

Ponckhockie Union

(Excerpt)

Brent Robison

1: Today

Right now the air is fresh and bright, warming after a frost. I'm grateful to need neither sweater nor jacket as I sit here on my deck. Sunshine and breeze wrestle to decide which controls the temperature. The lawn glistens, striped by long afternoon shadows of tree trunks, and occasionally the forest shivers and twinkles and yellow leaves drift singly to the ground. All sounds are a distant hum and shush—a car on the road, an airplane, rustling treetops—but then a lone birdsong, from somewhere near to my right, dips and twirls above all the sounds, like a dragonfly over a pond.

I have a story to tell, but first, I will ground myself in my own internal world of perception. This is my way.

In my leg that rests across the opposite knee, I feel the pulse of my blood, a steady beat. I see the wrinkles in the skin of my hands. This aging hulk of flesh and blood and bone is my current manifestation of self, in this here and now. Sometimes I feel closely identified with it, sometimes not. Right now this body just seems like any other random event, an arising in the field of awareness, like the birdsong a moment ago.

It doesn't feel like "me." Whatever that is.

Random arisings... like the fly that just landed, touched my finger, and flew away. Or the shadow that just crossed my page and, when I looked up, became a perfect brown oak leaf dancing its way down the air to the ground.

Or like the thoughts, images, feelings that follow one after another through my mental space, some of them carrying the label of “memory” and others the label of “imagination.” Yet each is nothing more than a current circumstance, a little electrochemical flicker in the brain, happening nowhere and nowhen but here and now: Willow, New York. October 17th, 2015.

I meditate on these ideas while the story takes shape in the dark reservoir beneath.

It’s entirely possible that there is no such thing as linear time: past, present, future. Maybe the apparent timeline we call a life is just a creation of the human mind. Yet, along its illusory course, strands of linked events meander and fork and intertwine like rivers seen from an airliner window.

Yesterday and today, suddenly my past has invaded my present.

Yesterday afternoon, the 16th, while my wife was working, I sat at home looking through old videotapes from over twenty years ago. My ten-year-old daughter, Chandra, is into roller skating and I wanted to show her the skate-dancers in Central Park that I had shot on video in the early nineties. I dug out my ancient Sony 8mm Handycam and shuffled through a box of poorly-labeled tapes, viewing the footage on the camera’s little fold-out screen.

After several tries, I found a tape marked *Aug ‘94 Park* and fast-forwarded it until I saw skating footage. Tinny disco music blared out of the miniature speaker as I watched the graceful, funky dancers skating in circles. It’s interesting what time will do. I had no memory of being the eye behind that camera, as if someone else had shot this scene. I watched as the camera panned across the crowd of tourists and gawkers.

Then a gesture caught my eye. The flutter of a hand. A left hand wiping sweat from a brow, a flick of wrist, an angle of elbow, a moment gone. It echoed a memory, long repressed, of an inexplicable disaster, a wrenching turn in my path.

I immediately stopped the playback and rewound the tape, back to where I’d seen the gesture. Yes. There he was. A man whose face was so bland it was easy to overlook, almost invisible. It was a face that had gradually dissolved into a blur in my memory, out of reach. But now here it was again. The face of a man I once called Double Naught, as in: no, none, a negation. A man like a black hole, who shed no light.

Two decades had passed since I saw that face. I had hoped to never see it again.

I spent the next hour looking with care through the rest of that tape and another one from the same summer. I kept my focus always on the background, the blur of passing strangers, that New York City human atmosphere that becomes almost invisible. I glimpsed him two more times, once at Bethesda Fountain and again on Central Park West.

Gradually the revelation dawned: he had been following me. Even then, a full year before we met, before the events tumbled down on my head like a building collapsing, he had been there. Watching me. Planning. The old familiar dread, gone for so long now, crept again up my spine. Is he still watching me, even now, waiting to swoop down and destroy?

That discovery itself was unsettling enough, but there was also the fact of today’s date, a date inextricably connected to the man on the tape. A truly odd coincidence, except that I don’t

believe in mere coincidence. And then my questions were intensified even more by what happened this morning.

Around 10 a.m. my journalist friend Paul called and asked me to meet him at the mortuary in Woodstock, and to be prepared to view a corpse. He wouldn't say more. I left immediately and drove the five miles into town, dreading what might be in store. Paul and I had met in the nineties during that same difficult period that was already nagging at my mind. Even though we still see each other occasionally, I had the inexplicable sense that his call was related to those long-gone times.

October 16th and 17th: the dates of the burning of Kingston and the surrender at Saratoga during the Revolutionary War, dates that once ruled all my thoughts, that summer twenty years ago when I was so irrationally immersed in that little slice of American history. The year of change, the year that marked the end of one self, the beginning of another.

In the chilly prep room of Lasher Funeral Home, the mortician pulled back a sheet and I saw an elderly man with long, tangled gray hair and beard. For a moment I was blank, then I recognized him: this was a man who wandered the streets of Woodstock, silent but often smiling. His sole occupation seemed to be painting graceful Sanskrit symbols—*Om* and *Om Mani Padme Hum*—on rocks, boards, driftwood, then giving the pieces away to whomever took his fancy. He had given more than one to my wife—they decorate our front porch and a couple of window sills—and she had told me he was very sweet to her. Among the several eccentric street folk of Woodstock, he was the most lovable. His death from a heart attack was a sad event for our town, yes... but I never knew his name or where he lived and had never had any direct contact with him. Why was Paul showing me his body?

I have an answer. But the answer requires a long, convoluted tale—especially in light of what I found yesterday afternoon. Synchronicity carries meaning. Yesterday the man on tape, today the dead man—the two of them forever connected in a long-past mystery, unsolved.

I'll never know the whole truth. But now, I can't help it, I have to look back. Two specters from my past suddenly here again, on these dates. I have to go over the story once more, once more, as if maybe this time it will make sense.

2: Heat

I suppose that if I'd known what would happen later, I never would have driven upstate that long-ago day. Or maybe I would have, but I wouldn't have spoken to Nils Nilsson when I did; I would have just nodded and turned away when he said hello. And even if I had spoken to him, I wouldn't have called him the next week to follow up on his offer. That was the turning point.

Or maybe it wasn't. Maybe the decisive moment was much earlier, when I first decided to make the film. But of course, all this speculation doesn't matter, because I didn't know what would happen. One never can. So I did what I did, the events tumbled after like dominoes, and I landed in the middle of something I never could have imagined, with no way out. By the time it was all over, my life had been altered forever.

To this day, there are still far more questions than answers about what was going on that summer, but that's okay. I've grown a lot since then; I've learned to prefer the questions. And the ironic thing is that as much as I might say that I would have liked to avoid what happened, still I know that all of it was bringing me to where I am now, and I wouldn't want today to be any different.

The date it all started was July 15, 1995, a Saturday. Earlier that morning freak windstorms had inflicted massive forest damage in the Adirondacks—"blowdown" they call it, broken trunks and limbs tangled twelve feet deep in places. At the same time, a heat wave was blasting the entire eastern half of the country. I learned later that over 160 people in Chicago died as a result of the temperature that day. The New York area had a heat index of 112°. Also, the dew point was abnormally high, which meant not only that the humidity was nearly unbearable, but also that air conditioners, designed for a specific dew point, couldn't do their job. Over the next two weeks, some days set all-time records of power usage. More people died.

On that Saturday, I was driving up the New York State Thruway on my way to the city of Kingston, exit 19. I had left my office in Jersey City around 1:00, intending to arrive a little early for my 3 p.m. appointment with a Mr. Randall O'Brien, owner of one of the oldest houses in Kingston. I wanted to feature his house, maybe even him and his family as well, in a film I was planning to make. At this stage the film was officially just speculation, with strong interest from the State University of New York, but no contract. And I wanted to eventually sell it to PBS. It was to be a historical documentary—a series actually—about the beginnings of New York, the story of its transformation from a British colony into a state, one state in a new young nation of states, united. I was attracted to the fact that it was not general knowledge that Kingston was New York's first capital; it had played a brief but important role in the drama, and gotten burned

in the process. I was going to shed some light on those facts, among others.

I also had a secret agenda, one that I never mentioned to potential funding sources, who tended to be politically conservative. I wanted to promote a subtle revisionist history, take the official record out of the hands of the moneyed elite and put it where it belongs: with ordinary citizens. I had read Howard Zinn's *A People's History of the United States*. I was a Zinn man but I would smile and pretend I wasn't, and people would give me money. Then I would make the movie I wanted to make and they always loved it, never realizing the subtle ways I was undermining their corporate gospel. There was never much profit in this, but I was proud to have succeeded several times, and I was hopeful this one would go the same way.

But the film never got made. It started as another typical idea, one of my many dreams, that my wife and business partner, Cate, called "lovely, insubstantial schemes" as she blamed them for all our financial struggles. But this one ended far differently from the ones that had come before, and the fact that our marriage ended along with it is only a small part of the damage done, the blowdown, of that summer.

On the afternoon that my adventure began, I was at the usual stage of information gathering, preliminary interviews, location scouting. In those days I always carried with me a small video camera, and I had just bought a Sony model, the first of the new breed of all-digital camcorders using Mini-DV tape. That meant I got surprisingly good quality with handheld mobility, plus the convenience of quickly dumping the footage to a computer in my office and making rough cuts for planning purposes. It was the perfect note-taking camera for a dinosaur like me who always wanted to do the "real" production on film. Thirty-five millimeter if the budget could handle it. Film—that old-fashioned analog stuff with sprocket holes and a thin coating of light-sensitive chemistry that made such beautiful pictures, pictures with subtlety and truth that the magnetics and electronics of video could never capture. At least, not in those days, before HD.

But of course, while I dreamed of warmly lit, gracefully composed motion pictures, the world was passing me by with flashy bytes and sparkling pixels. My company—I say "company" despite the fact that it was me, alone, doing most of the work—had already done a couple of video productions for paying clients, with not a single foot of celluloid to be seen. I was being dragged into digital video because—*Don't you get it?* the voices of reason said—it was cost-effective.

Still, for this historical series, it seemed justified, even necessary, to choose the right medium. I really, really wanted to make a film, not a video. I was prepared to fight, to fight my wife, to hold on to artistic integrity. But it all came to naught. On the seat at my side was the bag that held the camera about which I had this paradoxical mix of feelings: such a fun, efficient little marvel; such a threat to all I held dear.

I drove and sweated. I sweated because, when I bought my little Hyundai—the cheapest car in America the previous year—I had opted for the most basic model. No air conditioning. Such was my financial condition. But I made that decision also because I was typically not much

bothered by heat, even in the intense grimy humidity of New York City summers. I surrender to sweat, I let the glistening film cover my body, and I go about doing the things I want to do. I'm grateful I do not suffer. Sweat forms on my upper lip under my mustache, in the crease of my neck under my beard. I wipe it away; that's all.

Today, right now, two decades after the events of that July, here on the hidden bank of the Little Beaver Kill in Willow, the weather is perfect, the temperature cool, the breeze gentle, and the hot, dirty city far away and forgotten.

But on that day, not even my standard cooling method (the one my father had made the same joke about every summer of my childhood, varying it only to fit the numbers to the situation: "Got the 4-60 System on," he'd announce with a grin as if we'd never heard it before, "4 windows open, 60 miles an hour")—not even the constant 75 mile-per-hour breeze from my open windows could disguise the fact that it was hot, damned hot.

The window roar was drowning the music from my tape deck and I hated struggling to hear my favorite album. Better to just shut it off. Leonard Cohen had just started with "The birds they sang at the break of day / Start again, I heard them say / Don't dwell on what has passed away / Or what is yet to be..." when I ejected the tape with a brutal clunk. I told myself there was a sort of music in the white noise of the Thruway. Listen for it.

Between exits 17 and 18, I came suddenly upon traffic stopped dead across both northbound lanes, a few cars even parked on the shoulder. The obstruction was too far ahead to be seen. I was in the fast lane, and the feeling of forward motion inexplicably halted was disorienting; the Thruway was not a place for standing still. Some people just stayed in their cars, air conditioners blasting. Others got out, stood talking in small groups, or tried to see ahead, even by climbing on the roofs of their vehicles. I watched. Here was one of the things I've always loved about New Yorkers (and I've been to enough other places to know it's not universal): they can make a social event out of anything. There's no such thing as a stranger when you're all in a bind together. Although I've been amongst them since the day I was born, I've always felt a bit outside that way of thinking, a bit withholding, withdrawn, reticent about self-disclosure. But I love the way these garrulous, crusty, straight-talking neighbors of mine can draw me out.

Minutes crawled by. Two police cars made their way up the shoulder, weaving between parked cars, to get to the scene ahead. I overheard conversations; someone said an ambulance had gone by earlier. I sat in my car. There was nothing on the radio about the blockage. Without motion, the open window was no help; I couldn't even hang my arm out because any contact with metal would mean a serious burn. I oozed; my shirt stuck to the seat. I opened the door and stood up, hoping to catch a stir in the torpid air.

"Killer hot day, eh?" I heard from behind.

I turned to see a tall skinny guy in a short-sleeved yellow shirt and khaki slacks approaching from one of the cars behind me. I guessed he was older than me, fifty-ish. He wore thick glasses and several pens in his shirt pocket. Strands of thin blond hair were sweat-plastered across his balding dome. "Any idea what's going on?"

“Nah, I don’t have a clue,” I said. “Nothin’ on the radio.”

“Got a long trip ahead?” He swabbed moisture from his brow with a bare hand and wiped it on his pants. In addition to the big dark circles in his armpits, his shirt was showing small wet spots here and there, growing as I watched.

“Just trying to get to Kingston; what... 20 miles? Gonna be late for an appointment now.” I wasn’t sure I wanted a conversation with this stranger, but there seemed to be nothing else to do. “How about you?”

“Going home. Little nowhere place called Quaker Springs, Saratoga County. Beautiful there. Peaceful.” His shoulders were rounded, his shoes in a V, toes out, and his hands hung unnaturally still at his sides. “I’ve been at a conference in the big city for a couple of days. Now I’m just wanting to relax at home in the country, y’know? But... patience is a virtue, they say.”

We stared ahead for few seconds. I felt uncomfortable, as I often do when it seems that small talk is required. I surrendered to the pressure. “What kind of conference?”

“A.L.A.—American Library Association. I’m a librarian. But my name isn’t Marian, ha ha.” His tall body made a sudden weaving motion, a little stationary dance. His fingers flared in front of him, then all went stock still again. I assumed the little grimace on the lower half of his face was a smile at his own lame joke. He jabbed a thumb toward my car. “I see by your license plates you’re from New Jersey. What brings you to Kingston?”

It was not in my nature to be very glib about my work, especially in the beginning stages. “Oh, just some historical research— Revolutionary War stuff.”

Behind the thick lenses, his eyes widened. “Really? Please say more.”

I found myself wondering if this guy was some kind of crank, but at the same time feeling he was likable—odd but trustworthy. An innocent. And I had nothing to hide, after all.

“Well... did you know that the British burned Kingston to the ground during the Revolution?”

“Yes, I certainly did... do... I do know that. I’m kind of an American history buff myself. I gather you’ll be visiting the Senate House, the old stone homes uptown, and so on?”

“Well, yes, eventually. Today I’m headed down to the riverfront to an area called Ponckhockie, where they say the first house was burned.”

“Oh, yes. Can’t say I know much about that. But, when you’re in the neighborhood, you should drop by the Ponckhockie Union Congregational Church. Beautiful piece of architecture, one of the first uses of reinforced concrete. Dates from 1870 or so, not exactly the time-frame you’re investigating, but...”

I wasn’t especially interested. “I’ll check it out.”

We both peered north again for a few seconds, then he spoke with a rush of enthusiasm. “So if you’re an expert on the Revolution, I’m sure you *must* have been to Saratoga. My house is right on the edge of the old battlefield there, the north end, near the Benedict Arnold monument. You probably know far more than I, so please, forgive any *faux pas*—Saratoga, of course, was *the* big turning point in the war. Those nasty ol’ redcoats never quite recovered, and it proved to the world that America was a force to be reckoned with.”

At his mention of Benedict Arnold, I felt a wall go up in myself. It was an old sore point, a long story, one that I'll tell later. My chuckle was disingenuous. "An expert? I'm definitely no expert. I don't know much at all, really. I mean, who can remember their high school history class? Not me."

"Oh, I suppose you're right." His smile slumped a bit.

I wiped a drop of sweat from my eye. I wanted to brush him off, but I was also curious about his knowledge. "I'm just beginning to study this stuff—it's actually for a film project I'm doing for SUNY. I've heard of the Battle of Saratoga but never been there."

"Tell you what..." He pulled a plastic business card holder and a pen out of his overloaded shirt pocket. "If you ever have the desire to come on up and check it out, give me a ringy-dingy. Here, I'll put my home number on the back." He hunched over the card in his right hand and scribbled with his left.

"I just may take you up on that," I said, and the truth is, I wasn't pretending. Oddball or not, maybe he was a real resource, a librarian with historical smarts and local connections. My childish touchiness about America's most famous traitor was no reason to ignore an opportunity. I leaned into the car and extracted a card from my camera bag. "Here's mine."

He spoke as he moved my card up and down, searching for focus. "And by the way—these things happened at the same time, did you know that? Vaughan's men torched Kingston—a nasty little exercise in punishment, with no strategic justification—and the very next day, Burgoyne surrendered to Gates at Saratoga, while the ruins of Kingston smoldered." My card disappeared into his bulging pocket. "I mean, no cause and effect there, I'm just saying it's quite a coincidence, don't you agree? That we meet here on the road, each with some kind of relationship to those October days way back in 1777. And speaking of burning, I *must* get back in the A.C. immediately. Nice conversing with you."

He turned abruptly and walked back the way he came, south along the shoulder. As I turned away I felt sincerely impressed with the details he'd just spouted; they echoed in my head. Plus, I'm always a sucker for that term "coincidence;" I want to look below the surface. There was more at play here than this stranger knew. Something about the fact that he had unwittingly touched a raw nerve gave the whole thing a multi-layered resonance that I found fascinating. Inside, I felt something like a smile, despite the temperature.

I looked north again, craning my neck fruitlessly, then walked over to the guardrail, squinting into the hazy distance. Nothing to see but hundreds of vehicles lined up, receding into the distance in the shimmering heat, to disappear behind a grove of trees. Across the wide grassy swale of the median, cars and trucks whizzed south, free as birds. I sat down in my car with the door still open and looked at the card in my sweaty hand. It read: Nils Nilsson, Director, Schuylerville Public Library, Schuylerville, NY. I never saw what car he was driving.

I stood again, I sat, I sweated. Those were the days before everyone had a cell phone, so our miniature city on the blacktop baked in ignorance. We had no choice; we all gave in to the mystery and let patience rule. The sun beat down through a thin white haze; the highway radiated

heat. We suffered together.

Finally, after nearly an hour, traffic began to move again, and as I slowly made my way around a wide bend a mile ahead, I saw the cause. I had already guessed what had happened: a car fire. Once before, on an incredibly hot day, I had been delayed by a car ablaze in the narrow, grimy, shadowy underpass that led from the Holland Tunnel to New Jersey Routes 1 and 9. It was a surreal scene, like an urban war zone. This time, as I waited, I had pondered the irony that the main focus of my trip was fire—the burning of Kingston—and the only obstacle to its success so far was probably fire.

In the center of the median, across the guardrail, sat a minivan burnt to a cinder. Impossible to tell its original color; it was gray and black, with no windows or upholstery left, and the ground charred all around it. The guardrail was dented and leaning as though the car had crashed against it, perhaps even rolled over it, before landing and bursting into flame. It must have been a huge roaring blaze. But when I got there, there was no sign of the occupants. Had they gotten out before the explosion? Or were they burned to death in an instant? Or something in between, an even more ghastly thought—life with terrible burns.

Plus, it was a family type of car. I imagined a man driving his wife and kids upstate for a weekend in the country. I made him up in present tense, like a character in a movie: perhaps he's a busy New Yorker, overworked to make ends meet in that cruel, overpriced city, and he hasn't slept because he had deadlines to meet before he could take this tiny vacation, but the family is happy to be driving upstate, maybe to see grandparents or go fishing, and the man feels good. He smiles at his wife, he jokes with his kids. And then in the next minute he is dozing, and running off the road, and rolling, and bursting into flame. A whole family—its dreams, its potential, its legacy, its endless branching story—is over, cut short in a few seconds of hell. This is a father's responsibility. This was a man's failure as a father, a failure hidden in the very heart of apparent success. The smoking remains tell the truth: the actual man was not with his family on a sweet vacation; the actual man was at work, at the office, at his paid labor. This cremation was his choice, and he chose it by choosing his drug, his obsession, his god, and then lying to himself and those he pretended to love. His was the worst sort of betrayal.

I could say this to myself because I knew that father. He could have been me. There were so many times that I had begun to nod off after all-nighters in the editing room, cruising up this very highway toward some Catskills campground, wife and child belted in and trusting me. But Cate was always watching; she'd punch me on the shoulder, hard, and say "Ben! Pull over, we're trading places." And I'd get a nap in the passenger seat while she took over and got us to our destination safely. I remember tears jumping to my eyes that day as I felt a rush of gratitude for her strength. Without it, who knows the damage I could have done to our family?

We could have ended up like the people in the minivan, the family in my imagination, victims of someone like me. My own guilt—that was the lesson to be learned from a burning car on the edge of a highway. But then I thought again. It's also possible that, simply, there is no meaning to be found. No lesson, no fault. Perhaps the blind machinations of chance put a car

with a random mechanical defect in the possession of this driver, and a whole family is dead, with nobody to blame. We are all powerless in the beautiful mindless flow of the stream, in the steady endless current of the universe.

That is, whatever universe we happen to be in. The year before, I had been studying quantum physics and superstring theory, and knew that cutting-edge science now allowed for the possibility of an endless number of simultaneous universes, each only a slight variation of the others. It was confirmation of Borges' fiction, one of my favorite stories, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, and I thought, somewhere in an alternate universe that family in the minivan continues happily on their vacation. Just like all the religious people who manufacture the myth of heaven to ease the unbearable pain of losing a loved one, couldn't I take refuge in something as well?