



ROBERT PARHAM

The Desperation of Dangerous Men

PARHAM

BUT

“He was kilt,” James William said. “But not by no war.”

It was an answer to something, but I hadn’t asked a question.

But I was young enough that the number of dead men near enough by me for someone to care about talking about them, to think I would care or know how to speak of them or about them, were few.

“Johnny?” I questioned the space that had shortly before contained James William. “Uncle Wallace?”

DOCTOR PHILBUS

Martin Anderson Philbus was the doctor in our town, in Clarksburg that was just outside the shadow of

the mountain, that was a one-horse town waiting on its first horse to arrive.

But there was a red light that blinked in what was not quite the center of the town, where a crossroads let you turn west to Damascus or north to Frederick or south to Rockville or double back toward Boyds, if you were stupid enough to want to go back.

Philbus was watching us play pickup softball at the field adjacent to the elementary school, the one I had attended fourth through sixth grade. The one where my mother had gone to make the principal appoint me a safety patrol with the white belt that cinched at the waist and across the chest. I didn’t want to be a hall patrol, but a school bus patrol who got off the bus at every stop and stood by the door, or if someone had to cross the road, to walk in front of the bus and guide the person across by pointing them toward where they apparently didn’t know the lived, while at the same time signaling the car drivers to stop who didn’t understand the red blinking lights of the school bus, and the arm that the driver flipped out that read STOP.

Mama had been an orphan. She’d been taken in by the Swans, whose daughter married a Hansen. Winnie was their daughter, who became my Aunt Winnie, who taught me piano for a bushel of tomatoes every visit until

tomato season ended. Otherwise, it was cucumbers or pole beans. Early spring there were only radishes.

Martin Anderson Philbus was the doctor in our town, in Clarksburg, and he took a hankering to my mother.

I was playing short. The batter hit a short fly over my head toward the left fielder, but one he couldn't get. I ran back, took it over my shoulder, pegged it back to second. Because I could. The same reason Philbus hit on our mother. It felt good and he could.

GETTING SITUATED

If you drive fifteen miles south on Route 355, toward Washington, you'll get to Rockville and the northernmost Confederate monument. My sister lives there. She used to live with us, on the farm near Hyattstown. This is two miles north of Clarksburg and eleven miles south of Frederick.

I'm not trying to give you directions, because there'd be no reason to go there now. None at all. But getting oneself situated, I've discovered, is important in life. Knowing where you are at all times. I've had three wives but none of them can understand this. But it may have something to do with how men and women is put to-

gether, as my daddy would say it. Or it could be like that Venus and Mars guy trying to help men understand women, or women men, whichever. To which my daddy would say if that's true than Venus ain't nowhere and Mars must stand at the center of the universe. I wouldn't know.

All the places I've described are in Montgomery County, except Washington, of course. And Frederick, which is in Frederick County. There ain't no Montgomery in Montgomery County, Daddy said once, even though nobody had asked the question.

Once, after the shadows from Sugarloaf Mountain had turned into actual darkness, my girlfriend and I sat in the smaller darkness of my car, where the cobblestone crossroads caused by the park entrance met the roadway.

She was so pretty, still probably the prettiest face that sneaks into my memory, and she had a wonderful ass. I was most taken by her face, though, since I was at an age when touching a girl's arm had pretty much the same effect as touching her ass.

She and I were working our way into that tangle of legs and arms and lips that gives you a glimpse at why the apes came out of the trees to become men and why creatures eventually left the sea to try to stand up. Sometimes it's just easier to do things in certain places. Not

necessarily in cars, though.

THE NATURE OF KIN

James William is family, probably a cousin. That's what you call them when it's not quite certain, but almost sure they're kin. He could be an uncle. Not an aunt. Uncles can be younger than cousins, kind of like it can snow in Africa. Jennie Funderburk brought pictures to fifth grade that her brother, who was in the Army, had taken of snow falling there. Not up on Mt. Kilimanjaro, but down where it was usually hot.

I think I was the most interested, the most excited about the pictures. And I was the quiet kid in class. Jennie let me sneak a second look at the packet of photos during study time. Mrs. Thompson probably knew it, but she also knew I was the smartest kid in the class. She probably saw this as just another kind of learning.

James William carried THE family bible around with him. He called himself The Chronicler. My father called him crazy.

"But he's got THE Bible," I said. "Doesn't someone think it's a little crazy letting him keep it?"

"It's his," Daddy said.

"But it's got—"

"We all got bibles too," he snapped.

Nobody's had the full record of all the Parkers and the Raymonds and the Woodwards like James William did, though. He had the history and he could talk about it in a way that went beyond family trees. It was history with all its stories. So when James William did what he did—about somebody being killed—and just walked away without talking anymore, well, that wasn't like him. It was a tease that had become a form of torture.

WHAT WE CALL PEOPLE

Despite the way he had terms for people, Daddy wasn't a name caller. He didn't cuss, almost never. But the world was a place to be named for him. It was like he was the first biologist naming plants and animals, the first explorer, naming continents, towns, hills.

"Nobody ever got better of something by ignoring it," he said.

As I got older I was able to sort out, most of the time, what was something that approached wisdom from him and that which was just whiskey talk. They aren't hard to separate in most men, because there isn't much wisdom

to worry about and their whiskey habits, like fighting and cussing and treating women badly, those things that automatically follow, pretty much don't make such considerations take much time. But Daddy wasn't a fighter, except when he had to. And he treated Mama good the whole time they were together.

On our farm there was a long hill where the pasture kept narrowing down until it disappeared into the woods. Honeysuckle lined all the fences toward the bottom, and other vines and weeds, so in early morning as well as late in the day, the darkness seemed to grow up from the bottom of the hill, like deep water rising.

At the very crest of the hill was a dead tree, the wood so hard it was like stone. The few limbs on it were stumpy and grey, which on one side of its trunk was a black line where lightning had seal the fate of the tree long before. But the tree wouldn't fall. Being dead had nothing to do with it. I called it the Witch's tree because it stood there where I had to pass during the time I started to bring in the cattle until the time dawn crawled up the hill and revealed the dead tree for what it was.

I told Daddy what I called it. I didn't mentioned my fear.

"Don't call things what they ain't," he said.

I asked him about this concept almost immediately.

But like when James William was talking to me, Daddy too had vanished, as though a vapor. The way there are always more questions than answers.

SISTERS AND BROTHERS

I have a sister and sort of have a couple brothers and another sister. Being adopted makes some things a little more complicated than others.

First of all, should I have a real sister or brother, I wouldn't know it. But I have a real adopted sister, just like I'm her real adopted brother, or, as they say in the formal way: *adoptive*. The problem with them fancy words, Daddy said, is sometimes they sound like they're trying to say what something is like, not what it is. That's how I feel about *adoptive*. I'm not LIKE my sister's adopted brother: I AM.

But now I'm sounding like those philosophers my teachers used to keep trying to teach me. I am therefore I am. I ain't therefore I ain't. Either you is or you ain't.

AND

Some things simply require you to add them up: this and then this and then this add up to three of something. If you're observant you know what you've added up. If you're not, then you don't know whether it can be added up, or should be.

DOCTOR PHILBUS

News is what you get when you don't have any idea what the fuck is going to happen next, so it's probably going to be news to you. Sort of like seeing Doctor Philbus' naked ass bobbing up and down on my parents' bed that Tuesday afternoon when I came home sick from school, and got sicker.

"What was that?" I heard my mother's voice say, as I opened my bedroom door down the hall and waited a moment before closing it.

I don't know if my coming home was news to her, but as I lay there, thinking about the ball game and about Doc Philbus in the cluster of folks on the hillside, drinking Cokes and beer, paying a little attention to the game, but mostly just having an excuse to be there, then I realized I had been the one paying too little attention.

Reuben Savage had put our team together. We trav-

eled around a bit to play other teams, but mostly we invited them here to play one our field made of pebbles and clay and incidental grass. Reuben said it was our home field advantage. Every time I took a hard grounder in the nuts and my voice was a girl's for a day, then I wondered about that advantage.

"Way to stay in front of it," Reuben said.

"I only have two of 'em," I countered.

But on the hill, that whole time, and I think others, was Doc Philbus of the bobbing ass on top of my mother.

JUST ABOUT HERE

Some places make you want to go back, again and again. Where you're from, what you call home, that place, that town, is the seed that gets planted in you and makes you think that's what you want. Your mama and daddy beat you and send you off, from a town so pour spit is how you water the grass, yet something about that place keeps tugging at you to go back.

For me it was a lot of little things. Certainly those evenings by Sugarloaf Mountain, Priscilla and me learning about the evolution of the human species together. And there was the ball playing and a few friends who

while they faded away in terms of contact, didn't become less in memory. Maybe they became more. Lewis. Boyd. Ellis. Buddy.

And there was my sister. My little sister who grew up faster than me.

But now I'm mixing up people and places. We do that, you know.

Once, Priscilla and I drove to Frederick to go duck pin bowling. There aren't that many people, except those maybe in that area now, who even know what this kind of bowling is. The balls are small enough to hold in your hand. There aren't holes bored in them for your fingers. And you get three of them to knock down the pins. Only you count them up the same. And maybe I don't remember right about the three balls. It's been a long time.

But we loved to do it, and our friends did too. But Priscilla and I went to Frederick to bowl, just the two of us, instead of Gaithersburg at Twinbrooks. Then we went to a drive-in for food where I always got a banana shake. And then we came back by the mountain, skirting it from the north and doubling back to the parking spot that had become ours.

Near the mountain was a tiny town named Comus with a fancy restaurant that the city people drove all the

way out to eat at. Once, before I went off to school, I took Priscilla there. Partly because it was fancy, so maybe special. The other was because it was near a special place for us.

She loved the meal. I thought it was okay. And I didn't think, once we'd done it, the place had anything to do with the mountain.

It took me all summer to work off the money I'd borrowed from my father for the meal. I told him it didn't seem as special to me as it had Priscilla.

Then he told me about how I thought didn't mean much. And he talked about how my mother glowed when he took her there, just lit up, he said, and that made every dollar spent more than worth it.

At the end of summer when I gave him the last of the money I'd borrowed, he took out his wallet to put it in, only instead he took out the whole sum I'd borrowed and gave it to me.

"You made good," he said. "That's something most people just can't do."

JIMSON WEED

Nobody told me about Jimson weed. Daddy called

it by names. Several of them. I never quite put together that they was all the same thing. Not for awhile.

“The thornapple is gettin’ ripe,” he said one fall, as though we’d put out a crop I didn’t know about. He and William in the fields while I was in school. It’d been surprised before, like the time in the corn field finding morning glories running up the cornstalks, pretty in purple and blue and white, depending.

Even moreso, on the outside rows and going with Daddy and my sister to “pick peas” but passing right by the garden and into the farm truck and off to the far field where, on the outside rows the black-eyed peas were running up the cornstalks, just like the morning glory was, only the peas were a whole lot more useful.

“No use puttin’ in poles when you can grow up,” Daddy said.

“The stinkweed ain’t as bad this year as a-fore,” he told William once. To which William grunted assent and kept digging the post hole where we were working on the fence lines, as we did every spring.

Like every farm kid, every farm hand, I kept a blade of grass, the stem of something in my mouth. For a kid it is probably a pose most of the time. For the farm worker out all day, it’s a way the mouth keeps from being dry between chances to get a drink of water at the end of the

row, the corner of the field.

I was a particular liker of sourweed, that looked like little clover, only not as green and not as tall. But I wasn’t averse to a slick, dry stem I could insert between my teeth and still talk without its falling out of my mouth.

“You go on out and open up that new field for the harvester,” Daddy said once, “And I’ll get you that .22 you been wantin’.”

What seemed an easy job when I was part of three or four men doin’ it got way large fast. Cutting and stacking all the grown corn for enough rows for the forage harvester and the tractor pulling it and the wagon into which the harvester blew the cut silage was no small task.

After a couple hours I realized the country store in Hyattstown was no more than a half-hour’s walk away, and although the hill climb back would be hard, the two Royal Crown sixteen ounce colas, and the snack in my belly would make that easy enough. So I did it.

I finished one RC and put the other in the shade, since there wasn’t any creek near the field. And I cut some more, building half-ass shocks since we’d been feeding the corn into the harvester first time around anyhow.

Although I didn’t expect him before near dark, just before late supper, Daddy showed up, said I ought to come to the barn and finish helping the clean-up after

milking.

Daddy was always quiet, but the weight of his silence was the kind that strapped itself onto you, but was also the kind you didn't want lifted since you might be the cause, as most certainly I was this time.

Finally he asked me how it had gone.

I said it had gone fine.

"You able to work on through?" he asked.

"Sure," I said. "It was all right."

"Old Mr. Hammond any help?" he asked.

Mr. Hammond ran the country store.

"No sir."

"I never had you lie to me before, Bobby," he said.

I was right sure I had, but the matter now was that this one, small as it was, mattered more.

"I'd a-thought you'd been on locoweed," he said. "Cept you ain't sick."

And that was it.

But the next spring, disking down a field William had just plowed, I got off to clean some trash off the disk harrow. I was at the fence line and I'd checked my brom sedge all the way to nothing, so I needed something else to chew on. There was a weed, pretty white flower on it that I stripped away, broke away all but the stem, and put

it in my mouth. It was right bitter, but I'd tasted worse.

I did another full round in the field and felt my insides get all twisty, like something bad was coming on, only it wasn't time for flu and we mostly decided not to get sick on the farm anyways.

Too, as I looked up the row's end, it seemed the fog had begun to roll in from nowhere. My mouth got drier than ever and I could feel my body turning red, especially my neck, almost as bad as the embarrassment caused me when I lied to Daddy about going to the store.

I made row's end, shut down the John Deere, and staggered into the fencerow, trying to vomit, only I couldn't. Then, right away, I knew I had to drop my pants, because there'd be no time to get to a bathroom or an outhouse.

I got to the barn, finally, pale by then, and talking to myself more than to my father or to William.

"You been in the weed patch, boy?" William asked.

"Where's that?"

"How 'bout the fence line?"

"So what's unusual about that?" I asked to the black man who seemed more green right then.

"You look like a boy done got into some Jimson weed to me, boy," he said. Then chuckled and slid in beside a cow to see if she was about through being milked

out.

“Am I gonna die?” I asked.

“It’s killed many a man, but more boys,” William said, unconcerned.

“So you don’t think it’s Jimson weed.”

“Oh, I’m right sure it’s Jimson weed. You’re half-crazy, more red than white, but talking so crazy, yeah, I’m sure.”

“So I need to get to a doctor,” I said. “Fast.”

“Nothing Doc Philbus can do for you,” he said, and by then Daddy was back in the barn, listening, and just nodded assent and got under another cow.

“So I’m gonna die and you can’t do nuthin’?”

“Naw, I think you’ll live. But you need to pull you pants up and keep close watch on those seizures.”

Daddy laughed.

Later, alive, I got real picky about my weeds.

RELATIVES

I recall when my Aunt Jenny Lou talked about some relative being “once removed” and I found myself puzzled. I’d never put much in the worship of relatives, being as I was adopted and on a rainy day that seemed a

little bit like being on loan. But I listened hard, because I strongly suspected being removed once was all it took. I certainly preferred not to be removed at all.

Eventually, though, Aunt Jenny either left or I nodded off and slipped into daydreaming that had gotten me the nickname “Unconcius” about the time of first grade on.

I realized eventually that cousins ranged from first cousins right on down, sort of like in the army with a first lieutenant and a second lieutenant and so forth. Then I found out that first cousins, while there were more special, were also, as the Germans would say, *verboten*. You didn’t kiss them and you certainly didn’t park under the shadow of the mountain and tussle around. Or worse.

So the tangling of limbs was not the only snarly things one had to worry about. It seemed, then, like those vines along the fence line at the bottom of Hyattstown Hill, that figuring things out meant studying them carefully, as up close as a boy could, without getting too close.

Unlike my sister, though, I somehow couldn’t feel the connection so much. Being adopted was fine in the first circle of the family, but beyond it things faded fast. Maybe that was my imagination. Maybe not.

REMOVED

When I first came home from college, home sickness worse than hunger at first, but my stubbornness even greater because I wasn't letting any person tell me I couldn't finish what I was doing, and I wasn't letting myself tell me I wasn't gonna even start, my Aunt Wilma and I got into it about kinfolk.

"Well, now, she's twice removed from you," Aunt Wilma went one, but instead of exhausting the concentric rings of family she somehow got stuck.

Finally I just said to her, "Yes, I remember reading about what Plato wrote about being removed like that?"

"Play-Doh?"

"It sounds like my cousin Sissy is twice as far from the truth as somebody or maybe I am," I said. "That's the gist of what he was writing about."

"I thought it wasn't no person's name, but like a play on words, you know: 'dough,' she said.

"It is, Aunt Wilma," I said. "Plato lived a couple thousand years ago."

"We'll he's dead."

"Yes he is."

"Then how would he know anything about Sissy?" she asked.

It didn't really get better at church, to which I went

to please my mama who played the piano for the main service.

Preacher John, fresh in from Bob Jones University, did a little fire and brimstone and did a little different kind of guilt to get collection plate donations up, then we dismissed. However, he caught me at the door.

"You must be Bobby Lee Blakely," he said.

"You'd be right," I answered.

"What are you reading out there in college?"

"Oh, we read some Schopenhauer, and some Kierkegaard," I said. "I liked Kierkegaard."

"Well, son, you'll go to hell reading that Kierkegaard," he said, somber as Mr. Death himself.

I tilted my head, confused, rather than running with the sweat of damnation worry about me. Finally, before heading off and not coming back again, I asked him a question. "How do you know that, Preacher?"

THEREFORE

James Williams rocked back, his ass in my mother's rocker on our porch, and proclaimed "I knows you better than you knows you."

"I know enough about you to hurt you," I said back,

calmly, believing every word I said.

“You shunt say things like that,” James William said back.

“You got a granddaddy who plays the devil’s instrument,” I said.

“He was one hell of a fiddler,” he said.

“Was?”

“The devil done took him,” James William said.

I felt like I had been making butter, knowing it was good stuff, salted just right, shaped up, and I’d just put my stamp on it when the man helping me pushed it right up against the box stove and melted it to a puddle.

James William laughed, rocked some more, offering me only a chuckle or two now.

I knew all the Williamses though, including a good bit about the dead ones. When we’d bought our place of the side of the mountain above Luray, the Williamses appeared like their holler in Tennessee was just up the valley from us. Only that wasn’t true and yet they just appeared, like stray dogs come home after tearing up the sheep of a neighbor just far enough away they won’t never get caught.

James William stopped rocking.

“Willie Overton Williams came home one Sunday with a fiddle that looked like it had been stolen from the

New York Philharmonic,” he said. “It was so purty it could still be called a violin, ‘cept anything with strings had to be called a fiddle or a guitar, not counting the harp the womens sometimes played.”

I felt myself settle in, despite not liking James William a lick, into that comfortable place where receiving a story is like having dessert you didn’t know you was going to get, but immediately you’re glad, no matter you don’t know quite what kind yet.

DOC PHILBUS

Being back from college made me bolder than I realized. So I went over to Doc Philbus’ house. I didn’t know who I would find. Maybe Doc Philbus. Maybe my mother.

It was a day when the doc could have been at work. I’m sure, Sootie Maybelle, his receptionist, felt he ought to be at work.

Only he wasn’t, and answered the door himself.

Robert!” he said, all surprised, more than he had a right to be.

“Yep,” I said.

“What can I do you for?”

“Thought you’d want to talk,” I said.

“We can do that,” he said, waving me in and taking off his dress jacket, black, as though he were ready for a funeral he hadn’t got word of yet.

“About my mother,” I said.

“I don’t talk about my patients to others,” he said.

“Then you shouldn’t of told me she was a patient.”

“You done got smarter than a man has a right to figure in a year,” Doc said.

“Not really,” I said.

“Now that’s probably true,” he said. “And accurate.”

“Maybe.”

“Yeah, I know a lot about saving lives. And about making people more comfortable about things like dying. Worse, I know more about dying and what makes it happen than almost anything in the world. It’s something that makes you want to grow flowers,” Doc said.