The Slow, Steady Drip of a Leaky Faucet

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"Individuals vary significantly in 'primary reaction tendencies' . . . revealing marked differences in their sensitivity to aversive stimuli."
— James C. Coleman, Abnormal Psychology and Modern Life

"INDIANAPOLIS, IND. (AP)—An 'ideal tenant' at an Indianapolis apartment complex held two sheriff's officers at gunpoint there today, complaining about one resident taking up two parking spaces and kids on motorcycles making noise when he's trying to sleep.

'It's the little things that bother me,' the gunman said."
— Des Moines Tribune, Sat., May 6, 1978

"That's all I can stands, I can't stands no more." — Popeye

The girl named Shaughnessy who looks like Maureen O'Hara has just raised her hand and said, "That Jane Eyre is a real schlemiel. I mean, what's she being so kosher for?"

The class gives its first indication of consciousness—in the manner of a burlesque show audience—since the beginning of today's forty minute lecture on the tragic lives of the Brontë sisters and an ensuing feeble attempt to initiate discussion of Charlotte's novel. The guy in the muscle shirt next to Shaughnessy slaps his desk and shakes his head, as if to say, "What a mind she's got, too."

I sit in the corner and fail to see the humor in this. There is something not quite right here, which I cannot put my finger on, and it bothers me. It may be as much the general levity so soon after the sad tale of the doomed family of authoresses as it is the apparent likelihood that Shaughnessy will show up in a

Artwork
by
Lisa Fawcett
yarmulke on Friday. Somehow this does not strike me as the proper way to conduct a literary classics course. As the hour ends, I have decided there is a time and a place for everything.

I push my scholarly concerns to the back of my mind on my arrival home that evening. I have just spent five and a half hours searching in library rest rooms and wastebaskets for a valuable reference book for a paper on Shakespeare due the day after tomorrow, only to find it in its proper position on the shelf. I come in by the kitchen door and find my mother struggling with a plastic bag of potato chips.

"Winifred, guess who's here," she says, as though I'll win a prize if I do.

A familiar cackle sounds from the living room. "Aunt Dinah and Uncle Vin," I say. Aunt Dinah and Uncle Vin from Toronto have stopped for their annual visit on the way to Florida. Usually they make the trek in winter, of course, but this year Uncle Vin's health hasn't been good.

"May seems as good a month as any," they had written in the letter giving their two weeks' notice. "Maybe this time we won't even go home again!" They have said the same thing prior to every trip south since I was three. Still, we keep hoping.

"You'll be in to say hello, of course," my mother says.

"Of course."

She switches to a whisper while pouring snacks into hard plastic bowls, so that I can barely hear her. "Now you remember what I told you?"

"About Aunt Dinah and the meter reader?"

My mother blanches and begins to shout. "It's down the hall, second door to your left, Dinah." She cranes her neck. "Find it, dear?" Confident that it is safe to do so, she continues. "No, no, about your Uncle Vin's heart."

"Oh, yeah. 'Don't slam any doors—'"

"We don't want a relapse in our living room."

The toilet flushes and Aunt Dinah re-emerges. My mother carries a tray into the living room and says, "I hope you didn't notice my dirty bathroom. Cheese curls?"

"Maybe later," I think I hear Aunt Dinah say.
There is a rule in our home: no smoking as long as I live there, the result of an isolated asthma attack in 1965. The sole exception is the presence of visitors, the Supreme Law of the household being, "You cannot be rude to human beings outside the immediate family, even if they are suffocating you."

The folks invite friends, relatives, and women in line at the supermarket over to the house as often as possible, then scramble like kids on Christmas morning to the drawer where the smoking paraphernalia are stored. My mother has an almost obsessive attachment to a ceramic ashtray that is supposed to bring to mind a hippopotamus, but has looked more like a bloated zebra since my brother added tempera paint stripes to its sides. The cigarettes rest across the snout and are extinguished by running them through either nostril into the open mouth below, an activity which regularly caused me to shriek as a child. The beast has acquired a whole mouthful of lipstick-stained cigarette butt teeth when I make my entrance to say my lines.

"The pain just cut through my chest, just cut through it," Uncle Vin is saying.

"Oh look, it's Winny," Aunt Dinah says.

"Hello," I say, then wave, recalling the days I wore size 6X undershirts.

"How's it going?" my invalid uncle asks, with a cigar in one hand and a Harvey Wallbanger in the other.

"Hello," I repeat. Now it is time, I know, to summarize my activities since last year.

"You're still in college, aren't you?" Right on cue.

"Oh, yes."

"Majoring in—don't tell me—" Uncle Vin holds his glass to his forehead and squeezes his eyes shut.

"English," I say.

My aunt has thought of a good question. "I'll bet you won't be sorry to see summer get here, will you?"

"No." I think I should say more. "No, I won't."

"But then you've got to work like the dickens for three months at—where is it?"

"The post office," I say.
My uncle shakes his head. "Tough job for a girl."

"It's the only thing she could find," my mother is quick to point out.

This seems like a good place for an ad-lib of at least one sentence to demonstrate the knowledge it has been my privilege to soak up at college.

I clear my throat. "I guess that's the way it is for young people nowadays."

I could not possibly have chosen a worse line. This one unleashes a torrent of young-people-nowadays stories—during the recitation of which I am ignored—including the following:

1. By mailing a $22.50 money order to Poughkeepsie, N.Y., my cousin Harlequin has received a certificate declaring him an ordained minister.

2. Someone's sister's boy is into the Trans-Am-dental Meditation and wants his grandfather to sell him some Iowa farm land in order to start a commune. He obviously has no idea what Iowa farm land is worth.

3. That's nothing. Somebody else's brother's girl gave up a good job as a travel agent to live with a law school dropout in a teepee in Texas.

4. My other cousin Guinn has been married to a girl who doesn't shave her legs by his brother the minister. The ceremony took place in the shelter house at a municipal park. At this point, photos are passed around which Aunt Dinah took at the wedding. The bride is not fully present in any of the snapshots because my aunt forgot she didn't have to compensate for parallax with her new camera.

"The bride's right side is certainly attractive, however," says my mother.

"Thank God she wore a long dress," Aunt Dinah sighs.

5. Only a half block from Aunt Dinah and Uncle Vin's house in Toronto, which, by the way, they have remodeled, a very polite young man bludgeoned to death six members of his family, including his sister who played the organ at the Presbyterian church, with a hockey stick, after a throwaway remark by his father suggested a lack of athletic prowess.

6. The general conclusion circulates from the couch to the rocking chair to my father's recliner and back to the couch that "Kids nowadays." There is an outbreak of nodding and mm-hmming. Also agreed on is "When we were young."
About this time our dog Jeepers runs in and scoots her little behind on the shag carpet, then engages in earnest self-licking. At this, and at a dearth of young people stories, the conversation abates. More drinks are in order.

I consider explaining that Jeepers has an anal gland infection, but Uncle Vin has shoved a handful of party mix into his mouth. If I time it wrong, I think, he may choke, go into paroxysmal coughing, and collapse with a massive coronary onto the rug beside Jeepers. Though it might be educational—I have never seen a dead person—my mother would no doubt kill me. So before funny dog stories begin, I say, “Well,” slap the tops of my thighs, stand up as though reluctant to leave, and continue, “I guess I better be going.”

“Oh, Winny, that’s a shame. Do you really have to?” Aunt Dinah says.

“She has a lot of homework to do,” my father answers for me.

In reality, I have decided right then and there that, if nothing else, I will return two books to the library that aren’t due for a week and a half.

“But that can be done tomorrow,” my aunt helpfully indicates.

This time I speak for myself. “But why put off till tomorrow what you can do today, I always say.” Actually I never say this, but then who’s going to know? I could have said it every day of my life and no one would remember.

Ten days later the English department discipline committee votes 5–4 to allow me to continue my studies even after trying to strangle the outstanding senior student of the year. The incident has nothing to do with the award—I am only a junior and never doubted I would be the unanimous choice next year. I am the first to admit that my chances have now slimmed considerably; yet the possibility remains that I will write one crack paper in my Shakespeare class that will result in the overlooking of attempted murder.

If I’d been honest with the committee I would have explained it was the way Mary Frances Bendixson approached the business of the sack lunch that incited the attack. I was the only person in the student lounge of the English building when Mary Frances entered and said, “Hello.”

I acknowledged her presence.
She sat at a nearby table and pulled a synthetic bag with carrying handles from her smart canvas purse, which probably doubles as a beach tote. The bag had a paisley design and the name of a chic local women’s shop printed on the side. This was her idea of brown bagging it.

Fortunately I had already finished my lunch and was busy staring into space; otherwise I would have had to slink away in shame with my leftover-from-the-bananas paper sack. Now I was free to suck peanut butter out of my back teeth and watch in disgust.

Mary Frances removed from the bag a plastic cylinder, along with a small white dish. I was sure it was Spode until I heard the dull thud on the Formica tabletop—so it was only plastic after all. I began to lose interest until she opened the cylinder and sprinkled lettuce leaves into the dish. A Tupperware cherry tomato storage container proved to hold exactly the proper number of cherry tomatoes for a clever spoke design, in which some of the miniature tomatoes were lined by threes in rows leading to a slightly larger tomato centered on the lettuce. Finally, Mary Frances consulted a princess-style watch on her delicate wrist while shaking a corked laboratory tube containing a milky blue liquid. After precisely one minute, I’m sure, an appropriate amount of Roquefort dressing was applied to the salad with a cloverleaf motion of the tube, while Mary Frances hummed “Three Coins in the Fountain.”

It was what came next that was the crucial event. She withdrew from her bag a little white plastic fork—certainly to be expected, I thought: after all that she’s going to use her fingers? But she didn’t begin eating right away; instead the fork was held in the bowl with the left index finger extended along the handle, and a matching little plastic knife was put to work cutting the lettuce! As someone who subscribes to National Geographic, I am familiar with many quaint, distinctive, alternative practices, but cutting your lettuce with a knife, for God’s sake!

Now a tiny square of lettuce was passed through her lips. needless to say, she did not chew with her mouth open. Nor did the lettuce make the crunching sound normal people produce when chewing it. But her jaw cracked with every bite
and it was the only noise in the room. And I was thinking, Well, I turned in that Shakespeare paper this morning and I've got some breathing space for a while, so it might be fun to try to strangle Mary Frances, because her cutting her lettuce with a little plastic knife and the cracking of her jaw is really starting to get on my nerves like nobody's business.

I felt her Adam's apple give way beneath the butt of my hand, and heard the crack of her skull against the cement, like the sound of Joe DiMaggio getting good wood on a fastball in Yankee Stadium. A spot of blood remained on the wall while Mary Frances' good posture finally deserted her and she drooped and slid towards the floor. The blood followed her in two trickles racing to see which hit bottom first.

I didn't let go, but proceeded to slam her head one-two-three against the wall. Her eyes rolled up into her head. I was beginning to enjoy the feeling of my fingers in the flesh of her neck, digging deeper into the muscles which had recently been used in swallowing those bits of carefully-cut lettuce, when my faculty adviser walked in, said, "Oh my God," and advised me to stop by means of a kidney punch.

I went down hard, grasping my lower back and rolling around saying, "Ooh boy."

My adviser, displaying the quick mind that helped him earn his Ph.D. at the age of 58, lifted a leaf of damp lettuce from the forlorn salad bowl and dabbed it on Mary Frances' temples. "Come on, Mary Frances, come on. You can do it, girl."

For some reason, I began to recall paper training Jeepers. I continued writhing on the floor. Before long Mary Frances began speaking in incomplete sentences, which I remember hoping might lead to the revocation of her award.


"There, there," came the soothing words, as only an adviser can deliver them. Could he be patting her on the back?
"We'll notify your parents."

"But. Oh. My neck. They live." Sniffle, sniffle. "In Biloxi, Mississip—"

"Pi."

As I said, I could have been honest about the provocation for the attack—that Mary Frances asked for it by cutting her lettuce with a little plastic knife, for God's sake!—but let's face it, they wouldn't understand. I'm not crazy, after all, and I wasn't born yesterday, either. What I came up with was to my mind a rather ingenious substitute. "I guess," I said, wringing my hands in front of the board of inquiry, "that I just don't know."

Three long rectangular tables had been gathered from various rooms and arranged to create a courtyard effect. I was seated in a plain folding chair in front of the fifty or so people present.

I was rather pleased with the large turnout. I can't say the entire English staff was there, but close to it. The only non-faculty-members that showed up were Mary Frances, who refused to look at me, while attempting to drum up sympathy with dainty touches to the back of her head at obviously random intervals; and her mother and father, who never took their eyes off me, and who resembled Agnes Moorehead and Curly of the Three Stooges with a mustache, respectively. Which is to say the Mrs. was neatly dressed and might have been considered pretty, especially if she had quit squinting at me. The husband, on the other hand, could only be termed a fat slob whose clothes must be tailor-made with steel-reinforced seams, and who probably eats a baker's dozen powdered sugar doughnuts for breakfast, then goes to the office with white particles sprinkling poetically from his upper lip to his tie.

My parents were unaware of the entire episode. They had been satisfied with my reference to an exceptionally long and early Memorial Day vacation as an explanation for hanging around the house so much.

"You mean to say you can't explain your senseless violence?" the department head asked, leaning forward in his chair.
Didn’t I just say that?, I thought. However, I had to use tact. “Is there an echo in here? Sir?” I added a chuckle to show a good orientation to reality. But I was annoyed by his self-contradiction: if my violence was senseless, how was I to explain it? And this was the head of the English department!

No one else laughed, and three days later I am summoned into the main office, handed a three-thickness typed statement, and encouraged in no uncertain manner by a secretary, “Sign.”

The other secretaries stop their typing and nail filing, and at least one brandishes a stainless steel letter opener. I sign. I am given a copy and told, “Read it.”

I do. “I, the undersigned, hereby agree to refrain from violent attacks on classmates, except where necessary to save a faculty member.”

It has to happen then, I suppose. Some people have no sense of timing. Whether it is the unusually hot, humid weather or what, I don’t know, but an old woman collapses, just sort of folds up like a chaise lounge, on the sidewalk not far from me as I return to class that morning. She is a member of the English staff, which makes the event especially humorous for all English majors, although we later participate in the moment of silence requested, but not required, the day of her funeral.

She had once been my teacher for three weeks, until I dropped the course upon finding she was one of those who place question marks after every item on a test just because it’s on a test.

For instance.

1. Did Hawthorne purposely make *The Scarlet Letter* boring? Explain?
2. Describe in as much detail as possible the cover of the Bobbs-Merrill paperback edition of *Moby Dick*?

She might well put a question mark after such a test item, I would tell myself. So I decide she deserves to die in the humiliating manner she does. Still, I had nothing to do with her death, contrary to what everyone seems to think.

On my return to Lit. Classics, I discover Shaughnessy continues her slow but unmistakable conversion to Judaism.
My first day back she wonders aloud, "At the time of Ivan Ilych, was Tolstoy aware of the miracles chicken soup works on any ailment?" This delights her classmates, the instructor, and especially her muscle-shirted neighbor, who is still slapping his desk in amazement at the depths of her mind.

Shaughnessy is starting to get on my nerves.

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**In Onan's Apartment**

*by*

*Mark Osing*

*English 3*

There is maleness here
among the musty oaken massiveness,
among the ethereal white mold on the linoleum,
grown secretly under a brown bag sodden with coffee grounds,
among the dust balls, those phantoms of the activity of decay,
among the filmy dishes, greasy coat of use, of guilt,
among the stacks of papers, news frozen — unread, yellowing,
and among the floorboard cracks, bits of toenails, pliable discarded male bone.
Maleness wafting about a pornographic magazine pile
an ever so faint smell of sex
Maleness drying
dissipated into linen
There is Maleness here,
calling for complement.