

The forces of the universe fell into perfect alignment when the McCarthy family received into its midst one Michael J. McCarthy. A family rife with tale tellers, jokesters, and mockers of human foibles became greatly enriched with the arrival of its greatest artist in the romance of storytelling.

What are the qualities of the quintessential storyteller? As Saki put it to quote loosely, “Romance at short notice...”. One must have that great ability to create stories that grab the listening audience, stories that twine and mesh and gel into pieces of life important and greater than life but still reflective of a credible, believable happening. Such were the stories indeed created by Uncle Ming. Throughout the tellings there remained always the greatest of humor and such marvelous enjoyment of the follies of real flawed but clever inhabitants of our coves and harbours and towns and cities, whether real or embellished. Ah, such romance.

Uncle Ming was quite simply a master in the art of storytelling. He enthralled and regaled his nieces and nephews with tales that left us spellbound. The stories conveyed countless themes and messages but all implied a strict moral code in which good was rewarded after much adversity but evil, heinous terrible evil, suffered ignominious crushing defeats. One tale involved the wanderings of three brothers namely, Jack, Bill, and Tom. This mythical Tom was rewarded with half a kingdom plus the hand of the princess in marriage for he had been the brother who shared his meager fare of bread and water with a poor stranger. The other two brothers paid for their lack of generosity in not sharing their sumptuous repast of cake and wine (talk about biased mothers). These two mean spirited ones not only lost the challenge set to them

but had their heads summarily removed. Their task had been to climb a glass hill in three attempts, the penalty for failure being the aforesaid grisly decapitation. As the first two fell and joined the throng of the newly headless dead no listener grieved at such horror. Fairy tales hardly ever were glossy and gentle and for the young hearers of the tale in which the morally superior person reigned in the end, the message was clear. Not surprisingly the hungry wayfarer would turn out to have provided Tom with gifts which enabled him to ascend the slippery slope. This help may have been magical or may have been as simple as molasses to coat the underside of his boots or spikes to attach to his footwear, For us the hero was always named Tom, that being our father's name. At my uncle's the protagonist's name would change with the setting. Certainly Uncle Ming knew how to warm the hearts of his audience and was a master at creating enchantment himself.

The audiences for these story fests would be large, with children hanging from every available space. We listeners sighed, gasped, and were certainly fulfilled when the dramatic ending came. Now, I can only admire the patience of a man who had to entertain a family of fifteen kids, plus various cousins, ever voraciously hungry for his stories.

The stories, ah, the stories. There was no typecast and we listened to adventures rooted in folklore, sweeping sagas of pirates who raided the seven seas, tales of war, tales of shipwrecks, tales of saints and scholars and martyrs, gruesome accounts of murders, hangings, and bodies drenched in blood, great and terrible yarns of ghosts, and spirits, and haunts, fearful whisperings of fairies, plus all the lure of mythological man and beast. Captive were the audiences and spellbound were the moments.

Yet the stories could change from the world of fanciful deeds to the oral tradition of the folk character. Great was the amusement when we heard the account of one gentleman who bested a huge black bear and had the bearskin to prove him the victor. Apparently, this man was somewhat chagrined when the fearsome animal ate the potatoes from his outdoor frying pan. Upon emerging from his crudely constructed winter tilt wearing only what he termed his small clothes and encountering the grizzly this enterprising man dashed back inside, grabbed his old 22 rifle and, as he put it, “Got him right between the eyes,” all the while proclaiming, “You’ll eat no more taties out of Mike Coomb’s frying pan.” We could easily envision the great drama of the moment, ending with our appreciation of the final contemptuous, “You’ll eat no more taties...”

Every community has its colorful characters and in the hands of the master storyteller these paragons of wit and folksy humour could live forever. Then there was the assigning of appellations to those who carried foibles of their own. In this particular area, Uncle Ming had to share the limelight with his siblings. His sister, a great storyteller in her own right, said “to be able to make the cats laugh,” renamed a would-be rival in romance as “The Lily of Hillbilly Valley and the Pride of the Game Warden’s Heart.” (With creative abilities such as these, is it any wonder the victor in the fray?) Uncle Pat created a whole village of characters in code. In this way, he and Tom could readily converse in the very presence of their blissfully unaware victims. The only clue might be that Pat could never keep from punctuating his comments with bouts of chuckling. For example, one particularly rotund priest remained forever “Friar Tuck”. One erstwhile shopper came to be known as “The Hiner Legs of the Chicken” and another “The great Speckled Bird”. Then there was “The Lawyer”, “The Mayor”, and “The Town Crier”. Tom

was no slouch in spinning yarns, knew endless jokes, (sometimes

slightly risqué in nature), offered up long sagas from his travels as a young sailor who journeyed afar and handily quoted poetry. I remember finishing a particularly fine account of the tale of Doctor Faustus and announcing, “Was this the face that launched a thousand ships?” Suddenly I heard, “And burnt the topless towers of Ilium....” He then went on to not only finish the poem, but to recite many pages of The Iliad. Regretfully there was no modern technology to record and capture the thrill of the performance.

Oh yes, the family genes spewed out naught but genius in the way of diversity and colour. Many were the supposed sagas of their father, the first Tom, who captained a boat back and forth to the exotic St. Pierre, bearing wares unknown to the right and proper authority, the customs agent. This swashbuckler was under absolutely no suspicion at all. A false bottomed boat, a quick wit, and an otherwise strict moral code were all the protection he needed from the reach of law enforcement officials. Once the customs man questioned the presence of a locked trunk on the boat. Our hero carefully explained that he was transporting it for a former resident of St. Pierre. This technically was the truth. Captain Tom said he had no keys to the lady’s personal belongings but he was more than willing to beat the lock from the trunk, thereby satisfying the inspection. The customs man was taken aback at the idea and offered that he did not need such drastic evidence. As I said, one did not question a good, God-fearing, church-going man. Note that the art of smuggling was never considered an immoral occupation in Fortune Bay, but rather an honorable undertaking. Truly if it should happen that goods were offloaded at one point and placed under a barrel and if it should happen that the duly appointed exciseman ironically should lean on this barrel while holding forth in conversation with the worthy smuggler, well that’s just the way it happened. And then there was their Uncle Martin, certainly touted as a character. One

story oft repeated told of his misadventure on a late winter's night. Upon leaving a rousing game of cards at a house somewhat removed from his own, he was taunted that he was afraid to pass the church, where a corpse was waking. The teasing accelerated to the point where Uncle Martin had to defend his valour. He warned them that his lack of fear would become clear. Imagine the general community uproar in the morning when the lady at repose was found face down in her coffin. Such a daring albeit totally disrespectful deed could only become the stuff that folklore was made of. Few knew of the other possible culprit and the spirits that walk by night received due credit.

Uncle Ming was well-educated and well-read. How lucky were we to know firsthand of the classics and the greats of literature. For example, Swift's, "A Modest Proposal", was often offered up in situations duly in need of satirical insight. One, however, might need a somewhat macabre sense of humour to enjoy the intended jest. For example, the fate of many a politician who professed to be a panacea for the woes of education was a fantasy of epic proportions. Such creations belonged by right to one who regularly reread Dickens, Shakespeare, the Brontes, Homer and other great spinners of tales.

Apart from formal storytelling, Uncle Ming was a great conversationalist. Every word indeed created story. It mattered not the topic because all was made interesting in the detail. He was gifted with the ability to read an audience and provide appropriate items of personal intrigue. He was also an artist with an uncanny ability to find something positive in characters often reviled by others, unfailingly finding something to ponder in a situation. This is not to say that Uncle Ming did not recognize vice in others. On the contrary, his reflections on many a scene would be witty, insightful, and sometimes plainly satirical. He was just not an idle gossip spreading nasty,

but rather he uplifted the spirit and lightened the load.

Did you envision Ming's appearance based on his nickname? My Placentia cousin, Jeanette, set up the girls in Littledale beautifully by letting them believe that her Chinese uncle was coming to take her out to supper. Imagine their reaction when he walked up the wide steps of St. Bride's College. His physical appearance was as described by one observer, "That blue-eyed, white-haired...". Jeanette had many a good laugh over her confused friends' reactions. Actually the complete description spit out nastily by the above lady who happened to be mightily ticked off as she blamed him for passing her on the road -she having been entirely mistaken about the event- was, "That blue-eyed, white-haired, son-of-a-bitch." The white hair was his trademark since teen years and provided such wonderful contrast with the implications of "Ming." By the way, she was quite right in her description of appearance but dead wrong in character assessment.

The nickname has a very simple explanation. It seems cousin Michael P. pronounced Uncle Mike as Ming and Ming it remained. The same cousin was also responsible for Ming's sister, Alice, becoming Ao for life. The assignment of nicknames is an art form in this family and perhaps a necessity. As cousin, Gold, pointed out, the family has a penchant for naming kids, Michael. Starting with Ming's paternal grandfather, the first Michael there have been something along the lines of eight counting the new wee one. Then there was the diminutive but formidable Sister Mary Michael, she who was christened Alice but upon entering the Presentation Convent chose to be Sister Mary Michael. The redoubtable Mary Mick as we sometimes irreverently called her was the essence of family lore. So really it seems that an otherwise creative family is kind of stuck

on repeating names. We are now down to the fifth Thomas J. McCarthy. I might mention here that my beautifully named sister, Laura, expresses thankfulness that she was not the firstborn for she might have been sent forth into the world as a Thomasina (A thousand apologies to all the Thomasinas out there).

Uncle Ming was responsible for some of the titles assigned to the family cats. Over the years there were many and various felines. What other family in a small rural village had a cat named Minerva and another called Guinevere? I have to say that we drew the line at Clytemnestra and Agamemnon.. Clytemnestra? *Imagine going outside and singing out, "Here Clytemnestra"*. Yes, Ming offered up wonderful sounding appellations steeped in history, literature and mythology.

While we are on the subject of naming, he, somewhat facetiously, I hope, suggested that each newborn human addition to the family be referred to such as Wolfgang Aeschylus or Arabella Anastasia. It's lucky for us that our parents recognized the spirit of these offerings. And you, dear reader, take notice that when our esteemed uncle sired his own offspring, they escaped his egregious naming patterns. Michael John and Karen are very far removed from the possible Menelaus and Iphigenia. One figures that our esteemed uncle's good wife, Anna, was of worthy influence. As a side note here your humble writer concedes that there may very well have been some little justification for his dubbing the somewhat contrary niece who pens this as, "Mair the Bear". Others certainly applauded his choice of description and concurred heartily.

This honorable relative was very conscientious in his role of uncle to some thirty-one nieces and nephews,

bestowing wonderful presents on each household including at one point pet turtles. Regretfully, I cannot recall what we named them for I am certain that the choices were quite interesting.

Anyway these turtles were much admired, a testimonial either to our great boredom or our great creativity. Did you know that one can create wonderful fantasy worlds around a single turtle taking it easy in its glass dish? There was a spirit of competition created also because we were dead sure that our amazing reptile was far more exciting than the one at the other house as we referred to our Uncle Pat's. Did you know that if one left a turtle in its dish in a cold Newfoundland pantry that by morning it would be frozen in the aforesaid vessel? But no, it would not be dead! Just get the kitchen fire going and place its dish on the back of the stove. Soon all would be well and the family pet was ready for its great exploit filled day of eating and sleeping in its small glass yacht.

Another significant present bestowed on us was a badminton set complete with net. This new sport was entirely fascinating and I would venture to say that we became quite proficient as we played outdoors in often questionable weather. Not even a Newfoundland gale could dampen the spirit of competition and when the net wore out (eventually succumbing to the power of wind and storm) we played on using the fence as the net. Many a heated game crept into the annals of time and so happy were the players.

Uncle Ming also was my godfather, a point one could throw up to various siblings and cousins who might have a tendency to brag about their importance in the scheme of things (not that I would do anything so crass). A godchild could appeal for extra favours and for me his gifts of books were hugely anticipated. Ah the thrill as one turned to the first enthralling page of Edith Hamilton's, Mythology, Twain's, Huck Finn, or Longfellow's, Hiawatha.

Christmas memories create especial warmth and it goes without saying that Uncle Ming would

establish his own fond tradition. He was the early Santa Claus arriving a day or two before the portly gentleman himself. Yes, there was great excitement when Uncle Ming arrived for the holidays. He would literally have sacks on his back, sacks filled with presents. Bear in mind that between Placentia and home he would have some thirty-one nieces and nephews, plus six adults to acknowledge at the joyous season. It has always amazed me that he would have age appropriate gifts for all. Words could not convey to you how we felt as he dived into the bags and brought out marvelous offerings. I might add here that if one were keen enough or greedy enough to wait around for the bottom of the sacks there would be extras that one could receive. Uncle Ming was nothing if not smart for he took no chances on leaving anyone out. Thus, these added presents, an assurance of good will all around. How we pitied the crowd down the harbour who had no such Santa relative.

Uncle Ming also endeared himself to his siblings' children with a tradition probably unique to us. Those were the days of the dreaded public examinations which were held for grades nine to eleven. Grade nine obviously was a huge rite of passage and our uncle recognized this transition. To each candidate he presented a transistor radio and they were wonders beyond ken in a small Newfoundland outpost. In fact at least two of my brothers still have their tiny radios, a tribute to the overall significance of the prize. Indeed, one of these had his radio stolen from him while he worked a summer job. Upon returning to the bunkhouse he was outraged at the crime and using intuitive detective work managed to identify the perpetrator. I will not go into detail as to the ensuing scuffle but suffice it to say he has his radio today and it still works.

Our knowledgeable uncle also introduced us to different types of music. He had a reel-to-reel tape player which produced great recordings of musicals such as "The Music Man" and also much of the song culture of Ireland which was a fine change as the radio played mostly American

country and western music . Anyway when he went off to Ottawa in the summertime he would leave all this music at our house. One only had to convince Mom to let us use it for after all it was Uncle

Ming's. She would relent though if you argued the proper reverence for the instrument.

Unfortunately for one of my brothers he broke it once, (not huge nor deliberate damage) provoking dismay from Mother for quite some time.

Scrabble became a board game that inspired lion-like competitions in our houses. Uncle Ming would sometimes bring the Placentia cousins to visit, a thrilling event for us and hopefully for them as well. On one such occasion a Scrabble game came with them and soon we were all under the tutelage of our brilliant cousin, Jeanette, who had already learnt to play. Truly the competition became fierce. Once we even contacted the University's Linguistics Department to vouch for the authenticity of a word.

Uncle Ming was an avid trouter. When he came home trouting was a great part of his visit. He would load up the car and head off to try the old bamboo at Dunn's River or some other suitable location. On one occasion with a full car load he headed out. It happened that our father decided he needed family power to do some shifting in the warehouse (a chore done so often that we called him Old Shifter). Upon the much later return of the happy trouters he proceeded to rant about the crowd who went gallivanting with work to be done. Well, Uncle Ming's rebuttal won that round and trouting excursions would remain sacrosanct. Excursions in the car would also be regular story-filled treats and we felt more than lucky for the opportunities even if we were squashed together in ungodly numbers. Note that it was to Uncle Ming's credit that nieces could get to enjoy the excursions. He did not appear to play gender favorites and indeed treated women

with the utmost respect. He once told me that he was very proud of one young woman from our home community. She was a very bright, enterprising student who before she even finished her trade was offered a position as secretary to the Minister of Education, quite a prestigious opportunity for her. One day the “honorable” Minister himself commanded her attention by whistling to her from the doorway. Well, Ming said that she slowly looked up to the room at large and enunciating clearly enquired, “Did somebody call the dog?” The “worthy gentleman” slunk off back to his office. Yes, Uncle Ming oft referred to her in tones of admiration.

It was true that like many young Newfoundlanders Uncle Ming left home at a very young age. Around sixteen he was when he headed off to places such as Cape St. George, St. Brendan’s and Fogo Island to teach school. In June of his first year away he went to St. John’s (where he would eventually teach). It appears that he may have felt somewhat homeless as his parents had died early on and his brothers were busy procreating in goodly numbers. When no home visit was forthcoming, my father, Tom, removed himself summarily to St. John’s where his young brother was asked what did he think he was doing. Tom let him know in no uncertain terms that Michael had a home with him and his family for as long as he chose to have it. Thus was born Uncle Ming’s Room. In a house which sheltered fifteen children plus two adults one room was kept sacredly unoccupied waiting for his visits. One of those visitations occurred in the late hours of the night. When he arrived the household was sleeping so he fixed a cup of tea and went on up to his room. It was during breakfast the next morning that our parents noticed his car parked outside. The episode says a lot about the safety once experienced in Newfoundland communities when doors were never locked at night. It also proves my point about Uncle Ming’s Room being there for him. In this way, Uncle Ming was an integral part of our family unit and in later years when he had a family of his own that room was still his. It was perhaps

not to our credit that we lorded it over the next-door cousins about having Uncle Ming. They were not entirely left bereft, however, because when Ao (we never called her Aunt) visited she slept at their house. Ah, the petty rivalries of children.

Uncle Ming left us legacies from his boyhood with his duck pond and his ice skating pond. The duck pond has long disappeared but I believe that the ice pond is not entirely lost to succession. Both of these were hand dug by Ming when he was a boy. It was on this pond, a monumental feat for one small lad to create, that we learnt to skate and learnt to compete savagely in the holy game of pond hockey. Perhaps by your standards it was not that big but to us it was an outdoor stadium. Many were the willing bodies to clear a new fall of snow from Uncle Ming's Pond and many were the splendid hours of enjoyment as we learnt to skate and play hockey before we ventured under public scrutiny onto rinks such as Poppy Pond and the Barachoix..

Our mother came to Terrenceville as a teacher and in fact taught Uncle Ming. Upon his returning home for lunch on school opening day his grandmother enquired about the new teacher. Ming's response was to the effect that she was very pretty but that her slip was showing. Apparently, Grandma, shocked beyond measure by her precocious grandson's audacity in mentioning female underclothes, dropped the bake pot she was carrying and pot, dinner and all, lay shattered on the kitchen floor. Anyway, this pretty teacher would become young Mike's sister-in-law and theirs would be a lifetime relationship of mutual respect. Truly in our house, he was indeed a demigod and always spoken of in the highest possible terms. Both our parents presented him always as a role model. One could hear comments such as: "Uncle Ming never did anything like that" and "Uncle Ming never ran with a crowd like that when he was young". I remember when

he was a grown man and would be heading off to summer school in Ottawa our father would ask him if he had enough money to manage. Yes, in many ways he was their eldest son. For instance his writing career was held in great esteem in our house, so much so that one time I just happened to mention in passing that I thought there was a technical error concerning hockey which the editors had obviously missed in one of his books. Well, my father's reaction was nothing short of vituperative. I had only said that Uncle Ming was perhaps not a huge hockey fan (like his brother I might add) and had missed this finer technical point. The scolding was acidic with comments such as, "All that's wrong with you is you read too much!" I have to say that I saw no mortal sin in the act of excessive reading nor could I appreciate its bearing on the subject at hand. However, the real problem was, of course, his rage at a perceived criticism of his younger brother.

Uncle Ming seemed to possess a temperament very unlike that of his brothers. At home the two of them were known to vent handily. Perhaps their temper was often justified in dealing with twenty-five offspring who were often not model citizens and in serving the endless vagaries of the shopping public. Their younger sibling, however, appeared to be the essence of calm. I do remember one time when he exhibited quite a colorful anger. His two brothers decided that they were going to get "rid" of some of the hens which roamed freely around the garden. Well when the time came they were able to catch some of the intended birds. However, others had found refuge in inaccessible places under the house. What did our would-be-heroes do but bring up from the shop their old twenty-two rifle, intending to blast their prey. These two may have been mostly intelligent fellows but on that day one could only envision the ensuing tragedy as bullets penetrated the wooden structures which still, by the way, were quite full of family members. It was more than propitious that Uncle Ming was there to stop the impending disaster.

His railing at his two “Mensa’ relatives was the stuff of legend. Oh it was a beauty to behold. The upshot was the hens received a temporary reprieve and the occupants of the house a more lasting one.

When we were at Memorial University we had a Sunday ritual that many of our peers at residence envied. Uncle Ming would pick us up at the university and there would follow an afternoon and evening of pure privilege. First, we would spend two or three hours going for a drive. It was by this means that we became very familiar with the streets and history of Olde St. John’s. We also visited the communities and settlements of the Southern Shore, often stopping to walk in La Manche or to visit landmarks on the way. We traveled out to Cape Spear, out to Cape St Francis and explored the communities in between. Conception Bay was also explored in detail and I remember in particular the autumn afternoon we spent in Brigus, as he imparted the pirate lore. Later he cooked a full- fledged meal while we vegetated with libation in hand. Ah those daiquiris! Supper would be a repast offering succulent testimony to the chef. Chilled tomato or vegetable juice would always accompany the meal and would serve divinely. The traditional Newfoundland dinner followed by some form of dessert certainly seemed to be more tasty as it was also flavored with interesting conversation flowing freely throughout. Believe me even the brussels sprouts were tasty. After, while he cleared the dishes we retired to watch television while sipping on an after dinner brandy or wine, whichever seemed to suit the mood of the moment. Added to this when Uncle Ming returned us to residence later in the evening there would always be a little cheque to help with the week’s pocket money. Then we were duly appreciative of the Sunday ritual outing, for indeed we went every single Sunday barring only blizzards. However, it was only in later years upon contemplation of this generosity that one is

astounded by the munificence of it all.

In my adult years I always felt welcome at the home of our uncle. One felt free to just drop in and as life led us all on different paths we still treasured those occasions when we had a chance to visit. It is of consequence that Uncle Ming was not alone in his generosity. His wife Anna obviously possesses the same greatness of spirit.

There is perhaps only one area in which one could fault Ming. He was perhaps just a little too modest and unassuming. He was just never going to trouble others. This remained a lifelong characteristic of his, and so there was no real opportunity for us to repay his attentions to his nieces and nephews who are blessed to have had him to claim as our very own. Yes indeed the gods were smiling.

It is true that there were many other facets of Uncle Ming that one could explore. There was his unflinching commitment to his wife and children, his wonderfully varied career in education, his life as an historian, a writer, and a mentor to those who wrote. One such testimonial is seen in the bi-annual reading done in his memory at the Mount Pearl Library. Certainly, the personal tributes are out there. Recently, I was sitting in a doctor's office in St. John's and was engaged in a conversation with a retired teacher from the Southern Shore. I happened to mention to this former teacher that he probably had met Uncle Mike. It was rewarding to hear his commentary for he had not only known him but informed me that Uncle Ming was one person from the school board that they loved to see coming. He remarked that to converse with Mike was to be involved in story. And so this brings us full circle back to Uncle Ming as the quintessential storyteller. Ah, the stories, the stories.....

