



LOL

At Least a Moment of It and I Want More

By G. Raymond McCullough

It is Saturday morning. A very dear friend and I decide to have coffee at a Starbucks in the Queen Anne neighborhood of Seattle, just a short walk from her condominium. We enjoy having coffee together. Our excursions usually entail musing about the mundane and not-so-mundane activities of our lives and, of course, solving the problems of humanity. The highlight of our visits to Starbucks is people-watching. On this particular Saturday morning, we find ourselves seated one table away from a couple. The table in between ours and this couple's table remains unoccupied, most likely because it would require close quarters for all and the dispatching of any imagined sense of privacy.

Anyway, I find myself fixated on this couple sitting a table away. They are engaged in what my friend calls "parallel play". In other words, he is doing his thing (reading the sports section of the newspaper), and she is doing hers (being bored—that's my interpretation). As time progresses, the woman's exasperation appears to mount as she is seemingly being ignored by her companion. She turns her attention to her I-Phone and begins conversing with her virtual companion (a girlfriend, boyfriend?, family member) through text messaging. This couple is lost in their own worlds.

I am relating my observations to my friend who doesn't have the proper position for observation because she is sitting in a seat with her back to the wall. I coax her to discretely turn to her right so she can partake of my enjoyable observations. She is reluctant to do so, and thus I remain the conduit for all that is occurring between this couple. I am okay with my role.

Occasionally, they both make attempts to engage each other in conversation. His attempts are marked by making small talk about what he is reading in the sports section. He says, pointing to a picture on the front page of the Seattle Times Sports page,

"You see this guy grabbing the jersey of the other soccer player? I didn't know you could do that, but I guess you can." She looks unimpressed with his attempt and feigns mild interest before she returns to her I-Phone and text messaging. He follows mere moments later with, "You remember when I use to play?" Her response is barely discernible because she does not respond verbally, and if there is a nonverbal response, it is imperceptible. Minutes later, the woman breaks from her parallel play and attempts to engage her male friend in conversation by relating the content of a text message she has just received. The response from her male friend is a disinterested nod that is barely noticeable. This interaction, or lack thereof, goes on for the next 30 to 40 minutes.

At some point the woman says to a male companion, "I am going to the restroom." Her male friend barely acknowledges her comment as he re-reads the front page of the sports section for the fifth or sixth time, briefly getting up to retrieve another section of the newspaper that he appears to quickly become bored with. The woman is gone for what seems like fifteen minutes. I say to my friend, "She must be constipated if it is taking her that long in the bathroom." My friend responds, "You know there are always lines for the women's restroom. Or maybe she is in there talking to her boyfriend on her I-Phone." She reads my mind with respect to the latter-stated possibility.

During the woman's absence, my friend and I commiserate over what is happening in this relationship. We both reflect on our past relationships, and we make note of some of the similarities we see in this couple and in our past relationships. My friend talks about her past marriage and I about mine. This is not new territory for either us because we have had similar discussions with each other about this topic on many occasions.

As I do my analysis of the situation at hand, at one point my friend says to me, "I am re-traumatized by all of this because it reminds me so much of my marriage." One thing leads to another, and we find ourselves talking about our weddings to our previous spouses and the lack of joy involved in the festivities. I have told my friend on repeated occasions that I was so drunk and high at my wedding reception that I have very little memory of the event. However, I do clearly remember the wedding ceremony and feeling wrecked with abject terror about the journey I was about to embark upon. During our discourse, my friend says to me regarding my being so high and drunk that I couldn't remember the wedding reception, "Maybe you were celebrating."

This comment causes me to experience a rolling laughter that I can barely control. This is the kind of laughter that I have not experienced in years. I want to remind you that my friend had to know her comment was nowhere near the truth. Maybe that's why it was so hilarious to me because it was one of those absurd truths. Absurd truths?

Nonetheless, I am able to regain my composure by the time the woman returns from the restroom. My astute observations are back on to the case study at hand. I almost forget that my friend and I are trying to determine if they are married. My friend has already related to me that the guy doesn't have a ring on so I task her with trying to determine if the woman is wearing a ring when she returns from the restroom. She does, a solitaire emerald surrounded by diamonds. I assume they are real.

Upon the his companion's return from the restroom, the man seems to realize he has been ignoring her (at this juncture we will call her his wife). He offers her a piece of his lemon shortbread bread that, after sitting untouched for the last hour, has to be as stale as their relationship. She declines his offer, and he looks distressed. For the next couple of minutes, they each make attempts to engage each other but with little success. It seems as if the window of opportunity for that to occur shut 30 to 40 minutes ago.

As they gather their trash to leave, they hold on to two clear Starbucks Viente cups containing ice that has almost completely melted and some water. This will likely be the only reminder of their morning coffee together. They disappear out the door, and we see him pass by the window in front of us. Where is she...we ponder? She is standing alone outside the door. Minutes later, the man once again passes by the window to rejoin her. We watch them as they cross the street together and proceed up the sidewalk side-by-side in what appears to be parallel walking.

At this point, you are probably asking yourself what this story has to do with the title. Well to you, maybe nothing. But for me, I remember the minute details of this couple's interaction because it is linked to a momentous occasion of my "laughing out loud". I enjoyed that morning with my friend. It was a special morning as are many of our treks to Starbucks for a triple-tall-nonfat-mocha-extra-hot with light whipped cream and a 8-grain roll heated up with a pat of butter (that's my dear friend's consistent order). And, for me, it depends on what mood I am in but usually it's a green tea latte— but not on this day.

A laugh alone is like a tree falling in the woods when no one is there to hear it fall. A poignant moment shared with a friend that brings laughter is like being in that forest surrounded by falling trees and being assured none will fall on you. It's dramatic, it's thunderous, and it's surreal.

When we are no longer under the influence of alcohol and other drugs we become very aware of our surroundings. This gives an opportunity to self reflect and grow from our observations. Along the way we may even get a good laugh.