

## Billy Haze

Heidi's new Remington was bound to kill someone. It was an 820 double-barrel shotgun with a slide-to-load chamber and a rubber pad at the shoulder stock to cushion its kick. The wood wore an almost maroon coat of finish over a flowing, like hair would flow, grain. Hank bought the rifle for Heidi as a Christmas gift, in exchange for which he received an AK-47 assault rifle, the happy couple sitting among long, hollow cones of discarded wrapping paper, mutually glowing around the hands and eyes over their shared good fortune, which wasn't to last.

For some time, their marriage had lost its charm for Hank. He seemed to walk through its trappings like a man so tired of the Earth that he won't even sleep on it anymore. But there were deep motives for this behavior, and probably not the ones Hank frequently quoted while sitting with his male friends around a tabletop of empty beer bottles, like a miniature nuclear launching site.

One such friend was Billy Haze, a former New Yorker whose reasons for moving to Alaska were as obtuse as everyone else's. "I wanted to do something unconservative," he claimed. Then he failed to enumerate the other possible choices, as if the bootless step into sub-zero temperatures and perpetual winter darkness was a given within said context. It was not. Nor was Billy to see with significant clarity how other forces in his life were more responsible for his decision, which to him felt like the strong tug of destiny's dog-team instead. For example, he had never reconciled himself to his intelligence, but ran from it. A geographical point, this principle applied also to his interpersonal conduct. Billy attempted to listen to everyone, precisely because he could not comfortably admit that

much of what he was hearing along this quest was rubbish and originated within a stupidity that justified callous amusement. By playing at the egalitarian ethic that all conversation, however grossly confessional and trite, deserved his sincerest attention, Billy ultimately turned into the intended role of therapeutic ear for the species.

One night Billy and his girlfriend for the last two years, Susie Sumack, met Heidi and Hank at the Doghouse Pub in the college section of Fairbanks. The Jives were slightly late, so Billy and Susie worked on a pitcher, intermittently discussing Susie's trip the next day to Portland, Oregon to see her parents, who were flying there from their hometown of Islip, New York. It promised to be a stressful reunion, because Susie was already feeling stress from her failed plans to accomplish a mountain of academic work on her thesis, which was due as the crown of her bachelor's degree in Psychology in four months. For Susie, the Christmas vacation had come and gone without accommodating her will, and now its last days would be spent in a single room with her neurotic parents, for whom lights out was eight pm. She would study by the light of the mirror lamp in the bathroom and sit on the toilet.

"What if they wake up to use it?" Billy asked. Susie frowned. She had told him before she did not want to talk about this, by which she meant the entire experience. Billy drank. The beer carved sharp tracks along the whole length of his tongue.

In the bar, an overhead television was tuned to Wheel of Fortune during the first puzzle, Before & After. Only two letters were revealed and the answer was In The Beginning To Understand. It made little sense to Billy and he did not share the solution. When the Jives arrived, the contestants were taking consonant pot shots at the last remaining letters because they too were less than certain.

Hank sat down quickly, leaving Heidi in the space outside the intimacy of the table, there to loosen the buttons of her navy blue sailor's jacket and unwind her black scarf. Unlayered, she was skinnier than ever, and the change was striking because Susie and Billy had not gone out with the Jives in over three months owing again to Susie's thesis and also to Billy's applications to graduate schools in Philosophy. Having finally finished and mailed them, he was overcome with an urge to see neglected friends, and called.

"You look incredible," he told Heidi.

"You lost so much weight," Susie said.

"There's no happy medium with Hank," explained Heidi. "I'm either too fat or too thin." Hank scanned the menu.

"Boy, I sure am hungry," he said.

"Have you ever eaten here before?"

"No, we usually just get drunk, although one time Dr. Davis ate a foot long chili dog and puked it. That count?"

"Well, the food's pretty good."

"We don't usually eat much anyway," Hank said. "We usually get too full from all the drinking. I don't like eating."

"Me neither." When the waitress came, Heidi ordered a prime rib sandwich, Hank a taco salad, Billy and Susie an eggplant parmigian sandwich each, and one more pitcher of beer, which became four more pitchers of beer, which became an invitation to move the party to the Jives' house on Madcap lane, where the prices were lower and the tunes were more varied. That night the college station was playing a marathon tribute to U2 that ran

the whole meal. Billy accepted the invitation, and Susie was taken home to pack for her trip.

In the morning, the phone rang through an atmosphere thick with stale cigarette smoke and excess oil heat. Billy heard it from the couch, but could not move. His head was heavy. The answering machine clicked on and he listened to the voices of the Jives speak an unfamiliar Spanish to the effect that they were tired of answering the phone and would the caller leave a message. Susie responded that it was an hour later than the arranged time for a call about taking her to the airport and that she would like to go in another hour. Rather than resist his hangover by trying probably unsuccessfully to interrupt the machine, Billy dragged himself past it to the bathroom, where a cold face washing bought him the energy to call Susie back.

"We'll be over for you just before eleven," he said.

"Don't be any later."

"No." Billy hung up the phone and picked up the television remote control, muting the sound as he tuned in an NFL playoff-game between the Steelers and Chargers. In a little bit, Heidi wandered out of the bedroom, wearing an old, white terrycloth robe with a childish pattern of fading rodeo riders and big, raised lassoes. She went into the kitchen and prepared a pot of coffee.

"You can turn up the volume," she said.

"What about Hank?"

"He's not in there. He fell asleep in the other room, against the heater. He's curled up that way now." Billy got up again and this time walked past the bathroom into the two further rooms of the house. In the second, Hank slept in a fetal position that had as its

support system the large, cylindrical furnace. His face was deeply red and imprinted on one side with the texture of the carpet, as if he had rolled not more than five or ten minutes ago.

"I'm always awake," he said, not opening his eyes or moving or imparting any inflection to his voice. He seemed to be speaking simple and obvious facts from a region beyond time and passion. "I am never asleep when people think I am."

"Then get up. Susie's waiting on your promise."

"I lied."

At the airport, Susie's check-in went quickly and she, Hank, and Billy had time to stop in the bar, where the football game continued toward a San Diego victory. After a short explanation by Susie of her parents and their tendency to overbear, Hank thought it was a good idea that she smoke some of his cigarettes and drink as many beers as possible before boarding. Instead, she chose coffee, which Hank paid for and brought to the table with two beers for the men. Soon, Susie picked up her carry-on and said goodbye.

"Let's have another anyway," Hank said. He jostled his Marlboro lights in his left hand and their substantial weight seemed to support the idea. He removed one from the pack and lit it. The smoke rose up his face like a slow surface current in a stream over a bed of polished rocks that were his eyes. He scratched at the hair beneath the band of his green wool skiing cap.

"My plans just took off," Billy consented.

"Good. I've done something that won't die. I slept with Tracy and Heidi's mad as hell. We had a party on Christmas Eve and during the meal she told everyone there that I

was cheating on her, and who with, and what a jerk I was. But she won't leave me. I keep telling her she doesn't need me. She's winning first places in art shows at the U. She looks better than ever. I'm just dead weight. You're out of beer. Hold on a second."

Hank stood up from the table and ordered another round, which he carried back.

"What're you going to do?"

"I'm still sleeping with Tracy."

"Why?"

"What do you want out of life? And don't tell me you want to be happy. I hate those boring bastards."

"Influence," Billy said.

"What do you think I should do? Tracy's got two kids. She's just trying to get out of a shitty marriage. She was supposed to be Heidi's best friend."

"Don't think ahead."

"I was thinking behind. It's time for me to ride on out of here is what it is. Time for me to ride." On the ride back to Hank's house, where Heidi had been preparing an egg breakfast for the past two and half hours, Hank spoke about his need to stir things up. He was convinced in the way that speaking about it makes questionable that he needed at all times to push the neglected buttons in his life. He made references to William Blake and Friedrich Nietzsche. He quoted Heraclitus that everything is in a state of flux, and agreed with the necessity of the observation. He asked Billy over and over again what he wanted out of life, and Billy always said influence, grinning. In the driveway they agreed that they ought to hang out together more.

Four days later it was time to pick Susie up after her return flight. Besides that first day of her absence, Billy had not seen the Jives at all, having stumbled from their house that first evening into a phone call at home from a guy named Craig Craver, who explained how he recently told his wife he was with Billy on Saturday night and not cheating on her with two seventeen year old girls, as she supposed. To make up for the hassle, Craig brought over two cases of beer, his guitar, and two seventeen year old girls, whose sparse conversation turned repeatedly to death. The next nights Billy slept it all off.

He waited at the Klondike Lounge and Bar, as arranged, for the Jives to show up with Susie.