

BLACK'S GASLIGHT VILLAGE

One Friday night in the spring of 1966, the first year I was at the Fiction Workshop, I was waitressing at the Steak-Out when Phil came in, a blonde, good-looking undergraduate who lived in one of the basement rooms in the L-shaped building where I lived at Black's Gaslight Village. Phil was carrying a huge coil of rope. I asked him, teasingly, what he was going to do with that rope. Oh, he said, I'm going to hang a few little things on it. We laughed – the reference between us was so absurdly alarming and obvious. He laid it over a table, sat down at it, and I dismissed the flash in my mind's eye. He'd laughed.

His girlfriend Pam, he said, had gone out of town. He played "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf, Part I and Part II" on the jukebox. Asked me what I'd like to hear. It was early: only a couple other customers were there. I didn't know him well. I served him a few beers, we joked, small-talked.

I stayed up until 5 that night with several others at Black's in someone's attic room in the big house, drinking, talking.

About 10 in the morning, I stumbled, bleary-eyed, into the shared kitchen of the L-shaped building. I don't remember who told me. Maybe Mary Kat (Mary Kathleen O'Donnell). Phil had hanged himself. In his room, directly below mine. I sat down. I described the rope spread on the table, what we'd said, what I'd dismissed. I remember noticing a book of Anne Sexton's poems that Chuck Hanzlicek, who lived upstairs, had left on our table: *All My Pretty Ones*.

A few minutes later my friend Steve Orlen came downstairs. Have you heard any more about Francoise? he asked. Why was he talking about anyone or anything else right now? What are you talking about, I repeated at him angrily. He interrupted sarcastically, Well, I woke up this morning to the news that Phil hanged himself and Francoise was killed in a car accident.

I didn't believe him. I told him so. I went outside. Three guys were standing there. One, Mike, a grad student in acting, was someone I'd been seeing a bit, who Francoise had just begun to date. She was a pretty French girl, blonde, and a senior in English, like Phil. Two weeks before, I'd taken her to my parent's new farm in Arkansas for Easter week. She, my sister and I sunbathed, gossiped, hiked the farm. We were in the same short story course and usually sat next to each other. I'd been cool to her that week, though I knew it wasn't so much Mike as my ego between us. Now he was standing there in the morning sun with two other guys, when I burst out the door. Where's Francoise? Have you seen Francoise? I demanded. Mike looked at me, peculiarly. He glanced at the others. Then he said, Man, she's dead.

The cover of Anne Sexton's book featured a quote: "All my pretty ones? Did you say all? O hell-kite! All? What, all my pretty chickens, and their dam, At one fell swoop?"¹

It was Matt Dillon (real name Howard McMillan – Mr. Black dubbed him Matt because he was from Kansas, and it stuck), who worked for Mr. Black on the place part-time, who received the call from the police about Francoise. It was Matt who led the exterminators, who came that morning to exterminate termites, to the basement, and

found Phil. Phil'd put the Beatles on, before he hanged himself. They'd been singing "Help" over and over, all night long. It was Matt who turned off the stereo.

We'd planned a pig roast, following Iowa tradition, for that night at Black's. We postponed it to the next Saturday night. We hung around together, in each other's rooms and the various kitchens, quietly, instead.

There were about 40 students living at Black's Gaslight Village, nearly all graduate students, mainly in the Workshop. Not everyone knew everyone. But it was a community. I suppose there's one there still. So there was the thing of distinguishing if someone knew or not, the thing about telling, among us, some sense that death stalked around our corners. It was an odd place, Black an odd man, always in lawsuits, two sons who'd committed suicide, his cane tapping around for the rent. And we, as a group, were fairly unsteady ourselves.

After a few days, black humor began to abound at Black's. The tombstones Mr. Black had amassed from God knows where that lined the front of the U-shaped building took on an ironic appropriateness. Matt, sobered but dry-eyed, matter-of-fact, made wordplays on "exterminate." Mark Marcus confided he was mad at Phil. I mean, he was supposed to give me a haircut this week.

The week went by. We planned the pig roast for the coming Saturday night. There was a memorial service for Francoise. Her body was shipped back to France. Harrison Golden and others took up a collection for a red maple tree and planted it behind the big house. Her parents wrote my parents. Yours was the last family she was with, they said.

We discovered Phil had attempted suicide earlier, at age 16. Pam, his girlfriend, had gone away because she didn't know how to cope with his depression. All day long he'd carried that rope, and all day long people who knew him intuited, and then dismissed, its purpose. So, we were discovering, it goes.

On the next Saturday, Steve Orlen and I picked out a plump, reddish-brown pig, on the hoof. The guys (Carl, Joe, Harrison, others) dug a pit between the L-shaped and big house. The pig roasted all day. In the evening everyone came to the feast. Mary Kat had her guitar. I think Jonathan Penner had one too. We sang, drank beer, ate. The mood was not somber, or festive, exactly. There was some rage, defiance, as an undercurrent. Why? Why all my pretty ones? Then we'll show you. We put the pig's head on a stick and stuck it into the ground near the fire. Lord of the Flies.

The Vonneguts lived next door. Jane Vonnegut wanted to see the conglomeration of rooms and antiques she'd heard so much about. I invited her to the pig roast for a tour of Black's kingdom. There were no stairs down to that same basement, only a board propped from the doorway to the floor. There were no lights in the hall, either. I descended first, warning o no stairs, but failing to warn of the narrowness of the board. She stepped onto it with her right foot and into thin air with her left, hitting her knee hard on the edge of the board. The tour ended. Later, Kurt was furious at the lack of lights and stairs and the consequences for Jane's knee, which were serious enough to require an operation, if I recall correctly. He initiated a lawsuit.

Two people had gone off for a motorcycle ride. Diane Neighbors², a beautiful, black, talented writer from the South, had never been on a motorcycle, so Jack, in the undergrad fiction workshop, offered to take her for a spin on his. Diane didn't live at the Gaslight Village. But she was a close friend of Larry's, and others, who did: Larry was from the deep south, from Georgia, too, but white, a grad student in intellectual history, and Diane was often at Black's. One of her stories had just been accepted for publication in *The Atlantic Monthly* and she was getting her MFA in a couple of weeks.

Howard McMillan, alias Matt Dillon, had gone off by foot to Kenney's, a bar in town.

More pork, more beer, more talk. Where were Diane and Jack, Jack's wife Linda began to wonder. Murmurs. Ought to be back by now.

Mrs. Black came out near our party, without a word, and got in her car. We looked at one another. One group, including Larry, got in a car and followed. Judith Goode and I and others got in Judith's car. We knew where they were going.

Diane died a few minutes after arriving at the hospital. Jack was all right except for a smashed toe. They were coming out of an alley. The passing VW's driver didn't see them. Diane wasn't wearing a helmet.

This was too much. It was already too much: this was beyond too much. Three people from Black's, all young, beautiful, intelligent, in the space of one week. Those who had reacted woodenly or philosophically before, now reacted emotionally. Those who had reacted emotionally, as myself, now reacted woodenly. Those who didn't know the victims well and were therefore distant, felt the impact of pure numbers. Seemed we were under siege, without arms, in a war we didn't know we'd been in.

Vietnam was occurring then. Kennedy had been assassinated a year and a half before. The Civil Rights movement was in full swing. The previous spring I'd marched in Selma. Many marches and murders were still to come. I remember Michael Lally on a soapbox for SDS in the student union. We Shall Overcome. Hell, no, I won't go. But we'd grown up in the comfortable Fifties.

All this surrounded the Workshop. The Workshop itself went on as itself – competitive, egocentric, inspiring, anxious, supportive, chauvinistic, sometimes very moving. That year, 1965-66, we were in the quonset huts. They were cold, shabby, smokey, and wonderful. None of your usual classroom aesthetics or bodily comfort. We were there to write. That was the priority outside the quonset huts as well as in. From the hospital Larry, who was usually theoretical, above-it-all, with impeccable Georgia manners, walked out the doors in a daze of fury. I called Black's, spoke to Tom Jones, to let them know as promised what'd happened, and to tell them Larry was blind with grief and to watch for him.

But it was too much to ask to watch out for someone else. I can't remember, Tom Jones or Chuck Aukema, smashed his fists into the wall, instead.

Mike, Francoise's friend, appeared by the still-smoldering pig, as Judith and I returned. He wasn't at the party earlier. He'd just got home. He felt something immediately, like an ill wind, he said, an evil wind, in the place. He left his room right away and came back to the pig roast, spooked, to find out what the evil was.

Some of us grouped together in various rooms, as we had the Saturday night before. I remember being in Larry's attic room in the big house, then later in a front room downstairs. I was outside that room, sitting on the stairs by myself, when Matt opened the front door. He'd been at Kenney's all this time – the bar that workshop students frequented – yakking and drinking the beer Irene Kenney served so well. He stared at me. Then he said, Just tell me who it is. He didn't want to know how or what happened, he said. He just wanted to know who it was this time. His voice cracked.

I told him who. But I just had a beer with them, he said. They were just at Kenney's. He sat down on the steps in front of me and his shoulders began to shake. I was dry-eyed this time: everything appeared distant, as though I were outside of the world. Matt and I held each other. I could feel the heaving in his back, in his chest, the not-being-able-to-stand-anymore, against me, and my numbness.

I could not see clearly all the next week. I walked around and around. I was taking a poetry class with Paul Carroll. Garcia Lorca. A la cinco de la tarde. Exactamente a la cinco de la tarde. I will not see it! I read that poem again and again and the quotation on the cover of Anne Sexton's *All My Pretty Ones*. I kept passing the Vonnegut's house. I wanted to go in. But I was too cut off, didn't know what I wanted or could be given inside, was worried about Jane's knee and my part in it. I had called my parents the week before, but my mother didn't know what to say. What could she say to my outrage? I think now it was as though I were accusing her. But that was the week before. This week I didn't call. Just wandered. Couldn't concentrate.

The following weekend there was supposed to be another pig roast, the annual spring pig roast at Bourjaily's. I think this one was a political fundraiser. I called Vance's at the end of the week to see if it was still going on: everyone wanted to know. They'd decided to go ahead with it, Vance said. Then Tina Bourjaily was on the phone. I don't remember exactly how it began. But I knew she and Vance knew about tragedy. Their child had been killed in a car crash, a car Vance had been driving. I must've said something like I couldn't fathom it, believe it. Kurt always said Tina was like an Indian. She managed the farm, their horses. I didn't know what Kurt meant precisely, but I understood the quality I think he meant. At that moment, Tina told me, simply, that these things happen. And, she said, when they happen, they often come in twos or threes. She did not offer a theory or an explanation. I began to weep.

Write down the truest thing you know, Hemingway advised. Another famous man said, the truth shall make ye free. What Tina said, no more or less, was all the truth.

Over the summer, friends from Black's kept track of each other. Who knew who would or wouldn't be there the next semester?

Howard McMillan aka Matt Dillon wrote a novel based on Mr. Black and the Gaslight Village, a few years later. He set out to get it all, he told me, including That Week. But all for one novel was too much. As far as I know, no one else ever tried.

The following spring we Vonnegut workshoppers threw a farewell party for Kurt, on John and Jane Casey's and David Plimpton's farm. I sneaked out a 1900's yearbook from the library, everyone contributing a passport-sized snapshot, and my roommate that year, artist Susan Harris (we'd both moved from Black's) reproduced the hairdo's billowy dresses and funny suits from that era in black ink. We replaced their 1900's faces. We framed it, and gave it to Kurt at the party. John, Jane, David, Gail Godwin, John Irving, and I don't know who all, decorated the walls of the farmhouse. Plastered up everywhere were the things Kurt'd said in class over and over, or sometimes once, like "Throw out the first two pages," and "Who's Keats?"

-- Suzanne McConnell

¹ The quote is the Shakespearean character Macduff's reply when told that Macbeth has had his wife and children killed.

² I composed this memoir while in Cologne, Germany, and could not remember or ascertain Diane's last name for certain, although I thought it was "Neighbors." Later I discovered I had been wrong. Her last name was Williams. "Neighbors" was the title she'd given her story published in *The Atlantic Monthly*. Set in her native Georgia, it concerned an African-American family trying to decide whether to subject their young child to the brutality of being one of the first black children to attend a white school.