

Between Us. “That guy in the mask thinks I was conspiring to infect him”

"He was sick of people, especially those he saw in masks because of their obsessive fear of death"

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Theme: [History](#)

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The road led up the hill between houses until it came to the lake where it ran between the lake and the woods and the thought of people disappeared if he was lucky. He was sick of people, especially those he saw in masks because of their obsessive fear of death. They ran in packs. They seemed insane to him, as if germs might fly through the country air and infect them with a virus in a reversal of the way the insects were starting to fly low over the water and the fish would jump to devour them. He preferred the fish and the bugs and was glad no masked bandits were on the road to rob him of the morning's beauty.

There was a young boy fishing, casting and reeling back in a rhythmic way. The boy yelled out as he reeled in his first catch of the season, a glittering rainbow trout that sparkled in the sun.

Once he was twelve years-old and started out very early between the edge of night and the dawn of day. Alone, beautifully alone, with the dew thick upon the grass and the fog still clinging to the water in the creek. His family was at the farm. He awoke in the dark while his sisters and his mother slept and his father snored loudly. He tiptoed through the cabin and quietly shut the door behind him, almost catching his hair in the flypaper on the way out. He got his fishing gear from the porch. In an old Maxwell House coffee can were the night crawlers and the other worms he had dug the previous evening under the apple tree by the bull's pen.

Now it was April and the ice on the lake was gone and the two geese he had seen last year had returned to their old nest. Last spring he had watched them very closely for more than a month as the goose sat patiently on her eggs and the gander sailed the waters on alert for predators. Some days he would see them swimming together near the nest. This worried him. He wondered if leaving the eggs unprotected for even a short time would give a predator an opening to attack. When the goslings never appeared, he assumed a predator had seized them.

The worms in the can were big and juicy. When he moved the dirt, they gyrated to the surface and tickled his fingers. He felt sorry for them. They seemed so alive and would soon be dead. Maybe he should set them free. The dirt where he dug them behind the old shed

between its back wall and the thick wooden slats of the sad bull's pen was dark and wet and redolent of fallen apples. The huge ring-nosed bull had heard the grating of his spade and had come over to the fence. It was dark there in the enclosed space and he got the chills as the bull snorted at him through the empty spaces. A strange vibration passed between them.

The boy showed him the trout as he unhooked it. He grasped it with two hands and gently bent and released it into the shallow water where it hesitated, as if shocked, and then swam away. The boy turned to the man and they gave each other high fives. Something passed between them. They laughed and the man walked on wondering why people liked to kill and capture free creatures.

He thought: Is it possible not to remember to forget but just to live forward in a forgetfulness that is a constantly emerging present?

The road turned sharply there and a man in a mask approached him. On an impulse, he asked the man why he was wearing a mask when he was outside on a gorgeous morning. The man said, "To protect myself from the virus. Why aren't you wearing one?"

"Because I don't think pigs can fly," he said.

The other man gasped and his eyes flared in fear and he rushed away.

He walked on and saw the gander standing on the beach, looking around like a proud sentry. The goose was on her nest. Maybe, he thought, they, at least, had learned something.

Then it was raining lightly. The only sounds were the birds and the rain and he opened his mouth for the rain and his ears for the birds and his heart for the day. He walked down the gravel path up past the barn to the road and crossed the bridge across the creek to get to the side where the fishing was really good because the river twisted and turned over there to create little peninsulas that protected deep pools where the fish lay in wait. It was also where the Hermit of the Esopus was said to live. His name was Billy Bush and he wondered if he was a fictional character. He had never seen him.

Maybe he was asking the wrong question. He felt in a flash that he knew the answer but couldn't say what the true question was. But it didn't seem to matter now. He felt as he walked ahead he was heading back to find his future in the present.

Back in time and the city, his parents had appeared on a television show called, "Do You Trust Your Wife?" The host of the show was Johnny Carson. This was his first gig before he would become famous as the long-running host of "The Tonight Show" and an iconic figure in TV lore. This is true, but he wasn't sure back then whether the hermit was as real as Carson because he saw Carson and they talked but the hermit seemed like a legendary figure. Carson asked him to stand up in the audience and he asked him if he felt weird being the only boy as the middle child with seven sisters. He said, "No." Carson persisted, "I guess you feel like the baloney between the bread." The boy hated baloney and he was silent. A man held up big cue cards that said applause. Carson looked like a giant cardboard cutout. The audience clapped and the show went on as it always does.

A year later they changed the name of the show to "Who Do You Trust?". Not a bad title for

the first Cold War era, but that guy in the mask probably thinks I was conspiring to infect him, that I was a Russian agent. Maybe pigs do fly now. Everything seems to have changed between people. How can you trust someone whose face you can't see? To face the faces that you faced was once upon a time the way things were. You had a chance to tell if the words that passed between you were true or not, but now the masquerade is complete. Deep darkness has descended. Do we have to wait for death to see face to face?

He passed the goose on her nest near the swampy end of the lake. Although he couldn't see her face clearly, he imagined she looked expectant, feeling urgent for the future. He wondered what it might be for both of them. What was he looking for in the days ahead, what did he desire, where was he going? He thought of the guy in the mask and all the people everywhere enchained by fear. Why was it so hard for them to see that the prison gates were closing around them and the living-dead elites were devouring their futures?

The path down to the river twisted through dense woods. He could tell people had traveled it but not heavily. The sun had risen behind him and the mist on the water had given way to glitter on the fast-running water and the wet rocks throughout it. When he reached the water's edge, he felt relived. Now he could fish but had this strange sensation that he didn't want to, now that he had reached his destination. It's funny how when you think you want something and you are about to get it you have second thoughts. Maybe not thoughts. He sat down on an old log and stared at the water. The sound of the water moving fast over the rocks and the sun hitting the water spray put him into a cataleptic state in which he lost himself. He was jolted by a voice. He jumped. A man with a grayish-white beard and bright blue eyes under a worn fisherman's cap stood to his left.

The man said, "I'm surprised to see you here. No one comes here."

The boy was frightened. He stammered, "Oh, I was about to fish."

"It's a great spot," the man said. "I come here to read and meditate."

An awkward silence came between them. The boy had an impulse to jump up and run. Then the thought: Could this be the Hermit of the Esopus? He's real?

Then: Am I dreaming?

The man said, "My name is William Bush. What's yours?"

Without thinking, the boy also gave his formal name, "Edward Curtin."

"People call me Billy," the man said. "I've heard they even think I'm a hermit and I live in these woods by the river." He laughed.

Past the swamp, the road curved up a steep hill that led to the local college that had previously been a Jesuit seminary. In the woods to his left were the crumbling remains of wooden stations of the cross that the young men once followed. He thought of his father and where he was now. He said, "Good morning, Dad. I miss you." The bond between them had always been powerful and when his father died it became even stronger in a sad way. It was such a beautiful morning that he started to cry. Three deer were grazing in the clearing halfway up the hill. A doe and two fawns. They looked up, then looked down, ignoring him as they resumed eating. His father made the best pancakes. Then there were the father and son Communion Breakfasts with the buns. He was hungry now. There was

no end to it.

"What do people call you?" he asked.

"Eddy," the boy said.

"How do you spell it?"

"E-d-d-y," the boy answered.

Billy Bush chuckled and pointed to a spot in the river where the fast water hit a big rock and turned back to create a whirlpool. "There you are," he said, "that's an eddy. Eddys always run contrary to the main current, so you're in good company." The man laughed, which made the boy laugh. Then the man told him that he was not really a hermit but lived in the old farmhouse up the hill near Brown's sheep farm but that he found it amusing that people created this legend about him and so he played along. He said he had once been a philosophy professor who came from the city to his sister's country house to be alone and think and write while his family stayed in the city. Since he was only here off and on and loved to wander through the woods down along the river people had for some reason come to create a legend about him. "I have found," he said, "that people are so afraid of being alone that they create weird stories like the one about me being the Hermit of the Esopus to scare themselves to death."

He didn't like going onto the college campus because it reminded him of being trapped in school and so at the top of the hill he turned and started down. He remembered when he was a boy how down he would feel when his mother would send him to the front door to greet his father on the threshold when he came home from work to see if his father had stopped for a drink. He hated being put between them. He felt guilty for having done her bidding. The deer were gone and he wondered what they did all day. He wondered what people did all day and why. He wondered how they spent their lives and where they thought they were going in their masks. He wondered what they thought was at the end of the road. He wondered why they drank and why they didn't. He wondered so many things he wondered why he was always wondering them.

The goose was still on her nest. The gander was nowhere in sight. He stopped at the beach that extended out into the lake and took a gander. Nothing. He wondered where he was, what did he do all day except stand watch for death to come flying through the air. The boy who was fishing was gone. Four masked people dressed in black approached him. He said, "Good morning." They looked away in silence as if he didn't exist.

Billy Bush said he had to go. He asked the boy if he liked to read. The boy said, "Yes." He took a book out of his back pocket and handed it to the boy and said, "It's a good one and some of it may be difficult for you now but it will grow on you. I've learned a lot from the author. He once said to wonder is to begin to understand, and that's why I come to the river. It always surprises me. But please do me a favor, don't tell anyone you met me and I told you I wasn't this legendary hermit people want to believe in. They love their illusions. Let's keep it between us. Okay?"

The boy said, "Yes." He took the book. Billy Bush left. The boy sat where he was, looking and listening to the river flow. Sometime later he got up and left without fishing. He told no one about the hermit.

When he arrived home from his walk, the man went to his bookcase and pulled out the old, battered paperback book Billy Bush had given him years ago. He had never read it for some reason. He had never even opened it as if to do so was to spoil his encounter with the hermit. To break the spell. Now seemed like the right time. He opened the book whose title was *What Is Philosophy?* by José Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher. In the front was a signature: William J. Bush, S.J. He flipped through it. It was unmarked except for a few lines near the end. He read them:

The future is always the leader....We live forward into our future, supported by the present, with the past, always faithful, off to the edge, a little sad, a little frail, as the moon, lighting a path through the night, goes with us step by step, shedding its pale friendship on our shoulders....the vast majority of human beings....are preoccupied with becoming unpreoccupied. Under their apparent indifference throbs a secret fear of having to solve for themselves the problems posed by their acts and emotions - a humble desire to be like everybody else, to renounce the responsibility of their own destiny, and dissolve it among the multitude.

He said to Billy Bush, "Thank you, it took me a while, but between us, that sure explains the masked desperadoes running in packs. But I won't tell them, for as you told me long ago, they prefer their illusions."

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