

The Commingling of Billy and Calliope: A Fox Story

By Bryon Cahill

— *Picture this, Marcus.*

The temperature is high and so is K.C. He's pacing Petey's double-wide from wall to wall and back again, acting like a desperate, wounded jackrabbit gone berserk down in a well. No, not a jackrabbit, a killer coyote, as his dull, self-designated acronym suggests.

“Sit down, man! You’re making me dizzy.” Tito takes his eyes off the K.C. whirlwind and busies himself with packing another bowl. He brushes aside a littering of beer cans to make room for his degenerate task. A dozen or so wasted tin soldiers fly off the table. One remains, teetering on the edge for a second or two, as if deciding which fate it should choose.

“Timber!” Tito calls, and the Schlitz goes the way of his fallen brothers, crashing down to join the random mess they’ve made of themselves. Warm, bronze liquid pours out, saturating the tattered rug.

Petey’s konked out in the corner. His head is supported well, for now, by the sturdy angle of two of the dilapidated mobile home’s four walls.

Tito finishes his precise task. K.C. ceases his feral pacing to grab the bowl from his hands. A zippo materializes and in a mosquito's heartbeat, K.C.'s lungs are filled with the white smoke of dark crystals. He exhales noxious fumes, wheezes, coughs, and laughs. Like a little boy daydreaming of flight, he pinwheels his arms in a mad circle, all the while careful not to drop the drugs. The secondhand vapor tastes like metal and liquid ash. I try to breathe as little as possible.

Tito stands and snatches the bowl back as K.C. resumes his deranged, purposeless walk.

"How 'bout now, Billy? You cannot say 'no' forever."

"No," I tell Tito for the hundredth time. "Forever no."

"Forever no! That has a nice ring to it, sí?" He takes a well-drawn hit. Settling in to the ratty sofa, Tito grins like a medieval soldier on break, having himself a pleasant sit and dangling his legs from the castle's parapet. Because why not? There's nothing fucking better to do.

I take a last swig of my beer and stand to go. I've stayed long enough to be polite. My duties as a casual acquaintance are fulfilled. This night, I vow, will be the last. I can't keep wasting my time with them. It's clear they're going

absolutely nowhere and every passing day they travel faster and further into the abyss. There are better things written in my stars. I just know it.

"Where you off to?" K.C. speaks.

"I'm beat, man. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Yeah," he snorts. "Tomorrow. Same ol' shit, different day. Am I right?"

I have no answer for him. The days of looking for work are long gone.

Now we sleep until noon or later, pass each waking hour by poisoning our bodies with drugs and alcohol, and then pass out again. This is the extent of our enlightened existence.

There are no jobs within a 100-mile radius. It's almost as if Texas decided it was developed good and well enough. It doesn't need any more roads or parks or schools or office buildings. The state is stuck. *Thank you very much for your sweat. Your services are no longer necessary. We're good here. Piss off.*

What's an out-of-work, down-on-his-luck, construction worker to do but collect food stamps and worry himself into an early grave? *At least I'm not married*, I think. *At least I don't have kids*. Tito's strapped with five rugrats. All boys. Five! That doesn't stop him from blowing the last of his severance on the mamba jamba. God, what animals we are.

“Stay,” K.C. insists. The top half of his face is frozen in determined panic while the bottom half (everything below the bridge of his nose) twitches uncontrollably. Or maybe he *is* in control of the grinding of his teeth and the mad quiver of his lips. If he’s aware of these tics, that just makes him all the more dangerous.

“Drink,” he says, and tosses me a fresh can. “Sit. We need to talk.”

We need to talk? Is he breaking up with me?

I stifle a smile. When he’s like this — insane — Killer Coyote is about as predictable as a thunder lizard. You never know which way those damn things are gonna scatter in a rainstorm. Any bodily betrayal on my part could unleash his inner beast. And with him flying this high, I don’t wanna chance a beating. No doubt he’s always indestructible; the crystals only add to his beastly nature.

“OK,” I say, popping the can open and sitting back down on Petey’s cruddy couch. “What’s up?”

K.C. resumes his pacing once more. His stride is faster, more erratic now. As he speaks, his words, choppy at first, soon find grace and flow, undeterred as the steady Sabine River.

“There’s just nothing out there. You know? It’s this world. It’s this

country. It's all of it. I mean, how is a good and decent man supposed to get by? It's all crumbling. Crumbling to shit. There's no sense of decency anymore. No. Not like when we were kids. There's no five o'clock TV dinners. Those are gone the way of fucking fresh-cut lawns and star gazing. Forget that scene. You think anyone can afford a home-cooked meal? Your momma's not gonna cook for you tonight, Billy!"

K.C. doesn't know the first goddamn thing about my momma. But I let that one slide. Not because I fear him. I do not. I believe I can take down any man, regardless of his unbreakable stature, if given the right motivation. But believe it or not, I ease myself down off the ledge *because* of momma. She would never approve of such violence in her name. So I allow him this one discretion. Just the one.

"Yeah," Tito agrees. Sitting next to me, he coughs out more smoke.
"Your momma ain't cooking no roast beef for you tonight."

My reaction is faster than even I am ready for. Tito falls backward on the couch, clutching his throat in terrible pain. I look down at my right hand. It had moved swiftly, of its own accord, and karate chopped Tito's larynx. The bowl he'd previously been repacking had flown out of his flailing hand and traveled the

length of the room to smack Petey in the forehead.

"What the fuck, man?" he says, rising from his unconsciousness.

"You all right?" I ask Tito. He nods and his breath returns.

"Fuck you, Billy," he says. But his face tells me he doesn't much care.

He knows he deserved the beating.

"See, that's what I'm talking about, right there!" K.C. is reenergized.

"The four of us, we're connected. Ain't no one that can hurt us except ourselves.

And even when we inflict pain on each other, it comes from a place of respect.

That's a sure sign of a tight gang right there, that's what that is. Screw the world

and screw America! We ought to take what's ours, by right.

"I mean, just think about it. Back in the olden days — I'm talking way back when the west was won by being wild. What did they do? They went primal, didn't they? Those outlaws, those cowboys, they took what was owed to them, yeah? I'm talking about the banks, brother. That's our money in there. They have it. They stole it from us. It's rightfully ours, you dig? It's our duty as red-blooded Americans — we ought to take it back."

I'd been hoodwinked. That's what this was. Six reptilian eyes press into me, scanning for friend or foe. In the dim light, K.C. borrows the appearance of a

pit viper cottonmouth, tasting the smell of my soul with his flickering tongue.

They're all in on it — this very occasion is a premeditated ruse to gauge my loyalty.

"K.C.," I say. "What are you talking about?" But I already know.

"There's gold in them there hills," he hisses. "And we're just the fools to take it."

"You want to rob a bank?"

"No," he says. "Don't want to. *Have* to, Billy. Don't you get it? Don't you see? Our whole lives have been leading up to this. It's our destiny."

He blinks a couple dozen times in succession. Time is marching on without him, without any of them. Without us. We are utterly alone in a world that has no need of our kind anymore.

They're all staring. Waiting for me to come around to their way of thinking. I take some time with my process.

The local bank is situated all by its lonesome on the far end of town. The few shops nearby have all gone under in the past couple years and no one has inhabited them as of yet. In fact, there's a good half mile of vacancies on either side. Main street mainly remains still, collecting dust, making our Rio Torto

just a tumbleweed away from being a ghost town.

Back when we were getting regular paychecks, we would cash 'em at the bar. Aside from the grocer's and the bank, Tommy's Place was the only establishment still thriving.

One fine day, on a lark, I walked into the bank to see about opening one of them savings accounts. I just wanted to see if the jerks that ran the place would throw me out on my ear. The one guy I spoke to was over-the-top friendly. His name was Bob Jones or something equally as plain and he wore this big getup, a gray suit with a bright purple tie. He said his six-year-old daughter gave him that dumb thing as a gift on Christmas. Right there I knew he was a liar. What six-year-old kid has any money to go and buy their dad a fucken tie? Right?

Well, that banker led me around and introduced me to Sue and Charlotte. ... Maybe they were Becky and Lorraine or Lisa and Tammy? I don't know what their fucken names were, I'm making this shit up as I go. The point is, there were just two of them and they were both of the female persuasion.

"Nice place to work," I said to the man, and he grinned, getting my meaning.

"It sure is," he agreed. "I hardly even notice the hour-and-a-half drive down from San Antonio anymore."

"You drive an hour and a half every week?" I asked, not sure I heard him right.

"That's just one way, my boy. But trust me, a man can get used to anything if given the time to assimilate. Oh, I stay in the almost-always vacant hotel there in town; I pretty much have the run of the place. Then on Friday afternoon I drive on home to my pretty ladies. I'm not going to lie to you, the bump in my paycheck sure helps our time apart. It is, ahem, quite a substantial bump." His paper-thin grin is only missing a twitching mustache for him to pluck.

"Good money being a banker in a dead town, is there?"

"The tides ebb and flow, my friend! Don't count Rio Torto down and out just yet. In fact, I have it on good authority that some very important corporations plan on investing in this town soon. That's why I'm here! To get the lay of the land, so to speak. And to move large quantities of old gold."

"Gold?"

"Haha! Who said anything about gold?" He realized he'd said too much. The jackass. It only made me hate him more.

He offered me a seat in his office, and I told him I preferred to stand. I'd decided I wasn't going to stay much longer.

"Suit yourself," he said. "Fine by me, sir. I pretty much sit all day long myself. It's good to have a stand. Now say, Mr. Fox. What kind of accounts were you interested in again? We don't have much to offer in a line of credit, but we do have CDs and IRAs and PDMs and CBCs and, oh, well I'm getting ahead of myself. What was it you said you do for a living?"

It was a mistake going in there. I told him as much. I turned and walked out of his bank and headed straight for Tommy's Place; once there, my hard-earned check was immediately turned into the loud, angry, familiar promises of sorrows and suds.

"All right," I tell K.C. and the gang. "I'm in. Fuck it. Why not. Let's go rob the goddamn bank. What's the plan?"

* * *

– *Hey babe, come on in here and tell Marcus how we met.*

– *Go and get yourself fucked.*

– *Well now, I suppose that was my own fault for asking.*

It's morning. I'm standing on the corner of 4th and Dixie, right on time.

When the bank opens, we're going to bum rush it. Get in and knock anyone down who gets in our way. That's the plan anyway, such as it is. I can feel my six-shooter in my waistband. It's heavy and clunky and frankly it's about all I can feel in the world.

Seven minutes till open. Six. Where are they? At two minutes to nine, Tito's boxy Dodge Polara rolls onto the scene. He lays on his horn, which is not a horn in the traditional sense of the word. He's rigged it to beep out the opening bars of "La Cucaracha." The wind takes the old Mexican folk song for a ride up and into the distant hills.

"You crazy motherfucker!" he shouts at me from his open window. "Man, you just lost me thirty bucks! No, fuck that. They ain't here. I'll just say you was a no show. If they even remember the bet. Which they won't."

"Where's K.C.?" I ask. "Where's Petey?"

"They sleeping it off. What the fuck you even doing here? You so bad you gonna rob a bank? You dumber than you look, Billy Fox."

Across the empty street, the bank doors open. A ray of light in a golden sundress steps out onto the sidewalk, looks directly at me, then goes back in.

"What are you saying?" I shake off the strange illumination and jump

right down Tito's throat. "Are you saying you were all messing with me? Is that it? You were just messing with me?!"

"Hey, take it easy. It's all a bit of fun, no? You should see your face, though. You one dumb motherfucker, for sure."

"What did you say about my mother?"

We aren't friends, that's certain. No man who would call another man his friend would ever do this to them. The other two low-life scumbags couldn't even drag their asses out of their self-induced drug comas to come and laugh at me.

"Fuck you, Tito," I say. And then, for some reason, I start walking toward the bank.

"Yes, fuck me, sure, sure. ... Hey, Billy? Where you going? Come on, amigo, get in the car. First drink's on me."

"It's nine in the morning, asshole. Destiny calls."

That was a dumb thing to say, I figure. So to punctuate my lame one-liner, I shoot at one of Tito's tires. Or at least, that's where I've aimed. But having never fired a weapon before, I'm a pretty awful shot and I hit the passenger side mirror instead. Glass shards rain down on hot asphalt. Tito screams some

obscenities, but to no avail. I am deaf to his protestations.

I am.

I am fire.

I pass through the gates of hell and I don't even know why.

Who am I?

I enter to the chilling sight of an empty bank. I rush toward the one office I know of. I've been in there before. I throw the full weight of my body against the door and it explodes off the hinges. I didn't even bother to check if it was locked or not.

There are two girls cowering in the far corner. One of them is the mesmerizing creature in the golden sundress. Something about the way she is shaking seems over-the-top. The other girl, crouching and terrified beside her, has her head buried in the shining dress. She is crying rather loudly. She won't look at me. But the vision — behind her mask of fear, I detect a note of annoyance. With me?

The bank manager, Bob Jones, I think, has got one shaky finger in the rotary dial of his phone. I point my gun at him.

“You wanna keep those digits, Bob? I suggest you hang up. Now.”

He does so, barely able to get the receiver in the cradle without fainting dead away.

“Come on up and out, girls,” I say, unsure where all of this might be headed.

“His name’s Jim,” the beautiful one says.

“What?”

“You called him Bob. His name’s Jim.”

“Hey, that’s fantastic. Let’s go.”

The three of them obey and follow the wafting direction of my gun out into the bank where I ask the timid, crying one to go behind the counter and empty her register.

“Just put all the money in the sack.”

“Wh-what sack, m-mister?”

“Aw shit.” The sacks were Petey’s responsibility.

There never were any sacks, were there, Petey?

“Now, now, now, we don’t want any trouble, do we, Jennifer? Here.”

Bob Jim Jackoff proposes a solution. He removes a large plastic bag from an

empty, cylindrical, aluminum trash bin. “Just fill this up with all the money in the registers. We don’t want anyone to get hurt here. Do we, friend?”

“What happened to Sue and Charlotte?” I ask. Time is moving in slow motion and my mouth and deeds have taken on their own steam.

“Who?” the manager asks. “There’s no girls by those names here, friend. We had a Denise and Becky a few months back. But they’re gone. This here’s the new girls, Jennifer and Callio —” He stops. Resets. “Say, don’t I know you from somewhere?” He studies my face and I realize I’m super fucked for being super stupid. “Yeah, your name’s Billy Fox, right? You came in a few months ago. I never forget a face.”

The beauty in the golden sundress is walking toward me. Her curves flow every which way. Her eyelashes are as long as a sultry octopus’s reach, and she flutters them my way. Before I can tell her to freeze or stay back, she is on me. She holds me with her raw energy and her feminine prowess.

“You’re early,” she whispers. “I wasn’t gonna shake loose the bones from outta this tree till next week.” She studies every inch of my body at once. And in an instant, she knows me. “But you’re late on your own time, aren’t you? Huh. Funny that. I guess it all depends on how you look at it. Which way *are* you

looking at it, Billy?"

"Lady, I —"

She hushes me with lemon-scented breath and places her index finger right up on my lips. I can taste her glory on the outskirts of my mouth.

"Shh," she says, from out of a dream. "Don't flap your yapper all over my nice, new dress."

"Calliope?" Jennifer looks betrayed. As if she's witnessing a friend transform into an enemy. I know the look well. I've worn it numerous times.

"I can see this is your first takedown. Follow my lead, Billy. I'll help you through it."

"I robbed ten banks just last month," I tell her. I don't know why I'm lying, but it feels good. It also feels good to see that she doesn't buy it. Not for a second. She doesn't care either way. And she sees me.

"Shh," she commands. "Let momma handle this."

"Calliope, don't be stupid," the manager implores her. "The man has a gun, for Pete's sake!"

She ignores him. In an act of explicit selflessness, this vision of perfection, of growing uncertainty and terror, leans forward and kisses my entire

mouth with her entire mouth. Before my overloaded senses can signal to my brain what is happening, it's over. She's smiling at me and pointing my own revolver at my chest.

"Now," she says. "Let's do this right. But don't worry, love, I've got your back. Duck."

From behind me, I can sense the big glass doors swinging closed. I turn to see Tito's potbelly frame come barreling into the bank.

"Billy, you crazy son of a bitch. You shot my car, you sinister shitbag fucknuts ..." Tito's curses fade away as my one true destiny speaks again.

"Fine, don't duck. I guess I have to do everything."

She lowers her kinetic body halfway to the ground and squeezes off a round, just under my left hand. She's back up and standing before the bullet crushes its mark.

Tito hits the floor. He clutches his side, trying his damnedest to keep his insides in. He's only somewhat successful. Blood rushes out, but his organs stay put.

The shrinking violet called Jennifer bowls over into a faint and she's stone cold out behind her counter.

The bank manager is too dumbstruck to move or speak. But it doesn't matter. Before he has time to contemplate his next thought or action, his brains are chunks and splatters across the wall. His lifeless body crumples.

The image of perfection in the yellow dress is moving. She bends down and removes a set of keys from the dead manager's pocket. As her attention is diverted, Jennifer surprises us all by leaping up from her position.

"Faint faker!" I sound the alarm. But it's too late. She's got the jump on Calliope and manages to sack her hard. The keys go flying from one hand and my gun ejects from her other. Unlucky for Jennifer though, the weighty weapon does not travel far, and Calliope need only stretch out her unrestrained arm to retrieve it. She does so, clutching it once again, and blasts her former coworker to smithereens.

"Sweet baby Jesus!" the injured Tito cries over the shot's resounding echo.

Calliope gives me a nod, thanking me for the fair warning. She snatches up the manager's obnoxious set of keys and continues the work of figuring which one she needs.

"Bingo," she declares upon finding it, and glides to the large, wrought

iron gate in the back. The firestorm wearing felicitous flesh, supple bones, and a summer dress unlocks and pulls open the heavy door. And she is gone.

Tito is hollering for me to help. My feet are carrying the rest of my numb body his way. I don't know what I will do when I reach him. But then, an answer presents itself — my gun comes sliding back along the floor and rests at my heels.

"Finish him," she says between laborious grunts. It sounds as if she's trying to lift a rhinoceros onto a piano back there, or vice versa.

"Billy, man, you gotta get me outta here. That loco bitch fucking shot me! You gotta take her out, Billy!"

She emerges, dragging three giant sacks by their pull strings; presumably, they are loaded with something massive. Perhaps something golden.

She's next to me, and every ounce of her aura encapsulates my being. She kisses me again. This time harder and more intense than before. When she releases her tongue and backs away, I know where I need to be.

Forever yes.

"Mm, mm, mm!" she says, licking her own lips. "I just needed to be sure."

OK then, help a girl out. Won't you, Billy? These sacks are too much for little ol' me to bear. Let's go."

In a daze, I follow my destiny toward the exit. As we go, Tito looks up one last time, begging me with dying eyes.

"This guy your friend?" she asks.

"No," I answer truthfully.

"Then end him, Billy. No witnesses."

She's moving through space and time and big glass doors. Outside, there are no cops or people or signs of life aside from a murder of crows squawking in the sky above.

"Billy, mi amigo. Don't do me like this, Billy. The cops will be here any second, and ..."

His body jumps and crashes, jumps and crashes. Click, click, click.

I follow my future, out and into the light.

"This your car? It will have to do for now."

Tito, in his mad rush to meet his maker, had conveniently left his keys in the ignition. I heave the bulky sacks in the back and then hold the passenger side door open for her.

“Oh honey,” she says. “Don’t.”

I don’t tell her the car was Tito’s. The time for truth is gone. I simply slip into my new role like it was always there waiting for me, just on the precipice of my horizon.

As I drive out of town, we hear the first sirens approaching the slaughterhouse.

“Too little too late, coppers!”

“Who are you?” I ask my newfound queen.

“I’ll be the love of your life if you let me, darlin’.” And then she slides over to my side and wraps her legs around my waist. She undoes my pants and pops my ever-loving self into her.

“I should … pull … over.”

“No time, Billy. Come fly with me.”

Before it is finished, angels and devils are slaying each other in open combat on the battlefield of my soul. And I let them.

I let them still.

* * *

— *Bafa boo tah bah bah.*

— That's right, Marcus. That's how I met your momma! And the rest, as they say, is history.

— Bada squa kah da. Liar!

— What did you just call me?

— Da lia! Hahaha!

— Hey, Calliope! Get in here! Your son just said his first word! Marcus said, “Dada!”

— Congratu-fucking-lations, you're father of the year. We're out of cigarettes.

— Squakah boo boo boo. Ah haha aha ha!