Unstuck in Time: The Barbara Pilgrim Edition

Barbara Pilgrim has had enough; she might have married a closeted homosexual man, inherited her mother’s marshmallow stature, and her children might hate her, but today she draws the line as she marches to her father’s basement. She stops before she opens the door; Barbara doesn’t want to give him the satisfaction of walking all the way down to the freezing area where the oil burner has quit. She thinks that just because he refuses to plan a funeral for his deceased wife (leaving Barbara to do it herself), refuses to come to work and continue the optometrist business (leaving Barbara to do it herself), and escaped from his house against a doctor’s orders to go to New York and talk about aliens on the radio, that he wants to spite her. Poor Barbara believes that her own father wants to spite her.

 “Father, I know you know I’m up here. I’ve been yelling for quite a while now! Come out of there and we will have a civilized conversation like two adults…” A silence creeps into the atmosphere. “Stop ignoring me and come upstairs!”

While Barbara Pilgrim is having a tantrum, her father, Billy Pilgrim, sits downstairs barefoot, feet blue and ivory and frozen half to death, writing a letter to the Ilium News Leader, a letter which will cure the world of misery and heartache once and for all.

You see, Billy Pilgrim has insight that other people of the universe do not. He knows about the planet of Tralfamadore, a home to a species that sees time in a fourth dimension. These Tralfamadorians tell him that the way humans see time is skewed. Instead of seeing a single moment, Tralfamadorians can view every moment that has ever existed at once. Imagine the Rocky Mountains. While humans see a single part of the mountain, Tralfamadorians have the ability to see the front, the side, and even the back of the mountain. That is exactly how they view time. They tell Billy that when a person dies they only appears to die. That person is still very much alive in the past, so it is very silly for people to cry at funerals. This is exactly what Billy plans to write in his letter to heal the hearts grieving families. Billy is so excited by this he doesn’t hear his daughter bawling her giant eyes out upstairs.

Poor Barbara’s tantrum turns into a nervous breakdown, a habit that runs in the family. She throws herself onto her father’s bed and turns on the Magic Fingers, then she sobs and wails until she runs out of tears. While Barbara wallows in misery, she thinks about what a hard life she’s had. You might call Barbara Pilgrim 'spoiled', what with living off an optometrist’s salary and the Merble legacy combined, and of course there were the expensive toys and the lobster dinners that children in Africa could never have, but Barbara wasn’t thinking about that; she was thinking about the neglect and loveless environment she and her brother, Robert Pilgrim, grew up with. Poor Barbara knew deep inside that her father stopped loving his children a long time ago, if he ever even loved them at all. He was always so unreceptive, never remembering any birthdays or choir performances or baseball games. He would nod passively when Barbara would bring home straight A’s, staring off into the distance. Billy never took an interest in his children, not because he didn’t love them, but simply just because. Meanwhile, Barbara and Robert grew 21 years thinking their father a heartless man. They believed their father stayed in the family to mooch off of the money in the Merble legacy and certainly not because he loved the woman he was married to.

As for Valencia, big and plush as she was, she was pleasant and loved anything as long as she had a chocolate bar in her mouth and a big fat diamond ring to show off.

Barbara takes a few deep breaths, like the self-help columns in her magazines suggest: inhale once, exhale twice*.* She goes to the bathroom and looks into the mirror as she gives herself a pep talk, a surefire way to “gain control” according to *Good Life* magazine.

"Barbara Pilgrim, stop your blubbering. No one likes a woman who feels sorry for herself." She sniffles, staring deep into the eyes looking back at her. "You've got to do this. That man downstairs is your father. Swallow your pride. He is a senile widower and with all he’s been through – Inhale once, exhale twice. “He is traumatized and he needs your help! So go and help him Barbara, you can do it!" She gives herself an encouraging smile in the mirror, because according to *Happy, Healthy You,* no one will believe in your confidence if you, yourself, do not.

You must understand that Barbara Pilgrim isn't an ignorant woman. She recognizes all the dreadful things Billy has had to deal with in his life. She knows that when he came back from the war, her dear brave father went into a terrible, depressive state of mind. She’s just worried about Billy; all she wants to do is help him. Perhaps you would sympathize with Barbara’s situation more if you could see what she’s seen. Let’s say that we are unstuck in time.

We could go back to the day where Barbara is breaking the news to her dear brave father that he has lost his wife:

 “Father I have to tell you something terrible, just terrible… I can’t believe she’s gone.” Barbara struggles to control the tears streaming down her cheeks. She takes a deep breath and inhales once, exhales twice.

Billy Pilgrim awkwardly strokes her arm. The pain medication makes him think that his daughter’s hand is a sausage and he has to resist the urge to bite it. As poor Barbara sobs, she hears her father whisper something.

“Sausages…I love sausages thank you…being served a giant sausage feast… British…Cinderella is so beautiful… Blue Fairy Godmother is funny–“

“Father! I understand that you are heavily influenced but I need you to listen to me!” Barbara’s round, tear-streaked face snaps Billy out of his drugged haze. “Mother is dead.” She was expecting a tear – a gasp at least.

 Instead, Billy continues to stare at her sausage hand. Now, the freckles on her limb mesmerize him, twinkling and climbing all the way up her arm like a constellation.

“Stars…beautiful stars…like the sky and space…Tralfalmadorians…you are beautiful Tralfamadorians…thank you for Montana…”

 “Father, please.” Poor Barbara begs.

 Now the stars on her arms turn into big gaping holes. Like bullet holes.

 “Bullet holes…vy me…this jacket is small…vy anyone…it’s cold…jacket is small…”

Barbara stares silently at her father. She knows she can’t do anything to help. She stares at him for so long that she eventually falls asleep in a chair beside his bed. When she wakes up she sees Billy Pilgrim looking at her questioningly.

“Dead, you say?”

She nods her head, afraid a verbal response might set him off.

“So it goes.” Billy shrugs.

“What?” She takes deep breaths and inhales once, exhales twice. “So it goes, that’s all you have to say?”

“She’s still alive you know. She really is.” Billy Pilgrim looks at his daughter with an expression that is supposed to comfort Barbara.

Barbara is appalled at her father. She can’t imagine why he would be grinning at the thought of his deceased wife so she breaks down sobbing once again.

Billy tries to calm his daughter down by assuring her that there is no possible way to prevent what happened. That Valencia Merble only *appears* to be dead, so there’s no need for a funeral either.

Poor Barbara sobs even harder.

“Barbara, sweetheart, please don’t cry, it’s pointless. This is out of our control don’t you see. Just like the airplane accident.”

“What do you mean?” Her crying stops.

 “I knew that airplane was going to crash. I just didn’t want to make a fool of myself by saying so.”

Barbra Pilgrim stifles a gasp. “Why didn’t you tell the pilot?”

“Because the airplane would have gone down anyway. There was nothing I could do about it. I can’t change time.”

Poor Barbara is livid now. “You mean to tell me you got on that plane knowing it would kill all those people? You couldn’t be bothered to do anything about it so you just let all those men die--“

“They aren’t dead. They just appear to be dead, like your mother.”

“Stop saying that, just stop! Stop it! Stop it! Stop it!” And so on until her giant marshmallow body falls to the floor. And so on until seven male hospital workers have to come and escort her out of the building before she disturbs any more patients in the hospital. No amount of tips from the self-help column in *New You, Better You* could help Barbara Pilgrim in that moment.

Or we could even jump to the future where Barbara Pilgrim is knocking on the front door of Kilgore Trout with her sausage hand. Barbara knocks until Mr. Trout opens the door.

“What do you want-- hey, you’re Billy Pilgrim’s kid, aren’t you? You look just like your mother.”

 “Mr. Trout, I need you to speak to my father for me. He says he will be in Chicago one week from now and a man named Paul Lazzaro will hire someone to kill him with a laser gun.”

 “And what the hell do you want me to do about it?” He grunts, taking out a cigarette and lighting it with a match.

 Barbara explains to Mr. Trout the way that her father explained to her about the Tralfamadorians. She explains the way they see in a fourth dimension and all of their philosophies to life. She adds in that the doctors believe that this is her dear brave father’s way of dealing with his post-traumatic stress disorder.

 “So leave him alone. Let him deal with his disorder. Better yet, tell him to write a book, it sounds like a good story.” Mr. Trout takes a drag from his cigarette, inhaling once, exhaling twice.

 “I don’t think you understand, Mr. Trout. My father has always been a passive man, but now he’s starting to worry me. He’s saying that there’s no such thing as free will. He’s saying that he has to go to Chicago and die because that’s the way it has to be. I’m sure that this Paul Lazzaro fellow is just some sort of metaphor…”

 “I still don’t understand why you’re here.” Mr. Trout looks at poor Barbara with boredom.
 “I want you to talk to my father. Tell him he’s capable of making his own decisions. Tell him he doesn’t have to go to Chicago and that the moment isn’t set in stone; tell him this is all just nonsense! He’d listen to you!” Barbara pleads.

 “No.”

 “And why not?”

 “Your father is not suicidal.” He takes another drag from his cigarette.

 “Please Mr. Trout, all his life he has lived without interest. I can’t remember a time he’s ever said, “I love you” to me and all I’ve ever done is tried to please him, to make him happy. Any father would be proud to have a daughter like me!” She whimpers, trying to control her tears. “Once my dear brave father came back from the war, I thought to myself, ‘He’ll appreciate you now, Barbara. With all those terrible things he’s seen, he must be grateful for having you around.’ But he came back and he was even worse. He’s gone through all these terrible things and all he can do is be quiet about them. Like he’s happy these things, these terrible tragic things, have happened and all because the Tralfamadorians have told him they must. He’s embracing death with open arms for Christ’s sake! Please help me Mr. Trout!” Poor Barbara believes her speech has inspired Mr. Trout to come help her after all. She secretly hopes that her speech was so heartfelt that Mr. Trout might shed a tear.

Mr. Trout throws his cigarette butt into the neighbor’s side of the lawn and looks at Barbara Pilgrim in her tear-stained marshmallow face. “If you protest, if you think that death is a terrible thing, then you haven’t understood a word he’s said.” He closes the door and leaves poor Barbara to sob on his front porch.

You can see why Barbara is so upset all the time; she’s concerned for her father’s safety. All she wants to do is help him, but everyone seems to be working against her, refusing to help. Poor Barbara can’t figure out why everyone believes it’s futile to try and fix tragedy. She doesn’t understand why these delusional people are so accepting of the bad things in life. Why can’t they see things the way they truly are?

Barbara Pilgrim makes her way downstairs to yell at her senile father. She chants a self-help mantra in her mind, because as *Good Life* magazine says, a person needs focus and affirmation in any stressful situation.

The mantra Barbara repeats to herself hangs on a poster in her father’s office. It reads: “God grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference.”. So as she marches downstairs to basement, that she fills herself up with confidence. She can't change the fact that she married a gay man, she can't do much to lose weight, and she can't figure out how to make her children love her, but she has the courage to help her father. Barbra Pilgrim is wise enough to know that.

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