

Squirrel Stew and Bach

A twenty-two year old scruffily bearded recent college graduate, wearing a ragged Butler University T shirt, frayed khaki shorts and scuffed running shoes, I opened the door of my new salmon colored (my girlfriend said it was pink), red leather upholstered, 1961 MGA 1600, spoke-wheeled sports car (down payment made and thirty-six monthly payments to go) and shoved in my suit case loaded with a summer navy blue suit, white button-downed collared shirt, blue tie, and cordovan loafers.

I was headed on my life's journey, first a two-week hiatus between dependence on parents and independence as a high school teacher, then Bill's fishing camp, followed by a piano recital at Indiana University. Two paths were diverging in the psychic thicket of my mind, one a shared enjoyment of my father's penchant for primitive living and the other a scouting through the musical thickets of western culture. First, squirrel stew (a squirrel, fried, sliced, diced and dumped into a pan of Dinty Moore Beef Stew) then Bach's Goldberg Variation and Beethoven's Diabelli Variations, and then... who knew.

My father was born in 1910 and spent his first decade in a clapboard-sided log cabin near Burr Oak, a White River bottom community a few miles north of Otwell, Indiana. He remembered his grandparents' hard scrabble corn farm, the woods near the river, mules eating ears of field corn rattling around in an oak feedbox, wild climbing roses, morning glories, freshly picked blackberries in a cobbler warm from the oven, the Rockingham bowl with drippings of bacon grease for seasoning nearly everything, corn bread, "rosineers" (translation: roasting ears of corn), grits, hominy, sorghum, his saintly grandmother, an herbalist, who picked plants from the woods and concocted homemade remedies for the family and neighbors.

And Bill, a neighbor in the country, later a mentor in town where Bill had worked for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad until he retired and left civilization for the woods. Bill was a "road's scholar." He had ridden the rails before he worked for the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad, learning enough about the lean life of a hobo and the drudgery of framing wooden box cars so that he never wanting to revisit either of these life's chapters.

Bill was a six-foot four-inch, ham-handed, strong chinned man always in OSHKOSH B'GOSH bib overalls (pronounced "overhauls" in Hoosier dialect), a man who left his wife in town for the better part of nine months a year, then lived on the south bank of the "big" White, west of the confluence of the east and west forks, just beyond Seven Mile's Bend. We called it Bill's fishing camp, though properly it was not his camp, but the end of a someone else's corn field a few yards from the river. Apparently no one ever complained about the loss of six rows of corn for Bill's road because at the end of the ruts and mud holes was a steady supply of beer and whiskey, all frowned upon by the farmers' wives, though they were cooks who liked Bill's fresh fish, which they swapped for jams, jellies, pie, cakes, and the left-overs of the evening's supper delight.

Bill's camp had some of the amenities of a Fifth Avenue apartment. It had doormen, two "blue tick" coon hounds, friendly enough if they knew one's scent, but challenging enough to persuade a stranger to stay in his car until offered a proper welcome. Under the canopy of riparian sycamores, cottonwoods, poplars, hickories, and walnuts stood Bill's "castle," a shack which a realtor would have called "charming" or "darling," complete with a bedroom, a parlor, a kitchen, and a toilet.

The "castle" itself was an architect's dream. Frank Lloyd Wright would have loved its organic structure. Early on Bill had discovered three trees which formed a ninety-degree angle. By adding a vertical 6" x 6" post footed in concrete along the hypotenuse, Bill had a whopper-jawed rectangle

and four corners of a building, no footings required. Bill walled his castle with discarded oxblood red B&O box car siding, wrapped it with tar paper, roofed it with corrugated sheet metal, insulated it with card board boxes, and hung a screen door even low IQ mosquitoes could penetrate. Inside the cozy hut Bill had a 10' x 10' sleeping quarters with iron beds, springs, old mattresses, pillows, and a spray can of DDT for killing bugs and deodorizing the ancient mattress ticking.

The kitchen had a great view. It was outside. For cooking, a giant black coal-fired stove sat under the trees. For cooling there was both a "frigerator" and a refrigerator, the former a faded red and white COCA-COLA store cooler, always in need of blocks of ice to chill a case or two of Sterling beer, and the latter a Serval Gas refrigerator sitting atop a four-sided pyramid of concrete blocks. Bill had to climb up a few concrete block steps to open the Serval door, especially the freezer compartment. The Serval was elevated to prevent unexpected visits from the White when it occasionally raged out of its banks. The contents? Mostly meat. Bill attended Friday night shotgun "shoots" in Jasper. The shooter paid a fee to participate and was provided a paper plate and a pencil to mark an "X". Whoever got a buckshot closest to the "X" won the meat, perhaps a ham, a side of bacon, pork chops, or beef steaks.

Bill always kept a fifth or two of J.W. Dant bourbon in the refrigerator. In the morning, first thing out of bed, Bill would climb the concrete block steps, grab a bottle of Dant, clutch it in his right hand, press it to his lips while grabbing his right wrist with his left hand because if he didn't, his right hand would shake so much that he couldn't keep the lip of the bottle tight against his two lips. No, it wasn't Parkinson's. The shaking was caused by a war injury...rather a bar injury suffered when he fell off a tavern stool with a glass in his hand, shattering the glass and severing blood vessels and a nerve. The Dant, I guess, was medicinal.

The kitchen was also outfitted with livestock, chickens and squirrels. The local hatchery provided the chicks, not your normal everyday clucks, but deformed ones which couldn't be sold. There might have been some with a bad leg, crossed beaks or a missing wing. And they all had to fight for the cracked corn Bill scattered on the ground. The chickens were welcome to the night crawlers and insects they found on the ground, but only the meanest got its fill of cracked corn.

Fox squirrels came with the place, gratis. They played in the tree tops all day, sometime cavorting on the ground. Bill liked them. They were his constant day time companions. He was a good housekeeper, had a leaf rake and a broom, and would sweep the camp floor of leaves a few times a day, then sit in an old green wooden porch chair, smoke a cigar, and admire his work. But when he noticed squirrels in the tree tops, cutting nuts and dropping their hulls on his dirt floor or scolding and barking too loud, Bill would caution them to stop. He might warn them two or three times before he got his .22 caliber rifle, took aim, and replenished his meat supply. There were eighty-five squirrel tails hanging on a clothes line strung between trees. Apparently an agent of some company occasionally would stop by and buy them for boys to dangle from the ends of their bicycle handlebars

Fish of all sorts, catfish, perch, carp were kept in three live boxes at the river's edge. Bill fished every day, not sissy fishing with rod and reel, but with three trot lines, a net, and an illegal wire trap, which the local game warden had to know was there but ignored. The trot lines were run every morning before breakfast, once in the afternoon, and finally after dark. Baits were minnows captured in glass traps or small fish snagged on the hooked trot lines. Occasionally a bait fish was one which a larger fish had tried to swallow but couldn't get down his gullet.

Bill had competition as a predator. There were gars, big gars, and they liked to dine on what Bill liked to dine, other bottom feeders. And when one of these beaky monsters got its lip hooked on the bait of one of Bills stringers, Bill, like a dentist with forceps preparing to extract a tooth,

pulled a pair of pliers out of his rear pocket, ripped the beak from the gar, and tossed the toothless bait-thief back into the water where a cousin gar probably ate it.

And the bathroom. Expansive. As big as all outdoors. Well, it was outdoors, every tree a potential urinal. And the “commodes” (I think the word means “with style”) were plentiful. Draw a circle whose radius was at least a hundred feet from the center of camp, trod carefully across the foliate flooring, take the Kohler, American Standard, or U.S. Army entrenching tool with you, and, well to be delicate, do your business. An alternative was to find a low hanging tree branch extending from the river bank out over the stream. And it was “de rigueur” to take some bum wad with you.

Bathing? Both branches of the White coursed the entire length of the state, confluencing into the Big White, formed by the Creator for the singular purpose of transporting the run-off of agricultural fertilizers, the unused entrails of animals from the packing companies, broth from the chemical and industrial wastes, whatever the upstream cities’ sewage utilities could not or would not process, and one’s own bar of soap. Strip off, wade out, scrub down. The fish didn’t seem to mind. After all, they wore no clothing themselves, performed their bodily functions, and fed in the same water.

All good things, well bad things too, have to come to an end. At last my two-week avoidance of adult reality was over. My life as a wild man had come to an end, and Bill prepared a going-away feast. The cook stove was fired up, the cast iron skillet was out, a pot was ready for mixing and combining ingredients, and the tea kettle was aboil. Fresh corn on the cob, sliced tomatoes from a farmer’s wife, green onions for garnish, and the aforementioned fried, diced, and sliced squirrel (Bill probably knew his name) stirred into a tin of Denty Moore Beef Stew. And to quaff down this sumptuous repast was what Bill called a Tom and Jerry. To wit, a tea bag in a coffee mug, boiling water, a slug of J.W. Dant, a fresh egg, a dash of Carnation Evaporated Milk, well stirred, and topped with a generous shake of nutmeg. Omar said it best, “A jug of wine, a loaf of bread....O wilderness were paradise e’now,” or Bill’s Hoosier words to that effect.

Then parting. I didn’t know it, but this was the last time I would see Bill and his camp, though his memory lingers through my years. We shook hands, gave a hug, and I slid into my MGA and headed for civilization. I stopped at my aunt’s house in Petersburg, where I took a baptismal bath, shaved a month of fuzz from my face, slicked my hair down with my uncle’s Wild Rose Hair Tonic, put on my suit, and headed for Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana to attend a piano recital by Bela Nagy a faculty pianist. I have no memory about how I knew about the concert, but Bloomington was geographically midway between Bill’s camp and the small country town where I would begin my public school teaching. And metaphorically this stop was halfway between pleasures of childhood and pleasures of the rest of my life.

The approach to Bloomington, home of Indiana University, was a museum of prehistory and contemporary history, the highway carved from diluvian limestone, now decorated by modern billboards, one advertising “Bed Bug Killer” and another for PLUTO WATER, a laxative (When Nature Won’t, Pluto Will!). There were geometrically laid out streets, street signs, sidewalks, pruned trees, neatly trimmed lawns, turn of the century houses with gingerbread trims, vertical gray limestone buildings, two one-way streets, two stoplights. I knew I wasn’t in Kansas with Dorothy and Aunty Em anymore or with Bill and the long-tailed rodents, but at the front door of high Western culture, a concert hall.

Here was order. Classical music lovers dressed in conservative suits and dresses in an orderly ticket queue. What I guessed was the proverbial professor of something, chubby, vested, bushy bearded, beret, smoking his pipe. Printed tickets. Aisles. Carpet. The Steinway grand. Bela Nagy

in tuxedo. Applause. Silence. And then the Goldberg Variations (Aria-Aria de Capo) performed from memory, but memorized from printed texts containing exact musical notations. There was very little freedom for the performer, but it was that tiny bit of freedom, that opportunity to be a bit wild, that distinguished a great performer from a mundane one. At intermission I overheard one patron say to another, "I've never heard the 'Variations' played that way before." I had to agree, having never heard the "Variations" at all. Then the Diabelli (Vivace-Menuetto Moderato). Then applause breaking the reverent stillness. People standing, a few shouting "Bravo! Bravo!" Their enthusiasm contagious, I clapped and clapped and wanted to yell "Bravo! Bravo!" with them but felt eminently unqualified to do so. Then the filing out, the whispered critiques, goodbyes, and I was alone.

The vacation was over. Time to get on with life. I slid into my car, looked to the south, thought of Bill sitting in his porch chair, serenaded by his squirrels barking and chickens clucking, then headed north on the highway entrance to the rest of my life. No more squirrel stew to eat, hoot owls in the night, blue jays squabbling, mosquitoes humming, frogs croaking, crickets chirping. but lots of Bach, Beethoven, Berlioz, Bartok, Bizet, Bellini, and a bevy of their brethren, violins shimmering, cellos moaning, trumpets alarming, tympani thundering, and oboes (well, there is no word for it...perhaps plaintive kazooing?), more than an even swap.