



Vincent Barry

## Sibelius Has a Thing Going On at the Hotel California

. . . My wife sleeps a lot lately. Except for that, and that she never leaves the house, my wife is an ordinary woman of—well, she wouldn't want me to tell. . . .

My wife wears glasses which, I've always felt, reflect me twice my natural size, till of late, half.

"You think maybe a new prescription?" I suggest. "They're fine," my wife snaps.

My wife's glasses are double bridge, the lens teardrop shape. Her bathrobe is yellow collar chenille and sheds a lot when washed.

Before retiring to our faded sofa—or is it "couch"? I never know. Something about arms. One has, one doesn't. Whichever, before retiring to it my wife rises from her narrow trundle bed—"the field bed," so the speak, being long ago too cold to sleep—about nine, has two fried eggs, over well, with toast which is never burnt.

*When she scrambles and burns is time enough to worry, I tell myself.*

Then I ask, “How d’ja sleep?”

“Okay,” she says, bent over her breakfast fixings with palsy head shakes. “You?” “‘Bout the same,” I say. “So,” she goes, *Smugly*, I think, “doxepin makes no difference.”

Doxepin. Taken it for years. Till the pharmacy runs out. Something or other about a supply chain. . . .

“I can’t sleep,” I keep telling the doc, year after year.

“Oh?” he keeps going, year after year, peering over glasses. Not the same ones. Sometimes square, other times rectangular.

This time, though, my wife is with me, ’cuz this time she is determined that this time will be different. This time the doc’s glasses are round black, and I think, *I bet he bought one to get one free*.

“This is ridiculous,” my wife says to me, then the same to the doc, just like that. But before, continuing to me, “When is your next appointment?” I tell her. “I’m going with you.” “Oh, you don’t have to.” “I’m going!” She’s like that, my wife is. Dogged. Or was. Of late, desultory.

“This is ridiculous,” my wife tells the doc, palms down. And I think, *If she turns over those phthisic hands, she’ll go all stormy petrel*. She does. “Look,” my wife says, leaning in, and with startling abruptness, “have you nothing to help him through the night?”

Goggle-eyed, the doc prescribes doxepin, an anti-depressant he says helps with insomnia. . . .

“Alamere,” my wife gets out on the way home.

It’s raining and I watch the rain turn red, as the wipers go swish, swish, before starting to chatter, which makes me think— “New ones,” my wife sniffs. She means the doc’s glasses.

“Two for one?” I say, thinking, y’know, LensCrafter.

At that she—what? guffaws. Hmm, don’t think I’ve ever used that word before. But ’s what she does—my wife guffaws.

She then rattles off, “Ultra lightweight, . . . durable frame, . . . ultra-thin, . . . solid bridge, . . . color completely handmade,” tapping each out on the steering wheel with a long, stiff finger.

Then, mockingly, “‘Two-for-one.’ Puhhlease! . . . Didn’t you see the biocompatible, hypoallergenic and nickel-free frame?”

I didn’t, but I take her word for it.

Taking the wheel firmly between blue deep-veined hands she murmurs to herself, “Classic wayfarers with crimson frame. . . . Ugh!” . . .

You can see that my wife is really up on stuff like that—eye fashion, I mean. Me, I try to keep up, but—well, I’m more a shape person, if you know what I mean. But my wife—she boasts of being a conscious consumer. Well, used to. Of late, as I say, she just sleeps, and never boasts, or even titters, let alone guffaws. Just sleeps. Me? Well, this might surprise you.

Sibelius.

Really! I listen to Sibelius. “Valse triste” mostly,—y’know, “the sad waltz”? For its “mood and color,” as they say. “Air,” I simply call it, but, admittedly, own to myself, now and again, “A little morphine in all the air would be wonderfully refreshing.” At such times—when it’s a “damp and drizzly November in my soul,” y’cud say—I don’t account it high time to get to sea, but to the Hotel California—always with the Gipsy Kings—where for “pistol and ball,” as it were, I inhale the “warm smell of colitas.” Anyway—

“Terminal insomnia,” diagnosed over Alamere glasses.

The doxepin helps for a while. Now I chase the dox with Xanax. One mg.

“Terminal insomnia”? Oh, I know, sounds fatal, but it’s not, TG.

“TG”? Oh, that’s the Irish in me. “Thank God.” TI is just when you can’t sustain sleep, TG. Like you’re out like a light for a few hours, then awake and can’t fall back? Right, like that. Unlike my wife. She can sorta raise her head now and again, but then it falls, and a thin bony arm covers her eyes as if blocking out light, before she nods out again. . . .

I get it. I mean we get a lot of sun in the living room. Closed drapes help a little, but they’re beige.

I suggest black—y’know, like blackout hotel drapes? Like the ones General Bradley had in his command post?

“Are you insane?” she says. “You want this place looking like a goddamned chapel?” Which, oddly enough, is what Patton says of Brad’s CP.

But that was a while back.

I bet now she wishes she listened to me. I don’t know. I haven’t asked. And now—well, now, as always, it’s too late. Of course, I suppose I can just call Shade Bliss and order them. But I don’t know. Years ago SB screwed us on an expensive outdoor patio set. Inside a year the table top pealed.

She’s furious, my wife is.

“This table—this is ridiculous! The top is all peeling. . . . The *chairs*? What about the chairs? The chairs are fine. See here, I’m talking about what we—my husband and I and our guests eat off of—duh!—it’s all peeling!”

I don’t know why she says that. We never have guests. “Pests,” she calls ’em, guests.

Doesn’t do any good. Shade Bliss just says, my wife mimics, “I’m sorry, madam, but you bought our distressed line of teak patio furniture.” Then, “Imagine!,” my wife asks me to do.

So, I really can’t call SB. And, frankly, I’m not sure it will help, given my wife’s state, which, by the way, I feel guilty about for having shared with Hope.

Hope? Oh, let me explain.

But wait-wait! Come to think of it, I feel—what? Liberated. Yes, liberated. You could say I feel guilty about feeling liberated. . . .

It’s important, y’know, to get in touch with your feelings. Why I can’t say. But, anyway, I feel guilty about feeling *liberated*, not about sharing. . . . Honestly, though, I don’t feel any different for saying so.

Okay, that out, let’s see, where are we? Ah—

The thing is I go to the Y every afternoon. “Religiously,” as they say, though God knows I’m not religious. I agree with Napoleon: “Religion keeps the poor from murdering the rich.” I go for strengthening, not not to kill the rich. . . . “Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn” what happens to the rich. . . .

Aerobics I do outside in the early AM, uphill. 'Bout five. Morning, not miles. . . . Did I mention I don't sleep well? Oh, right, right, doxepin. The thing of it is, though, dox, says Dex, hasn't shipped yet. But then, hey presto!, it comes in and I get one of those, y'know, automated calls telling me my script is ready? Right, one of those.

So out I go—on Sunday, of course, always on Sunday, 'cuz naturally there's less traffic, and I say to V&V, "No more doxepin," 'cuz, as I say,—or my wife does—, it doesn't seem to help anymore, so why waste the money. You know what I mean?

Anyway, V&V—'s what I call Varavara— she's the sweet clerk with the thick accent who bears an uncanny resemblance to Melina Mercouri, and wears, I'm sure my wife would agree, if she could, Warby Parker's. Eastern European, I'd guess. Ukrainian, possibly Lithuanian. V&V, not WP.

Anyway, in mind's eye I see between V&V's lavishly red and moist lips a long Karelia or Rex like, like, y'know, Ilya?. . . *Never on a Sunday?*. . . Right, right, that Ilya. . . .

Of Varavara, "Hopefully not Russian," my wife scowls some time back. Then, a marked pause, before an indignant, "Not after what Yelizaveta said to me."

"Vhat do yoah myean?" she means.

Liz—'s what we call Yelizaveta, is my wife's Russian hair dresser.

She still has her hair done, my wife does, about—oh, I don't know, every three weeks, maybe? So, y'know, I think that's good. I mean like the eggs and toast. *When she misses her hair is time enough to worry*, I tell myself. I don't know.

Once I could have told you—I mean exactly how often and all—but that was when my wife noted all appointments on our Charley Harper kitchen calendar. But no more. Hasn't since "Tall Tail." You know, the month with the image of a roadrunner snatching the tail off a lizard? Right. But that was a while back. No entries since. So, I don't really know how often she sees Liz. But the point is she takes offense, Liz does, at something my wife says. What I can't say, and she certainly can't, my wife. But, "Vhat do yoah myean?" Liz goes. That I remember, 'cuz that's exactly what V&V says: "Vhat do yoah myean?" Like Count Dracula, if you know what I mean? Then, as if taking offense, with thinning lips, "No morrre doxepin?"

Well, of course, given my wife's experience, I-I well, I am discombobulated, y'cud say. Yes, discom—

“Yes, no,” I cough up after an embarrassing pause, which I endeavor to cover with, “Where's Dex?”

Out with a bad knee, turns out.

That's the problem with running, 'cuz I used to be a runner, y'see. Well, not marathon or anything like Dex, but a runner nevertheless.

“Wow!” I say, “that's no good.” “Tell me about it,” Dex says,” limping back to get my monthly stash: Amlodipine, lisinopril, metoprolol, chlorothiazide, all for, y'know, high blood pressure. And, of course, dox for sleep.

“Essential BP,” the doc names it, gesturing, I see, a blade across his throat while peering over—and this is just a guess, but no less educated, 'cuz, y'know, I've picked up a lot over the years from my wife—Tory Burch tortoise shells. I figure that's good, though. I mean BP, not TB. I mean how bad can *essential* BP be? I mean—what? crucial? vital? indispensable? How bad can such BP be? . . .

Oh, almost forgot, Eliquis, the blood thinner? That too.

“AFib,” the doc throws in, over his TB's.

Atrial fibrillation, he means. You know, abnormal heart rhythm?

“Stroke, heart failure,” he mutters, I think, 'cuz, y'know, the tinnitus in my left ear makes hearing a little hard. But hey! the right one's good— so far. . . .

Anyway, “Vhat do yoah myean?” Varavara goes, before her dark eyes snap, “No morrre doxepin?”

“Yes, no,” I say, with fluttering heartbeat, shortness of breath, and lightheadedness. Her glacial smile then sends me slinking off to the Y. . . .

Weights. Not heavy, minja, but hey! I'm not training for the Olympics, if you know what I mean. “Maintaining,” 's what I call it, “just maintaining,” as I say to Hope in the parking lot.

I'm coming, she's going. Haven't seen her in years. Looks great, still has her figure. Or maybe I'm seeing how she looks when way back when the four of us are swinging and I am singing, "Me and Mrs. Jones," 'cuz we have a thing going on, me and Mrs. Jones, dancing on the patio, in the sweet summer sweat, dancing to remember or dancing to forget. "Such a lovely place, such a lovely face."

"I know what you mean," I hear, before, with a vocal tremor, a rushed, "I have to go."

"Really?" I say, imagining, "*But tomorrow we'll meet the same place.*"

But instead, "Of course, of course," comes out, 'cuz earlier she tells me what it's costing to have a caregiver for Slim. He has Parkinson's, y'see, Slim Jones does.

"A few hours a week," Hope allows when I ask, y'know, for conversation, but really to keep her close like sunlight, "How often?"

"Whatever," she says, adding a weak, "we can afford." . . . Then, just to be polite, I guess, "And you? How are you and I doing?"

Usually, y'know, I just blow off such as that, but this time, I don't know, but I just go off, spill the beans, so to say. Like, "Ivy's not good," and so forth and so on.

That's when she hugs me, tearing, the both of us actually, and I say something vapid, something like, "It's okay, it's okay," when we both know it's not okay, at the YMCA.

"Depression," Hope whooshes in my bad ear, as of a monster in the bitter night, and again, "Depression."

She's a nurse, y'see, Hope is, or at least used to be, and they're pretty sharp, y'know, those nurses are.

"Depression," Hope sighs again, and fidgets with her edgy glasses so as to fist her eyes. "We can do things now with depression."

And I think—imagine! —albeit for just a split second, but still, *I wanna be lost in your eyes. I wanna meet and talk with you, Mrs. Jones.*

When she breaks away I say, “Tell Slim hello,” and right away I think what an idiotic thing to say, ’cuz, y’know, Slim Jones used to work on an oil rig and now he can’t even remember his own daughter’s name. Or is it son’s? Whatever—

“Oh, I-I’m sorry,” or something lame like that I cast into the wind, and the wind kinda spits it back, the way it ever does the banal when there’s nowhere to turn, nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. But Hope is good.

“Oh, he’ll remember you,” Hope shouts back over a rounded shoulder, before a hurried, “Say hi to I.”

I go into the Y, thinking, *How wonderful to be remembered*. Then, during curls, maybe lifts, *Except, perhaps, to be forgotten*.

I go home.

I hover a while over the figure crumpled up like a stress ball that now and again coughs, and to my lips comes, “Where’s the paint from your lips?”

Then, bingo-bango, I feel alive, like fireworks and symphonies, and think, *I am not alone*. *We can do things with depression*.

Then I turn on “Valse triste,” and sit on the edge of our unarmed whatever, ruminating.

*Without you I’m broke. I’m just a sad song, before all else I think, searching as if for the passage back, with a kiss and a heave, I can check out anytime, but I can never leave. . . .*

---

After retiring from a career teaching philosophy, Vincent Barry returned to his first love, fiction. His stories have appeared in numerous publications in the U.S. and abroad, including: *The Saint Ann’s Review*, *The Bitchin’ Kitsch*, *The Broken City*, *Abstract: Contemporary Expressions*, *Kairos*, *Terror House*, *Caveat Lector*, *The Fem*, *BlogNostics*, *The Writing Disorder*, *whimperbang*, *The Disappointed Housewife*, *The Collidescope*, *Anti-Heroin Chic*, and *Beakful*. Barry lives in Santa Barbara, California.