

All in a Day's Irk

By Theodore Dalrymple

The most famous line in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's whole large oeuvre is the opening of her Sonnet 43 from the Portuguese:

How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.

Having no poetic faculty, I am, like much of humanity, more inclined to ask: What in life irritates me? Let me count the ways.

I woke up this morning rather earlier than I wanted and still tired, but could not get back to sleep. I knew that this presaged a day when my brain would never be as clear as possible, and throughout which I would drag myself, exhausted.



Then I came across an article on my phone about a women's rugby championship. It is unseemly for women to play rugby, and they will never be any good at it. It is a game made for men and increasingly for monsters. In the days when it was still a genuinely amateur sport, those who played it were of ordinary dimensions and often young men who went on to sensible careers in medicine, law, business, and the like.

Now, however, the sport is professional and played by men who seem to be eight feet wide and run straight into one another, very fast and often headfirst. Not surprisingly, a significant

proportion of them suffer from traumatic dementia very early in their lives, and some, understandably though I do not think justifiably, try in the early stages of their sad condition to obtain financial compensation. The sport has become so violent that even people who are not unduly sensitive to violence shrink from observing it close-up.

Freud might have taken these women's desire to participate in a sport that is so radically unsuited to them as an instance of what, in one of his absurd speculations about the psychology of women, he called penis envy. I think, rather, it is a sign of the masculinization of at least some women, who are responding to the overvaluation in our culture of the exercise of power as the supreme end in life. The exercise of all power is fleeting, sporting prowess being among its most fleeting forms; but the illusion dies hard.

Then I had difficulty in removing from its packaging a pill I wanted to take to relieve the discomfort of the arthritis in my hands. It seemed that the pharmaceutical company had designed its packaging specifically to cause the maximum pain for such as I, when it would have been perfectly feasible to manufacture packaging from which it was easy to remove the pill, as indeed is the case with the other pills I take.

Then I couldn't find a rubber with which I wanted to erase the price of something that had been written on it in pencil. I fell prey to the illusion that if I looked hard enough, my determination would in itself eventually produce a rubber, irrespective of whether or not one actually existed where I was looking for it. In this strange way, we infuse the world with moral meaning: Existence itself yields to virtue (if persistence is a virtue). How many hours of my life have I wasted because of this foolish illusion, growing angrier and bitterer as the searched-for item maliciously refuses to turn up!

Then a guest staying in our house received a telephone call

informing him that, in his absence, his home had been broken into by burglars, who had turned it over, creating a terrible mess that would take hours of miserable labor to clear—as well as taking valuables, of course.

Although the burglary was not of my house, the news plunged me into a further state of irritation. It was highly likely that the burglars were young drug-takers in search of the wherewithal to pay for their debased and stupid pleasures. I thought of all those middle-class intellectuals who would excuse the little tykes because they were drug-takers and therefore in the grip of a supposed illness, addiction, such that they could not help themselves from breaking into people's houses, having first observed them to check that they were unoccupied. (Our guest, incidentally, had guns in the house, a hunting rifle and a pistol.)

The police wouldn't do anything to catch the burglars, always having something more urgent or important to do than attend to whatever you complain to them about—other than attending to it bureaucratically, of course, for there is always time for form-filling. And if by some miracle they caught the culprits, the courts would almost certainly set them free with hardly a slap on the wrist. Some lawyer or other would present a picture of unfortunate young men with bad family backgrounds, now by happy coincidence sincere penitents, and the judge would pretend to believe it because there are not enough prison places to imprison them anyway.

We took our guest to the station so that he could return home, 400 miles away. His ticket was expensive, his holiday ruined. On the way back from the station, we stopped off in a small town, not very prosperous, for lunch. The weather was fine; we sat outside. The restaurant was in a narrow street, and next to us sat a couple of middle-aged degenerates with missing front teeth. She was overweight and blowsy, with a large butterfly tattooed on her breast, the tattoo's ink now spreading through her skin in a blue mist; for some reason,

such people always squeeze themselves into tight-fitting clothes to make the worst of themselves. He, by contrast, was cigarette-thin, with the kind of thinness that results from heavy smoking; he had a tattoo on his forearm in the form of italic writing, but I could not read it. They started with a large glass of white wine and progressed to a carafe of red. They were, so to speak, an epidemiologist's nightmare.

Unaware of my derogatory thoughts, they were extremely friendly toward us. They seemed to be enjoying themselves in a completely innocent and unselfconscious way. They were not uninteresting and provided us with much local information, for example about the trout farm not far away where you could fish and take away your catch. The man had lived all his life in the town and had no regrets about knowing nowhere else. Lucky man! She was of Polish and Hungarian descent, her grandparents who immigrated to France deciding henceforth to speak nothing but French. No multiculturalism for them!

The restaurant was very small, run by a husband and wife, he the front man eager to please, she the cook in the tiny, cramped kitchen behind. The fare was simple but good, not expensive, all freshly cooked from fresh ingredients. The couple were not short of customers—had as many as they could manage, in fact—and were working flat out. I saw in this the heroism of small business, where no fortune but an honest living, of value to others, would be made.

We waved them all goodbye, my irritation with life completely dissipated.

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