

Marathon

A Story of Endurance and Friendship

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Author Portrait by Dora Boneva

Vivisphere edition, 2002

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ISBN 1-892323-58-3

ISBN-13: 978-1-892323-58-3

Library of Congress Catalogue Number 00-101954

Printed in the United States of America



VIVISPHERE PUBLISHING

A division of NetPub Corporation

675 Dutchess Turnpike, Poughkeepsie, NY 12603

www.vivisphere.com (800) 724-1100

August 20, 1987

Two days ago I turned forty-one. It wasn't the momentous day that becoming forty or thirty or twenty-one was, but it had its own particular sting. An old Russian who is often part of my birthday celebrations told me over his vodka that now I was to begin to subtract the years. Not exactly a cheery sort of countdown when you think of it. Still, there was lobster and a rum cake and more champagne than anyone could drink. The conversation was bright, and as I served coffee in the kitchen it sounded as if twice as many guests as I'd invited had arrived.

Most of these guests were over sixty-five. When we're at our country house in Connecticut many of the friends we see are retired from the college where William taught before his stroke. We all drink too much and get into complicated disagreements, but on the whole these "oldbodies" are about as entertaining a group as you can find. They say one way to stay young is to hang out with people older than yourself. But lately my defense strategies against the middle-aged blues are wearing a little thin.

Earlier this summer I went to a small reunion for our college junior year abroad, and that buoyed me up some, surprisingly. It was touching to see what good people these friends had become. They were a bit arriviste, possibly, their politics become pragmatic with age, but there they all were, dancing to the

Rolling Stones just like the old days, passing around photos of their teenage children, and catching up on one another's lives like a scene out of *The Big Chill*. Old animosities had disappeared, people paid attention when they spoke to one another, and they moved to the bar at brunch on Sunday with a certain earned weariness. Some of the women were more beautiful than they'd ever been, though crinkles around the eyes were universal. I imagine the gray hair on many of the men could no longer be called premature. I was glad not to be among their number, even if I imitated some of them with a slight paunch.

My nervousness about this reunion, however, was all wasted energy. I was between jobs, fair enough, but I had just published a new book after seven years of silence. I hadn't become a millionaire, but I had done some good work in my life, a respectable if somewhat checkered career. It had been seventeen years since I'd met the friend with whom I was still sharing my life, and my classmates were sincerely happy for me.

An old flame, divorced, pretty as ever, wanted to know if I had "kept the faith." She remembered a line I had written for a hymn we sang at a secret folk mass in the Swiss mountains. As we passed around bread from the local bakery and glasses of jug wine that our chaplain had agreed to consecrate, we sang, "Christ hung burning from a golden tree, come down Jesus, come save me." What had I meant? How was I coping with the Church's homophobia? Did I know that two of our classmates had committed suicide? She showed me a picture of her little girl, who had the same sweet, crooked smile.

It didn't seem, twenty years later, that I had turned out so badly. Jack-of-all-trades, master maybe of none, but all my scars were well earned. I wasn't first in my class, but I wasn't last either. I guess I was swimming roughly in the middle of the school.

I wouldn't say I'm exactly satisfied with my life, though. No one ever is, I suppose. But the past few months have become something of a do-or-die situation for changing my life. Four years ago my dear William had a stroke, and I've been the

caregiver ever since then while working pretty much full time at various professional positions. I've come to see what it's like to run a house and an office, cook meals, shop, pay bills, battle with Medicare, keep up William's correspondence, and try to maintain a lifetime of friendships that go back before the war. I guess there are plenty of working mothers who routinely manage this kind of life, but after four years I am getting a little frayed at the edges. And, unlike the children working mothers might care for, my charge will probably never grow to independence. Success for us is holding the line.

Since the stroke left William unable to speak much or read or write, I felt isolated. In addition I felt a profound loneliness, missing my old friend whose wit had always entertained, whose intelligence had always illuminated our life. And I was living with the daily sadness of watching this great American writer cope with being a prisoner in his own body. It became easier to schedule our activities in my own mind than to try to make him understand what the day held in store. On long drives to visit friends or going to his therapy classes, I would clam up. I began to eat and drink too much, became moody, short with sales clerks, impatient with William, surly. A prisoner of my rumination.

"How is Charlie Smith?" someone asked of a friend once at a dinner party. "Oh, he's fine," came the response. "He falls down and cries a lot, but otherwise he's fine."

A number of years ago I went back to school and became a physician's assistant. It has helped me save William's life on a number of occasions, I suppose, but it has also helped me see that I was in trouble from time to time. The manuals warn about the danger of wallowing in one's role as victim. Alcoholism and depression can sneak up on you, and the next thing you know the caregiver is in need of care.

William and I have been a lot luckier than many, though. Things are tough at times, but our life together is filled with light, our love deepens, and the "glamour" of sharing William's life hasn't diminished. His stepmother (in her mid-nineties and

very sharp) set up a trust fund after the stroke that enables us to keep a winter house in the D.C. suburbs and maintain the Connecticut farm for use in the summer. There are various cars and boats and other toys to play with, and if we want to visit friends in Europe or sponsor a reception for a friend's exhibition, we can just do it. William always took care not to be pushed around by money, a quality in his character I've tried to imitate. I don't *think* I let money influence my goals or decisions in life unduly, or enter into how I value people. Certainly, money doesn't compensate for poor health, but I can understand a lot better now the tragedy of the elderly poor in this country. It doesn't seem fair to work hard your whole life sacrificing for others and then live final anxious, crimped years for the lack of money. I don't plan to let it happen to me. The caregivers who do it somehow without adequate resources are the real heroes.

William is the only American to win the Vaptsarov Prize, something like the Eastern Bloc's Nobel Prize, and so we travel to that part of the world as guests of the state from time to time. Other awards and special recognitions brighten his career these days, but perhaps the luckiest charm in our life remains our friends.

Over the years Betty has been one of the most loyal of these friends, something like a bodyguard, spiritual adviser, and financial counselor combined. She and I met jogging on the streets of Rabat in 1980, where she had come as a consultant to develop economic opportunities for women and I was serving as health officer on a project to build a new radar system for the Moroccan air force. It was something like a golden period in my life. Policemen saluted me after they checked my papers if I got stopped for speeding. I had a town house and a beach house, and I even had a helicopter at my disposal if I needed to get somewhere fast in an emergency. William visited me five times during my work there and got to be Betty's good friend too.

After raising four sons and too many years pretending to enjoy the role of Mediterranean society queen, Betty went back to graduate school and set up a consulting firm in the United

States. Her years as a pilot and counterintelligence operative in World War II tested her mettle and left her uncompromising about what sort of foolishness she would tolerate in life. She isn't pushy about her advice, but like a teacher or politician, she isn't reluctant to give it either. More than her vast experience, though, or even her good will and unpretentious common sense, the most valuable thing about her is her absolute honesty. She never hedges her bets by saying, "Of course, it's your life and ultimately you'll have to decide." More likely it's "Now you've got to quit your job and enjoy your life with William for the summer," or "Why don't you run with me in the New York City Marathon this year and get rid of that gut? It will be good for you. You're getting a little strung out lately."

So here I am, two hundred pounds plus, still carrying too much weight to train comfortably, but making it. At six weeks into my training, though, and with ten weeks left until the race, I'm still not on target in my training. I should be up to thirty-seven miles a week, and I've only done twenty-five. I'm a little thinner, and now the four-mile run to Fort Shantok along the Thames River is not a real hardship. I'm hardly out of breath at all by the time I get to the site where Uncas is said to have buried his princess. If I can start getting up earlier, it will be cooler, and I'll have my run out of the way before it's time to begin William's day. And, if I can limit my drinking to two martinis a day, my friend Charlie says getting up early will be no problem. I guess I'll get serious about this New York Marathon. Betty runs it each year, and as she says, "You can walk twenty-six miles, can't you?" A few weeks ago a sprained ankle kept me from running, and I suppose a more serious injury could ruin my plans. Or a Mack truck could come around the bend and do me in. It would be a pity to go through all this for nothing.

A little earlier this summer we visited friends in the country who have forsaken city life and taken to raising horses year-round in the hills of New Hampshire. Wonderful people, but so self-congratulatory about how hard they worked, how healthy

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they were, how beautiful their garden was, how svelte their coronary arteries, how superb their homemade jam. They made you feel like a moral degenerate if you weren't out of bed by 8:00 AM. And perhaps keeping a record of my progress will seem just as self-congratulatory—if I make it, that is. But if one heavy-drinking, mildly overweight, middle-aged, overburdened, B-minus poet can change his spots a little by using the structure of a marathon run, perhaps it will be a useful account.

William says of an imaginary painter in one of his poems,

Man and artist, he is working on his ways
so that when he becomes set in there
as old people must, for all that their souls
clap hands, for all that their spirits dance,
his ways will have grace, his pictures will have class.

And surely this was William's own intention before his illness. I used to watch him almost physically restrain himself from delivering a well-deserved reproach, or extend a generous opinion by sheer force of will. It's the only way I can imagine he survived the insult of the stroke. Often stroke patients plunge into depression, and their lexicon turns dark and foul in the face of their tragedy. But his sort of manners and dignity and courage are qualities that don't just happen. They are as hard earned as the seemingly effortless elegance in his verse.

In classic culture the highest manifestation of love between friends was the ability to inspire the desire for the good in each other. Robert Frost told William once that he'd have respected him if for nothing more than the thirty-two night landings on a carrier deck William had made in the Pacific as a navy pilot. In these past years I've seen even greater examples of guts.

I expect there will be some dark days in my future. Last summer I had a little cancer cut out of the bladder; it's the kind they say is not life threatening but often returns. We are none of us getting any younger. Many of the people I love are consider-

ably older than I. And there are the dear parents and siblings whom I have come to love so too. My baby sister Judy will be forty in six days. It seems incredible. I try to maintain a faith that we will all get out alive, but in the process a lot is required of us. And if William is right, fortunate responses to life are more than genetic. We have to train, it seems, especially when our life gets a little fat, our soul a little out of shape.

August 20. Day one.

