

March 23, 1985

Dear Connie & Bob,

Fran's father died early Wednesday morning. Damn, but the man was good. The traditional priority rates relatives above friends; I always figured that you can pick your friends, while relatives are a matter of coincidence. Bill was both; I considered him a very close friend. He was one heck of a nice person. If I'd been told he could be saved only by removing my left arm, I'd have been digging for a knife while trying to figure out how to deal with the socket. For once, I'm not stretching the point; it would have been nothing. If I had never known anyone else in his family, it would still have been nothing.

Bill enjoyed an off-color joke with the best of them--he was no stuffed shirt. We swapped quite a few. Those were amusing days. He'd started out on an Ohio farm, won a scholarship to study in Athens, became one heck of a classical scholar. He taught for a while in various colleges. Then in 1955, the U of Maryland asked him to come up and found a department of classical languages and literature. He moved up from Louisiana with Frances Sr. (his wife) and Frances Jr. (his daughter) and founded the department. He started out moving his own furniture and being "the" department. When he left as professor emeritus nearly thirty years later, they had one very fine department operating. The fellow could speak, as I recall, some two classical (Latin and greek) and five modern (Spanish, Portugese, Italian and a few others) languages. And those are only the ones he judged himself competent in--most folks would say he spoke quite a few others, including German, but by his standards anything less than a perfect familiarity with all the nuances and local accents of a language was not knowledge of the tongue. I'm told that in Sicily the folks constantly told him he must be a mafioso, because while he insisted he was American, he could speak Italian like a native Sicilian. They would pester him for his "real" name. Once in a Spanish restaurant here I heard him talking with the owner at great length, and I knew enough Spanish to know when the owner was asking him what part of Spain he was born in....and was told Ohio. And there was the time ~~we~~ had an Indian waiter. Bill asked the fellow about the Yorkshire Pudding, and was told, in English, that the waiter didn't think much of it. Bill laughed and made some remark about English cooking, and the waiter agreed. He then made a remark I didn't understand, and the waiter nearly croaked. It turned out it was Hindi for "The English are such pigs," a common remark among higher caste Indians, and something the waiter had not heard since he left Delhi years before--and certainly never expected an American to pop in with.

I've seen men with far lesser gifts than these grow puffed with pride (myself included), but Bill was as down to earth as anyone. We held long debates on the obscure origins of four letter words and equally interesting discussions on the derivations of Spanish from Latin. (One of the best documentations of this comes from the letters a fifth-century Spanish nun sent to her convent during a pilgrimage to the holy land. These were filed away and only discovered twelve hundred years later, when they gave linguists vital clues into how one language was fading into another shortly after the collapse of Rome). God, what a mind, what a man, is now dust! He met Frances Sr. when he was returning from service in WWII. He had been stationed in Egypt and India, and had met "uncle willie", as Fran Jr. calls him. Willie's sister, Frances, was a war bride who had been widowed when her first husband was lost in the Normandy landings. Bill and Frances hit it off, and in 1948 they were married.

In any event, Bill was 72 but doing rather well physically. Around 2 AM Wednesday morning, he had difficulty breathing and asked Frances Sr. to call an ambulance. He was taken to a local hospital and admitted. He seemed to be doing quite well. Around 3, they let Frances Sr. in to see him, and he spoke to his

cardiologist on the phone; the cardiologist later told me there were no signs of congestive heart failure at that point and he had figured on seeing him around 6 AM to give definitive opinion. About 4, though, he suffered a massive heart attack: lost consciousness, blood pressure plummeted, etc.. The ER staff worked on him and got the cardiologist in. (The card. later told me they'd tried to put on a pacemaker on the outside of the chest; I don't know if there is such a device, or if he was attempting to reduce CPT to a layman's terms. I guess it doesn't make much difference.). Around 5:20, I think the OR folks tipped the nurse-receptionist that there wasn't much hope, and she finally browbeat our phone number out of Frances, Sr., who had refused to give it on the basis that Frances Jr. was 7 1/2 months pregnant and would be disturbed. A few minutes later I got the call, the nurse saying that Bill had been admitted earlier and had just coded; we'd better get out there. I had Fran, jr., who probably suspected the message, asking in one ear who it was, the nurse in the other giving directions, and me trying to speak in a way that didn't give matters away. Then I lay down and told Fran as carefully as I could. We burned up the beltway getting over there and then waited in the reception room. The nurse explained they had him in the OR, were putting in a pacemaker but it didn't look like he would make it. Around 8 AM or so, while both Frans were in the restroom, the cardiologist came out and explained that he hadn't: they'd tried everything and nothing had worked. He was somewhat astonished himself, repeating that he had talked to Bill around 3 AM and an hour later he was all but dead, that there was no sign of congestive heart failure then, and so on.

When Fran and her mother came out, I whispered that I would circle around behind Fran, Sr. in case she fell. She didn't, although we you can imagine and I saw the reaction. We had an open-casket viewing starting Friday morning. I had thought that rather barbaric, but now agree that it is essential. This morning when we first came in Fran Jr. went to the restroom and her mother wandered off. I guessed correctly that she wanted a few moments along with Bill. After a few minutes I followed, very quietly, and remained in a position where I was outside the room, was not close enough to hear much, but would see and hear if she fell or anything like that. If this sounds excessively precise, let me add one detail; I was having a hell of a time keeping my eyes clear enough to see and my own sobs quiet enough that she would not hear. As I am typing now I am keeping my head back, because water of any form can short out a computer keyboard. I had my own few seconds alone, when I dropped three dimes into the coffin...the Latin tradition of giving the deceased three coins to tip the boatman into the underworld. It was probably the only part of the ceremony Bill would have cared for. That, too, came to me through a haze of tears when I realized there wasn't much here that would have appealed to him. That, and the realization that for him as for me, the work is the most important thing. I went through his papers on his desk to try to find out what would be most vital. I found one letter of recommendation for a student he had found promising--the letter said he was the best student he'd had yet--so I located the person, found it should be forwarded to a certain office, and will send it with appropriate documentation tomorrow. I found some other papers which will require handling. That will be an honor. There are some which were in positions that suggested he might be doing something with them--papers on Vergil the Roman poet, and on the translation of Dante from the Italian, and some on his travels in Spain just before the second world war--maybe he was thinking about editing these into something publishable. I'll have to contact the classics department about those. (Lord, one of the students told me she recalled hearing Bill and his closest friend, Henry Mendeloff, who passed away a few months ago, many times cracking jokes. She said it was the funniest thing she'd ever heard; two men carrying on an hours long vaudeville routine in four languages, comparing puns, insults, translation

errors, and so on. What a hell of a character!

He got around, too. He spoke of his travels just before WWII broke out, through Spain, Germany and Italy (he knew how to pick them). There was the professor at one German university, whose students gave him a beer mug, inscribed with their name, at graduation. He was quite proud of the collection. As he showed it to Bill, he asked "And whose might THIS mug be?" and popped the lid open to reveal names like the Baron von Richtofen, the "Red Baron" of WWI, and von Ribbentrop, Hitler's minister of state. Bill also recalled being outside one Fascist rally in Italy, which was to be addressed jointly by Adolph Hitler and Benito Mussolini. A stereotypical German--down to a monacle--was pleading to be admitted despite his lacking a ticket and, as I recall, got Bill to translate from German into Italian that he had driven all the way from Munich on his motorcycle just to hear his fuhrer speak.

I've probably gone on too long as it is, but this was a very personal blow. Bill was a danged close friend as well as Fran's father. He did make it to 72, which is about average for males, did so in perfect health (The night he died was the only time he spent in the hospital in the entire 72 years), and lived a fuller life than most folks, including myself. He went out quickly, had a chance to meet with his wife before then, yet didn't go out in her presence (I never agreed with the popular favor toward punching out in your sleep--that just leaves your spouse to find you). I wish he'd been around in another six weeks to see his grandchild. Or another ten years, or whatever. But if that wasn't in the cards, it was as good a way to go out as any and better than most. At least this is what reason tells me. My guts just say slicing off the arm would be a trivial exchange, and that I'd better not get my head over the keyboard because a salt solution is especially bad for circuitry. I cannot speak much of it here, for the other two persons here are a widow of 37 years whose anniversary would have been next week, and a daughter of 34 years. Under the circumstances, the friend of 5 years has a duty to be the most stoic about it. Oh, well. The arrival of a grandchild in five or six weeks should do much to cheer both the mother and the grandmother, and caring for it will be a suitable diversion, so that will be a desirable comfort.

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