

IN THE COUNTRY OF THE ENEMY

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Ellen Yellowbird worries about Milo. She sits at her massive roll-top desk, stained dark like old age to give it that handed-down-for-generations look that sold her on it that day in Major Brothers Furniture. Who would not trust a woman with such a desk, the salesman had asked, while Ellen Yellowbird was busy dividing up the nine brass handled drawers into real estate, projects, miscellaneous, self-improvement, life. She justified it as a business expense--Milo's idea, who, at eleven, had mastered the intricacies of the "business from your residence" section of the IRS code. Later she burned incense in a short but solemn ceremony under the mesquite tree in her backyard to pay homage to any wood spirits possibly offended by the sacrifice for furniture.

Ellen Yellowbird has worried about Milo since before he was born, quick in her womb when her husband, twenty-two years her senior, died and left her with a house and a business and a five-speed foreign sports car she did not know how to drive. Ellen hired a bright young man from Dallas to run the business (for a fifteen percent cut of gross profits), hired another to teach her to drive the car, and dedicated herself to the child within. The first order of business was a name. She listed names she found in her real estate manuals, each at the top of a 3 x 5 index card. She drew a line down the middle, listed pros on the left-hand side and cons on the other. Early on, she knew she could not name him Joe, after her late husband, because a name like that--a cliché in itself--would surely damage a child destined for success in the twenty-first century.

In the end, after an hour of Yoga meditation the shift nurse was sure induced early labor, she'd settled on Milo. The card read: distinctive, bold, no literary history.

Ellen Yellowbird sees money change hands. A boy about ten, with no shirt, hands her son two quarters in exchange for which Milo has secured a dangling brake wire to the handle of the bike the boy rides. Milo fills out a receipt, smiles and waves like a used car salesman as the boy rides off. Milo pockets the quarters and disappears into the garage.

Ellen follows. Above the side door to the garage Milo has stenciled in two-inch black letters: Big Ed's Duct Tape Repair. Inside, he sits at a desk made out of two sawhorses and a piece of plywood covered with an old white sheet on which he has stenciled in the same two-inch black letters: "We stick it to high repair costs." Behind him on a makeshift bookshelf, she sees a stack of her late husband's business books, then a copy of *Marketing in a New Age*, *Everything You Ever Wanted to Know About Business** and *A 1001 Uses for Duct Tape*. Next to that, on a shelf marked "Parts," sit three rolls of duct tape, two silver, one black.

Milo slips the coins in a coffee can he keeps taped to the leg of the right-hand sawhorse and updates his ledger. He pops an M & M in his mouth from a dish he keeps on the left hand corner of the desk, not conspicuous, but handy enough to coax a reluctant customer into negotiations if necessary.

"Think of it as a better mousetrap," Milo says.

But before Ellen can answer, Milo is out the door to attend to another customer, this time a little girl no more than eight with a doll whose arm has fallen off. Milo listens intently, nods sympathetically, calculates the price of the repair.

Ellen Yellowbird is stumped. She consults her sources: *Old-fashioned Children in New Fangled Times*, *The American Child: An Owner's Guide*, *Parenting Skills* (vol. 1 and 2). The advice is oblique. "A healthy adjustment to environmental stimulus," reads one, "but the desire to emulate the primary bread winner should be tempered with more spiritual goals." "The business of life is life," reads another. "Invest in your children." "Buy low, sell high," reads the third, "the key to your child's success."

She stacks the books on the desk, closes her eyes to meditate. She envisions a lotus flower, her question locked tight within. She allows one petal to open. (She cannot peel a banana without thinking of this exercise.) In the center sits a man she's never seen before, his profile perfectly aligned with the opening. His forehead juts low and heavy, his nose thick, his lower jaw rigid and dark. Just under his chin she sees a collar with "Big Ed" stitched in red. She strips another petal. She sees Milo holding the chain attached to the collar. Another petal gone and she sees Joe, dressed in his burial suit, perplexed, methodically cranking a hand organ. Under the next petal she catches a glimpse of a man sitting behind a typewriter, a jester's cap on. When she catches his eye, he shrugs. A tale to tell, he says, and bares his teeth in a smile.

Ellen Yellowbird finds it at last on the top shelf of the last bookcase. She reads it once to refresh herself and then heads upstairs to tell Milo.

Milo eats M & Ms in bed. He highlights passages in *1001 Uses for Duct Tape*. Makes notes. He smiles angelically, offers her an M & M.

Ellen Yellowbird, concerned, smiles back, sits on the edge of the bed.

"How's business?" she asks.

"Business is good," Milo says. He shows her a sheet with the day's take: \$22.25. He has already deducted overhead, supplies, estimated tax.

"Milo," she says but doesn't know how to begin. She picks at imaginary lint on the bedspread.

"You're wondering about Big Ed," he says. He sits up, the same intense expression on his face he'd worn this morning with the little girl and the broken doll. She realizes that, even in bed, his hair is perfectly combed.

"Marketing research," Milo says, as though it explained the whole thing. "The product must have a context and that context must be connotatively communicated by the product name."

He eats another M & M, this time a red one.

"Big Ed manifests upper-lower to lower-middle class self-conceptions," he continues. "Sell the consumer who he is or, more important, who he wants to be and, bingo, profitability."

Milo folds his hands on top of the covers. End of lecture.

Ellen Yellowbird tries again. "Milo," she says, "I want to tell you a story about things."

"Things in general?" Milo asks.

"No, things themselves."

Milo looks attentive as Ellen begins.

"This story happened a long time ago," she says. "Long before you were born."

"Most things have." If Milo's joking, he doesn't show it. He smiles pleasantly at Ellen.

"A long time ago," Ellen repeats. "In a far away land."

"1960s?" Milo asks. "California?"

Ellen stops. She has the terrible feeling of being mocked even before she

gets going. This was not how she planned it.

“Longer ago and farther away,” Ellen says. She waits for Milo’s question. She knows he wants things precise. Sometimes she thinks his ability to imagine, to fantasize, has been stripped away. Milo says nothing. Ellen continues.

“There were these newlyweds who loved each other very much, but they were very poor. The depth of their poverty,” she says and likes the flourish, “equaled the height of their love.”

Milo nods. “An inverse relationship,” he says. “A common natural phenomenon.”

Ellen purses her lips. “Anyway,” she says, “they were very much in love and very poor. And that was all right because they had each other, though they didn’t have a lot of things. They had each other and that was the main thing.”

Ellen pauses to gauge his reaction. Milo nods encouragement.

“All this was working out fine. In addition to each other, each had a thing of great value and beauty. He had a fine pocket watch that had belonged to his father. She had shiny black hair that fell below her waist.”

Ellen absently smooths the bedspread. Milo eats another M & M.

“All this was going along fine, like I said, until just before Christmas. After the rent and the groceries and the bills, there just wasn’t any money left for presents. But they were newlyweds, you know, and they thought they needed gifts--things--to express their love. Thus, to please the other, they both go off and do things they’ll regret.” Ellen leans closer to Milo, building up to the climax. “Pretty soon it’s Christmas morning. They both get up, still wearing their pajamas and nightcaps. She gives him his present first--a tiny, brightly wrapped

box. When he opens it up, it’s a chain for his pocket watch. Then she opens hers up--another tiny, brightly wrapped box. It’s silver clips for her hair. Only there’s a problem.”

Ellen stares deep into Milo’s eyes. “He’s sold his watch to buy her the hair clips. Then she pulls off her nightcap to show how her hair has been clipped to the ears. She’s sold her hair to buy the chain. Then they both break down and cry because they realize how their desire for things has made them ignore the most important lesson of all.” Ellen leans even closer, moved by her own story. “Do you know what the lesson is?”

Milo nods. Ellen smiles.

“Mismanaged credit,” he says. He pops another M & M. “Both parties,” he explains, “would have been perfectly content if they had established a regulated income on which to build a credit line that would have allowed them to purchase needed or desired items now on the basis of projected future income.

“In short,” Milo says, “a credit card would have averted the disaster.”

Ellen, inexplicably, hears organ music.

The next morning, Ellen wakes to hammering.

She pulls on her robe, rounds the corner to the garage to see Milo supervising the erection of a 20 x 15 ft. sign that reads “Big Ed’s Duct Tape Repair, Inc.,” On one end is the figure she saw in her meditation.

Milo wears a sports jacket and dress slacks. He carries a silver pen in his breast pocket. For a moment, he stands back, arms akimbo, critically appraising the new sign, then catches her eye and motions her inside.

Milo has installed a window air conditioner. The desk is new, a K-Mart special. Milo sits behind it, unlocks a

drawer, pulls out the coffee can. He takes out a \$5 bill, turns to a boy, maybe twelve.

“Another roll of silver,” he says.

The boy nods, takes the bill and heads outside for his bike.

“His name is Danby,” Milo explains. “He hopes to become my assistant.” Then he explains how he hired him for two percent gross profits, which makes him-- Danby, that is--responsible for his own taxes.

Milo reaches for an M & M from a dish in the corner next to the phone, the cracked receiver wrapped with duct tape. The cord runs behind the new cork board where twenty-two new rolls of duct tape hang. To the side sits one of her old filing cabinets. The drawers read: Clients, Marketing, Supplies.

Ellen watches a black Lincoln pull up. A man in a dark suit, brief case in hand, comes in. She notices the thin strip of duct tape across the bridge of his glasses. She pulls her robe more tightly around her, but the man walks by without noticing, hands her a business card without breaking stride. It reads: Uriah Dweedle, Attorney at Law. The man lays the case on the desk, snaps it open.

“Incorporation papers, Mr. Yellowbird,” he says.

Milo leans back in his chair and smiles.

Ellen Yellowbird consults her sources. “Children should be encouraged to use their imaginations to create their world and to effect as much of that world as reasonably possible,” advises one. Under “enterprises, business” in *Parenting Skills* (vol. 11 and 12), Ellen finds: “Teach not your children that money is the root of all evil, but that the love of money is. If your child’s enterprise produces a public good, private profit is sure to follow.” The third,

“Buy low, sell high. The key to your child’s success.”

She stacks the books on her desk. Opens the drawer marked life, rummages until she finds the green stone. She places it in the exact center of her palm, chants under her breath, infuses the stone with energy. She opens her eyes, exactly seven minutes later, goes to Milo’s room and puts the stone under his pillow. From his window she sees an old woman in an ancient Buick head toward the garage.

By the time Ellen rounds the corner, Danby is already under the car, black duct tape in hand, wrapping it conscientiously around the tailpipe.

Milo stands next to the woman, listening, nodding, calculating the cost of the repair.

Ellen Yellowbird sits on Milo’s bed, picking imaginary lint.

“It’s done all the time,” Milo explains.

“I don’t think it’s safe, Milo,” Ellen says, but she really doesn’t know.

Milo considers. “She couldn’t afford a new muffler,” he says. “And there are no used mufflers. Ergo, she must have it repaired. Thus, we used the best material available.”

He offers her an M & M.

“But it’s a stopgap measure,” Ellen argues.

Milo sighs and eats the M & M himself. “If we didn’t repair the car, she couldn’t drive it. Given her options, she chose the most logical one. Big Ed’s merely provided the service which she could take advantage of in order to meet her own desire to continue driving.”

Ellen thinks the logic impeccable, balances her own misgivings against the advice from her sources.

“I don’t know, Milo,” she says,

anxious not to make a mistake that might affect him even years later.

Milo smiles and holds up one hand. He reaches for the coffee can on the night table, opens it. A single piece of paper flutters to the bed when he turns the can over--a bank deposit slip for \$6,347.22.

"Net," Milo says and pops an M & M.

Ellen Yellowbird frowns, both impressed and dismayed.

"Milo," she says, "I want to tell you a story about money."

"This money?" he asks. He carefully replaces the slip in the can.

"Money in general," she says.

He nods, waiting.

"It was like this," she begins. "In a place called Flanders a long time ago. Before the '60s," she adds, waiting for Milo to interrupt.

He eats a red M & M.

"These three friends, really close buddies, you see, went out walking one day. They were like the three Musketeers. Would do anything for each other. In fact, in a secret ceremony, each cut his thumb--just enough to make it bleed--then they pressed their thumbs together, just the three of them, so that they became blood brothers."

She waits for the significance to sink in.

"Anyway, these three friends went walking one day way out in the country. They were looking for good deeds to do, wrongs to right. That sort of thing. While they were walking, they came across an old, old man."

"Older than Mr. Featherbottom?" Milo asked.

"Twice as old," Ellen said.

Milo quickly calculates the age. "That would make him one hundred and forty-four," he says and Ellen knows he

doesn't believe her. She doesn't know how she raised such a literalist.

"People lived a lot longer back then," she explains. Milo seems to buy this, so she continues. "This old man asks them what they're doing so far out in the country and they tell him they're looking for good deeds to do. So he tells them about a place he knows where all the money that was ever lost goes so that they can return it.

"He tells them to walk until they come to a big tree. Well, they do and when they get to the tree they find the old man was right--there, at the base of the trees, are eight pots of gold."

"Bars, ingots or coins?" Milo asks.

"Coins," Ellen replies.

Milo nods. Eats a green M & M.

"These three friends, blood brothers, mind you, sit down to rest. But it's not long before one of them suggests they keep the gold for themselves. The other two--forgetting all about the good deeds they are supposed to do--agree." She stops a minute to gauge Milo's reaction. He sits impassively.

"They decide that they should wait until dark to move the gold and that one of them will have to go back for a wagon and cheeseburgers so that they won't starve to death while the other two guard the gold. They decide to draw straws to see who would go."

"Where would they get the straws?" Milo asks.

Ellen frowns for a minute and says, "I was just getting to that. But after they realize they have no straws, they play rock, paper and scissors instead. The youngest one loses. While he's away, the oldest one notes how much more half the gold is than a third, so they plot to kill the youngest one when he comes back.

"Meanwhile, the youngest one decides he wants all the gold for himself and

puts rat poison on the cheeseburgers. Well, when he comes back with the wagon and the cheeseburgers, the other two jump out from behind the tree and murder him. Then they load the gold in the wagon, but that makes them so hungry that they eat the cheeseburgers and die.”

Ellen waits for the full impact of the story to sink in. She leans across the bed toward Milo. “Do you understand the problem in the story,” she asks.

Milo’s eyes cloud for moment, then brighten, as blue as the day he was born.

“Failed corporate vision that led to an ineffective hostile take over bid,” he says.

He smiles at Ellen and offers her an M & M.

Ellen Yellowbird begins the ritual to talk to Joe. She arranges her hair in two Indian braids, slips on a leather headband and moccasins. She fastens the ceremonial necklace she keeps wrapped in a white linen cloth in the back of her dresser. Finally she searches under the bed for the blanket she has painted--a tepee set beneath a sky divided exactly in the center. One half the moon and stars, the other the sun and four dark streaks representing wind. Ellen pauses long enough to examine herself in the mirror. If it weren’t for her blonde hair, blue eyes, pale skin, she’s sure she would be mistaken for full-blooded Cherokee.

Then she calls Milo, but Danby answers, says Milo is in a meeting, takes a message.

Ellen drives to the cemetery, confident that Joe will tell her what to do.

She parks next to the grave, not quite on the road but not blocking it either, and spreads her blanket out in the shade of a tree near the headstone. She sits cross-legged, rests elbows on knees, closes her hands, palms upward, until the fingertips touch. Then she closes her eyes, chants his name

three times and waits for him to come.

Ellen Yellowbird has a vision. She enters a building so tall that its top is lost in the clouds. It shimmers in the sunlight, all glass. Inside the air is so cool it makes her gasp. In the middle of the room, near the spiral escalator that ascends through each floor (looking for all the world like an old-fashioned drill, Ellen thinks), stands Joe. In the background she hears faint organ music. Joe points to the door to her left. When she opens it she hears a polka and a voice like Lawrence Welk’s. She listens intently, realizes the words are in Polish. She closes the door and looks to Joe. He shrugs and points to the escalator, directs her up. When she opens the door on the second floor she hears mariachis, on the third a waltz, on the fourth a Russian folk song. The ride up is slow and endless. On each floor, a different music, a different tongue.

When she reaches the top floor, there are windows but no door. A small crack, curved like a hook or a question mark, runs the length of the ceiling. She feels the building sway, gravity a tangible menace here. When she turns, Joe is there.

“Everything’s a danger. Everything’s unknown,” he says. “But nothing’s the end.”

She hears thunder and feels the floor tremble.

“Don’t ask me what it means,” he says and offers her an M & M.

The first thing Ellen notices when she pulls into her driveway is the herd of school busses parked near the garage. When she rounds the corner to find Milo, she is stopped by a young woman, no more than twelve, who explains that Mr. Yellowbird requests that those without appointments to please have a seat.

Milo has renovated. The garage is divided into three sections and an outer

office for Ms. Nately, the secretary. Milo has installed central air, hung a painting on the wall leading to his office. Ellen Yellowbird picks up the *Wall Street Journal* on the coffee table. Milo has made the front page.

Mr. Dweedle, the lawyer, dances out of Milo's office. He stops long enough to kiss Ellen square on the mouth.

"Just think of it, Mrs. Yellowbird," he says. "Franchises. Big Ed's Duct Tape Repair Centers everywhere you look. We'll make a killing, Mrs. Yellowbird, we'll make a killing."

Ms. Nately slips deftly between Ellen and Milo's office door. She asks for Ellen's business card, nods sympathetically when Ellen explains that mothers don't carry them. She announces her anyway. Ellen can tell by the way she says Milo's name that Ms. Nately is in love with him.

Milo sits behind a massive mahogany desk. He wears a handmade suit. A portrait of Big Ed hangs behind him. He keeps his M & Ms in a silver bowl.

"Milo, we have to talk," Ellen says.

Just then Danby pops in. The patch above the breast pocket of his uniform reads "Foreman." "We've finished repairing the drive shaft on No. 3 and the loose rod on No. 22," he says.

Ellen hears the peal of thunder from her vision.

Milo smiles, nods, asks him to shut the door on his way out. "He's very proud of his promotion," Milo explains. "He may make vice president before high school."

"Milo," Ellen says, "you can't repair school busses with duct tape."

"Certainly we can," he says. "We won the contract this morning."

"But Milo," Ellen explains patiently, "you're not qualified."

Milo offers her an M & M. "The school board is made up of competent

members elected by competent voters. Thus, the board would not award a contract to an unqualified firm. It awarded the contract to Big Ed's Duct Tape Repair. Ergo, Big Ed's must be qualified.

"Besides," he says, "we had the lowest bid. Thus, the schools profit, the state profits, eventually the taxpayers profit. You profit, Ellen Yellowbird," he says, then realizes he's standing on his chair.

He smiles sheepishly, sits down, eats an M & M.

Ellen Yellowbird hears thunder all afternoon, though there's not a cloud in the sky. She takes it as an omen and realizes she must make her vision clear to Milo before it's too late. She consults her sources but her sources fail her.

When she goes to Milo's room that night, she has to clear a space on his bed. Milo pulls a computer printout from the coffee can, unfolds it.

"According to projected revenues," he says, "we should clear two million by Tuesday."

He carefully refolds the paper, stashes it in the coffee can, then puts the coffee can in his brief case. He gathers the rest of the papers and slips them into the brief case with the coffee can.

"Milo," she says, "I want to tell you about a vision I had today."

"Like a dream?" he asks.

"Like a dream," she says.

He pats her hand. "It's only excess electrical discharges in the brain. Nothing to worry about." He pops an M & M.

"No, Milo, this vision has a meaning," she says. "It concerns your father."

Milo listens attentively as Ellen describes her vision. He asks who Lawrence Welk is, then nothing until she is finished.

"What does that vision suggest to

you?” she asks. “What do you think your father is trying to say?”

Milo concentrates, looks troubled. Then brightens, his smile angelic. Ellen swears she can see the dim outline of a halo as he answers.

“Diversify,” he says, “diversify.”

When she wakes the next morning the ground is trembling. Great peals of thunder echo. Ellen Yellowbird thinks that this is how the world will end. It’s not until she struggles into her robe and then outside that she realizes it’s only the earth movers Milo has hired to dig the foundation for his new building.

Ellen goes to find Milo in the garage, sits down at Ms. Nately’s request. From the room to her right she hears metal on metal. The door reads “Big Ed’s Enterprises: Research and Development.” In a moment, a young man, maybe ten, in a white lab coat walks from the room carrying one of her cookie sheets. As he goes by, Ellen sees colored duct tape stickers in the shapes of all the cookie cutters she owns.

The young man disappears into Milo’s office. A minute later, he reappears with Milo and a reporter from People magazine. Milo wears a new suit.

“New product line,” Milo explains, pats the young man in the white coat on the back and sends the reporter on his way.

“Milo,” Ellen says, “I want to talk to you.”

“But people will buy them,” Milo explains. “They will be happy to buy them.”

Ellen sighs, tries again. “But they’re pieces of duct tape, Milo. Of absolutely no value. You can’t even repair things with them.”

Milo smiles patiently. “It’s the use of thing that makes it what it is,” he says. “That’s what gives it value. Therefore, if

consumers want to spend \$5.98 for a set of stickers, then that’s good. When the company profits,” he lectures, “everybody profits.” He paces, raising one hand for emphasis. “Take, for example, the new factory we’re building. It will give people jobs, increase property value, lead to corporate growth.” Milo stops, clasps his hands behind his back. He reminds her of General Patton.

“But Milo,” she says, “it’s duct tape.”

Just then the door opens and Uriah Dweedle comes in to explain that the tape gave way on bus No. 3 and the steering column froze and the bus crashed into a tree and was totaled--the bus and the tree--though no one was injured and to remind Milo of the no liability clause in the contract (put in after Milo convinced the lawyers that since everybody profits, suing Big Ed’s would be like suing yourself).

Milo looks deeply disturbed, concerned, sympathetic. He looks at Dweedle and says, “You get what you pay for, you know.”

That’s when Ellen Yellowbird faints.

When Ellen wakes up, she’s in her own bed. Milo sits beside her, eating M & Ms. She can still hear the thunder of the machines.

Milo holds her hand.

“Milo,” she says, her mouth so dry her teeth feel brittle, “you’ve killed a tree.”

Milo sighs, picks at the bedspread. He pops an M & M and says. “No liability. It’s in the contract.”

“But, Milo, the tree’s not in your contract.”

“Everything’s in the contract. Whether it wants to be or not,” he says. “That’s the catch.”

“Milo,” Ellen says but stops. She’s sure she hears organ music. Her throat

constricts.

“Mother,” he says, “let me tell you a tale about business.”

“Your business?” she asks.

“Any business,” he says.

But even before he begins, Ellen Yellowbird is sure she knows it.

Contributor’s Note

Pat Miller is a professor of Journalism in the English Department at Valdosta State University. She has published numerous short stories and articles ranging from literary journalism to pedagogy. “In the Country of the Enemy” won second prize for fiction in 1993 in a contest run by *The Painted Hills Review* and is reprinted here with permission of the author.