



The Mountain Pass

by Will Ferguson, illustration by Jillian Tamaki

I HAVE BEEN THINKING ABOUT PARABLES LATELY—AND WHY no one seems to write them anymore. My interest grew from a screenplay I first developed when I was in university, back in 1987. It's a story based in psychiatry, about people who believe they are Jesus. It deals with identity, with how we define ourselves. A few years ago, I returned to my original material, and in doing so I reawakened a half-forgotten fascination with parables.

"The Prodigal Son." "The Lost Coin." "The Good Samaritan." Much like the related literary form of the fable, parables are philosophies distilled in narrative form; small stories told to illuminate a single point. But unlike fables, parables are not fanciful—there are no talking rabbits or hard-working ants—and more importantly, the lessons they contain are not explicitly stated. Parables are never didactic or heavy-handed. The insights they present must be grasped *intuitively*, with the moral of the story filled in by the listeners themselves. Parables act like arc lights leaping across the space between contacts. They have more in common with Zen haiku than with Aesop.

Nor are parables necessarily religious. Jesus spoke in parables, but it was often in answer to specific questions about everyday life. The parable of the Good Samaritan, for example, although derived from the edict "Love your neighbour," is presented as an answer to the corollary question "Who is my neighbour?"

I was wondering what had become of parables. Then it hit me: parables are all around us. They are imbedded in the stories we tell, in the lives we lead, in the choices we make.

I found this out first-hand when I returned to another screenplay of mine, one titled "The Mountain Pass," which I developed during my 1986/87 year at film school. When I went to write a film treatment based on it (that is, a summary of the screenplay) I realized, to my surprise, that it was in the form of a parable: two young men meet on a mountain pass in the borderlands of South America during a howling storm. They take refuge in the cabin of an elderly *campesino*, and as the storm rages outside they tell their stories...

"My father was a man of science," says the first traveller. "He developed a program that was able to predict with perfect accuracy the course that someone's life might take. He had only to enter enough material—the demographic data, the environmental factors—and he could tell you exactly what choices you were going to make. I discovered my own file by accident several years ago and I was horrified. Everything the program had predicted—every moment of rebellion, every failed scheme, every major decision I had made—had come to pass. It was as though my life was predetermined; it was as though I had no free will. So I

fled. I have lived my life in as random a fashion as possible ever since. I have tried to make nothing but arbitrary, unexpected decisions. I have tried to be free. And it has brought me here. To this very pass."

The second man tells his story. "Why am I here? Because I have always believed that life *wasn't* random, that there was some larger master plan at work, that I had a destiny to find—and to fulfill. I am haunted by the thought that our lives are meaningless. I have travelled the world trying to find what it was I am meant to do—to uncover this secret blueprint, this sense of a destiny foretold. And this has brought me here, to this mountain pass."

At this stage, the two men realize that the *campesino* has not yet spoken. They turn to him. "And you?" they ask. "Why are you here?"

The old man looks up. "Because I live here. Because this is my home."

Thus ends the screenplay and the parable...

When I first wrote this story, almost 20 years ago, I was working out my own feelings as a young man. I was also drawing upon my time in the Andes mountains of Ecuador, near the Peruvian border, where I lived and worked in 1985/86 as part of a cross-cultural volunteer corps—in the same way that my screenplay about mental patients who believe they are Jesus was drawn from my mother's experiences as a psychiatric nurse in the 1950s. These are my stories. They are a part of me.

Perhaps, when we feel adrift or uncertain, it is because we have lost our narrative thread. At such moments, it helps to look on our lives as stories, as parables unfolding. We can apply this to larger social issues as well—we can even apply it to politics, to provinces, to world views. In answering the question, "What is Alberta?" we might well begin with a story. "*Once there was a young farmer, raised on the west wind, who discovered a great treasure beneath the land...*"

I'm not sure why, but lately I find myself being asked to "explain Alberta" to people outside this province more and more often. This makes me uneasy, because I do not, in any way, consider myself a spokesperson for this land of thorns and wild roses. Nor am I an apologist for it. Or an adversary. I live here, that is all. This is my home.

Will Ferguson is an award-winning author whose work has been published in 31 countries and 29 languages. His screenplays are represented by the Becsey, Wisdom & Kalajian Agency in Los Angeles. He lives in Calgary with his wife and two sons.