

Emeritus

a jeu d'esprit

by James Como (August 2016)



Students – thousands – could no longer stand him, and so they had poisoned his vocation (for that is what teaching had been for him, a calling) with bad ratings, venomous petitions, veiled mockery, all sorts of grumblings to this dean or that, and the worst punishment of all: avoidance of his classes. It ate away at what he understood to be his standing. Then the other shoe: the provost told him his time had come. After forty years at the same plough, discrete retirement, no farewell dinner.

Still, at the very least he could say his own goodbyes. Get “closure,” a horrid word he always thought of as closed in quotation marks. Some appropriate valedictory for students, the *right* students. Not dinner: too ostentatious, and too much work. But drinks? Yes, drinks at his duplex! That would signal his goodwill and open-mindedness. Hail fellow well met – that sort of thing. Not *his* usual thing, but, this once, he knew he could muddle through.

He invited eight, all on the dean’s list, of course racially and ethnically diverse, males and females: straight, gay and bi. Hmm. No transgenders, he thought. But he didn’t know any so there could be no finger-wagging on that. No

violations of the University Guidelines on Heterogeneity and anti-Hegemonic Practices. Of course there could be no political diversity because, even though the University claimed to trade in ideas above all, no fundamental intellectual variations were permitted. There homogeneity was not only favored but enforced.

And they came. “Why the fuck not, right?”

Upon arriving all were surprised. Not by the house: it perfectly reflected the taste – a style one of them had labeled Old School Uncool – of “Prof HeadDick” (his first name *was* Richard, and decades ago he *had* headed his department). No, it wasn’t the house. It was the other guests that surprised each of the invitees. Each thought himself and, especially, herself as very special indeed but the others really – but *really* – stupid, unentitled to academic achievement, to social distinction, or even to an invitation to the anthropological expedition that this visit promised to be.

He knew that about them. He expected it. Still, he wanted a democratic soiree, though democratic in the academic sense: a microcosm of malice and malaise. It was why he took such care to get just this particular mix.

They were dressed up, or maybe down (he couldn’t tell), like wannabe street trash, but expensively. He was in a bowtie. “Drink up!” he chirped. He was hearty and actually cheerful but, in truth, was hoping for an early evening. Drink up they did.

“Delicious sangria, professor.” That was Elibel, the cutest of them. She dressed like a tease but didn’t, because her cell phone mattered more than any attention she had to work for.

The others nodded along. In fact, each had had a second glass, some a third, that’s how good the sangria was.

“Why thank you, my dear. An old family recipe, from Galicia. That’s in Spain.” Then, suddenly, “But hey, never too late for a toast, right? Let me start.

“To you, Billy and Joy” – he chose the most intelligent first – “for so badly wanting to know at least the *gist* – as you put it – of the French

Revolution. Real intellectual fire there.” And Billy and Joy glanced at each other.

“And to you, Tashika and Princess” – he could never have imagined fingernails either longer or more complexly adorned than theirs – “for having the courtesy to ask if you’d missed anything, like, *important*, after being out a week. So thoughtful.” They shrugged.

But none of them could hide their amusement, betrayed by incipient sneers: was there irony in the air? *Their* specialty?

“And to you, Tiffany and Troy, for being so *serious* about the final exam. Would that all my students had that . . . that *gravitas* . . . er . . . seriousness. Well, of *course* – of course *only* those chapters you’ve *actually* read would be on it, so you tell me, even if it makes for a very short exam.”

He was seated now in his brown, studded leather, straight-backed armless chair, his legs crossed, circling the inside rim of the glass with one finger, waiting. Two student remained.

“And you, dear Elibel, and you, Sasha, thank you for your insouciance and solipsism – do you remember those vocabulary items? Of course not. How rude of me.”

– Wait. What?

“And to all of you for mistaking the college for a hotel and me for your concierge.”

He could see it first in their eyes. Maybe *not* irony? Then in their squirming.

Tashika – she of the painted claws – twisting as she whined, “professor please can I have a . . . make-over? . . . I mean a do-over? . . . some makeup . . . a . . . a makeup – ”

They were dropping now, all at once, finally lying draped like a clump of so many splayed, poisoned weeds.

“Oh, and you’re all getting Fs. That way you’re dead *and* academically dismissed. Like, cray cray, right? How cool is *that*?”

He sat. Time enough for that damnable paperwork. The last of it! And then . . . eventually, after a short vacation, back to . . . to . . . well, it could be anything, couldn't it? There would be no syllabus to write. No papers to correct. No preposterous adjustments to student illiteracy, posturing, laxness, complaints, and *whining*. He could return to his own writing. "Plato's Mythopoeia: A Fraudulence" (radically cutting edge). "Dante's Floral Imagery in the Middle Six Cantos of the *Purgatorio*" (much neglected in the scholarship). "Marvell's Mistress and Browning's Duchess: The Same Woman?" (They are! They are!)

And then he thought, There were those deans and that one vp – of student affairs. *That* one. And colleagues The Personnel and Budget Committee!

Maybe, oh, four more parties?

He'd make lists.

He loved lists.

James Como is the author, most recently, of [here](#).

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