

In
GARDENS
Elsewhere



DILLON HAMILTON

In Gardens Elsewhere

by Dillon Hamilton

Stewart rubbed the lapel between his thumb and pointer-finger until his skin was pink—almost raw. The Harris tweed jacket, with loose threads arching up from the elbow patches and shoulder seams, lay next to a hard copy of his speech. A pen and a half had laid their lashes into its white flesh and the more Stewart stared at it, laying there all pulped and bleeding, the less he wanted to spare the rod on this brainchild of his.

“Stew, would you please zip me up? I haven’t worn a dress like this in some time and my shoulders are too rigid to reach,” Joan asked.

“I’ve told you we can get you back into therapy,” he said.

She shook her head. “Insurance won’t cover it.”

“We can pay out of pocket.”

“Whatever the university gave you to retire won’t cut it either.”

“We can find a way to pay. It’s no problem.”

“I’ll just wear more dresses. I’ll miss my sweaters though.” Joan looked down at the jacket and then over at the speech. Then back to the jacket. “You need a new jacket. It would only cost what a few therapy sessions would cost.”

“I won’t have much need for a new jacket after tonight,” Stewart said.

“Won’t you read it to me?”

Stewart chuckled, picked up the papers, said, “Sure.”

“Oh good!”

“At the memorial.”

“Darn you, Stew! And for the final time it’s not a memorial. It’s a gala, a fundraiser and you’re the keynote of the entire event.”

“Oh goody. It’s my memorial and I get to speak at it for the purpose of funding my usurpers.” He paused and thought more clearly about his old employer’s motives. “They must believe they’re *sending me off* or *honoring* me, but its morbid.”

Joan clasped her hands together and pursed her lower lip. “This is why I want to hear what you have to say to them. I know it’s good. I want to know when to laugh at their surprise or the little jokes I won’t get them unless you explain them to me now.”

“I had trouble adding any jokes. I don’t care enough to make these people smile.”

Joan giggled and touched the lapel where Stewart had abused it. “Maybe I can help you with a few jokes. I’ve been thinking of some for that Dean Mason for almost a decade.”

“He’s only been here for four years,” Stew said.

“Really? Seems longer.” She unclasped her hands and dropped them, palms up, at her sides. “So, you’re really not going to read it to me?”

“You will hear it when they do.”

“Fine. Where’s your new overcoat?”

“In the closet next to my duck hunting waders.”

Joan scoffed with overwrought surprise. “Your what! We bought that overcoat specifically for this night.”

“It’s too warm to wear.”

Joan, having only one heel on, marched or hobbled over to Stewart’s closet. “Thirty-eight degrees is not too warm.” She shoved hangers down the metal bar, a shrill scraping. “Uh! These

waders aren't even washed. Red clay everywhere. You could have ruined the overcoat." Joan plucked the overcoat from the closet and turned, frowning.

Stewart shrugged, leaned against the bed, and began to work over his lapel, again.

"You can at least give me a sneak peek or hint about the speech," Joan said.

Stewart peered up at the slow-spinning ceiling fan. "There's a poem in it. To you."

"Now you're kidding with me, so I won't ask any more questions," she whined.

"No, it's true."

"What's it about?"

"You'll know soon enough."

"You're cruel."

"You really think so?"

"No, you're kind."

"You really think so?"

Joan sighed dramatically. "I don't know what to think."

A laugh sputtered out of Stewart's sealed lips. Joan threw the overcoat, wooden hanger and all, at him. "You're cruel! You're cruel! You're cruel!" She shuffled across the room and dove into his chest. He wrapped her tight and kept them both from tumbling over the worn ottoman that touched his calf. With her lips buried into his white undershirt, she kissed him and breathed in the scent of his cologne.

"That's the bourbon scented stuff that Davy bought you for Christmas, isn't it?" Joan asked.

"Yes."

"I love our kids."

“Me too.”

“I wish they could come.”

“Maybe it’s for the best.”

Joan pushed herself far enough away to look up at him but still hold tight. “Of course, it isn’t. Their father is being honored. The grandkids would have loved the food.”

“Children don’t need to see their father fall.”

Joan buried her face in his chest. She squeezed him until his back cracked. “You always act like this is a battle or war you have lost and you’re relinquishing your sword,” she said.

“Is it not?”

Her squeeze relaxed and she adjusted her head to lay her ear against his chest. “Sort of, but there’s no shame in having your children there.”

“There is if there is shame in the loss.”

“There isn’t. You just feel that way. It’s not true.” A droplet fell on to and then off of the tip of Joan’s nose. “Oh, stop. Stop!”

“I know. It’s selfish wishing to have stayed longer and thinking I could have done anything about all this. I’m even throwing myself a pity party because it was a group of my own disciples who forced me out, but I failed them as well.”

Joan wiped the streaks from his cheeks to his jawline. “You keep lying to yourself like this and you’ll begin to believe it. Let’s get you dressed.”

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“Doctor and Missus S. C. Wallace, I presume?” the girl at the entryway asked Stewart, who was too busy cringing about all the colorful stage lighting to have heard her.

“That’s us,” Joan replied from Stewart’s side.

“Follow me and I’ll escort you to President Simms and he’ll take you over from there,” the girl said.

Joan gripped his forearm. “Look alive, Stewart.”

“Do I look dead already?”

“You know I hate those jokes.”

“I love them. Makes everyone uncomfortable.” Stewart tugged Joan along. They could see the event center through the glass lobby. Graphics flashed across a stage-sized screen behind a crystal podium.

“Wonderful. A transparent pulpit,” Stewart grumbled.

“It’ll only be for a few minutes,” Joan said.

“It only takes a half-blind eye a few seconds to realize my legs look like corduroy incased sausages.”

“Just the way I like them,” Joan said.

Stewart scoffed and the girl with the headset and loud voice continued to ferry them through linen-topped tables with rose centerpieces. The silverware was still being laid by a few dozen event staff, wearing latex gloves and hairnets. And it wasn’t silver, it was plastic, but the roses were real. The provost, Harry Yates, rehearsed his lines as MC. He had opening remarks before introducing a number of early short speeches from heads of student government and advocacy groups. The remarks were palatable to anyone coming in off the street, but to someone like Stewart, who had heard them year after year and knew their sole purpose was to warm the teats before their annual three-hour milking session of bank accounts that lay dormant until the teats were told how great they were for donating to such a great cause, it was like being told a lie having already heard the truth. Though he appreciated the amount of craft and research these

remarks required, to avoid every sensibility in a room of nearly five-hundred potential milking cows, who at any point could kick you from your crystalline stool, took care, acumen, and frankly, giftedness.

Harry was nothing if not a gifted speaker, which Stewart knew well. The provost had come close to convincing him that an early retirement was profitable, preferable, and even Stewart's idea. Stewart was thankful it had not played out that way.

Chilled, glass pitchers of water made their way from carts to tables, while Stewart and Joan were stopped by some of the seated early arrivals. First, their journey was interrupted by the young star of the business department and his wife, a former Olympic swimmer, Foster and Gelda Braithwaite. The only thing notable about Foster's attire was another one of his ridiculous bowties that had the motto of the current zeitgeist embroidered on it and Joan noted later that Gelda's dress seemed only a bit baggier than the suit she had swam in for the London Olympics.

"I'm so glad they picked you as the keynote, Doctor Wallace. I always appreciated your lectures whenever I would sit in, and I might've shouted something obscene if they had picked another one of those halfway famous people, again," Foster said, as he stood to shake Stewart's hand.

"High praise," Stewart said.

Foster gulped down some water and adjusted his tie. Gelda engaged Joan about her dress, and Foster guided Stewart away from their wives. "Doctor Wallace, I wanted to ask you something before...well, before you leave campus for good."

"Okay."

"I know you and Dean Lieberman were close."

Foster was one of those young men who talked with expressive hands and brow to get his point across and appeared as if he knew what he was talking about, but Stewart used only his ears and let his eyes wander off toward the bar of the event center, which would go unused on this night.

“Yes,” Stewart said.

“I was wondering if you could like maybe convince him of my abilities, if you saw him outside of work. I could maybe even set up a dinner between the two of you and your wives, pay for everything. I don’t know. What do you think would be best?”

“I do not know your teaching abilities. I have never seen them in action. If you knew Doctor Lieberman at all, you would know he expects substantiation to any claims that are made in his presence. It’s why taking a dinner or nightcap with him can be an excruciating experience.”

“So, no to the dinner?”

Stewart could tell he had set Foster’s script ablaze by the way the young man’s brow and hands fell like a reed broken by winter wind. While Foster’s head was held above water by surface tension alone, Stewart decided to stand him up straight with some advice.

“Foster, you have created and sold three of your own businesses, have you not?” Stewart asked.

“The first one was my father’s old business.”

“We all have to get our startup talents from somewhere. Why don’t you go back to that trend? Build things and sell them for profit.”

“I’d like to take Dean Lieberman’s position someday.”

“You like teaching that much?”

Foster buttoned the top button of his suit jacket and moved closer to Stewart. “No, but there’s prestige and perks that come with being the Dean of the Business school. Not to mention the connections that can be made from that office.”

“Bridges are burned, and sacrifices are made from that office as well.”

“But the perks. Well, one could live off the perks.”

“Or die on the perks.”

“But the prestige—”

“Is lost as easily as a good name.”

Foster pulled Stewart further away from any nearby ears. “Doctor Wallace, why are you discouraging this? Isn’t it good to have aspirations?”

“You’re climbing the mast to a sinking ship, Foster. By the time you get to the crow’s nest, you’ll be knee-deep in the sea,” Stewart said.

“Our university is older than the state it sets in. The business college celebrated its centennial before the state did.”

Stewart snorted and chuckled. “Institutions are like names, son. They are built over decades, generations and lost in moments of decadent cowardice.”

The reed’s head rested upon the surface of the water once more. Foster peered back at their wives and gave a hopeless smirk. “I guess I should have expected this.”

“Expected what?” Stewart asked.

“Cynicism.”

“You’re reading the writing on the wall wrongly. Your ability to build up a business and sell is reason for optimism.”

Foster bit his lip and nodded toward Gelda. “She won’t see it that way. My dad definitely won’t see it that way.”

“I see.”

“She sees nothing but more of these galas and elite parties in our future, and I don’t know if I could ever bookend my name with enough titles to satisfy my father.”

They stood there in silence for a moment. Foster worried about the future that his bride wanted and Stewart marveled at the future his bride had. Gelda stood cross-armed and taunted, chilled without her coat, which hung over the back of her chair. Joan, her dress being sleeved and coat being thick, spoke and stood comfortably. Her plush hip leaned into the back of Gelda’s chair, barring the Olympian from donning her comfort.

“Joan,” Stewart called.

“Yes?” Joan answered.

“You think Gelda might want her coat? They haven’t turned the heater on, yet.”

Joan scrambled, spazzed rather, for Gelda’s coat. “Thank you, Stew!” she said.

Stewart turned to Foster. “What did you mean by expecting cynicism from me?”

“Oh, I didn’t mean that you’re always cynical. It was more like given the situation.”

“Meaning?”

“I’d be cynical.”

“About what?”

Foster scoffed. Life returned to his brow and hands. “What do you mean ‘about what’? They forced you out in a year you were up for the Poet Laureate. You were the only reason kids still enrolled in the English program. Even I thought about getting an English minor because of you when I was in school, and I’m like the furthest thing from a typical English student.”

“Who told you I was forced out?” Stewart asked. He asked the question plainly and squared his shoulders toward the young business professor.

“Easy,” Foster pleaded. “No one needed to tell me. It was obvious. It’s still obvious that they feel bad about it, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“How many universities that you know of would invite a professor that they just shoved out into the Sea of Retirement to be a keynote at their biggest fundraising gala of the year? You cannot tell me that you didn’t see this.”

“Joan had to point it out to me.”

“Wise woman. Also, I have another theory,” Foster said, while rubbing his hands together.

“Let’s hear it.”

“This is like deep conspiracy stuff now, but I think some of the silver heads that will be here tonight heard about your ousting and weren’t happy about it. Bringing you back as a keynote might have helped ease some of that tension.”

“That’s a nice theory, but I don’t know any of the silver-haired philanthropists well enough for that to be true, and even if I did, an English professor wouldn’t be worth the fight,” Stewart said.

“It was just a theory.” Foster shrugged and went back to his table, slumping in his chair and looking very contemplative. Stewart returned to Joan. They said their goodbyes to Gelda and Foster and continued to follow their guide, who mentioned in passing that her name was Elizabeth.

“Foster sure looked frustrated with your conversation. What did you do to the poor boy?”

Joan asked.

“He asked me to convince Doctor Lieberman of his merits, and I told him what I thought.”

“What did you think?”

“That Foster should do what he does best.”

Joan rolled her hand like she was pulling taffy from her husband’s mouth. “Which is?”

“Building up a business of his own and selling it.”

“Is that what he wants to do?”

Stewart rubbed his wife’s hand that rested in the crook of his elbow. “I think he does.”

“Few people get to do what they want to do,” Joan said softly.

“And even fewer want to do what they are supposed to do.”

The second stop they made was for a former colleague. Ollie Penmore, a chemist and marathon enthusiast, jogged over from his table to embrace the Wallace’s together. “Are you ready to hear it again, Joanie? It’s been so long. Too Long! I miss hearing this guy in lectures and what have you. I’m ready. Are you ready?”

Joan rubbed Stewart’s back. “I’m always ready to hear this man say anything.”

Ollie recoiled. “Really? Anything? Even the first groggy words in the morning when he doesn’t sound like himself?”

“Especially then!”

“I like him more when he’s warmed up. Are you warmed up, Stew? You look warmed up. That neck is looking cherry red against that collar.” Ollie reached out and pressed Stewart’s neck.

“What’s that all about?” Stewart asked with a chuckle.

“Have you had high blood pressure lately? Feel like you need to sit down?”

“I’m fine, Ollie. Still running, I see.”

Ollie locked his knees, tilted his shoulders forward, and clasped his hands behind his back. “Still running, but Jeremy has me on this biohacking kick. The research and uniqueness of each case fascinate me.”

“Each case?” Joan asked.

“Well, you know he opened that upscale gym north of the city. I tell ya, it’s not my cup of tea. Too ritzy by half. But he’s given me twenty clients to ‘hack’, and I’m loving it.”

Stewart clapped Ollie’s bony shoulder. “We sure are glad to hear that.”

“I tell ya, I didn’t know what to do after my Gwenny passed, but Jeremy gave me my space for a few weeks and sprang it on me when I finally called him. He said he knew I would get bored pretty quickly. Sons, huh? What a blessing!” Ollie said with no hint of solemnity but full of reverence. “How are your kids? There when you need them, I hope.”

“Always,” Joan answered.

“Are they here tonight?”

“No, we didn’t need them tonight,” Stewart replied.

Ollie laughed and Joan and Stewart joined him in succession.

“I always loved your humor, Stew. You deliver it flat and sweet.”

“Mmm...like pancakes,” Joan said.

Stewart pulled her close and kissed her forehead. “Loves her breakfast food, this one.”

All of a sudden, Ollie seemed happily distracted. “Hey, I gotta go give Larry Yoast a piece of my mind about his newest research. Loved seeing you both. Say hello to your kids for me!”

With that, Ollie went jogging across the event center. Stewart and Joan resumed their tailing of Elizabeth, who began to show signs of tension above her immaculately manicured left eyebrow. It twitched from time to time. To her chagrin, they were halted, this time from a call at their rear. Neither Stewart nor Joan needed a peek over their shoulder to recognize who had shrieked, “Oh, Wallace’s!” from somewhere near the lobby.

Stewart groaned and shook with a frustration only Joan could detect. “Five minutes in and she finds us. This has to be the record,” he said

“Hush, Stew. We love her.”

“Yes, I love her all the time that I’m away from her.”

Joan cleared her throat to drown out Stewart’s grumbling and turned to greet Sandra Jones, secretary to the university president, who shuffled over to them in a skirt too trim for her hips and thighs, bringing her knees to a point and flailing her high heels in an outward, circular motion. Stewart held his breath until she came to a stop in front of them. He now knew what it was like for movie characters when the steam engine stopped just centimeters from their nose.

“Sandra, we were hoping to see you before the festivities began,” Joan said with practiced excitement and joy. Then, she whispered, “Let’s see it!”

Sandra held out her left hand. Joan gasped and Stewart blew out an exasperated breath. “What does he do?” Joan asked.

“He has CFO’ed for a few environmental organizations, but this is the fruit of a book on the necessity of political unity. It’s selling well in our circles. Have you read it yet, Stewart?”

“Never,” he said.

Joan elbowed the pudg around his ribs. Stewart wheezed, coughed, and said, “Never heard of it. What’s the title?”

“I just love the title. *Peace, Peace: Lessons from the Cringey Claptrap*,” Sandra said.

“*Lessons from the Venus Flytrap*, you said?” Stewart asked and he received another of Joan’s elbows.

“No, sorry. I’m not as articulate when I’m thinking about Richard. *Lessons from the Cringey Claptrap*. It’s about how all of this hateful and meanspirited talk in our world has done so much to cause great division and pour salt in old wounds,” Sandra said.

Stewart forced a grin. “It’s going on my list.”

“Oh, wonderful,” Sandra said. “Excuse me, but I see Donna Yoast and I must say hi.” She shuffled off.

“My list of things to never read,” Stewart muttered

Joan waited until Sandra was clearly out of earshot before chuckling. “I’m glad she is happy.”

“Me too,” Stewart said.

“There’s President Simms!” Elizabeth said with suddenness and verve. She grabbed Joan’s elbow, and by extension, Stewart’s, and dragged them both into President Simms’s presence. Simms contemplated what he was being told by the awkwardly large and soft Dean of the music department, Nelson Williams, about issues with funding and recognition for his program. As was Nelson’s way, he complained indirectly by mentioning the student’s obstacles and difficulties, which gave him the opportunity to double the complaint as a compliment to the resilience of the students under his watch. Compared to Simms, Nelson looked like a bear sizing

up a poor sapling to rub his back against, but Simms stood with a resolute demeanor in the face of these veiled complaints—even cool. Simms’s suit, fresh in style, fit tight around his legs, slim around his waist in juxtaposition to his large, round head. He wore his hair longer than most men on campus to distract from the obvious mismatch. It was an easily-passed-over distraction.

“I have seen some of these kids struggle with dented, chipped instruments from their high school concert days, and yet, they thrived. I just want them to have the experience that I and our university have promised them,” Nelson said. He let the back of his hands brush down his pant legs with a thespian’s flair.

Simms leaned in with assertive nicety and ambiguity. “Hey, I hear ya, Nelson. You and your students have taken the brunt of this cutback with more grace than any other department. Leaders like you are why I come to work every morning confident that I have the right people in my corner. It’s also why I trust that you and your students have what it takes to press onward, come what may.”

Nelson, who normally stood a head taller than Simms, drooped below the President’s stature and thought better of rubbing up against this particular sapling. He began to turn away, but Simms caught one of the burly shoulders with his bony fingers and held it gently. “Nelson, I’ll do all that I can for your department, as I do for all others. I’m here for you and your students, fighting in your corner so that you can worry about more important things. These times demand our cooperation, sacrifice, and brotherly love. Do you agree?” Simms asked.

Nelson slumped further and returned to a small jazz ensemble he had handpicked for the evening. Simms smirked as a father might toward a child disappointed with the answer to his question of a new toy car. He noticed the Wallace’s and beamed.

“Doctor Wallace!” He covered the ground between them in one long stride and took the hand Stewart offered with both of his. He shook, released, and turned to Joan. “And the regal, Joan.” He embraced her.

“Always too nice, Danny boy.”

President Simms recoiled. His supreme aversion to being addressed by his first name was only supplanted by a greater disgust when he was addressed by his mother’s secret pet name for him. “How did you—yes,” he said. He was surprised she knew it, or had guessed it, but settled himself on the fact that he could endure one last night of pet names. A smirk returned to his face and he asked them both, “Are we excited about to night?”

“I am!” Joan said.

“I am prepared,” Stewart said.

“Keep that measured tone and you will have nothing to worry about Doctor. Do you have your speech with you?”

“He won’t let anyone touch it, Danny boy.”

Simms cringed and searched Stewart’s person with darting eyes, hoping to get a glimpse of the hardcopy poking out of a pocket.

Stewart noticed the reconnaissance, raised an eyebrow, and said, “No one reads or revises. That was the agreement, President Simms.”

“And it shall be adhered to with the strictest obeisance. Just be mindful to unfold it away from the mic. These new mics pick up everything and we don’t want to jar our audience with the horrid sound.”

“Teats are sensitive,” Stewart said.

Simms and Joan expressed their shock to the comment with their brows, but each brow said very different things.

Joan's said, "Stop. Not before your speech!"

Simms's said, "Please, not another farmyard riddle, Doctor Wallace. There are distinguished guests close by."

"On a milking cow. Their teats can be very sensitive, especially if you're late to the stool and they've had time to drag over the dewed grasses and get pruned and cracked. A rough business those teats."

Joan, relieved and eager to push the conversation along, asked, "What brought this to mind?"

"The mind wanders," Stewart said.

Simms simply said, "Yes?"

The Wallace's sensed a growing dread emanating from President Simms's general area. The President stood, heels together, hands tied and wringing behind his back, and rocking his upper body forward and backward.

"How are you, President Simms? Excited?" Stewart asked.

"Yes, quite. We have a star-studded lineup and a great staff taking care of things around us. Should be a lovely evening. What do you think of the lighting? Colorful, isn't it?"

"Very discotheque," Joan said.

Stewart surveyed the exposed, steel beams and said, "Hmmm."

"Many of our donors want to take this architectural vision and apply it to any new buildings around campus," Simms said.

"New buildings, huh? In an era of cutbacks and declining enrollment?" Stewart asked.

“Sadly, when a donor donates, they dictate its distribution,” Simms replied.

“I’ve been in a few of those meetings when Gene Reilly was president and he influenced nearly every single donor to fund the much need projects over against the donor’s desired projects,” Stewart said.

Simms chuckled. “I’m flattered by the comparison to someone as *influential* as President Reilly, but I don’t have that sort of clout at the moment. Maybe in a couple of decades. And I’m sure you noticed, Reilly and I did not share all the same ideas or outlook.”

“Hence the motto change?” Joan asked.

“Hence the motto change. *Vision for the future*,” Simms said and since his gaze had tilted upward as he spoke an orange spotlight flashed over his face, causing him to wince away from its power.

“Isn’t that the suggestion you gave the marketing firm on the first day of the rebranding?” Stewart asked.

Simms pretended to search for the right answer. “I don’t recall.”

“Hm,” Stewart said.

Simms separated his heels and said, “May I show you to the Keynote’s table?”

“Oh, our own table? Isn’t that great, Stew!” Joan exclaimed.

“Yes.”

Stewart felt genuinely appreciative for an intimate table to share with his bride but knew as soon as they headed for and ended up in the corner of the event center, he should have offered President Simms his other cheek sooner that way this backhand did not appear so sudden. It was one of those what-was-meant-for-evil-would-be-used-for-good situations.

Stewart took Joan's coat and helped her sit. He then seated himself. A small candle burned before their smaller version of the rose centerpieces at the other tables. Stewart reached for the candle and Joan slapped his hand away lightly. "Don't play with the wax," she chided. "He reverts to his childhood habits when there are flames about him," she said to Simms.

"Understandable. You'll have a sound check soon, and I'll send one of the media team over to you when you have five minutes left," Simms said as he turned to walk away.

"Five minutes left for what?" Joan asked.

"To prepare himself to go on." Simms turned on his heel and walked on the balls toward the nearest hors d'oeuvre tray that he could find. Stewart began to tap a rhythm with his fingertips on the table. Joan reached over and held the hand that was tapping.

"You don't need to prepare yourself to go on. You've done this more times than you can remember," Joan said.

"I have done this or something like it many times, but I don't feel prepared. I may never feel prepared."

"I can't see how. You've been over that manuscript at least five times."

"I lost count how many times. I've made many corrections."

"Big corrections?"

"Small. Mostly small."

"But some big?"

"Yes, some big."

Joan breathed over the candle and it danced. "You never stress over your speeches like this. What's wrong?" Joan asked.

"I had no trouble with your poem. No corrections there."

“Of course not. It’s your prose you’ve always struggled with, but not to the point of anxiety. Why would this be different?”

“There could be fallout.”

Joan laughed and squeezed his hand. “That’s the fun part about listening to the famous Doctor S. C. Wallace. You know the trail of gunpowder leading to the powder keg has been lit somewhere backstage and you’re just waiting for the line that leaves the audience in smithereens.”

Stewart shifted his hips in his seat and leaned closer to Joan. “I’m talking about causing an outrage. I know these people are wearing mink and monocles, but savagery can be committed in any attire.”

Joan rolled her eyes. “That’s silly. They will simply raise questions and blood pressure—nothing more.”

“I still don’t know if it’s worth it.”

“If what is worth it?”

“Going up there. What good can come of it?”

Joan released his hand, which immediately resumed its tapping, and leaned into the back of her seat. “You don’t think any good can come from what you plan to say?” she asked.

“I don’t know. Maybe.”

“I would like to hear it.”

“I know you would, but I can’t just—”

A chair, being dragged over concrete, cut Stewart off. At first, Joan stared around Stewart with an expression to let whoever was dragging said chair know of her annoyance, but the annoyance receded, and she appeared pleased. Stewart turned to stare as well. He stood, stunned,

and gave his best effort at a run toward the mustached scoundrel that was drawing all the attention of the room to himself. In the time it had been away, the mustache had changed from mostly salt sprinkled with pepper to a white that Saint John encountered in his apocalypse, but the smile, holding the mustache up, was as youthful as when they had met. Stewart was responsible for the first smile that Furman Batra had cracked on U.S. soil.

“Furman!” Joan said.

Stewart didn’t slow until he held his friend in a dangerous embrace. “I thought you said you couldn’t come this early,” Stewart said, still holding Furman.

Furman drew a quick, strangled breath. “I lied,” he said.

“Good,” Stewart replied. Stewart ripped the chair from Furman’s grip and the floor and shoved his friend toward their table. Joan rose and hugged Furman. Stewart reseated her. Furman seated himself snugly against the tablecloth, pressing his ribs over the edge and near the plate.

“Much posher than years past,” Furman said.

“You’ve been gone for quite some time,” Joan said.

“The wood floors at McRaney Hall were much more fun than this—what is this? Stained concrete?” Furman asked.

“Glazed, I believe,” Joan said.

“Oh, good grief! Now I want donuts,” Furman said. He leaned forward, smelled the roses, and said, “Fake.”

“No, they’re real,” Joan said.

“Must not have my smell back, yet. How long does that take?” Furman asked.

Stewart tilted his head back and looked straight up. He shook his head and brought it back to a normal sitting position. “Can’t speak with vigor in a place like this. McRaney had that

glorious vaulted ceiling of oak timbers. Straight away from the podium was that stained glass. Marquise stars falling from the sky. A man could bellow doxologically more readily with things like that about him,” Stewart said.

“And here I thought *I* was being nostalgic,” Furman said and chuckled.

“How did you get off of work this early?” Stewart asked.

Furman reached for a passing tray of hors d’oeuvre and missed. “I lied,” he said.

“About what?” Joan asked.

“I didn’t expect you to go breaking commandments just to get here for this! It’s nothing special,” Stewart said.

“I told the TA that I have leading the research that I needed to come back early for equipment, which technically isn’t a lie, but I didn’t need to come back this early for it.” Furman reached out once more, and this time, snagged an hors d’oeuvre.

“Thank you, Furman. You didn’t have to,” Stewart said.

“Of course, I did!” Furman exclaimed.

“Yeah, you did,” Joan said.

Stewart interrogated Furman on every detail of his research. Furman answered all his questions but knew Stewart was stalling. Stewart had refused to divulge the story over the phone a week before, even though he was met with Furman’s stout persistence. Finally, Furman found a gap in the ramparts of the fortress that was Stewart and he charged. “Why did they do it?” Furman asked as Stewart drew breath for another sentence meant to stall the inevitable.

“Who did what?”

“Not that game, Stew. Furman is much too smart and you’re much too bad at games,” Joan rebuked.

Stewart let the chide settle in and turned his face toward it in agreement. “Yes. I think the better question would be what are the reasons they gave me and what do I believe their true reasons are?” Stewart said.

Furman gestured for Stewart to continue.

“The reasons given were myriad, friend. I think they had a list they were reading from behind one of Simms’ stacks of books that he leaves on his desk,” Stewart said.

“Really? Let’s hear a few,” Furman said while rolling his hand conspiratorially.

“Budget, low enrollment in the program, increasing expenses, etc. You know, most of the it’s-a-matter-of-finances-my-hands-are-tied reasons,” Stewart said

Furman scoffed. “Don’t these young executives understand that we know the game by now?”

Stewart shook a finger. “Oh, no. These lads came prepared. I made objections to all financial points and they took my fire with great resolve. I saw no signs of retreat. In fact, they advanced while I let my barrel cool.”

“Advanced? Toward what? If they’re kicking out a three-time Poet Laureate nominated prof, with the still most-watched lecture series in the world on sea shanties and their origins, you better wheel out the R. J. Gatling.” Furman liked to see Stewart’s metaphors from the womb to the tomb.

“I was mowed down, friend,” Stewart admitted soberly.

“What? How?”

“And you’re next.”

“That’s disconcerting.”

“I’m serious, Furman.”

“Me too.”

They set the news down for a moment. Furman’s grasp had been slipping, and with Stewart carrying the brunt of the load, they both needed a rest. But Furman, being one of those old fellows who thinks they’re much younger than they really are, picked it back up. “I’m still confused. What did they mow you down with? And why would I be next?”

“Not you specifically but your department.”

“Right. What is it?” Furman asked somewhat exasperated.

“Purpose, meaning, ends. They’ve chucked them all.”

Furman gave Stewart a sidelong look and glanced at Joan worryingly, who was giggling at him. Furman decided to remain the calm, patient, sane party at the table. “They have, huh?” he said.

“Yes, and replaced them with their own purpose meaning, and ends. These types of destructive moves always start with stories, poetry, and art, and end up with man turning the gun on himself. Anyway, Simms and Yates, with the help of Dean Mason, are taking the English department in *that* direction. They asked if I would be willing to *deconstruct* as well, and I was not. They knew I wouldn’t be. It had all been rehearsed. I could tell by the dullness of their speech,” Stewart said.

“I’m sorry, Stewart,” Furman said.

“What’s worse is they weren’t up for hearing my suggestions. It was my full cooperation or nothing at all.”

“Always a man of principle,” Furman said.

“The only way to keep his mannishness,” Joan said.

Furman retrieved a tattered notebook from his pocket. "I must record that one for later use," he said and mouthed the word mannishness as he wrote it. He tilted his head at the word and then showed it to Stewart. "Is that correct spelling?" He asked.

Stewart nodded. "Prepare now and don't be surprised when it comes, Furman."

Seeing that Stewart was serious, Furman fought off the urge to jest about the university's leadership being comparable to the Stasi and said, "I will."

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As promised, Simms sent one of the media team members over to the Wallace's table. He was a heady man in appearance and recall of factoids but not in meditation, destined to forever retain his current status at the university. "Wallace," he said, smiling and holding up all five fingers.

Stewart appreciated the efficiency and rose from his plate of filet mignon and asparagus, which had been noticeably downsized from last year's plate. He tapped the inner pocket in his jacket. The familiar crunch of paper reported back. He looked to Joan, then to Furman, and back to Joan and said, "Pray."

Provost Yates stirred no souls with his introduction. No hearts were quickened, nor ears tickled. Stewart assumed the provost must have still been a bit sore around the heart after the tongue-lashing Stewart had given him at their last meeting. The coldness with which Yates emitted, "Doctor S. C. Wallace," was no surprise to Stewart either. For where there is soreness there should be a fair amount of icing. Stewart entered the stage lights on cue to mild, widespread applause. Though he could pick out two pair of hands clapping louder and faster than the rest and knew it came from one corner of the event center in particular. He shook Yates' hand and gave him a warm grin before turning and offering the same grin to the crowd. The

applause died. Yates exited the stage right. Stewart turned his back to the mic and opened his hardcopy. The mic picked up each pop and crackle, anyway. He laid it on the crystal podium, grinned one last time to his audience, and never looked up, again. He did not have to.

“What lies before me is what some have expected, some have feared, and some have hoped for. Dash them all. Dash your expectations, your fears, and your hopes for this evening. What lies before me is what I want to have read, but never written. It’s what I want to have conveyed, but never said aloud with my own lips. It has been a tremendous exercise in writing many true and good things for a night and an occasion in which they should never be read. I leave them for another night, another occasion.”

Stewart took the first six pages of his speech, folded them, and placed them back into the inner pocket of his jacket. He read from the last page that remained on the podium.

“Long have I toiled in gardens elsewhere,
Neglecting mine at home,
Pruning, weeding with studied, gentle care,
Making leaf-mold loam,
The while our beds lie unused, dejected,
In drought we thirst for sin,
My eyes, life, flesh focused on infected,
Fruitless, elite boughs—thin,
Bring me fruitfulness and increase, in vats,
Of wine, water, olives,
Bring me marrow and fill tables with fats,
I am now a captive,

To those waiting, wanting rows,
I was reaping, now to sow.”

Stewart exited the stage the way he had come. The event center was shocked, silent. Joan clapped until he reached her. “I get it! I get!” She said. He embraced her and she squirmed deep into his arms.

“Good,” he said.

At their own table, three rows from the front, Simms and Yates expressed their views.

“He’s been nominated to the Poet Laureate how many times?” Simms asked.

“Yes, I don’t get the point,” Yates admitted.

“Me either. How are we going to fill the next thirty minutes?”

“What about the video?”

“It’s only twelve minutes long.”

“We could play it twice?”

Simms grimaced as if to say, “Not much of an effort.”

By now, the scales had fallen from the cows’ eyes and no one sat at the milking stool.

“This is much worse than I had imagined it,” Simms said.

Simms, a man known to be decisive when in a pinch, hopped from the table and praised Stewart’s poem, performance, and many years of service as he scurried to the podium. His mind filled with encouraging, unifying stories to run out the clock on Stewart’s remaining time and was confident, even jubilant, that such a task could easily be carried out by someone as talented in the tongues as himself, but suddenly the mind went as blank as the page Stewart had left atop the podium.

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