

William Roland Braunschweiger's communal Victorian mansion in Baltimore City off Fredrick Avenue in the proletarian neighborhood of Irvington, in the east of Paradise and west of Westside, was where I celebrated my first Christmas at the age of twenty-one. Before PCs, email, the Internet and cellphones; 1977: the only thing digital in our world were sublime keyboard synthesizer sounds unlocked from their analog vinyl grooves by vibrating diamond needles. My first year living away from my parents, the year after I graduated college. Bill was my first landlord, my friend and role model.

"Seventeen rooms" he boasted broadly smiling while I followed, counting. Embossed brown leather wainscoting along the stairwells. Engraved door hinges. Wide, dark oak molding and trim around the doors. A fireplace. A lion's-paw bathtub. Chandeliers. Tapestries on the walls. Oriental rugs. First-floor ceilings high enough to stand a thirteen-foot tree on the parquet oak floor between his study and dining room in the space revealed when the heavy wooden pocket doors were rolled into their tall, narrow pockets.

You see, my family was nominally Jewish so I had never decorated a Christmas tree. Instead we dutifully lit the menorah— socks and underwear were my usual gifts except for one memorable year when my Uncle Bernie, a spiral-stair builder who had for months secretly built a model train garden for me on two sheets of plywood at his house re-assembled them in our basement the night before Chanukah while my parents took my sister and me out for Italian food.

Bill and his borders, seven young men and women, decorating the tree with strings of miniature white lights, ecumenically- themed silver glass- ball ornaments that said JOY, PEACE and LOVE, silver tinsels, smoking pot, swigging *Heinekens* from bottles garlanded with distinguishing colored bows, reminiscing, munching brownies. The linear-tracking turntable, tube amp and three-way *I.M. Fried* speakers pounding out *Gentle Giant*, the booming deep bass notes merrily rattling the stained glass window in the transom above the wide- open music room door:

*As the dust settles, see our dreams*

*All coming true, it depends on you*

Bill spots me on the ladder, I place the angel on the tree's apex, her head against the ceiling, wedging the tip of one chipped ear against the plaster. Bill darkens the rooms and lights the tree, we stand back in awe. The stunning white shimmering lights, twinkling crystals like frost, incongruous, like the frozen rooms from *Doctor Zhivago*, the sporadic sparks of iridescence shooting from the edges of the engraved silver balls. Every sense gratified, swaying dizzily with the heady joy of being unconditionally - alive in this moment.

The holy virtue of hope suddenly, unexpectedly, *magically* (if not miraculously) realized for me at the age of twenty-one at Christmas, of all times! I had eclipsed my children- of- the- Depression- era parent's meager expectations for life; my horizons were broader than theirs could ever be. Although I hadn't yet heard the expression, "*Friends are the family you get to choose,*" I was transformed by being with these new friends in this moment. Like Chanukah, Christmas wasn't *my* holiday, and never would be. I was like someone who ducked into a church, stood by the door staring out at the rain listening to transcendent organ music who had an epiphany. Still, *this* holiday, my first on my own, beyond the suburban box, changed me, irrevocably, decisively, and for the better.

I met Bill at UMBC in a contemporary German lit class taught by an engaging visiting lecturer named Andrei Codrescu who, years later, I heard reading his ironic essays on NPR. Bill said something, I disagreed, he sought me out after class, and we began a conversation in the hall that continued over beers a half-hour later on his second-floor screened-in back porch overlooking his tired carriage house and his pale yellow honeysuckle bushes. That was the first of three years of discussing books and music mostly, his life and adventures, his house full of eclectic objects and people— revelations all for a sheltered, bookish, atheist loner from suburbia who had never drank, smoked or had sex. Or had met anyone who lived a daring life. Bill told me he “*planned memories*” that is he lived his life with premeditated- unforgettability. He planned to be the next Henry Miller. Not to be outdone I was going to recapitulate Jack Kerouac.

Bill’s was the first house in Irvington, the biggest and finest, built when streetcars were still taking working- class families out of the swelter of Baltimore summer weekends to picnic in the grass under the spreading canopy of trees at Loudon Park Cemetery a stone’s throw away. Where our street dead-ended I slid daily under the fence to walk or run through the cemetery, both day and night, usually with my dog Murphy and a few times when it snowed a gang of us would make a fire in a drum at the top, sip schnapps and slide down the big hill on makeshift toboggans. I discovered H.L. Mencken’s uncharacteristically modest gravestone and a grand one belonging to one of Napoleon Bonaparte’s sisters. I saw the neatly aligned tombstones of Civil War soldiers segregated by army and learned the South’s monument was secretly built an inch taller than the North’s. Or so they claimed: I never measured them.

Most weekday evenings we were up past midnight, high, listening to records, reading and discussing Gunther Grass, Kafka, Nietzsche, Thomas Mann, Hesse, Sartre, Camus, Beckett, but going nowhere with Joyce or with our own writings. We invented a game where we would smoke a joint and jointly join the first and last sentences from any story in his library. Alternating turns, offering one sentence apiece, we spun a yarn that connected, say, “*The sun shone, having no alternative, on the nothing new*” all the way to “*The last Mr. Murphy saw of Mr. Endon was Mr. Murphy unseen by Mr. Endon*” by way of, say, a chameleon falling into a sensory- deprivation tank and turning transparent, a character-actor with so much character he could only act with the identical twin sisters he loved when they were all together to ensure their equal treatment, and the absurdly narrow Murphy bed the three shared. This literary exercise, a sort of cross between sixty- degrees- of- separation and a Rorschach test, we pretended might inspire us to write but only rarely did Bill tap the keys of his typewriter for a few consecutive late nights and whatever he wrote, if he ever read it to me, was utterly unmemorable. As for me, I wrote even less but my excuse was that I hadn’t yet gone on the road to experience life.

Bill was a good-looking guy with a *Cool Hand Luke* swagger, an endearing smile and a steady stream of girlfriends stayed in our house after his wife divorced him and moved back home to Kansas. His proposed imitation of Henry Miller extended only as far as the pursuit of carnal adventures, not their ribald retelling. He had been in the Air Force during Vietnam and returned with rugs, tapestries, brass figurines and improbable stories from his time stationed as a radio operator near Istanbul. Bill was a frustrated electric guitarist and a bad chess player. An alcoholic who drove a liquor truck, Bill nightly took home to consume with friends his daily allotment of “breakage”. Some mornings I saw him wake up, light a cigarette and finish the previous night’s stale beer from a plastic cup on his nightstand before getting out of bed. Bill was a joyful drinker, always the charmer, and a magnet for women and men alike.

I lost touch with him after I hitchhiked cross-country to the Pacific Northwest to bum- around for a few years pursuing adventures, the very best of which rivaled Bill's: From Baltimore to Baltimore by way of Olympia; From Marjorie to Lisa by way of Daria. After I heard a few years ago he died in 2013 at the age of 65, each Christmas I raise a glass of *Heiny* to remember my old friend Bill with gratefulness and sadness and I wonder: Did he ever finish any of the stories he began on his old manual *Underwood* in his study, surrounded by his books? Who was with him at the end? Did Bill know when it was his time to die? Did he speak in the monotone grey colors of distraction? Did he feel joy, sadness, relief? And who lives in the old Victorian house now? Do they put up a huge Christmas tree? Is the carriage house out back still standing? Do the honeysuckles still bloom each summer?

A half- century later I wonder what that house has witnessed. The people, all the lies and loves, births and deaths, the generousities of spirit, the prides and regrets. The foibles of young people with boundless energy, middle-aged resignation, old men and women increasingly mindful of their mortality. What we don't remember; what we can't forget. How we defend our existence: *"This is what I learned. This is what I did. This is who I knew. This is who I loved. This is who I was. This is how I will die. This is when I will be forever forgotten."*

Silly, really, isn't it, at the end of it all, life that is, with all its associated histrionics? The passing from slavery to the presidency by way of civil war; from horses to automobiles by way of streetcars; from LPs to streaming by way of CDs; from actual to virtual by way of PCs; from duopoly to autocracy by way of social media. From dust to dust by way of broken angels.