

Happy Talk

by James Lynn Smith

Doris saw fellow worker Bill on a counter stool in the coffee shop. To her, the aroma was rich and uplifting, but apparently not to him. Hunched over, his face was practically in the coffee mug. He was not one to brighten a room with gaiety, but she approached anyway. His white shirt and tie seemed the ones he had worn for a week. *No stickler for outward appearances. Too bad, with a little grooming he'd be a nice looking guy.*

“Lighten up, Bill,” she said. “The sun’s shining and you’re not broke or sick. Maybe everything’s not going your way, but you’ve lots of reasons to be happy.”

He brushed back his unkempt black hair, graying on the sides, but didn’t face her. “True, all that. But it’s not so simple. I have an existential sadness pulling me down. It’s like a weight, even making the air I breathe seem smothering.”

“Like ‘existential’ in philosophy? Then you’re saying you feel all alone and the only thing you believe exists is what you directly experienced.”

“Yeah, what I feel can’t be lifted by Pollyanna rhetoric. I have to see something, feel it, taste it, or have it knock me on the head before believing it.”

“Wow, you’re a case. But haven’t you ever done something fun?”

“Sort of, but there’s also the awareness that it’s temporary. Even our sun will engulf the earth someday and then burn out.”

“That concerns you in your earthly lifetime?”

Bill rubbed his chin. “Why wouldn’t it? It’s going to happen and then those joyful times might just as well have never occurred.”

Doris hesitated, mouth agape. “If you’re existential, why do you say that?”

Have you experienced the sun burning out?”

“What do you mean?”

“You have to experience it or you can’t believe it, remember.”

“Big deal, so maybe I’m not entirely existential after all.”

“No. Merely a pessimist with a grim attitude.”

“Now you’re judging. What I’m saddled with is serious. And medications for it have bad side effects.”

“Sorry, you’re right. I think it’s depression.” Doris considered telling him how depressed she was as a teen, wanting to be a tall blonde and developing into a petite, pale, freckled face redhead instead. Now, pushing middle age, she had conquered most episodes of despondency. However, her teen woes didn’t seem to be something he could relate to.

“So you think I need drugs and a therapist to lecture me with happy talk, huh?”

Doris waited for his frown to subside. “I don’t know for a fact. But I know brain chemistry affects how we think, how we feel, and what we do. And affirming positive thoughts, when we follow through by doing something, affects the chemistry.”

“That’s not convincing. Why should I waste my time with affirmations and efforts at ‘doing?’ First I have to feel better before I can ‘do’ anything constructive.”

“Bill, you’re still *functional*. A lifestyle change might help you without a kick-start on meds. Depression is the great trickster. It talks through your feelings, telling you that cures are hopeless, saying it’s your constant companion and there’s nothing to be done about it.” She moved closer and looked directly into his eyes. “It’s a lie. Action, based on right thought, can flush it out. Reward yourself for the slightest success. Be aware of the warm sun on your face on a crisp morning.

That's a positive. Make your mind register that."

She scooted onto the stool beside him. "Think of it this way: depression is a negative spirit, desperate to survive in your brain because it has no real power. It exists on the energy you feed it through your belief in it."

"Humph," Bill muttered. "That idea sounds good, even to me, but I still can't connect. When people start this positive mumbo-jumbo, I automatically fall asleep, tune out, or look for somewhere else to go."

Doris nodded. "That's because what they're talking about is beyond your reach at the moment. You have to start where you are. Baby steps."

Bill's brows knitted in thought. "I wouldn't even know what 'baby steps' to take."

"Start with an obstacle first, one that seems hopeless. Is there anyone in your life you're reluctant to reach out to, but feel you should?"

"Wow, that opens a can of worms. My wife died years back, and I have a grown daughter who moved away years ago. When she was home, we argued a lot. She wanted to skip college and start a super model career. Finally, we couldn't talk at all. She moved off to the big city, got into drugs, then recovery, but wouldn't communicate. I gave up on her. Last I heard she was a part-time waitress."

"Do you have a phone number or address?"

"Yeah, one time I tracked her down, but I don't know if she's at the same place now. I never called."

Doris raised her eyebrows in question.

"There's no point," he blurted. "We'd still disagree so I don't know what I'd say."

"Bill, you don't have to agree or bring up old subjects. Tell her you think about her. That's not something to argue about, is it?"

"Sounds stupid to call up for nothing more than that. What's the point?"

“That’s depression talking, Bill. The ‘droopy D’ is trying to convince you to give up doing something that would make you feel a tiny bit better, simply because it is tiny.”

“Oh brother,” he said, hunched over and pulled the coffee mug to his face again. “Where do you get all this stuff? Depression tells lies, positive affirmations. Are you a psychologist?”

Doris looked away and spoke quietly. “Sorry, I’m just sharing few things I know from personal experience. Not exactly a clinical prescription.” She shook her head to the coffee attendant and eased off the stool, turning toward the exit door.

*

After work, Bill stopped by a diner, had his evening meal, and went home. He started to turn on the TV and plop into the lounge chair, but instead sat on the couch and thought about this morning at the coffee shop. *Doris is a good gal. Smart, attractive, efficient, always a cheerful word.* He took a breath and muttered to the empty room, “At least to most people she’s cheerful. Why not to me?” He felt sure he was a “drip,” but other people had an incurable naiveté called “hope.”

Bill became aware that he sat beside the end table with a telephone, not his usual seat. He wasn’t conscious of making the choice to sit there and wondered about it until—

“Give me a break,” he barked at the empty air. “I’m not wasting my time.” Bill leaned forward, burying his face in his hands and took a long, full breath. Shaking his head, he straightened up and fumbled for a small booklet of phone numbers.

She’s probably not there or moved away. With slow deliberation to overcome trembling fingers, he punched in the last phone number he had for his daughter. *The ringtone started. I’ll give it four rings.* He felt the pulse in his temples, faster than usual. With four rings, he started to hang up, feeling relief, but

then stopped. *Well, just a few more, then I know I tried.* After the seventh ring it seemed certain she was away, but as he began to pull the phone away from his ear, he heard the click.

A tired, weak voice answered, "...Hello?"

He wondered if it was her. "Is this Janet Woods?"

"Yes." The sound of a sigh came next. "Look, whoever you are, if I owe you, I'll get it to you soon as my paycheck comes in."

"Janet, this is..." *What do I say? Father's so formal and supportive. Bill or William too remote—Crap, just do it!* "This is your dad, Janet."

"You're my dad? Why are you—Where are you?"

"I'm at home. Thought I'd touch base with you and see if—"

"If I'm ready to see the error of my ways? Please, I'm too tired to argue."

"Wait, Janet. I didn't call for that." Bill swallowed. "You are often on my mind, that's all." He heard no response at all. *Fainted or what?*

Finally, a weak quavering sound, "I think of you too."

Unable to think of anything important or non-argumentative, he said, "I've got to take care of some things before tomorrow, so I'll go now. Take care, Janet."

"You too, Dad."

After the call, Bill moved toward the TV, but stopped. Instead of turning it on, he went to the kitchen and made a cup of coffee. A pile of unattended mail was on the table edge. A charity solicitation was still in the top envelope, unopened. He had decided months ago it was worthwhile, but put off doing anything, thinking he could make little difference in a world so full of need, chaos, and misfortune.

Bill didn't feel so indifferent to the solicitation now. Could it be because he had called his daughter? No problem was solved there, just a contact. Tiny, but it was still something he did. A hint of magical feeling brushed through his mind, almost as if hearing distant laughter of children or bells on fairies' shoes. *Damned*

if I don't actually feel better. He pulled out his checkbook, opened the solicitation, wrote a check, and placed it with a form into the enclosed envelope. After attaching a return address sticker and stamp, he placed it in his mailbox.

When in bed that night, he thought about Janet. Obviously, she was not fully self-supporting. What if she needed help, but was unwilling to change her ways? Would his assistance encourage the mismanagement of her life or help her turn it around? He finally decided he was willing to help if she asked. Arguing never helped, so he would take a recoverable financial loss if necessary, but would not give unsolicited advice.

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The next day at work, Bill cornered Doris at the office vending machine and said, "I apologize for being abrupt with you during our last conversation. I contacted my daughter, and, if you don't mind, I would like some more advice."

"I'm shocked. The diehard existentialist thinks there might be more than somber resignation to life."

"I'm serious. As I said earlier, her mom has died and she's been estranged from me. But with little more than an 'I'm okay, you're okay' on the phone, I feel she might be willing to connect. How do I go about this without screwing it up?"

"Ah," Doris said. "I think some gesture might help before much talk. Do you have something she's been attached to in the past?"

"Gee, I don't know. If I look in the storage closet, maybe a book or doll. I used to read stories to her at bedtime."

"That's excellent. Just say you want to drop it off for old time's sake. Don't explain or get into her career or marriage issues. That's too complex for now."

That night, Bill called Janet's number and got her voice mail. "Janet, this is your dad. I'd like to drop by for a quick visit tomorrow evening. Hope you can be there. Call back if you're going to be out." He received no reply afterwards, so

looked up her address on an Internet map of the city and plotted his travel route.

*

Bill pushed the buzzer for Janet in the apartment building lobby, announced himself, and heard the metallic click of the lock on the partition granting access to the building's living space. He passed through and climbed the iron and wood stairway, noticing the musty odor characteristic of old, neglected buildings. Feeling like an economically privileged "fuddy duddy" from a different age, he rang her bell and at length the door opened.

She stood facing him, eyes downward. "Hello, Dad. Place's a bit untidy, but had to juggle things to get time off early." She moved back and waved him in.

"That's okay. It's just that I was reorganizing my place and came upon some things you might like to have. There's more, but this caught my attention." He smiled and held up a doll. "Remember this? You always insisted on having it sleep with you."

Janet's face seemed to register puzzlement, then recognition. "Ah, Tristy, my sleep angel. You kept her?"

"Yes, it was in the storage closet. One of the things I thought you might want in remembrance of your youth someday."

"What else are you holding?"

"A storybook of tales I used to read to you when you were little. To me, it calls to mind some of our best times together."

Janet's eyes began to tear. Her bottom lip quivered as she reached out and took the book, pressing it to her breast. "Thank you, Dad."

Afterwards, the conversation grew strained as father and daughter from different lives struggled to find commonality. A half hour crawled by and Bill felt it was time to leave. On the way out, he noticed recently opened mail, one piece being an ad to register for a quick course called Modeling Auditions Preparation. It

required a hefty fee for registration, instruction, and referrals to important auditions. From the appearance of her furnishings, Bill was certain she couldn't afford it. She looked away when the microwave alarm announced her pot pie was ready. He took advantage of the moment to stealthily lift the ad and put it in his pocket. "See you later, Janet. Take care."

*

Bill registered Janet for the audition coursework and paid via mail, despite his concern that it may be a scam. Then he sent an official-looking letter to Janet, explaining that she was one of the recipients for pre-paid registration in an auditions preparation course. It claimed a team of anonymous benefactors felt she was one of the contestants in a previous, lesser audition who showed promise. Though there was a chance Janet might suspect her father was the anonymous donor, he wasn't going to confirm it.

He later made a phone call from work, getting her voice mail. "Janet, it was good talking to you during my visit. Please call and let me know what is going on in your life."

Several days later he arrived home with the phone recorder beeping. *Might be Janet. If about the audition, she'd probably call when only the recorder gets it. Still afraid of an argument if I disapproved.* He punched the playback.

"Dad, luck comes my way sometimes. I went to an audition for modeling. This one was especially important, and I was lucky enough to get a short, pre-paid, preparation course for it. And the audition's result—they want me! The first job is a two-week tour for a famous clothing designer. I've reviewed the coursework I had at Lair Community College in Product Marketing and my elective in Elements of Design and Poise. The tour's organizers have already cropped my blonde hair into a pixie cut and showed me how to use toner for my pale skin. Orientation was exhausting, but I'm excited. Now I've got to arrange a substitute while gone from

my waitress job. Fortunately, I know some temps.

*

Bill called Janet but only got her recorder. A week passed and there was still no response to his recorded inquiries. It was only after two additional weeks that his phone rang one night.

“Dad...” She sobbed at length. “I’m a complete loser. The modeling establishment hates me.”

“What do you mean?”

“They said I didn’t have what it takes. And they’re right. I hated the tour. To me, the girls on the trip were stupid and self-centered. They picked on every flaw I had, and constantly strived to promote only themselves. I can’t work with people like that. Yet, I don’t know what else I am good for.”

“Honey, there’s a whole world out there. And I’m sure some of the models you will meet are nice people. But, in that community, you’re also going to meet egos and assholes. I know about criticism and what it’s like to be down in the dumps. I’m sorry if you inherited that tendency.”

“It’s more than a tendency, and not just about modeling. Like a beast, it weighs on me all the time. I know that you’ve had depression and don’t know how you survived it. Tell me what to do, I don’t know. There are things I can’t talk about and can hardly stand it anymore.”

Bill felt both alarmed and helpless, but also a prompt from an unknown source. “Honey, listen. You’ve got burdens you shouldn’t bear alone. Life is full of problems but also solutions we can’t yet imagine.” He heard only sniffles and continued. “I’m coming to visit you tomorrow night and I’ll bring a friend you’d probably like. Just hold off on self-judgment until we have a face-to-face. Okay?”

*

The next morning Bill approached Doris and asked if she had a few minutes

to talk. He told her about Janet's aspirations and disappointments. "But there's something more that's bothering her. There were a couple of suicides in her mother's family, so when she's down, it concerns me, big time. Would you go with me to visit her tonight?"

Doris hesitated. "Tonight? I guess I can rearrange plans a bit. Sure, how about coming by at 7:45."

*

After one ring of the doorbell, the door opened and Janet stood there in a pullover jersey and casual blue jeans. Her pale skin made her look fragile. "Come in, Dad." She looked at Doris. "And who's your friend?"

"This is Doris Wane," Bill said, "a good friend I made at work."

"It's good to meet you," Doris said, extending her hand.

Janet took it briefly. "Come in and have a seat. I'm making coffee now. Like some?"

"That'd be nice," her dad said. He and Doris sat on the couch while Janet retreated to the kitchenette and poured three cups.

Returning with coffee, Janet sat facing them in a padded chair with worn fabric. Conversation started with the neighborhood, how long it took her to get to work, and the weather. Before long, she asked, "What did you want to discuss, Dad?"

"Last night you were moody and said there were things you couldn't talk about. I've felt the same way, and Doris helped me budge out of my doldrums a bit. We all need friends."

"Think I don't have any?" Janet said abruptly, then sighed. "Sorry, Dad, I didn't mean to be short. But people back at the restaurant have their own problems, and the gals on the modeling tour just soften you up to get close, then stick it to you."

Doris leaned forward, “You may be sabotaging your success without knowing it. More than likely, those girls are simply immature. I talked to a model a few years older and she told me ‘Beautiful is having features that vary from the norm by no more than the slightest amount, but tending toward the slimness of youth.’ Few people are that average, they vary on one side or the other, and thus are considered less than ideal. She also said, ‘I have no illusions that I’m special. Why should I be? How does being stuck in the middle with the onus of starving to control my weight and wearing a mask of makeup prove I’m superior? I’m just lucky I can make a living this way.’”

Janet brushed her recently cropped blonde hair back. “Humph, they should all be that honest.”

“Her mother was a stickler for dress and poise,” Bill said. “It was as if success were simply superior bearing and taste in clothing. I think this influenced Janet quite a bit.”

“But Mom had a softer side, Dad. There were times when she felt free and could laugh and be playful.”

“How well I know. She was a paradox. Never knew which person would crawl out of bed in the morning. Had blonde hair like you, but a bit taller. It would have been easy to for me to feel outclassed.”

The conversation turned to coping with frustrations and positive ways to express complaints to people. Janet seemed to be feeling much better, but there was no admission of privately kept secrets. At 9:30, Bill and Doris walked to the door.

“It’s good to have met you,” Doris said.

Bill turned just outside the door. “And call if you want to talk, girl. I mean it.”

“Thanks, Dad. Don’t worry. And Doris, I like your color of red hair.

Something about you reminds me of Shirley MacLaine in the late night movies Mom used to watch.”

*

Arriving home, Bill made himself a drink. When stress reared its head, he sought comfort in a bottle, more and more of recent. A thought of Janet flashed in his mind concerning her drug problem, hopefully past. Realization of his current near-abuse made him feel more compassion, but that wouldn't justify sliding into alcoholism. His interaction with Janet needed to be a model of stability. *A lot more coffee from now on.* Bill peered in the bathroom mirror. Lines in his face were deepening and his tanned skin wasn't as tight once was. *Little to do about that, but my scruffy, graying, black hair could use a trim.*

*

At his office the next morning, he pored over architectural plans for his clients and approved the associated documents. Normally humdrum, his work now seemed more meaningful. Doris was supervisor of the decor art section. He dropped by mid morning and invited her to have coffee with him.

At noon his phone rang, forwarded from his home address. He picked up and heard nothing but breathing, then a tortured voice.

“Dad...I can't take it any longer. The beast is back.” She moaned and took a deep breath. “You wanted to know.” A panicky anger was now apparent in her tone. “So I'll say it. I don't care, nothing can be worse than what's crushing me now.”

“Slow down. Where are you, hon?”

“Home, but not for long.”

“What's the matter. Tell me.”

“I did it! I killed my mother. No one knew, but it was me. I killed my beautiful, infuriating mother.”

“Janet, it was an accident. What do you mean by—”

A click and the line went dead.

Bill turned and raced into the hallway.

Doris was walking toward him from the lunch room. “Bill, what’s the matter?”

“It’s Janet. She’s over the edge. I’ve got to get there.”

“I’ll come with you,” she said and rushed outside with him to his car.

*

When they arrived at Janet’s apartment, the door was open, but she was gone.

“Oh God, she’s not here,” Bill said and began pushing papers and objects around, looking for some hint of where she might be.”

“No note or anything?” Doris asked.

“Not so far.” He sat down and covered his face. “Now where would she have gone in her frame of mind?”

“What was the last thing she said to you?”

“That she killed her mother. I can’t fathom that. Her mother fell from a cliff in Marley Park on a hike. Janet was there but how could she—”

“Let’s go there,” Doris said.

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Speeding toward Marley Park, Bill used his horn, passing other vehicles. “I think some of her current problem is an unresolved love-hate relationship with her mother. Feeling like she had to measure up, but despising the pressure to be a fashion icon. She was only eight years old when her mother, Marge, fell. What could she possibly mean by killing her?”

“We can only ask once we get her calmed down.”

“And, like me, you’re thinking she might be intending to jump off where her

mother fell?”

“Possibly, but, let’s hope for the best. If she just wants to run away, it’s likely a search by police would find her. Whatever the case, she needs care.”

Bill turned into a road with the sign “Marley Park.” Soon they were in the hiking area and exited the car. “The path is this way,” he said. “You may want to stay down here. It can be tricky farther up.”

“Like hell I’m staying. I was carrying walking shoes for my daily hike when you saw me in the hall. They’re in the car. Go ahead, I’ll catch up.”

Bill began a rapid pace up the path, dreadful thoughts forming. Did Janet push her mom? Or refuse to get help if she fell, hanging onto the edge? *I’ll work that out later. She was a kid, for Pete’s sake. Just get to the top.* Though tired, adrenalin pumped his body and he barely slowed.

Finally the overlook appeared. Though the path did not stray to the precipice, the edge was accessible to anyone who ignored the warning sign. Huge limestone boulders with grassy vegetation pushing through the cracks formed the escarpment. Bill approached with trepidation, not wanting to discover what might have happened.

Then he saw her, standing near the edge. “Janet, wait. Let’s talk.”

“Stay away,” she screamed. “Don’t come closer. This is the only way.”

A few yards from her he stopped. “Okay, first get it off your chest. Tell me, how did you kill your mom?”

“She jumped, but it was because of me.”

“What on earth do you mean?”

“The night before, Mom was advising me on how to dress—again. I got so mad I yelled something I’ve regretted the rest of my life, every single day.”

“What?”

“I said ‘If you and Dad ever separate. I want to live with him.’ I’ll never

forget the look on her face. She scrunched up her face in anger and then it went slack. I've never seen that before. It was like the life went out of her. Lines came across her forehead and her mouth trembled. Tears ran down her cheeks and she stopped trying to talk. The next morning she was strange. Kind of passive, like she was hiding hurt when she invited me to hike up here with her. I didn't want to, but because of what I said the night before, I agreed. When we got here, Mom outpaced me when we neared the top. She went around a big boulder, and I couldn't see her. I didn't hear anything, but after I moved closer, she was gone. I finally came to the edge and saw her down below. I knew she jumped off because I'd failed her again."

Bill struggled to get his thoughts in order. "Honey, it's not what you think. Investigators found scuffmarks where Marge slipped. It was an accident. Your mom's delicate mood that night was from an altercation with her father. She told me about it earlier. If you think she was a fanatic about style, that doesn't compare with him. He was the most rigid, success and appearance-oriented man I'd ever known. Marge said that after the blowout with her father, she realized she'd been doing the same thing to you, and even me. Yes, it was bothering her, but you're not the villain. Your mom was coming to terms with an overbearing, learned behavior."

Janet's brows knitted. "You're whitewashing the whole thing. I never heard anything about what you said."

You can't find out the truth by keeping painful ideas inside and going silent."

Janet's eyes glistened with tears, her mouth turned down, and her shoulders began to shake. She did not resist when Bill moved in and put his arms around her.

When Doris arrived, Janet's sobbing had turned to laughter and emotional release. "Gosh, you guys, Sounds like somebody's been doing some of that happy

talk.”

“Only after some *heavy* talk,” Bill said. “Come on over and let’s make it a group hug. Then I’ll fill you in and we can find a place to sit. This girl’s gonna be all right and find the life path that’s right for her. No weighty delusions in her way now.”

They found seats on stones atop the trail lookout. The hilltop breeze carried the scent of wildflowers and, in time, washed tensions into oblivion.

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