11 Bits About Laura & Dennis

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Recommended Citation
Available at: http://scholarworks.gvsu.edu/fishladder/vol1/iss1/8
Laura is 20 year-old college student. She is picking up a few groceries and is coming from home. She has nothing else to do. Dennis is a 33 year-old cashier who lives with his mother. He looks a bit like Big-Boy. Laura wants happiness. Dennis wants to be happy. And they both tend to wait for second chances.

Snow fell softly from the sky, as Laura trudged up to the Shop-Mart. Little white flakes floated to the ground like pretty dandruff and landed on her vinyl navy rain slicker, melting immediately. Little droplets of snow-water speckled her coat. And because she'd left her only gray ski-cap at her parent's house, she turtle-shelled her head into her slicker to cover her ears.

It wasn't that cold. The digital thermometer on the bank's clock sign across the street read 42 degrees, which wasn't even cold enough to snow, really. It should be raining, not snowing. But it wasn't.

Laura had brushed her hair that morning, but now the wind whipped it into a frenzy. The sky was gray and foggy, and the Shop-Mart's parking lot was almost bare.

Dennis toddled into the time-clock room. His fatty cheeks were red and his nipples were cold and hard. His little brown eyes quickly looked over the room, noticing it was empty and fairly clean. His navy-polo was soaked from snow-water and was tucked into his khaki slacks. A substantial gut hung over his belt. He'd tried pulling up his pants over his belly, once. Someone had told him that you look slimmer if you do. But when he did that, he just felt queasy and had to go to the bathroom. So he stopped doing that. His mother had always told him to never let vanity make you feel bad. He swiped his punch-card through the time-clock and it beeped. The digital reader printed in tiny electronic letters: "Punch Accepted at 5:09pm."

He was late again. Todd, his boss, had never gotten mad before. He said he didn't care if he was late, so long as he showed up. But it still made him nervous, like the world might shift one day and things might be different.

He poked his head around the corner of the door and noticed that the place
was fairly slow. That was a good thing. Dennis turned slowly and meandered into the cash office to check out a drawer.

Laura carried a gray shopping basket over her right arm and turned down Aisle 1 for cereal and bread. She doesn’t actually need cereal, it just happens to be in the same aisle as the bread. The specials flyer had said that Pepperidge Farm Gourmet Wheat Bread was on sale for 3 for $5.00. It was nice bread and it was a very nice deal. The bread was normally quite pricey, and she always felt like she was splurging when she bought it. She didn’t really have money in her budget, but she made due. She had it once and couldn’t fathom herself having any other kind of bread and definitively decided that it was her favorite. Her only complaint with the bread was its small size. Each loaf was probably on about a foot long, if that. So she went through a loaf fairly quickly. But since it was on sale, Laura planned on stocking up. She meandered casually down the aisle to where the Pepperidge Farm breads should be. Slowly, as not to seem too eager. But she was shocked to see an empty space where the gourmet wheat bread was supposed to be. Her stomach sank and her knees felt like knocking.

It appears that a lot of folks like Pepperidge Farm Gourmet Wheat Bread.

“You’re late, Dennis,” Todd barked as Dennis toddled up to him. He didn’t even look up from a clip board. Dennis’s face flushed red and he got confused.

“I-I-I thought you said it wasn’t a big deal. Just so long as we actually came.” He felt shaky. His mother warned him not to be late. That he should have left quicker.

“I don’t give a shit, man. I’m just lettin’ ya know.” Dennis blinked and stared at him. “Just don’t make a habit of it, man. Gist in case the big-wigs decide to show up.”

Dennis blinked again and Todd studied the clipboard. He looked over his face. Was he joking? His face was stern, and he wasn’t smiling. And one would think that if he was joking, he’d have been smiling. Dennis knew that folks called him a jokester. But he couldn’t remember when he’d seen the man actually smile. So maybe Todd was one of those folks who don’t smile when they tell jokes. A stone face. But he wasn’t sure. He began to sweat and looked around the area. Everything was fuzzy to him. Like someone hadn’t focused the camera just right. Why did Todd have to be so blank? What’s the problem with emoting?

“A-a-are you teasing me. Or. What are you doing?”

Todd looked up at him for the first time. He smiled slightly and chuckled. “Yeah, Dennis. I’m just givin’ ya shit. Sorry man.” Dennis blinked. A wave of relief washed over him and he began to laugh.

“Okay, good. Sorry. I didn’t understand.”

“I need you to go to express for me. Lane 3.” Dennis was half-way to the
lane, before he stopped laughing and realized that he was going to express. He hated express. Express always made him tired fast and he’d been on express for the last 4 nights.

An older Italian man was stocking the generic Shop-Mart Wheat Bread. His hair was grayed and his skin was a deep olive color. He had thick, bushy eyebrows that slanted inward towards the nose. Like an old-timey villain in one of those Charlie Chaplin films. His navy polo was untucked and unbuttoned. A thick bush of salt and pepper chest hair was visible.

“Excuse me,” Laura said tentatively. He whirled around and glared at her like she was begging for change. “I-I-I... I noticed you seem to be out of the Pepperidge Farm Gourmet Wheat Bread that’s on sale.” She paused, hoping his scowl would melt away and he’d suddenly become a friendly person when he saw that she meant no harm.

He yawned and went back to work. “If it ain’t out there, we ain’t got it.” Laura’s face flushed. “You don’t have any more any in back?”

“If we do, I ain’t goin’ back to look.” Roughly, he grabbed a loaf of bread by the middle and squished it between his fingers. He shoved it onto the shelf and it sprang back to its original shape. As though he hadn’t touched it. “Have some of this stuff.” He gestured towards the Shop-Mart Bread. It was cheaper. 33 cents. And the loaves were larger too. Her mother had always said things like “Bread’s bread” and “Pizza’s pizza,” that sort of thing. But she was wrong. Things are different. Some things are better than others. She had her priorities, and she had to stick with them.

“Couldn’t you just go back and check, for me please? I need this.” Laura fidgeted with her basket.

“Look babe. I’m real busy. I’m coverin’ two other departments and I don’t got time for placatin’ yer tastes in bread.” He was right. She was being a pest and he had a job to do. Jobs. Why did she need to interrupt it for bread no less. She could probably come back and get it later. Tomorrow was a possibility. But Saturdays are always so crazy and crowds make her antsy. But by Sunday, the sale would be over.

“Do you suppose I could get a raincheck for that bread, sir?”

He didn’t look at her. “I don’t have a pen. Ask your cashier.”

She smiled and said thank you. He didn’t respond. Laura turned around on the heels of her feet and walked down the cold linoleum of Aisle 1.

A perky young girl. 16. 17. Somewhere around that. Bobbed brown hair and bouncy-ball breasts. She had on a tiny, baby-doll pink shirt that had “Bitch” printed across the chest. Her little teen belly shone in the florescent light and a tiny sparse-trail could be seen beneath her button. She trotted up to Lane 3—Dennis’s Lane 3, with her order clutched to herself in her fists.

“H-h-hello.” Dennis smiled. She nodded and set her purchases on the belt: perfume, a pack of gum, flavored Chapstick, glitter make-up and a magazine.
entitled “Teen Beat.” Dennis began ringing her purchases up and she looked down into her purse, and began thumbing through paper and assorted knick-knacks.

“Did... Did you f-f-find everything okay?” His eyes flittered from her face to her purchases and around the world like a hummingbird. She wore too much make-up. Dark around the eyes. Too much dark around the eyes. She didn’t acknowledge him. Dennis wondered for a second, as he placed her items into a brown plastic sack with “School Daze” across the front in funky lettering, if she was deaf. Or dumb. A mute. A lot of things about this girl seemed weird and didn’t make a lot of sense to Dennis.

“No no,” she said, waving her hands frantically, “Can I just put them in my purse, I don’t want a bag.”

“O-o-okay. No problem.” Dennis reached into the bag and gave the girl her purchases. She took them and shoved them roughly into her purse. He didn’t think it’d fit, but she seemed to get everything in. Dennis noticed her hands. Very smooth. With women, he noticed, the first thing that seems to age is their hands. Their skin gets real tight on their hands, and they look veiny. Their veins stick out like worms digging through a thin layer of dirt. But this girl’s hands were smooth and seemingly very young.

“I-I’m glad you can talk. I thought for a second you couldn’t talk.” The girl’s eyes shot towards him. Big doe-eyes, confused. They’d look angry if not for the distinct cataracts of apathy. She seemed to ask what he meant, she didn’t actually ask it. Dennis chuckled and gave her the total. The girl handed him her money wordlessly and walked towards the entrance.

“Trina?” Todd said, emerging from the manager’s office with his clipboard under his arm. The girl turned around, her hair twirling in the air.

“Todd! Oh my God!” she squealed and ran to him. “It’s so fucking good to see you!” They hugged tightly. Her breasts mashed against Todd’s barrel chest. Dennis saw it and wondered if that hurt.

“I know! It’s been so long...”

“Since, last summer, huh?”

“Yeah... You workin’ there this summer?”

“No.” She frowns and makes a pouty-face. “I gotta get a real job. Somethin’ to pay the bills.”

“I hear that.”

There was a slight pause in conversation. An older Jewish man trotted up to Dennis’s line. He turned to wait on him, and couldn’t really hear the rest of the conversation.

“How’s your mom?”

“She’s good. Now at least.”

“That’s good.”

“Are you just starting shopping?”

“No, I’m done. I’m leaving now.
“Did you go to lane 3?”

“Yeah.”

“How was he?”

“Alright, I guess. A little weird.”

They talked in low voices and they turned away. Like God was listening and they didn’t want him to hear them poo-pooing the cushions on the pews.

Todd nodded.

“Is there something wrong with him?” She tapped her pointer finger against her forehead. Her mouth gaped.

“Not really. An egg short of a dozen, I think. But he’s a good guy.”

“Cuz he seemed weird.”

Dennis watched Todd talk to the perky young girl. He couldn’t hear what they were saying, but he hoped it wasn’t about him. He wondered how Todd knew her. She seemed so young.

Laura riffled through a rack of clothes. Her basket was full and a gallon of half-percent milk sat on the floor next to it. Milk was on sale this week, at a $1.66. With the exception of the bread, she’d gotten what she’d come for and was ready to go. But the sign above the circular rack distracted her. Caught her eye. “Women’s Turtle-Necks – 30% Off,” it said. That was a pretty good price and she loved turtle necks. Her chin always got real cold and turtle necks seemed like the most logical option. Aside from her nose, her chin got the coldest in cold weather. Well, her ears, too. But everything else was warm and toasty nine times out of ten. And here, there were so many turtle-necks on the racks. So many different colors. There were a few lavenders, and she’d always liked lavender. But green. Emerald green. She loved those kind of greens, that you could get lost in. And reds... reds were always so tempting. Too many choices. Her face flushed and her eyes grew tired. A bead of sweat rolled down her forehead and onto her nose. Too many choices. She had to go. Too many choices.

At that moment, a little blond girl and her matching sister tumbled into the Laura. They wore matching white dresses and tittered like field mice. Laura yelped and went down into the rack of turtle neck. She grasped at a few turtle necks, pulling them off their plastic hangers. Her feet thrashed out and kicked her gallon of milk. It split down the side and the milk washed out over the linoleum like a thousand melted clouds. Or like semen. The little blond girls fell flat on the floor and lay in the pool of milk and laughed like idiots, slapping at each other. Only the cuffs of Laura’s pants and her socks got wet. The milk washed away from her basket, leaving it intact.

A strapping man wearing a white t-shirt in his early thirties stepped angrily into the puddle of milk and picked both girls up by their arm pits. They could have been made of paper, it was that easy.

“What the fuck are you girls doing?”

They giggled madly.
“Answer me!”
“We’re laughin’ Daddy!”

The man growled and tossed the girls to a petite red-head standing by a cart full of groceries. She took them into her arms and held them gingerly. The man turned his attention to Laura on the ground.

“Are you okay miss?” One of his gigantic paws wrapped around her arm, while the other cupped her bottom and hoisted her up. A tingle shot through her body as he guided her to her feet. He held her shoulders while she steadied herself, controlling her so she didn’t tumble back down. It felt good. She hadn’t been held like that in a while.

“Y-y-yes, I am.”
“Are you sure?”
“They just startled me is all.”
“Well I’m sorry miss. My girls need to learn a little respect. They need to learn that when we go to the store that it is not playtime.”

“It’s okay.” She bent over to pick up her basket, but the man stopped her. He bent his knees and scooped up the basket. Laura nearly swooned. A young employee was already on the scene with a mop. Part of Laura hoped they’d offer to make up for it somehow. Take her to dinner. Pay for her groceries. Something. She didn’t deserve it really, but it’d be nice.

“We’ll go back and grab you another jug of milk.”
“O-o-oh okay.”
“You just wait here and we’ll go get it.”
“O-o-oh okay.”

“Girls.” His voice was a bark and the girls snapped to attention. “You two go wait up front by the ice machine until we get done.”

“Dad!” A simultaneous high-pitched whine.

“No whining. Go!” The girls bowed their heads and trotted up towards the ice machine. Milk dripped from their dresses, marking their trail with tiny droplets of melted cloud. When Laura turned back, the man and red-haired woman were walking away. She was a dwarf compared to him and his big bear arm pulled her into his arm-pit. Their ass-cheeks flexed in time to their step and Laura sighed. She wanted to buy a turtle neck now, more than ever. What color? Red? White? She turned and began rifling through the clothes rack, waiting for her jug of milk.

Not a lot of people came to Dennis’s lane. Lanes 1 and 2 were closer to grocery. All the customers, when they found those lanes, they quit looking. That’s enough for them. Dennis didn’t mind so much. It gave him time to look around and see people. That’s what he liked best, seeing people. It frustrated him sometimes, but he liked looking anyway.

In front of the ice machine, to the left of his lane, were two little blond girls. They wore white dresses that were dripping, like they’d been dipped in white
chocolate and it didn’t have time to harden. The girls seemed to pretending they were in outer space, with the glass door open in between them. One of them was talking in some high-pitch alien voice, while the other made a gun with her hand and made little laser-shooing noises with her mouth. They jumped around on their tiny, light feet and the smiles on their faces were so bright. Dennis felt warm and nice watching them play. They were like his mother’s kittens, very alive and bubbly. Women are like that, he thought. He had thought a lot of mean things about women in the past, but when you got right down to it he knew how wonderful they could be. At their worst, they were devils who refuse to speak to you, and at their best, they were angels who swallow you with glory. But somewhere in the middle, at that neutral ground that people seem to default to, women are kittens. Playful and affectionate, with an intensely peculiar ability to make you feel like you’re part of something complete and important.

He watched them play for what seemed like hours, but might have only been minutes. Then the little girl’s parents passed them. The father waved them on, warmly and they ran to him. The girls used their father as a shield, playfully zapping each other, giggling and retreating to their respective sides of his old beer gut. Dennis watched them leave and imagined that he was their father. And that he was laying on the sofa, watching them play their outer-space alien games across his stomach. One hid next to his head, while the other by his feet. They move forward to “attack” each other, walking on their hands on his chest and across his belly. He felt their hands pressing down on his belly and their laughter echoing in his ears. The sizes were all askew. In his mind, the girls were no bigger than his fist and his stomach was longer than an acre. But the feeling was real. And accurate. He wondered briefly who the mother would be. His wife, if he had one. It occurred to him that he didn’t really care too much. He felt important thinking about those girls, and that’s all that mattered.

“E-e-excuse me.” The heavy-set man turned around to see Laura standing there, with her groceries. “Are you open?” She held her gray basket, jug of milk and red turtleneck closely, in case he was closed. His name tag read “Dennis.”

“Yes, I’m open.”

“Wow,” Laura said, “I didn’t know I could get through here so fast.” She smiled and laughed a bit too much laughter than was warranted. The gallon of milk flopped on the belt with a thud, and Laura emptied the contents of her basket. There wasn’t as much on the belt as it had looked in the basket.

“W-well, we’re not to busy to-night. So I guess t-that’s it.”

Laura smiled.

Dennis grabbed the jug of milk by the handle and drug it across the scanner. It beeped. On the computer screen, “MILK/SKIM - $1.65 (Nontaxable)” appeared. Odd price for the milk. It seemed odd that they would have the cents be in an odd number like that. But he never really understood numbers
anyway.

"Say. Do you suppose. If it's not too much trouble. Do you suppose you write me a raincheck for the Pepperidge Farm Bread?"

"Y-y-sure. No problem."

His eyes pivoted. Back and forth. No rings on her hands. Up and down. Her hips were wide and thick, but she was very skinny otherwise. Back and forth. The veins in her hands stood out, as though her skin had been stretched too tight. Up and down. Large, meaty breasts rested comfortably on her upper chest, like one would think breasts should. She looked alright to him.

Laura noticed how chubby his cheeks were. He'd cut himself shaving, it looked like, right by his laugh lines. His hair was short and greased neatly to one side. And his eyes looked watery, like little buckets that had been filled too full with water. He moved slowly. Grabbing an item. Searching for its UPC. Swiping it and putting it into a bag. His brow furrowed as he did it and his scrunched, like it confused him. Like it all confused him.

"D-d-do you like working here?" The question came out before she thought about it. Dennis placed the last item in the bag. He looked up, blankly. Mouth gaping.

"W-W-what?"

"Do you like working here? You seem to be here all the time."

"It's okay." Words slow and chosen carefully. "It's a job. I gotta be here. The people are nice. It's nice to see the families and all the kids. It pays pretty good." This was an important conversation, he felt. It should, perhaps, go on. He should continue it. But he didn't want to continue it too far. Was this interest or a passing of time?

There was silence, as they stood looking at each other. Dennis took the red turtleneck and removed the hanger. It stretched the neck slightly, but Laura didn't notice. She opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted by Dennis.

"Okay, your total comes to $18.72." They finished. Laura produced a wrinkled twenty and gave it to him. Dennis took it and punched some keys on his register. The drawer popped open and he put the twenty in and produced $1.28 change and gave it to her. And the entire time, they both felt as though there was something else to be said.

She smiled.

"Thank you, Dennis."

He wondered how she knew his name.

"T-t-thank you, miss. Have a nice day. Thank you for shopping at Shop-Mart."

She smiled again and walked down the way, towards the entrance. As he watched her go, he felt like things had ended too quickly. Like they had been shorted. And they'd missed some great thing that was supposed to happen.

About ten minutes after she left, he realized he'd forgotten to give her the raincheck. His stomach gurgled and he cursed himself for forgetting. He
hoped that she would remember and come back. Perhaps he'd know what to say then.

Laura walked out of the store, holding all her bags in one hand. The red turtleneck was in a plastic sack next to the milk. She wondered briefly if she should have gotten the white. It was raining now, like she had wanted. The rain soaked her, flattening her hair and washing the sweat from her face. It felt good and she quickly forgot all of what had happened in the store. The parking lot was a bit fuller than when she'd arrived and Laura was a little confused. But she knew she'd manage. She'd always manage and the thought of freed her mind of the worries that she was too picky or that painted by the numbers a bit too often. It was her way and she knew that, by sticking to her way, that she would get through it all somehow.