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February is a draggable load

By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—Most miseries end.

I'm thinking of February in particular.

February circles around every winter like a resistant flu virus, lands, infects everybody and then gets away scot-free.

It would be better if February would be given a bum's rush out the door, don't you think? We could send it on a space probe.

It's good that February is a temporary misery. You may not be aware that more jihadists see their light in February than in all other months combined. Living in a permanent February, like they do, would bumfuzzle anyone.

As long as you are certain that February comes to an end, you can get through its 28 days of sub-zero temperatures, howling winds, frozen snow drifts, bone-breaking ice, plugged pipes, electrical outages, equipment breakdowns, dirt-encrusted vehicles, Valentine's Day and friends in Florida sending selfies in bathing suits.

I've found that every unpleasantness is manageable when I know it will pass. Hiking a mountain, for example, has a finite number of steps no matter how steep. The trek can be only so long. A 60-minute workout has only 60 minutes to sweat through.

Open-ended miseries are, on the other hand, dispiriting. In the worst case, a light can never appear at the end of the tunnel. In a less worse case, you never know *whether* a light might appear. And in a case less worse than that, you never know *when* the light might appear.

Permanent miseries that can never get better are best avoided.

I try to roll with February rather than duke it out. I try to keep it out of my head. I do the same with barking dogs and annoying children, though not very successfully.

If February crawls into your brain cavity and takes up residence, it makes you drag a great weight each day.

When I was a kid, I was in attendance at weekly piano lessons. (I have chosen the verb phrase “was in attendance” with great care and surgical precision.) Piano lessons were neither my idea nor my idea of a good time.

The instrument and I never hit it off, given my near-total lack of musical talent and my near-fanatic unwillingness to practice.

John Thompson’s Teaching Little Fingers to Play was the first of many books I rarely opened. One of its melodies was the opening bars of the Russian “Song of the Volga Boatmen.” The lyrics, grunted in step coordination, consisted largely of dirgeful “Yos,” “Heaves” and “Yos.”

I spent my practice time staring at the line drawing that framed this song. A gang of ragged men pulled in harnesses along an icy ledge trail, hauling a loaded boat against the current.

I felt that I and my little fingers were also pulling a dead weight upstream; it was called “taking piano.” It didn’t help that my classmate and friend, Mia, had perfect pitch, musical genius, nimble fingers and an ear that Mozart would have envied.

That simple illustration was probably inspired by the early-1870s, oil-on-canvas painting by Ilya Repin, “Barge Haulers on the Volga.”

Repin, a young Ukranian artist, was a founder of the rebellious Wanderers school that focused on the real-life circumstances of ordinary Russians, showing both their labor and their inner attitudes. (Click on the pixel dimension for a detailed view.)



1,280 × 592 pixels.

These men were called “burlaks,” a Russian epithet that originated in a word for “homeless.” A Russian proverb suggests where burlaks ranked: “Dog, do not touch the burlak—he is a dog himself.”)

Burlaks worked on Russian rivers, notably the Volga, from about 1700 to the first years of the 20th Century. In 1800, they numbered about 600,000.

Women were also used as boat-hauling mules. Not many realize that feudal Russia was the vanguard of equal employment opportunity.

Burlaks were serfs, a status controlled by landlords that combined slavery with sharecropping. Russian serfdom ended in 1861. Oppression did not.

The burlaks in Repin’s painting had been officially emancipated a decade earlier. It does make you wonder about the Russian definition of “freedom.”

Of interest is Repin’s commentary. The boat being pulled is a dead weight, much like Russian peasants dragging feudal Russia behind them. Its Russian flag is flying upside down, a distress signal. Another boat in the extreme right background shows a plume from a steam engine—the

humane alternative. The steamboat is going downstream while the men are pulling upstream.

Ten older men are painted darkly even though it's a hot, sunny day. The only young hauler is lighted and shown struggling defiantly against his traces. The men represent Russia's different ethnic groups united in their shared suffering.

The Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich -- son of reform-minded, serf-emancipating Emperor Alexander II of Russia and brother of autocratic Tsar Alexander III -- bought the painting and had it displayed publicly. He took after his Daddy.

The song and drawing in my piano primer must have struck a minor chord. As a 10-year-old I felt that I was pulling my piano upstream. Perhaps, I'd worked the Volga's boats in an earlier life.

Most of us from time to time feel that we are dragging a heavy load, unfairly. February is one; there are others, even heavier and more unfair.

I was too young or dumb, of course, to understand that pulling the load called "taking piano" was an opportunity.

Most loads, I've discovered, are druggable. The pulling is easier if you can figure out how to work with the burden rather than struggle against a task that you can't escape.

One nice thing about lugging a load is that you might forget over time just how distasteful it was.

By July, February will be just another blurry memory.

Still, Blue Grass is shoveling out from under another snowy foot as I write.

Maybe, we should add the first week of March to February and throw the baby out with the ice water.

At least, we're not Boston with almost nine feet. Why don't you people up there dump February into the harbor once and for all?

Surviving February builds confidence.

"Here comes the sun."