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White People Problems

Dawn broke to a peculiarly warm day- the valley, which typically remains frosted hours after sunrise, filled with rising dew; a vernal apparition as it were. Streets stitching themselves along the bottom of the valley lay quiet and unused. The high-rise dormitory along route eight's wayside stood generic in early day sunlight, with all but one window shade pulled neatly down. Seventh floor, room three: silhouettes of a desk, bureau, and an uneasy bed.

On the bed, a plump quilt stirred with movement, no doubt a result of the sunlight. Coming feet first, a naked body slid hesitantly from cover, beguiled by day. *It's really hot*, Steve thought as he sat up, reluctant to open his eyes. Toes curled, he lifted his arms to stretch, simultaneously wiping drops of sweat from his rosy cheeks and nose. He fell back on the bed, lying atop quilt and all. *Where am I?*, Steve mumbled to himself, squinting upward at the ceiling. His newly opened eyes were of something close to a settling fresco, a mix of green and blue presented on a convex ceiling.

A violent and sudden shudder of a door closing followed by incoherent conversation brought Steve again to an upright position, but with a sense of purpose. *What am I doing here?*

Steve worked himself out of the bed, stood, and contemplated his nudity. His skin was smooth and pale. He stared curiously downward, one hand softly groping the nape of his neck. The placement of his belly button, the point at which his legs met his torso, the slight bend at his knees all at once provided an overwhelming sense of nausea. Not willing to look away, he

continued to stare at his condition with dizzy eyes when, out in the hallway, another crashing door usurped his attention. The sound of chatter outside assumed comprehensible levels, and Steve inquisitively drew closer to his door:

“I know, man. Steph Goldbloom was fuckin’ shitty last night,” a baritone voice proclaimed, “did you see her boot all over Ryan’s desk?”

“No, but she sits in front of me in my economics class, I’ll be sure to put her on blast” replied a similar yet slightly hoarse voice.

“Dude, she sits in front of you?! That’s awesome, she’s got a spectacular can!” replied the first voice before a bout of heavy laughter.

The voices faded away and Steve looked downward at himself again. *What was that about?*, he thought, *I don’t feel right*. He wandered over to the bureau, a large particleboard box with four drawers and opened the second from the top. A pair of jeans sat folded on a layer of unfolded white tee shirts. He pulled them and a shirt out, and clothed his body. On the desk, a clock reading 7:00 a.m. began playing polite jazz music and Steve pressed the power button, noticing a piece of paper with his name written on the top right corner. It was a schedule of classes. It read in the manner of time following class: general philosophy, eight o’clock, chemistry one, nine fifteen, and botany, two o’clock.

I think I will go get a waffle and an egg thought Steve; he was quite hungry and stepped out of his room into the now vacant hallway. It was dimly lit, and still cool from the previous evening. He continued to the stairwell and floundered down fourteen sets of stairs. “There are

ninety-six stairs in that stairwell,” Steve mumbled just as he ventured outdoors; gathering the attention of two young women smoking one hundreds.

Outdoors was rich in hue, far more rich than the pastels of his room, the hallway, and even the clothes now concealing his body. Canada geese flying overhead caught Steve’s attention; something about their synchronized wings, the way they assume that giant arrow, and the forever obnoxious honking seemed intoxicating to him. Until the geese disappeared into sunlight Steve would have observed them, but a slew of bodies passed Steve on the sidewalk, drawing his attention to move forward to the dining hall for breakfast.

A heavy Belgian waffle and boiled egg now sitting peacefully in his gut, Steve wandered across the central quadrangle to a large concrete structure with narrow slit windows. The building itself was hideous, similar to bunkers strewn across the beauty of Normandy, relics of past assent. Steel letters painted black spelled “Murdock” across the top of the doors, and Steve recognized this as where “general philosophy” should be located, according to the sheet he found on the desk. He entered the building and discovered the same lackluster paint from his room lining the walls. The staircase in front of him begged ascent, to be counted, albeit a far cry from the ninety-six steps he counted in the dormitory. *Forty-six steps.*

The lecture hall was well lit and Steve found the seating to be most comfortable, cushions and all. He sat in what he thought was the exact center of the class, but it was actually two rows from the front and eight rows from the back. He waited.

The clock struck eight; several more students ventured in and took seats, all of them behind Steve. He could here whispering and was tempted to look aft of curiosity when a voice made its presence known even before entering the room-

“Good morning,” the voice declared, drawing on Steve’s attention; “I trust most of you find yourselves in good spirit and with evermore gumption.” A face to the voice appeared at an unmarked door opposite the one that students had used. He was a handsome man in his elder years. He had finely groomed gray hair, distinctive facial features, and dapper sense of style. His disposition seemed quite the spectacle to Steve, and as a result, could not focus on anything else.

“My name is Daniel Foster, I am a professor of philosophy both here and down the street at Williams. We will be discussing the nature of this class and what I expect from you as students; but I digress, only to discover who you are. Let’s begin with you, sir,” with an open palm directed toward Steve. Steve said nothing. “Well, we have the strong, silent type here! At the very least, won’t you give us your name?”

“My name is Steve”

“Okay, Steve, why are you here? Do you have any objectives or goals for this class or in general? What do you plan to reap from your time here?”

Steve looked upward at the ceiling, and his mind flooded. *What does he want from me?* thought Steve while remaining silent. *I don’t understand*, he continued to himself, *why should this be the matter? Shouldn’t we be discussing philosophy? Do these people really have a desire to discuss me? I should...*

“We’ll come back to Steve,” said Mr. Foster, who at this point was leaning against the professor’s desk at the front of the hall. He began asking other students of their presence in a strangely indifferent way, almost as if it were a standard procedure; and the other students followed suit. Perhaps Mr. Foster neglected to come back to Steve, or simply forgot because he jumped into pedagogy as soon as the last few students recited their “ambitions.”

Dismissed after a great deal of time listening to what Mr. Foster wanted from the class, Steve walked out of the lecture hall flabbergasted. With no desire to spend another moment in Murdock hall, he hastily walked outside, neglecting to politely hold the door for the person behind him. Sunshine was hidden behind rolling under cast, and the air was far more brisk without it. The quadrangle seemed revolting all of a sudden, gray and loathsome. Trees aflame in reds, yellows, and oranges by the spark of autumn just an hour ago appeared charred in grayscale. The buildings now surrounding Steve –ugly as always- seemed at once more unfriendly than ever. He sat on a bench between the library and Murdock, on a rarely used walkway leading to a faculty parking lot.

Steve began contemplating at great length a blinding irony- *why do people want to know why I am here? Why should it matter to anybody but myself? I don’t understand what makes this an appropriate venue for maturation, let alone education.* Steve’s fresco eyes seemed wholly one dimensional in lack of sunlight, and tears began to build up around his eyelids, becoming caught in the lashes; *I don’t want to be here and listen to everybody talk about what they want from me. I can’t give anything, what could I give anyway? I don’t owe anybody here anything, why can’t they recognize that?*

A voice from what seemed to be around the corner interrupted Steve's thoughts- "Mr. Foster is a total weirdo, right?" He looked immediately in the direction to discover a young woman standing only a few paces away. She was looking curiously at Steve with her left hand locked around her right index finger; and the moment they made eye contact, both of their heads fell to the ground. Steve didn't know what to say, and he began to panic and tap his foot for fear of blurting out something asinine. He could feel the pounding against his sternum; he could feel the pushing against his Adam's apple, and it squeezed words out of his mouth uncontrollably- "Stuff happens sometimes, I guess."

She raised an eyebrow slightly to his response, but continued- "Are you new here? I am. It's so much better than high school, but sometimes I wonder if I am actually going to learn anything," she said as if asking a question.

"Yeah, I am new here as well. It's interesting to say the least, but I'm not sure how I feel about it," lied Steve.

"I'm sure you'll find out why you're here," she dismissed, "my name is Anne, do you have another class right now? Want to go for a walk if not?"

"I have do, in a few minutes."

"Okay, maybe I'll see you in the dining hall tonight. Goodbye Steve." Anne began walking away and Steve spoke quickly-

"My name is Steve."

"I know that, I think everybody in the class knows."

Anne disappeared into the library while Steve stood up and walked to the campus center building where the department of natural sciences was located. *Thirty-three stairs and four doors*, he thought as he entered a laboratory classroom. There were no desks, but instead large tables equipped with a sink and several gas nozzles.

At a vacant table in the back left hand corner, Steve took a seat and observed a woman shuffling through a stack of papers at the front of the room. She began speaking without any introduction the nature and history of the periodic table of elements. The class concluded as quickly as it started, and everyone poured out of the room.

Steve was the last to exit the room, curiously examining the various posters that lined the room. After spending a few moments admiring a large x-ray diffraction photo of coal, he wandered outside and back to the dormitory. He entered the building and began walking up the stairwell, letting out a content sigh as he thought about the previous lecture and counted. *Ninety-six stairs*, he thought, *men in suites hang themselves*.

Upon reaching his room, Steve turned the ceiling light on and sat down at the desk. He began reading the syllabi given to him by his professors and promptly gave in to the insurmountable urge to shut his eyes. Things were quiet and dark.

My arm is falling off; what is going on? I can't feel it!, I can't feel it! Steve woke suddenly, lifting his head and his arm slid off the plain of the desk. He and his arm had fallen asleep, apparently beyond his last lecture for the day. It was dark outside, the clock on his desk read seven thirty-eight p.m. *My arm hurts*, he thought. *I should probably go to the library to*

email the botany professor, he continued. Then, remembering the conversation he had with Anne earlier that day, entertained the idea of visiting the dining hall.

After emailing his Botany professor at the library, Steve made a trip to the dining hall to dine fine. He entered the hall, the noise was overwhelming. Voice upon voice overlapping one another. Steve was certain he wanted to turn around, but something about the situation seemed too appealing to leave behind and he entered the kitchen. Inside, there was an array choice in a buffet of sorts. Steve picked up a plate with what seemed to be turkey on rye. He walked through the sitting area and took a seat against the far wall, which was lined with windows. The sandwich had a strange taste to it; Steve could not pinpoint exactly what, however. He wanted to look around as he sat, but the noise was far too distracting to do anything other than eat with his head down.

Moments passed, as did Steve's desire to be in the dining hall. He finished his sandwich and immediately walked toward the door when he heard his name- "Steve!" proclaimed a delicate, recognizable voice.

He stopped and turned around. He was looking back and forth, from wall to wall and heard his name again. *This is terribly unpleasant*, he thought to himself as he finally noticed Anne waving her arm. She was seated at a table just behind his and he weaved his way to her. She was sitting alone and Steve was bewildered as to how she did not notice him.

"How are you?" asked Anne as Steve sat down next to her.

"I am fine. I missed a class today because I fell asleep. How are you?"

“Not too shabby, I didn’t miss any classes, but I already have a boatload of assignments to complete for tomorrow. Do you like your classes so far?”

“They are okay, I suppose. May I ask you a question?”

“Certainly,” replied Anne.

“I noticed as you called me over that you are sitting at the table just behind mine; I’m just curious how you didn’t notice me.”

“Really Steve?! I did notice you! I said hello and you didn’t say a word. You were just staring at your sandwich.”

“Really?” said Steve, “I had no idea. I’m sorry.”

“It’s no problem. May I ask *you* a question?”

“Certainly,” said Steve, in a jumbled mumble; now aware of his poor social skills. The lion in his chest was again roaring.

“What are you doing here?”

Steve froze. His jaw fell slowly downward and his eyes stared right through Anne’s. It was all he could do to even stand still; after a moment, he realized his utter lack of response, and turned away. As soon as he exited the dining hall, he ran all the way to his room, and fell into the bed.

Steve stood and then sat at the desk. He tore a piece of paper from a notebook, leaving the tears from the spiral on the sheet. He wrote-

I am far from certain why, but I know I can’t do this right now. I want to be free from inorganic motivation; I want the lion in my chest to wander free in search of exuberance- the shade under a tree on the savannah. I don’t know if I’ll ever find what I am looking for, but I do know that this is not the place and time where I am free to think, free to be.

Steve signed the note in enormous block letters, and left it on his desk. As soon as he finished, Steve walked down ninety-six stairs and followed a large cat down route eight.