

PO Box 105552
Jefferson City, MO 65110
richard@richardprosch.com
About 2,800 words

Ida Tully and the Telephone

by

Richard Prosch

Thirty-four years a bachelor, Marvin Dell rubbed his woolen sock feet together warming them at the fat bellied cook stove in the ranch house corner and pulled a match from the center pocket of his overalls.

Flame at the open grate cast flickering shadows over the unfinished walls of the line shack and its few sticks of furniture. Weird silhouettes of Marvin in his rocker and his younger brother Emil, his relentless jaw working over the cherry wood telephone monster.

"I've got the whole night here," said Emil, his left hand gently stroking the transmitter arm, his right cradling the receiver soft against his ear.

"I love-oo too, Cookie-nose," he said.

Things between 22 year-old Emil Dell and his girl, Ida Tully, were *just that serious*.

Marvin struck the match with his thumbnail, then spun a cigar through the flame, sucking smoke, smacking his lips.

Emil slapped a hand over the telephone mouthpiece. "Hush!" he said. "Hush! Can't you see I'm on the phone with I-daaaa?"

Marvin closed his eyes and wondered how it had come to this.

Only four months since his boss installed the telephone in the cabin, the line stretching across the telegraph poles along the Niobrara River, connecting the farthest acres of the Bar Seven ranch to the main house and the village of Albertson where Ida lived.

Four months of slow torture.

But wasn't it a blessing for the community?

Only a week after installation, didn't the phone save a Bar-Seven hay barn from fire? Didn't it save young Billy Carson's life a week later when he was snake bit and the village doc was immediately called in?

Marvin deliberated while chewing the end of his cigar.

To be honest, he'd never really liked the Carson kid.

"No, no," said Emil back at the phone. "I'm all alone here. Except for Maarr-viinnn, of course."

And this habit of stretching out names.

Emil had picked up the affectation from Ida.

From their endless conversations on the telephone.

Marvin smoked and eyed his Colt .45 hanging beside the cabin's front door.

One more stretched out name and Eeeee-mil might pick up a bullet.

"Drinking coffee," said Emil. "Rest assured, I never touch anything stronger. You know where drunkards end up."

Marvin nodded to himself, sucking in apple-flavored smoke.

Drunkards.

Yes, indeed.

That first week Emil took to the telephone like Uncle Willy took to hard liquor in '02, not bothering to start with short nips and shots, but going straight for the heavy dosage.

Ida was the same way apparently.

Suddenly she was there at the end of the wire, like she came installed with the damn thing.

Instead of riding fences, finding lost calves, fixing up the front porch, Emil spent hours out of each day hanging onto the box, his face pressed against it, his arms wrapped around it, worshipping it like it like a newborn calf at the udder.

"Yes, well you knoooooww how obstinate Marvin can be."

Marvin rocked back and forth.

The hell of it was, calves got weaned, Uncle Willy turned yellow and died, but Emil prospered.

Thriving on the daily dose of battery-driven static and Ida's noisy gabbing, he was never more content than ever, his orange mop of hair growing thick and long, his skin rosy and flush.

Since the end of summer, the boy had put on fifteen pounds.

"Ha! Ha-ha-haaaaahhhh!"

And developed an ungodly cackle.

The wet end of Marvin's cigar was in creamy shreds.

With warm feet but frayed nerves and winter just on the horizon, Marvin decided to do something about his predicament.

"We got all winter to talk," Emil said into the phone.

Maybe not, thought Marvin.

#

Snow was coming down thick like God cut a pillow and all the feather down twirled to the ground in frosty clumps. Ankle deep, it cast a smooth layer of blinding white across the hardpan range from the cabin door to the distant black gash of the river.

Marvin blinked away freezing tears, knocked an icicle from his nose, and shuffled forward on boots wrapped in fuzzy coyote fur and twine string.

Along the river, marring the white horizon, Marvin counted ten vertical slash marks. Ten hackberry poles, each doing its part to hold the snow limned telephone line high, like a chalk mark in the slate gray sky, an offering to heaven.

How proud.

To be able to talk across a distance, sight unseen.

To send dirty jokes and innuendo through a metal strand.

How proud, indeed.

Emil's cackle came again to Marvin's cold ears.

Wood axe in hand, he set out for the river.

#

That night, over a winning game table, Emil shared the dirt.

"Ida says you can get store-bought checkers at Belly's new mercantile in town."

He slurped the last of his puritan coffee and slid his game piece to the edge of the board.

"King me."

Marvin dropped a healthy dollop of rotgut into his own cup and stalled around scratching a pimple before topping his brother's rough-carved checker.

"If they're for sale at the mercantile then it stands to reason they're store bought," he said.

"What's your point?"

Marvin only had four checkers left. The same number his brother had lost.

"I mean factory made. Perfectly round and bright painted red and black. Real nice sets, Ida says. Chess sets too, and decks of cards wrapped in paper."

"I ain't playing cards tonight," said Marvin. "And I'm tired of hearing about Ida."

With the telephone not working, she was still with them in spirit.

Omnipresent.

Emil sighed, picked his nose, then jumped two of Marvin's remaining men in a v-shaped move.

"Jump, jump. V-for-victory."

"Let's call it a night," said Marvin. "I got that animal husbandry book to read yet."

"Animal husbandry?"

"We got snow on the ground and calves on the way."

"I guess our gals don't need a husband. They all got the same one."

Marvin brushed the checkers into their wood box and drank from his cup.

"I mean Lucifer, the bull. I mean they already got one husband."

Marvin carried the checkers to a shelf beside some jars of canned corn, then moved to his rocker beside the stove.

"That was a joke, Marvin. Animal husbandry."

"Yeah, yeah."

"I was just making a joke to pass the time. I guess I knew what you meant." Emil floundered at the table, tapped his fingers on the checkerboard. "Sure is lonesome without Ida. Without the telephone."

Marvin flipped open his hardback book, read the same page twice.

"What do you suppose could've happened?" said Emil.

"With what?"

"With the phone. What happened?"

"I wouldn't know."

"I sure hope Ida's okay."

"Why wouldn't she be? She's safe and sound in town."

"You think it's the weather? Maybe snow on the lines?"

Marvin thumbed the red blister on his palm with a wince. Even through his gloves, that axe rubbed his skin raw.

The pole came down harder than he'd thought it would.

"Wouldn't know."

"I do wonder what she's doing though."

"Probably driving her brother crazy."

"Oh, she ain't got no brother. She's an only child."

"I see."

"Lives in a little white house with green shutters. Flower garden out front. Right at the end of Taylor Street. You know where that is?"

"Albertson's only got one street. I guess I know it."

"You don't get to town much. I didn't think you knew the place."

"I don't recall it exactly, no. Just making a point about the town."

"When's the last time you went to town, Marvin?"

He thought back, counting the winters, counting the calving seasons.

"Five, six years, I suppose." Marvin closed the book on his finger, holding his place.

"But that was just to haul some boys out of the pokey." He had a warm feeling beyond the heat of the stove. "I can remember a time before there was a town even there."

"One day you'll get civilized," said Emil. "You'll meet somebody just like I met Ida."

"I hope not."

"I sure hope she's okay."

As if in answer, the wood box on the wall rang with a tremble that shook the cabin wall.

One short, two long. The line shack's ring.

"Heavens to Betsy!" said Emil, stumbling over his feet as he stretched to pull down the receiver. "Ida, honey? I was so worried. Yes. Yes. Yes."

Marvin pricked up his ears and chewed his tongue.

He'd worked himself to a lather that morning, taking the post down, cutting a wide hunk out of the line, burying the wire in the river bank.

How could it be fixed already?

"Oh, my. Thank goodness. Oh, yes. Thank them for me too."

Marvin cranked his head around, looked over his shoulder at his brother with the question.

Emil covered the mouthpiece.

"Ida says the phone went out this morning. Lucky for us her cousin is one of the men helped install the thing. Says those wormy hackberry poles tend to blow over easy in the wind. So him and some men rode out this afternoon and fixed it. Ain't that lucky?"

"Yeah. That's lucky."

"Ida says she wouldn't know what to do without the phone."

"I'll bet."

"No, no, sweetie. I was just talking to Mar-viiiiinnnn." He cackled and Marvin pressed his blister hard enough to bring tears to his eyes.

Cutting the line wasn't the answer.

He'd have to get directly at the root.

Then and there he made plans for a trip to town.

#

Later that week, the little white house with the green shutters at the end of Taylor street was quiet. At the nearest hitching rail, Marvin Dell climbed down from his horse, straightened his string tie, and fluffed up the flower bouquet he carried in a white knuckled grip.

He walked toward the house.

The flowers were wild, a rough collection of late violet thistles and wilting sunflowers with a couple sprigs of cattail. Nothing as vibrant as the autumn rainbow of mums spackled with splotches of melting snow that decorated the front yard.

Marvin walked up the rock sidewalk, his pounding heart keeping time with boot steps that sounded unnaturally loud.

He rapped the door with bare knuckles and reached for his hat.

A beautiful blonde girl half his age opened the door.

"Yes?" she said.

"Miss Tully?"

"Yes. Who are you?"

"Well, I'm...that is..." Caught like a drowning man in the violet blue whirlpool of Ida's eyes, Marvin couldn't breathe.

He thrust forward the bouquet. "These are for you."

Blinking rapidly, Ida caught the flowers with both hands. "Thank you," she said. "I'm much obliged, I'm sure. But you still haven't told me your name."

Ida cupped the flowers to a swelling breast covered in clean blue gingham, and planted a lightly closed fist on the swell of her hip. She wore loose fitting trousers like a boy, but stood so the curves proved her a girl. She smelled of cucumbers and sandalwood.

Despite the cool breeze coming into town off the range, Marvin broke out in a sweat.

"I'm Marvin. Marvin Dell."

"Marvin?"

"I'm Emil Dell's brother."

Ida's smile outshone the garden of mums.

"Why didn't you say so? Dear, you must come in. Come in!"

Marvin let Ida lead him into a corner sitting room. The room was papered in a green

floral swirl, furnished only with a squatting turquoise daybed and a small walnut secretary with a primitive three legged stool. The rest of the house hid behind two closed white doors.

"Please sit down. Can I get you some tea?"

"I ought not to get too comfortable," said Marvin, trying to convince himself more than Ida. "I got something I need to tell you."

"Now that's a coincidence," Ida cocked her head and offered a mysterious smile. "But I'm sure whatever it is will go better over tea."

"Coincidence?"

"Make yourself at home," said Ida, passing through one of the white doors and leaving it open behind her. "I'll be right back."

Marvin sat down on the too low daybed, palms cupping his knees. He heard Ida puttering around, moving pots and pans, humming to herself a happy, familiar tune. He imagined her flitting around in her gingham blouse and pants that showed off every curve, casting her bright smile and deep blue eyes at cups of black tea topped off with cream, sweetened with sugar.

He pictured her soft voice, her hair, her skin. Thought of her making tea. Making dinner. Stitching a woolen sock.

He pictured that smile turning fast when he told her what he had to say.

He stood up abruptly. Almost fled.

And then, through the open door, he saw the telephone.

Screwed to the wall, its mouthpiece and looped receiver drooping down, it was a brooding vulture waiting for dark. A wooden box with a dark purpose, waiting to claim the souls of his brother and the innocent young beauty humming her way back to him.

Marvin wouldn't let the monster win.

He was going to go through with his plan.

Ida came through the door holding a silver tray with steaming cups and saucers, restoring Marvin's resolve.

"I've got something to tell you," he said. "Before I lose my nerve."

Ida's face was open with curiosity. "Go ahead," she said.

Fight fire with fire.

But how to fight a monster?

With another monster.

A green-eyed monster.

"Emil is fixing to get married."

To her credit, Ida didn't so much as flinch at the news.

Instead, she set the tray on the flat writing surface of the secretary, then handed him a cup.

"Do sit down," she said.

Marvin sat.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"About Emil getting married?"

"Yes."

"Yes," she sipped her tea. "I suppose I knew it might happen."

"You did?"

"Yes, of course," she said, "In fact, it's what I meant when I said it was a coincidence that you had something to tell me. Because I have something to tell you."

Now it was Marvin's turn to be curious.

"These nightly calls with Emil on the telephone," said Ida. "I haven't been in favor of them. I want you to know that."

"You haven't?"

"No," said Ida. "I have not. And the news you've just given me only confirms my opinion of that damnable box."

"Your opinion?" Marvin couldn't believe his ears.

Ida's face was a storm of emotion. "Frankly speaking, I hate the thing." She set her tea down on her lap and raised both hands to the sky. "I know all the arguments. It's a blessing in an emergency. It brings the community closer together." Her blue eyes flashed with the tempest of her anger. "Well I think it tears people apart. It makes intimate moments like this one---between you and me--irrelevant."

Marvin felt himself blushing.

"It's come between friends and family. It's come between men and women. Excuse me for saying it, but that rotten brother of yours has nearly ruined my life."

"I had no idea," said Marvin. "No idea."

His plan to break up Emil and Ida now seemed pointless.

Ida's features softened and breathless, she batted her eyelashes. "I must apologize. I do get carried away."

His big idea to plant the made-up story of another woman in Ida's mind, to relate an imaginary betrayal wasn't necessary.

Ida herself was ending the affair.

Or was she?

Marvin sipped his tea.

Something didn't add up.

He looked around the room, saw the stain where the ceiling leaked, noted the old bottle of ink, the yellowing envelopes on the secretary.

"How long have you lived here?" he said.

"All my life."

"And how long is that?"

"I'll be 23 next month."

"And you live alone?"

Ida put her hand to her throat. "Alone? I don't understand."

"Alone," said Marvin. "As in, nobody else in the house."

"Nobody but mother of course." Her lips curved and she laughed. "But you're teasing me now, Mr. Dell. You know that darned good and well. After all, weren't we just talking about her and your brother?"

"Your mother?"

"Yes?"

"Your mother talks on the phone with Emil?"

"Naturally?"

Marvin swallowed the rest of his tea with a hasty gulp. Again he stood.

"I'm the one that needs to apologize, Ida. I think there's been a mistake."

The girl stood too.

"Ida? That's mom's name." She narrowed her eyes and peered at him with a grin. "You didn't think...?"

Marvin nodded.

"I'm afraid I did."

"My name is Velda. I'm Ida's daughter. I've never talked to your brother in my life."

Marvin blinked twice.

"But I have to say, it's a pleasure to finally meet you."

Velda's firm hand on his arm pushed him back to the daybed.

"From everything that mom says, you and me think a lot alike." Velda took his cup.

"Would you like some more tea?" she said.

"I wouldn't say no," he said.

"Shall we talk about the telephone some more?"

"I'd prefer something more...intimate," said the no-longer confirmed bachelor.

"With nothing between us," said Velda.

"Forget the tea," said Marvin, and he reached for her hand.