

THE
Westchester
REVIEW

A LITERARY JOURNAL
OF WRITERS
FROM THE HUDSON
TO THE SOUND

Hudson River

Long Island Sound

Fiction • Poetry • Nonfiction
Volume 3 • 2009 • \$10.00

Bob

Kevin Egan

When you first see me, on page 27, I'm driving the lead truck of a traveling animal show. The art work dates from the 1940s, but even for its time it is fancifully archaic. The truck resembles a cross between a farm tractor and a sedan, with fully exposed balloon tires and a large chrome grille. My face is long and cylindrical, like a cartoon steam whistle with a ski-jump nose. The Director sits beside me. He has a round face and slick black hair parted in the middle and a handlebar mustache.

What you don't know is this: We're about an hour out of the last town and have another hour's drive till we reach the next, where we'll set up for tonight's show. The Director talks. The Director likes to talk and he rides with me because he can talk and I will listen. Well, not really listen. I just don't say anything to interrupt him, which he interprets as listening. I can barely hear what he says above the rumble of the engine, but I know from the pattern of his words and the length of the pauses in between that he's complaining about this year's bookings, which are in smaller towns with fewer people and less money.

I spot the monkey first, and because my job sometimes involves the care and feeding of a whole menagerie, I don't think much of it. But then it registers: that's a monkey with a bag slung over its shoulder pedaling a bicycle with a broken wheel along the highway.

At that exact moment, the Director yells for me to stop the truck. I do, and the whole caravan skids to a halt behind us. The Director climbs down. The monkey drops the bicycle. He

sits on his haunches, a hand across his eyes, his mouth twitching. His bag is yellow and made of canvas, with neatly folded newspapers inside. His bike is blue, with sixteen-inch wheels. The front tire is flat, the rim bent as if it hit a boulder at high speed.

The Director crouches on one knee and slowly holds out his hand until the monkey sidles over and touches it. Then he turns to me and winks. The wink says, “I have an idea.”

In a second – the quick turn of a page – we’re back in the truck and rolling again. The monkey sits between the Director and me; the bicycle is tied to the roof of the truck. The scene is severely foreshortened, the truck and its three trailers receding deep into the background. An ostrich peeks out through the bars of one of the trailers.

“This is Bob,” the Director tells the monkey. “He’ll fix your bike in no time. And then ...”

Yep. That’s me. I’m Bob, a perpetually grinning minor character in a children’s book about a monkey. But I have my own story, too.

I’VE ALWAYS had a knack for fixing things. In that long ago time depicted in the book, every town had a repair shop owned by a grandfatherly man with wild gray hair, a bushy gray mustache, and a pair of magnifying glasses that clung to the edge of his nose. His shop would be filled with all kinds of broken objects, from tiny lady’s Bulovas to bulky Admiral televisions in thick plastic cabinets. It was a different era. People treated what they owned with respect. Something broke, and they didn’t junk it; they fixed it.

We were tight for money, so my father always tried to fix whatever broke in our house himself before trotting it down to the repair shop. One day I watched over his shoulder as he removed the screws of a Philco radio and lifted off the body. Inside, the tubes stood like skyscrapers in an Art Deco city. He wiggled each tube till it loosened enough to pop out, then blew the dust off the bottom and pushed it back into place.

“That should do it,” he said.

He clicked the On/Off switch. The tubes slowly brightened into their warm orange glow. He twisted the tuner knob. A silver wafer shaped like a half moon see-sawed back and forth. He frowned, cranked the volume knob, and leaned his ear close to the speaker as he ran the tuner up and down the band.

“Dammit,” he said. He flung himself away from the workbench and wandered across the basement, slicking his two wings of hair over his bald spot.

I hopped onto the workbench and turned off the radio. After the tubes darkened, I ran my fingers along the wires, tweaked the connections, tapped all the different parts that, though nameless in my mind, had a sense of rightness in form and function, like parts of the human anatomy. I switched the radio back on, then slowly nudged the tuner. Sound erupted, so loud I could feel it in my chest. My father came back to the workbench.

“How did you do it, Bob?” he said.

I shrugged.

WE PULL INTO Nelsonville and onto the high school ballfields. I usually help the roadies set up because something always needs to be fixed or jerry-rigged. But today the Director says, “Stick with me, Bob,” and while he brings the monkey into the costume trailer I bend the bicycle rim back into shape and patch the gash in the tire. I finish just as the Director clomps down the trailer steps with the monkey on his shoulder and a bugle in his hand.

“See that?” the Director tells him. “You’re wearing an outfit just like Bob’s.”

I hate the damn outfit. The green jacket cuts under my arms, the white breeches ride high in my crotch, and the black bow-tie presses against my Adam’s apple. Everyone in the show wears the same outfit day and night, and as bad as it looks on us humans, it looks worse on the monkey.

“A monkey riding a bicycle is old hat,” the Director says. “But a monkey riding a bicycle and blowing a bugle, now that’s something.”

He bends sideways to let the monkey drop to the ground and hands over the bugle. The monkey wraps his lips around the mouthpiece and blows. Faint bugle noises reach my ears.

“Hear that?” the Director crows.

“I see,” I tell him.

I WAS FIVE years old when I fixed that Philco radio, and after that I spent long hours in the basement tinkering with broken things. The work absorbed me. I rarely spoke and never answered

the dinner bell until my mother came down and tapped me on the shoulder.

“What will become of him?” she would ask my father. “He’s so ... so disconnected.”

“He’ll be a repairman,” my father would reply. “The world always needs repairmen.”

In school, the nuns thought me dull, stupid, even lazy. I was in third grade before the school nurse attached me to a black box with big headphones and asked me to raise my hand when I heard the beeps in my ears.

“Hard of hearing” was my diagnosis.

“That explains a lot,” said my mother.

I met Zoe my first day of fourth grade. We were the two shortest kids in our class, so when the bell rang and the nuns assembled us for our march into the school we were side by side. Zoe took my hand. We didn’t just cup palms; she twined her fingers in between mine. I smiled.

Over the years, Zoe often said how my smile captivated her on that September morning. Only later did she understand that my smile was my way of dealing with the world, of answering questions I never completely heard or saying things that never quite formed on my tongue.

Zoe and I got married straight out of high school. My father had died and left behind a small insurance policy with me as beneficiary. I used the money to buy the local repair shop. Zoe would come to the shop at noon everyday, reverse the Open/Closed sign that hung in the door, and spread lunch picnic-style on my counter. After lunch, she would wink, I would smile, and we would repair to the cot I kept in the back room.

After a while, Zoe stopped bringing me lunch and began sending me off to the shop with a brown bag. First it was once a week, then twice, then five times. Alone, I began nipping at a bottle, napping on the cot after hours. Zoe didn’t complain about me dragging myself home in the night. Then one lunchtime, on a hunch, I reversed the Open/Closed sign and walked home. I found Zoe in bed with a man who, not so coincidentally, had brought in several broken watches that morning.

I stood at the foot of the bed, my smile a dumb grin of disbelief. Zoe pulled the covers to her chin. I didn’t know which hurt worse, the situation or her need to be modest in front of me.

“I’m sorry, Bob,” she mouthed.

“How are my watches coming?” said the man.

After that, my business tanked. It probably had been failing for awhile and I just hadn't noticed. But now people stopped coming in altogether. One day, I just got tired. I closed the shop for good and took a walk and saw a sign plastered to a telephone pole.

Animal Show – 7 PM Tonight – Village Fairgrounds

I went to the show and marveled at all the workers in their green-and-white uniforms. How happy they seemed, how efficiently they kept the show rolling, how quickly they changed the sets in the center ring like a finely tuned machine. After the show, I knocked on the door to the Director's trailer and asked for a job.

"I'm always looking for good people," the Director said. "What can you do?"

"I fix things," I said.

THE SHOW HAS a crew of twenty, including the Director. At night after the crowd goes home, we build a campfire in the sawdust and break out a jug. As the whiskey flows, so do the stories. One guy is running from a girl he got pregnant. Another guy is hiding from the law after punching out his boss. Several were jilted like me, and though the details are different, the end results are all the same: our girls dumped us for other guys, and here we are.

The Director doesn't join in these bull sessions. He hovers out where the firelight shades into darkness and the animals rustle unseen in their cages. He's not like the rest of us. He's bigger and rounder, while we're all straight and angular. Plus, his green jacket is the only one with tails.

The Director and I spend hours together in the truck each day. When he isn't talking, he slaps his knee or taps his foot to a song playing in his head. In front of the crowd each evening, the Director is all smiles and charm. But during the day, with the sun angling through the windshield, he's neither as round nor as smooth as he looks in pictures. His stomach sags over his belt. His face is seamed with scars. Some days, when he feels expansive, he'll stop whatever he's telling me and take a deep breath as if he's about to confide a secret.

"There are things you don't want to know, Bob," he'll eventually say. "Things that would wipe that smile off your face."

Some days, I feel expansive, too. I want to tell my own story. But I always pull back because I'm afraid it would sound trite compared to whatever he doesn't tell me.

THE DIRECTOR sits the monkey on a bench and warns him not to go too close to the ostrich cage because the ostrich will snatch the bugle from his hand and swallow it.

Then the Director pulls me aside.

“Keep your eye on that little bugger,” he tells me. “I don’t trust him.”

The grounds buzz as we set up for the evening show. We don’t have a tent or a big top, we don’t have a sideshow or clowns. We park the trucks and trailers in a semicircle for the backdrop, then complete the circle with benches. The benches are old and heavy, with dozens of coats of yellow paint holding their splinters in place.

I keep one eye on the monkey as I help the other guys. He sits where the Director left him, alternately punching the inside of his cap and tooting on the bugle. Eventually my eyes slide away and I forget about him. Nelsonville is the closest we’ll get to home on this swing through the state. I’m thinking Zoe knows we’re in town. I’m thinking she knows I joined the show. I’m hoping she comes to the show tonight and that we’ll have a moment to talk.

These are fond hopes, but they are enough to keep my eyes searching the edge of the ball field rather than watching the monkey. Then I hear a sound like a foghorn coming from a great distance. All the guys drop the benches and run. I see immediately what happened. The monkey is standing outside the ostrich cage, and the ostrich has the bugle stuck in its throat.

I run over, too, and climb into the cage. I may be smiling, but in my mind I’m cursing the goddam monkey. Another guy and I hold the ostrich around the waist while the Director pulls at the bugle. The bugle pops free, and the Director lands on his ass. He slaps the sawdust off his pants and screams at the monkey. The monkey’s shoulders sag.

I lock the ostrich cage. When I climb down, the Director stops me.

“Bob,” he says. “I give you one thing to do. One simple thing.”

“Won’t happen again,” I tell him.

The whole crew breaks for lunch, but I sit on the bench with the monkey instead of joining the guys. The monkey takes off his jacket and cap and sets them and the bugle between us on the bench. I peel off the crust of my tuna sandwich and give it to him. He pinches it with his fingers, tilts his head back and forth to inspect it, then lowers it into his mouth. I rip the rest of the sandwich in half.

The blue bicycle leans on its kickstand a few yards away. The front tire is plump. The rim is a perfect circle. Monkeys don't live wild in this part of the world, and even if they did you wouldn't find one bumping along a highway shoulder on a bicycle with a canvas bag full of newspapers. But the Director ignores these obvious facts. All he can think about is the picture in his head of the monkey dressed in green and riding the bike and blowing the bugle. He doesn't think that this monkey had to come from somewhere and that maybe, if not probably, it's the only friend a shy, lonely, and possibly sickly kid might have.

I'm thinking of this theoretical young boy when I notice the whole crew is up and running again. The monkey is still sitting on the bench, not getting into any mischief, so it takes me a moment to understand what's happening: the bear cub has escaped!

The bear cub is a new addition to the show. (The Director bought him from some shady animal supply outfit in Boston at the start of the season.) The cub's act is to ride on the ostrich's back while the ostrich parades around the ring. I'm the guy who leads the ostrich by its leash.

I join the chase as the cub darts across a baseball diamond toward a line of trees. Something speeds past me – the monkey riding his bicycle, the canvas newspaper bag flying from his shoulder. He rides faster than any of us can run, and he closes fast on the cub, but not fast enough. The cub reaches the trees and climbs up to a limb fifteen, maybe twenty feet off the ground. The monkey drops his bicycle. He sits on his haunches and looks up. The crew and I catch up and gather around, reading the situation until the Director pushes through.

“Oh shit,” he says.

The cub is too scared to climb down, and there's no way any of us can climb that high. We all start talking. Ladders, ropes, human chains, building some kind of cushion on the ground so the cub can drop down safely.

The monkey points at the limb, rubs his face, gibbers and screams. The Director is boiling, as if he wants to blame the monkey but knows he can't. Then the monkey starts climbing up the trunk, with the canvas bag hanging from his shoulder. He reaches the limb and tightropes out to where the cub clings to a branch.

“What the hell is he doing?” says the Director.

I see it before anyone else does and set myself right underneath the limb with my arms

stretched up. The monkey stuffs the cub into the canvas bag, then holds the bag by the straps and hangs from the limb by his feet. With me stretching and the monkey hanging, we cut the distance in half. The monkey's eyes lock on mine. Everyone around us goes silent. I wink. The monkey lets go of the straps. The cub drops into my arms.

A huge cheer goes up from the guys.

The Director is happy with the monkey and happy with me and thrilled to have the bear cub safely on the ground again. We all go back to work. There are more benches to line up and more props to position in the center ring. The bear cub, unaware of his celebrity, tumbles in his cage. The monkey, wearing his green coat and hat, rides his bicycle and toots the bugle.

Around dinner time, a blue convertible pulls up outside the circle and a guy dressed head to toe in canary yellow unfolds himself from behind the wheel.

"Get a load of that creep," says one of the guys.

The man in yellow stands arms akimbo, looks us all up and down, then speaks in a demanding voice. Someone points to the Director's trailer, and the man in yellow pounds on the door. The Director lets him in.

We all move close, and even I can hear them trading shouts inside the trailer. A few minutes later, the man in yellow comes out with the monkey under his arm.

THE SHOW WAS a great success that night. The man in yellow allowed the monkey to perform and stayed himself to watch. The monkey rode his bicycle and blew his bugle. I led the ostrich around the stage with the bear cub riding on its back. The Director stood on the stage and, in his inimitably charming way, announced each act. The townspeople filled the benches. They ate the day-old popcorn and drank the flat soda, and no one seemed to care.

After the show, in the fading twilight of a summer evening, the man in yellow took the monkey and the bicycle to his blue convertible and drove away. We stood around, cracking dirty jokes about the nature of their relationship. Then the Director poked his head out of his trailer and told us to get our asses moving and dismantle the set.

The next day, on the road to the next town, I didn't hear a damn word the Director said. All I could think about was how we were moving away from our closest encounter with my old

home town. The balance of summer had tipped. We were on the downside now, meandering toward our winter grounds in Indiana. That night, after I led the ostrich around the stage with the bear cub on its back, I slipped away from the show. I stood in the darkness at the edge of the grounds. The crowd straggled past, heading for home. The guys started loading the benches onto the trucks. They talked and laughed. The Director poked his head out of the trailer and yelled. I heard my name mentioned, but no one missed me.

I took one step. Then another. And then another. Soon enough, I was gone.

I walked all night. The next day, a farmer in an old pick-up truck offered me a lift.

“You’re from the animal show, ain’tcha?” he said.

I was still wearing my outfit. The inside of the truck smelled of chewing tobacco, and as the farmer bumped back onto the highway he ejected a long stream of dark juice out the window.

“Caught the show in Nelsonville two nights ago,” he said. “Brought my little grandson. There was this monkey. Wore the same outfit as you. Rode a bike and played a bugle at the same time. Never saw anything like it.”

It took me all day and three more rides, but by nightfall I was walking down the street to my old repair shop. I found the key right where I’d left it hidden behind a loose brick, let myself in, and crashed onto my cot.

Three days passed before anyone noticed the shop was open for business again, and five days before the first customer came through the door. It was Zoe. She carried the little two-cup coffee percolator we’d gotten as a wedding gift.

“It doesn’t heat up,” she said.

I unscrewed the bottom and lifted off the silver body. The heating element looked fine to me, and I realized that was the point.

“I’m sorry, Bob,” Zoe said. She had tears in her eyes.

I tried not to smile.

NO ONE IN TOWN ever spoke about the animal show, and though I scanned the newspaper everyday of every summer for several years, I never saw any advertisements for it. I kept my outfit buried in the bottom drawer of my dresser and occasionally would catch a glimpse of the green

jacket as I searched for something else. Then one day the outfit was simply gone. I never asked, but I assume Zoe dumped it in the Goodwill bin.

The monkey went on to other adventures in other books. He baked a cake, went to a hospital, and climbed the skeleton of a dinosaur. His life intersected with the lives of many people like me and temporarily made them famous.

Once or twice a year, I sneak off to the town library and pull down the only one of those books that matters to me. Looking at those pages is like looking at an old photo album. Everyone is so young, the Director, the guys, even me. I can see right through my stupid grin to the pain I felt from missing my Zoe. But on page 43, the last page where I appear, I notice something interesting. I'm circling the ring with the ostrich on a leash. The monkey is in front of me, riding the bicycle and blowing the bugle. The man in yellow sits in the front row of the benches, clapping like hell. I'm looking at him out of the corner of my eye and I remember being impressed by his devotion. That was the exact moment I decided to go home.

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ISBN-13: 978-0-692-00185-1



9 780692 001851 \$10.00