

Solstice

I am now a very old man and this is something which happened to me when I was very young. It was June 21st, 1928, Summer Solstice, and just about smack dab between the First War and the Second. I've never told anyone exactly what happened that day, and I never will . . . at least not out loud. Instead, I've decided to write it down in this little book that I will leave on the table here beside my bed. I'm lying down as I write, tubes in me every damn place, and Death is so close I can feel its breath on my face. My hands shake something awful these days, and my eyes are weak, but before I go, I need to write this down.

I have carried a terrible memory for more than eighty years. There was a time in my life when it was almost forgotten, reduced to a rare bad dream: a fleeting, random reminder as Spring turned to Summer each year. But now, here at the end, the memory has come back stronger than ever and it is here to stay. So I will write. I will write in the hopes that getting these thoughts out of my head and onto the page might give me some peace. I am not a Catholic, nor was I ever a Church-going man, but I understand the act of confession. And so this is mine.

I grew up on a farm in New Brunswick. We were in the woods, near a little village called Tabusintac, on the edge of the great watershed of the Miramichi. My mother used to complain that we lived near a big river, cheek-by-jowl with the Atlantic Ocean, and yet here we were, a bunch of land-locked potato farmers. We had some livestock, the best blueberry patch in the British Empire, and row upon row of our prize-winning Chieftain Russets. We shared the country with bears and wolves and coyotes, grouse and hare and deer. Every spring, we could hear the Caribou bucks crash and

thump through the hemlocks to the north of our spread. Sounds pretty romantic, I suppose.

You know what I remember best? Black flies and mosquitoes and me marching up and down every planted row, hunting potato bugs. Today you've got your spreaders and crop dusters spewing the chemical clouds like they gassed them in Flanders. But when I was a boy, the only way to keep your crops alive was to bend down and crush each and every potato bug between your thumb and forefinger. Every leaf of every plant. Find 'em all, kill 'em all. And the next day, you start again. Come September, if you're lucky, you'll have enough potatoes to haul out to the depot at Moncton. You might make enough money to keep the bank at bay, patch up the windows, and lay in supplies for the winter. If you call that romantic then I'll sell you a bridge.

Tabusintac is different now, except that it's still a place nobody's ever heard of. Last I saw of it, you've got your cars, your pavements, your telephones and power lines – same as anywhere. But there's still some salmon in the Miramichi. Still a few stubborn farmers. And you still won't get a better blueberry pie anywhere else in the Wide World. The sportsmen got all the Caribou, though. Every last one of them. And I guess that brings me back around to Death.

My father died when I was three years-old. He survived the Great War but not the wounds he brought home. Try as I have for more, I retained only one, single memory of my father: I am seated on my mother's lap in the summer kitchen and we watch together as he readies himself for a Veteran's parade. He is resplendent in his dress uniform and kilt. He is standing over a wash basin on the floor like a dairy cow over a bucket. He and my mother are laughing. He is scrubbing his knees.

The summer my father died, the local Orangemen paid to have Union Jack bunting draped on our veranda. Some bureaucrat townie came to collect it in the fall but it was too late, my mother had cut it up for table cloths and tea towels. A portrait of my father in his uniform hung over the fireplace, a constant reminder of his absence. A constant reminder of Death.

But I didn't see Death up close until Summer Solstice, 1928, when Charlie went mad from rabies and tried to kill me.

Now, June the 21st is always a fine, warm day where I come from. It's the day when you suddenly notice the sun hanging right over your head and you wonder, "Where the hell did that come from?" You get to believe, if only for a moment, that winter is a long way off. But when I think of this particular June the 21st, I feel a deep, dark cold no January ever knew.

Charlie was our mule. He was provided to my mother and me by the "concerned citizens" of our township after my father's passing. Charlie was the picture of everything you'd want out of a working jackass (my term of endearment). He was docile and dumb as a post. He had spindly legs and a swayed back. But if you asked him nice, he could pull the Titanic onto the beach. And then he would pluck an apple out of your hand as gentle as you please. His big eyes were alert, honest, even understanding. I considered Charlie my best friend.

But somewhere in the spring of 1928, I found him in the East field with a gash on his leg. Mother put it down to a run-in with one of those sharp pieces of slate in Taylor Creek where he liked to eat river weed. But I saw right away. His eyes were different. Something sick had got at him – probably a muskrat, maybe a bat – and he was changing.

It started with a little bucking when we would saddle him with a load. Then, he started kicking at his stable door in the night. We knew it was bad when he nipped at my mother as she offered him one of his favourite Granny Smiths. He missed her hand, she pulled back just in time, but the sharp clack of his teeth coming together meant he would have taken her fingers clean off.

My mother talked about Charlie's sickness exactly once. I was standing on the back stoop; I had been bound for the summer kitchen with water jugs when Mother called to me in a voice that meant business. I turned around to face her. She was standing at the stone counter in a flood of strong morning sunshine falling through the double windows over the sink. There was a curl of hair lying across the side of her face and touching her cheek. The bright light turned that little curl to filaments of gold and made me want to run to her and put my arms around her. In that instant I saw her as a woman, saw her as my father must have seen her. She was wearing a housedress, ivory with blue polka dots, and she was kneading bread. Hamish, our cocker spaniel was standing alertly by her feet, looking up, waiting for anything that might drop. She was looking at me.

"You mustn't worry about Charlie," she told me.

My heart sank suddenly. "Yes, ma'am," I said.

"Promise me."

"I promise."

She smiled, but it was a worried kind of smile. "What do you promise, my love?" she asked gently.

"Promise not to worry nothing for Charlie, ma'am."

I felt that double negative tumble out of my mouth and I believe I winced. My mother was a stickler for grammar and she would always correct me. On this day, however, she said nothing, only offering me another worried smile as she went on working the dough which now had a smooth, silky look.

A look of mixed grief and sympathy crossed her face and she nodded, “Go on, now, my love.”

That was the only time I ever heard my mother speak just that way. I understood her as well as she understood me. But for my part, I told myself lies. Maybe the sickness would pass. Maybe I could keep my best friend.

And so on Solstice morning, we found Charlie frothing at the mouth, attacking the chicken coop. The frightened hens clucked and squawked and flapped their wings, desperate to fly the way only flightless birds can be. Hamish kept up a passionate bark but didn't dare get too close. It was just my mother and me, the hands not due until July, so I thought I'd better act Man of the House and save the chickens. I ran into the summer kitchen and pulled a couple two-gallon tin pots down from the iron rack. I hurried back out into the yard, shouting and knocking the pots together. I advanced toward the coop, hollering and banging, trying to spook Charlie off his quarry. But I didn't scare him. He spun around on me and snorted, all indignant and mean, froth dripping from his lips. He didn't look a thing like my best friend. He bared his blocky teeth, pawed the ground like a bull, and charged. I no longer gave a Good God Damn about the chickens. I turned and ran, tossing the pots as I went. I slipped and stumbled and Charlie cornered me against the North shed. His eyes were huge and wild, his mouth made bloody from chewing paddock nails and chicken wire. He reared up and kicked at me. I felt one of his old,

cracked hooves whistle past my left ear. I figured that was it for me: dead at a lousy nine years old.

But that's when my mother appeared, out of nowhere, running toward me, (I had never seen her run before). She was holding her favourite lamp up over her head. The wick was high and a big orange flame threw smoke up the chimney, charring it black. She looked for all the world like the Statue of Liberty running to catch a train. In mid-stride, she threw the lamp at Charlie's face. It broke against his brow and the oil ignited. He staggered away, bucking wildly, his head on fire. He ran into the stand of maples that bordered the yard. We could hear him, blind and terrified, crashing through the underbrush.

My mother pulled me – or did she carry me? – back to the house. We passed Hamish cowering by the stoop, unable to bark anymore. We made it into the summer kitchen and she closed the door. We were both in shock but she was doing her best to settle me down, to bring me back from where we had just been. She thought of chores:

“Now go in the house and get the wash buckets out of the pantry. Fill them from the kitchen pump and you set to work cleaning those upstairs floors. It's too hot to be working outside...”

Her desperate attempt at normalcy in that moment broke my heart.

“Don't forget to heat the water first and get good suds before you dip the brush.”

We heard a terrible, long, animal moan come to us from the other side of the door. It was Charlie. Somewhere, out there, in the little stand of maples, he was dying.

“Mother, make him stop!” I shrieked, desperate to ease his pain, “for the love of God, make him stop!”

My mother slapped my face. She pulled me from the summer kitchen, past the stairs and through the house to the cellar door. She grabbed the cut glass doorknob and turned hard, forgetting it was locked (as it always was from May to October, better to safeguard the cool air below). As she fumbled for the key that hung on the wall nearby I started to weep in great, heavy sobs. But when she finally unlocked the door and flung it open, the blast of chilly air, so different from the sharp heat of the day, cut off my convulsions at once, like a sluice-gate stops a stream.

I see it in my dreams, I see it every time I close my eyes; I can see it now: the narrow staircase that descends into darkness. My mother pulled on my hand and even though I had been down into the cellar a thousand times, on this day I resisted. We could still hear Charlie's high-pitched moan coming from outside.

She pulled on my arm again and I pulled back with all my strength. But my mother was stronger and her mind was set: she was determined to spare me the pain of hearing my friend's death throes. She wrenched me down the steps, one by one.

Because of the panic of the moment, and because she had to fight me for every inch, she forgot about the missing riser at the fifth step. She lost her footing and gave out a tiny cry of surprise. I tried to steady her but her hand slipped out of mine and she pitched backward.

I recall the soles of her shoes and the billowing of her dress. For an instant, my mother was flying. Flying away from me, into darkness. She hit the earthen floor hard. The noise her body made at impact was a heavy and deep sound the likes of which I have never heard since. I felt my heart rise up into my throat. I scrambled down after her.

After the dazzling June sun, the windowless cellar was black as ink. I was blind. I called out for my mother and heard no response. I called out for her again and again, my voice seeming to fall to nothing in the cool, damp air. I crouched low, extended my arms, spread my palms, and tried feeling my way through the gloom. My hands clawed over burlap bags of Russets and turnips and carrots, my knees hit crates of preserves, my chin struck the edge of a barrel-top.

Then I found her. From the very first touch – the fingertips of my left hand brushed her back – I knew she was gone. I tried to rouse her anyway, pleading and crying, begging her to wake up. When there were no sobs left, I could only slump over her body, spent. We were but two more sacks of potatoes on the cellar floor.

And there, as my heart beat slower and my gasping turned to quiet breaths, I could hear him again. The noise was as faint as a whisper in the wind, but I heard him. Through the trees, across the yard, down into the earth and through the foundation wall, came the sound of Charlie screaming.

I walked up the stairs and went back outside.

My father had kept a rifle but it had long since seized up and a new one was considered too dear. The only thing immediately to hand was an old Methodist axe, the kind with a blade on both sides; “two-faced”, my mother used to call it, and she would laugh.

Hamish watched me as I gripped the axe’s neck and headed out to the maples. It wasn’t hard to find Charlie. In his sightless panic, he had broken both front legs. He was half against a tree, on his knees, his chin on the ground, his haunches in the air, as though

he were bowing before a King. One swing behind his ear and Charlie's screaming stopped.

I moved slowly, as if in a dream, back inside the house. I sat down in the summer kitchen and watched the morning turn to afternoon, Hamish curled at my feet. I thought of my Father and my Mother and Charlie. When the Solstice Sun finally began to descend from its great height, I brought a blanket down into the cellar. I found my mother once again, then I found her face with my hands and closed her eyes. I covered her with the blanket. I sat with her for a time until I fell asleep.

Some hours later I awoke, heart-sick and afraid. I said my goodbyes and climbed that staircase for the last time. There were still stars visible in the pre-dawn sky as Hamish and I walked the six miles into town.

I don't remember the first person I encountered or how I reported what had happened to my mother and Charlie. I only remember I was taken to the Doctor's house where I spent several days, confined to bed. I recall listening through closed doors as adults discussed what to do with me.

"Could the boy have...?"

"My God, you don't mean to suggest...?"

"Well, you saw the mess that was made..."

"My God..."

In the end, the "concerned citizens" put me on a train to Toronto where I became a ward of the crown. I was not allowed to bring Hamish with me.

What followed was a series of boarding houses and city streets and strict schoolmasters, all of it a strange blur of time in my mind's eye. I kept my head down until I came of age, whereupon, like my father, I sailed to France in uniform.

So much has passed – more than eighty years of life – since that Summer Solstice. I've had a good run, all things considered: a wonderful wife, three healthy children and more grandchildren than I can keep track of. I've always had a good home, friends, and freedom from want. I have handsomely surpassed three score and ten and I accept that it is my time. As I lie here in this hospital room, in this wretched body of mine, I tell myself I have lived a good life; that I have been, for the most part, a good man. But upon the Summer Solstice of 1928, I caused the death of my mother and my best friend. I know I will be called to account for these crimes and I have nothing to say in my defence. This is my confession.