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THE LAST EDUCATIONS

...abruptly Presley saw again, in his imagination, the galloping monster, the terror of steel steam, with its single eye, cyclopean, red, shooting from horizon to horizon; but saw it now as the symbol of a vast power, huge, terrible, flinging the echo of its thunder over all the reaches of the valley, leaving blood and destruction in its path; the leviathan, with tentacles of steel clutching into the soil, the soulless Force, the iron-hearted Power, the monster, the Colossus, the Octopus.

—Frank Norris, *The Octopus*

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Fate

A man's power is hooped in by a necessity, which, by many experiments, he touches on every side, until he learns its arc.
—Ralph Waldo Emerson

At the end of the semester, the week after a cheerless and lonely Thanksgiving, on a dreary, rainy day, I was trudging along with mobs of students through Parlin Hall, the English building, when someone called my name. I looked around. Damp, dripping students were coming and going in the hallway, many chattering chatting on cell phones, some hooked up to iPods, jostling along with backpacks and books. Then I saw Dr. Camille Braddock, a professor who had been on my committee.

“Tom!” she said. “What luck—I was just thinking about you.”

I felt a sudden wave of guilt and anxiety. She had no reason to be thinking about me. I asked, “What?”

Dr. Braddock stepped between a pair of giggling girls and came over. She was dry—had probably been teaching in one of the classrooms upstairs—and trim and cheerful, carrying an armload of multicolored folders. Student work, probably: even professors had to grade, sometimes, a little.

“Absolutely,” Dr. Braddock said. “I was thinking about you—wondering if you might be able to do me a favor.”

A favor. I looked away, down the hall to the retreating girls—still giggling, and it briefly occurred to me to wonder just what the hell they were so happy about—and I then looked back at Dr. Braddock. It was one of those day-to-day moments that everyone has at times, I think, and seem to happen to me fairly regularly, moments that open up into an eternity, an endless unfillable void where a person can instantly pause to consider just how screwed-up a life can become. *A favor.* I was already doing too much, and following through on too little. I was a post-doc, a lecturer, an adjunct—a serf. I was teaching two sections of Intro to Literature and a section of Composition and Rhetoric at the university, and three sections of comp at the community college. I was tending bar three nights a week to get enough extra money to at least make payments on my loans. I was scrambling around trying to find a tenure-track job. And Dr. Braddock, who should have known or at least sensed my status and situation, wanted to ask me for a favor.

“A favor?” I asked. I was starting to come up out of the void, and I was pissed, and depressed. A fucking favor.

“You have a minute?” Dr. Braddock asked. “Or do you have to go teach?”

I checked my watch. I had twenty minutes until the next class. “No, I’m free right now.”

“Excellent—come on to my office.”

I turned and followed Dr. Braddock up the hallway I had just come down. The floor was a little muddy and slippery from all the water the wet students had tracked in, but Dr. Braddock calmly stepped along in an expensive pair of black boots. Faculty offices opened on either side of the hall: the office doors had large, frosted glass windows in them, and many professors had

photos and newspaper clippings taped to their doors—cartoons, funny sayings, poems. Dr. Braddock's door, though, was bare: creamy whitish gray paint, the frosted gray window, a cardboard tag with her name and office hours. Over the years I'd been past this door dozens of times, maybe hundreds, but had never gone through it, not even when I was one of her students.

"Come on in," Dr. Braddock said. She unlocked the door and opened it. "Have a seat."

Dr. Braddock's desk faced the door, and beyond it was a window—a window! My office, if you could even call it that, was stuck in the dark basement of the undergraduate library, a dank cubicle I shared with a pair of adjuncts from the Spanish department and a leaky sewage pipe. Dr. Braddock's office was big and dry and had a window. Life on the tenure track! I almost felt like crying.

"Sit down, please." Dr. Braddock dumped her big armload of student work to the desktop. A red folder slipped off onto my side of the desk, and I picked it up and put it back. I sat down.

"Just a second," Dr. Braddock said. "There's something I need to look at."

I sat back while Dr. Braddock checked her email. There were bookshelves on either side of the desk, and behind the chair I was sitting in. I recognized a few titles: Goetzman's *West of the Imagination*, Nash's *Wilderness and the American Mind*. *Desert Solitaire*, *Great Plains*, *Regionalism and the Humanities*. Dr. Braddock worked in literary and photographic narratives of the American West.

"So—how are you?" Dr. Braddock turned away from her computer and looked at me.

"You're lecturing, right? On the job market?"

"Yeah," I said. "I interviewed at Northeast Oklahoma a couple of weeks ago."

“Northeast *Oklahoma*,” she said, slowly. There was a little trace of—what? Mockery? Pity?—in her voice, like she was really saying *Bumfuck State* or something. What the hell—Northeast Oklahoma was a real job, with health insurance. She asked, “How’d *that* go?”

“Haven’t heard anything yet,” I said.

“It’s rough out there,” Dr. Braddock said. “The job market’s tight.”

I shrugged. “That’s what everybody says.”

“I know you’ll find something good,” Dr. Braddock said. “But listen—I wanted to ask you for a favor.”

“Yeah?”

Dr. Braddock leaned forward like she was about to share a secret. Her chair squeaked.

“I’m going out to California over break,” she said. “I’m going to do some work at the Bancroft Library and I was wondering—thinking—*hoping*—that maybe you could come by and feed the cats while I’m gone.”

“The cats?” I asked. I slumped down a little in the chair. I thought, At least cats are less trouble than dogs.

“Yeah, my cats, they need somebody to come by a couple of times a day and feed them. It shouldn’t be too much trouble—they’re older cats.”

The void opened up again. Despair seeped out. I do too much, I don’t follow through enough. It was the end of the semester: in a few days I would have 150 or so papers to grade and a job search to organize. A life to lead. Despair seeped out of the void, enveloped me. I was going to say *Yes*, of course I was—I couldn’t say *No*, ever. My parents raised me to be nice, to be agreeable, to be helpful, and I am. It’s a quality that has never served me well. When friends need help moving, I move. When students think their grade is too low, I raise the grade.

Dentists and doctors schedule my appointments at weirdly inconvenient times. Butchers sell me bad meat. I paid too much for my car, and pay mechanics too much for not fixing it. I can't say No. If I was a girl, I'd be pregnant all the goddamn time, with a half-dozen or so brats from previous favors—previous *Yeses*—squalling around unfed in dirty diapers. It's just the way I am. When I look in the mirror I see a very weak man.

“Yeah, I guess,” I said. The void closed. The despair, I knew, would linger. “I mean—sure. I don't have any plans or anything. I like cats.”

“Excellent!” Dr. Braddock said. “I knew you were the man for the job!”

From: Emily Caldwell
To: Thomas Holt, PhD
Subject: Money

So when are you going to get me that money for the electric bill? This is taking way too long!

Em

At 2:00 on Mondays and Wednesdays and Fridays, I taught a class over in Garrison Hall, a section of RHE 306, Rhetoric & Writing, and it was the class I always dreaded—not so much for the class itself, 25 or so sullen young people who didn't want to be there, but for the room I taught in. Garrison 128 was right next door to Garrison 132, and in Garrison 132 at 2:00 MWF was a class taught by my ex-girlfriend, Emily Caldwell.

I did my best to avoid Emily, but even so I managed to run into her at least once a week before or after class. Seeing her was always the low point of my week. Emily was always quick with a snarky remark about someone or something—bad professional behavior, I thought—and even quicker to bug me about money she claimed I owed her on our last electric bill.

In order to avoid Emily I usually got to Garrison 128 a few minutes late—Emily of course was always very punctual and always started her classes on time. I was happy to dodge her and begin class a few minutes late, much to the annoyance of a few students who saw themselves as consumers of education and expected everything to run as smoothly as a goddamned Jiffy-Lube. I was unmoved by the consumers, though, and usually ended class a few minutes early, too, rushing the students out into the hall and off to wherever they had to go, then fleeing myself. I put more work into dodging Emily than I did teaching the class.

But after seeing Dr. Braddock I was running a bit later than normal, even, and to cover the material I ended up running the class longer than usual, too, aware of the few students who were angry at me for my weird starting and stopping times, and the many students who were pissed because I hadn't finished grading the essays they'd turned in almost three weeks earlier. Still, class came to an end, and the students dropped off their homework assignments and hustled off into the hall. I could see through the open door that Emily's class was letting out, too. I scrambled around, trying to pile up everything—homework, handouts, whatever—so I could escape. When I looked up again, I saw a student coming back into the room—Nelda Krueger, a pretty girl who had been making me nervous all semester.

“Dr. *Holt*,” Nelda said.

I looked past Nelda and saw Emily standing in the doorway.

“What can I do for you?” I asked. I looked away from Nelda, down at the jumbled stack of paper on my desk.

“I was wondering what the deal was on the final portfolio,” Nelda said. She had fine brownish blondish hair and sharp brown eyes and pearly teeth and she smiled with her mouth open. “You said it was supposed to be our best paper, revised, but I haven't got my last paper

back yet, and it's my best one, I think. So how can I revise it if I don't know what you think of it?"

"There's plenty of time," I said. Emily was still standing in the doorway, clutching books to her chest and pouting. I looked back at Nelda. "I'll get the papers back Wednesday—or maybe Friday—and you'll have plenty of time for revision."

Nelda put her hand on the table and looked distressed. "But I have all these *other* assignments coming due! I'd like to get this one out of the way."

"You're going to have plenty of time," I said again. "Really—you're doing fine in this class. You don't have anything to worry about."

"Okay." Nelda didn't sound convinced.

"Come by my office and talk to me," I said. "We'll get it worked out for you. You're going to do fine."

"Okay," Nelda said again.

"Send me an email if you have any questions," I said.

"Thanks, Dr. Holt," Nelda said. She turned to leave and I watched her walk away, then looked up at Emily standing there, dumpy and frumpy and frowning. She came slowly over to my table.

"So," Emily said, "I guess that's the undergrad you're fucking this semester, huh?"

"What?" I looked at her. "No!"

"I saw how you looked at that girl," Emily said.

"I was not," I said. "Besides, what am I supposed to look at—the floor?"

Emily smiled a little. "You can look at anyone you want, as long as you look professionally."

Professionally. Right. I asked, "Yeah? So who are you fucking now?"

"Not a student!"

Somebody, then. I didn't care.

Emily said, "So when are you going to get me that money for the electric bill?"

The electric bill. That. I sagged. "I don't have it," I said. "You'll have to wait."

"I've been waiting," Emily said. "It's not much."

I pulled out my billfold and gave her twenty dollars. I said, "That's all I have right now."

Emily stuck the bill in her pocket. "You still owe me eighty-four dollars."

"Whatever," I said.

Students from the next class were filtering into the classroom. I finally jammed the homework into my briefcase. I said, "I've got to get out of here."

I grabbed my briefcase and we left the room and went up the stairs and out onto the mall. The rain had stopped but the sky was still overcast and low. I started back toward my dungeon in the basement of the UGL.

"Walk me over to Parlin," Emily said. "I need to check my mail."

"I was just over there," I said.

"Well, you can go again."

I gave up. We passed the statues of Jefferson Davis and Woodrow Wilson and down the steps to Parlin. Emily, still in grad school, had a mailbox there. Me, a post-doc, a nobody, an unperson with no rights, of course had nothing, anywhere.

"You shouldn't stare at your students like that," Emily said.

I shrugged and didn't say anything. Emily was always jealous. I remembered mornings Emily would sit puffy-faced and grouchy, watching the cable news. The blond women reading

the news always seemed to annoy her. “You’d probably fuck her, wouldn’t you?” she asked one morning, pointing at the television with the remote.

I said, “I don’t know.”

“Of course you would. The valorization of blondness in this society is a disease.”

I said, “Everybody on TV is beautiful.”

“Her mouth looks like a vagina,” Emily said.

Every morning was like that—one grouchy whine after another. Emily was very smart—sharper than me, at least—but her never-ending petulance made her a pain to be around. Really, I was happy when she kicked me out.

Just outside Parlin we passed a curly-headed little man all dressed in black.

“Hi, Dr. Wytowski,” Emily said.

He walked on past us without looking up. Emily leaned over to me.

“Wytowski’s wife left him. He’s fucking an undergraduate.”

“How do you know?”

“Everybody knows! The girl went on grademyprofessor.com and gave him straight fives and a chili pepper ‘cause he’s so hot.”

I looked at Wytowski walking away from us. I said, “He’s not so hot.”

“Well, you’re not fucking him.” Emily opened the mailroom door for me. “That girl thinks he’s hot. And then his wife went online and gave him a single star—you can’t get any lower than a single star—and she said he was a lousy lay.”

The mailroom was decorated with photos of long-dead and forgotten professors. They made me sad, the photos of the forgotten. Sad, and suddenly afraid that I might never even get into a position to be forgotten, unless I got busy and found a decent job. Emily peered into her

mailbox—nothing, of course, just a flyer for some lecture series nobody was interested in, and a memo reminding instructors to get their grades turned in on time. Emily dumped the papers into a recycling bin.

“Listen,” Emily said. “I wanted to ask you a favor.”

Another favor—of course. The void opened up again. But I tried to stop it.

“I already paid you what I have—”

“What you *owe* me is an obligation—”

“I don’t have anything else—”

“This is a favor—”

“And I’m not sure I owe you anything!”

“A favor, okay? This won’t cost you anything.”

Sure. I looked at the photos of the dead professors and didn’t say anything. A heavy-set, professorial-looking woman ducked into the mailroom and peered into her mailbox. She dumped some unread paper into the recycling bin and ducked back out.

“A favor,” Emily said. “I was just thinking you could read a chapter of my dissertation.”

Her dissertation. Oh, that. It had something to do with gender roles in the anti-slavery movement, or maybe early feminists—rhetorical positions, something something whatever boring whoever. We’d talked a lot about her dissertation—well, she talked a lot, and I pretended to listen—but I was never really clear what she was working on.

“I don’t have any time,” I said. “I’m teaching six fucking classes. I have papers to grade.”

“There’s no real rush,” Emily said. “A week or so, maybe.”

“I’m too busy—”

“There’s no one else I can hand this to,” Emily said. “You’re the Emerson expert.”

“I am not!” My own work was on 19th century nature writing, mostly on John Muir, and though of course Muir and those guys were all heavily influenced by Thoreau and Emerson, I was certainly no expert.

“You took that Transcendentalism Seminar.”

“So did you!”

“Yeah, but you paid attention.”

The void opened wider—really, really opened. I could feel my whole future falling into it, joining my past, which was of course already lost in shadowy hellish nothingness.

“C’mon,” Emily said. “I’ll buy you dinner.”

Right, I thought. Buy me dinner with the money I pay you for the electric bill I don’t owe anything on. But I didn’t say anything. I remembered Emily’s prickliness, her defensiveness, her aversion to criticism. In the Transcendentalism Seminar she’d written a paper on gender roles and transgression in *The Blithedale Romance*, and I’d made a couple of suggestions—just moving a couple of paragraphs around—and she didn’t speak to me for a week.

“C’mon,” Emily said now. “It won’t be so bad.”