



Fools Like Me

by Peter Murphy

Once upon a time I was born in the small country of Wales which is best known for its most famous poet, Dylan Thomas, who is best known for his most famous poem, “Fern Hill,” which begins:

“Now as I was young and easy under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green...”

“Bough,” I’m sure you know, is a fancy word for a tree branch, but “Fern Hill,” you may not know, was the name of his aunt’s farm in Wales where Dylan spent his happy-go-lucky summers as a young boy.

Soon after I was born, my family left Wales, sailed across the Atlantic and settled in New York City where I was young and easy on the concrete pavement and happy as the asphalt was black. I loved the smell of diesel exhaust in the morning and the noise of taxi cabs blasting their horns throughout the day. But more than anything, I loved my tree.

Each day I ran down six flights of stairs, went outside and hugged it. I rubbed my fingers

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over its smooth, silver trunk that rose straight into the sky. At the top was a long bough with a bright light that lit up the street when it got dark. When a neighbor asked what I wanted to be when I grew up, I said I wanted to be the tree-man so I could turn the light on and off. The neighbor shook her head.

One day my father told me my tree wasn't a tree. "It's a lamppost," he said.

"No! It's a tree."

"It's a lamppost."

"I don't believe you."

He took me on the Subway to Central Park. I had never seen such a place. "What's that?" I asked, pointing at the green stuff on the ground.

"That's grass," my father said as we stepped off the path and walked on it. Unlike the firm pavement I was used to, grass was squishy, and I was afraid it would suck me in. We stopped near some big, ugly things that rose out of the grass. My father said, "These are trees." I rubbed my finger against the surface which wasn't smooth like my tree. And when I looked up, branches crowded with green, papery things, blocked the light.

"I don't like your trees."

"They're not my trees," my father said. "They're your trees too. They're everybody's trees."

"I don't like them."

"Everybody likes trees," my father said, shaking his head. When I looked up again, I saw the boughs move, and heard the leaves rustle.

Years later I left the city to go to college in the country. I was walking to class with a

country friend when I looked up. "What's that?" I asked, pointing at the sky.

"What's what?" my country friend said.

"Those colors."

Confused, my friend said, "You mean the rainbow?"

"Rainbow?" Of course I knew what a rainbow was. Everybody knew what a rainbow was, but I hadn't realized that I'd never seen one before. My friend shook his head.

In botany class we took a field trip into the woods where the professor asked us to identify trees. The country kids touched the trunks, examined the branches, looked at the leaves and called out,

"Beech"

"Maple."

"Hickory."

"Birch."

"Sassafras."

"Poplar."

"Sycamore."

I rubbed the trunks, examined the branches, looked at the leaves and called out, "Tree."
My professor shook his head. I looked up and saw the boughs move and heard the leaves rustle.

When I failed botany and flunked out of college, I blamed the trees and have avoided them since. There is a tree in my backyard. It was there when I bought my house, but I don't go near it, especially when I see the boughs move and hear the leaves rustle.

Recently I visited friends in Wales. Gwen and Trevor live outside the village of Llangain, next to the farm that had been Dylan Thomas' Fern Hill. Gwen showed me some old

black and white photographs they found after moving in. Dylan's wife, Caitlin, was skinny dipping in Fernhill Brook which runs through my friends' property. Her large white breasts and smooth belly gleamed through the surface of the murky water. Trevor suggested we go for a hike. "We'll walk down to 'Dead End' where the photographs were taken."

Dead End, I thought. This can't be good.

Soon we were walking across the squishy grass into the woods. We walked single file along a narrow path, Gwen in front of me, Trevor behind. Marshes on our right. Fern Brook was on our left, and all around us, trees, trees, trees, their boughs heavy with leaves, their gnarly roots snaking in and out of the slippery ground. Finally, we stopped. Trevor pointed at the water and said, "Here we are at 'Dead End' where the bard once trod, and his wife bathed naked."

I stared at the brook, and even though the photographs had been taken seventy years before, I half expected to see Caitlin Thomas and her large white breasts rise out of the water. "Fern Brook," I joked, "sounds like a porn star." Gwen and Trevor shook their heads.

As I turned around and started to walk back to the house, a root rose out of the dirt tripping me, and a branch smacked me on the head, tumbling me into Fern Brook. Gwen and Trevor hauled me out. My face was bleeding where the tree hit me, and my eyeglasses were gone. When I looked up, even though they were fuzzy, I saw the boughs move and heard the leaves rustle.

The first thing I did when I returned home was face the tree in my backyard. Nothing moved when I looked up, and the leaves didn't rustle. But I swear, I swear, I thought I heard something whimper as I swung my ax.