his desk here, the hours he'd have spent indulging bad habits and avoiding work.

"One could spend a lifetime, Ed."

"I know, I know. I'm a world-class wanker. It shows in my prose. That's what the Brits call it, right? Wanking?" Bill mumbles, "And tossing off." But he is still hard to read. Ed sighs, "God, the wasted hours."

They make eye contact. He says to Ed, "Don't look backward, look Edward. Think about the women. I don't mean as a moralist, I mean as a realist, as a writer. Think about the women and the camera; the lens, the cameraman, the location, dramatis personae. Think about the women 10 minutes before the shooting and 10 minutes after."

They hold eye contact.

"Ed, I also know that you used my PC, and if anyone found that stuff..."

A jolt springs Ed to his feet. He is pacing and apologizing. He is saying it was just a few times, a few minutes online each time. He will pay for any damages to the software, hardware, everything. He continues to pace, repeats himself as he repeats his steps, from the door to Bill's desk and back again. Bill looks away, focuses on the desktop of his PC and randomly clicks through files.

"It's not that Ed. It's just that it's not *my* PC, it's the Center's. If you were looking at stuff and throwing it in the Trash bin, it could still be found. The PC is registered to me."

"Bill, I swear to you there were no illegal pics or vids or anything. Not on your computer, and not on mine. I may be a pervert, but I'm no pedophile!"

Bill shooshes him and motions with both hands palm down for him to be quiet. A quieter Ed continued, restating his guilt and expressing a desire to make amends, to change. He was doing his best to explain where he was in life. In a word, he was stuck. He lacked the magic of transformation. He felt he couldn't bear to remain who he was but didn't know then how to become a new man.

Then he got an idea. "I'll write a resignation letter to the office, telling Ms. Pickles that I used your PC to view pornographic material against Center policy. That will clear you. Then I will move out of my apartment and check into some kind of sex addiction clinic. Do they have those? Anyway, it'll completely fuck up my life, but maybe that's exactly what I NEED!"

"Ed, I've got to tell you something. It's difficult for me bringing up this next part. Believe me, this is as difficult for me as it is for you. A few days ago, when I did a diagnostics on your PC and found all that stuff, I worried a bit about what you might have done on my PC, so I checked it out. Whether you were careless or just ignorant, I guess you probably didn't know, eh? But the files and programs and things (pointing at the Trash icon on his desktop), they stay there until you click 'Empty Trash'. Actually, that sounds like an excellent title to a story of some sort. Believe me, I'm not trying to air your dirty laundry here, but this is your screen name,

right? BownArrow17. You must have clicked on the save password option, ditto with save conversation history. A few brief conversations, time stamped. I noticed the others first on your PC and then checked here. I guess you were feeling pretty desperate if you needed to use my office PC.”

Secret revealed. Paradise lost, then regained, and now utterly annihilated. It was for the best. He'd never had the courage before to give it up, but now he was all stripped down, naked before Bill. Avoiding the raunchy details, he confessed about the online chats with teenage girls. The one in Illinois with the webcam and nose-y little brother. That lasted about six months. And then there was lilkate15 in a small town outside of Austin, gorgeous in her gymnastics leotard. And so on. He'd employed fake photos of some decent-looking boy, aged 17, and started most of his conversations with them, after niceties, with a line like, “Would you think it's hot if...” And that could go on several nights a week for an hour or more. He'd never met any of them, never proposed a meeting, and fled into obscurity when they asked to see more photos of him. Photos with “friends and stuff.” Starting the whole process over again, he'd alter his screen name, descend as if from the clouds into another chat room, and look for some girl who would buy into his disguise. His latest manifestation was one that Bill referred to. Some new girl with a forgettable name was his online concubine.

“Yeah, BownArrow17. Think I've been using it for a year, a bit less. I'm deleting it today. I only used your PC a few times. Some girl, don't even know her name. I feel so empty.”

Bill asks, “Do you think you can write a wrong?” He makes a gesture for scribbling with his right hand and smiles. It's then that Ed sees something in Bill's face. Cracks are forming, like his whole visage was about to fold and cave in. Water seeps in and pools his eyes. Bill what is happening?

Ed stammers, “What is this, Bill? What is going on?” To his utter amazement, Bill stands wracked with convulsions, a shambling, shivering mass, arms stretched wide and beckoning for a hug. He puts both hands on Ed's shoulders and with an agony that transforms his voice into some other man's, some wretched creature's, he says to Ed, “I need help too. It was me the other night. I'm her, Psyche95!” And he completely abandons himself to the spasms and the shame and bear hugs a wide-eyed Ed.

All Ed can say are variants of Jesus and holy shit and no way, with a “fucking” thrown in to modify the exclamations.

“Jesus Christ, Bill. You goofy bastard.” They stay embraced for some time and as we leave them to it, whatever “it” is, Ed has the final word, punctuated with pats on big Bill's back. “We'll be ok, Bill. We'll be ok.”

O.K. class. Don't disappear yet. Tomorrow, we will be introduced to an eighty-year-old writer, not exactly Ed but someone new, an old codger in search of a story. He is more-or-less happy, more-or-less healthy. He will be rummaging through a notebook, flipping through the thing in search of material, some spur to set his hobbyhorse in motion. A faded note will fall from its resting place between the pages. He will get the idea to write the epilogue and then compose the story backward.