

THE DEATH OF MEMOIR

by Morgan Scott Phenix

Here is my final complaint, a final echo. I have worn out the years. There is nothing left for me to resurrect. I will instead reflect through another's mirror. I am almost done with mine. Life has been such a fleeting treasure, an ever-mutating puzzle, always caught up in the moment, yet anticipation for the morn. Or a New Moon. Or the Since Forever. Once lived, the reminders of a path make for good tales, or at least for sharing, but it's just life in the rear-view mirror. Or through a streaked windshield. Choosing the best words and tunes and wishes to re-create a moment. Memoir. Fact and near-fiction. I have reached an end, nothing more to say.

I have struggled, digging in my mind files for days, trying to find something I haven't already told. If not ten times. Something new, worth sharing. Enough memories of father and mother, brother, an aunt who really told tales, and the wonderful embrace of grandparents I hardly remember. Towns and travels and schools and jobs. Mistakes and triumphs. Recipes, even. Some shared again and again. Enough. I am done with memoir. Well, except yesterday. Something old, yet strangely new. One day's separation, memoir? Freshly shared here, yet part of my decision to finish with it. There's a story to pass along. Maybe hidden in the weeds.

My neighbor Billy passed away. Eighty-something and in failing health for quite some time. His wife died ten or more years ago. Injuries suffered in a car wreck, Billy driving, waiting to make a turn. But Billy died in a nursing facility only weeks ago, after a month or two away from home. We had spent many hours in conversation and tales, sitting in front of his house. Neighborly memoir for thirty years. Lately, the limits of our conversations were the length of his oxygen hose. Even so, we had a great view of the mountains and sky to the East, and shared lots of things from the past. Among them, the sight of Billy's 1967 Chevrolet convertible slumped in his yard, half-covered by an old loose tarp, flat tires in mud, a woodchuck family beneath the car. Coming and going. The sagging car remained on the spot. At least for the thirty years we've been neighbors. Never a mention of getting it running again. That would probably have been a tall tale.

But our conversations often turned to Billy's love of country music. He said he played the fiddle. Almost in passing, he told me he had a Stradivarius, won in a card game. I must have showed some surprise or doubt, but he said

there was a signed label visible inside the fiddle's scroll vents. Old paper, he said. He countered my smile with a better smiling response that he had the violin in a bank vault in town. He touched on the Stradivarius fact now and then, and the country music stars he had met. I am keenly aware of the precious nature of memoir in every possible telling. And, of course, the absolute possibility of truth. The truth now is the *For Sale* sign in front of Billy's house.

Yesterday was a beautiful and windy day, bright sun and scudding clouds, intermission from the glare. I sat in our front yard with the dogs. They had barked at the deer, making their twice-daily pass across the field, the dogs' ferocity safe behind our chain-link fence. The barking continued as a pickup truck drove up the hollow's lane. It was Billy's son, followed by a local salvage yard's diesel roll-back.

I waved, wondering if the family had sold Billy's car for parts, or maybe someone had bought it, to fix it up. I couldn't imagine the rot and rust, most particularly the convertible top and seats and floorboards and dashboard. Perhaps the engine and transmission were worth something. I wondered if Billy's Stradivarius might be in the back seat or trunk of the old car, perhaps in similar shape, moldy or decayed, woodchuck tooth marks. The car and the fiddle were part of Billy's repertoire, his memoir. Well, his late memoir. I had an idea I would call the salvage operator, whose father I had known. I could ask about the car, curious where its story might end. It had been part of my daily view for thirty years, though it had never moved. Well, not until now. Billy's own memoir becoming an echo. It gives me a chill.

The wrecker backed up to the car and rolled the deck off to the car's front wheels. The driver took only a few minutes to attach the winch cable and hook to the car and pull it slowly up onto the deck. He secured the car and rolled the loaded deck back onto the wrecker.

Billy's story? I recalled he had never once mentioned anything about the car. Not a word. When had he bought it? How long he'd had it, any adventures related to it? No story. Nothing. In thirty years of conversations. Just woodchucks. I'll drive out to the car salvage lot and ask. Maybe in the morning.

Billy's son waved to the rollback driver, climbed into his own truck, and backed out to the road. He turned and headed further up the mountain toward his own house. A half-mile's goodbye to another chapter in his father's story. His father's convertible gone.

The rollback rumbled out to the road. To my surprise it made the turn up the mountain road toward Billy's son's house. A while later, the rollback came

back down the hill. Empty. The car's story is on hold. Maybe another thirty years?

The rollback driver waved, gave a single beep from the horn. A new chapter echoing in Billy's memoir. Fresh weeds? Ashes? A better view of the mountains?

Billy's house sits empty. I'll ask his son about the violin. Have I ever mentioned? I was first violin in my elementary school orchestra. Three years. Now I have finished my memoir.

