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Bub comes to Blue Grass: He vents, I listen  
By Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—A knock-knock -- no joke -- at the front door stirred me from my pre-sleep, Friday-night doze in front of the television. It was after 12. I wobbled across the living room, careful not to disturb our two, zonked-out Yellow Labs sprawled on their backs, paws in the air.

“We’re here!”

I blinked.

Bub and The Missus were smiling at me, suitcases in hand.

“Couldn’t call first and bring down the media hordes on you,” Bub explained. “We ditched the Secret Service and escaped for the weekend.”

“Well, come in, of course,” I said, grabbing luggage.

“We need a vacation...from our vacations,” The Missus said, air-pecking me on my beard. “So he said, ‘Let’s go to Blue Grass. Work on the farm. Make pies. Play checkers by kerosene lamps.’”

“I thought you were in Florida, on the beach.”

Bub grimaced. “I’ve eaten so many Gulf Coast oysters during the last month that I have a pearl necklace growing in my gut.”

“So that’s what it is!” The Missus said.

“Hello,” Melissa called down from upstairs. “I’m asleep. Oh my! The guest room hasn’t been dusted for a week. Corky--Put out fresh towels. Make sure they have soap!”

“Did you bring soap?” I asked.

Bub and The Missus grinned.

“Melissa, they’ll be fine. They’re here to rough it.”

I got them settled. As I was getting a drink of water in the kitchen, Bub came in.

“How’s it going?” I asked.

“The honest answer is that nothing is going well...and there’s not much I -- or anyone -- can do to make it go better. A majority disapprove of the job I’m doing. That’s what I’d say too.”

“Really.” I knocked out a couple of Lucky Strikes, and we pulled up to the breakfast table, not smoking them.

Bub started talking. “Iraq and Afghanistan can’t be made into functioning countries, because both are centuries-old functioning conflicts over religion, tribes and ethnicity. The more we are there, the less support the governments get from their people. We’re stuck with corrupt governments. Staying longer won’t make things better for them or us. They want us out, and the polls show Americans want that too. There’s no happy ending whatever we do.”

“That bad, huh?”

“The economy is worse. The jobless and underemployment numbers are much higher than we’ve been saying. Consumers aren’t buying because they either don’t have money or fear that they won’t have money in the future. Businesses are sitting on \$2 trillion, because they too fear the future. I don’t blame them. I wouldn’t hire new employees based on the audacity of hope.”

“Want a beer or a match?” I asked. He nodded toward the refrigerator. I cracked a couple of bottles.

“We’re out of ideas,” he said. “Both parties. Federal spending hasn’t worked very well, and neither business nor consumers want to be the first to move. That keeps us stuck. I’ve been thinking. Let’s do a real tax cut, something like a 25 percent reduction or more for everyone, including capital gains. If it works, I’ll get credit for being bipartisan...and we’ll learn something. If it doesn’t, we’ll share the blame...and maybe reframe the discussion of what moves this kind of economy—and what doesn’t.”

“What about health care? You got that through.”

“Pinky-finger Band-Aid on a hemorrhage. If we don’t force down costs in its administration, the federal government will have little money for anything else.”

“Wall Street reform?”

“Too many gaps and loopholes. The history of regulatory agencies is that the regulated generally get pretty much their way over time,” Bub said.

“I remember your 30-percent rule,” I said. “The President -- no matter the party -- proposes 80 percent of what he thinks the country needs in a bill. If Congress passes it, it’s down to about 50 percent. And once it has been ground through three or four administrations, lawsuits and political opposition, only 30 percent of the substance survives at triple the projected cost.”

“Yep. It’s why people are fed up. It’s why they turn to dictators who blame an internal enemy and promise jobs and national pride.”

“Well,” I said, “at least you’ve proved that you were born in the United States and you’re not a Muslim.”

“Right,” he sighed. “Half of America thinks I was born in Osama Bin Laden’s tent in Saudi Arabia with a Qur’an in one hand and an IED in the other. I didn’t choose my name; my father did. He abandoned me and my mother. He was wacky in many ways. I had no relationship with him. Had my mother and her parents not paid attention to me and put me into a good high school, I would have been a ‘lost boy.’ My father would have made things worse had he stayed. His dreams weren’t mine. He was a rotten Dad and husband.”

“Do you care about a second term?”

“I care more about what happens, that we find a way to crack the hardest nuts. But I don’t care that much about serving a second term with a hostile Congress that refuses to move. I’d rather...I’d rather try farming.”

“Maybe, by then, we can afford a full-time hand.”

Bub took a drag on his unfired Lucky. “I’m not like Bill Clinton. I don’t need the White House. The girls -- all of us -- would like nothing more than go back to being fairly normal. I’ve actually been thinking about farming.”

“Farming what?” I laughed. “Are you going to raise issues. Will you grow a crop of political organizers? How about milking words from dry udders?”

“Better than putting old utters in new speeches.”

“Groan,” I said.

“I’m serious. Farming’s tangible. You see the results of your efforts.”

“I won’t quarrel with that,” I said. “You certainly have a right to buy a farm wherever you want and build what you like consistent with local zoning, but I’m not taking a position as to whether this is or is not a wise decision.”

Bub laughed. “The mosque mess. People have been fighting religious wars for more than 2,000 years. Each religion has its fringe of fanatics. The hardest thing to do is for a majority religion to maintain political and religious room for minority faiths. America has done it better than anybody, though not without wrong moves. It’s hard to get along with people of the same church let alone folks you think are spiritually incorrect. We’re losing ‘good will to men.’ We’ve got to get it back. Maybe the mosque developers will relocate. How about Blue Grass?”

“That would certainly shake some apples out of our trees.”

“I could harvest them.”

“Better to gather apples when they’re on the tree, not after they’ve fallen on the ground.”

“Hmmm. Farming’s trickier than it looks, a lot like politics.”

When I crawled into bed, Melissa stirred. “So what did the boys talk about?”

“The usual--sex and football.”

“I should have known.”

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