

Laura and Bill Make Their Way Through A Life

Hurt

Laura was one of those intensely ebullient people who are great at the right kind of party, but who wear mightily on the nerves in a small tight space. *Yes, I, Laura, know that this is an opinion widely held on the subject of Laura. Who better than Laura to understand the upside (if there is one) and the downside of Laura? But does anyone see the grief that roils right below the surface of the forced ebullience? Does anyone ever look at Laura and think, Gee, that woman is hurting? Maybe there's some way I could help her. Anyone?* Laura looked out the window at the grazing cows in the pasture nearby. Wisconsin cows they were, Holsteins, black splotches on white. *What do they think about, as they stand out there all day doing the one thing cows enjoy: turning grass and straw into cow plats? Do they know the meaning of grief? Moo.*

Thuffering

Everything had fallen apart in the marriage of Laura and Bill. They seldom spoke to one another, and when they did it was only to bicker. Once they were watching the evening news in the family room. The announcer tripped over the word “suffering” and stuttered out, twice in a row, “thuffering.” Both Laura and Bill laughed, which produced the effect of a match touched to damp paper. There was a little flicker, a sputter of flame, but it would need long, long tending—gentle breaths of tender air—and even then it

might go thuffering out. How would either of them, Laura or Bill, conjure up the soft air to blow on that tenacious flame and make it grow again? How?

Interested

Laura tilted her head and listened hard to her boss's presentation. Her boss's name was Latimer J. Hinchcliff. Enough said. She put on her best ebullience, but she had a distinct feeling that this morning she was just not up to it. Faking the hard listening, she wrote INTERESTED in her mind in block letters on her forehead, then addressed that head to the boss, like a bored but ambitious young scholar at a lecture by a shambling old colleague. Grief roiled about in her bowels. "Interested" struggled to make itself legible on the gloss of her forehead, failed. She knitted her brow and two wrinkles crisscrossed on that forehead. The wrinkles were what Latimer J. Hinchcliff saw when he peered down from his lectern.

Old

Bill looked at the three lonely old men on the park bench, basking in the sun, with their wet lips and black ball-bearing eyes, with scrawny necks that barely supported their heavy heads, overladen with the many mistakes of a lifetime, with grievous hurts never healed, with the funerals of friends. One of them slowly raised his superannuated bulk off the bench, slowly turned in place, naught but spindle bones in a pair of pants. Laboriously he directed his feet toward the lake and the pasture, where black-white dairy cattle ruminated. He stepped out, taking carefully measured steps on the smooth bone of his stick-legs, walking a cane beside him, bent nearly double as he ambulated. *The worst thing* (imagined Bill) *about getting old is this: you lose your levensperspectief—a Dutch word meaning the sense of having something to live for.*

Wet Day

The weather man on the local channel was a red-headed clown. Here's what he said today on the six o'clock news: "A shift in the jet stream today, and a cantankerous as usual El Nino with a tilde, will bring lots and lots of bulky rain clouds and three inches of serious participation. The morning forecast calls for thick humidity to rise, and a dense frog will hop in. So don't forget those raincoats and brellies if you're off to participate in the humidity or do some hopping with the frog. One more thing: in the afternoon we can expect goofball-sized hail." Laura laughed.

Horsies

I like horses (thought Bill). *I like riding horses, talking to horses. I don't like cows, though. How can anybody like a cow?* Just that bovine leer they direct at you when you walk up, snatches of straw sticking out of their gormless moist mouths, that's enough to turn anyone against a cow. Last week I was out at Ned's Riding Stables, and I struck up a one-way conversation with a nice palomino, who was looking sad that day. "Listen now, horsie, horsie don't cry, you'll have your neigh in the sky by and by. Horsiekins, all of us have in us dorkiness; humanness often is worsen than horsiness." The palomino shook its mane, snorted, whinnied and trotted off, feeling, apparently, much better. *I like riding horses, talking to horses. I sure would rather talk to horses than to horses' asses.*

Jogging

Puffing along, circling the high school track, envying the people who could really do this, *enjoy* this, Bill put one weary foot in front of the other. *Puff, plod, puff, plod*. Nobody ever knows what or who he is (thought Bill); we just stagger on in life, ignorant of who or what we are, until one fine day we stumble over it: ah, so that's who or what I am! Trouble is, try as I might, so far I've never stumbled over anything. *Puff, plod, puff, plod*, and that's when the sleek-shanked, in-shape young runner-guy went by

once again, knees lifted high, lapping the puffery-ploddery of poor Bill, passing him with the contemptuous ease of a jet-ski rider overtaking a coal barge on the broad Ohio River. *You bastard* (thought Bill), as he smiled at the lapper going by.

Maculate and Immaculate

Conceptions are of two kinds (thought Laura): immaculate conceptions and maculate conceptions. Me, unfortunately, Laura M. Dormeyer (nee Denzell), I was born of a maculate conception. Can't even visualize what it would be like to be immaculately conceived, thereby bypassing the requisite filth of animal coupling, the panting and moaning, the slime. That baby in Cleveland must have been in the immaculate category: born at 10:11 on 12/13/14 and named Hazel Grace Zimmerman. Way to go, immaculate Hazel.

Lonesome

The early twilight, smoky and gravid, scratched its big sow-belly on the shingles of the roof, as Bill sat on the front porch, musing on life. *Let sleeping dogs lie* (thought Bill). *Leave 'em be!* But sleeping dogs, even those left to lie, eventually wake up. And bark. *That's the trouble with sleeping dogs*, thought Bill. Later the sighs of the day were breathing on restlessly in the respirations of dead dark night, and still Bill sat musing. *All the things I ever did in my life to ward off the coming of the lonesome time, all of those things have ever and always come to nothing.* Still later Bill lay asleep in his single bed, dreaming of himself squirming in a straight-back chair, anxiety-ridden, clenching his sphincters, like a man with watery bowels in the front pew at a funeral service.

A Prayer

Bill was on his knees by his bedside, saying his evening prayers. Thou hast brought me forth, Lord, out of boundless ineffable nonbeing into the misery and squalor and splendor of being. Thank you for that being, Lord. That being, at times, has been a fine place to be. Now I'm tired, though; I think I've had enough. Now, as my earthly being winds its way along to the end, please have the grace to bring me forth gently and kindly, back out of being and back, once again, into the serenity of the nonbeing where I began. Okay, Lord? Amen.

A Colloquy

Laura and Bill were sitting in the family room. Silence. The television was off. Strain was dripping from the air like humidity condensing on the trunk of a rubber tree in the tropics. Silence. Finally Bill spoke up.

What time is it getting to be?

Correction (answered Laura). What time has it *got* to be.

How come?

Because time may be getting to be all the time; time runs on. But when you want to know the precise time right now, you, in your mind, *stop* time for a second. You ask what time it has *got* to be. Or gotten.

I see. Okay. I don't like the word "gotten." Let's start over. What time is it?

Time never *is*. Time's on the move. And time is not an 'it.'

Yeah. Right, then, we'll do it your way: what time has it got to be?

I don't know. Look at the clock.

Death

Bill was out at the cemetery, laying flowers on the grave of his parents. *Death* (thought Bill), *a thing so at peace in the graveyard, so abstract in the demographic charts, but it will truly come for me.* In fact, I

often welcome the thought of its coming, but I don't really believe it ever will. Sure, other people die, but not me, not William J. Dormeyer, not little Billy, momma's boy. There's some kind of defense reflex built into the human brain. None of us deep down believe we will ever die. Look at that tombstone over there: a single surname Clayton and two first names, Wellington and Elvira—the first with beginning and end dates already provided, the second (Elvira's) expectantly blank in its terminal digits. She has been born (see the 1940?), she's still out there walking the world somewhere, Elvira is, but you put her name on a tombstone and that blank space after the dash, and you're already putting one of her feet and most of her soul underground.

After Further Review

How can you watch such a stupid game? (said Laura to Bill), who was watching football on television. It was the South Carolina Gamecocks versus the Florida Gators.

Bill didn't answer; what good would it do to have this conversation? But Laura wanted to have it. All they do is keep stopping the play (she went on). Any reason they can find to go to a commercial.

Bill said nothing, went on watching the commercial with long-tall Samuel L. Jackson, the actor, jiving around in a fancy suit, touting some bank credit card.

It's always time out (said Laura), or the quarterback gets up on the line, ready to run a play, and then he yells "Omaha," and after that everybody stands up and looks around in their big fat butts. Duh. Another "penalty."

Bill watched Samuel L. Jackson, who had put on a smug leer for the camera now, and was saying, "So what's in *your* wallet, sucker?" After that the game came back on. Florida ran another play, but then the referees stopped the action, got together and consulted. "Looks like this will be under further review," said the announcers.

See (said Laura)? Here we go again. Or somebody gets hurt, then lies there writhing on the field, four medic guys and one water girl bending over him while they take another time out. Why not watch soccer? At least they *play* the game. They kick at each other's legs, they fall down on the ground, screaming and holding their ankle, pretending to be hurt, but even then they *go on playing*.

Bill was watching the main referee, who was delivering the verdict following the consultation. "After further review," said the referee, "the previous play stands. First down, Gators." He turned and pointed downfield with one index finger.

After further review (snorted Laura). Why is it "further." They don't have "further" review. They have just *one* review. It should be "after review." Idiots.

Bill kept his silence, went on watching the game. Deep in his heart he knew she was right. He hated the way they played football nowadays. Back when he played in high school, well, that was *real* football. Smash-mouth stuff, not for pussies. No face guards on the helmets. None of this "breaking the plane" crap either. To score a touchdown you had to run the ball over the goal line into the end zone, not hold out the football in one hand.

Another commercial came on. This one had the little lizard guy who pitches car insurance in a New Zealand accent. Bill went on watching, gritting his teeth, saying nothing.

Psychobabble

Laura was watching Jane Fonda's appearance on Oprah's program. Bill said, "I'd find it more interesting watching the cows graze in the pasture outside," but he didn't get up to go watch the Wisconsin cows, those fine Holsteins that were out there producing milk high in protein.

Jane spoke of how even after her many successes as an actress, after the Oscar she won for "Klute," she never felt fulfilled. At age sixty "I had entered a new phase of my life and still had not fully found myself."

Bill said, "Stupid airhead bitch, I'll never forgive her for what she did in Vietnam."

Jane spoke of her relationship with Ted Turner, how she had known when it was time to move on, although the breakup devastated poor Ted, whom "I still love dearly and he loves me as well. We are good friends now." Then she went on to speak of her new flame, the man she was dating these days.

"Dating," said Bill. "How old is she, the pinbrain? Seventy-five?"

Jane went on babbling earnestly on behalf of all the psychobabblers of America, for all the viewers of psychobabble on TV, the imbibers of the psycho-pabulum America so loves, while Oprah put on her most sincere frog-faced look, cocked her head sideways and listened, utterly enthralled. Laura picked up the remote, clicked off the television set, and left the room.

Your Prayer Will Be Answered in the Order It Was Received

Never say die (thought Bill). The slightest dent in the steel wall of impossibility is the miracle you've been waiting for. Persevere, persevere. Our problem is this, Laura's and my problem: we are chronically normal people. Does God answer the prayers of the chronically normal? Doubtful. Why? Because such ordinary types spark no interest in the Creator. God, and Jesus too, wants bare-assed ascetics who spend their days sitting naked by a Wisconsin waterfall in winter sunshine, watching the water frozen into solid iridescent curtains of ice, watching, watching, smiling and shivering, and, meanwhile, sending prayers up to the Deity. God, says, "Hey, that's quite an act you're putting on down there, Mr. Bare-Assed Ascetic." God says, "I believe I might could even answer a prayer or two from you, son." But Laura and I, kneeling at our middle-class, utterly bourgeois bedsides in the night, amidst our egregiously insipid existence, you think God has time for us? No way. God has as much interest in us as He does in those black-white smudges of cows out there in the pasture, calmly chewing their cuds. But cows don't need to pray. Cows are perfectly content with the mindless bovine life they live. Moo.

El Nino with a Tilde

Laura sat looking out the window at the house across the street, on the other side from the cow pasture. Rain was spitting slowly down, swirling in the wind. *Rain in February* (thought Laura), *in Wisconsin for Christ's sake*. Somebody has messed up the weather big time, and now no way we'll ever get it straight again. She watched a snowman the Olsen kids had put up in their yard. The snowman was doing his best with the rain and the thaw, still smiling his coal-pitted grin, persevering as he melted, comprehending nothing of his imminent demise, watching all the nothing that was not there and a bit of the nothing that was. His eye sockets thinning, his torso sagging, he went on doggedly grinning in the southern rain of northern Wisconsin. Nobody knows what's wrong with the weather, everybody says it must be "global warming," or it must be El Nino with a tilde. People use expressions like that, having absolutely no comprehension of what those expressions mean. People say, "It's all in the DNA." But, barring a couple of scientists at Harvard, does anybody really know what DNA is? I certainly don't. I wouldn't know the backside of DNA if it showed up perched on my toilet seat.

No There Here There

Bill was reading an article in *The Atlantic* about the writer Gertrude Stein. "In 2005 a sculpture was installed on the Berkeley-Oakland border. On the Berkeley side of the statue the word 'Here' is written, and on the Oakland side the word 'There.' This is a snide allusion to Stein's remark about Oakland, her home town: 'There is no there there.'" That reminded Bill of a remark John Updike made in his aging years, about getting old: "You're still here, but it's a different, rather pallid sort of hereness." You got that right, John. *Thing of it is, though* (thought Bill), *is there really any there or any here anywhere?* *Doubtful.*

That Kind of Guy

Bill was thinking about going to work tomorrow (Monday), thinking about how he'd rather not go to work, how he hated his boss, a fat snarky man named Elwood Hortenstine. *What kind of guy* (thought Bill) *is Elwood Hortenstine?* Elwood is the kind of guy who, when he's watching a thing on TV about a little dwarf of a Thalidomide man, born with no arms and with flappers for hands, which man has now become a famous accordion player, Elwood is the kind who, instead of reveling in the triumph of the Thalidomide man, shedding tears over the "Row Your Boat" emerging from the accordion under the seal-like non-fingers of that disabled man—in a word, Elwood is the kind of guy who'd be puzzling over just one question in his mind all the time: "I wonder how a guy with no hands beats his meat?" That kind of guy.

Worries

Midsummer. Laura sat in her back yard, watching the cows graze in the dry pasture beside her house, worrying about the growing threat of diseases spread by mosquitoes: dengue fever—also known as "freak-bone fever"—and chikungunya, which causes painful contortions, paroxysms of hurt. *Aedes aegypti*, whose biting females spread these diseases, have now evolved to resist four of the six insecticides used against them. Worrying, among a myriad of other worries, about her personal, perennially fucked-up life, about the drought, about white nose syndrome, a fungal disease that is devastating the bat population in the U.S., about huanglongbing (HLB), which wreaks havoc on Florida citrus. And what can we do to help the desperate honeybees? Out in the fields the cud-chewing black-white Wisconsin Holstein cows, which produced milk with a sumptuous butterfat content, ruminated over oblivion. They knew that even the drought would end some day, that the slow closing eye of the pond in late fall would open once again come spring, would blink (that eye) and look around—at the sky,

the rain, at the bowed bovine backs, splotches of black on white—and some day at the end of the be-all and end-all of it all, at oblivion. *Let it come, oblivion* (ruminated the cows); *we ain't askeert*. Moo.