

# Late Bill

A sequel to *Early Autumn* by Langston Hughes

Telofy

1x4x9.blogspot.com

January 2010

You have to know, dear reader, that Bill and I had been best friends for years before all this happened. To honor this friendship I will at no point in this account resort to falsehood. I will clarify why he did what he did and I expect you, my reader, to trust me as you would trust your own best friend.

Bill had always been a rather solitary person, but when his beloved brother suddenly died he was truly alone. Luckily, at the same time I joined his high school class and soon our congenial personalities and our shared dream of studying law and becoming attorneys bonded us in such a profound way that we met almost every afternoon at his place to do homework and to debate recent legal opinions of supreme court judges. It was I who taught him to forget his brother.

One morning, it was the year 19— and we had just graduated, a letter came that he had been accepted into a college in Ohio. He had already gotten an acceptance from his first choice college, but when he learned that I, too, had received the same letter, his decision was clear. At the time, even I deemed this coincidence auspicious; in retrospect it was ominous.

In college we shared one room. At first there was only one bed in it, so we asked around whether it was possible to get a second bed. The answer Bill usually got was a brisk “No,” which, to us, sounded almost British in that Ohio accent. Finally, and with a few bottles of liquor, the janitor could be bribed into providing a spare bed for me. It took the three of us almost half an hour to carry it up the stairs along the main hallway, through a few ogival arches and into the smaller corridor that led to our room. Also, we had to forgo the luxury of the extra table—be-

sides the desk—to fit it in. It was worth all the trouble though, for it was softer and less worn than the other bed. We sometimes had bets to determine who would sleep in which.

The first two semesters went by quickly. Bill had performed well in his exams and all the studying still left time for us to take long strolls. Long they were necessarily for it took us some time to get out of the city and to the more picturesque countryside or the suburbs. When he lacked the time, Bill usually contented himself with shorter walks to certain places in the vicinity. So it was on the day he met Mary. The third semester had just begun and he still had classes later that day, making a long stroll impractical. Instead he went to a wide hilly meadow not far from the college. There was an old gate, or rather the remnants of one. It must have had a roof in its days of glory, and of the wall that had once stood to its sides, little was left, so you could just walk around it. That day however Bill felt like walking through it, imagining a roof on top of it and its structure sound and sturdy. Then he fought his way through waist-high grass until he reached one of the weathered rocks, where he sat down and began reading in a textbook. A mere page or two later and only a few yards off, suddenly, but without startling him, she revealed her presence: She lifted her head over the tall grass and their eyes met for the first time. In a romantically subdued register they talked for hours—Bill missed all his classes.

The economics department, where Mary was studying, was situated close to our wing. This “our” however had already begun to crumble. We spent a lot less time together since he had met Mary; I could not possibly be around when he was with her. In fact

I was unable. But I was saying that her department had not been far off and so Bill met her frequently, often serendipitously. At the same time the effort he had to put into his studies increased significantly. No longer could he go on the strolls he so enjoyed; they had been replaced by brisk walks from the lecture hall to his room and back again. Accordingly, whenever he met with Mary, he knew that it meant missing some lecture or deadline—a drawback he accepted all to readily.

Since you, dear reader, probably never have met Mary, you have no idea of her uncanny gift for empathy and her keen insight into Bill, into his situation. She had noticed how he was pressed for time, how his timetable had gotten so very tight and rigid and how his coffee consumption had increased. Yet, when they talked about it, neither of them was ready to cut back on their time together. The only solution which seemed feasible was to plan their rendezvous, to meet to a specific time at a specific place. From ten p.m. onward every evening was Bill's suggestion, and of course on weekends, when they could meet by day. The place, they quickly decided, would be a room at the top of one of the towers—they had discovered it a mere week earlier. On one side, part of its wall had recently fallen in and the room seemed to be used as a dump for decrepit chairs and tables. For the winter they would have to find a different place, but during the remaining warm nights of the year, when the silvery light of the moon drenched the room's desultory assembly of furniture, they relished every second spent there. When the moon failed to join them, however, they usually left the then subfusc and shadowy place to go somewhere else; often to that meadow where they first met, or—especially when it was raining—just through the vast university buildings on a quest to discover its obscurest corners and innermost recesses.

Sleep became one of Bill's foremost concerns for he slept enough only during the weekend. Nevertheless, the moment he and Mary convened in that room and they sat together on the floor with a perfect view of the whole premises, he was instantaneously wide awake. It is hard to imagine how they always had something to tell and learn from each other, be it in words or in this tranquil silence of perfect rapport which is no less eloquent. On certain nights, especially when the moon was nearly full, they bolted the door to their storeroom and, with the moonlight glistening in pearls on her silky

skin, surely gave rise to some tales of the tower being haunted. Many weeks went by like that.

Sometime after the first month, when Bill's initial infatuation had segued seamlessly into something he first more tentatively but soon confidently described to himself as love, something new crept in with it. Back in the days when he lived with his parents, he had always been afraid someone would want to separate the two of us, sever our friendship ties, take me away from him. To prevent this from happening we had reached the agreement to see to it that our friendship remain a secret as far as that was possible. Even from his parents. While in school we had just never worked in groups together and had met only clandestinely when no one was around; meeting in a similarly furtive manner after school at his place had proven harder, at least when his parents were home. Luckily it seemed family policy not to talk about personal matters, so the issue never came up. In him, this shared fear that we might lose each other if the wrong people learned about us, transformed radically as his relationship with Mary progressed. I can only hypothesize that when Mary, unwittingly, began to tear him away from me, and we both had to go our separate ways in college, this fear just lingered on, finding a new target in his love for her. Part of him knew those anguishes to be unsubstantiated for he trusted Mary as he had once trusted me, but as much as that part tried to shrug them off, his feeling of inadequacy and the dread, someone more intrepid and valiant might snatch Mary away from him just kept getting stronger. Also there was a nagging suspicion that when this happened, Mary might not even be aware of it—a thought that failed to strike him as absurd. It grew until it surrounded him like a wall, closed, eventually, even to me.

One Monday shortly after noon I came into our room startling Bill who had just napped with his head resting on one of my volumes by Alfred Swaine Taylor. Absently he stacked it onto the Robert Christison while he turned around. (I needed those books for a course of mine. Purely educational.) Unfortunately, the reason I had come was to relay to Bill that a new project—having to do something with European stock markets and different time zones—forced Mary to work every Monday and Tuesday night, so that they would not be able to meet on those two days for the moment. As much as he regretted that

change, I was relieved to learn that still he was glad of the extra sleep it got him.

In the following morning, Bill became aware of something disturbing. True, he was always very tired during the day, despite the copious quantities of coffee he drank, but usually his sleep was rather light, nonetheless. The last few nights however, he had slept very deeply. So deeply that today, not even the long and loud ringing of his alarm clock had sufficed to wake him. Yet he felt tired and exhausted as if he had spent the whole night studying. Had someone sedated him? And if so, why? Also he wondered why I had not seen to it that he woke up—had I even been back for the night? Moreover there were those dreams. In all three nights he had had dreams somehow circling around Mary though she was seldom actually visible. They were hazy and indiscriminate, but at the same time close enough to waking life that they hardly faded during the day. Almost like ordinary memories.

Sitting on his bed, reconstructing last night's dream, two originally far separate concepts in his brain suddenly snapped together: Whenever he was with Mary, Bill never thought of me. He searched his memory for any shred of a sentence with which he had ever mentioned me to Mary—and came up with nothing. How is it possible that throughout the hundreds of hours they had spent together he had never mentioned his one long-time friend? From this point onward his attitude toward me grew even more askance and he tried to channel his confused fears and suspicions by making them explicit in a short story he wrote. Not wanting me to read it, he kept it always in his briefcase, a measure which proved ineffectual. His story, set in the future, paints a dismal picture of Mary's and his fate after Mary has suddenly been married away from him by some anonymous perpetrator—me?

Over the course of the whole next week he slept only two or three hours in total and then also very lightly again. As a result, his behavior became increasingly erratic. One rainy afternoon two college staff inspected our room. They asked Bill whether he really needed the extra bed. After he implored them on his knees not to take it away, they, looking somewhat vexed, acquiesced and left. It kept raining. It had been raining a lot that month, so you should think that by then Bill and Mary should have been experts in the architecture of the buildings. Far from it. In fact that Thursday they found a hall, connecting

two sections of the basement, one which they had never seen before. Due to construction work, several doors stood open which were usually barred, and trails of cement dust led through them. Apart from its novelty to them however, the interior was not especially thrilling. After a few minutes of walking through that basement, Bill passed by a low door and, pulling it open, looked on an assortment of dusty furniture and stacks of curly, yellowed paper. At first he wanted to show this seemingly forgotten old storeroom to Mary but she had already walked far ahead, so he thought better of it and followed after her, quickening his pace.

Since the previous Tuesday, Bill had been drinking very little for fear someone—especially I—who might have slipped some soporific drug in his water or even his coffee the week before, could try it again. His defense, of course, could only be to pay utmost attention to what he drank. In the cafeteria he was very cautious indeed. First he checked that his mug was absolutely clean, then he waited for five other people—none of whom he knew—to fill their mugs from the pot, watching them attentively, before he filled his. While he was eating—again he had been very cautious in taking from the right bowls—three people he hardly knew came up to his table. To each of them he made it perfectly clear how attentive he was. Of course he let them eat at the table, after all Bill's is a very polite demeanor, but not for a second did he take his eyes off them. They had to know that no one could put drugs in his food without his noticing! They soon gave up and moved to another table. He won.

Despite all his efforts he had yet another night of that deep unrelaxing sleep that left him wearier than the evening before. Again he had this curious type of dream in surroundings he did not recognize. He remembered a plant with conspicuous blue flowers seemingly in some sort of greenhouse. This plant he did recognize. He had seen it in a book I must have been so unwary to forget, open, on the desk. Suddenly it occurred to him, and he scolded himself for not having thought of it earlier, that his tormentor might even use injections to drug him. If administered dexterously one may not even feel the pinch of the needle. Without intending to, the man he envisioned holding the syringe in his hand was me. Henceforth he was careful to swerve to the other side of the hall whenever anyone came as menacingly close as a couple yards, a distance he took care

to maintain to all other people during lectures. Right after one of those lectures he was walking along the main hallway on the ground floor when a certain detail about it caught his heightened attention: The hall was much longer than the day before. At that time he thought that someone might indeed have extended it, after all there was a lot of construction work going on around the building, later however Bill was rather inclined to attribute the elongation, the perceived elongation that is, to some sort of mirror magic at its ends. Seconds later he stumbled and fell.

He had become used to these fits of dizziness; while he had lost a distinct feeling of thirst, these fits still served as a reminder for him to drink something. But now was not the time. No compromises! No risk-taking! He cannot recall what had taken place after he fell, but not even an hour later he was back at the cafeteria with a new plan. First he talked to someone very loudly. Hence, if I was stealthily spying, I was bound to notice him. Then he ordered a glass of water, positioned himself in the center of the room, so to be in plain view of his tormentor incognito, and drank. Ha! In fact he only pretended to drink, no drop went past his lips. Having thus fooled his adversary, he thought himself safe.

Then night approached. With considerable mental effort and lots of coffee Bill kept himself in that state he called awake. For fear of falling into it, he also kept away from the bed as if it were a canyon. A stump of a candle shed its feeble light upon a pile of legal texts which he knew for an inextricable labyrinth of paragraphs but only saw as an army of blurry ants thronged together—in the semi-darkness seemingly moving. Long already, he had been unable to concentrate on anything. Whatever thought he tried to focus on, immediately dispersed like a ball of spiderlings touched. The candle went out. He waited for me. An vexing tune played in his mind, haunted him, played in piercingly high keys, then higher and higher. His thoughts screamed against the noise. He drove his fingernails into the wooden desk, as the darkness was slowly sucking him in. Half an hour later he had become one with the pitch black nothingness that filled the windowless room. He waited, wondering where I was and who was with me. Ethereal shapes, black on black, were leaping at him and in the repetitive carnage of inner voices he was yanked down boundless cataracts of despair. His words became insults to their meaning.

Gushes of brackish water on seething grease. Eyes open or closed, indistinct memories crept up to him, vanishing the moment he noticed them. Then a picture appeared, like one from his dreams, and was gone. It had shown Mary from behind, silhouetted against the sky. But where? He tried to haul pieces of the picture back into his consciousness but he had no control of his thoughts. They all slipped away, then the thoughts that reminded him not to let them slip away, slipped away also. Again and again in never-ending cycles he recalled what he had tried to recall and lost it again. Then, much later, the picture flickered past his inner eye once more, and without conscious recognition of anything in particular he felt that its setting had to be the lofty room where they had met so often. The feeling abode with him. He clung to it as a shipwrecked sailor might to a chunk of wood. Still I had not arrived; now Bill gave up waiting and, rediscovering his limbs, made toward the door.

Every lightning flash flooded the deserted main hall with its icy travesty of sunlight. While he was climbing the stairs, one hand on the rail, the shadow of a cobweb was cast upon the wall. He reached the top, the door was ajar, he stepped in and was alone. The missing part of the wall had become a wall of water. As impenetrable for Bill as the darkness of his room—and as mesmerizing. For minutes he stared into the dark void, often a white void for a split-seconds. He remembered what he usually saw from there and after several minutes his brain tricked him into actually seeing parts of it: Water running down the weathered granite of another building, trees, bent by the storm, and then the path that led toward the meadow. His quest for me, for Mary and for who-knew-what easily mingled with his memories of the meadow and his rampant imagination drove him down all the staircases and out into the overwhelming downpour. His clothes were drenched in a matter of seconds.

For the creeks running down his face, it was hard for him to keep his eyes open. Yet he saw suspicious movements and raced after them. First through muddy grass, then onto asphalt. Midnight was past. Where were we hiding? He ran even faster. In the cold cones of the street lights the raindrops became leaden bullets, pelleting his skin. After felt hours of running and stumbling he reached the dilapidated gate that lead unto the meadow. He sank to the ground. His whole body ached. Then a thought of

Mary renewed his resolution but failed to renew his strength. To escape the muddy whirl around him, he crawled onto the remnants of masonry adjacent to the gate and from this slightly elevated vantage point for the first time beheld the meadow for what it really was: A cemetery. Perhaps it was even the first cemetery the city had had. Today it lay in ruins, overgrown and now largely flooded. Though he could not see it from his position by the lychgate, he knew from his strolls over a year ago that the new cemetery was only a few miles to the east. The boulders everywhere had to be the vestiges of mausolea and tombstones. I grew scared; I had to show myself.

“Confound it! Bill! You’re in the middle of a thunderstorm. You’ll get us both killed.”

“What are you doing out here?” His question was accentuated by lightning, very close. I shuttered.

“I’m worried about you. I know for a fact that you get little sleep and now, moreover, you hardly drink anymore. You are my best friend, I have to look after you.”

“Oh, yeah. Good job. You sedated me several times, didn’t you? What is it you do while I sleep?”

“I didn’t. Never.” If I explained everything to him now, he would believe me; he could not but acknowledge its veracity.

“I don’t care how you got me to sleep like that. What are your insidious plans for Mary?”

I was torn between telling him everything at once, and trying to weasel my way out of it and getting us back inside somehow. He grew impatient with my hesitation and laboriously crawled upon a larger chunk of wall remnants. With some effort he stood erect and cried toward the sky:

“You care about be? Then leave Mary alone or I’ll forfeit my life to Zeus!” He was not joking.

I saw no other way: “Bill, it’s very simple. I am you. We share one mind. If you’re dehydrated I’m feeling awful, too.”

“What the fuck are you talking about?” was Bill’s reply, yet I knew that really he was only surprised not to be more surprised.

“Yours is also my body, Bill. And I won’t have it fried by lightning out here; nor am I keen on getting hypothermia.”

“But Mary, she’s real, isn’t she?” He almost lost balance. “And that project of hers, you made that up, didn’t you?”

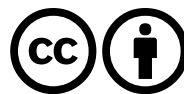
“Yes, I might have lied about a few things, but it was for our both good, for our friendship, the one she jeopardizes.”

“O, I know what you’re up to. Dare not! Not her! Not again!—I’d rather kill us both.”

Obviously he was delirious. I cannot remember what I replied but I saw that he did not believe me at all. He surged with anger and perhaps that was how I finally got my foot into the door. Bill passed out; I took over.

Gradually he woke up. Then this process reached a certain level and he snapped awake. It was still very early. Naturally he had no notion of how he had gotten back to his room, and when he had hung his wet clothes to dry. To him, though, it was all crystal clear: His friend, nay, adversary, was trying to take Mary away from him. He, Bill, had the power to stop him; and he had an idea. Still in his bed clothes he ran through the vacant halls of the law school, then down to the basement where they were renovating. The site was deserted. While he stacked bricks onto a barrow so high he could hardly control it, only thoughts of Mary could briefly pierce his wild frenzy. Several barrowfuls of bricks he brought thus through the low door into the forgotten storeroom which he had discovered so recently. Then mortar and a container accelerator. He filled several buckets with hot water from a near restroom. Finally he purloined a selection of trowels, entered the room, pulled the door shut, removed the handle and went to work. He was afraid I might manage to stop him, so he hurried. A mere hour later the low door was walled up.

I cannot say why it is exactly that I felt compelled to write all this. Perhaps it is to vindicate poor Bill, in case someone finds my—our—mortal remains one day. Yet still I have hope that my cries will be heard sooner or later. Bill had stayed very focused for the whole day and the following night before I was able to take control. The mortar, aided by the accelerator, aided by the hot water had already proven impenetrable at that point. I think I will hide these sheets around here somewhere—hopefully, he will not find them.



This work is licensed under  
[http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.en\\_US](http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/deed.en_US).