

A Life of the Mind

by [James Como](#) (August 2024)



Italian Cemetery at Dusk (Saint Albert Chmielowski, 1880)

There is never a need to describe the filth, stink, and degraded behavior that make for abject squalor. Its etiology is various, its spiraling morphology predictable, resignation within the soul its likely catalyst. Sometimes delusion follows denial. Think Miss Faversham, or, last century, the Collyer brothers up in Harlem. But no concrete image, no clever simile, is fitting.

This drawn-out endgame is a cliché. People—friends, neighbors—sense something, eventually intervene, then a social worker, if necessary a judge. The final move might be to a Home, so-called: desultory care, morbid confusion unto numbness, damnable loneliness. Utter apathy. Or maybe someone finds the corpse.

This story is not about that. It is about how, in one self-inflicted, self-indulgent instance, that ending came to be. And know this. Though there was cognitive decline (call it anything you please) it was not causative. The mental squalor came second, the physical squalor third. The soul devolved first. This, by the way, is the short version and is more study than story.

John's Gospel renders the first words from Jesus as "what do you seek?" In other words, "What do you love?" which implies a third question, "Who are you?" Dangerous questions, these, for anyone, because we commonly become, or at least get closer and closer to becoming, what we love. That's the first (and last) thing to know. Second is not theology but social science, Girard's Theory of Mimetic Desire: since we don't know what we want we mimic our surroundings. Third, and finally, of course is the Next Shiny Object reflex, simple but fundamentally sound, even for understanding the most intelligent people, especially when it comes to eros and one's identity.

Those three together nearly tell this story, especially since the endgame—the mental and physical squalor that warrants no description—is already in the open. But its local twists are interesting; not *knowing-them-changes-my-life* interesting, but interesting in a gossipy way, unless the person was a friend, or family, in which case the whole and its parts are heart-breaking.

Now the story-teller has the common problem, namely, where to begin. The obvious answer in Bill's case is when he left his first wife for an artist, a pathologically neurotic narcissist. But that, though outward and obvious, is wrong. The real answer is when Bill, after a semester at State, went into the navy at the end of the Korean War.

Contrary to his later, academic Leftward stance, Bill was gung-ho. Not a Mississippi farm boy, he was raised conventionally, as a Baptist and a patriot. The exception to

this upbringing was racial tolerance. His mother, a church lady, and his father, a salesman, would have nothing of prejudice, except for a benign anti-Catholic bent, socially acceptable there and then. They also took schooling seriously, more than they did football (which Bill did not like) and even baseball (which he played fairly well and would love his whole life).

So nature with nurture (*sans* any life-altering trauma) produced in him moral fiber. For example, he was, mostly, loyal, though his judgment—loyal to what or to whom? —was muddled by, yes, eros and a shifting identity (except when it came to friendship, “the highest good,” he would say, adding “I’m with Aristotle on this”).

He had a good mind, good habits and, though he read Classic Comics, he read some good books too, and he was a good—not a great—student. He also had character. At eighteen he was a big kid and when he saw a neighbor strike his wife he quietly approached him and warned him not to do it again, because, he said, “I won’t be calling the sheriff.” He was, you might say, “passively arrogant,” or willful, and along with stubbornness would become more so as the years passed.

In the navy he got on well at first, then very well when he fell in with a small group whose members not only read books but difficult books, philosophy and serious literature and the like, and enjoyed discussing them. This proved a powerful, even if deeply counter-intuitive, intervention. Intervention by whom or what? one might ask. Fate, if you believe in it.

From then on, though he drank and fought some (though not with the North Koreans) and knew this girl and that one, he mostly read and talked about what he read and even—here was a revelation, that one could do this—read about what he read, mostly, but not only, in magazines and journals from New York. Curiosity overwhelmed him and he fell furiously in love with ideas and their expression. And something more: he fell in

love, even though it was by second hand at this point, with the culture of—let's call it intellectual journalism. There, too, was eros. He wouldn't know it then but he was on his way to living the "life of the mind," as he would call it many times.

Of course not everybody is St. Paul, turning about in a flash. Conversions take time and, as in history, eras overlap. He used his navy benefits to get into Duke University, where he luxuriated in learning, including much theology. He even gave the Episcopalians a decent shot, but The Church of Good Taste didn't give him one back.

Along the way he courted Elizabeth, a girl from the town next to his. "Ah," he thought, "ideas and love. What could be better than this?" Elizabeth was no ordinary woman. A born administrator, she earned a master's degree and, but for her devotion to Bill, would have gotten her doctorate, but he decided they had to move to New York.

He was at work on his own doctoral dissertation in American culture (with an emphasis on William James). They lived in Queens, Elizabeth working clerically to support the two of them. He finished the dissertation and got a non-tenured appointment at a small liberal arts college.

After the birth of their first child, a boy, Bill insisted on moving to Manhattan. It was inconvenient—his teaching post was in Queens—but the Intellectual Life, as he called it, was in the City, capital C. Once ensconced on the West Side he read and wrote feverishly. (In his decrepitude he would boast, truthfully, of having written over one hundred articles on a vast range of subjects, from baseball to Existentialism.)

He gained a reputation, well-earned. He was a very fine thinker and writer (though in his entire career he wrote only one strictly academic article, that is, on an esoteric topic and amply footnoted). More important to him, though, than the publishing was the Circle. He met the leading New York

thinkers, publishers, writers, editors and—well, in a nutshell, the intelligentsia, preponderantly Jewish, which appealed to him and among whom he was welcomed. Irving Howe and Sidney Hook became his cronies

He did not notice, and might not have cared, that Elizabeth was bereft, because the re-invented Bill was jubilating in his re-invention, that identity almost, but not quite, complete. She was a deeply good and capable woman, who became a very fine mother. If not his intellectual equal, Elizabeth was well-read, smart, an adept conversationalist, a satisfying sexual companion—and, in Bill's mind, thoroughly bourgeois. Most men would have dropped to their knees in gratitude for having such a mate. Elizabeth, though, simply did not fit the New Bill, the one whose epiphany in the navy had compelled him to move from middle-class Queens to the chic Upper West Side of Manhattan. She certainly did not fit into the Circle.

It would be easy now to yield, unknowingly, to the mistake of simplifying Bill, to blame him, more willful and stubborn, more self-involved, more accomplished than ever, and we would not be wrong. We must take note, however, that it was Elizabeth who first wondered aloud about the marriage.

"You're going through the paces, Billy. I feel redundant. You are living a perfunctory married life and making me perfunctory." Not in those exact words, but with that directness. But she did not see into the depths of her own diagnosis. "I would like us get help." And just there was the spell-breaking word. "There is no 'us'" Bill thought, "at least not the sort of 'us' you mean." But he didn't say it, yet.

Did he love Elizabeth? That depends on what you mean by love. At first it was what C. S. Lewis has called Need Love; Elizabeth fulfilled conventional needs. But it was never (as it was for her) Gift Love. He could not become—really be, 'existentially' as Bill would say—one with Elizabeth. Simply

put, she was unsuited to the emerging Bill.

And at that Fate stepped in, again. With Ph.D. in hand, he accepted a tenure-bearing assistant professorship at a large municipal College. It paid better than the urban backwater he had been at, his teaching schedule was lighter and varied, students were better prepared, the English department was large and populated by scholars with versatile minds, and among the general faculty were people of genuine learning who promised rich conversation.

The friendships he made were not merely the icing on the cake but nearly the cake itself. Literary critics, historians, philosophers, even a man who was an astronomer and a Catholic. (He took to calling Bill Billyboy or Billbo: "you could be an overgrown hobbit"). A favorite joke between them was Bill's mockery of Jack's forehead 'smudge' every Ash Wednesday. Jack's game was to make Bill choose between two absurd alternatives. "Bill, whom do you choose never to have existed, Freud" –a hero to Bill– "or Lincoln?" There were even a few scientists.

These friendships would develop differently over the years. Some friends died, others retired, a few deepened. These were his best friends, men with lives like the one Bill had abandoned, friends like Bob. He was a diminutive Jimmy Stewart who was at his funniest when telling the dirtiest of jokes. In a hospital, at his death bed, Bill wept.

But other friends were what Bill wanted to turn himself into. This was no Master Plan but rather a seepage of character that moved him further away from the repulsive bourgeois life. One man married for politics, another for young-and-sexy, a third for an 'international lifestyle' (though Bill himself would never use the word 'lifestyle'). Such friends–they re-invented themselves however they pleased–were all around, representing options and opportunity; in short, freedom, the last, missing piece of the neo-Bill. He saw this, he wanted this: Girard's

Theory at work. Ditching the middle class and the loving wife that came with it was the thing to do, and it was, in fact, a 'thing,' that is, of the *zeitgeist*, as Bill would put it.

Having heard that Fate is at work a reader will suspect that a dollop of irony is on the way, and that reader is right, of course. In Bill's case self-persuasion worked its dark magic, until—there she was ... The Next Shiny Object, the last piece of Bill's identity, the final segment of the arc that would close the Circle: Esther, a sculptor, painter, and multi-media artist.

Bill claimed that on his first sighting of her in the dining hall he was 'bedazzled' by her beauty and into his decrepitude would call her his 'beloved.' Now, whoever said "love is blind" was only half-right, because in Bill's case it was also delusional.

Esther was an impressive artist. On that there was consensus. Her sensibility, conceptions, execution, and imaginative power *were* impressive. She also spoke some Spanish, Italian, and French. (Bill had Spanish and German.) They were not only accomplished but, together, perfectly well-rounded, in a sort of cosmopolitan way, she a long way from her Brooklyn roots, he much farther away from Mississippi.

Yet—alas—she was otherwise helpless. People who knew both Elizabeth and Esther couldn't fathom Bill's behavior. Men found Elizabeth attractive, no one found Esther at all appealing. Words they used to describe her were 'precious,' 'affected,' 'arrogant,' 'fragile,' 'diaphanous,' and 'nuts.' The divorce was quick, as was the decision to cohabitate.

Bill did travel, a recreation towards which Esther was coldly compliant when compliant at all. As entertaining as he was with his colleagues—he seemed to forget nothing, about baseball, movies, literature, history—he never mentioned his ex-wife or his children or (eventually) his grandchildren.

Never.

Colleagues and their wives found Esther difficult. At dinner, with everyone having ordered, she would continue reading and re-reading a one-page menu, heedless of the vexation this trance-like bemusement caused everyone else, as though the decision were of exquisite delicacy. Her—disability? —was such that she could not type her own proposals, prospectuses and grant applications. Bill would type it all.

As it happened, he and Elizabeth, and his children, would talk by phone very occasionally. But always apart—in fact secret—from, Esther. Once, when he and Esther were in Sardinia, Bill's female cousin, a favorite, flew in from London. Esther packed her bag and left the next morning. Such was the brand of freedom, in fact a self-indenturing, for which Bill had opted. Eventually Esther's totalist campaign won for her what she seemed to want—Bill's total estrangement from his family; a kind of amputation. The organ of natural affection was gone.

We might think of this in terms of a fable, the frog in the pot of water warming so gradually that, when the frog finally realizes he's being boiled, it's too late. On two occasions Bill told Esther that he was leaving her. No one knows the reasons he gave her, or if he gave himself the true reasons. Given his intellectual honesty he very well may have told the truth, the same truth as always: he needed his freedom, he needed to be Bill, and she was a heavier lift than he had signed up for. She threatened suicide. Bill knew she had been in a psych ward in her early twenties—and that she had no one, no family, no friends. (Her story is deeply sad, but what agency she retained she bent to her own will and none other. It is for someone else to tell.) So, knowing she probably meant it, he stayed, thus having to reconfirm with greater strength the self-woven mythology of Beguiled Oneness. Had he really wanted to leave, he told himself, he would have done so. Some might call this a version of the Stockholm syndrome.

Then again, many men are inordinately uxorious. But what does that mean? Well, not only, or merely, or necessarily, or at all, lust. There is that self-persuasion. If I chose this it must be what I wanted and if I wanted it then it must be right and if it is right then I must be one with it – not merely tolerate it, nor even embrace it, but become it. There, too, is the life of the mind.

As with most declines, this one was fitful; down a slope, then a fall off a cliff, then a plateau, then more slippage. Esther's work became more and more esoteric. In retirement, both were financially sound, but not physically. They had bought a house in a remote area of New England, not realizing they were too old for its upkeep. Doctors and hospitals and grocery stores were inconvenient. Worse, the world of exhibitions and publishing had passed them by. Millennials ran those shows, and they don't answer their mail. Bill's writing became acerbic, even nasty.

Now travel was out of the question. Esther had bad knees, easily repaired, but she was far too fragile to submit to replacement surgery. So their life shrank. One spring they decided to take a small, local vacation by visiting an inn for a week. "Let them cook and clean and do laundry," Bill said. And who has not had the very same idea? The problem, though, was that they never left.

There began the squalor, mental and physical. Bill, always digitally clumsy and never at home with technology—he would blame the world rather than himself, expressing surprise that it had moved on—would unlock his computer, then, not realizing he had, would lock it again. In the dead of summer Esther insisted on keeping the windows closed so as not catch the flu. At first little by little then by a lot they moved in clothes and books, those piled on the two beds, leaving only just enough space for a body lying on its side.

Their hygiene slipped, not quite cascading but enough for the

innkeeper, who liked Bill, to have to bring in a cleaning service. There had been incontinence. One day he slipped out to call Elizabeth, who had called the innkeeper, who thought only eviction was an option and so called a social worker. "If we are separated," Bill said, "I will kill myself and Esther too." His only worries were the reputation of her artwork and the seven-books worth of articles saved in a computer that he (mistakenly) thought was crashed, the work lost forever.

Because he could no longer write, his articles stopped appearing in the usual places. After several months of that Jack, who had followed Bill's work, called. He had tried various numbers from the past but they were disconnected and, of course, email was not an option. But he had heard about the inn from Bill's last publisher and gotten through there. Bill asked Jack to visit. "Can you come tomorrow?"

The next day was Ash Wednesday so, right after an early Mass, with his forehead 'smudged,' Jack took off. It was a short trip, under an hour, first on the Metro North out of the 125th Street station, then a short cab ride. Jack found the squalor, the filth, the stink, and his debilitated friend. Esther was gone. "She died last month, Jack. The bank foreclosed on the house. The inn has given me a residency deal."

Jack got his old friend up and out onto the front lawn, where they sat.

"Bill. How the fuck?"

"Lots of pieces to that puzzle, Jackie, lots of answers along with lies. But I've been thinking, which, at times, I'm still good at. And you know what I've concluded, Jack? You will like this. It was pride. Pride fucked up my soul, then my mind, then my body. I burned in my own Hell. Hey Jack," Bill rushed on, "you've got dirt on your forehead."

"Ah, Bill, Billyboy, you overgrown hobbit. I've missed you. A

lot of people have missed you.

"I miss me, too, Jack."

"You know, Bill, this suffering of yours could be purgatorial."

"Time off for good behavior?" Bill chuckled. Jack stared. "Well, then, what the hell can you do?"

"For starters I'm getting you out of here."

"To your place, Jackie?"

"No, Bill, to a hospital. Get you fed and hydrated and cleaned and tested, and— "

Bill tensed. "Not the family, Jack. I couldn't take that embarrassment, that humiliation. Even if they were willing to see me they couldn't forgive me. I feel so guilty, Jack, so goddamned guilty. I *am* guilty. I can't forgive me."

Jack turned in his chair, looking straight into his friend's eyes. "You hid them pretty good, Bill, and I gotta tell you that has really pissed me off. Why the Great Wall of Bill? What, or who, were you trying to keep out?"

Bill's head bobbed. "*Out?* I was trying to keep the shame in, Jack, *in*, and it worked. No matter. Those mystic chords of affection haven't snapped."

After a pause, "ah Billyboy, you do know you're dying, don't you?"

"Sure, Jackie, I know that. But, tell me, Mr. Christian, is my soul dying too?"

"Your soul? No. That cannot happen. But it is diseased and tormented. It could use considerable repair."

"You mean fumigation, like my stinking room?"

"You can smell that, Bill?"

"Now that I'm outside."

"You can't get outside of your own soul, Bill."

"How about my own mind?"

"Yeah, that you can do."

"How, Jackie? Tell me how."

"Bill, tell me, Babe Ruth or U. S. Grant. You can have only one."

"You know the answer. You know my answer. The Bambino, of course"

"Really? The Civil War doesn't matter?"

"Not as much as civil peace, Jack, and that's what Ruth brought us. Anyway, Sherman and Sheridan would have won the war without Grant."

"You loved the Babe, didn't you."

"Not as much as I loved Joe Gordon, then, when I'm twelve, those bastards go and trade him. Heartbreak."

"Bill, have you figured out how you escape your mind?"

"You've been reading St. John, again. Do you remember the literal translation of his opening line?"

"I do Billyboy. The Logos 'pitched a tent' or something close, right? And do you remember that when we ran for union office you said you couldn't let me do that alone?"

"You had told me I sounded like William F. Buckley! The leadership were all fucking anti-Semites."

"And that was no prank!" Jack was smiling.

"And that Wednesday dinner group. What conversation. But, Jack, it's too late for memory lane, isn't it. So do you love me Jackie?"

"I do."

"And I you. So will you give me some smudge?"

Jack swallowed hard. He looked at the sky, clear, and the trees, splintering sunlight in the stillness. Bill said, "you thinking it over?"

"No, Bill. I was just wondering if you can abide by the conditions."

"If you do smudge me I'll give you my story. All of it. I've been a dick, twenty-four carats. You will see that whatever misery I've endured I had coming. But, as Greene has his Catholic psychopath say in *Brighton Rock*, much can happen between the stirrup and the ground. So, the conditions."

Jack nodded and said, "sounds like a confession." Then, with a faint smile, "simple. You bear the sign of the cross on your forehead, with its usual blessing, and say amen. And mean it. Now, Bill, I'm not sure you can do that. But if you say you can I'll believe you, because you're honest. And you know, you still won't be off the hook."

Now tears were creeping down Bill's cheeks. "Thanks, but a qualification. Honest, except with myself. Until now. I will abide, Jack, I promise. Please do it. It will help with the guilt. That's the real consequence of overweening pride, you know. Overwhelming guilt. Gotta start someplace."

Jack nodded, put his thumb to the ashes on his forehead, leaned into Bill, and while making the sign of the cross with those ashes on Bill's forehead said, "from dust you came, to dust you shall return. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen."

Bill, without hesitation and with eyes wide open, looking at Jack's forehead, whispered "amen."

Jack arranged the funeral. Only he, the innkeeper and, of course, Elizabeth attended. She saw to his burial in Mississippi, where the family finally said goodbye, a long way from the Upper West Side.

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James Como's new book is *Mystical Perelandra: My Lifelong Reading of C. S. Lewis and His Favorite Book* (Winged Lion Press).

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