A Terminal Professor's Last Lecture Turned My Story into an Eerie Tale

Long before Randy Pausch delivered his heartrending *Last Lecture* in 2007, a Cornell University professor was doing the same thing. In fact, Will Provine had been doing them for years. With a tumor lodged in his brain, he knew that when it came out of remission, he'd be dead within weeks—and he'd already lived several years longer than what his doctors expected.

Rather controversial for his strong opposition to the afterlife, Provine taught Ecology & Evolutionary Biology (BIOEE207), a core course at Cornell. Every time he taught its final class of the semester, he'd do so as if it'd be his last, talking about life and death and what it means to be a member of the human species. Every student in the course—even the truant ones—attended.

I took Provine's course in fall 2003 and attended his "last" lecture that semester. As I sat there, Provine revealed something that made his last lecture culminate in a way that only I knew. But rather than sharing it with him after the lecture was over, I walked out of Kennedy Hall and held onto what I knew for years—years that Provine's doctors said he didn't have.

Summer 2003 – Cornell University Collegetown – Ithaca, New York

I sat beside Bill on the step we'd taken up so many times before. It was a slab of stone, the only step under an alcove of a dimly lit convenient along Eddy Street, which ran along the bottom of Cornell's steeply sloped collegetown. Most of the customers came out with forties wrapped in thin paper bags that crackled around the bottle because they were made to conceal, not to carry. I'd never seen Bill with one of those light brown bags sitting beside him. I never really saw him with anything at all other than the ragged clothes he wore and perhaps the book he was reading.

“I’m in a bad way, Fish,” Bill said, referring to me by my last name. He didn’t look at me when he spoke those words. The bottoms of his feet inched towards the pavement as the soles of his shoes flapped open. He looked down and began picking the dirt out of his toenails.

I’m in a bad way, Fish.

Never before had Bill expressed concern for himself. Usually, he’d sit and listen to me mull over my relationships and then offer me feedback when the time was right. There was never a trace of scorn or hint of judgment in his voice. After a little while, I’d recognize that my problems weren’t the only problems that mattered, and I’d ask how he was doing. “Oh fine, Fish. Just fine.” That’s all he would say. He wouldn’t offer any details, and I didn’t prod.

He would talk about anything else though. Like the books I brought him from time to time that he’d devour faster than I could keep pace. I was majoring in Industrial and Labor Relations, a study so reading-intensive that its acronym jokingly stood for I Love Reading. So he’d read books I’d had from previous semesters. Kozol. Sinclair. Durkheim. And books that I’d been reading over the summer—baseball books like *Lords of the Realm* and *Wait Till Next Year*. Once he finished a book, he’d return it to me even though I always told him that he could keep it. It could be his.

“In a bad way?” I asked.

“Well, Fish,” he took a deep breath, “I’m being kicked out of my house tomorrow. And I don’t have a place to live.”

He was divulging something he appeared to be ashamed of, yet my first thought was, ‘I didn’t know you even *had* a place to live.’ He was so attached to that step that I didn’t think about where he went at night. I almost figured he never got up from it to begin with.

“Where’s your place?” I asked.

"Do you know where State Street meets North Quarry?"

They were two streets along the southeastern side of Cornell's collegetown, no more than a ten-minute walk down from where we sat. 'He lived *that close by?*' I thought.

"And you don't have anyone you can stay with?" I asked.

"I'm trying to find someone. But even if I did, I don't know how I'd get there."

Then I realized that of *course* he lived that close by. Everything for Bill had to be ambulatory. A part of me felt ashamed for never considering where it was that he lived, not so much because it showed a lack of wanting to know about him, but because it was a quiet assumption that he slept wherever he could find empty, out-of-the-way space—on a park bench, in an abandoned building. It was an assumption stemming from someone who never knew what it was like to have a problem finding a place to go. Even when a fire had engulfed my summer residence, I had several friends offer to put me up when the house got condemned. That's actually what led me to cross paths with Bill. I'd relocated to a friend's house on Eddy Street, the street where we now sat.

But Bill didn't have anyone reaching out to help him. It made me wonder what it would be like to have so few friends. There was an emptiness about it, and I couldn't decide of that emptiness was more like a hungry stomach that yearned to be fed or an invisibility that yearned to be noticed. I sat beside Bill on that cold step and watched others walk right on by.

"Tell you what," I said, "I don't have a place for you to stay, but I do have a car. I'll drive you wherever you need to go." That was *mostly* the truth—I didn't have a place for him to stay. After all, I was staying in an empty bedroom at my friend's house, so I wasn't in a position to be offering a place. But the truth is, had the place been mine, I still wouldn't have had a place for Bill to stay. My conscience found a convenient way out.

"Oh Fish, that'd be great," Bill said.

We arranged for me to pick him up the following evening after I got out of work. The next day, I met Bill, who was sitting on that step as if he'd never left.

"Hey Fish, would you mind if we stop at my place? I need to get my stuff."

I didn't even realize he *had* stuff, just as I didn't realize he had a place to live. We drove the few blocks to the house he was being made to vacate for reasons I never asked about.

"It will only take a few minutes," he said when we got there.

"You need a hand?"

"No thanks, Fish. I can manage."

Bill walked out carrying two cardboard boxes, one stacked on top of the other, and set them on the backseat of my car. I glanced back at them, those two boxes that contained every last one of his possessions. Some pots and utensils. A couple books shedding their pages. You'd think his possessions were basic, but they were beyond that. It was as if they'd once been set on the curb in those very same boxes and left for whoever came to claim them first: Bill or the garbage men. Now they sat in my car as I wondered how long it'd been since Bill owned something that someone else would covet. Then I wondered if he ever had.

Bill directed me south on Route 13, a highway that led through and out of the City of Ithaca. He guided me to a motel that was a rather seedy place, with a fading exterior and half-lit neon words that gave off the dreary impression that rooms could be rented by the hour. We walked in, and a squat Indian fellow had his face immersed in the small television on the desk behind the counter. His lethargy changed the moment he looked up.

"I'd like to rent a room," Bill said.

The man stood up and peered at him, his dark brown eyes narrowing. They turned to me. Then back to Bill. “I’m sorry,” he said, “we cannot rent you room.”

“But,” Bill said, “but you have rooms available.”

“I’m sorry, we cannot rent you room,” he repeated.

“But I’ve stayed here before.”

The man shook his head.

“I can pay you now.” Bill took a roll of bills from his pants pocket, taking off the thick, dirty rubberband wrapped around it. He unfurled the bills—not ones or fives, but fifties and hundreds. I’m sure it totaled a few grand, which caught me for a moment.

A few grand? Who carries a few grand on them? Then I realized: Just because he was homeless didn’t mean he was penniless. And Bill didn’t have a bank account. All he had was either on his body or in the back seat of my car.

“No, no,” the man said, sweeping his hands in the air as if to shoo the money away.

“I can pay you *now*,” Bill said. “In advance. For a few nights. I have the money right here. It’s *right. here*.”

“No, no,” the man repeated. “I’m sorry. We cannot rent you room.”

“But,” Bill looked to me, “but he can vouch for me.”

The man studied me a second time. I’m sure to some extent he wondered who I was and what I was doing there.

“Right, Fish?” Bill said. “You’ll vouch for me, won’t you?”

I nodded, but I could see the man read me. He noticed the subtle hesitations in my nod, ones that belie assurance.

“No,” he said. “I am sorry. I cannot allow.”

"But … but I have the money right here! I can pay right now!"

The man folded his arms and shook his head as Bill grew exasperated. It was the first time I'd ever seen him that way, and what it took was being denied shelter—*shelter that he was able to pay for*—all because of his appearance. He'd passed the point where his clothes had become too ragged, his hair too uncut, his skin too unwashed that his money turned to mere paper.

We left the motel, Bill angered and I somewhat relieved, though I hid that from him. As much as I wanted him to find a place, I didn't want to be implicated in it. I suppose that was the reason so many others walked by him on the sidewalk and never extending a helping hand. It crossed my mind that maybe I was more like those people than I wanted to admit.

We continued driving south on Route 13, farther from Ithaca. There was another motel, Bill told me. One that he'd also stayed at before. But as we approached that place, it was easy to tell that he wouldn't be staying there any longer. Nobody stayed there any longer.

The motel's defunct sign still stood, its neon lights no longer glowing about vacancy, its plastic letters missing so that incomplete words were all that remained. The grass on the sides of the motel was overgrown, thick tufts of brown stalks puffing out of them. The cracks in the parking lot were filled with weeds that spread over the old asphalt. I pulled into the parking lot, but left the car running.

"I used to stay here," Bill said.

I nodded. I didn't know if he was looking for affirmation. All I saw was an eroded structure that time had passed over. I looked at Bill, the wrinkles set below his eyes, just above his scraggily red beard that had scraggly white hairs twisting inside it, and for a moment, just a brief moment, a thought flashed through my mind. *He could still stay here.* Neon lights or not,

the motel was as vacant as vacancy gets. And I hated that thought. I despised it. I wished it hadn't scurried through my mind like the cockroaches that ran along the sidewalks.

We pulled out of the motel and headed back toward downtown Ithaca in the direction of a house that Bill "wanted to try." I didn't ask just what he meant by that.

We pulled up to the house whose screen door was open, hanging by its bottom hinge. The porch screens were ripped, flaring out at the corners, a place where mosquitos could freely enter.

Bill trudged up the porch steps, past the screen door, while I waited in the car. I heard his knuckles rap on the front door. Knock-knock. Silence. Knock-knock. Silence. Without peering through a window to see if anyone was home, he turned around and came back to the car.

"Don't you want to wait?" I asked.

"No, they're not there," he said.

I wanted to ask why he didn't just wait until they *are* there, but I didn't. It was clear to me that he didn't *want* to wait for them, something that was completely foreign to me. If I'd shown up at a friend's house in need of a place to stay and that friend wasn't home, then I'd simply park myself on their front step and wait until they got there.

"Let's go," Bill said.

'Let's go *where?*' I thought. '*Where* are we going to go?' While I was driving back uphill, back toward collegetown, back toward where we'd started, I asked him, "Isn't there a shelter you can go to?"

"No, Fish, there isn't," he said. "Not here there isn't."

"But we're in Ithaca." Ithaca was known for its extensive network of social services.

"Not for me," he said.

"What do you mean? There must be shelters downtown."

"For women and children there are. Not for men."

"Then what are …" but I stopped. I was going to say—"Then what are men supposed to do?"—when I realized that would do nothing other than highlight Bill's invisibility more than it already was. I knew that there were separate shelters for women and children, protecting them from abusive men. Not all men were like that though. Bill, for example. He was so calm it was almost as if life had worn away the jagged edges of any possible meanness in his body. He'd been smoothed over, left in a soft state of resignation where there was nowhere to go and nobody to go to.

We pulled into a small, empty parking lot that was about five minutes from Bill's concrete step. We got out of the car as dusk became night. I leaned against the hood while Bill stood there, looking lost. It was as if the only place left was the step in front of the convenient store that nobody cared about. All the places in the world, and he didn't have anywhere to go other than where he already was.

"Can I use your phone, Fish?" Bill asked.

As I pulled out my phone, I had this awful sense that I wanted to be somewhere—*anywhere*—else. I no longer wanted to be there with Bill and nowhere to go. I had places to go, friends to see. Couldn't Bill just find somewhere—*anywhere*—to be as well? I handed him my phone.

"I didn't want to make this call, but I know someone. He'll let me stay with him."

You've had someone to call this whole time?

As Bill dialed a number he had memorized, I wandered a few steps away and looked into the darkening sky while biting my nails.

"He says it's fine. I can stay with him."

"Who is he?" I asked.

"An old friend. And I really didn't want to have to call him."

Why didn't he simply call his friend at the outset? Why not avoid all the traipsing around? But just like nights on that step, I didn't pry. Besides, Bill now had a place to go, and I wanted to get him there as fast as possible. "It's good that you called him then," I said.

We drove back downhill toward the eastern side of town where Ithaca College is located. We made our way along side roads that weaved and twisted into places I didn't recognize. Once we got to his friend's house, I pulled into a driveway that wasn't so much a driveway as it was a patch of gravel where the front yard should have been. As we came to a stop, stones crackling beneath the car tires, I saw a shadow standing beneath the single tree in the front yard. Branches draped over him as if they were cloaking him.

"There he is," Bill said.

I turned off the ignition and stepped out of the car to the stillness of a sticky summer night. We walked up to the shadow that stood every bit as still, and Bill greeted it as if they were friends from childhood. The man was calm and quiet, slightly hunched over in tattered clothes. His hair puffed out in long tight curls that fell over his face in a way that didn't appear to bother him. His hands were cupped together in front of his stomach.

"This is Fish," Bill said, introducing me to a man whose name I'd quickly forget. "He's the kind one who drove me out here."

The man reached out his hand as I stepped toward him, and as I got closer, I noticed that his hand had no direction in it. It just hung there as if it were being held up by that thick summer air. His unwashed hand blended in with the night. I could see fingernails extend from it by a length that took me aback as I reached out to feel calluses that were far tougher than his grip.

“It’s nice to meet you,” he said.

“Nice to meet you, too.” As I said this, I looked through his curly hair to see where his eyes should’ve been. Instead, all I saw was a dead whiteness, as if his eyes had rolled into the back of his head.

“I’ll get my stuff,” Bill said.

This time, he let me help. He took one box, and I took the other, and the three of us headed inside the house. The moment I crossed the threshold, I entered a life more decrepit than any I’d ever seen. Trash bags littered the floors of each room, some with gaping holes, spilling their garbage all over the floor. Crumpled newspapers that grew yellow. Rotting food that flies picked at. Thick stalks sprouted from old potatoes. The air was revolting, and I held my breath as long as I could. When I needed to breathe, I did so through my mouth.

“You can put it over there, Fish.”

I laid Bill’s belongings on the one bit of clear kitchen countertop as I observed all that surrounded me. It now made sense why this was Bill’s last place of refuge. I felt an ache in my stomach that I wish I could say was for Bill or for that man or for the both of them. But I knew that was a lie. I knew that part of the ache had to do with my wanting to be nowhere near this place, nowhere near its stench and decay. I walked back outside, and Bill followed me.

“Thank you, Fish,” he said. “I can’t thank you enough.”

“It’s no big deal.”

“It is to me, Fish.”

I shook Bill’s hand.

“You saved my life,” he said, as if to emphasize how big of a deal it was to him.

It only made me feel worse.

I repeated to the man that it was nice meeting him, and he waved while looking in a direction that was directly at me. “See you again, Fish,” he said.

But I knew that would never happen. I knew I’d never come back to this place. As I drove out of sight, I began downshifting through turns on the winding road, then uphill and back into collegetown. I drove toward the lights and the music and the people. I drove away from the dark and the silence and the seclusion. As it turned out, I never saw Bill again.

Fall 2003 – Cornell University Campus – Ithaca, New York

That fall, I was one of many packed in the auditorium for Will Provine’s last lecture of the semester—the one that his former students said couldn’t be missed. A spitting image of Slugworth from the original *Willy Wonka,* Provine talked about evolution and how it had influenced his personal beliefs. He didn’t believe in God or in afterlife, something that was remarkable to hear come from a man whose life was so close to death. Then he talked about his religious neighbor who held opposing beliefs and emphasized that though their beliefs were quite different, that didn’t—and should never—prevent friendship and living side-by-side in harmony. Humans, he said, were social creatures meant to treat each other well.

He then turned on a projector and told the class that he’d made a video of his peers, asking them what it was about Evolution that attracted them so much they made it their life’s work. We watched as professors and scientists answered the question.

Then a man appeared on the screen. His hair puffed out in long tight spirals that fell over his face in a way that didn’t appear to bother him. He wore tattered clothes, and his eyes were almost closed except for the slits of dead whiteness in them. It was Bill’s friend.

Coldness came over my body as the friend spoke about Evolution and what it meant to him, his face pointed slightly off camera. After he was done speaking, Provine paused the video.

"Do you see that man? Do you see how he looks?" he asked the class. "He's one of the world's foremost Evolutionists. That goes to show you that you should never judge someone by their appearance."

I sat there, disquieted, letting this coincidence sink in. This man who'd lived in such filth, this hoarder who'd been Bill's last resort, was now in my classroom being referred to as a veritable genius by my esteemed professor.

I didn't tell Provine about this, not even when I had him as my advisor for an Independent Study that very next semester. I didn't tell him about taxiing Bill around Ithaca until he found a place to stay. Or about Bill's last resort being this man's home. Or about walking through this man's home, inhaling the stench of the squalor in which he lived.

I didn't tell him just what it meant to find a book without its cover.

I held onto this story, not telling anyone about it for more than a decade. I felt that what I'd done for Bill wasn't meant to receive praise. But finally, one night while I was an old college friend who had also taken Provine's course, I told him this story—from beginning to end.

You need to tell Provine this story, he said.

Then we looked at each other and wondered the obvious: Was he still alive?

He wasn't. He'd died on September 1, 2015, twelve years after I'd sat in on his last lecture. He'd outlived some of his doctors, some of his peers, some of his friends. But he didn't outlive the time it took for me to realize this story was one that he was meant to hear. One that would have breathed life into his last lecture in a way that not even he could have imagined.