

Skets

by Alex MacDonald

Complicity

Melissa Gabrielle stops in mid-sentence because her guest lecturer, Dr. Lancelot Andrewes, has appeared at the door. The thirty-five students in her English 100 class have followed her gaze and so there are thirty-six staring at Dr. Andrewes.

He is a short and heavy-set man, known among English students as “The Beard,” on account of the hair which descends in a slanting Niagra from his face to his chest. Close inspection, by a young man enjoying elevator travel in company of the professor, revealed the hair of this beard to be slinky-like, hard little coils along the strands, excellent for trapping vagrant particles of food such as cookie crumbs. Ms. Gabrielle, Sessional Lecturer in English, has not seen Dr. Andrewes for five years, since her last semester as a graduate student, and now the memory of that day floods back.

It was the last day of class and Melissa had arrived early. She did not know that Dr. Andrewes saw her in the hall and followed her in. The other students had not arrived yet. He leaned on the table across from her. "Dear girl! Melissa! your eyes are so...clear. Like liquid pools. No, that's a dreadful cliché. But they are, like still pools in a forest glade reflecting the sky above. Why do they always seem to be judging me? Why are they so mysterious?"

"I assure you there is no mystery. Actually my life is quite ordinary.

"Don't say it. Those eyes of yours are pools of mystery and I lose myself in them"

"I'm not totally comfortable with this, Dr. Andrewes."

"Heavens, I certainly don't want to make you uncomfortable. My interest is purely academic, arising from my work on eye imagery in the dramatic monologue. Your eyes happen to be singular."

"Like the Cyclops?"

"I mean singularly beautiful of course you naughty girl. I really do see the sky in them."

"My eyes are hazel, not blue."

"I wasn't speaking exactly of the colour, you know, more the impression." Dr. Andrewes stepped back, like a man who has dipped a toe in the water and found it to be cold. "I must pick up my books from the office." Melissa wondered why he never said "my office," which would be more natural.

Now it is five years later. Melissa has completed her degree, traveled for a while and come back to Regina to set up her fashion design and, hopefully, production business. This is her third contract as a Sessional Lecturer, which helps to pay the bills. She enjoys it, after she got over the terror which caused her to write down every word she would say in class. Seeing on the Departmental web-site that her old professor Dr. Andrewes is working on a book about the dramatic monologue she invites him to guest lecture to her class about "My Last Duchess." She has not actually seen or spoken with Dr. Andrewes and there was no sign, in the politely worded acceptance of her offer, of the dissolution which must have occurred in the five years since she had seen him last.

He marches in to the classroom, with his beard thrust out like a shovel blade slicing into soft earth. And out of the classroom hurries Pamela York from the back row, cell phone chiming "Please answer me!" The eyes of the young man in the front row are glued to the seat of Pamela's tight jeans. Andrewes stops behind the teacher's desk. With a quick shove he

clears Melissa's notes and text to the side and places his own files in their place.

"Welcome to our class Dr. Andrewes," says Melissa.

He makes a gesture toward her like a Master of Ceremonies bringing on the next act.

"When Ms. Gabrielle was in my class I used to tell her that her eyes had a peculiar haunting quality." He smiles at the class.

"Once, Dr. Andrewes." Where is this going?

"Aha!" He beams at her, a broad smile, and winks to the class.

Melissa continues. "Dr. Andrewes is truly one of the pioneers here. He completed his PhD at Queen's University, more than a generation before I was born. His courses on Victorian literature have enthralled thousands of University of Regina students over the years."

From the hall comes the voice of Pamela York, on her cell phone. "Just like that? You want me to leave school and come in just because you're short-staffed?"

"He is a widely recognized authority on eye imagery in the dramatic monologue. When I saw on the Department's website that he is completing a book on the subject I invited him to..."

"You can take your restaurant and you know what you can do with it. Sideways. I quit!"

"...to... uh...speak to us today about 'My Last Duchess.'"

"No, don't call back in a while. I'm turning my phone off." Pamela appears at the door, closing her cell phone with a single castanet click. "Sorry," she says as she slides into her seat at the back of the room. Melissa also sits down, in the chair she has positioned along the side wall, and Dr. Lancelot Andrewes has the floor.

He looks at the class for a long, silent moment, hitches up his pants, and intones in the manner of Gregorian chant:

That's my last Duchess painted on the wall

Looking as if she were alive. I call

That piece a wonder, now...

"I read it that way," he says, "to de-signify the usual signifiers and to invite your very special attention to the word 'looking.' 'Looking as if she were alive....' We understand this word in a passive sense, that the painting looks as if it were alive. But hidden within the word like a secret code is the active sense, meaning she is looking, she looks. We have, in short, an example of what may be called the female gaze. Scholars have made much of the famous male gaze, meaning that look by a man towards a woman which diminishes the woman to a sexual object.

Dr. Andrewes turns his head and looks at Melissa. He looks at her nonchalantly, as if his eyes merely happened to land there, but the look lingers for a second too long.

"My contention, although I should not say contention because I have proved it beyond the shadow of a doubt, is that this last Duchess is a practitioner of the female gaze, that is to say of the castrating gaze, that gaze by a woman which looks ironically towards a man, calling into question his manhood and the very core of his being. Any man who has experienced this ironic female gaze will know whereof I speak. The Duchess is looking at him despite the fact that, apparently, she is dead. She is looking at him with that ironic female gaze and it is so powerful that the Duke is driven to explain himself to an underling. Am I saying that the Duke was right to have her killed? Certainly not. I do not say that we can condone this Duke's action, but I do say that, given her persistent, ironic female gaze, we can understand this Duke's action."

"Incidentally, since I have raised the issue of secret code, I want you to consider the syllabic breakdown of the word 'looking.' It consists of two syllables, loo and king. You may or may not know that in England a loo is a toilet. According to the secret code, then, the Duchess is telling the Duke that he is the loo king, meaning king of the toilet, or in other words that he is full

of shit. Yes Ms. Gabrielle?"

"Excuse me Dr. Andrewes," she says. "You could not be expected to know this but my policy is no profanity in the classroom."

"Come, Ms. Gabrielle. We are all adults here, in the chronological sense at least. And this is something we all do, even the goddesses among us. There sssshhhhould be no sssshhhhame in a good old Englisssshhhh word. However, I shall respect your wishes. Yes Ms. Gabrielle?"

"Thank you Dr. Andrewes. But don't you think this theory of the female gaze is just a bit reactionary?"

"As I said, dear girl, it is no theory. I did, however, intend to be provocative and I see I have succeeded. I will answer your question in due course if I may proceed?" He continues the chant:

...Fra Pandolf's hands

Worked busily a day, and there she stands.

Will't please you sit and look at her?

"I want you to observe in particular the phrase 'busily a day,' which illustrates my theory of transgressional acronym. The theory will be fully articulated in my monograph, of course, but the essence of it is that in apparently ordinary speech we find acronyms which reveal guilty secrets. That is why I call it transgressional. In this phrase 'busily a day' the first letters form the acronym b - a - d , which is also a word we recognize as 'bad.' What it means is that Fra Pandolf was mixing more than burnt umbre that day. You've heard about the man from U.N.C.L.E. Well, this is the Duchess from B.A.D. Yes Ms. Gabrielle?"

"I really must interject here Dr. Andrewes." She speaks to the class. "You should be aware that there is another opinion about the Duchess's character which is nothing at all like

this theory. This speech by her pompous husband tells us he murdered both the Duchess and her virtuous character. As well, psychology has known of the coded revelation of repressed content for years.

Andrewes continues to smile. "That is really your opinion about the Duchess?"

"Of course it is my opinion Dr Andrewes, or else I wouldn't have interrupted to point it out."

"Oor worried about oor widdle stoodents?"

"Really Dr. Andrewes!"

"Just a joke. Ms. Gabrielle, you may be surprised to hear that I agree with you."

"You do?"

"Yes. What I am doing now is developing a straw man, meaning a fallacious argument. Before I conclude I will demolish it utterly."

"I see."

"If I may proceed?"

"Yes, of course."

"Very well, then, I'll get to the nub of the matter: 'she liked whate'er/She looked on, and her looks went everywhere.' You all know what that means, don't you? I have seen students much like you in my classes during these last few years, while our once great culture has been sliding into the sewer. You look at each other with bold gazes, mentally stripping the objects of your contemplation, and it is clear to the dispassionate observer that you have only one thing on your minds, just like this Duchess, whose looks went everywhere." His voice rises from lecturing to haranguing. "What does 'everywhere' mean? Does it mean looking at the toes? Does it mean looking at the maidenly or the manly cheek? Or does it mean staring at that young woman's

breasts and the cleavage thereof shamelessly displayed?" Or does it mean staring at that young man's rear end, encased in pants as tight as sausage skins?" He stabs his arm at Pamela. He points at the young man in the front row. His voice rises from haranguing to shouting. "Aroint thee, witch! the rump-fed ronyon cries'- that's Macbeth, not Browning. Yes, Ms. Gabrielle?"

"Dr. Andrewes, I really must ask you to stop."

"You're worried about your precious students again? You shouldn't be. Beneath their nonchalant exteriors they are really sex-fiends. There's nothing that they like better than a novel by Anthony Trollope!"

"What exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"You know very well what it means, Ms. Gabrielle, whose looks go everywhere."

"I don't believe this. You are calling me a trollop?"

"Ha! Caught you! I didn't say that, did I?"

"No, but you certainly implied it. I want you to get out of my classroom."

"Or what? You'll give commands? And all my brilliant lecturing will stop together?"

Three seconds of intense silence are ended by the appearance at the door of two university security officers, a paunchy middle-aged man and a pretty young woman with her blonde hair pinned behind her uniform cap.

The man speaks. "Is everything all right here? Somebody called."

Pamela stands up at the back of the room, with her cellphone in her hand. "That was me," she says.

"What seems to be the trouble then?"

Melissa walks briskly across the room to face the officers, a smile on her face. "Oh there's no trouble. Dr. Andrewes and I were just rehearsing a dramatic scene for the class. Ms. York there came in late and apparently she thought it was real."

"Yeah, right," responds Pamela and stops, caught by something in Melissa's eye. "I guess I did come in late. Sorry." She sits down.

"So it was just a mistake?" the officer said.

"Oh absolutely, a mistake. Sorry about the confusion and thanks so much for coming." But there is a chuckle in Melissa's voice, to confirm how unnecessary this was. "In any case, the class is over now and we have to clear out of here. Read Atwood for next time please."

The students stand up and they follow the two officers of the room. Melissa turns to face Lancelot Andrewes, who stands as if he is shell-shocked, his face ashen. "Why did you do that?" he asks. "Why did I do that?"

"I don't know why you did it. You have changed from what you were five years ago. As for me, I suddenly remembered a time when I came to your class without the reading done. You asked me a question but when I paused you picked it up and answered it for me. You saved me from looking foolish in front of the class. Why did you do that? Do you remember it?"

"Of course I remember it. I did it because you looked harried that day and I felt sorry for you."

"Even with my ironic eyes?"

"How can you ever forgive me for this?"

"I don't know that I can."

Lancelot Andrewes meets her cool, unflinching gaze and nods his head. He stands there, in the empty class, for a long time after she has left the room. At the end of this semester he accepts the early retirement package which the Dean had been offering for the past three years.



Telling Her

When Josh wakes the first time there is a crack of light under the bathroom door. She is in there. He closes his eyes and the next time he wakes the electric clock is buzzing. As he heads for the now empty bathroom he hears her opening the front door to get the paper and he smells coffee.

His morning is a ritual. It is important that things be done in the right order. First the teeth must be brushed to get the crutty taste out of the mouth. Then the beard is splashed with medium hot water and the lemon-lime shave cream is applied with careful pats. Now and only now may he turn to the toilet to relieve the morning pressure of the bladder. The stream is good and strong, whipping up a froth of yellow bubbles on the surface of the water. The significance of this sequence is that the beard has time to soften up while Josh is relieving himself. On those occasional mornings when the pressure to pee is too strong to wait he feels as though there has been a violation. Because after he pees, brushes his teeth and applies the shaving cream, he has to stand there doing nothing while it works. The inefficiency of this offends him, not to mention the scratchiness of the shave if he proceeds without proper softening time. After the shave comes the shower, with body wash, shampoo and conditioner. He stands under the hot water for a long time, not singing or even humming, then steps out on the blue mat to dry himself, comb his hair and apply the stick deodorant to his underarms. One time, still half asleep, he had found himself showering without having shaved. So I'll shave after the shower this time, he said. But he could not leave the bathroom without having another, very quick, shower, to restore things to their right order. This morning, however, things go well.

He comes out of the bathroom to find Roberta sitting on the edge of the bed in white

underwear, one leg up as she rolls panty-hose onto her foot. He knows it is because she is sitting on it that her left thigh appears so large. Her body is actually very good, though that hardly matters now. From his side of the dresser he selects one of the many pairs of plaid boxer shorts and pulls them on.

"I made coffee," she says.

"Mmm. I smell it."

"Says in the paper there's going to be a blizzard."

"Great! This Winter is sure hanging on. A last kick before it goes."

She is standing now, pulling the hose up around her waist, and she looks at him in an odd way. Guilt renders him silent and he is glad when she goes back into the bathroom to apply makeup. He thinks about telling her now, before they go to work, but somehow it doesn't seem right. He eats the Nutri-Crunch standing by the kitchen counter on which is spread the front page of the *Leader-Post*.

"How does your day look?" she asks.

"Hectic," says Josh. "Parent meetings after school and lots of issues with the kids. Yours?"

"Same."

They are both teachers but at different schools. Roberta has a Grade One class and Josh teaches Grade Five. Their day begins at the same time so usually they ride the elevator down to the garage together, as they do this morning.

"See you later," she says, kissing him on the cheek before they get into their cars.

When Josh gets to school he finds his noon-hour supervision has been cancelled. At recess he phones Roberta's staff room and invites her for lunch at a Robin 's Donuts about halfway between them. He wants to get it over with. She agrees at once. When he gets there

at ten past twelve she is already seated at a corner table with a muffin and a cup of coffee.

Josh orders a sandwich.

"Your tie's crooked," she says.

"Ah. Thanks."

"Don't mention it. A little service in my role as fashion consultant."

"It would be pretty awful if I went back with a crooked tie. What would the kids think?"

"They might think you were cool."

"Now that 's something to shoot for, to be thought cool by the Grade Five class at St. Zebedee's School. Hey, that rhymes."

"Definitely uncool. Rhyming is uncool these days."

"I know. I wonder why that is?"

"There's worse things than being thought cool by your class."

"Is it even possible? Even if I were to take more drastic measures—loosen my tie and undo the top button—I think teachers reek too much of authority to be cool. Cool is the opposite of authority."

"I don't know. Remember Mr. Smith in Grade Twelve? Now that man was cool. And he had authority."

"He hung out with the kids a lot. Maybe it was arrested development. Didn't he get in to trouble with the School Board after we left?"

"According to your definition that would make him cool. It was nothing. A party. He happened to be there for a while. Some girl got sick after he left."

"What happened to him?" "He retired."

"Was he that old?"

"He may have been fifty. I don't know what he's doing now."

Roberta sits back and touches with one hand her dark red hair, an Afro which frames her very pretty face. For a moment she seems to radiate with dark beauty and Josh feels an ache. How can he tell her now? The moment is lost, behind them on the stream of moments.

"I had a session with Kelsey today," she says.

"He's the LD kid?"

"She. Yes. She was telling me about her baby brother. It was the cutest thing. Her little face all scrunched up and she says "tried to play, baby only cry, eat, poop, pee."

Josh smiles, takes a drink of his coffee. Why does it grate on his nerves so much when Roberta does one of her kid imitations? She's always doing it. It's one of her things.

"What's the matter?" she says.

"What do you mean?"

"That look on your face. Like somebody walked over your grave. Me."

"That's a bizarre thing to say."

"It's just an expression."

"Nothing's the matter."

"I see. That's serious all right, if it's nothing. Nothing is the worst sometimes."

"I've got to get back."

"Yeah, me too. We'll talk tonight."

"Yes," he says. "Let's do that."

As Josh drives back to school he tells himself it would have been absurd—a twenty minute lunch is not the time, nor is Robin's the place, for a scene like that. And it will be a scene, tears, recriminations. He dreads it but he knows it has to be tonight.

It is a strange afternoon. Do the children look at him in an accusing way? Are the other teachers in the staff room at recess somehow hesitant, as if conversationally tip toeing around him? At the first parent conference he begins "Although I'm not a parent myself...." He has said this a hundred times but today he feels devastated with guilt, and he leaves this out of the other two meetings. At five o'clock he feels electric, crackling with nervous tension. He decides to stop at the 'Y' on his way home. Luckily there is a free treadmill. He runs the electronic road and does not stop until his legs are shaking and he is pouring with sweat. As he starts his car the feeling of foreboding is strong. All seems normal as he rides the elevator to the nineteenth floor, opens the apartment door, sets his briefcase on the dark wood chair and hangs up his coat.

He smells the food. She's made dinner. And then she appears in the doorway.

"Come," she says.

He follows her to the dining area off the living-room. The table is set. There are candles. There is red wine in the large crystal glasses at each place.

"Pasta and salad," she says. "And fresh bread."

He smiles uncertainly at her and sits down while she brings the pasta from the kitchen. This is terrible, he thinks. How can I tell her now? And yet I must, I must do it tonight.

The air seems thick with constraint. The candles flicker, from lack of oxygen. He asks her about Kelsey. She asks him about the parent interviews. Mostly they eat, putting forks down at the same moment like a pair of synchronized divers, putting hands to wine glasses and holding it, that pose.

"Josh," she says, "I want a divorce."

Friends

Anne and Gillian sit at a small round table of wrought iron painted white, one of the half dozen tables on the deck which is built around the old elm whose branches shade the small space. The deck is attached to Café Olé, a shop selling coffees, teas, spices, and some exotic kitchen appliances. The shop and its small sidewalk cafe occupy the ground floor of the old house and the owner William, whose scruffy beard, striped apron and wire glasses suggest a conscious caricature of the small shopkeeper, lives upstairs with his books, his collection of sixties records, and the cats who roam freely in and out.

Under the sunny Southern windows of his rooms, the ones which overlook Thirteenth Avenue, William grows a hardy variety of dope. When his shop is closed for the day, when supper is done, the cats fed, then comes a blessed moment of lowering the needle into the groove of an old but carefully preserved disc and setting a lighted match to the end of a fat joint.

The small legacy from his uncle gave him the capital, and William knew exactly what to do with it. He knows he will never make more than a small living at it, and this suits him just fine. He is far more interested in maintaining his independence and his pleasant life than he is in making more money or having a large shop with employees to worry about. When he delivers the two capuccinos to Anne and Gillian he does so matter-of-factly, not with any flourish, for as the owner he is above having to prove anything. I am glad you are here, his manner says, since I put these tables out to be sat at on just such pleasant Saturday mornings as this one. But if you were not here, someone else would be, so let's not get carried away.

Gillian, who is on the verge of saying "Thank you so much William" catches the subtle warning in his manner. She merely nods and says "thanks", at which William smiles briefly and nods in return. Anne takes a sip of the scalding brew, which William prepares as well as anyone

in the world, and lights one of her extra skinny cigarettes with the three purple rings around the filter.

"You're not still on those things," says Gillian disapprovingly.

"That man," replies Anne, "is staring at me. No. Don't look over now. In a minute. Yes, I am a bit, but I've cut down a lot from where I was."

"I should talk." Gillian taps the pottery bowl of brown sugar from which she has just shovelled two heaping spoonsful into her cup. She is comfortably rotund, and in sharp contrast with "type 'A' Annie" who is taller, bonier, hollow-cheeked and apparently of nervous temperament, driven—the quick draws at her cigarette, the way her foot taps the deck, the way she jumps when something lands on the table beside her cup.

"Oh my God! What is it?"

"One of those worms," says Gillian, looking at the branch above them. She flicks it away with the long nail of her little finger.

"Gross."

"It will be gross if we lose these elm trees. Anyway, tell me the news now." When Anne had phoned Gillian to meet for coffee she had hinted at certain exciting developments at her office.

"That guy is still staring at us," she says in a whisper. "It gives me the creeps."

Gillian glances back again and a very odd look appears on her face.

"Do you know him?" asks Annie.

"No, no, I don't know him. Just ignore it Annie. Come on now, tell me."

"It's been such a week, Look, I can't stand any more. I'm going to speak to him."

"Don't."

"Yes, I will. I'm sick of being treated as if I were a piece of meat, stared at like that. As if I haven't had to put up with enough of that at work." She stands up, gives a hitch to the belt of her calf-length skirt.

"Ah," says Gillian, putting her coffee cup to her lips.

Anne strides the few feet to where he sits at the corner table, both hands around a mug of black coffee, and that offensive leer on his face, staring as if he owned the world.



"Pardon me," says Anne.

"Yes?"

"Perhaps you're not aware of it, but your staring is making us nervous. It isn't polite and

I'd like to ask you to stop."

He says nothing, does not move his head or seem to acknowledge her words in any way.

He continues to stare at the back of Gillian's head, ignoring Anne.

"Did you hear what I said?" she asks.

"Yes. I heard you,"

"Must I resort to calling the owner?"

"It would be better if you didn't."

She is becoming angrier each moment at the way he studiously ignores her and continues to stare at Gillian. But just now, just as she is about to unleash on him the pent-up frustration of her week at the office, she takes a step sideways and sees the end of his white cane. It had got lost in the white wrought-iron.

"Oh!" says Anne. "My God. I see. Oh shit, I'm sorry. I didn't see your cane. I thought..."

"I know," he replies. "It's okay."

"What a thing to do, God, I feel awful now."

"Really, it's okay."

"I'm sorry."

"Apology accepted,"

Anne nearly stumbles on her way back to the table. She is filled with revulsion at her self-preoccupation and her lack of sensitivity. Why hadn't she ignored it, as Gillian had advised? Why couldn't she be like Gillian, for that matter, solid and cheerful and easy-going. Gillian would never have gone off the deep end that way. Gillian would have noticed the man was...

Anne looks at her friend in a way she never has before. Gillian is still holding the coffee cup to her mouth with both hands.

"The poor guy is blind," Anne says at last. "He wasn't staring at all. I feel awful."

"Ah," says Gillian, "that explains it." For a moment there appears on Gillian's round face a very peculiar and a very unpleasant expression. Anne feels the ground giving way beneath her feet but she pushes the alarming feeling away. She tells herself not to be silly, and how lucky she is to have a friend like Gillian. Yet her account of the week's events at work is rather more subdued and tentative than the version she had planned while driving over here.

The Chocolate Bars

My name is Ainslie. This is a picture of me in front of my house. I have a big job to do. I have to sell these chocolate bars to the people on our street. The money is for my school. This is what my street looks like. It is a very nice street and I'm sure I will sell a lot of chocolate bars.

I go to the first house and I ring the bell. Ms. LePoop opens the door and smiles at me. The LePoops are French. Would you like to buy a chocolate bar, I ask her. No, I'm sorry, says Ms. LePoop. We need our money for groceries.

I go to the next house and I ring the bell. Mr. Poopschmidt opens the door and smiles at me. The Poopschmidts are German. Would you like to buy a chocolate bar, I ask him. No, I'm sorry, says Mr. Poopschmidt. We need our money for fixing up the house.

I go to the next house and I ring the bell. Ms. Poopioni opens the door and smiles at me. The Poopionis are Italian. Would you like to buy a chocolate bar, I ask her. No, I'm sorry, says Ms. Poopioni. We need our money to pay for the car.

I go to the next house and I ring the bell. Boris Poopikov answers the door and says Hi Ainslie. The Poopikovs are Russian. Would you like to buy a chocolate bar, I ask him. No, I'm sorry, says Boris. We need our money to buy winter clothes.

I go to the next house and I ring the bell. Mr. Poop-basa answers the door and smiles at me. The Poop-basas are Sudanese. Would you like to buy a chocolate bar I ask him. Well, he says, we are saving our money for college education but we do like chocolate. I'll take one. I thank him very much.

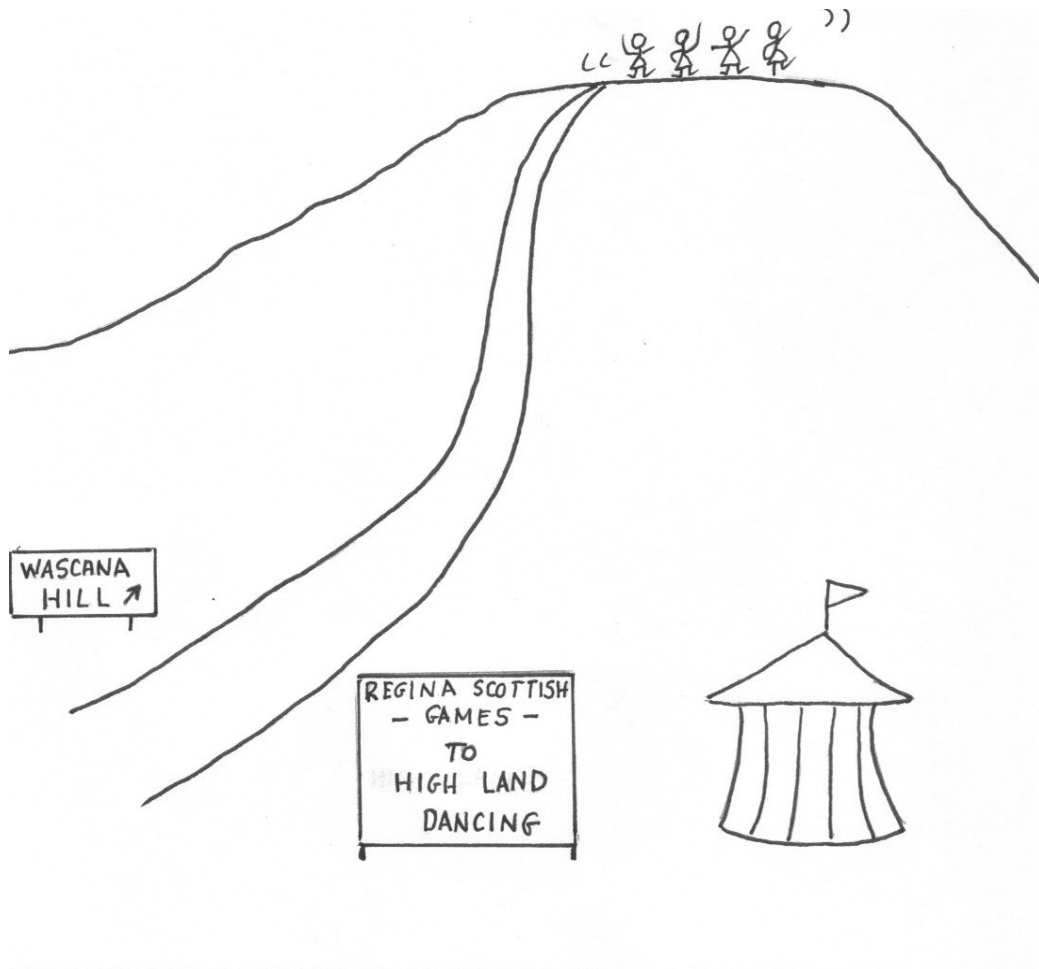
I cross the street after carefully looking both ways. I go to the next house and I ring the bell. Ms. Poopigato opens the door and smiles at me. The Poopigatos are Japanese. Would you like to buy a chocolate bar I ask her? No, I'm sorry says Ms. Poopigato. We need our money for a trip to Mexico.

I go to the next house and I ring the bell. Mr. Poopoza opens the door and smiles at me. The Poopozas are Spanish. Would you like to buy a chocolate bar, I ask him. No, I'm sorry, says Mr. Poopoza. We need our money for music lessons.

I am getting discouraged but I decide to try two more houses. I go to the next house and I knock on the door because the bell does not work. Ms. Poopski opens the door and smiles at me. The Poopskis are Polish. Would you like to buy a chocolate bar, I ask her. No, I'm sorry, says Ms. Poopski. We need our money to pay for a new doorbell.

I go to the next house and I ring the bell. Rani Poopindi opens the door and says Hi Ainslie. The Poopindis are from India. Would you like to buy a chocolate bar I ask her. No, I'm sorry, says Rani, who is in my class at school. We need our money for my old grandparents.

I go to the next house. It is the last house on the street. I ring the bell. A lady opens the door and smiles at me. Would you like to buy a chocolate bar, I ask her. The lady doesn't say anything at first, only smiles. These chocolate bars are for my school, I tell her, and I'm sure they are very good. I have only sold one. The lady laughs and she says, of course I will dear. In fact, I'll buy the whole box of chocolate bars. Then the lady leans down and gives me a big hug. Can you guess who it is? It is Ms. McPoop, and she is my mother. The McPoops are Scottish.



Multiple Choice

Now that I think about it I have to admit I hardly knew him, so it was a terrible thing to do, what I did. But it was satisfying in an uncomfortable can't-go-back-there-again kind of way.

That tablecloth was one of the things he was laundering when we met at the Wash King, along with half a dozen pastel shirts and numerous pairs of striped shorts. The latter he was folding neatly and I thought of the chaos of my own dresser drawers.

"It's important to fold them as soon as they come out of the dryer. Then the ironing is a breeze."

"You iron your underwear?" I asked.

"Well, sometimes I'm too busy."

"So what do you do to earn all the quarters for these machines?"

"I'm a full professor of English at the University."

"Not a quarter professor, then. Is it interesting work?"

"Very funny! It has its moments."

We talked for a few more minutes after which we exchanged names and telephone numbers. I thought he was a bit of a strange duck, though good looking in a way, and I failed to notice that he didn't ask a single question about me. Of course he asked for my phone number, after I asked for his, but he didn't ask whether I was an information retrieval and provision specialist. Meaning a reference librarian at the Public Library downtown. I wanted to show him he was not the only one who could make jokes about job titles. But, as I say, he didn't ask and it seemed too much like competing just to stick it into the conversation.

About a week later he called and we went to see a movie. It wasn't at the mall, with buttered popcorn and super-sized diet drinks. It was in a lecture theatre at the University and it

was called the Get Reel Film Society. Afterward we went for coffee across the street and he explained the movie for me.

When I say it like that I get mad all over again, but life is never so simple when it's actually happening. What actually happened was that he asked me a sort of tentative question about the food symbolism and when I said I didn't notice it he said in a kind of apologetic way that he was a real bore about movies and liked to cook up theories about what they mean. I asked, sort of a side effect of being a literary comprehension technician? He laughed, obviously pleased that I'd remembered his joke. And then he proceeded to unpack for me the symbolic meaning of food in the movie.

"However," he concluded, "speaking of food, how would you like to come to dinner, chez moi, on Tuesday night?"

"Tuesday?"

"On Tuesday, why not? At seven."

Some instinct warned me to find an excuse but some other instinct stifled it ruthlessly.

"Ah," he said, as if apologizing for stating the obvious, "if you have a little black dress that would be perfect for the occasion."

"I have a little red dress. Would that do?" I did not own such a dress, but I had seen one in a window at the mall.

"Well..." he said, then spoke confidently as though he'd made a decision on the spot to trust me, "I'm sure it will be alright."

"Thank you," I said.

Looking back on this it seems so obvious that I should have phoned him and begged off due to whatever, such as the flu. To be patronized so blatantly, told what to wear, and yet the

mere words don't capture the tentative and apologetic expression on his face, or the cute way his blonde hair fell over his forehead and so despite the sirens wailing and the warning bells clanging I went speeding forward.

"I'd love to come."

I had bought the little red dress with spaghetti straps and when I walked into his place a little after seven on Tuesday night I felt very put together. There were eight of us. First we drank wine out of crystal glasses and displayed ourselves on the leather furniture in the living room. The other guests included a professor from the Film Department and his wife who worked in the University Library. I wondered if she had been invited for my benefit, or I for hers. Then there were two pairs from the English Department, a young couple who had just come here and were coping with two teaching careers and young children, and a gay couple of middle-aged English professors who had been together many years. They all seemed nice enough and it promised to be a pleasant evening after all.

He seated me at the far end of the table opposite him, and asked me to help him serve. He had taken particular care with the table setting. On top of that white tablecloth I had seen him folding so carefully at the laundromat was a large, clear crystal bowl full of water, with floating candles and flowers. There were silver candles on either side, crystal water goblets and wine glasses, and a tasteful china pattern which he told me in the kitchen had been his mother's.

The food was delicious—he was good in the kitchen—and the conversation was lively. The young English professor lamented the empty shelves in the intellectual cupboards of today's students and her husband, also a young English professor, lamented that they had no theory. They could hardly be expected to have theory at that age, said his wife, but they are high school graduates and, frankly, they don't know anything, a total dearth of general knowledge. The Film

professor, who was older, said maybe they know different things. After all, the whole culture has shifted away from print and you can hardly expect them to know what Victorian schoolboys knew.

Now that, said the middle-aged English professor who was the more talkative of the gay couple, that is sheer nonsense. Marshall McLuhan was a great man, no doubt, but he didn't know what he was talking about. People read more books than ever. Look at the sales of books today for goodness sake. So it went, and we librarians had things to say about how libraries are changing because of computers. Things were pretty convivial up to the moment when the desserts—pineapple cheesecake slices—were served on fine china plates.

“Tell me,” said the Film professor to our host. “Has she passed the test?”

“I beg your pardon?” he responded.

“Come come, dear boy,” continued the Film professor. Evidently he had had a lot of wine. “Your little lady in the red dress there. Has she passed the test? Are you going to ask her to marry you? Ha. Ha.”

“I wasn't aware this was a test” I said starchily to the other end of the table.

“Of course it's a test” the Film professor explained. “He always does this, you know, gets to know a girl a little bit, then has a dinner party to see how she performs as hostess. I suspect him of having designs on the Department Head's job. We've been to, oh, I don't know how many of these dinners. But it's time dear boy. This is a good one.”

He nodded at me. I couldn't say anything. I stared across the elaborate centre piece, waiting for my date to deny this, waiting for him to tell the inebriated film professor where to get off, to mind his own business, anything, but he didn't. He just sat there, first with a horrified expression on his face and then with a sheepish half-grin, that cute apologetic look from the

laundromat. This was to be treated as a jest, as not serious. We were to pick up our silver dessert forks and dig into our cheesecake as though nothing had happened.

“Well?” I said, sitting lightly on the edge of my chair with both hands resting on the table. There was no response.

“Well?” I said, standing up abruptly and knocking my chair backwards onto the floor. There was no response. He didn’t know what to do.

“Well,” I shouted, “test this!” I grabbed two handfuls of the tablecloth and pulled it hard towards me, backing up, right off the end of the table into a heap of tablecloth, broken crystal, water and cheesecake on the floor.

I walked out. I did not phone him to apologize for ruining his dinner party. Nor did he phone me. My guess is that I did not pass the test.

