

Love, Love, LOVE!

by [Paul Illidge](#) (February 2024)



A River Landscape, Westphalia, Albert Bierstadt, 1855

Down the Jordan, the Black, the Ausable, the Manistee and the Muskegon. Down the Saint Joseph and the Paw, the Kalamazoo. Down the winding Tippicanoe. Down the Iroquois, the Wawasee, the endless Wabash! Up the little Wabash, the Mackinac, the Salt. Down the mighty Kashikin, the Shoal, the Illinois, the Spoon. Up the Mississippi, the Missouri, and the Niangua. Down the Jones, the Gasconde and the White. And now, at last, he was on the Sac.

Young Billy Hutton was tired. He was also very happy and proud as it had been a long trip. Twenty-seven days to be exact. Nearly nineteen-hundred miles. *Phew*. Billy was glad he was almost there and he wondered how it would feel to be a land-lubber again—to make the big step ashore in Skunky Creek, Missouri.

His means of transportation had been a raft—or more precisely a large cork archery target, the outer ring painted white, red next, then blue, then black, finally at the center the gold bull's eye. Billy liked the target fine. It was round and nice. It floated, and had kept him dry enough, and Billy had had such an enjoyable trip that he didn't mind riding on the strange raft—the peculiarity of it just didn't occur to him.

The diameter of the target raft was exactly four and a half feet, and though Billy had not been able to stretch out during the journey, he had adjusted to this. Legs folded beneath him, sitting on the golden bull's eye in the center of the target (as he had done more or less for the last four weeks), Billy had spent most of his time dreaming . . .

The Sac River was refreshingly cool, he thought, trailing his hand through the water, and to his eyes the river was clearer than a wishing well could ever be. Billy noticed that the bottom of the river was lined with unopened cans of Campbell's soup. He was not surprised. How the cans of soup got there never crossed his mind. Glancing down for a closer look, he saw a Beef Barley, a Minestrone, a Chicken Noodle, a Tomato, and was reminded for some reason of other rivers he had traveled on.

Billy, dressed in old khaki pants and a soiled white YMCA t-shirt, watched the ripples his hand made dragging through the water. It was an absolutely perfect day and Billy sighed, thinking about the trip. Once again he recalled his great surprise—indeed it had been the highlight of his trip—at seeing Ernest Hemingway, or someone with spectacles and a

bushy white beard who resembled Hemingway, up on the Big Two-Hearted River in northern Michigan. His fishing rod bent double, Ernest was reeling in what must have been a large fish. Billy recalled how using both hands he had paddled closer in an effort to reach the bank. But the current was too strong and carried him away, Hemingway scooping a large Rainbow Trout up in his net and calling after Billy, "Maybe next time.. "

Billy looked at the sun. He sneezed. He looked again and realized it was noon-lunch time. He paddled into the shallows, reached down and retrieved a can of Scotch Barley soup. He threw it back and this time found his very favourite Campbell soup-American Vegetable.

Using his Swiss Army knife, Billy opened the can and ate the soup.

The target raft drifted through the water making a quiet rippling sound. Billy watched the scenery on the shore pass by-saw butterflies, a hive of yellow jackets, chipmunks scampering along the tree branches. He heard wild birds chirping, tweeting, warbling, and, looking up, he could see the tops of the pine and spruce trees waving and bending in the breeze. The sky was deep blue and puffs of cloud sailed by. *Ah-h-h-h*, thought Billy, taking off his shirt and letting the sun warm his body-*the beauty, the magic-this is indeed the life!*

Suddenly the river went around a sharp bend. The current quickened. The target got caught in the eddy and the quickening current pulled it toward the river bank. Billy started paddling with his hands, but despite his efforts he was whisked toward the trunk of a moss-covered fallen tree, on top of which four bullfrogs were dancing and singing *I Heard It Through the Grapevine*, the tune originally made famous by the band Creedence Clearwater Revival, then more famous by the singing California Raisins in a popular TV commercial. The

target was headed straight for them! Paddling frantically, wind-milling both arms, the young man managed to avoid the bullfrogs and get the target back into the mainstream, and when, finally, it was safe, he turned around and hummed along with the bullfrogs, *I Heard It Through The Grapevine*.

Pretty good, thought Billy, making a mental note to buy some California Raisins when he got home.

As he usually did during the early afternoons on his trip, Billy soon fell asleep. He awoke in the late afternoon as the target was passing beneath a bridge. A sign above on the bridge read: *Osage Creek*—he was finally there.

Filled with nervous anticipation, Billy found a likely spot to make a landing—an old crab-fishing dock—and paddled up to it. He tied up the target, climbed ashore, and walked up to the bridge, continued a little way along the road beyond it to an abandoned gas station, with a phone booth set back from the road that seemed to be in working order. Picking up the receiver, he listened for a dial tone. There was one. With his last quarter, he called his friend Ty Soap, telling Ty in an excited voice that he had made it. Would Ty come down and pick him up?

Over the noise of what sounded to Billy like a party in progress, Ty said he'd be down in twenty minutes or so.

Billy waited. Kicking stones around outside the phone booth, he gazed up past the mountains in the distance into the Ozark sky, the power and mystery of it all gripping him like a giant magnet, and he nearly cried.

“God,” he thought. “God, God, God.”

As good as his word, in fifteen minutes Billy heard—and then saw—a helicopter approaching. It flew low, from the northeast, and in a few moments was soon directly above him hovering noisily. A door opened in the helicopter, a skyhook on the

end of a rope tumbled out, dropped through the air and hung close to the ground about thirty feet from Billy. Trotting up to it, his hair and clothes blowing in the wind from the helicopter blades, Billy saw there was a note attached to it which said, "*Good to see you, Billy! It's me, Ty Soap. Step into this sky hook!*"

Soon they were circling above Ty Soap's farm. Gazing down below, Billy thought it looked nice. A two-story farmhouse, a few sheds, a red barn, lots of corn fields, woods and a pond—all the things Billy, a city boy, imagined a farm having.

"Quite a little spread, eh?" Ty Soap shouted above the roaring helicopter engine. Billy, looking down at the farm, nodded. *The beauty, he thought ... the wonder.*

Ty landed the helicopter in an open field and he and Billy walked up to the house.

"Real glad you could make it, Billy."

"Well, I sure had some trip!"

"What did you see?"

"What didn't I see? All kinds of wonderful things, Ty. I even met Adam West at Maxson's Paddlewheel Inn and Restaurant on the Illinois."

"Batman?"

"That's right. He was doing a publicity tour. He signed an autograph for me." Billy pulled up his shirt sleeve, turned his arm, held the underside up, and there, in dark blue ink, was *Adam "Batman" West's* signature.

"Wow!" said Ty, impressed. "I guess you'll never wash that arm again," he said, holding the door open for his friend.

Wham!

Coloured lights, clouds of smoke, wailing electric guitars and the beat of wild rock-and-roll drums and cymbals came pouring out from inside the house like millions of systems gone mad, gone haywire or something. Billy smacked the door shut and backed away. *What the hell was it?* he wondered, looking at Ty in bewildered amazement.

Ty laughed. "Good grief, Billy, it's only a party. You've been out travelling rivers too long—go on in." He put a hand on Billy's shoulder and guided him inside.

Billy was astonished by what he saw. There were well over a hundred people crowded into the living room, the dining room, down the hall and into the kitchen. There must have been a dozen electric guitarists playing madly, drummers beating their drums, crashing their cymbals, high-pitched feedback screeching from amplifiers, voices screaming and shouting crazed words into microphones, people drinking cans of beer, liquor right from the bottle, smoking homemade cigarettes that smelled pungent, sort of skunky, and appeared to be making people laugh hysterically.

Billy stood on his toes and strained his eyes through the smoke looking from face to face, a hundred people having the time of their lives inside Ty's house, the wild party in full swing—even some TV and movie celebrities in attendance, so it appeared. *My Fair Lady* Audrey Hepburn talking with *James Bond* Sean Connery in his black tuxedo. Elizabeth Montgomery in her *Bewitched* costume. Beautiful Natalie Wood from *West Side Story*. Jimmy Morrison and The Doors wailing *Light My Fire*.

"Wow," Billy said, "this is really exciting, Ty!" noticing as he spoke what looked like Secret Service agents in grey suits, white shirts, skinny black ties, silver mirrored sunglasses, with earpieces, coiled wires disappearing under the collars of their suit jackets keeping a close watch on Smokey Robinson and The Miracles, the only black people in the crowd, belting out *I Feel Good*. It was all rather overwhelming to Billy.

"Ya bash, ah bish, ah boosh, ah gish," a bespectacled English professor was telling Billy, who nodded as he pretended to listen, taking a fresh glass of champagne from the tray a waiter was passing around. He noticed, as he sipped, that a lovely blond woman in a light blue sun bonnet, calico dress and white apron was motioning for him to come over.

"Hi," Billy said walking up and introducing himself to the pretty woman whom he now recognized as the woman from the *Blue Bonnet Margarine* television commercials.

"Everything's better with Blue Bonnet on it," she said brightly.

"Oh, I don't know, said Billy, turning his champagne glass in his hands, looking shyly down at his shoes. "I kind of prefer butter myself."

Miss Blue Bonnet offered him two crackers from a plate she was holding, each with a spread on it. "Try one of these, Billy," she said. "Then tell me which one you prefer. One's spread with *Nature's Own Butter*, the other has *Blue Bonnet* on it.

Billy tried the crackers.

"I like this one," he said.

"You like that one?"

"Yes."

"Billy Hutton, you picked the *Blue Bonnet* cracker!"

By 2:00 a.m. the party was beginning to show signs of slowing down, but that was all right with Billy. Standing alone by a chair, still drunk, he hadn't known what to think of all this to begin with. He had stopped drinking champagne and was now smoking a strange little cigarette someone had passed to him.

As he took a drag, coughing, Ty Soap sidled up to him and

confided, in a drunken whisper, "I've got a sure thing for you, Billy."

The party had reached its climax, Billy noticed. Things were gradually beginning to settle down. Couples were forming, a few heading upstairs.

"What's the sure thing?" Billy asked.

Ty pointed across the room to a woman with shoulder-length blond hair, standing alone, a pretty woman of Billy's age wearing yellow and pink daisy hot pants, a light yellow T-shirt and pink running shoes, exhaling after a puff of the thin white cigarette she was holding.

"She's a model for the *Virginia Slims* cigarette ads on TV," said Ty, "'You've come a long way baby.' You must have seen them."

Billy had seen the ads. "Well, I don't know, Ty."

"She's a sure thing, Billy. Just what you need after your strange odyssey."

"To be honest, I'm feeling kind of woozy, Ty. I need some fresh air."

The *Virginia Slims* model smiled sweetly at Billy. Ty walked over to have a word with her.

Billy cleared a path to the other side of the room where the door was. He made it outside with seconds to spare before he was sick to his stomach. The cool wind, the fresh air on his sweating face ... Billy couldn't remember ever having felt so cold and lonely.

He stayed outside, vowing he wouldn't return to the madness inside the house.

It was a truly lovely night. He began to feel much better in

the fresh night air. He started walking away from the house, slowly, his head clearer and clearer as he thought about the night. The fields, the trees, the lakes and the rivers, the black sky and the stars and the moon, the planets, the universe ... it was all such a puzzle.

Billy found a tree and with a weary sigh sat down beneath it. The full moon shone down high above him. In the distance he could see Ty Soap's house. Lights blazing in all the windows, it seemed to be rocking and swaying like a boat on the ocean. Forced to close his eyes with the wave of dizziness that had begun to envelope him, Billy listened to the night breeze rustling through the tree branches overhead. When it subsided for a moment, he heard what he thought were footsteps. *Footsteps?*

He thought at first that he must be wrong. But he heard them again. His heart skipped nervously as the footsteps came closer.

"Who is it?" he called.

"It's me," a high soft voice came from behind him.

"Who?"

"Me!"

Billy turned. It was Miss Blue Bonnet, standing a few feet behind him.

"Do you mind if I sit down with you for a while?"

"If you like," Billy said, moving over to make room.

"Thank you."

"Okay," Billy said.

"It's nice out here."

"If you like it, it's nice out here."

Not sure what Billy meant, Miss Blue Bonnet kept silent for a moment. "What do you do?"

Billy picked up a stick and idly poked it in the ground.

"Nothing too much. I came down here from Michigan on a target."

"A target?"

"It's a floating target. Like a raft. I travelled down a couple of dozen rivers. About nineteen-hundred miles."

"That sounds like quite a lot."

"It's not too bad if you're floating downstream."

She cradled her knees in her arms. "I wish I could leave here," she said wistfully.

"And go where?"

"I don't know. Just away. I'm so tired of doing Blue Bonnet commercials."

Billy thought for a moment. "You could come with me if you want."

"Where would we go?"

"I don't know. South maybe. Down the Mississippi to New Orleans."

"I've never been to New Orleans."

The full moon appeared from behind a cloud. The night was bright, the stars and moon were bright. Billy stood up and held his arms open to the girl.

She got to her feet. "Well," she said hesitantly. "Well," she

said less hesitantly. "Then let's go!"

They ran back to Ty Soap's barn, which was filled with different sized motorcycles. They selected the biggest one they could find, all red and chrome and shiny.

Billy checked the gas tank. Nearly full. He climbed on, got it started, and waited for Miss Blue Bonnet to climb on, clutching one arm around Billy's waist, with her other hand untying her bonnet and casting it aside.

Through the night they raced, sixty, seventy, eighty miles an hour. Billy was ecstatic.

Miss Blue Bonnet shrieked with delight.

"*To the raft!*" they shouted together. They could see it all now: the lights of towns getting smaller and smaller as they soared beneath the stars.

Ninety, one-hundred miles per hour! Billy could barely keep his eyes open with the wind rushing against his face, Miss Blue Bonnet's arms tight around his waist, her head pressed against his back.

Love! Billy thought, tossing his head back, laughing wildly into the night, *love, Love, LOVE!!*

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Paul Illidge's most recent book is the true crime financial thriller *RSKY BZNS* (New English Review Press, 2022), a "fascinating story" (Frank Abagnale, Jr., author of *Catch Me if You Can*), a "gripping and intricate read" (Conrad Black). His book *THE BLEAKS* (ECW Press), was a *Globe & Mail* Best Book of 2014. Books in his *Shakespeare Novels* series *Hamlet*, *King*

Lear, Othello, Twelfth Night, Midsummer Night's Dream, Macbeth, Romeo and Juliet, are all available internationally at www.kobobooks.com

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