

Search

by Michael Cocchiarale

Froggie's was a rather grim place to end a campus interview, but it was the only place outside of the cafeteria that served food, or what passed for it. I held the door for Ms. Dunbar, and we stepped inside, shoes squishing beer soaked carpet. Overhead was a poker match on TV, a row of hearts bunched up in the corner of the screen. It would be an hour until the students stumbled in, licking their lips for Hump Day specials.

The interview was officially over, and Ms. Dunbar, our applicant, had an early evening flight back to Ohio. Dennis, our considerate chair, suggested I take her out for something—the academic equivalent of a game show's "lovely parting gifts."

"Or," I said, thinking of my own obligations for the evening, "I could just drop you at the airport. Give you some time for yourself."

"No, no," Ms. Dunbar said, eyes fearless for the first time all visit. "I could really use a drink."

I laughed, and she smiled, hoping, I suppose, that this human moment might be taken into account when our department met to deliberate.

We scanned sticky plastic menus. Except for the side salad, everything was fried. "Anything you like?" I asked.

"The chicken fingers look good."

Had the interview been a success, she would have been laughing uproariously with the entire department at some upscale microbrewery in a nice part of town. She had to have known this. To her credit, Ms. Dunbar was a good sport. She was well into her thirties, and her brave face fit her like a glove.

A boy with vaguely familiar sideburns shuffled to our table. I ordered the basket of fingers and two gin and tonics.

"Were you one of my students?" I asked. He looked to me like the whimsical personification of an F.

"Maybe," the boy said, scratching an armpit. "Oceanography? I remember the Bluntnose Shiner."

"I specialize in Renaissance literature."

He laughed. "Right. That's what I was thinking of."

The boy left, and I watched Ms. Dunbar study the hanging jerseys,

the framed NASCAR posters, the infamous scrawl wall upon which students poured out their hearts, as long as they kept it clean. I was not good at small talk, especially after the morning coffee wore off.

"Your students asked such thoughtful questions," she said.

"I'm glad you thought so."

Ms. Dunbar's teaching demonstration had been a disappointment. Her curriculum vitae boasted a wealth of teaching experience: large and small schools, private and public, rural and urban. She had strong recommendations as well. Eyer, our surly Postmodernist, had "grave concerns" about her research. "Longfellow!" he cried more than once during our fall deliberations. "Longfellow!"—each time the author's name shot from his mouth with the surprise of a sneeze. The others had their reservations as well, but in a narrow vote, it was agreed that she should be one of the three to bring to campus.

At the beginning of her demonstration, Ms. Dunbar rubbed hands excitedly and said, "Today, I'm going to talk to you about a poem called *Paul Revere's Ride*. Next to me, Eyer dug a pen cap into his palms. Michael, our Norris scholar, fumed like Marcus at McTeague. Oblivious, Ms. Dunbar paced the room reading the poem, one stanza per row until she finished. To make matters worse, she just talked and talked.

"Such a good husband," she said of the poet. "Such a good man."

Then, awkward silence. Ms. Dunbar stood in front of us, anthology like a dead gull in her hands, mouth moving fruitlessly, until Jillian Wycoff, one of our best, asked if she would like a cup of water. In Ms. Dunbar's mind, Jillian must have stood for all those "thoughtful" students.

The boy with the sideburns brought our drinks, and we spent the next few minutes sighing and taking sips. I asked her about Ohio, and she said the town where she lived was small and more than a bit desperate around the edges. As a city girl, she could never get used to how dark the night became. "You look up," she said, "and if the stars aren't there it's like you've ceased to exist." I suspected she was alone—and that she was one of the many her age who thought there was a criminal for this crime.

My cell phone rang, which I thought was a mercy until I saw that it was my wife.

"I don't care, really," I said, trying to keep my voice level. That evening, we had a dinner engagement in Center City—old acquaintances from graduate school who were breezing through to see their youngest son, an Ancient History major at Penn. Sandy, the once-skittish guy I'd nursed through his dissertation, was retired already. His wife had come into serious money,

and he had been annoyingly wise with his own. In short, I wasn't keen on seeing them. My wife, however, seemed to think this was the opportunity of a lifetime and had been calling every hour with a new idea for a restaurant: White Dog, Queen of Sheba. Alma de Cuba.

"Pick and be done with it," I said.

Our food arrived in a thatched plastic basket. The fingers – five of them – were dark, gnarled, and hard. We both blinked at the food in silent dismay. Finally, I took a healthy bite of one to prove that they were edible. Ms. Dunbar nibbled another and wiped her fingers on a cocktail napkin.

We ate in silence for awhile. I thought to ask if she needed ketchup. She said she was fine. More silence. She made a comment about the poker on the TV screen, and, to say something, I said, "You gotta know when to fold them," instantly regretting it because she was sure to understand it as some cryptic comment about her professional fate. I switched to the subject of Ohio, forgetting I'd asked about it only minutes before.

"Oh, it's become a kind of home," she said. There were the small pleasures: the sprawling farmer's market, the artsy shops on Court Street, a misty morning jog along the Hocking River.

"I used to run," I said.

"Really? Why did you stop?"

I put hand to heart and made an ugly face. To my surprise, Ms. Dunbar dropped her head. My eyes were left to wander a white scar-like path of scalp. After a few moments, I asked, "Do you need—?"

"I'm sorry," she said, eyes shimmering. "I, it's just that, it's been a really long day."

I glanced at my watch. It *had* been a long day—seemed like years ago already since Ms. Dunbar finished her demonstration, years since she had been escorted by Jillian to the art gallery for the last stop on her itinerary and I dared to think there might be time for a brief nap before my dinner engagement. Eyler, though, his eyes blazing, hustled everyone into the nearest empty classroom, slammed shut the door, and declared, "No god-damn way in hell!"

"There's no reason for swearing," Donna said, rattling her bangles.

"She's someone I could see myself working with," Dennis said.

Eyler stared at him. He gave the applicant's CV a squeeze.

Julia said, "Was one lousy drink going to hurt her?" At dinner the night before, Ms. Dunbar had ordered a Diet Coke. Scowling, Julia ordered a third martini just to make a point.

"Look," Michael said. "From the beginning, I didn't like those two

blank years—out of the loop for 'personal reasons.' Did anyone press her on this?"

"I hate personal reasons," Eyler said.

Michael smiled. He started check marking the document in front of him. "And after that, one year appointments here and there. Some of you call this experience. I call it desperation. Longfellow or not, she's stale bread and it shows."

Eyler crossed his arms and grinned at Donna. "A-the hell-men," he said.

On the way to the airport, I became loquacious. Maybe it was the gin or maybe it was just my natural passion for the subject, but when Ms.



Model: Bethany Rand

Dunbar asked about my research, I told her all about Walter Raleigh: the failure at Roanoke, those years in the Tower of London, the vain quest for El Dorado. As we pulled up to her gate, I thought it fitting to end the lecture with a little of his verse.

“Stab at thee he that will,” I declared in my most emotionally affecting voice, “No stab thy soul can kill.” I glanced over to gauge the effect of these comforting words. Ms. Durbin was staring through the windshield, eyes shiny with tears.

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When we got out of the car, things became more awkward still. Ms. Dunbar dragged her suitcase from the trunk and tugged at the handle, which refused to budge. “This happens sometimes,” she said before kicking the bag savagely to the ground. She picked it up and yanked again; this time, the handle shot out with such force that the leather purse on her shoulder slipped down to the crotch of her arm. An electronic device clattered to the pavement.

When she gathered herself, I stuck out my hand and said, “Ms. Dunbar, it’s been a real pleasure.”

“Maybe I should have lectured on ‘The Cross of Snow.’”

I nodded, as if I understood.

“Thing is, I know I wouldn’t have made it past line two.”

“You’ll hear from us in a week,” I said, smiling with all the teeth I could manage. “If not sooner.”

Later that night, I sat in my home office, door locked, staring into the fireplace glow of the computer screen. To my surprise, dinner had not gone badly. Sandy held forth, of course, and my wife, as she’d done for thirty-two years, took up the conversational slack. I drank glass after glass of wine so that, come dessert, I could angrily wonder aloud: “Isn’t retirement a bore? How can you stand to sit around the house all day?”

“It’s paradise,” Sandy said with a hearty laugh. “What comes next is the goddamn problem!”

“Stop it,” his wife said. “He had one of those scares...”

“They saw something on the MRI.” He took a bite of his Death by Chocolate. “A shadow.”

“Oh,” his wife said, slapping him lightly on the arm, “turns out it was just his big fat ego!”

We all laughed; Sandy, a successful career tucked like a child into bed, laughed the loudest of us all. Without warning, he sought his wife’s hand and took it to his heart.

“What would she do without me?” he said, blinking away tears. Embarrassed, I studied the wine spots on the tablecloth.

On the keyboard lay Ms. Dunbar’s curriculum vitae, which I’d forgotten to bring with me this morning. Such nice, substantial paper. Such a clean, no-nonsense font. Such concise descriptions of every move of her professional life. I’d been over it several times in the last three months, and there was not a single word or piece of punctuation out of place.

It was 10:15. She’d be getting back to Ohio just about now, and I imagined her pushing open a warped door to cramped, roach-happy rooms. A tabby cat would run against her leg. There’d be a coffee table – plywood over books – and an unmade futon in the bedroom, where she’d sit night after night to wring her hands and wait for our call.

After a quick search, I found Ms. Dunbar’s Facebook page. Her last post, a giddy “Cannot believe my luck!!!” from two weeks ago, had yielded just a single response: “I will never fail you or forsake you”—this from a woman I assumed was her mother.

I heard my wife in the bathroom—water from the tap, the thunk of toothbrush against sink. The toilet flushed. I couldn’t hire Ms. Dunbar, but I could send a message—a show of empathy to make up for the awkwardness of that afternoon. The cursor blinked patiently in the subject box while I tried to think of the best way to begin.

At last, I typed out “Ms. Dunbar,” then fixed it to “Gwen.” “I decided to finish my lecture on Raleigh, focus on his demise. August, 1618, the Palace of Westminster. An old, ailing man, long out of favor with the king, the poet pledged allegiance to James for half an hour before the crowd that had come to see him die. Then, in one deft stroke, the head came off and was sent to be embalmed. Often, I typed more earnestly now, I’m moved close to tears by the thought of those sealed lids, the sewn up mouth, the cleansed face radiant with repose. Gwen, you may well find it a comfort to know the story of what happened then: the next morning bright, London pungent with life, Elizabeth arrived at court to claim her husband’s head and, true love knowing no bounds, kept it close in a sack for the rest of her earth bound days.