

BILL TAYLOR

Occidental Overview, Church, 1981
Watercolor on paper, 24 x 18 in



COURTESY RISK PRESS GALLERY

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Save Our Snap

Laura held the phone away from her ear and started scribbling a list of things she disliked—lima beans, people who talk during movies, the smell of disinfectant in restaurants. At the top of the list she wrote, “early morning phone calls from Connie” and drew two stars. She wasn’t sure when the best time would be to get a call from her sister, but the moment she got to work was definitely the wrong time.

“Slow down. I can’t understand what you’re saying. What happened? Is it Jeff? One of the boys?”

Connie sniffled. “It’s Snap. He’s not going to make it.”

“Snap?” Laura scanned her memory for a mention of that name. The family’s dog was Molly. When they were younger, her nephews had brought home snakes and various reptiles, but the terrariums had been empty for years.

“Haven’t you been watching? The bald eagle chicks in Minnesota.”

Laura held the phone away from her ear and made a hurry-up, circling gesture with her free hand, glad that her sister couldn’t see. She checked the time: 8:45. She had a meeting at 9:00. “Michael and I don’t watch much TV during the week.”

“It’s an eagle cam, not TV. Snap, Crackle and Pop hatched in February, but Snap’s not getting enough to eat. He may be stuck in the mud.”

“He’s not in a nest?”

“Of course he is. They haven’t fledged yet. The mud’s on the nest floor. Sometimes they need a little jiggle to get free, but the woman at the Raptor Wildlife Program claims it’s not their policy to intervene.”

“Makes sense.”

“It does not. We’re talking about letting a helpless chick starve to death while we stand by and watch.”

Laura knew better than to suggest Connie stop watching. Her sister’s causes were sacrosanct and any interference only provoked tears. She picked up the folder for the meeting. “I need to go. I’ll give you a call later.”

But Connie had more to say. “If Snap’s not better soon, I’m calling the governor. If I need to, I’ll hop on a plane to Minnesota and go see him.” Connie and Laura lived in California. Connie in San Luis Obispo and Laura a two-and-a-half-hour drive up the coast in Santa Cruz. This had always seemed like a good distance: close enough for holidays, but too far for casual visits.

“The governor’s a professional wrestler. You could get hurt in a tussle with him. Why not write him a letter instead?”

But a letter wasn’t enough to satisfy Connie. “We’re talking life or death. He needs to be responsible and do the right thing.”

“They’re wild birds. How do you know what the right thing is?”

“You wouldn’t understand,” Connie said and hung up.

Laura left for the meeting, clomping down the hall in her black patent leather heels. As usual, their conversation left her feeling selfish, her designated role in the family. Connie, irrational and high-strung, was considered the one with the heart of gold.

* * *

Laura wanted to empathize with her sister, but she had problems of her own. Two months ago, she had miscarried. The pregnancy, unplanned, had been like a dream where her body took action and then taunted her brain with what it had done. Tag, you’re pregnant, a voice seemed to say, now what are you going to do? But instead of being upset, her brain sat back and let her body proceed. Even more than the pregnancy, the sense of belonging had taken her by surprise. For weeks, she’d considered herself a mother, eligible to join a club to which she’d never sought to belong. She wondered if saying yes to one major life event—she’d married Michael only a year earlier—had rendered her receptive to other changes. And then she lost the baby.

She hadn’t told anyone but Michael about the miscarriage because the secret was all she had left of the baby. She realized that a forty-two-year-old woman who had suffered a miscarriage could expect sympathy, but she could also expect to hear, if only as an unspoken undercurrent, that it was probably for the best. She knew if she told, Connie would show up on Laura’s doorstep ready to stroke her arms and express sympathy that her life had not worked out. Laura didn’t want her sister’s strokes and pity. She wanted to be left alone until she could figure out what came next.

* * *

That evening after dinner she found a new email from Connie in her inbox, the subject line typed in all caps: SO YOU’LL UNDERSTAND WHAT I’M TALKING ABOUT.

She took her laptop into the living room to show Michael. “Look at this. My sister’s lost it.”

Michael asked, “What am I looking at?”

Laura glanced at the black scene and laughed: it was after midnight in Minnesota and nothing was visible on the eagle cam. “Okay, that was dumb. Now look.” She started one of the video clips on the website. The three eaglets looked like balls of dryer lint with beaks. Cute, but not cuddly. She pointed to the smallest one. “That must be Snap. Connie’s worried that he’s not getting enough to eat.”

She clicked on another video and they watched as one of the adult eagles brought a pigeon into the nest. The birds ripped it open. It was a female with an egg inside, and they tore into that, too. Laura closed the site. Not cuddly birds at all.

“What’s your sister trying to do?” Michael asked.

“Rescue them. She wants to be sure everyone’s safe.”

“It’s a little predictable, isn’t it? Empty nest and all.” Connie’s youngest son had left for college that fall.

She nodded, although she hadn’t made the association, and kissed the side of his head.

After he went to bed, she pulled up the eagle cam again. She resisted the urge to look at the puffins and grizzly bear cubs that were suggested, and stared at the dark screen. Finally she emailed her sister and asked if she’d seen the pigeon.

“It’s the way of the wild,” Connie replied.

This was what always happened. Laura tried to show interest in her sister’s enthusiasms, and Connie switched sides. Apparently in the hierarchy of sympathy, it was okay for eagles to vivisection a pigeon, but when an eagle chick wasn’t making it, her sister wanted to step in with an eyedropper.

The irony was that Connie wasn’t even a nature lover. Oh, she’d effuse over a brilliant sunset or a colorful dahlia, sucking all the air out of the room so that no one else could say anything, but when they went to Lake Tahoe together before Laura’s wedding—a girls-only weekend that Connie had insisted on organizing—she’d complained about the traffic and never left the condo.

The eagle website made it clear that their policy was not to intervene if the eagles got into trouble. They weren’t going to turn the camera off and they weren’t going to save any chicks. Scientists monitored the chat page and corrected misconceptions. They referred to the birds by

number: the cereal monikers had been assigned by the public. Laura skimmed a fact sheet and learned that during breeding season male and female bald eagles, who mate for life, build a nest that can weigh up to a ton and measure eight feet across. More poetically, eagles flying in a thermal are referred to as a kettle.

If a group of soaring eagles is a kettle, Laura thought, what is the vengy term for middle-aged women who have lost babies? An emptiness, a probability, a conclusion? Someone would need to give her a jiggle soon or she’d be stuck in the mud.

* * *

The next morning when Laura checked the site, only two eaglets were visible. The public outcry had grown hostile. Viewers demanded that the organization rescue Snap. If something wasn’t done, they would form a vigilante group, search the forest until they found the nest, and save the poor bird. One thread speculated that the female eagle was a first-time mother who didn’t know what she was doing. Someone went as far as to suggest that she should be removed from the gene pool.

Unbelievable, Laura thought. They’d kill a healthy, adult eagle because her chick wasn’t doing well?

Again, the scientist-moderators weighed in, explaining that intervening could compromise the eagles’ essential wildness, the very thing the webcam sought to preserve. But many in the chat room had been watching the nest since the chicks hatched and couldn’t bear to see Snap suffer.

Laura suspected that *motherluv* was her sister. The woman’s posts had grown increasingly adamant about the need to *do* something.

An hour later when she saw Connie’s number on her phone she didn’t answer. A text came within seconds. *They got Snap.*

She texted back: *In meeting. Can’t talk.* She wasn’t in a meeting, but she definitely didn’t want to talk.

Connie replied. *One wing was crushed and a leg broken. They may have to put him down.*

You did what you could.

We did the right thing.

Laura flipped her phone face down, determined to finish a client presentation for the next day. What made her sister an expert on the right thing? Distracted, she clicked

on the website: a video clip showed a gloved hand reaching in and removing the injured bird. “Fly high, fly free, little Snap,” someone had written. “You taught us so much.”

Who were these people, she wondered. What had they possibly learned?

* * *

That night Laura and Michael went to their favorite Thai restaurant. They studied the menu and then ordered what they always did: chicken with sweet basil and black bean rice noodles.

“We could have called our order in from home,” she said after they handed the waitress their menus.

“There’s always the possibility we’ll order something different.”

“We never do. Are we too predictable?”

“We’re compatible. That’s a good thing.”

When his deep-set blue eyes sought hers, she looked away. On the wall behind him was a teak carving of three elephants. Compatibility had been a good thing, but now their possibilities—possibilities they’d never considered—had diminished. “I wish we’d seen the tiger in the night zoo.”

It took a second for him to register what she was talking about. “Malaysia.”

She nodded. Two years ago, Michael had attended a sales meeting in Kuala Lumpur and she’d gone with him. Afterwards they’d traveled up the Malay Peninsula to Taiping where one evening after dinner in another Thai restaurant—more chicken basil and noodles—they’d walked across the park to the zoo, dodging the pods thrown at them by monkeys.

She’d been fascinated by the hooded cobra stretching up from its basket, by the fruit bats hanging upside down near the top of their cage. As they walked the looped paths, the warm night air was occasionally punctuated by the roar of a lion.

And then they came to a dimly lit enclosure. The sign read Malayan tiger, *Panthera tigris jacksoni*, but no animal was visible. She imagined the magnificence of the big cat slinking through the hanging vines. Granted it was a zoo, but she longed to see the tiger in its natural habitat. She stood quietly, feigning catlike indifference. She quoted William Blake. Nothing.

Michael asked if she was ready to go. She took one last

look, but the tiger, if there even was one, remained concealed. They returned to their hotel where an arrow on the ceiling of their room pointed toward Mecca.

The next day they drove to George Town and checked into the E&O. Charmed by the historic hotel with its pith helmeted doormen, the town with its clan houses and indigo blue merchant house, she forgot about the tiger. On the last day of their vacation, sitting next to each other on a seawall, they'd decided to marry. He promised her happiness, and even though she hadn't necessarily believed him, she knew enough to accept. Now she wondered how she'd ignored the signs—the empty cage, the arrow pointing away—and asked, “What if it's only the two of us?”

“That's how we thought it would be.”

She narrowed her eyes. His even temper angered her. Was he even sad?

He squeezed her hand. “Listen, we'll get through this.” “It doesn't seem like enough.”

He pulled his hand away and signaled to the waitress. His wife was feeling ill. Could they get containers for their dinner?

When they got home, she went into the office and stayed there until she heard him go to bed. She knew she owed him an apology. What she didn't know was if they had banked enough goodness in their brief marriage to compensate for this loss.

* * *

At the office the next morning, Laura had just poured herself a second cup of coffee when the receptionist announced that Beatrice from Secur-E-T, a wireless home security system whose account they handled, was waiting in the conference room. They'd worked with Secur-E-T before, but only on packaging. Now Beatrice, a middle-aged woman who'd been a stay-at-home mom, was taking over the business from her father and wanted to expand. Unfortunately, her inexperience made her unpredictable, and she had the tendency to change her mind at the last minute. Her boss had asked Laura to work with Beatrice, assuming their age and gender gave them something in common. Laura hadn't corrected him, but it was obvious Beatrice preferred working with the young men in the agency: with them she alternated between flirting and offering motherly advice.

The meeting started well enough. Laura presented the purchasing trends for home security systems. Sean, the account's creative director, a lanky blond with a goatee who had a tendency to become snarky when his ideas weren't acknowledged, dimmed the lights and showed mock-ups for a campaign that featured a matched pair of white German shepherds. Everyone in the agency had agreed they were the perfect image, appropriate for packaging as well as the print and digital campaigns.

Beatrice reached for a clip on the strap of her tote bag and twisted her thick blond hair up behind her. “The dogs are beautiful. Where did you find them?”

“We all agree they're the perfect image,” Laura replied. She opened her folder and pushed a paper across the table. “If you'll sign off on the concept, we'll move forward.”

Beatrice examined the paper but didn't pick up her pen. “Have you considered eagles?”

Laura felt her shoulders tighten and took a slow breath. When had everyone gone gaga over eagles? Had she missed some TV special, some news headline? “We're looking for something that represents security in the home.” She emphasized *security* and *home*, trying not to hit the words too hard. Beatrice might be inexperienced, but she recognized condescension.

“Eagles are powerful,” Beatrice said. “Like Secur-E-T.”

“Eagles are wild. The two dogs show the redundancy we're promoting. And they belong in the home.”

Sean flashed the German shepherds on the screen again. They were handsome animals, and the trainer was local.

“Then we'll use two eagles,” Beatrice said. “There was a bald eagle nest in Pittsburgh this year with two chicks. And another in the Twin Cities. Those regions are both in the pilot. Homeowners can identify with eagles.”

“They're not the right image,” Laura said. She felt tears form and turned to dab at her eyes with a napkin she found on the credenza behind her. She assumed her hormones were at fault; it had been years since she had cried at work. “If we're going to make the deadline, we can't keep switching directions.”

“Let's cut this short today. I have to pick up the boys at soccer practice. We can hammer everything out next week.” Beatrice stood and picked up her purse. When Laura moved to gather her papers, Beatrice held up her hand. “Don't bother. I know the way.”

After she left, Sean said, “You didn't make any friends today.” Usually, Laura was the one who calmed him down after client sessions. Moodiness was tolerated in creatives, but not the account team.

She blew her nose. “Allergies,” she explained. “Eagles are the wrong image. It's my job to help her understand that.”

“You didn't have to hit her over the head with it. I'll work up something and we can present both concepts next week. Maybe she'll change her mind again by then.”

“Fine. She likes you better anyway.” Laura went back to her desk and put her headphones on, the signal that she was unavailable. She knew she'd replaced grief with anger, but it didn't mean she had to accept everyone's stupid ideas. She'd call Beatrice in the morning and offer to take her to lunch. Maybe she'd invite Sean, too.

By the end of the day, she'd written a series of blog posts for another client and updated a presentation for a meeting on Friday. An uncharacteristic flare-up might not be good for client relations, but it made for a highly productive afternoon.

She clicked on the eagle cam. Even with Snap gone, the website was as active as before. Some viewers had detected a change in the female eagle's behavior toward the two remaining eaglets. The moderators again cautioned against projecting human emotions onto the eagles. Too late for that, Laura thought. You passed that point the day you turned on the camera.

She found a list of eagle facts on the site and forwarded the link to Sean.

* * *

When she arrived home, Michael was sitting at the kitchen table reading the news. There was an open beer in front of him, unusual for a week night.

“Your sister called,” he said. “She and Jeff are coming for dinner on Friday. She's bringing lasagna.”

“Did you tell them we were busy?” She couldn't remember the last time her sister had visited. Holidays were always at Connie's house, since Connie had a family.

“We don't have anything on, do we? I thought she might distract you.”

“She'll irritate me.”

He raised his eyebrows in mock surprise. “Same thing. She said they'd be here about six.”

She took the leftovers from the night before out of the refrigerator and put them in the microwave. “I'll call and tell her not to come. I'd rather have a quiet weekend alone.”

“I could use the distraction.”

She nodded and mentally walked through the rooms of their house. It was reasonably tidy for two people with full-time jobs. Nothing indicated that she'd been pregnant. There were no boxes of furniture waiting to be constructed; no books on what to expect stacked on her night stand.

She took a beer from the refrigerator and went to sit next to him. “I'm sorry about last night.”

He pulled her chair closer to him and put his arm around her shoulder. “What can I do to make you happy?”

“I don't know. Guess you're stuck with the old me.”

“That's the one I married.”

She leaned her head on his shoulder. But didn't he see, that woman no longer existed? She was neither the woman she'd been, nor the one she might have been.

“Why do you think they're coming?” Michael asked.

“Connie prides herself on these flights of fancy. It makes her feel superior to the rest of us plodding through life, taking step after careful step. Maybe she sensed something was going on.”

“You didn't tell her?”

She shook her head. “Don't want to.” She stood when the microwave beeped and divided the leftovers between two plates, giving him the bigger portion of the black bean noodles.

“They were always so wrapped up with their kids. They must be rattling around in that big house.”

Like we're rattling around in this little one, she thought. Where was the happiness that he'd promised?

* * *

When the doorbell rang Friday night, Laura felt a strong impulse to open the door and start walking. Instead, she greeted her sister; Connie handed her a pan of lasagna. “I've got garlic bread, too.”

Jeff stood behind her with their luggage. “Not much parking around here, is there?”

“I'll take your bags into the spare bedroom,” Michael said.

“Don't go to any trouble,” Connie said. “I didn't think to bring sheets.”

Laura sighed. Her house might be smaller than her

sister's, and guests had to park on the street instead of a circular drive, but she knew how to make a bed. "We have sheets. They're even clean." She headed for the kitchen with the lasagna, and Connie followed.

"We had an appointment in town, and with the boys gone, we thought we'd drive up and visit you. It'll give us a chance to know Michael better," Connie said.

"An appointment here?"

"At the Native Rescue Center. I'm looking to provide a safe home for injured birds and wanted to learn about their program. With my background, it seems like a natural."

Did watching an eagle cam count as background? Or was it her experience as a mother she was referring to? Laura opened a bottle of wine and handed it to Connie. "There're glasses on the table. I'll join you in a minute." She put the lasagna in the oven and, instead of joining the others, she took a few minutes to reorganize the cookbooks according to the color of their spines.

When she finally went into the other room, Connie held up her glass and said, "It's a party. Isn't this fun!"

It wasn't enough that her sister invited herself for the weekend, she wanted a party, too.

Laura went to stand by Michael who was looking at plans for an aviary Jeff was building. It looked like an overgrown dollhouse with wire-mesh walls. Her sister was transitioning from a soccer mom into the dorm mother of a bird house. Her refrigerator would hold containers of chicken hearts, her pantry live mice.

Connie pointed out how the detail under the eaves matched the front of their Victorian.

"Pretty fancy for birds," Laura said. She pointed to a stuffed eagle toy that Connie had placed in the center of the table. "Your mascot?"

Connie picked up the eagle and pressed a button so that it squeaked. Repeatedly.

"That's irritating," Laura said.

Connie held the toy to her chest and gave the bird another squeak. "I'm a hungry baby eagle, calling for my mother. Feed me. Feed me." Two more squeaks.

"Will you stop that?" Laura asked. The sound vibrated in the space between her eyes. She resisted the urge to grab the toy. "I'm not a mother eagle."

Connie squeaked again and put the toy on the table, gently fluffing the plush fabric. She picked up the wine

bottle and turned to refill Michael's glass. "My bossy sister. How do you put up with it?"

"We're a good pair," he said. "We all like our own way."

Laura pressed his arm in thanks and returned to the kitchen where she dished up large squares of lasagna, spinach and ricotta oozing between the layers of pasta. Before joining the others, she contemplated going out the back door and eating by herself on the deck.

* * *

Next door, the neighbors, who did most of their remodeling projects at night, started up a power saw. Jeff reached for a piece of garlic bread and Laura said, "Research has shown that men like their wives better when garlic bread is served at dinner." She'd read some study years earlier and often brought it up when conversation lagged.

"What's not to like about bread and garlic butter?" Connie asked.

"It's not about liking garlic bread. It's about husbands liking their wives," Laura said. She passed the basket to Michael.

Jeff held up his glass. "To garlic bread and bald eagles. Perhaps the first time they've been united in a toast." He turned to clink glasses with his wife. "The lasagna is delicious as always, Babe," he said.

Connie smiled, but Laura noticed a rash of irritation spread down her neck. Michael must be right. They were bumping into each other at home.

"How's Trevor enjoying college?" Michael asked.

"Time of his life," Jeff said. "We'd hoped he'd stay closer to home, but he insisted on Portland. Turns out, it's the best thing that could have happened. Both boys are thriving. We should have sent them away sooner."

Connie's mouth trembled. No tears at the dinner table, Laura thought. It had been one of their father's rules, which Connie had regularly broken. But she didn't cry. She turned to Michael and said, "You could participate in the recycling program, too."

"Recovery," Jeff corrected. "Recycling would be something else."

"Eagles turned into plastic soda bottles." Laura knew better, but said it anyway. "Or, better yet, fleece jackets."

"Why are you always so mean?" Connie's voice was tight. "Can't we all have a good time?"

Laura leaned across the table and picked up the stuffed eagle and said in a squeaky voice, "Hey, Connie, it's a party. Everybody here loves eagles."

As usual when her sister was nervous, her misuse of words accelerated. Connie sniffled and said, "I just want to offer an estuary until the birds can fly again."

"Sanctuary," Jeff corrected and rested his hands on his stomach. He wasn't pregnant, just well fed. "An estuary is beyond my carpentry capabilities."

"I want to keep them safe. Is that too much to ask?" Her voice broke on the question, although she still wasn't crying.

In an attempt to distract her sister, Laura quoted one of the statistics she'd learned in her research. "Did you know that the mortality rate of eagle chicks is fifty percent? Snap's parents were doing better than average if two out of three chicks survived."

But Connie wasn't mollified by the statistic. "Isn't that just like you? You think everything can be solved with numbers."

"Actually, I don't," Laura said. "But they're a starting point and give us something we can all agree on."

"Why can't we live in a world where all the eagles survive?" Connie asked. "How about if we agree on that?"

"It's not realistic. You know that."

"You're not a mother," Connie said. "You wouldn't understand."

For the last twenty years, this had been the end to every argument between them. Connie was a mother, and Laura couldn't understand. There had never been any need to understand Laura. "It's not such a difficult concept. I get the general idea."

Now Connie was crying. "I came here to ask for your help, but you're always so mean. With the boys gone, I'm thinking about going back to work. I thought I could get a job like yours."

Connie hadn't worked since her sons were born. Did she think she could step into a management role?

"What? You don't think I can do it?"

Laura refused to be drawn in. "I didn't say that. We can talk about it tomorrow. I'm fresh out of ideas tonight. Besides, what about the aviary? I thought that was your new project."

Connie reached for the toy eagle and held it in front of her.

"One peep and I'm throwing it down the disposal," Laura said.

Jeff held up his hand. "Come on. Your sister is having a hard time."

Then she should try to be less irritating, Laura thought. She folded her arms on the table and rested her forehead on top. The wine had invigorated her initially, but now she was tired and wanted everyone to leave. Alone was what she knew how to do. She was good at alone.

She felt Michael's hand on her back, unsure if it was there in support or as a warning. And then he said, "It's been hard since we lost the baby."

Laura jerked away. How dare he?

"It was my baby, too," Michael said. He spoke quietly, just to her. "You seem to think this only happened to you."

Had he said this before and she hadn't heard? She squeezed her eyes shut. The neighbors started their circular saw again, the blade screeching in protest at an uneven cut.

"You were pregnant?" Connie asked.

"Last March," Michael said.

"You should have told me. I would have come earlier if I'd known."

"We needed the time to ourselves," Michael said.

Laura realized she'd been holding her breath and exhaled. She looked around at the imperfect people around the table and, without speaking, swept her arm palm up, gesturing toward the dirty plates and empty bottles of wine. At the years of being the unmarried sister whose life had not worked out. At being the new wife who'd lost a baby and didn't know what to do.

Connie grabbed Laura's outstretched arm and, before Laura could pull away, placed the eagle chick in her palm.

Laura closed her fingers around the toy. An eagle was not a cuddly bird. She was not a cuddly woman. She brought the eagle back to sit in front of her and pressed the button on its belly to hear the high-pitched squeak. She pressed again and again.

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