

One Billionth of a Lifetime

by vic fortezza

Bill was queasy, short of breath, his chest tightening. He was next. How he hated this game of confession. It was harder than going to a priest, which at least allowed a measure of anonymity. True, these were friends, yet, in terms of the game, he was vastly inferior to them. He could never tell if they were being truthful. After all, they were actors, graduates of a famous repertory school. In the catering business, he was their superior, providing flexible employment hours and health care that allowed them to pursue their dream. He even contributed generously to their little theatre company. His storytelling, however, was unimaginative. Candy, his wife, would know immediately if he were fabricating. His unease this night, however, stemmed not from a fear of failing miserably but from the fact that he was tempted to reveal something genuine and horrible about himself. He'd felt compelled to do so as soon as the challenge had been issued. He hoped confession would wipe it forever from his conscience.

Kevin, an Alabaman with no trace of drawl, had begun the game. Everyone was familiar with his harrowing childhood, bits of which he would let drop whenever inebriated. His stepfather had raped him repeatedly and threatened to kill him if he told anyone. Bill had expected something along these lines, especially as Kevin, who was HIV positive, was now out of the closet, sober, and determined to confront his demons. He fooled everyone, however, claiming, maddened by a cooing that would not allow him to sleep, that he poisoned pigeons who perched on his fire escape. Only Bill believed him. The others surmised it a secret desire he longed to fulfill but hadn't. By rule, there was no obligation to confirm the veracity of a confession, although one was free to do so. When called on it, Kevin, smiling wryly, simply arched an eyebrow.

Carmela, a native New Yorker, surprised no one. She looked the part she'd chosen for herself in life: an abused lover who repeatedly selected men who treated her abominably. No one felt sorry for her

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any more in this regard, as she rejected any decent man who made overtures to her. Leaning back, cigarette held high, she boasted of having had sex with four men simultaneously.

After the chuckling had died, Candy said, eagerly: "How was it?"

"I was so stoned I don't know."

Everyone but Bill jeered at what was taken as soft-soaping, although no one doubted the tale was true.

"What's so base about that, anyway?" said Tim. "You'd think you'd've chucked your Catholic inhibitions long ago."

Bill cringed as he recalled a long, hard kiss Carmela and Candy had shared during a staging of Genet's "The Balcony." Candy later teased that Carmela had come to look forward to the scene much too eagerly.

Ellen, the beauty of the company, was the only one present whose origins weren't humble. Her father, a CEO, commuted to Manhattan by helicopter. In Bill's mind, she was the most likely of the women to make a major breakthrough. The others were her equal in ability but were plain by the standards of Broadway, Hollywood or television. The most any could expect, he believed, was minor supporting work.

"When I was a junior in high school," she began, smiling nervously; "I went on a date with a college sophomore. I thought I was so cool. I thought he was too. He had his own car. His dad'd bought it for him when he graduated from high school. Anyway, he bought a couple of six packs and a bottle of whiskey, and we went to a drive-in and proceeded to get smashed. After the movie, we drove to a lover's lane. I don't know how we made it without crashing that beautiful car."

She bowed her head and covered her flushing cheeks. Her audience, on the edge of its seats, urged her to continue. Bill wished he were elsewhere. He secretly loved Ellen and did not want to hear any dirt about her. He wanted her to remain pure in his heart, as pure as she looked. He was still miffed that Tim had directed Kevin to grab her crotch in the company's recent production of Moliere's "Tartuffe." He did not understand why TJ, her husband, hadn't made

at least the pretense of protest.

"As we moved close and were about to kiss," she continued, "he barfed all over me and passed out."

The others howled and thrashed about. TJ laughed loudest.

"Wait! I'm not finished. Wait!" She paused, whetting their appetites, making sure every eye was upon her. "I was so mad I pulled down my jeans and peed on his head."

Bedlam erupted. The baby was awakened. Candy ran from the room calling time-out. No one believed the story, despite its popularity. Eventually, Ellen capitulated and said that a member of her sorority had related it at a similar gathering long ago, citing defecation rather than urination as the punchline, which elicited new cries of amused disgust.

Bill was relieved, then tensed as he realized it'd be his turn in a moment. He poured himself a drink and went out onto the terrace. 20 floors below, traffic was flowing along 2nd Avenue, headlights aglow. Autumn was in the air. The city was cast in mellow, magnificent shades. How he loved this view. How hard he'd worked to attain the means to afford such a home. How lucky he was.

He decided to fabricate, say he'd knowingly served dated food when he'd first branched out in the business. To add the spice of the perverse, he'd claim several people had slipped and fallen on the upheaval that covered the floor. No doubt they'd see through the lie, but no one expected him to be good at the game, anyway. It would allow him a graceful exit. How in the world could he have entertained the idea of revealing so ghastly a secret?

"There you are," said Candy suddenly, kissing his cheek. "Come on, no hiding."

"Okay, Billy boy," said TJ once the hosts were seated; "fess up."

Bill lowered his gaze, appalled at the eagerness of the others. They had the boss on the spot and relished it. He began quietly. Suddenly, as if helpless, he found himself following a path that led to the darkest recess of his soul.

"...It was fifteen years ago, when I first came to the city. In case some of you don't know, I'm from a small town in Pennsylvania.

Anyway, I was really down and out, working temp' jobs when I could get them, subsisting on bagels and bananas, living in a rat and roach infested tenement in Hell's Kitchen. I was here two years and I'd yet to find a decent job or even a girlfriend. I didn't have any friends. I was always alone. I was mad at the world and even madder at myself for failing so miserably, and I'd get these frightening flashes of the most despicable sort."

Eyes averted, he could feel the others leaning forward, sense the bating of their breaths. In their thirst for psychological bloodletting, they seemed vampires.

"All those thoughts've basically been dismissed now - except for one. It haunts me occasionally, even though it was fleeting and absolutely nothing ever came of it. It was the only period of my life I'd ever had homosexual flashes. I was sneaking into the subway because I didn't dare spend any money on the fare. I'd be sitting on a crowded train and so consumed with despair I'd imagine shoving my face into a male crotch."

There were groans of disappointment.

"Is that all?" said Carmela. "Everybody has those. The way you started out, I was hoping you'd mugged or murdered somebody."

This incited snickering.

"And we all thought you were so pure," said Kevin, "although deep down I'd always suspected you were one of us. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

"I hated myself about it for a long time too," said Rob, breaking his silence with something other than laughter. "A lot of us did."

"Homosexuality's not base," said Tim. "You surprise me."

He was appalled - they assumed he was coming out of the closet. "For you it isn't. It's your nature. I was mocking myself with impulses that were entirely negative and hateful to me."

"That's a common rationale," said Tim.

Bill lowered and shook his head, peeved. He wondered if homosexuals had heterosexual flashes and hated them intensely. He didn't really want to know. Although he could feel his wife's tension, which was pleading that he cease, he chose to continue, baffled at

his need to confess. "That's not the worst of it, though."

"Now you're embellishing," said Kevin, smirking.

"I wish I was. It's much fouler."

"Onward, Macduff," urged Carmela.

"One day a little boy was walking down the street and I imagined..." Unable to mouth the words, coiling with shame, he made a sweeping motion with a hand, the crude gesture made by males regarding women.

Silence fell. Now they seemed shocked. Suddenly he despised them all, these hypocrites who reveled in the make-believe perversions and traumas of the stage.

"And ever since that fleeting moment, that one billionth of my lifetime, a mere thought, base though it was, it pops into my head every now and then and makes me feel like the son of Sam of sexual perversion. And there's nothing I can do to rationalize it, even though I know I'm not a" He paused, shutting his eyelids tightly as the image assailed, mocked him. "I tell myself I was rock bottom spiritually - I felt like the lowest of creatures - and what would the lowest of creatures do? But nothing could ever or should ever excuse something like that. It's the basest of crimes. Whenever I hear about one of those creeps I want him dead. But how dare I condemn anyone when the same thought once crossed my own mind?"

Tension filled the room. The guests looked at each other uncomfortably.

"We all have thoughts like that," said TJ soberly. "We just don't allow ourselves to focus on them. It's just the occasional madness of existence that afflicts everybody."

"You have every right to condemn it," said Kevin, seething; "and if anyone we knew or loved were guilty of it we'd all have to condemn him."

"My God," said Tim, "if it came down to thoughts we'd all be lost. You're not guilty of anything."

"Except conscience," Rob added. "A lot of people don't even have one."

"You know how many times I've wanted to stick a fork into a customer," said Carmela - "or you, for that matter?"

There was a pall over them. Ellen braved it, murmuring skeptically, smirking, shaking her head.

"I can't believe you've all been taken in by this. Nice try, Billy boy," she said condescendingly, patting his hand; "but you haven't fooled me. Maybe the first part would've gotten you into Circle in the Square, but the second.... Let me put it this way - remember what that so-called critic said about my performance as a male in 'As You Like It'? He said it was, er...." She paused for effect. "...disingenuous - as was yours."

He forced a smile to his lips, one he was certain was not at all convincing. Ellen always knew what to say. She charmed customers at affairs, diffused tension expertly. Now she'd come to his rescue in his private life, and he loved her more than ever. Suddenly the others were claiming they hadn't been fooled, either. Bill's eyes glazed. They were such dear friends, always so supportive. He dared not look at his wife, however. He sensed her embarrassment and bewilderment

His mind faded into the background as TJ began his account. He heard clearly, albeit faintly. Everyone seemed far away. TJ told of his inability to control his laughter as an altar boy when a priest, stricken by diarrhea, soiled the sacred area during mass.

"I couldn't help it," he pleaded as the others jeered. "I was only eleven."

When everyone had taken a turn, Bill excused himself. He hadn't even heard the remaining confessions, including his wife's. Always the trouper, Candy had recovered and carried on as if all were normal.

He splashed his cheeks at the bathroom tap. As he was drying his face, which was buried in the towel, violent sobs burst from him. He pressed the fabric to himself tightly, muffling the sound, head pounding. How could he have confessed such a thing? Some things had to be locked away, no matter how gnawing they might be. Ironically, confession had increased, not relieved, his torment. Now

his friends, his wife, knew the depravity that lurked within him. What had he been thinking?

Poised at the edge of the tub, he heard the others speaking softly. Were they talking about him? How was Candy handling it? Now they were laughing. Were they laughing at him? Why would they laugh at the basest thing a human could do? But he hadn't done anything! Why did he feel as if he had? How was it he'd forgiven himself all the physical and sexual violence he'd ever imagined against others and not this?

He tiptoed into his son's room and gazed at him lovingly, then shuddered as he recalled an argument he'd had recently with his wife. She'd just finished *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. * * * Curious, he pulled it from the shelf. He became enraged when he encountered what he considered the basest scene ever put into print. He tore the copy to pieces and railed at Candy for having placed it amongst their cherished collection. He now realized that it had been that passage that had awakened the black memory lying dormant within him, which subsequently led to his misbegotten confession.

Sliding into bed that night, cuddling against his wife as he always did, he felt her recoil slightly, and he wept quietly at her back. She did not turn to comfort him. No doubt she was no longer puzzled by his destruction of the book. He prayed he hadn't destroyed their marriage as well.

* * * Hubert Selby Jr.

