Vacancy: a New York story

(3,722 words)

I first moved into this building in 1977 when my aunt went away for the summer. I was staying in her apartment while she was upstate for a couple months, and Laurel lived down the hall. That summer would be, I thought, a welcome break from my shared and much less spacious apartment, also in the East Sixties. I didn't know then, of course, that I would move in for good, taking over the lease when my aunt died a few years later. My aunt told me nothing about Laurel, except that she was a widow and seemed friendly enough, if a little remote or just preoccupied. Even then, she had seemed *old*, in a dignified way that may be less common now. But I was only in my twenties when I met Laurel, and she would have been only in her fifties! One sultry July afternoon, Laurel told me her story—about her children, two sons just a year or two apart and, like me, by now well beyond middle age.

You see, there are two kinds of people in this world: the makers and the takers. Laurel was a maker, not of meals or clothes or other things that a mother might make but, in the American way, Laurel made a whole new life. Maybe people *do* make themselves in some way on social media now, but that's not what I mean—I'm talking about the 1950s, when outside of Hollywood making a life in Laurel's way was quite rare. It's different from what I make. I'm a composer, or was. I made music—and music is an object, or an experience I suppose, but anyway something *outside of* myself that I can point to. Laurel made her*self*, not just a persona. Everyone has one of those, at least as soon as they leave their apartment they have one. I learned all about Laurel's former self that afternoon during the blackout in July of '77, when she told me. But I don't think that I altogether believed her story until yesterday.

That summer I was going from gig to gig, rather than working on commission, and deep into writing a song cycle that I hadn't sold yet and might not ever, and it wasn't going well. Then, as now, the air conditioner in the front window ran continuously and inadequately; I couldn't keep the apartment cool enough, so after dinner I would take a long walk in the diminishing heat. Whenever my work wasn't going well, which was *often* in those months before my wife left—the divorce would be amicable enough for both of us, but not so easy for our daughter—I walked a lot, sometimes for hours. At about nine o'clock that night, when I got back to the apartment, the lights flickered and then went out.

At first, this seemed a kind of respite. That night and all the next morning I read a novel by Willa Cather—*The Professor's House*, I remember—which my aunt had left on the bedside table. She kept several oil lamps on a windowsill in the living room, and eventually I found a match and lit one to read by. In the morning, the power was still out. It wasn't as hot in the apartment anymore, but of course no one knew how long the power might stay out or how precarious the situation might become. For one, the bathtub and all the glasses and bowls in the kitchen could hold only so much water from the tank on the roof, a limited supply for everyone in the building after which there would be no running water. I don't think that we ever ran out though, if only because most people in the building were away. Of sixteen apartments, I think that only Laurel's and mine, both on the sixth floor, and Mrs. Bernstein's on the fourth, were occupied all year round then. My wife at the time was visiting her sister in Riverdale, our daughter was away at camp, and so I was alone in the apartment. I didn't know that our marriage was ending. Well, maybe deep down you always know those kinds of things, but my wife hadn't told me yet.

The mayor made a big announcement urging everyone to stay home—I listened to it on transistor radio, as did the rest of the powerless city. Some neighborhoods had big rooftop barbecues, all the residents bringing their raw meat up there for a turn on the charcoal grill. Otherwise, all the frozen food would spoil—and the ice cream would melt. I didn't know until later about the looting. It was odd, just waiting for the power to be restored. I didn't leave home at all, and only talked to Laurel—or, rather, listened to her.

I was avoiding my work at the piano by reading and smoking cigarettes—everybody still smoked back then—when I heard the knocking at the door, firm and deliberate. In listening to music, I always enjoy the feeling of being lost in sound, and so the pull back into the room was jarring and unwelcome. I opened the door. Laurel, her brown hair cut rather severely in a bob that just grazed her shoulders, looked at me with her eyes scrunched up in that way of hers and asked if I had a newspaper. Remember, this is 1977: no cell phones, even before the batteries die. When I said that I didn't have a copy of the *Times* and reflexively invited her in, to my surprise, she accepted and stepped into the apartment.

Maybe she wanted me to play the piano. Laurel had been listening for days, she told me right away, as I was running through a program for the Philharmonic—where I sometimes substituted for a mentor of mine—and that morning she had been wondering about the silence from 6B, she said, given that I too was hunkered down here alone without power. My aunt's piano, a Baldwin baby grand—a fine instrument, once shared by my aunt and my mother—is still up there in the living room, which shares a long wall with 6A. The building is L-shaped and has only two apartments on each floor: the A line is almost palatial, a large rectangle just over twice the size of the B line, a square with its four rooms. I never visited Laurel's apartment or saw inside it beyond the entryway, but I imagine it as austere. By contrast, my living room is

(still) full of my aunt's dark furniture and once-white couches and under-stuffed pillows—utterly comfortable, if a bit tawdry—and its overall warmth perhaps compensated for my reticence that morning, which seems to me now, all these years later, cold or even antagonistic given what Laurel shared with me. I wouldn't say that we had a conversation, exactly. This was her monologue, and I listened.

Laurel told me that her imagination had taken on a reality all its own, as she put it, that could be ignored only at her peril. Laurel could be severe like that, dramatic in her speech. One winter in the mid-'50s Laurel became dissatisfied, she said, not about any one thing specifically but, rather, about all things generally. While it didn't happen all at once, eventually her dissatisfaction felt absolute and unremitting. It was perhaps a common enough feeling about a seemingly conventional situation: her children, Peter and Stephen, were growing up and their father had died a decade before, so Laurel would be left alone in the small town of Hastings, in the Hudson River Valley, where the family of three remained until Peter, only a year or two from then, and Stephen, a couple years after that, would go away to college. Like the boys' coming of age, their father's death was not a surprise—he was 80 years old and a functional alcoholic for years before his last month of cascading illnesses—but nonetheless his death seemed sudden.

I made some reply to Laurel about how death always seems sudden, but she didn't seem to hear me. He never lived with them and rarely visited, she went on, because for writing he needed solitude during the day and for socializing he needed to go out almost every night. Laurel resigned herself to weekly trips with the boys, when they'd take the train to Grand Central and meet their father for lunch, usually at the Oyster Bar. Laurel enjoyed these lunches, she said, adding however that her fondest memories of him predated the boys, when she lived in the city and his attention still had been focused on *her*. She didn't suggest that he was a philanderer, but

perhaps that merely had been obscured by her deep reverence for him, even all those years later. He was a literary critic, a prominent writer then, unheard of now.

He held himself apart from what otherwise might have been a more traditional family. They never had talked about marriage, Laurel said, perhaps by way of excusing his behavior, and she came to feel irrelevant to him in a way that, I think, getting married might have alleviated. But he wouldn't marry, feeling himself to be in a different phase of life. Whenever she tried to remember her life *before* she met him—in Bonwit Teller, of all places, where she worked at the jewelry counter—a kind of emptiness closed in. The fact of his life, especially after his death, seemed to blot out any sense of who she'd been either before or even during the relationship. She had been, of course, the last of many very young girlfriends; the boys, however, were his only living biological relatives, so that for their care Laurel received all of his family money, modest but more than adequate given her frugality.

I was enamored with Laurel. I listened to her story with a concentration that I hadn't been able to bring to composing on the piano earlier in the day. I was impressed by her, as only a very young person could be—that is, my curiosity was uncritical, unalloyed with my own ordinary disappointments or resignations. I was flattered to be taken seriously by an older woman. It seems obvious to me only now that Laurel was totally *in*curious about me. To her, I was young, and indistinct from any other young person; and any fondness that she felt toward me was a generalized affection for youth itself or, perhaps, for Peter and Stephen as they had been, before she left them. Laurel was so poised, then and always, in a way that suggested to me either some deep contentment or else the absence of any feeling at all. Why the loss of electricity for a couple days became an occasion for our first and only truly substantive conversation, I don't know. But she was telling me her story as if all of it had happened to somebody else.

The boys probably found their mother odd, but in the rather conventional way of anyone who enjoys spending their days alone in an old house. Laurel was *not* a recluse—she was insistent with me on this point. However, apart from her daily walk and errands, she had no reason to venture outside. Her children knew this. Both boys likely were at least mildly protective of their mother—after all, a *single* mother in the 1950s—and perhaps preferred to think of her (when they *did* think of her) as safely enclosed in that warren-like clapboard house in Hastings-on-Hudson, her outpost at the edge of the river.

I mentioned her imagination. Laurel reads a lot. Literature had been for her a kind of solace, Laurel said, until she realized too late that her reading also had been a retreat from life, merely a satisfying way of filling up time, otherwise empty, between eight in the morning when the boys left for school, and four in the afternoon when they came home. Such disciplined reading—punctuated in the morning with a walk and in the afternoon with a trip to the market—had been her routine since the boys started grade school. Laurel read her way through the long novels of the nineteenth-century, the British and the French and the Russians; and on her long walks around Hastings she thought about them. The changing of the seasons, also, brought her pleasure on those long walks, but otherwise she felt little attachment to the town. It could have been *any* place: what was operative for Laurel was only interior.

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During that winter in the mid-'50s, soon after she became aware of her dissatisfaction, Laurel applied and gained admission to Barnard College, as a home economics major who later switched to comparative literature. In her middle or late thirties, Laurel however made her

application as if she were only nineteen years old, inventing both her name and credentials, including a near-perfect transcript and teacher recommendations from a small public high school outside Minneapolis, class of ’56. Laurel was just over five feet tall, with a child-like frame, taut skin and an olive complexion; and eavesdropping on the boys’ banter enough to have a sense of the worldview of someone their age from a small town—Peter was aged sixteen, and Stephen, fourteen—she was, she said, convincingly able to play the role of precocious teenager.

Laurel kept her life as a student separate from her life as a mother, as if on parallel tracks, so that her boys never knew about it. This was, surprisingly, not difficult to do. Early on, while the boys were still in high school, the problem of a call from the nurse’s office at the children’s school presented itself as the only impediment to her plan. Long before cell phones, children typically had no contact whatsoever with their parents throughout the school day, and with no disciplinary issues for either of the boys, a sudden illness could be the only interruption to Laurel’s new college routine. Both boys were healthy, robust even, but the stomach flu could come on fast—say, between first period and lunchtime—and, if Laurel was unavailable because at school herself in the city, Mrs. Stanislaw would take the call. Of all her neighbors in Hastings, Mrs. Stanislaw seemed to Laurel the most reliable and, perhaps, the least suspicious. If at all like our Mrs. Bernstein on the fourth floor, Mrs. Stanislaw was the sort of woman who had almost nothing to do. But, unlike Laurel, Mrs. Stanislaw was made vaguely anxious by solitude and therefore was acutely receptive to even the most mundane diversion from another monotonous day. Taking a call from the nurse’s office at the boys’ school, then, potentially solved a problem for *both* women.

By the time that the younger boy, Stephen, went away to college in Vermont, both boys would call Laurel from a payphone in the hallway of their dorms often enough, and they would

come home for a week over the holidays. At some point, though, Laurel had missed enough calls, and later on just stopped answering, such that their calls tapered off. Of course, the boys didn't forget about their mother; they just didn't *need* her anymore or, predictably enough, didn't need her in the same way. By the spring of 1960, Laurel's senior year of college, one or the other of the boys might call her once a month. Unlike their father, iconoclastic and domineering even in old age, the boys were easygoing and usually quite affectionate toward each other, and anyone else really. Peter was the quiet, exacting type who went to college at Dartmouth, and Stephen, though the younger of the two boys, was much taller, lanky even, more gregarious, and quite popular. Both boys were from a young age so *independent*, Laurel remarked. After all, they never really knew their father, and their mother was odd. Peter and Stephen seemed to share their strongest bond in life with each other, leaving Laurel on the outside of some inchoate but nonetheless shared understanding. The boys now had their own lives too, seemingly separate and inviolable.

Laurel told me how she came to move into our building in the first place—as herself, as Laurel, I don't know her previous name. Initially, she kept the house in Hastings and her other life there, for holidays. When she graduated from Barnard, she needed an address in the city where she could be assumed to be living and where she might receive correspondence about potential jobs in publishing, as 23-year-old Laurel Bourne. To secure the lease, she invented Mary and Howard Bourne as her parents and guarantors and, she claimed, the landlord evidently didn't check this when she paid one year's rent in advance. Laurel reasoned that, if later she decided to abandon the apartment and return to Hastings, all that would be lost would be that six-thousand dollars, a lot of money then. Laurel never took a job in publishing—and obviously kept the apartment. She moved some of the money that she'd inherited for the care of the boys

into an account under the name Laurel Bourne at a bank in the city and the rest of the money into another account under some other alias at yet another bank in the city, while leaving enough money in her old account that the boys used so that they could go on making their withdrawals for months before realizing that no statements had been received in Hastings. Her bifurcated life—as their mother in Nyack, and as Laurel on East 66th Street—worked for a while. But, in the spring of 1960, the only way to go on, she said, was to choose one.

Instead of abandoning the apartment and returning to the house, or else selling it with her sons' knowledge, Laurel moved into the apartment and abandoned *the house*. After all, they had lived in Hastings, she said, only so that the children could attend good public schools, which their father prioritized on principle. Her sons likely called her, but the phone rang in the empty old house much as it always had when Laurel just didn't pick up. By that time, neither of the boys called her regularly. After a month or two of unanswered calls, one or both of the boys likely visited, checked with the neighbors, and called the police; all to no avail. Two years later, Laurel read her own death notice in the *Times*—or, rather, one for her former life.

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That July evening—afternoon was sliding into evening by then, and the power was still out—Laurel looked at me unflinchingly and told me that, when she left Hastings, she didn't care about her children at all. Rather, she felt only a waning resentment toward them simply for reminding her of their father; and I gathered that she had (and perhaps still) idolized their father. Laurel preferred to be his disciple, not the steward of his children—which she had become

before she'd even grown up herself. When she said this, and not a moment before, I realized that Laurel was *confessing*, and that somehow she wanted my judgment.

I didn't know what to think or say, or what she might want to hear from me. I remember feeling hot in the face and neck, and noticing that the lipstick on her upper lip was smudged slightly. I felt angry. I also remember feeling, by some automatic restraint, the need to keep to myself any reaction that would be less than sympathetic. I was young. I didn't think to ask about so many things—like if the house in Hastings went into a sheriff's sale to recoup back-taxes. And I wonder if she left her car up there. It occurs to me that, in our conversation, Laurel put me, being about the same age as her children, in their position as a listener—as if somehow my judgment might stand in for theirs. But I wasn't prepared to give it. Instead, I asked if she missed her children; she said yes, adding however that her love for them wasn't enough to justify reentering their lives after almost two decades as a missing person presumed dead. But what about her love for them, say, just a week or two after she left—not enough then either?

What was she doing all those years in that apartment? If reading novels and listening to music before going out for long walks, her life seems enviable. Maybe Laurel made the break from her sons because of what she couldn't feel or say or do about their father. But why also take from her children what their father had left them? The money, I mean. Contemplating all this in the fullness of my own solitude, late into the night with only the street sounds to distract me, her story seems implausible. But why *make up* a story like that? I get angry with Laurel precisely when I doubt her story: I was completely taken in by it then, and I sympathized with her.

You know, living next door to me all those years, Laurel never asked about my divorce. After the blackout, I guess it was my turn to reach out beyond friendly hellos or complaints about the super. But, of course, Laurel *knew* when my wife left.

I forgot to mention that during that summer of the blackout, the so-called Son of Sam killer had been roaming the city, eluding police. Laurel said to me that afternoon, I don't think that he's killing anyone now, or even planning the next victim—her eyes widening almost in amusement—I think he's waiting just like we are for the power to come back on.

I don't know if I altogether believe this, but years ago now, the super told me that for decades Laurel was quite prominent in print as an *advice* columnist. He wouldn't say for which newspaper, under another assumed name of course, writing her columns just next door to me and sending in her writing by courier all those years. Do people still use couriers?

I couldn't sleep last night, thinking about all this again. Yesterday, when I got back from upstate with my daughter, the super told me that, right after I left for the summer, Laurel died—over *two months* ago, and no one had contacted him yet to clean out her apartment: it has nine rooms. But this morning, I met the man; he's up there now, her son Stephen.