

RAYMOND FRASER

## RUSSELL'S SHINING MOMENT

IT WAS IN THE EARLY SIXTIES and I was working in Montreal and one evening Cameron Mott telephoned me at my rooming house and said he needed twenty dollars to take the train back home to New Brunswick. He said his mother was in the hospital and seriously ill.

I said, "Where's Russell?"

The last time I'd heard from Russell McPhee he was sharing a room with Mott.

"Russell? I don't know ... I haven't seen him for weeks."

"Doesn't he live with you anymore?"

"No. He moved out and got a room of his own."

Cameron Mott had always struck me an honest guy, as much as I knew him, and I was inclined to believe his story. He was more a friend of Russell's than mine, but I'd talked to him on different occasions and felt I had him reasonably sized up.

Everyone is known for something, and Mott was known for talking in the clipped, tight-lipped style he'd picked up from watching gangster movies. That, and for saying, "Yabba-dabba-doo!" like the cartoon character, Yogi Bear. Russell used to imitate him when he wasn't around. "Good wine, this Hermit," he'd say. "Yabba-dabba-doo!"

But Mott wasn't saying "Yabba-dabba-doo!" when he called me. He sounded distressed, his voice trembling. I asked him questions about his mother's illness, and he said he was afraid she was dying, she had some sort of cancer that was eating her insides away. He almost broke down as he pleaded with me to lend him the twenty.

"That's a lot of money," I said. "I can't really afford it." I was making fifty dollars a week as a lab technician and trying to save enough so I could quit and do a little traveling. I had about eighty dollars in the bank by then, the result of two months of self-denial.

"If I don't get home I'll go crazy ... Mom, jeez ... I don't know how long she's going to last ...."

“Couldn’t your old man send you some money?”

“He’s working in the woods, up around Plaster Rock somewhere. Nobody knows how to reach him. That’s why I got to get home. There’s nobody with her.”

“How’d you find out about it?”

“The people next door sent a telegram. Mom gave them my address before they took her to the hospital. I don’t know what to do with myself. I can’t stop worrying.”

“Did you try Russell? Maybe he has some money.”

“I don’t think so. He never has any. I don’t know where he is now anyway. He never told me where he was moving to.”

There didn’t seem to be anything for it but to help out.

“When will you pay me back?”

“I’ll mail it to you. I’ll get it from the old man when he comes home.”

“If you’re sure there’s no other way. But I tell you, I can’t afford it.”

“I’ll never forget this, Macbride. You’re a real friend.”

“All right. Come round to my room this evening and I’ll give it to you.”

A month before this Russell had paid me a visit looking for a three-dollar loan. He was with some guy named Carl and they said they needed the money to take the train to Longueuil where this Carl had an uncle who owed him fifty dollars and wanted to pay it back.

“It’s a sure thing, the money’s ready, we just need to get to it,” Russell said.

“Well,” I said, “here’s twenty cents. You can take a city bus. That’ll get you to Longueuil, with a few transfers.”

“Oh?” Sully looked at the dimes like they were mouse droppings. “I didn’t know that. I thought it was further.”

It was a typical Russell scheme, three dollars being the price of two quarts of wine with some change left over.

And now here was Mott, a friend of his, looking for money.

I was suspicious, but at the same time I was afraid of being wrong. Nobody wants it on his conscience that he kept a grief-stricken son from his dying mother.

So I overcame my misgivings and gave him the money.

A few months after this I quit my job and took a trip to New York for a few days and then went home to New Brunswick myself. When I got back one of the first people I ran into was Russell.

I told him about the loan I'd made to Mott, and he said, "Yeah, I guess his mother really was sick. Not dying or anything, but she was in the hospital for a while. But I wouldn't trust Mott. The guy's filthy, he never washes. When we had a room together I had to kick him out his feet stunk so bad. I wouldn't be surprised if he made up most of the story."

Russell said he had to get home and pack, he was leaving for Toronto that very night—if I'd been a day later I'd have missed him. Mott was still around town somewhere, he said. There was no way he was taking that dirty bastard with him, they'd have to fumigate the train.

It was a couple of days later before I caught up with Mott. I spotted him walking along the front street with his head down, and ducked into a doorway; when he came up I jumped out and grabbed him.

"Yabba-dabba-doo, Mott!"

"Jeez, man. You scared the life out of me."

"Where's my money? You were supposed to send it to me, remember?"

"I know. I'm sorry, man."

"Well, give it to me now. Fork it over."

"I don't have it, I'm broke—I don't have a cent. I'm running around right now trying to find a job."

"So your mother wasn't dying after all, you lousy bastard."

"I know, I know." His shoulders were slumped, head hanging. "I shouldn't have done it."

"You son of a whore."

"I didn't want to, but Russell—"

"Russell?"

"It was Russell's idea, he put me up to it. We had no money and we wanted to get back home. You know what he's like. He knew you wouldn't believe anything he said so he got me to call you with the story my mother was sick. He told me everything to say."

"I was just talking to Russell. That's not the way he tells it."

"What would you expect? Next time you see him tell him I told you everything. We had a fight after we got back and we don't hang around together now. I wouldn't have done a thing like that myself."

"Russell's gone to Toronto."

"Oh. Well, I don't know what to do about it. I know you don't trust me now, but it's the truth all the same."

I believed him, knowing Russell. But I still felt like slugging him.

Where Mott went after that I don't know, but he went somewhere out of town and never came back, and with him went any expectation I had of ever seeing my twenty dollars again.

About three years later Russell wrote me a letter from Toronto. It was all about the good times we used to have, the wine, the women, the dances, those happy days when we were young and carefree (which would have been four or five years before this, in our late teens). He told me he was working as a carpenter and had just got married and wanted me to be godfather to his first baby when it came, which should be soon. In the meantime, and he hated to bring this up, but he'd gone and fallen behind in his union dues and if he didn't get them paid by the end of the week he'd be out of the union and out of a job. He wondered if I could send him thirty-five dollars. I would get my money back at the end of the month when he got his next pay.

I didn't answer him. What can you say to a guy like that?

Sixteen years passed, and one day I walked into the Wheelhouse Tavern and who should I see at a table in the corner but Russell. He looked much the same, still had the same ducktail hairdo from the fifties. He insisted on buying me a beer and said he'd come back for his father's funeral.

"I didn't know he'd died," I said. "Sorry."

"Yeah, the old bastard croaked two days ago. That's one down and one to go." By which he meant his mother was next. He was waiting for her to die, he said, so he could inherit the house and move back to Bannonbridge to stay. He was tired of Toronto. Up there he was sharing an apartment with his wife, three kids, his mother-in-law and his brother-in-law. He said the brother-in-law was the worst thief in Toronto. When he got married this brother-in-law came to the reception and stole the wedding cake, shoved it under his coat and ran out the door with it and tripped and fell. Russell chased after him and found him on his hands and knees trying to put the cake back together again. He looked up and said, "It's okay, Russell, it's not hurt much. I can fix it just like it was."

Russell was full of big talk about Toronto. The bars he hung out in, the criminals he knew, the cars he'd owned and wrecked, the times he'd spent in jail for fencing stolen car parts. He was proud of never having done a day's honest work in his life, that he'd supported his family with shady deals and what his wife earned working as a waitress. Toronto had been a great city once, he said, but now the niggers and pakis had taken it over and it was no place for a white man. Soon as his mother died he was getting out

and coming home.

It was no more than a year later that his mother died, and true to his word, he came back. He came back and sold the house and then returned to Toronto and bought a souped-up muscle car with part of the money and blew the rest on booze and clothes and whores and gambling.

Before he left, however, he did something astonishing: he gave me the twenty dollars I'd lent him and Mott. He said it had bothered him for years, my thinking he'd screwed me like that. Of course Mott had been behind it all, but still he felt some responsibility since he'd shared in the spoils. So here, take it, go on.

I didn't know what to say. It was such an unexpected gesture, coming from Russell. The almost admission of guilt, the almost humble apology, the almost act of full restitution. I had no real need of twenty dollars at this time, nor was the sum worth anywhere near what it had meant to me when I'd given it. I could easily have said forget it, either with good grace or bad—but I didn't. I was so astounded I merely extended my hand and took it.

Later, as I thought it over, I realized what he'd done, and what had vaguely troubled me as I accepted the money. Taking inflation and his new-found inheritance into consideration (he could have lit the big cigar he was smoking with twenty bucks and not noticed it), he'd bought his way out of his debt and my bad books for about five cents on the dollar. And I'd thanked him for it.

And he'd gone away, bathed in an aura of righteousness.