

Coincidental Conquerors

by [Ian C. Smith](#) (September 2024)



Two Men by the Window (Edvard Munch, 1887)

Our stories were published on consecutive pages many years after we last spoke to each other but the coincidence didn't end there. His was about us, brigands defying school authority in search of adventure. Bill, who had been William when he made a set of football cards of our school team complete with comments, used my nickname for his main character. The rural backwater where he lived that I Googled was from his bio. I knew this had to be my William whose address I was able to ascertain, so I posted a light-hearted card about the publication.

Awaiting his responding call, I explained my serendipity to friends who agreed about the long odds of such a dovetailed eventuality. Bill's call, guarded, polite, gave the impression he was pleased by my contact. His recollections of me were flattering. Living far apart we exchanged calls, both wondering about mutually convenient times and places to possibly meet. I had forgotten some of what Bill recalled. Putting this together with what I remembered had me sitting too long staring at phantoms, those reconstructed playground personalities, all strangers now.

His slight complaining tone put me off but I was keen to see him. Phone conversations are not ideal meetings and can be misleading. No body language. He had started to hedge about us getting together when I offered to make the long drive from a university where I knew someone I could stay with if I flew there. Bill was being transferred even further away so my visit needed to be soon. When I called from the university, his familiar voice, asthmatic, as in the sixth grade, sounded startled, and formal, using our surnames as if reading from the old school roll.

The road mostly straight, my journey new in this land of great distances and lonely byways, I drove in adventurous hope despite misgivings. I had avoided calling him for some time, anticipating this trip, saving news for our vis-à-vis reunion, a prospect that now began to agitate me. Crossing a great expanse of arid plain in harsh light I stopped to relieve myself. Sheep nibbled what they could glean, the road deserted. Back in the car, nervous, I brushed my hair, a flashback to self-centred teenage years.

I reached the sign, no town, just several houses, slowing for what looked like a school behind trees. It was Bill's. He was a primary school principal. I peered at a ramshackle house near it thinking he might appear, hearing my car that made the only sound for miles. There was no movement. I cruised past and entered the school grounds. Another, newer, building could

be nearby, I thought. The ramshackle house, bare and ugly, had me recalling a town in a Patrick White book written long ago: Barrenugli. I couldn't believe he didn't know I had arrived.

The ramshackle house was his school entitlement, a perk. I parked in front, taking my time checking my phone. As I queried if I'd got this all wrong a shadow moved on the porch. A short, sallow-complexioned man greeted me using my full name. I recognised Bill—just—but wondered how we ever shared part of our boyhood. Still fat and ugly, he said, waiting for me to cross the neglected space, apologising for mess in advance, blaming his upcoming move. He had been solid at school, his legs like tree trunks. Now he reminded me of pictures I'd seen of people bouncing around on big air-filled balls.

He made awful instant coffee while I sat in his obviously single man's kitchen offering lively anecdotal quips from memory's persistence. There were no pictures, and I could see nothing packed. He had told me his wife suddenly left him years before, and he seemed more interested in what to give me for lunch than in age-old school day pranks. Listing alternative dishes, he ended with the suggestion of a counter lunch in a nearby town's pub that I leapt on. There, he showed me off to people as if I were important. He was teetotal, and insisted on paying.

I realised our memories were often out of sync, just echoes like rumours from the mist of nostalgia that shelters childhood and could make me weep, with nothing corresponding since. He seemed to believe I was born lucky, a skewed truth that irked. Steering the conversation to our current connection, writing, I found no common ground. Several of my favourite writers were unknown to him. His claim to have never received an editor's rejection dragged a snort of disbelief from me but he said he always picked his mark with care because rejection would crush him. Starting to think his apparent lack of interest in shop talk was fear, I nudged him

more to open up.

He alluded to suspicious locals who believed he was conducting an affair with one of his teachers, a beautiful married woman. You've no idea what dirty minds they've got around here, he wheezed, denying guilt. At times he sounded realistic, aware, but at others I felt he wasn't being honest. His father, an egotistical man, who remembered me, had published a popular memoir reviewed as bush humour, a source of pride for Bill whose own writing, tales of iconic cultural myth, echoed his father's. When I mentioned poetry, he slammed its door shut. Then he referred to a book, his, as if I already knew about it, and large sums of money from TV rights, a mini-series. It seemed everybody was after the rights for this yet unpublished sensation. Bill was going to write a sequel, he assured me, an even better book.

Back in Bill's desultory billet when I asked for the toilet he directed me to an outside dunny. Beyond his back door I slipped, hitting the ground hard. Rattled, I scrambled to my feet hoping he hadn't seen or heard my pratfall. Laundry sagged from a clothesline, including a large pair of underpants with tiny surfboard riders. When I said it was time to leave, he delayed me, asking my opinion of Filipinas. Saying I'd never met one started him on a lengthy spiel, his voice trembling with fervour, jowls quivering, about travelling with a pal to tempt a young gorgeous uncomplaining grateful wife to bring to Australia. Bill was sending money to a girl he met there. Our mad married headmaster scandalised the district by eloping with a years younger girl shortly after we had left school. I think, again, of coincidence.

Driving fast towards tall buildings at last, Satie's melancholy piano compositions playing, I trawled that day's conversations toying with the idea of mirroring Bill's effort, basing a character on him. How much of me would my first-person narrator be? I knew my friend, a savvy feminist I wanted to impress, would listen encouragingly, but no matter

how I phrased events I felt churlish. There was a sadness to Bill, alone, nobody touching him, no pillow talk. I muttered aloud a weak joke about him having a fat chance of meeting anyone in these places as I passed those sheep where stunted trees slouched on sentry duty by the dead straight road. He was right. I was lucky. Good luck to that Filipina, I thought.

I might visit our old school, no doubt discover sense offensive changes where I rode my bike like it was part of my body. Bill told me I drew a wonderful picture of William the Conqueror for his assignment, a distant effort now beyond my fragmented recollection. At the back I sat next to William whose lunch sandwiches were wrapped in newspaper. With no notion of the sadness or disillusionment suffered by adults we read those flattened paged together, junior explorers sharing each other's plans, our stars set to awkwardly align in the unknowable landscape of the future.

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Ian C Smith's work has been published in *BBC Radio 4 Sounds, Cable Street, The Dalhousie Review, Griffith Review, Honest Ulsterman, Offcourse, Stand, & Westerly*. His seventh book is *wonder sadness madness joy*, Ginninderra (Port Adelaide). He writes in the Gippsland Lakes area of Victoria, and on Flinders Island.

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