

## CARL EDWARD MUCKLEY

by

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Carl Muckley lost his life prematurely in 2004 in a tragic automobile collision, when the driver of another vehicle fell asleep and crossed the median.

Carl's sisters asked me to give the eulogy at his funeral, but I proved inadequate to the task. His loss weighed so heavily that I was unable to meet their needs at a moment of loss. That failure of character on my part remains an enduring embarrassment in my life.

This eulogy is an attempt to offer a belated tribute to a person as intriguing as any I have ever known. He stood up for me at my weddings, and I was best man at his.

Carl was godfather to my daughter Mali, pronounced Molly, the Thai word for the jasmine flower. Thai is her mother tongue, and when she eventually began speaking English at about age three, Carl, who had always found her enchanting, took the greatest delight in chattering with her at last.

The time comes to mind when she, at age six or seven, and I were driving across New Orleans. On impulse we dropped in on Carl. Against one wall stood a large and rather costly marimba which he had purchased with the intent of acquiring musical skills. This urge lasted for two or three days, and the instrument was gathering dust. Mali had seen it before but, focusing on it for the first time, became fascinated. The four mallets lay at hand. She took them up and, tentatively at first, began playing chords.

"Ah!" exclaimed Carl, "I see she can play the thing."

"So it would seem," I replied, and Mali twinkled.

The next day our doorbell rang. It was Carl, pushing the "thing" into the house, and for as long as Mali lived at home it remained in her bedroom, gathering no dust. But why have a godfather in the first place if he can't occasionally appear with a marimba in hand?

Any attempt to describe the man is a challenge, since he was multi-faceted, a crazy quilt of sorts, consisting of many patches not all of which were congruent one with another.

The last time I saw Carl was on the University of New Orleans campus, and the first time I met him was also at UNO, when he enrolled in a large History of Philosophy class of about sixty members.

A few weeks into the semester, as I was droning on, the subject somehow turned to Casanova. I do not recall the reason, though the man is a legend, increasingly applauded as one of the premier prose stylists of all time, not just 18th century Venice, and his name has been incorporated into the languages of the world as a synonym for the irresistible lover.

It occurred to me, tongue in cheek, to point out the obvious, namely that our Venetian lothario has been grossly overrated.

"It is common knowledge," I said, "that the Casanova of bedroom lore was a mere novice, along with other amateurs such as Rudolph Valentino and the Sheik of Araby. As everyone knows, the *real* lover, who smiles over his shoulder at vain contenders, is invariably the slender clerk, slightly balding, who can perform day and night without pause."

Silence.

Then, suddenly, a booming laugh erupted from the last row in class. A student, wearing a workman's blue shirt with a name tag, had apparently found my remark amusing. The bell rang and the class slumbered toward the door, but the student in the blue shirt paused for a moment at the desk.

The name tag said **MUCKLEY**.

"A little bit of humor helps the medicine go down," he said.

"You're a working man, I see. What do you do?"

"I'm a welder at Avondale Shipyards."

"That's interesting. You enjoy it?"

"Yeah, I always get a boost from the workers over there. They keep me in touch with the Standard Man."

I had no idea who the Standard Man might be, but was later to learn that it was a reference to the *working person*, man or woman, who can examine his or her reflection in the mirror and approve of the image looking back, namely the solid person of integrity who goes to school, raises a family, and takes a well earned place as part of the backbone of the nation.

Carl the *working man* had appeared as the first patch in the quilt. Nothing in his demeanor led me to suspect that I was conversing with a millionaire many times over.

Other patches eventually emerged. As I got to know him better, I realized that he was also Carl the *literary man*.

He walked into my office one morning as I happened to be leafing through the pages of Finnegans Wake, a radial book which can be read upside down or downside up, left to right or right to left. It makes no difference.

"Ah, Joyce," said Carl, with a grin. "Always simplistic and to the point. Linear to a fault. How is the wake progressing?"

"It was a long, very long, a dark, very dark, an alburd unend, and, we might add, a scarce endurable, and somenwhat stumble tumbling night," I quoted.

"You are reading from the middle of the text, I see. I prefer opening lines, particularly those that possess a measure of authentic subtlety and depth."

"For instance--?"

"It was a dark and stormy night."

Bulwer-Lytton's immortal salvo, the opening line of Paul Clifford.

Just then an English professor stuck his head in the door.

"Muckley!" he exclaimed, glancing at the book in my hand, "what in Freud's name are you doing up here on the philosophy ward? Surely you, of all people on campus, could be discussing something a little more grounded in reality."

"Like The Faerie Queene?" replied Carl.

We all chuckled and, after the fellow had gone, a question popped into my mind. Where exactly did Shakespeare write of the mother who, seeing her daughter as a mirror of herself, thinks back to the lovely April of her prime?

"Dontcha see?" replied Carl. "That's in the third sonnet, not far from the end."

"Oh right, right," I said, looking out the window. "But while we're on the subject, refresh my memory. Who is the fellow who says something on the order of methinks the lady doth protest too much?"

"Dontcha see? It's the queen speaking, not some fellow, early in Act III of Hamlet."

"Oh sure, of course!" I nodded, staring more intently out the window.

It never mattered what literary question I raised, it was always "Dontcha see?" from Carl, who continued to give no hint that at least one of us, between the two, might be a man of means. But money never seemed important to him. Other matters were of greater interest. Moreover, he drove a modest car, and rented an unpretentious apartment, between marriages.

But Carl in the role of *entrepreneur* ultimately came into view as a patch in the quilt.

The first time my suspicions were aroused had been one summer afternoon as we were walking out of a matinee. Pausing by a telephone on the wall, he dialed a number and began speaking in a language that reminded me of English.

"Bob? Carl. If Amalgamated Enterprises gets above fifteen and a quarter, sell. OK? And if Consolidated Freightways goes down to six and a half, get me all the leverage you can. Got that? Great. My best to Jenny and the kids."

"What was that all about?"

"Oh, just my broker," he replied. "Good man."

The pieces were finally coming together. Reflecting, I recalled an occasion when he had enrolled in Tulane Law School, not in order to become a lawyer, but simply to take certain courses in which he could

learn more about handling his own personal affairs, instead of having to risk hiring an embezzler; and I remembered yet another time when he had been out of town for several months, studying political science at George Washington University, though not as a degree candidate. He merely wanted to become more conversant with the kind of language politicians like to hear when appropriations are being discussed.

In a separate patch, one having nothing to do with his fortune, Carl happened to be a very good *chess player*. One of his wives once interrupted the middle of a game and asked which of us was better.

"The man could give God a good game," I replied facetiously, gesturing toward Carl, as another of my knights was being carried from the field of honor.

"Bovine residue!" he snorted, "Give the Big Guy a break. I'm not even on His radar."

"Really?"

"Look! On the day chess was invented, God would have paused by the board and said, 'Ya call that a game?? Dontcha see?! White moves first, and whoever plays white always wins!'"

Right.

Yet an additional patch, perhaps less commendable, was Carl the *drinking man*. New Orleans is a good place to go out for night on the town, and sometimes he did just that.

One Sunday morning in spring, while waiting at a red light in Fat City, the entertainment mecca of Metairie, I heard a plaintive cry.

"Hanks? Hanks--, I need a ride home."

Looking out the window, I saw Carl lying on the grass, propped halfway up against a fireplug. The suggestion that he needed a ride home was one I could accept at face value.

Some people might be critical of a scene such as this, as his wife of the season soon proved when I delivered him to his door. But Carl was a responsible citizen, who never received a DUI citation for driving under the influence. He always hailed a cab, and certainly would have that Sunday morning, had one elected to appear in his field of vision.

"Thanks for the lift," he said later. "Next time I'll make certain I get a cab. The problem with driving while drinking is that you're sitting at a red light, waiting for green, and some zombie creams you from behind, impaling himself on the steering column. Everyone gets tested, you've been drinking, and suddenly the accident is *your* fault."

"Good thinking. This is, after all, N'Awlins."

"Yeah yew rite," he nodded, "let the cabbie get the DUI."

Another recollection of Carl the tippler comes to mind. He was returning from a trip to Russia, and I met his plane at the airport.

"How was the flight?"

"First class," he responded. "I always fly first class. Can't afford not to."

"How so?"

"Flying makes me nervous, and when I'm nervous I drink. The drinks are free in first class, and if I had to buy that many in coach, the cost of the flight would double!"

"Yeah yew rite."

The crazy quilt expands, its parts in search of a common denominator. Yet another of the patches was Carl the *gifted athlete*, a high school all-star in track and in football.

"What path led you to UNO?" I asked one day.

"I started college at Auburn, as a halfback on the football team, a position in which I was comfortable. One day the punt returner got injured, though not fatally. I was the fastest man on the squad, so the coach ordered me to get in there and replace him. I cradled the first punt in my arms and looked upfield. Eleven glassy eyed monsters with flecks of foam at the corners of their mouth were zeroing in, and it was clear that not one of them attached the slightest value to my survival."

"Wow. How did you escape?"

"Crazed with fear, I wove around and through them, laid the ball on the ground in the end zone, saluted the coach and walked off the field."

"And then--?"

"The next day found me enrolled as a philosophy major at UNO, back in company with the Standard Man."

The final patch in the quilt: Carl the *philosopher*.

In the Spring Semester 1973 he took a second philosophy class with me, and after that I didn't see much of him for awhile. Feeling the need for a change of pace, I put academic life aside for a time and drove gasoline tankers in Montana. Upon my return to campus, I was pleased to see that Carl had enrolled in yet another of my courses, this one entitled The Philosophy of Immanuel Kant.

Carl had been an average student in his earlier efforts, and I had no reason to expect that he would blossom, particularly in a course as demanding as this.

Kant is unusually difficult to teach to an undergraduate or, for that matter, to a graduate class. In nearly every case in which a thinker has authored a systematic philosophy, the system can be constructed part by part until a synoptic vision of the whole comes into focus. But with Kant, the student typically has to grasp the totality before the antecedent parts begin to make enough sense, partly because Kant was writing in a unique, indeed unprecedented, technical language.

About halfway through the semester, I became concerned that the class was not seeing the larger picture. I had been unsuccessful in helping the members grasp the architectonic whole, and the course was bogging down. Carl had been attending every session, sitting in the front row, still showing no visible sign of philosophical promise. But this was about to change.

One Monday morning I entered the room, and acknowledged a student whose hand was raised. Her question was a good one, and I paused to fumble for an answer.

Surprisingly, Carl turned around halfway in his seat, and began to speak fluent Kantese.

"Dontcha see? You can't have a Transcendental Analytic without a Transcendental Aesthetic in place, and you can't have either of those in the absence of a schematization of the categories, and the schema of substance, namely the third category of relation, is permanence of the real through time."

To my amazement, the class did see, and began scribbling furiously in notebooks. I may have been scribbling myself.

The next time we convened, the same phenomenon occurred, and suddenly the course became the easiest I ever taught. All I had to do each day was enter the room, ask if there were any questions, and listen to Carl say "Dontcha see?" while I stepped over to the window to contemplate the progress being made, if any, by the chinaberry tree in the patio.

Carl had become a disciple of German idealism, the thinking of Martin Heidegger in particular.

UNO is recognized as one of the world centers of Heideggerian studies, and in 2004 Carl funded the North American Heidegger Conference sponsored by the University.

I met Carl on the UNO campus, and said goodbye on the UNO campus. On an April morning in 2004 we walked out of the library together, going our separate ways. After a few steps I paused and looked back. He too had paused and, waving a Heidegger text in hand, flashed the broadest Irish smile.

A day later he was gone.