

# LITTLE DROPS OF WATER

By Kurt Vonnegut

Now Larry's gone.

We bachelors are lonely people. If I weren't damn lonely from time to time, I wouldn't have been a friend of Larry Whiteman, the baritone. Not friend, but companion, meaning I spent time with him, whether I liked him particularly or not. As bachelors get older, I find, they get less and less selective about where they get their companionship—and, like everything else in their lives, friends become a habit, and probably a part of a routine. For instance, while Larry's monstrous conceit and vanity turned my stomach, I'd been dropping in to see him off and on for years. And when I come to analyze what *off* and *on* means, I realize that I saw Larry every Tuesday between five and six in the afternoon. If, on the witness stand, someone were to ask me where I was on the evening of Friday, such and such a date, I would only have to figure out where I would be on the coming Friday to tell him where I had probably been on the Friday he was talking about.

Let me add quickly that I like women, but am a bachelor by

choice. While bachelors are lonely people, I'm convinced that married men are lonely people with dependents.



*Kurt Vonnegut, whose numerous novels include Slaughterhouse Five (1969) and Breakfast of Champions (1973), died in 2007 at the age of eighty-four. The story presented here is included in Look at the Birdie, a collection of previously unpublished stories, available in October from Delacorte Press.*

When I say I like women, I can name names, and perhaps, along with the plea of habit, account for my association with Larry in terms of them. There was Edith Vranken, the Schenectady brewer's daughter who wanted to sing; Janice Gurnee, the Indianapolis hardware merchant's daughter who

wanted to sing; Beatrix Werner, the Milwaukee consulting engineer's daughter who wanted to sing; and Ellen Sparks, the Buffalo wholesale grocer's daughter who wanted to sing.

I met these attractive young ladies—one by one and in the sequence named—in Larry's studio, or what anyone else would call apartment. Larry adds to his revenues as a soloist by giving voice lessons to rich and pretty young women who want to sing. While Larry is soft as a hot fudge sundae, he is big and powerful looking, like a college-bred lumberjack, if there is such a thing, or a Royal Canadian Mounted Policeman. His voice, of course, gives the impression that he could powder rocks between his thumb and forefinger. His pupils inevitably fell in love with him. If you ask *how* they loved him, I can only reply with another question: Where in the cycle do you mean? If you mean at the beginning, Larry was loved as a father *pro tem*. Later, he was loved as a benevolent task master, and finally as a lover.

After that came what Larry and his friends came to call *graduation*, which, in fact, had nothing to do with the pupil's status as a singer, and had everything to do with the cycle of affections. The cue for graduation was the pupil's overt use of the word *marriage*.

Larry was something of a Bluebeard, and, may I say, a lucky dog while his

luck held out. Edith, Janice, Beatrix, and Ellen—the most recent group of graduates—loved and were loved in turn. And, in turn, given the axe. They were wonderful-looking girls, every one of them. There were also more like them where they had come from, and these others were boarding trains and planes and convertibles to come to New York because they wanted to sing. Larry had no replacement problem. And, with plenty of replacements, he was spared the temptation of making some sort of permanent arrangement, such as marriage.

Larry's life, like most bachelors' lives, but far more so, had every minute accounted for, with very little time for women as women. The time he had set aside for whatever student happened to be in favor was Monday and Thursday evenings, to be exact. There was a time for giving lessons, a time for lunch with friends, a time for practice, a time for his barber, a time for two cocktails with me—a time for everything, and he never varied his schedule by more than a few minutes. Similarly, he had his studio exactly as he wanted it—a place for everything, with no places begging, and with no thing, in his eyes, dispensible. While he might have been on the fence about marriage as a young young man, marriage soon became impossible. Where he might once have had a little time and space to fit in a wife—a cramped wife—there came to be none, absolutely none.

"Habit—it's my strength!" Larry once said. "Ah, wouldn't they love to catch Larry, eh? And remake him, eh? Well, before they can get me into their traps, they've got to blast me out of my rut, and it can't be done. I love my cozy little rut. Habit—*Aes triplex*."

"How's that?" I said.

"*Aes triplex*—triple armor," he said.

"Oh." *Aes Kleenex* would have been closer to the truth, but neither one of us knew that then. Ellen Sparks was around, and ascendant in Larry's heavens—Beatrix Werner having been liquidated a couple of months before—but Ellen was showing no signs of being any different than the rest.

I said I liked women, and gave as examples some of Larry's students, including Ellen. I liked them from a safe distance. After Larry, in his amorous cycle with a favorite, ceased to be a father-away-from-home and eased into a warmer role, I in turn became sort of a father. A lackadaisical, slipshod father, to be sure, but the girls liked to tell me how things were going, and ask my advice. They had a lemon of an adviser in me, because all I could ever think of to say was, "Oh well, what the hell, you're only young once."

I said as much to Ellen Sparks, an awfully pretty brunette not likely to be depressed by thoughts or want of money. Her speaking voice was pleasant enough, but when she sang it was as though her vocal chords had risen into her sinuses.

"A Jew's harp with lyrics," said Larry, "with Italian lyrics in a Middle Western accent, yet." But he kept her on, because Ellen was a lot of fun to look at, and she paid her fees promptly, and never seemed to notice that Larry charged her for a lesson whatever he happened to need at the moment.

I once asked her where she'd gotten the idea to be a singer, and she said she liked Lily Pons. To her that was an answer, and a perfectly adequate one. Actually, I think she wanted to get away from the home reservation and have some fun being rich where nobody knew her. She probably drew lots to see whether the excuse would be music, drama, or art. At that, she was more serious-minded than some of the girls in her situation. One girl I know about set herself up in a suite with her father's money, and broadened herself by subscribing to several newsmagazines. One hour out of every day, she religiously underlined everything in them that seemed important. With a thirty-dollar fountain pen.

Well, as New York father to Ellen, I heard her, as I had heard the others before her, declare that she loved Larry, and that she couldn't be sure but she thought he might like her pretty well too. She was proud of herself, because here she was making headway with a fairly famous man, and she'd only been away from home

five months. The triumph was doubly delicious in that, I gathered, she'd been looked upon as something of a dumb twit in Buffalo. After that, she confided haltingly about evenings of wine and heady talk of the arts.

"Monday and Thursday evenings?" I asked.

She looked startled. "What are you, a Peeping Tom?"

Six weeks later she spoke guardedly of marriage, of Larry's seeming at the point of mentioning it. Seven weeks later she graduated. I happened to drop by Larry's on my Tuesday call for cocktails and saw her seated in her yellow convertible across the street. By the way she slouched down in the cushions, defiant and at the same time completely licked, I knew what had happened. I thought it best to leave her alone—being, for one thing, dead sick of the same old story. But she spotted me, and raised my hair with a blast of her horns.

"Well, Ellen, hello. Lesson over?"

"Go on, laugh at me."

"I'm not laughing. Why should I laugh?"

"You are inside," she said bitterly. "Men! You knew about the others, didn't you? You knew what happened to them, and what was going to happen to me, didn't you?"

"I knew a lot of Larry's students grew quite attached to him."

"And detached. Well, here's one little girl who won't detach."

"He's an awfully busy man, Ellen."

"He said his career was a jealous mistress," she said huskily. "What does that make me?"

It did seem to me that Larry's remark was a little meatier than necessary. "Well, Ellen, I think you're well off. You deserve someone closer to your own age."

"That's mean. I deserve him."

"Even if you are foolish enough to want him, you can't have him. His life is so petrified with habits, he couldn't possibly accommodate a wife. It'd be easier to get the Metropolitan Opera Company to work in singing commercials."

"I will return," she said grimly, pressing the starter.

Larry's back was to me when I entered. He was mixing drinks. "Tears?" he said.

"Narry a one," I said.

"Good," said Larry. I couldn't be sure he meant it. "It always makes me feel mean when they cry." He threw up his hands. "But what am I to do? My career is a jealous mistress."

"I know. She told me. Beatrix told me. Janice told me. Edith told me." The roster seemed to please him. "Ellen says she won't detach, by the way."

"Really? How unwise. Well, we shall see what we shall see."

When God had been in his Heaven as far as Ellen was concerned, when she had been confident that she was about to bring a certified New York celebrity back to Buffalo in a matter of weeks, I had taken her in fatherly fashion to lunch at my favorite restaurant. She seemed to like it, and I saw her there now and then after the breakup.

She was usually with the type of person both Larry and I had told her she deserved—someone closer to her own age. She also seemed to have chosen persons closer to her own amiable vacuity, which made for lunch hours of sighs, long silences, and a general atmosphere of being fog-bound often mistaken for love. Actually, Ellen and her companion were in the miserable condition of not being able to think of anything to say, I'm sure. With Larry, the problem had never come up. It was understood that he was to do the talking, and that when he fell silent, it was a silence for effect, beautiful, to be remembered and unbroken by her. When her escorts focused their attention on the matter of paying the check, Ellen, ever aware of her audience, indicated by restlessness and a look of disdain that this wasn't the caliber stuff she was used to. And, of course, it wasn't.

When we happened to be in the restaurant at the same time, she ignored my nods, and—giving less than a damn, really—I gave the practice of nodding up. I think she felt I was part of a *plot*, somehow in on Larry's *scheme* to *humiliate* her.

After a while, she gave up young men closer to her age in favor of buying her own lunch. And finally, by a coincidence that surprised us

both, she found herself seated at the table next to mine, clearing her white throat.

It became impossible for me to go on reading my paper. "Well, as I live and breathe," I said.

"And how have you been?" she asked coldly. "Still getting lots of laughs?"

"Oh yes, lots and lots. Sadism's on the upswing, you know. New Jersey's legalized it, and Indiana and Wyoming are on the brink."

She nodded. "Still waters run deep," she said enigmatically.

"Meaning me, Ellen?"

"Me."

"I see," I said perplexedly. "By that, you mean there is more to you than meets the eye? I agree." And I did agree. It was incredible that there should be so little to Ellen—intellectually, mind you—as what met the eye.

"Larry's eye," she said.

"Oh, come on, Ellen—surely you're over that. He's vain and selfish, and keeps his stomach in with a girdle."

She held up her hands. "No, no—just tell me about the postcards and the horn. What does he say about them?"

"Postcards? Horn?" I shook my head. "He hasn't said a word about either one."

"Natch," she said. "Excellent, perfect. But perf."

"Sorry, I'm conf and have an imp app," I said, rising.

"What's that?"

"I said I'm confused, Ellen. And I'd try to understand, but I haven't time. I've an important appointment. Good luck, dear."

The appointment was with the dentist, and, with that grim visit over and the back of the afternoon broken, I decided to find Larry and ask him about the postcards and the horn. It was Tuesday, and it was four, so Larry would naturally be at his barber's. I went to the shop and took the seat next to him. His face was covered with lather, but it was Larry all right. For years, no one else had been in that chair at four on Tuesday.

"Trim," I said to the barber; and then, to Larry, "Ellen Sparks says you should know still waters run deep."

"Hmm?" said Larry through the lather. "Who's Ellen Sparks?"

"A former student of yours. Remember?" This forgetting routine was an old trick of Larry's, and, for all I know, it was on the level. "She graduated two months ago."

"Tough job keeping track of all the alumnae," he said. "That little Buffalo thing? Wholesale groceries? I remember. And now the shampoo," he said to the barber.

"Of course, Mr. Whiteman. *Naturally* the shampoo next."

"She wants to know about the postcards and the horn."

"Postcards and horn," he said thoughtfully. "No, doesn't ring a bell." He snapped his fingers. "Oh yes, yes, yes, yes. You can tell her that she is absolutely destroying me with them. Every morning I get a card from her in the mail."

"What does she say?"

"Tell her the mail arrives as I am eating my four-minute eggs. I lay it all before me, with her card on top. I finish my eggs, eagerly seize the card. And then? I tear it in halves, then quarters, then sixteenths, and drop the little snowstorm in my wastebasket. Then it is time for coffee. I haven't the remotest idea what she says."

"And the horn?"

"Even more horrible punishment than the cards," he laughed. "Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned. So, every afternoon at two-thirty, as I am about to begin practice, what happens?"

"She lifts you off the floor with a five-minute blast on the horns?"

"She hasn't the nerve. Every afternoon I get one little, almost imperceptible *beep*, the shifting of gears, and the silly child is gone."

"Doesn't bother you, eh?"

"Bother me? She was right in thinking I was sensitive, but she underestimates my adaptability. It bothered me for the first couple of days, but now I no more notice it than I notice the noise of the trains. I actually had to think a minute before realizing what you were talking about when you asked about horns."

"That girl's got blood in her eye," I said.

"She'd do well to send a little of it to her brain," said Larry. "What do you think of my new student, by the way?"

"Christina? If she'd been my daughter, I'd have sent her to welding school."



She's the kind the teachers in grade school used to call *listeners*. The teachers would put them in the corner during singing class, and tell them to beat time with their feet and keep their little mouths shut."

"She's eager to learn," said Larry defensively. He was sensitive to intimations that his interest in his students was ever anything but professional. And, more or less in self-defense, he was belligerently loyal to the artistic possibilities of his charges. His poisonous appraisal of Ellen's voice, for instance, wasn't made until she was ready to be chucked in the oubliette.

"In ten years, Christina will be ready for *Hot Cross Buns*."

"She may surprise you."

"I don't think she will, but Ellen may," I said. I was disturbed by Ellen's air of being about to loose appalling, irresistible forces. And yet, there was just this damn fool business of the cards and horn.

"Ellen who?" said Larry fuzzily, from under a hot towel.

The barbershop telephone rang. My barber started for it, but it stopped ringing. He shrugged. "Funny thing. Seems like every time Mr. Whiteman's in here lately, the phone does that."

**T**he telephone by my bed rang.

"This is Larry Whiteman!"

"Drop dead, Larry Whiteman!" The clock said two in the morning.

"Tell that girl to quit it, do you hear?"

"Fine, glad to, you bet," I said thickly. "Who what?"

"That wholesale groceress, of course! That Buffalo thing. Do you hear? She's got to quit it instantly. That light, that goddamned light."

I started to drop the telephone into its cradle, hoping against hope to rupture his eardrum, when I came awake and realized that I was fascinated. Perhaps Ellen had at last unleashed her secret weapon. Larry had had a recital that night. Maybe she'd let him have it in front of everybody. "She blinded you with a light!"

"Worse! When the houselights went down, she lit up her fool face with one of those fool flashlights people carry on their key chains till the batteries pooh out. There she

was, grinning out of the dark like death warmed over."

"And she kept it up all evening? I'd think they'd have thrown her out."

"She did it until she was sure I'd seen her, then out it went. Then came the coughs. Lord! The coughs!"

"Somebody always coughs."

"Not the way she does it. Just as I took a breath to start each number, she'd let go—*hack hack hack*. Three deliberate hacks."

"Well, if I see her, I'll tell her," I said. I was rather taken by the novelty of Ellen's campaign, but disappointed by its lack of promise of long-range results. "An old trouper like you shouldn't have any trouble ignoring that sort of business," which was true.

"She's trying to rattle me. She's trying to make me crack up before my Town Hall recital," he said bitterly. The professional high point for Larry each year is his annual Town Hall recital—which is always a critical success, incidentally. Make no mistake about that—Larry, as a singer, is very hot stuff. But now Ellen had begun her lamp and cough campaign with the big event only two months off.

Two weeks after Larry's frantic call, Ellen and I coincided at lunch again. She was still distinctly unfriendly, treating me as though I were a valuable spy, but not to be trusted, and distasteful to deal with. Once more she gave me the unsettling impression of hidden power, of something big about to happen. Her color was high and her movements furtive. After a few brittle amenities, she asked if Larry had said anything about the light.

"A great deal," I said, "after your first performance, that is. He was quite burned up."

"But now?" she said eagerly.

"Bad news for you, Ellen—good news for Larry. He's quite used to it now, after three recitals, so he has calmed down beautifully. The effect, I'm afraid, is zero. Look, why not give up? You've needled him long enough, haven't you? Revenge is the most you can get, and you've got that." She'd made one basic mistake that I didn't feel was up to me to point out: all of her annoyances were regular, predictable, which made it



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very easy for Larry to assimilate them into the clockwork of his life and ignore them.

She took the bad news in her stride. I might as well have told her that her campaign was a smashing success—that Larry was at the point of surrender. “Revenge is small apples,” she said.

“Well, you’ve got to promise me one thing, Ellen—”

“Sure,” she said, “why shouldn’t I be like Larry and promise anything, any old thing at all.”

“Ellen, promise not to do anything violent at his Town Hall recital.”

“Scout’s honor,” she said, and smiled. “The easiest promise I ever made.”

That evening, I played back the puzzling conversation to Larry. He was having his bedtime snack of crackers and hot milk.

“Uh-hum,” he said, his mouth full. “If she *had* made sense, it would have been the first time in her life.” He shrugged disdainfully. “She’s licked, this Helen Smart.”

“Ellen Sparks,” I corrected him.

“Whatever her name is, she’ll be catching the train home soon. Awful taste! Honestly. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she’d thrown spitballs and stuck pins in my doorbell.”

Somewhere along the street, a garbage can lid clattered. “What a racket,” I said. “Do they have to be that noisy about it?”

“What racket?”

“That garbage can.”

“Oh, that. If you lived here, you’d be used to it. Don’t know who it is, but they give the can a lick every night”—he yawned—“just at bedtime.”

**K**eeping big secrets, particularly secrets about things of one’s own doing, is a tough proposition for even very bright people. It is so much tougher for small brains that criminals, for instance, are constantly blabbing themselves into jail or worse. Whatever it is they’ve done, it’s too wonderful not to bring out in the open for admiration. That Ellen kept a secret for even five minutes is hard to believe. The fact is, she kept a dandy one for six months, for the time separating her breakup with Larry and two days before his Town Hall recital.

She finally told me at one of our back-to-back luncheons. She phrased the news in such a way that it wasn’t until I saw Larry the next day that I realized what it was she’d given away.

“Now, you promised, Ellen,” I told her again, “no rough stuff at the recital day after tomorrow. No heckling, no stink bombs, no serving of a subpoena.”

“Don’t be crude.”

“Don’t you, dear. The recital’s as much for music lovers as it is for Larry. It’s no place for partisan politics.”

She seemed, for the first time in months, relaxed, like a person who had just finished a completely satisfying piece of work—a rare type these days. Her color, usually tending toward the reds of excitement, mysterious expectancy, was serene pink and ivory.

She ate in silence, asked me nothing about Larry. There was nothing new I could have told her. Despite her persistent reminders—the horn, the cards, the light and coughs, and God-knows-what-else—he had forgotten all about her. His life went its systematically selfish way, undisturbed.

Then she told me the news. It explained her calm. I had been expecting it for some time, and had even tried to coax her in that direction. I wasn’t surprised, nor impressed. It was a completely obvious solution to the mess, arrived at by a brain geared to the obvious.

“The die is cast,” she said soberly. “No turning back,” she added.

I agreed that the die was cast, indeed, and for the best; and I thought I understood what she meant. The only surprise was that she kissed me on the cheek as she stood to leave the restaurant.

The next afternoon—cocktails-with-Larry-at-five time again—I let myself into his studio. He wasn’t anywhere to be seen. Larry had *always* been in the living room when I arrived, pattering around with the drinks, elegant in a loud tartan jacket a woman admirer had sent him. “Larry!”

The curtains into his bedroom parted, and he emerged unsteadily, pathetically. As a bathrobe he wore a scarlet-lined, braid-encrusted cape left over from some forgotten operetta. He sank into a chair like a wounded general, and hid his face in his hands.

“Flu!” I said.

“It’s some unknown virus,” he said darkly. “The doctor can find nothing. Nothing. Perhaps this is the beginning of a third world war—germ warfare.”

“Probably all you need is sleep,” I said, helpfully, I thought.

“Sleep! Hah! All night I couldn’t sleep. Hot milk, pillows under the small of the back, sheep—”

“Party downstairs?”

He sighed. “The neighborhood was like a morgue. It’s something inside me, I tell you.”

“Well, as long as you’ve got your appetite—”

“Did I invite you here to torment me? Breakfast, my favorite meal, tasted like sawdust.”

“Well, your voice sounds fine, and that’s really the heart of the matter just now, isn’t it?”

“Practice this afternoon was an utter flop,” he said acidly. “I was unsure, rattled, blew up. I didn’t feel right, not ready, half naked—”

“You look like a million dollars, anyway. The barber did a—”

“The barber is a butcher, a hacker, a—”

“He did a fine job.”

“Then why don’t I *feel* like he did.” He stood. “Nothing’s gone right today. The whole schedule’s shot to hell. And never in my life, not once have I had the slightest bit of anxiety about a recital. Not once!”

“Well,” I said hesitantly, “maybe good news would help. I saw Ellen Sparks at lunch yesterday, and she said she—”

Larry snapped his fingers. “That’s it, that’s it! Of course, that Ellen, she’s poisoned me!” He paced the floor. “Not enough to kill me; just enough to break my spirit before tomorrow night. She’s been out to get me all along.”

“I don’t think she poisoned you,” I said, smiling. I hoped to divert him by being chatty. I stopped, suddenly aware of the awful significance of what I was about to say. “Larry,” I said slowly, “Ellen left for Buffalo last night.”

“Good riddance!”

“No more postcards to tear up at breakfast,” I said casually. No effect. “No more honking of horns before practice.” Still no effect. “No more

ringing of the barbershop telephone, no more rattling of the garbage can at bedtime."

He grabbed my arms and shook me. "No!"

"Hell yes." I started to laugh in spite of myself. "She's so balled up in your life, you can't make a move without a cue from her."

"That little termite," said Larry hoarsely. "That burrowing, subversive, insidious, infiltrating little—" He hammered on the mantel. "I'll break the habit!"

"Habits," I corrected him. "If you do, they'll be the first ones you ever broke. Can you do it by tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow?" He moaned. "Oh—tomorrow."

"The houselights go out, and—"

"No flashlight."

"You get set for your first number—"

"Where are the coughs?" he said desperately. "I'll blow up like Texas City!" Trembling, he picked up the telephone.

"Operator, get me Buffalo. What's her name again?"

"Sparks—Ellen Sparks."

I was invited to the wedding, but I'd have sooner attended a public beheading. I sent a sterling-silver pickle fork and my regrets.

To my amazement, Ellen joined me at lunch on the day following the wedding. She was alone, lugging a huge parcel.

"What are you doing here on this day of days?" I said.

"Honeymooning." Cheerfully, she ordered a sandwich.

"Uh-huh. And the groom?"

"Honeymooning in his studio."

"I see." I didn't, but we had reached a point where it would have been indelicate for me to probe further.

"I've put in my two hours today," she volunteered. "And hung up one dress in his closet."

"And tomorrow?"

"Two and a half hours, and add a pair of shoes."

"Little drops of water, little grains of sand," I recited, "Make the mighty ocean, and the beauteous land." I pointed to the parcel. "Is that part of your trousseau?"

She smiled. "In a way. It's a garbage can lid for beside the bed." ■

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### SOLUTION TO THE MAY PUZZLE

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### NOTES FOR "UPS AND DOWNS":

Puzzle editing by Dan Asimov. Note: \* indicates an anagram.

The unclued Down entries are the Seven Hills of Rome.

ACROSS: 1. \*; 5. val(I)ses; 9. p-roofing; 14. lover-(rev.)-VE; 16. Fe-m(aiden)-me; 17. \*; 18. (l)egos; 19. two mngs.; 21. I.R.A.-q-1's; 22. (re)veal; 23. rev.; 24. tal(e)-us; 25. et-N.A.; 26. in-tuition; 29. \*; 30. LOL-I; 31. (l)rene; 34. \*; 37. in(d-if)ference; 38. se(NATO)rial; 39. bulg(e)-aria; 40. \*; 41. \*; 42. lea(r)n

DOWN: 2. ash-Ram; 3. \*; 4. \*; 5. less-e(asy)-v(ictory), rev.; 6. lo(ganbe\*)rry; 7. slog-a-n; 8. homophone; 10. Rio(t); 11. s(FF)o, rev.; 12. IM-Am.; 13. two mngs.; 15. La(fit)te; 20. \*; 27. US-eful\*; 28. (b)alder; 32. (l)efts; 33. he-I-I; 34. hidden; 35. (c)hugs; 36. (s)core