

The Redemption of a Legionnaire

“Where is your brother?” Renata’s accusatory tone surprised me.

“I don’t know. Why?”

“Cause he’s gone! He left this crappy note telling me not to worry.” Her angry voice cracked.

The weekend before, Bill had invited me out to the ranch he was managing. We walked around the cattle paddocks while Renata made us hot chili. I teased him about the time he had been stirring a yummy looking red sauce on the stove and I asked for a taste. “Sure,” he had said, his eyes sparkling with enjoyment. Expecting a savory marinara, the spoonful of hot pepper juices burned all the way down. This day the sauce was much more palatable.

After lunch, he walked me to my car, and hugged me tightly. “I want you to know how much I love you.”

I was puzzled. “Why are you saying this? I’ll see you next week.” It turned out to be many years before I saw him again.

Billy and I were close as children, playing with his soldiers and my dolls. We pieced together structures of steel with his Erector Set, and performed experiments in chemistry. But when my parents began divorce proceedings, our bond became something more.

He called my sister, Bu, and me into his room. “Mom and dad are getting a divorce.”

I also had heard my parent’s conversation flare into anger. “I know. I hate it!”

“That’s why I called you in here. We can’t rely on them anymore. It’s up to us now to be there for each other.”

I loved our secret club, the vow we agreed to, feeling as though we were empowered enough to control our crashing world. Billy needed that control the most.

When mom left for work, my twelve year old brother took on the role of ‘man of the house.’ “I want you guys to clean up.” He pointed to each of us in turn. “You, pick up your toys. You, do the dishes.”

“No!” I planted my feet. I was only two years younger than he and wasn’t going to take his orders. “Mom never said you could tell us what to do.”

“You’ll do it or I’ll make you!” He pulled out his belt.

I ran and hid in the far corner of my closet, rolling into a ball so the strikes hit my back and shoulders. After a few horrible afternoons, I pleaded with my mom to stay home. “Billy beats us!”

“I’m sorry, I have to go to work. I can’t do anything about that right now.”

One evening he tried to stop my mother from leaving the house for a date. “You’re not going out wearing those,” pointing to her black patterned nylons. “You look like a whore.”

My mother didn’t know how to handle Bill and soon afterwards he left to live with my father. We were relieved. Though my love for my big brother never faltered, our little three-person club dissolved quickly under those pressures.

At age seventeen, Bill left school and hitchhiked to California. We heard from him once. A year later, he returned to Chicago, tall and muscular, dressed in jeans and an open leather vest, exposing bare arms and hairy chest. His stories spoke of orange fields, motorcycles and the Hell’s Angels.

I ignored his tough guy exterior and poked his belly, soft and yielding. “Oh, you growl, but I know you’re a pussycat inside.” He could not help but laugh.

At eighteen he joined the Marines and left again, this time heading to Vietnam. The brother who screamed in unison with us girls watching *The Tinger*, was shifting away from our family into a different life, a warrior’s life.

I preferred to see my brother’s softer side, but another side was not so light-filled. I wasn’t ready to hear about the harshness of war. While in Nam, his letters spoke of the ‘angel of death,’ who picked out members of his platoon. Twenty-two men went out, but only twelve made it back to camp.

He returned home wounded. Not physically, but his nerves were stretched thin. I came up behind him once and he spun around, a drawn blade pointed at my gut. “Don’t come at me like that. I could’ve killed you.”

I wanted to help but couldn’t. I wasn’t ready to hear what he had seen, what he had done. My half-hearted questions were easily deflected. As a sniper, he must have killed many. A dark pain brewed inside him. I hoped someday to have the strength to face his story.

Bill came home to a family and a society dead set against the Vietnam war. And being in the city was a cacophony of adjustments

for him. He and his girlfriend, Renata, soon moved to the small ranch my father had bought in the Wisconsin hills. Once school was out, my sister and I joined them.

Bill took a job at the steel foundry in the small town of Richland Center. A testament to his leadership skills, his fellow workers elected him as their union representative.

Our respect for Bill was a mixed bag. The couple collected stray animals, which irritated my father. "Their trailer smells like cat pee!" My sister and I called him Billy Bullshit, because he told so many tales. It was hard to trace which were true and which were not.

My brother worked at tough jobs over his life: motorcyclist, soldier, cowboy/rancher, steel worker, truck driver. He relished adopting the vernacular and characterizations of those roles, richly entertaining to his entourage. One day he walked into the ICU I was working at to visit a friend. His imposing presence, cowboy hat, handlebar moustache and mucky boots drew the attention of everyone in the room. I was proud to call him my brother.

For eight years, Bill tried his hand at cattle ranching. When he reached his limit, no one knew. When he finally left, no one was looking. Where he went mystified us all.

A letter from France arrived six months later. Bill had joined the French Foreign Legion. Although I never heard his explanation, the gaps in his story were not hard to fill. My brother could not shake the call of the military. The nine-to-five grind was not for him. He yearned for the camaraderie of men by his side. He yearned to live life at the edge. His skills in warfare were lost caring for cows. And, as an animal lover, he was never comfortable selling his cattle; not a useful trait for a rancher.

As siblings, we diverged sharply in our career choices. Bu chose to be a nurse, I moved to a spiritual community, and Bill followed a military path. His choice became a barrier between my mother, who strove for peace, and himself. My mother's judgement was a thorn Bill carried silently inside.

I saw a deeper meaning in what he chose. To me, Bill walked a dark road, a road through dangerous passageways. Yet along that path lay jewels of learning. How to wield power with fairness; how to stay kind while in a position of authority; how to control without being controlling.

Bill wrote us regularly from Chad, where his troop helped maintain order during the Libyan invasion. I learned later my brother was given a position in the Legion's ultra-elite paratrooper force, despite his older age. Always last to return from a run, yet still he kept up enough to stay part of that group.

The greatest insight I received into Bill's state of mind during his time in the Legion was from a documentary, entitled *Legion of the Damned*. It played as a National Geographic Special on television. He had been selected to represent the Legion to the english-speaking world. His words and image were peppered throughout the three hour show. The documentary continues to play on YouTube to this day.

His first comments reflected the cynicism that had grown inside him since we last talked. "When you die, don't nobody cry. What's a life worth?" He shook his head, smirking. "And who the hell am I?" Hearing of his nonchalance towards death disturbed me. But what hurt most was his assertion, "My family don't care."

I bristled under my breath. "As if that were true!"

Always a teacher of sorts, Bill, under the pseudonym Jhon Barkett, explained to the interviewer how hard it was to kill, the time it took to psychologically deal with it, to find the place between "hot and cold, fear and pleasure." He said most men were not natural killers. "It's not easy and it don't always work."

The toughness he portrayed on camera was countered by a story a friend of his told me later. In Bill's unit, most of the men killed out of necessity. But there were a few who enjoyed the job. One such man had been abusing a goat, when Bill came upon the scene. Like an avenging angel, he rushed in. "Get your hands off that animal!" He knocked the soldier down, who never had a chance, then turned to address the group watching. "You'll tell me if you see him doin' that again."

Bill expected to die on a battlefield, fighting hard and making his aggressor earn the right to take his life. Instead, after fifteen years in the Legion, he again found himself having to construct a future separate from the military.

He settled with Renata in the Provence area of France, working for lavender farmers to supplement his pension. His adjustment was not easy. Drinking alcohol had been a daily practice while in the Legion, a coping method to fill in the time gaps between assignments and slow down his aroused nervous system. As his life settled, he joined a

conservative Christian group, though Bill had never been religious before. He asked for Jesus' help to overcome his addiction to alcohol. Right then and there, he stopped. His newfound faith became the start of his healing.

My husband and I journeyed to Provence to visit Bill on our honeymoon. We stayed at a bed and breakfast in Sault, a medieval town situated on a plateau overlooking miles of lavender fields. As we settled in, the boom of heavy footsteps sounded through the hall. Then my brother's big body filled our doorway. A quarter of a century had passed since he and I had last been together. I burst into tears and rushed into his arms, all self-control gone.

As I pulled away, I saw his surprise. He garrumphed, straightened his shoulders and reached out to shake John's hand. Renata told me later he had been nervous before our meeting. So much had happened between our last hug and this one. I guessed he couldn't imagine how I could keep my heart open after his disappearance and the years he spent thinking his family didn't care.

I surveyed them. "*They look homeless.*" My brother wore green fatigues, a green cap, and a bushy grey beard. On his cheeks were scabs from the sun. Renata wore a long skirt and large shirt that disguised her figure. Grey and black hair strands framed her face. Some of their stained teeth were missing. Age had done its work.

They walked us to a food trailer that offered pizza by the slice. Although we could afford to dine out, we let them take us into their world. The pizza warmed our fingers in the cold evening wind. We stood overlooking neat rows of lavender plants creating patterns into the distance.

The next morning Bill and I walked up the hill behind his home to feed the sangliers, wild boar that roamed the land. The boars were often killed by farmers who lost fields of grain and small animals to them. My brother did what he could to help, by supplying food in a safe place. Over time he watched their babies grow.

Alone together, I asked about his leaving so long ago. He sucked on a pipe, thinking of a response. "I didn't think you'd understand. Hell, I didn't understand either. I felt like a stranger in the regular world."

We stayed a few days. I knew this would be our last time together, so we shared every moment we could.

Since our visit, Bill has called us every few months. My brother and I had to find a way to converse over the phone without raising our

hackles. An agreement was forged requiring restraint on both sides. He would stop trying to convert me and I would keep my interest in astrology and psychics to myself. Weather, animals and the state of the world became the touchstones that kept us connected.

In more recent conversations, the afterlife loomed large. A book, entitled *Heaven*, inspired Bill and relieved some of his fears. No matter what he had done during this life, he would be accepted in heaven.

He ordered the book for me, but I could not bring myself to read it. “I know you want to help me, but please don’t worry. Our heavens are the same, just clothed in different words. I know what awaits us.”

Bill died in his seventy-second year. It was not the expected bullet that took him down, but the slow draining of his life force from a resistant infection. Trapped for weeks in a hospital receiving IV antibiotics, he escaped as soon as he felt better, against the doctor’s orders. The remnants of the infection fired up again, and his doctor ordered him back to the hospital. Just as he left the doctor’s office, his body crumpled onto the concrete.

An epitaph about Bill was published in an online cycling magazine by one of the many cyclists he met on the road outside his home. The article, “Guardian of the Sangliers”, was not about the years he spent as a soldier, but was about the grizzly character who “shot the shit” with bicycling tourists stopping to view the lavender fields. Friendships were formed. His military background was an unknown for many of the respondents to the article.

Reading the comments under the YouTube documentary opened my eyes to the impact my brother had. Never one to think he was special, he would be surprised to learn that his words on that video had importance for many. He was an example of sorts for lost men struggling to find their way.

My brother visited me after his death, through a medium. He wanted to give me a happy message. “Heaven is just what I thought it would be.” Bill also visited my sister, Bu, in a dream. He held her tightly, filling her with his love. Normally she was someone who discounted the value of a dream and did not believe in an afterlife. But for her a painful rift had been healed. It is almost as though our little three-person club has been reformed, and Bill’s redemption complete.