

NIGHT WATCH

or A Handfull of Bird Shit

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Laugh as much as you like. This morning a bird shit on my head. It made a sickening mess. I smell it again whenever I think about it, although I scrubbed until my scalp burned and my arms ached. But that's not the point. The point is it wouldn't have happened if everybody didn't think I'm some kind of half-wit.

It must have happened as I walked from the mill to the cookhouse. Swallows build nests in the mill. It's beautiful and a little weird to watch them flying in and out through the open shutters while the saws and carriages make such a racket that the trimmerman has to use sign language to ask the tallyman, standing four feet away, for the loan of his tobacco. The carriages rumble; the saws scream; but the swallows don't seem to care. They fly back and forth all day long.

At quarter-time, when the mill shuts down fifteen minutes for oiling and greasing, some of the guys make a game of throwing board-ends at the nests. They giggle the way they cornered the mouse in the bunkhouse and danced around seeing which of them would stamp it to death. The nests are high, near the peak of her roof, and none of them has been hit yet. It's a damned shame, Hardscrabble says, their throwing things at the nests. What he actually says is: "The little birds, me boys! The little birds and the all-seeing eye of the great Calithumpian elephant! May he change you mean-arsed bastards into musical raisins!" Or something like that. But what he means is it's a damned shame.

The dead carrier, John the Hog, would have knocked down the nests with a pole of a smelt net if Hardscrabble hadn't bribed him with a pint of Lamb's Navy Rum.

But all that's another story.

This morning a bird shit on my head and I didn't know until all of us, twenty men and boys, sat down to breakfast. I wasn't thinking about much of anything, just comfortably aware of how hungry and tired I was. "Your hair," somebody said. I reached up and ran my hand through it, and my fingers came away all filthy and stinking, and everybody laughed.

The joke was that I hadn't known. John the Hog would have known. Even Hardscrabble would have known. But Kevin O'Brien? He hadn't known, because he was a fool. An idiot. A simpleton. A moron. An imbecile.

What I'm telling you is that when people decide you're a fool, all kinds of foolish things start happening to you.

Six or eight of us are walking through the lumberyard after a rain. All of a sudden, I hear the others laughing. I look around me. Everyone points at my feet. I've been wading in a porridge of red mud and foul green-black sawdust. My sneakers and socks are soaked through, and my feet are cold and slimy. Not one of the others stepped into the mire; they avoided it easily, without even thinking about it, by simply moving a few feet to right or left.

My mind tells my body to laugh or swear, but what comes out of my throat is not laughter or a curse: it's something between a squeal and a bleat. From now until the end of the summer anyone who can imitate that sound will be rewarded every time by gales of laughter.

At this very moment I'm acting like a fool: nobody but a simpleton would make so much fuss about a mud puddle and a handfull of birdshit. By understanding my problems I only add to them.

I'm night watchman at Blanchard's sawmill. The hours are long- from five-thirty in the afternoon until seven the following morning- but there's almost nothing to do between nine o'clock when I usually finish cleaning out the sawdust and five o'clock when I start firing up the boiler. There's time to read and write, or just think.

Summer nights are cool this close to the Atlantic. I've laid a twenty-four-inch-wide plank between two beams over the boiler and about thirty feet above the floor. Like a foot bridge. There's a ladder up the side of the boiler; I climb it and then walk out on a beam to the plank, where I put my jacket under my head and lie down. It's the only warm spot in the mill. I was comfortable enough there even in February and March, although the mill doesn't have any real walls: it's just a sort of big tent-like roof resting on a wooden frame.

I lie there in a cosy little pocket of light from a coal oil lantern and read all sorts of things: Poe. De Maupassant. Lawrence, the Psychology of Sex, The Story of Philosophy. Modern Screen, True Romances, Newsweek, Ellery Queen. Or I listen to the radio, mostly light classical music from WQXR.

At about two o'clock I eat the lunch prepared for me earlier by Morgan, the cook. Strong black tea, biscuits, a wedge of cheddar cheese, thick slices of cold roast beef or a couple of hardboiled eggs. Almost the only advice my father gave me when I left home and went to work was, "Never send anything back to the cookhouse; they'll give you that much less the next day, and chances are you'll be hungrier." So if there's more than I can eat I throw it in the furnace under the boiler.

Morgan is a Communist who predicts he'll live to see Jim Blanchard hang as an enemy of the working class. He wraps my lunch in copies of The Daily Worker, and has lent me pamphlets with titles like The Mistakes of Moses and One Thousand Absurdities in the Bible.

We talk sometimes, Morgan and I, especially on Saturdays when the camp is almost deserted because nearly everybody has gone home, or into Windsor to get drunk. Morgan doesn't think about me at all. I'm just an excuse for him to talk to himself. The men ridicule him behind his back, but are careful what they say to his face, knowing he could put them on a diet of weak tea, stale bread and sour beans.

The four freaks here are Hardscrabble, Morgan, Bible Billy Bond, and me.

About once a week Hardscrabble gets drunk and stays in the mill almost all night.

"My father-in-law was a Free Mason," he'll whisper moistly. "And my youngest son-," here he'll screw shut his eyes and roar, his head vibrating like a child's top when its spring is almost run down, "and my youngest son is no son of mine at all-," again his voice will drop, "but the son of the Black Gilies, that Scotch Jew lawyer who'd skin a louse for its hide and talow, who'd steal the coppers off a dead nigger's eyes."

He slides his hand under the bib of his overalls and into the breast of his underwear. There's a legend about Hardscrabble's underwear. It's said he owns two pairs, and when he changes them simply kicks the pair that he's taken off under his bunk, and leaves them there until he decided to change again. Now his hand comes out holding a bottle of whatever it is he's drinking: rum; whiskey, gin, vodka, hair tonic, shaving lotion or cake flavouring extract. "Are you a Doukhobor?" he asked me one night. "If you was to tell me that you was a Doukhobor I'd have to kill you."

"Look out. If you don't watch yourself you're going to spill that all over yourself and knock the lantern over, besides."

"I killed me a Doukhobor once. Hell, I killed me a hundred of 'em. I was in the war, I was. The old war. The war with the Doukhobors."

"Where was that, Hardscrabble?"

"Don't you know nothin'. Boy? In Africa. In Africa. The Doukhobors, they was out to conquer the world. But we beat 'em, by God we did, and by the Lord whistlin' Billy-be-Jesus if we have to, we'll beat 'em again!"

I wonder if Hardscrabble is like me: caught inside his own skull like a lightning bug in a jam jar. Or maybe the real Hardscrabble and the real Kevin O'Brien are only two inches tall. Maybe what we call our bodies are not our real bodies at all, but robots, and there's a control room inside my head where the little man who is the real me works levers and presses buttons to make me talk and walk. And maybe something's gone wrong with the machinery so that when the real Kevin throws the switch that ought to make the robot say "yes", the mechanical mouth says "yea-huh," instead.

There was no fork beside my plate, only a knife and a soup spoon. I knew I'd make a fool of myself if I asked for one. "Hey, Morg, how about a fork?" I'd say. Or "Morgan, I don't seem to have any fork." Or "It looks as if we're short of forks, Morg." But, of course, I'd mumble it all except the single syllable "fork" which I'd croak or squeak. Or it might even be "ork" or "urk" or even "oink." Yes, it was sure to be "oink." And ever afterwards anyone who wanted a fork would call loudly for an "oink". It might even become my nickname.

So I said nothing, and tried to eat my meat with a spoon. Because I'm a fool.

Behind the mill, and separated from it by cedars and alders are the sawdust piles, the accumulated sawdust of fifty years, great dunes of sawdust that become by moonlight a desert on the moon. I stand there sometimes looking up at the moon and imagining that it is the planet Earth. Yellow moonlight on yellow sawdust. The shadows of trees. My own shadow which does not even vaguely resemble that of a man, or anything human. There are moments when I'd like to run naked across the surface of the moon.

What would they do to me, the others, if they found me out?

And what would they do to me if they knew I was afraid of the dark, although less afraid of it than of them?

I've made up a story in which a man and a woman have a baby which they keep in a windowless room. When it begins to understand what is being said to it they tell it that it is God. The baby grows into a child. You are God, the parents keep telling him. There is nobody to contradict them, nothing except maybe a voice in the child's mind, and if he hears such a voice, they tell him that it's the devil, tempting him. So he grows up and one day the doors are thrown open and, for the first, time he goes out into the world, of which he has been taught to believe that he is God....

I'm not sure what happens then. But I suspect that he has only to stretch out his hand to raise the dead.

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