I Knew Laura

*(Ellington White published this in the New Virginia Review, in 1981. He was its fiction editor; I was in his VCU short story class. I look back now, amazed that he could just pluck it from his pile of weekly class submissions and run it alongside work by writers like John Gardner and Toni Morrison. Such huge thanks to him, and for the work he did with me to strengthen it.*)

"…with Laura Kalinsky to the…"

Peter, startled, cocked his head a little closer to the speaker and missed what came next. You could only hear the voice from the one spot; his friends had warned him; yet instinctively, he'd leaned away from it, towards the strangers at the far table, who now seemed to be talking about something else entirely.

This took place in mid-July, 1975, in an Italian restaurant set back along a side street near Tottenham Court Road. It was one of London's hotter summers, and all three of the men wore thin casual shirts unbuttoned to the first gentle slopes of their stomachs. Only Susie, Gerry's girlfriend, had attempted any kind of stylishness, in a cool Laura Ashley print. "I can just imagine you lot in college," she remarked, as Colin belched. "Three slobs together." She was some sort of champion shot-putter. Peter kept looking over as if he couldn't assimilate the fact. (He couldn't.)

They were in Gerry and Susie's favourite restaurant, eating hot heaping lumps of pasta. To Peter the food was unremarkable and the decor oppressive—although, he noted with satisfaction, a degree of shabbiness sabotaged its pretensions: the mock Sistine Chapel ceiling was flaking, and dead insects floated in the pale fishbowl bellies of the overhead lamps. It was not a night, or a place, he would ever have remembered, until Colin, leaning to his right, discovered that by some peculiarity of the dome he could hear the conversation at a distant table.

"It's that couple over there," he whispered. "Watch their lips. It's weird."

Gerry leaned to the left and bobbed back and forth for a few seconds. "Oh, yeah. Yeah. That's weird."

The two of them took turns relaying snatches of theatre talk, competing to make each fragment more oracular than the last. Voices from the sky. Eventually, Susie bumped Gerry from his seat and waved him smartly towards her own. She sat silent for a moment.

"Ooh! What if they were planning a murder or something. The white-haired entrepreneur and his redheaded secretary. And you knew the victim!"

"You've got that stuff on the brain, Susie. Did you know she was a friend of, what's her name, love?"

"Jessie Callan. You know, that girl who kidnapped that baby and killed herself? I competed against her a few times. She was the strangest person."

For a while, they exchanged gruesome stories—Jessie Callan, Mama Cass (recently choked to death on a sandwich), the murder in the Gene Hackman film "The Conversation," had the victim really been flushed down the loo? Peter eyed the far couple suspiciously. Then it was his turn to listen, and the white-haired man mentioned Laura Kalinsky, and he thought of her again for the second time that weekend.

By some chance, he and Bill Haines had been the only males in their sixth form group at the Technical High. "Lit-Lang," their friends pointed out scornfully. "What can you expect?" Peter and Laura were the two class members thought to be going somewhere; there developed between them an edge of rivalry, and another of sexual attraction. Both he and Bill tended to be sexually diffident among this gang of women into which they had been co-opted, so that nothing ever came of that side of things—it taxed their nerves so much less to chat up women they wouldn't have to face the next day. Nevertheless, he did make one assault upon her, considerably less drunken than it appeared, at a New Year's Eve party. Laura, with her quick rust-and-green eyes, her black electric hair,had the pick of four or five suitors that night, and was most interested in an older man in a white cowboy hat with a svelte black sweatband, a poseur from Marlboro Country, Hampstead. Peter had lagged after her for a while, from room to room, until he began to feel ridiculous. Afterwards, the sense of expending his youth in her shadow, a perpetual few steps behind, lingered in him and seemed to define their relationship, so that he never made another attempt. She was soon outscoring him regularly in exams, and when it came to A-levels, made three A's to his three B's. They'd gone different universities, Laura to Cambridge, Peter to an unfashionable corner of the industrial Midlands (which he'd found surprisingly agreeable), and he'd seen her only once since.

This had not been in their home town; their mutual friends still lived there, but Peter and Laura passed through more and more rarely, and never, it seemed, at the same time. Whenever he was in the area, Peter kept in touch by joining Bill Haines for a pint or two at the White Hart; Laura, for her part, would drop in on Lizzie Hardcastle, sampling the pottage of gossip and adding her own spicy tidings to the stock. By August 1974, the lines of communication were growing slack; Peter's family had moved from town, and he doubted he would see any of his old friends again. Instead, he'd been standing outside a pub on a back street in Edinburgh, somewhere near the Grassmarket, debating where to amble next, when Laura burst into view like a shock of sunlight among the crumbling grey-brown buildings.

"Hey! Well hi there!"

But she kept walking.

"Laura! Laura Kalinsky!"

She turned and looked. He was fleetingly aware of being robed in half-patched jeans and beer fumes, of the jagged hole at one armpit of his sweater; the effect pleased him.

"Peter. You bohemian. I didn't recognise you, with the beard and those glasses. I thought you were a beggar or something. Well, fancy meeting you here."

They were both up for the Festival, he as a spectator, she as an actress on the Fringe. They spent the afternoon together, touring Holyroodhouse (touching the same doorknobs as the Queen, exclaimed Laura) and poking among the ruins of the chapel. For a while, they sprawled out on the rim of an abandoned tomb and chatted—Peter trickling gravel through his fingers into the hollowed out stone, Laura prodding the weathered bottom with her painted and earth-stained toes. Peter felt uplifted to the point of lightheadedness: there was something doleful and assuasive in the chipped columns and arches, the ghost of the great central window.

"Where are you living now, Laura?"  
  
"Oh, North London. Working for a publisher, only about thirty hours a week—the theatre troupe's repertory, though, so I never have much free time. A busy little miss, I am."

"You subsidised?"

"Yes, but we're applying for more. If we get it, some of us will go full time. Our core people. We already have a permanent location. Some buzz. So we're hopeful."

"You're a core person, I take it?"

"Sure. I'm good, Peter. But how about you?"

"Nothing much to tell. An office job in Leytonstone at the moment. But I'm waiting to go to France for a year. In five weeks, actually."

"A year? What, to teach? Where?"

"The North. Lille. Well, probably a suburb of it. That's where the school is."

Laura snorted. "You wind up in the most unfashionable spots. For university, then that year, I heard, along Teesside, of all places." ("There was a girl," he began.) "This clerical crap in slummy Leytonstone. And now, yay, France, and you pick the industrial North. Oh, Lille's pretty big, could be bustling, better make it a backwater suburb."

Peter shrugged. Things happen. You take what you can get. Anyway, he'd acquired a taste for the seedy and the gritty; the bypassed, the neglected. He wasn't sure why it gave him pleasure, but it did. At times, he would claim to admire what was "tough" or "authentic" about it, but he disliked trying to justify it to sceptics like Laura; he could tell the explanation came out lamely.

"You know Lille?"

"Sure. I've passed through. On my way to Paris. From there to Spain and Morocco. I took a fifteen month trip. I was in Greece for three months, India for four. Turkey. The usual places. You probably heard."

They rose, left Holyrood, and made a leisurely climb of Arthur's Seat, the hill that overlooks the city. Peter spun anecdotes of his adventures youth-hosteling in Germany, and she laughed. Later, they went to a show together. At half past midnight he was watching her in Peter Handke's "Offending the Audience." The joint was packed; the piece was witty; the performances, particularly hers, were splendid: he hadn't enjoyed a day so much in years. The next evening, his last in town, they met for dinner and he probed some of the more startling gossip.

"The suicide at*tempts*?" She leaned on the final syllable, pulling a face. "Yeah, there was one, I suppose. The other was just a misunderstanding. I don't know, Petey, I take risks, I push myself too hard, I'm not like you… Anything I say is going to sound like I'm dramatising, and I'm not."

"It's okay, then, I was just curious."

"It drives me crazy how people like you and Lizzie find that stuff like legitimately glamorous. The bad one, and yes, it was bad, was basically a combination of depression and overwork. Of being in a dark corner of a dark hole and trying to medicate your way out. That enough for you?"

"It's okay. I'm sorry, I was just…"

"I know what you were just. The other time was during the trip. I'd gone maybe four months with virtually no money, I hadn't eaten, I couldn't see how I was going to get home…"

"So you wound up in the river."

"The stupid footbridge had a hole it it—right next to a broken rail guard! I *fell* in! I don't know, Petey. I have to *do* things. I can't just sit back. Sure, when I get frustrated sometimes, maybe depressed, maybe I've been pushing myself too hard, my tendency is to push even harder, to try to push through it, probably risk making it worse before it can get better. But that's me. I take charge and I take chances."

"Quite the philosophy, that."

"It's done well by me. It drives me crazy how people like—well, how some people—seem to sit around just waiting for me to fall off a bridge or something. Like I'm their salutary walking cautionary tale. Ooh, that Laura! She may be in the pink right now, but watch this space." She shared out the last of the wine and leaned back, sipping at it. "No offence, Peter, but back in school, I thought you might have the balls to be a bit colourful yourself."

"Maybe I will be," I said with a laugh. "I'm just slower than you are, Laura. I still have dreams."

"But you don't really have much imagination now, do you?"  
  
"What the hell brought this on? No, I don't think that's at all fair…"

"Or else you don't have much courage. What the shit, Petey. All those safe, boring places you wind up in as if they're risky, those ersatz gritty cities and those dull, tame ghettoes. People can *come* from there, be born *into* that kind of smothering baggage, that's fine, but what does that crap have to do with you?"

"I don't know, Laura, I don't think—"

"Oh, it would make sense if you were *from* there. It would make some kind of sense to move back home, try to make your peace with where you *are* from. But this romance of the gasworks crap? It's… It's just… *Ugh.* Sorry. Listen to me. *Sorry.* What it is is none of my business."

She caught the waiter's eye and ordered coffee. She fell silent. "It's okay," he said. And after a grimace and a rueful smile, they returned to small talk, even made each other laugh a little. But later, as they were parting, she took him by the elbow and added, "Don't get me wrong, Peter. I envy you, you know. I could learn from you. Cautious like a tortoise. At least you won't end up jumping off some bridge somewhere."

It was said jokily, but it was hard not to find something melodramatic in it; even a certain self-pity. Moreover, Peter disliked the way she had patronised him. Partly deliberately, to provoke him, to make him *reflect* or something, but mostly not; mostly just because she thought she was better than him. Both at the time and afterward, *reflecting*, he also felt oddly depressed; burdened by an obscurely sad truth: that he had failed a test which part of him would have liked to pass, just as part of her longed, in vain, to fail it.

It was eleven months later that he read her name in a film review, then heard it in a restaurant, whispered in his ear like a shibboleth. In the autumn he returned for a second year to his Lille suburb, as if to prove to himself that its seediness and grit were not mere gracelessness, and that under its grey indigence there remained more to discover. That November, at a dinner party in Lille itself, for the expatriate anglophones, a lively group of oddballs he saw far too rarely, the guests boasted in turn of the famous people they had known. A girl claimed to have met, in Paris, Jim Morrison of the Doors; another to have screwed Jimi Hendrix. Peter's contribution was that he had gone to school with Laura Kalinsky. *Who?* "She had a ten second bit part in *Corrigan's Blues,"* he added off-handedly, to fashion the explanation as a joke, so that everyone laughed—although her role had, in fact, been decent-sized, and the thought of her had not come as a joke.

His Lille suburb was called Loos; the local supermarket bore the legend SUPERLOOS, which, pronounced a little differently was the current generic term for the large, modern lavatories of London's main railway stations. His flat was a fifteen minute walk from Haubourdin, said to be the most polluted town in Europe. Its grunginess was without mystery, without energy. Riding the last bus back home from the *Grande Place*, he found himself reliving his last conversation with Laura. *What the hell,* he thought, *am I still doing here?*

Laura made more films, and became well-known, rubbing shoulders (and whatever else one rubbed in such circles) with the rich and famous. Peter met and married an American girl. He yelled at her once that she was middle-class and conventional. So, she replied, was he. Either that or nothing. Something in the matter-of-fact way she said it got through to him; the charge was not merely true, he was ready to accept it as true; he was struck, almost immediately, by a sense of relief. It began to dawn on him, with Sarah's help, that the "friends" he had been gravitating towards were weirdos, creeps, and liars, unwashed would-be geniuses and frustrated hacks. Yet he had never noticed this, until his wife's tastes—for thoroughly agreeable types, modest, quietly intelligent, giving—were juxtaposed with his own. People could be so nice: how had he never understood that before? If some in these new circles had their streak of melancholia, it was in their case an uncomplicated and muted darkness, as affecting as a moonlit cloudy night, and their capacity for warmth and joy counterbalanced it and gave buoyancy. He came to believe in the fundamental wholeness and haleness of things.

One summer, settled now in America, Peter undertook a long train journey to Chicago, to visit his in-laws; his wife had flown on ahead with the baby. Crossing Ohio, he fell into conversation with a garrulous and hirsute music teacher, who reacted to Peter's English accent as if it were a badge of cultural snobbery, as if by wielding it Peter accused him of provincialism. In response, he related the history of his life and travels. He had been to Greece, and to India: the usual places. He was originally from the same suburb of L.A. as Marilyn Monroe, in the days before her first marriage; she'd once slept with his elder brother. Steve was only two years old at the time, of course: she'd babysat for him. Interestingly enough, his wife had a cousin from the north-east who had slept in exactly the same way with Sylvia Plath!

Peter was reminded of his own competitive urbanity, dormant now for so long. He remembered the ache to be a writer, the clipped sombre poetry he had struggled to master. He thought of Laura: what spark had separated her from the rest of them? She had rather vanished from the public eye recently, or at least from his; he wondered what had become of her. Rather absently, he mentioned having known her, catching himself off-guard with the boast. Hurriedly, he cast around for a way to make it relevant to the conversation.

But the music teacher cut in quickly, rescuing him. "Really? Did you see today's paper?"

By now the train was banging into Gary, Indiana. Against that alien, unliving landscape (treeless and grassless, at least from the train window, a procession of factories, smokestacks, spurts of flame) he read that Laura was as well as could be expected in a California hospital, after a massive overdose of something Peter had never heard of. She had had a great many problems recently. (With addiction? With fame, the loss of it? Not specified.) Friends were saddened but unsurprised. (Close friends? Unidentified. Two who were had no comment.) The report, too gossipy and predatory for Peter's taste, did not say so outright, but it appeared that Laura Kalinsky would survive. Romance of the walking cautionary tale.

Peter peered out at the viscous grey lake, the pink smear of the sky, finding them strangely beautiful. "Yes," he added casually. "I was in high school with her. We were good friends. I made a drunken pass at her once."

As he handed back the column, a scant few inches on the fifth page, mostly photograph, of Laura squinched between two more famous people, he felt a sudden pride strut within him, red-breasted as the Gary sky, and was unable to decide upon its source: whether it was because he had known her, or because, after all, she seemed to be nothing much. A bit of both, perhaps, he decided, smiling at the music teacher, removing his glasses, and turning his closed eyes against the padded blue wall; but he could neither sleep nor cry.