

The Key West Literary Seminar
presents a memorial reprint of

John Hersey's story



Get up,
Sweet Slug-a-bed

in his *Key West Tales*

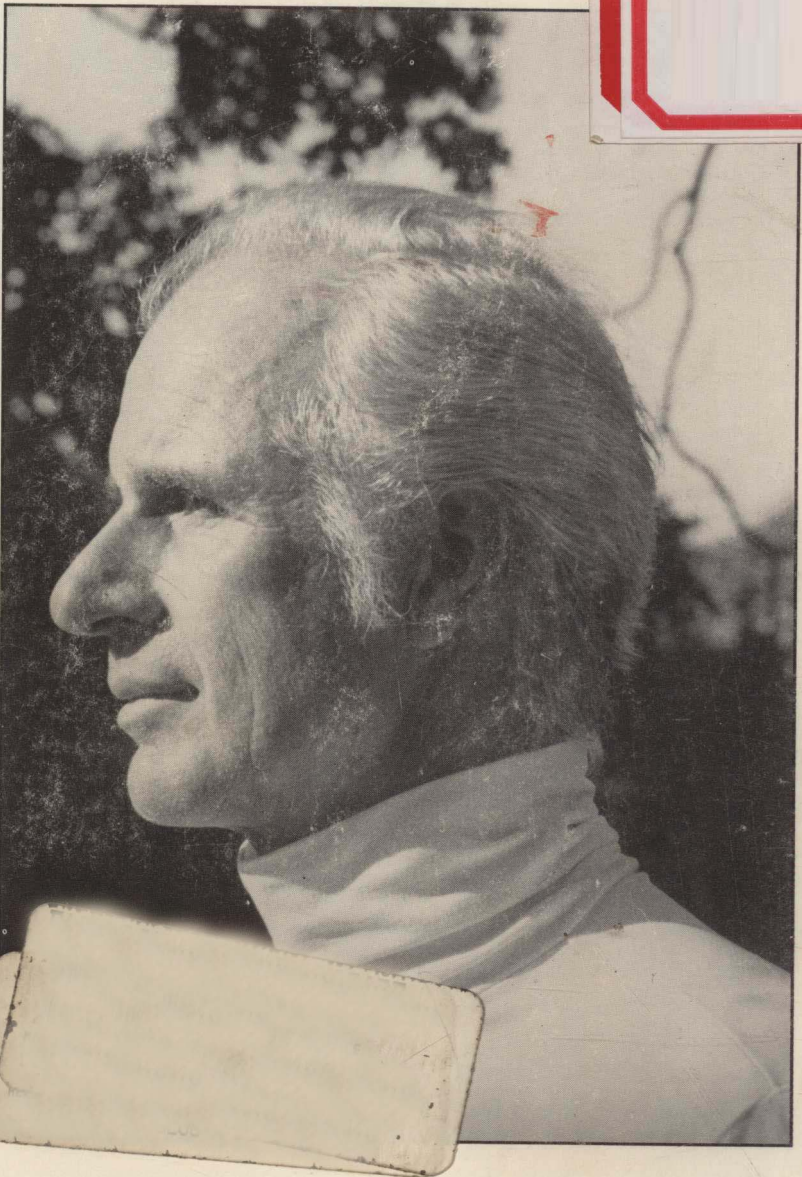
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John Hersey was born in 1914 in Tientsin, China and died March 24, 1993 in Key West. He produced 16 books of fiction and 9 of essays and reportage. His first novel, *A Bell for Adano* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1944. He bought his Key West home in 1976, where he finished *Key West Tales* the year before his death. He is survived by his wife, Barbara Hersey, and his five children, Martin, John, Jr., Ann, Baird, and Brook.

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Get Up, Sweet Slug-a-bed

Billy's hibiscus blooms every day, summer and winter. That shrub can almost talk. Nothing else in Paul's garden acts the way it does. Paul impartially waters all five of the hybrids in his garden twice a week, feeds them all on the first Sunday of each month with a special hibiscus formula they sell at Strunk's, tosses snail bait equally around under all of them, mulches them all—but only Billy's blooms every single day, the year round. It's a hybrid called Tamara, bearing a six-inch pale-yellow bloom with the most extraordinary deep grayish-lavender mouth at the center, which sends whispers of its color, like mischievous rumors, out onto the petals.

Those were the last colors Billy ever saw. The plant was in a pot in the window nearest his bed. Paul told me that the day after Billy died, the amazing Hospice people came in to “de-hospitalize” the room—arranging to return the crankable bed, the IV tree, the trapeze for Billy to help lift himself onto bed-

pans, and all the other rented gear back to Cobo's—and Mary Conover, the most equal among the several equal angels of Hospice, said to Paul, "Of course you'll want to plant Billy's hibiscus outdoors." She understood what Paul didn't yet understand.

Paul needed a lot of care from all of us after Billy died. It might have been easier if Paul and Billy had been lovers, for then Paul would have grieved normally. They were best friends. They lived in turbulent amity a couple of blocks from each other, Paul in a guesthouse on Simonton called Swann's Way, and Billy in a small apartment on William Street. Paul told me that one night, a couple of years ago, when they were sitting around, both quite tight, Paul asked Billy whether he thought they might have been lovers if they'd met when they were younger—when Billy, say, was twenty-one and Paul still in his mid-thirties. "Not a chance," Billy said, and then gave out that hoarse laugh of his, which, Paul thought at the time, put a puzzling and maybe not too nice edge on his answer. Paul tends to vibrate when he doesn't understand exactly what you mean.

Paul's rooms are on the ground floor of the guesthouse, and it has its own garden. He planted Billy's hibiscus on the side of his plot nearest Simonton. All five shrubs get plenty of light. Paul told me a few days ago that he'd been struck almost blind, that afternoon, by the sight of Billy's bush, which was prospering as usual, holding up for the pleasure of the sun's rays a dozen big dishes of those wizard colors. They made Paul dizzy, at first, with a perverse happiness, as he thought of Billy's energy, his zest, which came through in weak flickers even in his most vegetative state toward the end. His wit, always with a little price tag on it. His thick and merciless laughter. His anger, tumbling out through his utter helplessness in those last days. Remembering those things filled Paul with an enigmatic joy. "But then," he said to me, "I picked a bloom to take inside, and

I felt a horrible stab of guilt, as if I were killing the whole plant plucking off that one flower.”

Paul still lives a life of self-blame. Pain mostly, I guess, about having turned Billy over to Drew. He’d had to hire Drew. He’d really had to. Billy was alone. Billy had booted little Vanya Bronin out a month before he tested positive. He’d waited too long, years too long, to be tested, and on top of that he was destined to have a galloping case. He had full-blown symptoms within weeks, and since Bronin was no longer around, the entire care, when the bad signs set in, and for a long time after that, fell on Paul, who gave up his lunchtimes to fix Billy something to eat (or not eat) and used to sit by the hour, after he came home from work in the evenings, with what the rest of us considered an immaculate purity of friendship, reading to Billy, listening to CDs with him, holding his hands, massaging his feet, giving him back rubs, rolling him around to remake his bed with him in it, settling him for the night. Paul finally began to fall apart, just at a time when he thought he was taking another kind of fall—into love. He decided he had to get away from Key West for a few days, away from caring for and about Billy, to see whether what was happening with his new friend, Stanley, was for real. That was when he asked around and found Drew.

“I’ve combed the town,” he said to Billy, announcing the change with what he later thought might have been a little too much sales talk. “This Drew person is a classic. Wait till you see him, Billy, with his nurse’s cap. He’s a howl. But everyone says he’s the tops, really dedicated. Gourmet cook—you’ll start eating again. I checked a hatful of references. They all say he’s wonderfully sweet, oozes TLC. But also very strong—he could hoist you out of bed like a baby and put you on the potty. You know what a mess I am, helping you to move.”

“You S.O.B.,” Billy said. “You’re running out on me.”

People didn't run out on Billy. It always happened the other way round. Billy didn't know the meaning of the word loyalty. His idea of love was a romp. He was the best fun in the world, and you couldn't help wanting to be with him, but you'd better be careful.

Little Vanichka Bronin dropped in on Paul at the worst possible time, when Billy was beginning to fade fast. Vanya said to Paul that he wanted to warn him. Didn't want Paul to get burned the way he had been. Vanya is a short, butchy street kid—could pass for a featherweight boxer. He has a swaggering cockiness that I'd guess encodes a mess of self-doubt close under a thin skin. His unlikely line of work was as a taxidermist, mostly stuffing big fish for flabby-armed one-day charter-boat anglers—instant Hemingways—to take home as trophies. Occasionally he did up exotic birds, and once he claimed to be really pissed off at having to stuff a Key deer that had been illegally killed by a bow-and-arrow hunter.

Vanya said to Paul that he had done *everything* for Billy: kept house, gone shopping, cooked, done the dishes—and given him any pleasure that his whim might choose at any moment of any hour of the day or night. “The guy used me,” Vanichka said, his face splotched with puddles of his outrage. “I was just a servicer. Some kind of, like, fuck machine. He had no more feeling for me than he did for his right hand when he jacked off—less.” Toward the end of his tirade, Vanya said, “Son of a bitch tried to accuse me of having infected him.” That ugly claim of Vanya's Paul knew wasn't true, because Billy threw Vanya out a full month before he even tested positive, and he never saw or spoke to him again.

“Not to worry,” Paul said when Vanya finally ran out of steam. “I'm not in love with the guy.”

Vanya couldn't believe that. I do. Because when Billy said, “Not a chance,” that time, I think he spoke for both of them, whether Paul knew it or not. They were made to be just friends.

I'll never forget the first time I laid eyes on Drew Patterson. I dropped over one afternoon to see Billy, as I often did. I didn't know Paul had hired a nurse. I was one of half a dozen friends of Billy's—our little support group—to whom Paul had given keys to Billy's apartment, so that we could let ourselves in at hours when Billy was apt to be alone. So in I went, and there, leaning over the bed, gradually and it seemed endlessly straightening up at the sound of my entrance, was this six-foot-three-inch androgyne dressed in a white T-shirt and nothing else, it appeared, besides a white wrap-all-the-way-around apron that looked like a sheath skirt, and God knows what—pistil? stamen?—was hidden under it. His long, slightly curly, and very bleached hair was pulled back in a ponytail that hung nearly to his waist; on top of his head stood a lacy and frilly nurse's cap interwoven with a purple ribbon—the only color, aside from his green eyes, in the whole apparition. For some reason, perhaps the way the long torso sagged, with its weight on one hip, I had a sudden thought of a Saint Sebastian—was it Piero della Francesca's?—for there was something about this drooped figure that suggested multiple wounds.

"You're . . . ?" the nurse asked, in a challenging, officious tone, with a full, deep voice, as if to say, "What do *you* want?"

"He's Phillip," Billy said from his bed. "This is Drew, Phil. She's come to take care of me. She's very sweet."

The gender of the pronoun didn't come from Billy as a slip of the tongue. He knew perfectly well what he was saying. He may have grown weak, but he was still Billy the Kid. Drew didn't flick an eyelash.

The reports after that were that Drew was a wonder of thoughtfulness and solicitude. He wore membrane-thin rubber gloves for direct dealings with Billy, and he'd rub a little Oil of Olay on them, so that whenever he touched Billy, it was with

fragrant satin hands. With bare hands he fixed delicacies like *crème brûlée* and raspberry mousse, and on Billy's lunch and dinner tray, surrounding the dishes, he scattered emblems of the outdoor life that Billy had once loved—pastel bracts of bougainvillea, fragrant leaves of rose geranium, feathery ends of fresh dill, awakening buds of dwarf carnation: tiny gardens of distraction from the very thought of food. He sat by Billy's bed and read aloud to him by the hour, books Billy wanted to experience for a second or third or fourth time: Armistead Maupin's tales, David Leavitt's first collection, the George Stambolian anthology, Andrew Holleran's essays, and, most often, Edmund White's pre-danger *Joy*. Straight books aplenty too, of course; above all, the poetry of Billy's beloved Donne and Herrick. And it was true that Drew could lift Billy right out of bed like a baby to sit on what Drew called the "toidy."

Billy seemed to accept all this as a matter of course. "She's okay," he would grudgingly say, in Drew's presence, to Paul or to me. You never saw any sign of resentment from Drew of Billy's belittling offhandedness.

Little Vanya Bronin was right, of course. We had all known it: There was a hard place in Billy Chapman. Paul told me that with all the excruciating compassion which he couldn't help feeling for Billy's waning—Billy's terrifying evaporation—he nevertheless considered himself entitled to remember that Billy had done plenty of mean things in his time. You gave, he took. Paul says that in a way, this made Billy's lot as a helpless, needful sickbed creature even more heartbreaking than it would have been had he been a less selfish person. Someone with that kind of ego needs power; it was terrible to see him without a shred left. You saw that he was driven to hurt with the only weapons left him—words—as if to unload on others some of the excess of his own psychic pain. It was not at all, though, a matter of his suddenly having found a way to exploit his pitiable state; he had always been a predator.

But I remember the afternoon when Paul came alone to have drinks at our house, and he told Sarah and me about Billy's one tender spot. His only true love. It had gone on for thirty years. This was the one emotion in which Billy had invested, to be kept in trust for the rest of his life, his entire fund of altruism. In this single case he gave and gave—but it was all in his head, it was all a fantasy. He fell in love with a classmate in sixth grade, a boy named Sylvester Franklin. Billy and Syllly. Billy and his idol went off to Peddie together, and then to the University of Virginia. They never roomed together. Billy never declared his love. Paul isn't sure whether Franklin ever even knew about Billy's feelings, to say nothing of reciprocating them. Franklin went on to Johns Hopkins Medical School, became a surgeon, and took up practice in Charlotte—where, as it happened, both of Billy's sisters had also settled. There Sylvester Franklin lived a straight life; he got married and had a son and a daughter. While, all those years, from a distance, Billy still hankered after him with something like the yearnings of an eleven-year-old.

Billy used to go to Charlotte to visit his sisters, one of whom he more or less liked, and one of whom he didn't, just to be in the same town with the doctor. They saw each other rarely, as "old school friends." Franklin's children, and particularly the daughter, Molly, adored Billy. To them, he was jolly "Uncle William," on the few occasions when he dined with the family. He knew how to make a quarter disappear in a person's ear, to the amazement of young Tommy Franklin, and he showed Molly how to weave a cradle fit for the king of the cats with a loop of string. He safely lavished on the children the love that really belonged to their daddy.

Years later, a grown-up Molly came somehow to guess Billy's secret; perhaps she sensed the padlock on Billy's emotions, his

rapt caution, when he was around her father. She was open with Billy about it, for which he was grateful beyond words. He had confessed the secret to Paul, long since, and so had had a neutral ear to pour it all out to, but being able to talk openly about the secret with Syl's daughter, Molly, was to creep up to the very edge of the forbidden green glade of his dreams. Once—inflaming him, much too late, with absurd hopes—she said she had often wondered whether her so very conventional father had, as she put it, “a hidden bohemian side.”

About four years ago, long before he tested positive, Billy developed a sudden severe back pain, and it turned out that he was going to have to have his gallbladder removed. He called Sylvester Franklin and begged him to do the operation, and on the basis of their long acquaintance, the doctor arranged a bed for him, on astonishingly short order, in the Charlotte hospital. In the days before leaving for the surgery, Billy told Paul that he didn't know whether he'd be able to trust himself on the operating table. “This'll be the first moment of real intimacy,” he said, “that he and I have ever shared.” It would be the first time his beloved had ever touched him. He was terrified that with the palpations of the first routine exam, and then, God help him, in the operating room, all prepped in a hospital gown—and perhaps even under anesthetic!—his traitorous flesh, at Syl's touch, might be aroused and give him away.

He never told Paul how it turned out, and Paul, with his good manners, never asked. I certainly would have, if I'd been Paul. Because that anxiety of Billy's was such a clue to his vision of love: the be-all and end-all, for him, I always thought, was the joy and confident anticipation that came with tumescence. I suspect that whatever followed the pleasure of a buildup was never quite as good as it should have been. Billy lived for buildups. With Dr. Franklin he'd had one that lasted three decades—and led, at last, to a bizarre consummation of sorts on the operating table. The gallbladder removal was a medical