

THE GRIFFIN



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Gwynedd-Mercy College

Bubbling Up

Judy Belk

Laura's relationship with Albert was a classic one of love and hate. Lately, the hate mode was in overdrive. Albert's contentment and satisfaction was what she hated and loved about him the most.

He reminded her of a bubble, just sitting and waiting to be punctured. Laura was ready to do the poking. At times, she was ready for Albert, the bubble man, as she called him, to – just, well, to disappear. Lately, her fantasy had been to see bubble Albert float up and away like those soapy bubbles she often saw the kids at the playground blowing and then rushing to catch and burst. The bursting part looked the most fun.

But tonight as she glanced at Albert sleeping in the easy chair across from her, it was hard to imagine him leaving the house, let alone floating anywhere. His glasses were perched halfway down his nose. His favorite faded bathrobe, torn and spotted, could barely cover his middle-aged paunch. Even though he wasn't exerting an ounce of energy, sweat was pouring down his face, and his breathing was so heavy you would have thought he had just run a marathon. But his only movement in the last hour was when he had pushed his heavy backside slightly up from the chair (in her direction, of course) to let out a loud burst of bodily gas. The pungent smell was still heavy in the air.

How did her life come to be this? Sitting in a hot, childless, foul-smelling apartment with a man that at times she hated as much as she loved. She had a recurring dream of hiding all the sharp knives in the house from herself...afraid that she would wake up one morning and see him sleeping beside her and go berserk. In the dream, after searching days for a steak knife, he focused on the short term, never once asking the big question like, "Where the hell did all the steak knives go?"

But that's how Albert copes with life. Fix the problem, move on, and be grateful there's a Wal-Mart down the street. She's always been the smart one. Folks don't like to admit it, but in every relationship there's the smart one and a weak one.

People like Albert know their limitations, which make them easy prey for folks like Laura who were never taught the proper way to love or be loved.

Still, in spite of himself, it always seemed like Albert was the one who came out on top. Maybe it simply was a case of low expectations. Albert seemed to have everything he wanted, right down to the 50-plus cable channels; a dead-end, but well-paying job at the suit factory outside of town; a Kentucky Fried Chicken within walking distance; and a wife he freely admits he doesn't deserve.

Laura was smart all right, but nothing ever came easy to her. She was in awe of Albert's ability to find joy and contentment with such ease and consistency. Contentment was one of those mysterious feelings she knew she would never experience. She was here, and contentment was way over on the other side, and she had neither the energy nor the road map to make it from here to there. There was just too much dangerous ground to conquer in between. So she just navigated the best way she could.

From the moment she hit 35, Laura knew she wanted a husband. No, that's not totally true. She didn't want a husband. She wanted a baby. She needed a husband to get a baby, or at least at the time she thought so. Laura was more surprised than anyone when the baby thing hit her. For years she had sworn she would never bring a child into this world. Her parents, both alcoholics, made it clear to her every day of her childhood that they didn't want a child. They took okay care of her – fed her, clothed her, made sure she went to school – but both made it clear to her numerous times that if there was a choice between her and their next bottle of booze, the booze would win out each time. But that was fine with Laura, really. Laura liked to know where she stood with people. She always felt she had no standing with her parents and acted accordingly. She did her best to grow up as fast as she could, all the while thinking that the smart thing to do was to stay away from the parenting scene.

But then, just before her 35th birthday, both of her parents died unexpectedly, six months apart. By this time, she had her own struggles with the bottle. She had been sober for almost three years when she got word her father was dying. When she visited her father at the hospice center, she hardly recognized him. She hadn't wanted to see him in over five years, and she was shocked at the thin, sickly man who motioned to her when she entered the room. He was more talkative during

that last hour of his life than Laura had remembered him being throughout her entire childhood.

"I didn't expect you to come, Laura Lee."

"I didn't want to come."

"But you're here now, aren't you Miss Laura?"

Laura looked away and focused on the cloudless blue sky outside. She was glad it was him dying and not her.

"I got any grandbabies?"

"Not a one."

"What you waiting for, Miss Laura? You damn near forty, ain't you?"

"Thirty-five. And there won't be any grandbabies, Daddy."

"Well that just about breaks my dying heart. Now what am I supposed to say to your mama when I see her at those pearly gates?"

"I wouldn't count on the pearly gates being the designated meeting place for you or mama."

He started laughing so hard that he had a coughing fit. Laura thought he was going to die on the spot. He pointed to his water pitcher. She poured him a glass and helped him take a sip.

"You can't say we didn't raise you to speak your mind. You're a hard lady, Miss Laura." He took a sip and held tightly onto her hand as she tried to pull it back.

"We weren't so bad were we? Maybe liked our whiskey a little more than we should. But all in all we weren't the worst parents a little girl could have, huh?"

"Neither of you would exactly get the parent of the year award."

He let go of her hand and took a deep breath that Laura thought would be his last.

"No, I guess we wouldn't. Guess we wouldn't. So go and get it right, Laura."

"Get what right?"

"The parenting thing. Since we messed it up so bad – don't miss your chance to get it right. Besides, with your mama gone and me sliding out right behind her, you won't have to worry about nominating us for any grandparents' awards,

either. Likely to mess that up as well. It's better that we'll both be gone."

Her father died an hour later. The day after, Laura got the baby urge. She knew better than to think it was just a mere coincidence. His last words did more than stir her maternal instincts. She felt validated hearing him own up to what she knew all along. He had been a lousy father. Now that they were gone, she felt the freedom and determination to succeed in all the areas where her parents had failed her.

She met Albert a week later when she gave him a ticket for parking illegally in a disabled space. He came out of the local Kentucky Fried Chicken munching on a drumstick just as she was writing up the citation. He was sweating then, too, and she was bracing herself for some ugliness. Instead, he apologized and offered her a piece of his chicken. She couldn't help but laugh.

"What's this for?"

"You shouldn't have to work during the lunch hour. You look hungry."

"Is this your car?"

"Yeah. I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too. Here's a \$65 ticket...and your piece of chicken back."

"No, you keep the chicken."

"You trying to bribe a meter maid?"

"No, you just look kind of hungry."

"Well, we're not allowed to take anything from anyone, even a drumstick. It could be misinterpreted."

For the next three weeks, Laura issued almost twenty citations to Albert for parking in the same place at the same time. Eventually, it hit her. He was flirting with her. He finally got up enough nerve to ask her to a movie. She accepted initially because she felt bad about sticking him with all those tickets and felt one date wouldn't hurt. The funny thing is, she actually had a good time.

All of Albert's habits that drive her crazy now seemed kind of sweet back then. For the first time in a long time, she went months without even thinking about taking a drink. One thing led to another, and she found herself saying yes when he asked her to marry him a few months after they started dating.

In the back of her mind, she thought she would get pregnant right away, and if things didn't work out, she could always get a divorce. (She had learned from her parents' behavior to always have an exit strategy.) Besides, she felt she was smart enough to raise a child on her own. She knew from her own experience that having two parents didn't guarantee much.

Laura anticipated everything except her own infertility. The verdict was in. Three years of unsatisfying sex with Albert, hormone treatments, temperature taking – all had come up short and seemed to point to her as the culprit. Albert's sperm count was off the charts. It was her eggs that were bad. Damaged goods. Maybe a sign that she was unfit to be a mother? No, she needed this baby to prove something to herself, and besides, her own mother was proof that there's no correlations between fertility and maternal prowess. And what about Albert? She needed his sperm, his generous insurance benefits, and savings to pay for a series of artificial insemination treatments that she had just agreed to begin. She also realized she needed his help to raise this baby. A baby needed to feel safe and contented. Needed to know the proper way to love. Albert would be good at teaching the loving part.

She looked over at Albert, who was snoring loudly. She thought about waking him to explain the new treatment plan, but decided to wait until morning, or better yet, suggest they meet at Kentucky Fried Chicken for lunch. She didn't expect any resistance. Albert felt lucky just to have her. He told her that every night. Still, he wouldn't be happy about having to give yet another sperm specimen on demand. But he would do it. Each time he made the trip to the fertility clinic, he made sure he had a picture with him of Laura in her meter maid uniform standing in front of Kentucky Fried Chicken. He said she was his secret weapon. Laura suspected it was more likely the Colonel's chicken that got his juices going. The thought of Albert jerking off while thinking about a hot and spicy chicken wing made Laura laugh out loud. Albert didn't budge.

She reached for the bottle of scotch, which lately was always nearby. She took a sip of the whiskey. It felt good going down. She knew she would have to quit drinking as soon as she got pregnant. But right now, the warm smooth taste calmed her as she went back to highlighting names in a new baby book she picked up from Nan's Hallmark on her way home.