

A Position is Vacant

by [Armando Simón](#) (July 2023)



The Cocktail Party, Frank Hill, 1960s

The car slowly drove up the narrow street leading to the university's parking lot. The occupants inside were Orson Susskind and his wife, Fatima, and they were going to attend a faculty and graduate student get-together on that Friday night. The adjunct (part-time) faculty were also invited, of which Orson was one, as was the Dean of Liberal Arts. In short, most of the academic pecking order in his field would be there with the exception of the countless undergraduate students who made up the cattle from which the others fed off (financially, that is).

Old Doctor Jerry Jones had finally kicked the bucket—sudden heart attack—and his position had suddenly become vacant, with the result that all the adjunct professors were scrambling for it, hoping that an outsider would not be appointed to fill it. A death of a colleague is always a cause for joy in academia for many reasons, a job opening not being the least one.

Orson had persuaded his wife to take off from work that night in order to join him. Previous get-togethers had been boring affairs, but this one was different, for it afforded a priceless opportunity to fawn and otherwise make a good impression on the Dean, the Chairman and the other full-time staff. So, Orson had asked her to dress her best and act her most charming. He, too, was well dressed and intended to dazzle the party with his vast intellect (he considered himself to be ahead of his time).

They walked together towards the building. Relatively few students were about it, it being a Friday night, and it was a cool evening. Orson, in particular, felt good. As an adjunct professor, he felt marginal, included yet not included, teaching only two classes in a part time manner, without an office, without medical benefits, without tenure, subject to instant and arbitrary dismissal at the end of each semester. He could almost taste being a “real” professor. Having spent so many years in a university to get first a BA degree, then more time and money to get an MA, then repeat it all to get a PhD—in a field that had absolutely no demand outside an academic setting (or, as it was called, “the real world”), he felt like a fish out of water working at the telephone company, doing actual work instead of sitting around somewhere with a colleague trying to impress each other by discussing the same deep, philosophical issues that had been gone over countless times in countless settings.

They found the hall. It was packed. Though usually a relaxed affair with everyone casually dressed, the tension was evident tonight. The adjuncts were dressed particularly well.

Orson leaned over to Fatima. "See that young guy at the far end? The one with the light blue shirt?"

"Where? Oh, yeah."

"That's the Chairman of the Department, Doctor Bruce Porter. Don't be shocked by some of the things he says. He's a cynic. I mean openly cynical. About every little thing. He makes no bones about it. Apparently, he holds something over the Administration's head, that's why he gets away with some of the outrageous comments that he makes."

"Like what?"

"Everything! Oftentimes, he ridicules the Politically Correct fanatics in the university—and I've told you how much clout they have. But it isn't against just them. It's everything, everyone. Anyway, when you get to meet him, turn on the charm. He's a heavyweight. He has more clout than his position as Chairman would entail, so that tells me that there's something that we may not be privy to. I think that he deliberately turned down the opportunity to advance in the university. My guess is that he was avoiding The Peter Principle."

An older, bearded man approached them.

"Hey, Orson, glad you could come!" He shook hands.

"Doctor Guerrero, this is my wife, Fatima." They shook hands.

"Doctor Guerrero is our resident Nietzschean," he joked.

"Say, did you hear what happened between Doctor Kauffman and Doctor Hansen?" Guerrero dropped his voice at this piece of gossip.

"No," Orson tried on his most interested look.

"Right after Jones croaked, they rushed over to his office—you know that they're in those small, dark offices, you've seen them—and Jones' office is large and has a great view with a

window. Anyway, each went over there with empty boxes with the intention of quickly putting away Jones' personal belongings, so they could move in and make it his own office and they got there within minutes of each other and they almost came to blows. Right then and there in the office! Neither one would budge unless the other did first. And they both had classes to attend to! It was hilarious! They just stood there, fuming at each other without saying a word. Security had to be called in." Fatima joined in the laughing. "Anyway, Doctor Porter said that he's going to assign the office. So, he's enjoying their bootlicking in the meantime while he makes up his mind."

They talked some more about other things and then separated. At one point, Orson overheard another adjunct instructor talking to a tenured professor.

"Well, really, the number of philosophers that are listed and studied are far fewer than are available. We need to offer these others in new classes that we could be offering the students. Yeah, we have the usual Plato, Sartre, Descartes, Spinoza, Kierkegaard and all the Germans. But what about Ortega y Gasset, Lin Yutang, Vargas Vila, Kahlil Gibran, Eric Hoffer, Gregory Skovoroda, eh? I think that we could get some real mileage out of them!"

He avoided another professor standing by himself who was sensitive to everyone's shortcomings except his own. His claim to fame was to accuse others of racism. Intellectually sterile, he nonetheless had discovered how much power and notoriety a person could wield in the university simply by accusing others of racism on the flimsiest of reasons. Indeed, he had been one of the people who had condemned *The Color Purple* film for racism, based on the book by Alice Walker. Many years later, he had even accused the director of the recent science-fiction film *Star Wars* of racism because the members of an alien race had spoken with what sounded like a Japanese accent while another race walked in what could be vaguely construed, by a stretch of the imagination to the

breaking point, as strutting blacks. No one ever stated the obvious, which was: if no direct reference was made between the aliens and blacks or Orientals, then the person who made the association between the two must be a racist himself to think that way. He also felt that he had a shameful secret: he was not black. Yet, no one could have conceivably mistaken him for being a black man. He could never forgive his father for not having been black.

Orson overheard a graduate student talking about his brother, who was not present, a chap who apparently had a wealth of novel ideas on a variety of topics and was, therefore, a genius. His listener was throwing a bucket of cold water on the student's enthusiasm.

"Novel ideas are nothing. Following them through, ah, now that's a different matter. Years before MTV I myself had come up with the idea of music videos, but I did nothing about it. And Arthur C. Clarke came up with the idea of communications satellites in geosynchronous orbit, but he, too, didn't develop it and when Telstar and the other satellites went up, well, he got no royalties."

Orson and Fatima found a conversation where they could join in. Then went to another and to another. They even split up for a while. Orson felt that he was at his wittiest. In one group, Fatima often nodded her head, frowning, to show the Dean that she was as deeply impressed as he wanted her to be. She indeed made a good impression on him.

Eventually, Orson drifted over to where Doctor Porter was having one of his typically animated conversations, this time with Doctor Nguyen. They were over by one of the tables with snacks.

"But, you know, what still amazes me," he said, "is that year in, year out, they enroll in our classes, paying hundreds of dollars out of Daddy's wallet, or government grants, when all

the while they could just as easily drop by the used bookstore and pick up the books at a fraction of the cost that they spend on them at the university bookstore and simply read them at home. I mean, what do they really need us for? Yet, they do this, year in, year out!”

Doctor Nguyen was offended at this blasphemy.

“Oh, really, Bruce, that’s too much! You talk like we don’t do anything in the class, like we’re part of the furniture!”

“Some of the instructors are. All that they do is lecture from the text.”

“You’re going to tell me some sophomore is going to tackle Spinoza, or Kant, by himself? He needs a midwife.”

“OK, Spinoza, Kant, yeah, you’re right. They were deliberately obscure. But I’m talking Plato, I’m talking Locke, Descartes, Kierkegaard, Schopenhauer. You have to admit when their works came out, people simply read them. Their message was straightforward and needed no professors to tell them what to think or how to interpret them.”

“But, to get back to my point—and I’ll tell you what, I’ll stay away from our own field so you won’t feel threatened—a student who wants to get a solid knowledge in history, or literature, or anthropology, the only thing he, or she, really needs is to pick up the books—and read them. Our main duty’s to keep them in the dark about the college scam as long as we can by telling them that the purpose of a college university is to ‘expand their minds,’ so that they can keep on paying us and providing us with jobs. At least, until they get their degree. They can then take the next step into the unemployment line. Or, if they’re really obtuse, they go on to graduate school.” Orson nodded at this pronouncement, though his views were totally opposite his.

“Jesus, Bruce! Do you really believe that crap? Or are you

just doing it for shock value? I swear, sometimes I can't tell with you!" Nguyen was livid, Chairman or no Chairman.

"You should know by now, Phil."

"No, I don't! Sometimes I think you're not playing with a full deck."

"Now, see here, Phil, isn't it true that one of the ideas we inculcate them in college is that 'money is evil'? That people whose main preoccupation is 'make a lot of money' are immoral? You know we do it—in a hundred different ways, all very subtle. That a good person is the one who works because he loves his vocation and isn't concerned about the money, the salary? Why do you think that outside speakers' fees are called 'honorarium' and we distastefully avoid mentioning the words 'money' or 'fee' with them? Why, in Latin America, a lawyer's fee is also called 'honorarium,' for the very same reason. Phil ... this has been going on for centuries. For centuries. So, it's nothing new."

"So? That's just tradition. It doesn't prove your point at all."

"Well, let's ask Orson here. I'm sure he'll agree with me. After all, he's applied for Doctor Jones' position. Orson, isn't it true that you haven't been able to get a job using your degree in philosophy? Outside a college setting, I mean."

"N-No, I haven't," he stuttered.

"See?" He turned back to Nguyen in triumph. "Perfectly useless. I don't see why you're getting so hot under the collar, Phil. You went through it. I went through it. I'm just being honest or, if you prefer, realistic. I lost my naiveté a while back." He abruptly turned to Orson.

"Oh, Susskind. Good news. Doctor Jensen's going to be fired, so the chances of you making it have doubled."

“F-Fired? Why?”

“Got caught with his pants down—literally. Seems like he was having an affair with one of his students. She got mad at him over something or other—you know how women are—and went up to the feminist department and put in a complaint. Gives a whole new meaning to the title of Dean of Student Affairs, eh? The irony, of course, is that the feminist professor that she complained to has personally turned a number of her students into lesbians like herself, but that’s how those hypocrites work. In fact, several girls have accused her in the past, but because she’s a feminist, the college has ignored their complaints and they won’t fire her. I don’t care, really. I’ve always found appealing the sight of a girl temporarily wearing a goatee.” He looked at Orson’s look of dismay.

“Oh, don’t look so shocked, Orson! This is academia: you celebrate the downfall of a colleague. You always try to find dirt on a coworker so you can hold it over him. Susskind ... stop looking at me that way. This is academia. The only way that you can advance is if someone ahead of you dies, gets fired, or retires.”

Doctor Nguyen left their company with a sound of disgust. He passed Fatima, who had noticed her husband talking with Doctor Porter and had finally freed herself from the Dean’s attempt at being charming, in order to join them.

“Ah, Doctor Porter, this is my wife, Fatima. Fatima, this is the Chairman of the Department of Philosophy, Doctor Porter.”

“How do you do?” she said.

“Pleased to meet you,” he said and he looked it as he, in turn, gave her the once over.

At this point, another adjunct professor walked by on her way to the hors d’oeuvres.

"Hey, hello, Doctor Porter."

"Hello, Brenda. How are you?"

"Fine. Just got here."

"Oh, Brenda. You can't eat the shrimp."

"What?"

"You can't eat the shrimp. That's for the tenured professors. You get to eat those crunchy veggies with the cheese dip, or sour cream, over by that table. And I suggest you don't try the food over by the graduate students over there. Their crackers are really stale. I tried one earlier and it dried up my mouth."

With a look of disbelief, Brenda put the little plate of shrimp down and ambled to the other table. When she was out of earshot, Doctor Porter told the couple in a confidential tone, "I just found out that one of her published papers, the one on John Stuart Mill's essay *On Liberty*, was pure plagiarism."

"No!" Orson gasped.

"Oh, yes! And her resume wasn't altogether kosher, either. Yes, sir. She lied. She cheated. She was unoriginal. She took credit for other people's work. She'll go far in any university."

They then talked about other topics over which Doctor Porter was not excessively cynical. Throughout, Fatima was very charming and even laughed at all the right times. Eventually, Doctor Porter had to reluctantly leave their company. Orson whispered his compliments to Fatima for her performance during the whole night.

Not wanting to be overly obvious that they wanted to leave now that the Chairman and the Dean had left, they casually walked around the gathering, catching snippets of conversation.

“I’ve always wanted a gay son,” another adjunct instructor was confessing to a professor who was a vocal advocate of gay rights and of homosexuality in general.

The adjunct instructor who had earlier wanted to transform the curriculum in the Philosophy Department had now set his goal higher and was trying to reform the whole Graduate School.

“If you stop and think about it, taking the GRE is a pointless requirement for graduate school. What does the test scores reveal? It’s formally divided into Verbal and Math to add up to a number. But of what relevance are square roots and quadratic equations to philosophy—or literature, for that matter?”

After a few more minutes of nodding to acquaintances and brief, polite remarks here and there, they left the hall and walked towards their car.

On his way to the car, as they walked in the dark, Orson was half listening to his wife. His mind was thinking that he had discovered an almost certain way to be appointed to one of the two tenured positions that had become vacant. He had realized this once he had become aware of how Doctor Porter had looked over Fatima. The problem would be in convincing Fatima—that could get really messy. After all, she was not the philosopher that he was, she did not have the intellectual underpinnings to truly accept the fact that there is no right or wrong, only opinions, and nowhere was this principle truer than in a university.

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