

CATCHING THE SUN

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by

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ONE

Know what I think? I think that the first few weeks in October should be a period of enforced leave for lecturers on compassionate grounds. Unfortunately, however, since the first few weeks in October coincided with the start of the new academic year, the proposal never seemed to meet with much favour with the University Council. On the grounds of practicality, they said when informally approached; or at least when Juliette Albert, fortified by six gin and tonics, approached the Principal at the Senate's annual bash. Which we all felt to be a very restrained response in the circumstances.

But, I mean, really. What a waste of a day, not to mention my very expensive time and my very considerable intellect, having to sit in New College Hall filling out forms, ticking boxes and sending the First Years on their way clutching the piece of paper which finally admitted them to the (hallowed as they viewed it, ridiculed as we viewed it) ranks of the undergraduate.

Poor sods. There they all were, sitting in rows of plastic seats, as if they were waiting to give blood. Only instead of having their fingers pricked to see if they were

suitable donors, we made them agree to abide by the University Regulations to check out that they were suitable students. Because they don't bother much with entrance qualifications these days.

Years of experience of undergraduates meant that I could tell just by looking at them what types they were. I liked the ones who were terrified and serious; the ones who didn't know what they wanted to study or what they wanted to be or who they were or why they had chosen this University as opposed to any other; the ones who didn't know what anything meant, who anyone or where anything was. Because, if nothing else, education should be about discovery. You know, these assertive types who came strutting up to my desk reciting their chosen subjects and telling me what they'd be doing in ten years time, they pissed me off. Confidence and certainty in youth were so unbecoming, if only because, at the age of thirty five, I'd yet to attain them myself.

And then there were the students who chose subject groupings like Fine Arts, Logic and Metaphysics and Classical Culture, they pissed me off too. You know, they'd come to experience the myth not the reality of higher education. So they'd spend their first two years

smoking dope, experimenting with alternative religions and burning joss sticks into the night trying to be esoteric and arty-farty; then they'd drop out and end up in better paid jobs than the rest of us.

That was only the First Years. The Second Years pissed me off too. Because once relieved of being branded the new boys and girls, and thus being the subject of the entire University's ridicule, they adopted a mantle of superiority and an aura of infallibility which were only usually knocked out of them by giving them 'D's for their first essays of the new term.

Then there were the Third Years, who thought they were suddenly special because they were doing Honours. And the Fourth Years, who thought they could call you by your Christian name without being invited to do so just because they'd finally shaken off their teenage years and were on the verge of becoming adults. And worst of all, worst of all by a long shot, were the Post Grads., who would all have benefited from realising that they were only just beginning their education.

Students: it was frightening to think that I'd once been one of them (one of the terrified and serious variety, it

went without saying); even more frightening to think that one day they would become one of us.

I looked up at the clock in New College Hall to learn that registration still had another half hour to go. I sighed and cursed my bad luck in being press-ganged into it due to an outbreak of salmonella at the Staff Club having taken out forty lecturers. So it'd been left to the senior staff to answer the Principal's call to arms. So much for the sole privilege you get of being a senior member of staff, that you don't get involved in all the paper-pushing of registration. The sole privilege except, of course, that you can afford not to eat at the Staff Club, thus avoiding the more virulent strains of bacteria to visit our shores. Though you could hardly expect *cordon bleu* from people paid £4.85 an hour working on a budget of £3 per diner/guinea pig. A rose by any other name and all that.

We sometimes wondered if the Medical Faculty was secretly using the Staff Club in another one of its dubious and ethically questionable experiments. Joe Kavanagh in Microbiology had once done a test on a piece of the Club's steak pie and had identified traces of more than a hundred and fifty different substances, including arsenic. Though we think that that was probably an added

ingredient put in by some cooks in an attempt to get their own back on certain members of the academic staff who treated them as if they were something the dons had stood in in the park. But, you know, just because the food tasted like something they had stood in in the park was no reason to be supercilious.

A couple of students had joined my queue and were looking at me, awaiting the signal to approach my desk. I glanced over at them, pretending to be engrossed in some paperwork. Then, after an appropriate period, I looked over to the guy - nice looking guy - sitting in the first seat and nodded. He flashed me a smile as he got to his feet and swaggered over.

"Hi..."

"Hello."

"Hi. Uh, are you," he asked, glancing at the registration form he was holding, "Professor Henson?"

"Uh, yes," I replied, pointing to the scrawled notice, sellotaped to the front of my desk, which displayed my name, "that would be me." So far nothing out of ten for initiative here.

"Oh. Right. Yes, I see," he said, sitting down and presenting me with his papers.

"Thank you," I smiled. Because like the true professional I am, I did nothing to betray to the students that I would've found even a Senior Honours Maths lecture more interesting than registration. You know, at least during a Senior Honours Maths lecture you could experience something of the theatre of the absurd.

I checked through the relevant boxes on his form, which, I have unfortunately to report, had been filled in with turquoise ink. Yes, turquoise ink.

I glanced up, thinking it unusual that a man of the age, physical stature and rugged looks of the person sitting opposite me should be so frivolous. I mean, turquoise ink was the sort of thing I expected from seventeen year old girls' school students who were studying Social Anthropology. You know, if anyone ever handed an essay in to me done in turquoise ink, it'd be an 'E' straight off.

"Turquoise ink, huh?" I remarked.

"Uh-huh."

"Uh-huh."

"That all right?"

"Sure," I said, "yup."

The lengths some people go to to draw attention to themselves and stamp their individuality on things. Was this guy so unsure of himself that he had to use turquoise ink? It seemed hard to believe just by looking at him. You know, everything about how he looked oozed confidence: the perfectly stylish ruffled black hair, the colour co-ordinated designer casuals, the wide shoulders, the night shave look, the Blue Grotto eyes.

Not that I make snap judgements about people on the basis of their appearance and demeanour or anything.

"So, it's Mac L. Porter, that right?" I asked.

"Uh-huh."

Mac L. Porter stretched out in his chair and smiled at me while I rifled through the pile of papers on my desk, pulling out the relevant sheets.

"Uh-huh. Mac. That short for Raincoat?" I asked nonchalantly. As I glimpsed up, I caught his Blue Grotto eyes smiling at me in good humour. "Date of birth - fifteen three seventy one. Address - 45 Hudson Park. Faculty - Science." So, a mature student living in an upmarket part of town and doing a B.Sc. in Biological Science. Well, two out of three ain't bad. "That right?"

"Uh-huh."

"Uh-huh." I filled in the various boxes that said '*For Official Use Only*' (I guess I'd finally made it, huh?), then looked up at Mac, who was waiting patiently for my next question. "So, what subjects you doing?"

"Zoology and Botany."

"Okay," I said, writing them down. "What else?"

"I'm not sure. What would you recommend?"

"Me? Well, I, em, I don't know," I said, picking up my subject list and scanning it. "What do you Scientists normally do as fillers? What about, uh, let's have a look, em, what about Biochemistry? Ecology? Marine Biology?"

"Na. Bit too much in character, don't you think?"

"Well, pardon me."

"Kind of predictable."

"Apologies. But I made the not uncommon assumption that as a member of the Science Faculty you would be the predictable sort."

"Oh, no."

"Uh-huh."

Did I mention that mature students pissed me off too? Thinking that they knew it all just because they wouldn't see twenty one again. Thinking they could be impertinent

to their superiors just because it was more than three years since they'd left school. I tell you, how quickly they lost their deference.

"No, I was kind of thinking that maybe I could do something different," Mac added.

"Oh, you did, did you," I said, casting aside my subject list. "Like what 'different'?"

"Well, is it right that I can do a subject from another Faculty?"

"Uh, well, I, let me see ..." I said, trying to find my copy of the Regulations. "Em," I pondered, scanning the tiny print. This is what they got for putting senior staff in to do the job.

"That's what the Adviser said when I saw him in the summer," Mac announced.

"Oh. Well, if that's what the Adviser said then I guess it must be true," I pouted. I mean, I was only sitting in. I was only a Professor. What did I know about anything?

"So I was thinking about maybe doing something from the Arts Faculty."

"Oh, yeah? What? You think the Arts are an easy option, do you?"

"No. I'm just interested."

"You're just interested." Mac smiled again. "Okay, okay," I conceded. What did I care? "So what do you want to do? According to the rules, you can do anything as long as there isn't a timetable clash," I said, looking for the matrix which would show me just that. "So, what's it to be? Art History? European Studies? Moral Philosophy? Just interested in any of them?"

"Maybe," he shrugged.

"Or how about, let me see," I said, flicking through the Arts prospectus, "maybe Arabic Studies? Biblical Studies?"

"What is it you teach, Professor Henson?"

"What? Me? Uh, Italian. Why?"

"Really? Interesting. You know, I've always wanted to go to Venice ..." Oh-oh, here we go again. "How about Italian, then?"

"I don't think s..."

"Does it clash?"

"Em..." I consulted the matrix, hoping that it did.

"Well?"

"It would appear not," I had to admit.

"Okay. Italian it is then."

"Are you sure about this? I mean think of your CV. You know, when you're trying to be taken seriously as a scientist and trying to get a job in some lab somewhere with some mad professor, what d'you think they'll say when they see you did Italian instead of, I dunno, Advanced, uh, Dissection or something?"

"I think they'll say, 'What a well-rounded and cultured young man'."

"Uh-huh." So I had a smartass here. "Okay. Okay. Suit yourself. I'll put you down for Italian. But you need to realise that if there're too many people wanting to do it, priority'll go to those in the Arts Faculty," I said, in the knowledge that our numbers were slightly down on previous years and that there were a few places going - even for Scientists. Alas, these days we couldn't afford to be picky.

"Okay."

"And if you don't have any prior knowledge of the language, you'll have to go through intensive coaching at the start to get you up to speed with the rest of the class. Because most people in the class have done it before. To a pretty advanced level. You know, we can't spend the year mollycoddling complete beginners."

"Seems reasonable," Mac smiled. I double-checked his form, ticking the remaining boxes. "And do you do any of this intensive coaching?"

"Of course not," I laughed, ungraciously throwing him his signed passport to the ridiculed ranks of the undergraduate. He might have been mature but he sure was naive. This was Professor Lee Henson he was talking to: author, reviewer, commentator, occasional teacher and even less occasional lecturer.

"That's a pity."

"Oh, I think not." We held each other's gaze for a moment. "Okay, if you go to the office next door in Clerk Street, they'll do your ID card. Okay?"

"Well, I think it's a pity," he said.

"Next," I called abruptly to the spotty girl who was waiting in line to see me.

"See you in class."

That's what you think, buster, I laughed, at his further naiveté in thinking that Professor Lee Henson condescended to teach First Year undergraduate classes.

"Oh, and by the way, I'll be coming to see you anyway," he added.

"Oh?"

"Yeah, you're my year tutor. According to the noticeboard."

"Am I?" I hadn't looked at my list yet. "Oh."

"See you then."

"Yeah, see you," I mused, watching Mac stride from the hall, hands in the pockets of his pure new wool jacket, the heels of his black leather boots clicking on the polished floor.

"Hi! I'm Professor Henson," I smiled to the girl in front of me who, I suspected, was about to burst into tears and tell me she wanted to go home. You know, Octobers came, Octobers went, there was always at least one.

I was clearing my throat and smiling sympathetically in preparation for delivering my 'Don't worry, in a few weeks you'll wonder why you ever thought it was so bad,' speech when she explained that if she burst into tears I wasn't to worry because she had an allergy and that she wanted to study Geography, Ecology and Management, that she intended joining the Photography, Hillwalking and Chess Societies and that, after graduating, she was going to become a chartered town planner.

I said a silent prayer of gratitude that Italian didn't figure in her plans, signed her form and sent her on her way. That kind of vision and self-assurance we could do without in the Modern Languages School.

As Miss Confidence left, Juliette arrived at my desk.

"You wanna sign up for something?" I joked. "I hear the French Department's very good."

"If only," she said. "Listen, are you going to the cheese and wine?"

"Can't."

"Oh, Lee. Why not?"

"Meeting my editor."

"Can't you rearrange it? What about?"

"No. I don't know. Something or other. I dunno."

"I know! You could bring him along," Juliette screeched.

"No way." Much though I thought Roderick an insufferable little twat, I wouldn't have inflicted the cheese and wine even on him. "No way José."

"Oh, go on. If you don't go I'll be stuck with Benson and Phillips all night. Go on. You should be setting an example anyway in your position. Showing the First Years what you can do with a Language degree."

"Oh? And what's that? For God's sake, tell me what it is and I'll go and do it."

"Oh, go on. Just for half an hour."

"Well, maybe I'll..."

"Great!"

"... see what kind of mood Roderick's in ..."

"Great!"

"... but I'm not promising anything."

"See you later!"

"You hear me? I'm not promising anything!" I shouted after her.

"See you there, Lee!"

"Yeah, yeah."

I sighed. The prospect of meeting up with Roderick was bad enough without having to meet up with him at a University soirée.

Still, it might be fun. And it would give Juliette and me someone else to ridicule beside the students. Though, it had to be said, my willingness even to consider attending the School's cheese and wine illustrated the dire state of affairs that was my social life. For since I'd come back from the States, Jérôme had neither written nor called. So it seemed our eight year relationship was truly

over. So, instead of hopping over to Paris every other weekend, I was reduced to visiting my mother and attending Juliette's dinner parties in the hope that history might repeat itself and I'd meet another bastard who'd treat me badly but love me passionately.

Leaning back in my hard plastic seat, watching Miss Self-Assurance, the would-be town planner, introduce herself to Dr Washington of the Geography Department, I wondered where all the diffidence had gone. It surely wasn't just a trait of my generation?

But like innocence, good manners and student grants, like Jérôme, it seemed to be a thing of the past.



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