

Montreal Canada Who

The last time Shelly Day had seen her uncle Will was over twenty years ago, when she was only a girl of six. At that time her impression of him, which turned out to be the last for a long time to come, was of a playful goof who spent more time with the family children than with the adults, sitting at the kiddies' table by choice on Thanksgiving and making up "Knock knock" jokes for as long as Shelly liked.

Standing outside the bus station, twirling a long braid of crimson hair with her finger, Shelly tried to remember how any of them went. She could imagine herself asking, "Who's there?" but beyond that the words became secondary. In their place, floating magically like Technicolor clouds in her mind, were the sudden images of Uncle Willie's yellow teeth, and his overly wide necktie, patterned with tiny hot air balloons. That was the last time Shelly saw him. She returned from a meandering trip to the bathroom and he was gone without explanation. The other adults at the gathering acted like nothing had changed.

"Who's there?" Shelly wondered, repeating the joke to herself, removing a cigarette from the waist pocket of her fake half-length fur coat. It was a brisk winter day. The wind was blowing. Shelly's breath condensed as she exhaled hot smoke.

It seemed appropriate somehow, come to think of it, reflecting on it now after so many years, yes appropriate that Uncle Willie, the king of the "Knock

knock" joke, would disappear from Shelly's life without the least hint of goodbye. It was some sort of cosmic balancing act by which an overabundance of pretend greetings ultimately canceled all possibility of any real farewell.

Yet something wasn't right. Uncle Willie's endless joke telling was a generous act for the indulgence of children, not a nuisance or expression of self-interest.

He deserved better, Shelly thought. She took a long puff on her cigarette and looked around the outside of the bus station, expecting Willie to materialize somehow despite the fact that new buses had yet to pull up. Another notion of cosmic balance perhaps. In this one, if once upon a time her uncle disappeared like a puff of smoke (and considering this Shelly blew a big puff to demonstrate) then it stood to reason he was equally likely to appear from thin air, a condensation of sorts. Shelly blew another puff and watched the wind sweep it away.

She began wondering what Willie would look like. Maybe I won't recognize him, she thought. Or him me. She reached into her pocket and pulled out the letter Willie had sent, faulting it for not containing a photo, especially after so many years.

Frankly, there were many reasons it was a big oversight on Willie's part not to include a picture. Shelly considered them all; there appeared to be time for it. For instance, what does it say to a niece not to give her a clue who she's looking for at a bus station? Doesn't it say that her uncle is willing to put her in

jeopardy, subject to the approach of any random stranger reminiscent of the past? God only knew what might happen if someone malevolent miscreant sniffed out the situation. Shelly would still be considering him as a possible later version of Willie while he, not Willie at all, swept her off into an alley.

But here Shelly realized her imagination was getting the better of her. The odds of this dark fantasy coming to pass were an extreme long shot under any conditions; on a freezing winter day in the middle under bright winter sunshine Shelly was likelier to encounter animate snowmen. She took another drag on her cigarette and dropped the spent butt to the sidewalk, grinding it into the slush.

Besides, Shelly thought, it is a very sweet letter. She opened it up and read it for the fourth time.

"Dear Shelly," it said, "I'm going to be in Montreal on the Fifth of October. Can you meet me at the bus station downtown? It's been too long since I've seen you. You were just a little girl then. I was just a little boy really. I'll be wearing a hand buzzer. You'll know me by my sizzling handshake! My bus arrives at 3 PM. I'll look for the prettiest woman at the station. Please be there. Your uncle. William."

There were other oversights too, which taken together, somehow canceled out the omission of the photo. It was another mechanism of cosmic balance. Shelly smacked her lips over it.

For instance, Willie said nothing about where he was coming from, why he was coming at all, how he obtained Shelly's address, whether or not he was coming alone. The short note was a forest of question marks. Who could get hung up on any tree in particular? Nevertheless, the utter absence of a "knock knock" joke stood out.

Shelly folded the letter and put it back in her pocket, aware for the first time in her adult life that she was upset with her uncle for all the good humor he took away from her when he disappeared years ago. How dare he not only vanish, but take his goofball comedy with him, leaving Shelly out in the cold, at this point literally. That the note made not the slightest attempt at admitting, let alone ameliorating this heinous history of deprivation—well, it was too much to bear.

Shelly stormed away from the bus station to the edge of the parking lot where the buses pulled in. She hovered at the curb, at one moment peering into the distance for any sight of an approaching bus, at the next moment checking her wristwatch with the strong intent to leave. Willie was twenty minutes late. Maybe he wasn't coming at all. Maybe the reticent letter was the answer to a joke.

Shelly regarded it in that light. Knock knock, she said to herself. She responded, Who's there? Then she repeated the whole letter twice in a row from memory, adding the customary interrogative lilt the second time by tacking on the lone word "who," as if everything before it had been a repetition of the

solicitor's first words at the door. Then she realized if she structured it that way, there was no letter left to serve as the answer, that once again her uncle's last punch line was mysterious silence, a humorless void, a question without resolution.

Shelly was too tired to rearrange her choice about where else to put the customary "who," how to leave enough space after it that the second half of the letter could serve as an answer. She shook her head at the oncoming traffic, which contained no buses. Eventually she turned her back on the street and walked back to the station.

I hate Uncle Willie, Shelly said, lighting up a new cigarette. He's a terrible uncle. He abandoned the family.

I hate the family, Shelly continued. It's a terrible family. It rejected Uncle Willie and never said why.

Shelly drew on the cigarette. She did not want to admit that when push came to shove she had no idea what went on between Willie, the family, or anyone for that matter. The possibilities were too numerous, but also opaque, so that none seemed to exist at all. In relation to that kind of ignorance, Shelly felt totally helpless, sapped of all control. It was a terrible feeling and she tried to bury it in smoke, sucking fiercely on her cigarette and using its last spark for lighting a new one immediately. On account of the strong wind she blew a great cloud of smoke directly into her own face.

No control. No control. She repeated the words over and over in her mind, transforming them into a private unconscious joke. Knock knock! Who's there? Knock on. Knock on who? Knock On Troll. Knock On Troll. NoC on trol. No Control. Ha Ha, she told herself, realizing the wayward weirdness of her mind. It's not funny.

Still, it wasn't that bad, either, she decided. There was some kind of second-rate genius about it. It reminded her of Willie, speaking volumes on the subject of why as a child she had loved him so dearly, why she loved him that way now, as if a very peculiar genetic disposition, passed from uncle to niece, was a secret bond between them against the rest of the family. The funny bone gene.

Shelly started to laugh. She and Willie bore the funny bone gene. Or else hers was an act of cosmic balance, passed on only after Willie's disappearance, as if someone in the remaining family needed to carry the torch of humor.

Suddenly Shelly wondered if Willie's return would somehow cost her the one thing that kept her going in this world, her fierce sense of humor. She wondered would the cosmic scale tip back in his direction. Would she slide out of the picture? Knock knock! Who's there? But the door is already open and the world pitches forward. The person in the house begins falling. The carpet and furniture from the foyer slide out the front door after her, all falling into

space. Yes, it was images like those, arising spontaneously from the sparsest kindling, that Shelly worried about losing, because without them she was—

But here was the question she had never directly addressed, but rather peered at over her shoulder like a person being followed: what was she without her humor?

Fat was the first word that came to mind. It preceded thinking about it somehow. Shelly shook her head in disappointment. She took the last drag of her latest cigarette and squeezed out the stub in the palm of her gloved hand.

There weren't any buses yet, but Shelly peered into the oncoming traffic and said, That's right, Uncle Willie, I'm fat! Surprise. I can't stop eating unless I smoke. A man coming out of the bus station paused to consider if the words in progress were intended for him and decided no, and hurried along to a car.

Shelly watched him walk away, imagining a lean wife and kids at the end of his travels. She sighed as he started his engine and a blast of exhaust condensed from the tail pipe, reminding her of cigarettes. She remarked, Good idea, and took another from her pocket, lighting it up and making ignition sounds.

I'm no one, she said. I'm not the woman you wanted me to grow into, whoever that is. Mom says I'm lazy. Your sister. Your brother-in-law calls me a whale. My own father. Not to my face. But that makes it worse because then we can't talk about it. Not that I want to. I moved as far away as I could.

But I'm broke, Uncle Will. I don't make good tips at the restaurant. It isn't helping me that my meals are free there and I can't afford not to eat them. All starches like mashed potatoes and bread. Then when I look at a salad, I just don't want one.

It's a lot like Thanksgiving, she concluded, the idea applying to her disinterest in salad, but also harking far back in time, recalling the last time she and Will were together, the next time on its way. It's a lot like Thanksgiving, she realized. There was an element of cosmic balance to this parallel. Her present preoccupations and her memories were syncing up for the moment.

Considering this alignment, Shelly inhaled some smoke and watched a bus round a far corner in the direction of the station. She could not make out the sign above its front window yet, but her heart heard the sign to be saying Knock knock. As the bus pulled closer, the sign responded to Shelly's inquiry, Who's there, by revealing itself as containing the words Montreal Canada.

Montreal Canada who? Shelly asked as the bus approached the parking lot and pulled in. The silver slush sprayed out from its tires and left a permanent little wake in the parking lot behind it. The air brakes fired and the bus jostled to a complete stop. Behind the darkly tinted windows people rose and scrambled for overhead bags. Shelly could not find the silhouette of her uncle with any confidence. She stomped out her last cigarette and walked up to the front door.

The driver ratcheted the door open and a long line of old women proceeded slowly down the steps, clutching the handrail, wincing at the invasive

winter chill. Shelly helped them off the lowest step one by one and directed them toward the station, peering over the people behind them in search of her uncle.

William Day, Shelly's maternal uncle and the comedic inspiration from her youth, a man she had not seen for twenty years and missed too sorely to admit, was the last person to step from the bus. By that time Shelly was about to give up, peering through the dark windows at the empty seats and clear central aisle. Montreal Canada who? Shelly repeated sadly, searching among the emptiness. She walked back to the open front door and frowned at the driver.

A very portly number, the driver squeezed himself free of the tight space between his seat and the large steering wheel before it. He put the lights of the bus off, disengaged the key in the ignition, stuffing it into his pocket, which it wasn't easy for him to find. He took a moment to study himself in the wide rear view mirror at the front of the bus, adjusting his uniform and smoothing his hair with his hands. This last gesture seemed to awaken a memory in him and he reached back near his seat for a small silver item, which slid over the middle finger of his right hand and sat on his palm like a doorbell or a knocker.

The driver plodded down the stairs and stopped directly in front of Shelly, staring straight into her eyes. His mouth broke into a smile of deeply yellow teeth and he extended his meaty hand for a shake, the buzzer staring up from his open palm.