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# Jefferson in Central Pennsylvania

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## Jefferson in Central Pennsylvania

BY FRED G. LEEBRON

JEFFERSON WAS IN HIS TENTH WEEK AT THE COLLEGE when one of his students locked herself in her empty dorm room on a Saturday night, dished up the soundtrack to *Les Misérables* at high volume, and with a thick braided rope hung herself from a claw hook in the ceiling. The newspaper three days later called the cause of death self-strangulation, and Jefferson marveled at the opacity of the latinate, how it blurred the harshness of the act. He clipped the one-inch item and kept it in his desk, to show wayward students who insisted on giving credence to the rumor that she'd been murdered. On e-mail were instructions from the dean about how to handle this particular issue. Still, wasn't murder somehow better than suicide? In a detached way he tried to wonder at it, to turn it over in his mind like a shape of three dimensions whose actual essence could be determined by continual rotation.

Murder was someone's conclusion against another person; suicide was your own conclusion against yourself. The previous year the college had a student who was now being prosecuted for murdering her baby. Jefferson, who had two children of his own, had been screening potential sitters very carefully. Now the college had a student who had taken her own life. It was some kind of fucked-up school, he thought, glancing at the short column once again. But they'd bought a house and the academic job market was tough. They were staying.

In his briefcase was the dead student's last paper. She'd stayed up all night last Thursday to finish it, in class that Friday she rested her head on her folded arms, and Saturday night she completed her life. Was that a finer way to refer to it? On Sunday morning the dean had called her professors, Monday, Jefferson personally met with and cancelled each of his classes, Tuesday was the funeral and the memorial and that newspaper article. Now it was Friday and he was behind in his grading. He'd never contemplated taking his own life, but at times he endured months and months of deep depression. Perhaps that was a contradiction. How could you be depressed and not want to kill yourself? He would say, because he *loved* life. He *never* wanted to die. He was surprised that anybody would, and in the last four or five years—he was now thirty-five—his love had taken on a tenacity that prevented him from flying in airplanes or driv-

ing through storms or visiting large cities, unless he had to. He loved hiking the Appalachian Trail as part of a weekend cleanup crew, he loved following the anachronistic rules and sitting through the arcane meetings at the stuffy college, he loved the smell of his children even when they were sick and he could tell by the sticky sweetness of their scent whether it was a cold or a fever. And he loved his wife, whom he still buoyantly referred to—at almost eight years of marriage—as his bride. He wasn't crazy about his father, but his father was dead. He *adored* his in-laws. *He loved life.*

Of course, he knew what her paper was about. He knew what they were all about; he coached them through the hunt for topics and the construction of outlines and the unpacking of thesis sentences. She had been one of his brightest students. At its most recent stage, her paper had been too broad and ambitious, trying to address the demonization of women in eighteenth-century New England in under fifteen hundred words. If he had to guess, after studying her cheerful columns in the weekly student newspaper and her bubbly home page on the college's intranet, he'd choose home life as the catalyst. On the hour-long trip to the funeral in the college's packed minivan, he'd found himself muscling up for the task at hand. He'd *wanted* to study the family. But at the funeral in the jammed chapel of her Catholic high school, he'd sat in the first row and cried so unceasingly that he could just barely attend to himself. He hadn't been able to manufacture even one tear at his own father's funeral.

The air in his office seemed to grow cold as he unlatched his briefcase and pulled out the Eighteenth Century file folder. It was more than two hundred pages thick and nearly slipped from his hands. He wasn't going to read her paper. Not yet, anyway. He felt it might somehow destroy him. He dropped the folder on his desk—twenty-four papers to be graded by Monday—and switched on his e-mail.

With morbid curiosity (was there any other kind?) he traced the week's sad trajectory: the first e-mail from the dean on Sunday morning, the Sunday evening e-mail from the director of security confirming the cause of death. A clamoring message from her sorority sisters demanding tolerance for absences from classes and requesting that everyone wanting to offer them solace keep their distance unless solicited directly by a sister. How enraged that had made

him feel when he'd first read it—the self-absorption, the survivalist tone. She'd probably hated her sorority sisters. The announcement by the president of a town meeting where “we might all comfort each other in this time of tragedy.” Jefferson had skipped that particular event. The request for an interview by a writer at the student newspaper, which he had respectfully declined. She had been a good student. Instinctively he had liked her, the way you would like a student in a class of reluctant participants who helped you carry them through the hour. But he hadn't really known her. He only knew the hole she left in his class, a jagged silence and a descending altitude. Wednesday he had gotten through. He missed her.

Now Friday. The Faculty Social Hour had been canceled. Out the window across the frosted campus he sensed the collective hangover from what must have been the Town Meeting's emotional excesses. I recall her application, an admissions officer might have said. A sullen student would rise, baseball cap hooding his eyes. She had dinner with me once. Her favorite movie was . . . Jefferson hoped her parents, those huddled people whom he had barely glimpsed at the funeral, had not attended.

Her home page had not yet been deleted or annotated by the college. Her face, puffier, sallower, the indifferent brown hair combed back, was not as he remembered it. He could not quite remember it. He rose from his creaking desk chair, her page blazing at him in the college's colors of blue and purple, and put on his overcoat. He had a half hour until her class. From the back steps of his building he could see her dorm, a renovated red barn that hunched on the edge of campus. When he'd been a student, the rumor was that if your roommate committed suicide, you got a 4.0 for the semester. Now he wished that was true. He'd heard that they were all moving out—all eleven of them. That was one of the few things that made sense to him.

Outside, the air made him shiver. On nearly every building was a plaque. The town had been occupied in the Civil War. The administration building, a long tall white house, had been the infirmary. If you took the elevator to the basement at a certain time of day, you were supposed to see ghosts. He'd tried it several times and been disappointed.

Ruefully, he plowed across the lawn toward the Union. He could not get that Monday class out of his head. They'd all been there, expectant, miserably tinged, when he'd walked in, not even carrying his briefcase. “I guess you heard what happened,” he said. They nodded. “We're not going to have class today.” They nodded again. “But we can talk about it, if you want. Or you can leave.” No one left. A love for all of them leaped from his heart—even for the lacrosse player who was always late and hadn't turned anything in yet, and for the stoner who made overmany sarcastic remarks—and he fought to restrain it. He sat on the desk.

“She killed herself,” a girl said. “I just saw her Friday.”

“We *all* saw her Friday,” a football player said.

“I saw her Saturday afternoon,” a guy who had placed a pack of cigarettes on his desk arm said.

“And?” the girl said.

“Nothing. I just saw her.”

“Does it make any of you feel like killing yourselves?” That was—thank god—not Jefferson who asked. It was one of the students. There were nods and groans.

“I tried once,” someone whispered. He could barely catch who it was.

“I haven't thought about it since I was a freshman,” a junior said.

And he sat there, for the hour, letting them run their encounter session. He said as little as possible. He let them have it. At the end, there was some kind of sigh, and they all looked at him, deflated. He had to say something. He didn't know what to say. His face grew hot and he knew he was blushing and this made him hotter and redder.

“You just—we just—need to be as kind to each other as we can,” he said. “Because we can never know if it will be the last time we have.” Kindness, he was teaching them kindness. The faculty handbook said to teach Truth and Art. There was some truth in kindness—perhaps some art, too—but did he have to sound like a goddamn Hallmark card? They filed from the room.

Now, as he walked the campus, he jammed his hands deeper into his overcoat and tersely shook his head as if to rid himself of the memory of his own weak advice. Nailed to the brick wall of the Union were banners. WE MISS YOU. GOD BLESS YOU! A few wrapped bouquets sagged on the lawn. Inside, the coffee stand was inexplicably closed. The last time he'd seen her she was walking sleepy-eyed from his class. She was wearing sweats. She smiled shyly as she passed. In the e-mails and the banners and the pronouncements, was he wrong to sense an outpouring of grief not for her, but for themselves? Whatever else he could think, it was terrible to know that that could not possibly have been her intent. She had not grieved for them, but for herself on account of some of them, whoever they were and however they had led her to despair. The hole in his own classroom, the hole inside himself—that had been part of her intent. He didn't want any solace. He didn't want any attention. He didn't want to be hugged. He didn't want to express himself. He wanted her intent. He wanted to feel it, the ache, the hurt. She'd had enough. She hadn't wanted people hugging each other over this, intimately wiping each other's tears from their faces. She'd had a terrible intent. He just wanted to feel it the way she had wanted.

But what if she had hated herself, just hated herself and decided she didn't want to live, didn't deserve to live, no rage against anyone but her own perceived shortcomings? Then did the grief for themselves make sense? That they had lost her? His wife had been out raking the lawn yesterday, and

their neighbor had stopped over, a college alum in his seventies who had returned almost salmonlike to this town to retire. Now he was bereft. "We didn't have this when we were their age," he said, his face mottled with sorrow. "This self-confidence problem or whatever you call it." Self-esteem, Jefferson's wife suggested. "Yeah, well, whatever. We didn't kill ourselves back then." Jefferson's wife had stepped back and looked at him calmly, the children out of earshot in a pile of leaves. "People have always been killing themselves," she said. "Well, don't you two people go getting depressed or anything," the neighbor said, his face rosaceous. "It's not worth it."

"Every loss of this nature," the president had written in his e-mail, "is a personal loss. It touches all of us."

As Jefferson opened the door from the Union, he swallowed a gasp. Along the path toward him marched his colleague, the dangerous one, the one who had threatened to quit over his hire, the only other one in his particular field. The others had tried to convince her that Jefferson was just eager to please, but she believed him to be ambitious, and that terrified her. She was seventeen years older than he, and brittle and deceptively demure. He was certain that within the word colleague was an element of the noose—the collar. She was the only thing about the place that he hated. Every time he saw her he tried to feel the complexity in her face that would speak to him, that would tell him she was capable of empathy. She taught less than he did and she made nearly twice as much money and all he could see behind the clear-framed glasses and the dyed and curled hair was that she was capable of empathizing with herself.

"Hello, Jefferson." She smiled quietly. "How are you holding up?"

"Fine, I think. And you?"

"You know." Again she smiled without teeth, her pointy chin pointed down. "It's hard."

"Did you have her in any classes?" he asked gently.

"Oh no," she said, as if had the girl been under her instruction she would never have killed herself.

"She was in mine."

"I know." Her hand fluttered at her side. He was relieved it did not touch him. Briefly they waited for the bell to ring. It didn't.

"I have a class," he said anyway.

"I know." Now she patted him on the shoulder. He recoiled. She looked at him, still tightly smiling. "We missed you at the town meeting. It was *so* cathartic." Again her chin dipped toward the ground. "I read a poem."

This time the bell did ring. He could have kissed it. "I have to run," he said.

"There were more than a thousand people there," she called after him. "It was *really* something."

He hurried back to his building. He hadn't even known that she wrote poetry. But that didn't matter. What mattered

was up the stairs in a classroom. What mattered was them. What mattered was Truth and Art. What mattered was whatever he could figure out that mattered.

Was it that Christmas years before when his father had stood in the kitchen, downing his eighth scotch, slamming his empty glass on the counter? "I don't give a damn that he's done so well," he'd roared at his wife, while pointing at Jefferson. "I am *not* paying for his college." Jefferson's mother had looked up placidly. "Oh yes we are." "How much is it?" he bellowed. "Isn't it ten a year? I'm making what, fifty? You're making nothing. We have nothing. He is nothing." "Frank," his mother said. And Jefferson, a scrawny high school senior, against his dad, who had played football, reaching for him, his dad's long fingers knotting into fists, the wall of his dad's chest heaving. And Jefferson thinking, I can take him, I can take him. Pinning him to the fridge, the fridge rocking. Breath whistling through his father's teeth. Jefferson holding him, holding him, the plum of his father's face draining to white. He would be dead in six months. In six months he'd be in the ground. In six months, Jefferson would know he was going to college. Jefferson still wrapped himself around him, waiting for the shuddering to cease, their faces almost touching, the rough patina of his father's five o'clock shadow, how long ago he would take it against Jefferson during a tickle fight and rub it over his baby face until he screamed with pain and delight. The sorrow that divided him.

As he ascended the steps, a massive window opened onto the back of the college grounds, the empty red barn, the soccer field, and the thick belt of national park that separated the town from the state, that marked its last great engagement in the history of the country. During the Civil War, Lincoln had come here and given a speech, a speech which no one had particularly anticipated and which was generally dismissed. A speech which was now considered some kind of rhetorical marvel. Two years later, he would be murdered. Beyond the college, Jefferson could see restored canons and the careful hatchwork of battlefield fencing. He knew little about the Civil War. He wondered, Was it a campaign against the other or a campaign against the self? Soon it would be the anniversary of Lincoln's speech. The majority of the fancifully colored leaves had fallen, and what few remained were only muted brown or pale—flesh-colored. Winter would arrive before December. The class would plant a tree for her. He'd heard through the mill that she'd gone from shop to shop and found the rope at a paint store, that the chair pocked the wall in her dorm room when she kicked it back. He understood that she took her life.

The students were waiting when he walked in, their arms crossed within the tight chair-desks, their mouths closed into lines. He stood at the board and watched as they found their books and pens. "We have just four weeks left," he said, as he forced eye contact with each of them. "Let's move on." ■