

# The Steps

Eric Wasserman

Utap tripped at the top of The Stepwell that came to the highest floor of The Tower.

His knees ached as he pressed his palms to the cold tile of the landing and lifted himself to see the leather flap of his teaching bag open; applications of The Hopeful splayed out before the entry to The Department. After almost nine months in this position he should have been aware of the fact that The Education added a newly constructed step to the top of The Tower's Stepwell every Monday morning. But, as always, he forgot. At this point he was actually considering investing in athletic kneepads to wear under his khakis.

He collected the applications of The Hopeful into his teaching bag, stood and entered The Department.

"You should take the elevator, *Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor," Secretary said as he walked past the front Welcome Reception Counter where Male Student Assistant pretended to not lust for Female Student Assistant as they attended to administrative tasks involving paperclips. Secretary wore a tiny key around her neck suspended between her bosom by a silver chain. She had her head bent to a computer screen, examining a spreadsheet, the lines of which reflected to the lenses of her round, frameless eyeglasses. She suggested Utap take the elevator every time he caught his foot and plunged. The previous Monday's fall had resulted in her stuffing his nostrils with tissue paper for an hour until the bleeding finally ceased.

Utap had always dreamed of teaching in a quiet college town, perhaps one with a scenic lake to take contemplative walks around, and a nice citizen volunteer chamber orchestra and Brass quintet to enjoy, even a Rotary Club he could be a proud member of. He had imagined a lush, green campus with well-tended gardens, flowered bushes and vegetation to spend his next three decades strolling about, his office housed in an ancient but lovingly cared for brick-façade building much like the ones of his own undergraduate *alma mater* lined with oak bookshelves.

Instead, he accepted the singular offer he received, a position at The Education offered to him in the center of The Urban. The Tower was the very middle building of the entire metropolitan complex of The Urban—it was literally *all* of The Education. The only thing about The Urban that pleased Utap was that it rained all day every Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Utap felt quite at home in the rain.

Secretary was technically correct. Utap should have taken the elevator, but bringing himself to do so was impossible after arriving to campus from his morning swim at the Jewish Community Center of The Urban. It was not that the elevator was annoying—having to stop at each floor of The Tower’s many department’s and offices—or that with every rising floor one could taste more of the pollution of The Urban’s skyline. It was that Utap was terrified of elevators, the very idea of them really. The last time he had ever been in one—as an undergraduate college student on a date with a very pretty girl who would go on to discover the cure for The Disease—he had one of his *episodes* as they rose to the top of a building with an eatery where she had made a reservation. Utap had imagined the elevator’s compartment uncontrollably descending fifty-four stories; he could see the two of them obliterated upon impact with the ground floor before he even had the chance to tell her that he had been quite impressed by her refusal to eat animals even though she was the top of their class in dissecting them. Utap often wondered, if he had not been fearful of elevators, might he be married to her now and living overseas with her being their only breadwinner as he contemplated composing a story worth telling?

“Would you care for a donut, *Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor?” Secretary asked. She appeared no older than his younger sister who lived in the Non-Urbanized Region, but Utap admired how Secretary dressed modestly, which his sister never had.

Utap had not once seen Secretary herself eat a donut or any of the sweets that always seemed to adorn the front Welcome Reception Counter of The Department behind which she, along with Female Student Assistant and Male Student Assistant, positioned themselves. Yet, she always offered Utap what was on display. He thought that the selection looked exactly like the one the week before, set out by The Department’s Linguist who had presented them to her class on her evaluations day only to have none taken and the rest brought back here as giveaways. The last time Utap had actually accepted an offer for a free treat was when he randomly ate half a potato latke his chair’s wife had set out, resulting in him having suicidal thoughts for eight straight nights. Now he saw that the donuts adhered to the strict law of The Education that all free treats be in the shape of The Tower and not depict man or other living images.

“No, thank you, Secretary,” Utap said.

She peered up from her computer screen. “You are never a surprise.” She turned. “Female Student Assistant, tell *Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor who trips every time a new step is added that he is late for his Admissions Committee meeting to evaluate The Hopeful and that his *tenured* colleagues are waiting for him in the Conference Room at the end of the hallway to make decisions about who and who will not be admitted to The Education’s graduate program in

Writing Creatively.” She then returned her attention to her computer screen and tapped nail-bitten fingers to its keyboard.

Female Student Assistant, wearing the same frayed hooded sweatshirt Utap had seen her in since meeting her the previous August, looked directly at him and said, “*Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor who trips every time a new step is added, your *tenured* colleagues are waiting for you in the Conference Room at the end of the hallway to proceed with admissions decisions for your funny little program in scribbling.”

Utap then noticed a bowl of Halloween candy in a bowl with little pumpkins about its rim that had not been touched since October. He could see the dust on the bite-sized helpings left undisturbed for well over seven months. He always wondered if Female Student Assistant might eventually ingest one and develop a reaction that required Male Student Assistant’s attention.

He walked the length of The Department hallway, past the closed, darkened doors of the full professors who made the most money and were rarely seen, past the windowless adjunct offices where The Complacent and Resigned conferenced with students, pretending they might one day be something they never would. He opened his own office door and immediately realized he had not discarded his half-eaten egg sandwich from the last Friday he had been on campus; it was situated on his desk surrounded by his abundance of half-drunk plastic water bottles. He immediately stuffed it into a manila envelope and tossed it to the large trash container in the hallway. Not bothering to turn on his computer, he looked to his office phone and saw several red-lighted blinking messages. He concluded that they were the voicemails of disgruntled or excuse-making students, took the applications for The Hopeful and headed to the Conference Room.

Utap was thankful for the complimentary coffee in the conference room, along with the bagels and half-empty tub of cream cheese. He quietly took a seat next to Paula Ticks, The Department’s creative nonfiction specialist. She had her laptop open along with her iPad and SmartPhone. Utap had in fact never seen Paula Ticks so much as hold a real piece of paper, not even her own recently self-published memoir, *The Sausage-Maker’s Daughter: a Lingua Childhood*. She preferred the uploaded application files for her assessment. Utap had simply asked Female Student Assistant to print off and staple each of the online applications of The Hopeful for him in return for her favorite fudge brownies he bought at the Student Union. He would have never entrusted such a task to Male Student Assistant because Secretary had once warned Utap that he could not be trusted. Paula Ticks nodded in acknowledgment of Utap’s presence and continued eyeing her attention to her laptop.

“Good morrow, *Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor, writer of fictions,” The Wizard said.

"And good morning to you," Utap said.

While Paula Ticks was an associate professor with tenure and clearly the steward of the admissions committee, The Wizard had been The Department's poetry specialist for the past fifty-four years, had full professor rank with tenure and was assumed to be staying on the job until he eventually just died in front of one of his classes reciting the descriptions of the sailing vessels in *The Iliad*. Even with his own degree from The Prestigious Workshop The Wizard had not published a book in at least eighteen years but had his eighth and newest wife upload one of his poems each week to a blog that she maintained. He once told Utap that he found particular inspiration from his female students. The Wizard often provided his poems titles preceded by "Her," such as "Her Beauty," "Her Bump," "Her Cave," "Her Garden," "Her Hills," "Her Hole," "Her Mountains," "Her Peaches," "Her Towers," "Her Triangle," "Her Vessel," et cetera. The Wizard had a single piece of lined yellow notebook paper in front of him with illegible scribbles. Utap assumed they were impressions of The Hopeful. The Wizard was a tiny man with no hair upon his head and no eyebrows either who would often stop in the doorway of Utap's office and begin reciting e.e. Cummings and Richard Brautigan. When Utap had interviewed for his position the year before it was The Wizard who had said, "If we hire you it shall be the first time in many moons that The Department will have a Hebrew represented on its faculty." As usual, The Wizard now had his small rock pick hammer in front of him. Utap always assumed this senior colleague had a precious stones hobby.

"Shall we begin?" Archie Proscenium, *The Department's* dramatist asked. *He was a roundish man with an attraction to earth-toned collared short-sleeve dress shirts. His own plays included on-stage full-frontal nudity for at least one-third of their production. His light red beard that reached his belly and his wavy mane of hair made him look more the biblical prophet than an avant-garde wordsmith. His awarded tenure in The Department the previous fall had been a close vote, with him being pushed through to approval by a tally that included only two extra colleagues in favor. Following the chair's agreement to send the promotion file to the Dean's Office, Archie Proscenium's new play, A Case for Castration, premiered at The Community Playhouse of The Urban and became all the gossip of The Tower. He now had nothing in front of him other than his keys resting atop the surface of the Conference Room table. Utap was not surprised since the man had the reputation for having an audiographic memory. Archie Proscenium could come out of meetings and recite back what every person had said verbatim, which is why he had been permanently established as The Department's minutes-taker six years before almost immediately after being hired tenure-track.*

*The Education's three-year graduate program in Writing Creatively accepted only one*

woman and only one man from *The Hopeful* in each genre per cycle so that there were only twenty-four candidates total in any given academic year, each with fully-funded assistantships requiring them to teach one section of the freshman course *Composing Your Thoughts* every semester, for which Utap was required to review all of them in performance as the least senior hire in *The Department*.

Paula Ticks shifted her eyeglasses from the end of her pointy nose to its bridge between her eyes and let out a little sigh. "Well, gentlemen, I say we begin with the playwrights since there are always fewer applicants in that genre?"

Archie Proscenium gave an irritated stare to Paula Ticks then relaxed his jaw.

"All fine by me," said The Wizard, "only four playwriting applicants anyway."

Utap nodded in agreement, which seemed to please Paula Ticks since she smiled to him and he almost never saw her express anything beyond her clamped-lipped concentration. He would never admit it to anyone, but Paula Ticks greatly intimidated him and The Wizard not minding that she was taking over the meeting confirmed those sentiments.

"Well, Archie Proscenium?" Paula Ticks said. "You are our man of the stage, would you like to first weigh in on the four playwriting candidates?"

Archie Proscenium released a whistle of a cough. "Only one of the four playwrights that applied is a woman, so I guess she is an automatic acceptance, yes?"

"I suppose so," Paula Ticks said, "but maybe you should mention her work—for the record."

Archie Proscenium leaned back. "Laurie Raisin or Hansbberry something—family drama thing with an insurance payment coming in after a parent dies and lots of talking. I'm not crazy about it, but she'll do."

"That Walter character is clearly a misogynist. I despise him."

"Well, I suppose. But the Dean's Office will like it because this applicant has the minority thing going for her so it'll fit their dinosaurs and diversity and whatever else vision."

"Fine then. Now how about the remaining three male applicants?"

Utap had heard that Paula Ticks gave Archie Proscenium almost complete evaluation privilege for the playwrights, so he assumed this was all a formality. He had not heard the same when it came to poetry and fiction. The Department's Medievalist had mentioned to him the week before, "Paula Ticks told me that she had an original poem of hers published in her high school yearbook and since that makes her a published poet she feels she has the right to challenge The Wizard. As for fiction, as a memoirist she believes that fiction writers just change the names of people and street signs from their lives, so she feels her own work qualifies her to have equal

*say upon your authority. I can repeat that in Old English, if you like."*

*"This Sammy Beckett has an interesting approach," Archie Proscenium continued.*

*"I have no idea what his work is about," The Wizard said, scratching his bald head and looking to his scribbles on the lined yellow notebook paper. He squinted. "Yes, that was the one that made no sense."*

*Paula Ticks eyed Utap and gave an ever so most subtle shoulder-raise shrug, as if they had known each other for years. This frightened Utap. It was the same look that that pretty girl in college gave him on their only date when he had one of his episodes.*

*"I really liked the dialogue in the Gene O'Neill application but good God it was depressing."*

*"Oh, I completely agree," said The Wizard. "That mother character, I mean, Jesus, where to begin. I get the feeling O'Neill is a depressive type, could really dampen the mood of a workshop."*

*"Well, the work isn't always an indication of the writer's personality."*

*"Correct," said Paula Ticks. "But I would have to be in agreement that the piece is a downer."*

*"A downer?" said The Wizard. "I want to kill myself just thinking about it." He motioned his hands around his neck and stuck out his tongue. Utap noticed that it was blue.*

*"Your thoughts?" Paula Ticks said, looking to Utap.*

*Utap saw this as her invitation to be candid. Perhaps she thought they could form an alliance. "Honestly, it was more yawning than depressing to me. I'd retitle it Long Day's Journey Into Boredom."*

*Archie Proscenium began to chuckle but then attempted to disguise it with a forced cough, putting his fist to his lips. "Yes yes yes, well, I suppose Mr. O'Neill's work might be too much for our particular program here in The Urban. Then second playwrighting candidacy is between Mr. Sammy Beckett and this Sophocles."*

*"Talk about father issues," The Wizard said and rolled his eyes. "That Oedipus story is really fucked up."*

*"Wizard!" Paula Ticks said—curt.*

*"Oh, sorry for the language." He paused. "But it's still a messed up story."*

*"Actually, I do agree. It seems strange that many of our applicants are expressing parental issues in their creative portfolios."*

*"Maybe it's a generational thing," Utap said.*

*"I don't know about all of you, but a story about ta guy killing his father and sleeping*

*with his mother just has no place in our program, and I don't exactly consider myself a prude."* He paused. "Not that it doesn't have potential."

"Oh, it's quite original," Paula Ticks said.

"Mostly original, mostly," Archie Proscenium said. "But I think we should just go with this Sammy Beckett fella. He seems pretty grounded, the levelheaded type. And to be honest, it's a little irritating that an applicant goes by a singular name, as if this Sophocles thinks he's a pop star. What's with that?"

"Agreed," Paula Ticks said.

"Sure," The Wizard said, "But I still have no clue what he's talking about."

Utap just nodded.

"So, shall we run down the fiction applicants before deciding on the poetry and creative nonfiction Hopeful?"

Without much debate at all the following applicants were outright rejected: Mikhail Bulgakov, Miguel de Cervantes, Anton Chekhov, Joseph Conrad, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Ralph Ellison, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Nikolai Vasilievich Gogol, Ursula Leguin, Cormac McCarthy, Dorothy Parker, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Edith Wharton. The Wizard thought there should be some discussion concerning the applications of one Ayn Rand, but Paula Ticks was forthright with an adamant "Absolutely not!" declaration that pleased Utap tremendously because he despised that applicant.

The female acceptance came to a choice between Ally Munro and Carry McCullers but there was little debate as even Paula Ticks had to admit that every short story in Ms. Munro's exhaustive five-hundred plus page single-spaced portfolio was pretty much the same no matter what the quality of the writing. So, McCullers got the slot.

The male position in fiction proved to be a bit more difficult to agree on, particularly since Utap was so profoundly drawn to championing the portfolio of one Dr. Franz K.

"Listen," The Wizard began, folding his little hands into each other before his rock pick hammer. "I can see your admiration of the craft, but did you read his Statement of Purpose? Man of the stage, help me out here, tell *Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor what you said to me before we got here."

Utap instantly rethought everything he had ever felt about The Wizard and Archie Proscenium. It unnerved him that they would privately discuss their views of The Hopeful before convening this meeting.

"Oh, yeah," said Archie Proscenium. "Talk about a head case. I mean, what's with the doctor title in jurisprudence, telling us he's a lawyer? And he doesn't even practice law; he works in an insurance office or something. That's as bad as the poet who rattled off all the unknown

writers she was taught by as an undergraduate. What was that stupid applicant's name?"

"Anna something," said Paula Ticks, "Akhmatova, I think."

"Yeah, definitely scratch that hack off the list. But this K fella, I mean, I get the impression he thinks Writing Creatively is his exit plan from a bad job and maybe a worse family situation. I don't know if I can take him seriously. His first two reference letters are from his supervisor at the office he works at and the Jewish Community Center he volunteers for. And the third? Who the hell is this Max Brod talking about his own work and not the applicant's? K looks like a guy who thinks graduate school is the answer to his problems. I smell desperation, not commitment to the craft. He might have health problems as well. But more than anything, look at how the bug's father in his portfolio story is depicted; I don't know if I can put this applicant in front of students to teach the freshman *Composing Your Thoughts* course if he is awarded an assistantship."

"Reading that bug story of his was like balling with a really hot broad only to find out while lying naked together afterwards sipping a joint that she's also a Jesus freak," The Wizard said then paused at the silence of Paula Ticks. "Oh, sorry. But you get my point, right?"

"We can definitely forget this Ray Carver, I think I got drunk just from my fingers touching that manuscript," Archie *Proscenium* said. "And K's second piece, that novel excerpt about some trial feels incomplete and shows little follow through. Maybe we should just go with this Ernie Hemingway applicant instead. *He seems to be very familiar with The Urban.*"

"No!" *Utap* shouted, surprised by his own assertiveness. "I mean, well, I have to say Ernie's terse pose is refreshing, but did you read his Statement of Purpose? He seems to see all other writers as competitors instead of comrades"

Archie *Proscenium* cleared his throat. "I admit that Ernie and K are very different writers, but Ernie's work does show him to probably be a better workshop member. He would probably be very generous with his classmates. This K fella doesn't strike me as a fully functioning human being."

"Well, this Hemingway may be good in workshop for his fellow male classmates," Paula Ticks interjected. "I might have issues with K's characters—I mean, the bug is the only one I have any empathy for—but this Hemingway is simply a woman-hater. And what's with all of those generalized, declarative statements." Paula Ticks looked to her computer screen, a strand of her straight black hair falling over the tip of her long nose. She read aloud, "The world breaks everyone, and afterward, some are strong at the broken places. What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"I actually liked those parts," *Utap* said.

He received a cold glare from Paula Ticks, letting him know that she was trying to assist



his cause for K and that it would be wise for him to show gratitude and solidarity.

"I was creeped out by the bug story," said Archie Proscenium. "Surrealism is so misogynistic."

"But I don't think he's a surrealist. I—"

"I have an idea," The Wizard interrupted.

"Yes?" Archie *Proscenium* said, *seeming eager for the debate to simmer.*

"I have a conference at noon with a beautiful, just beautiful student concerning her Project. Why don't we break early and reconvene after the lunch hour to determine the creative nonfiction and poetry Hopeful and we'll have more time to think about Ernie and K by then and can put deciding between the two of them off until the end of the day."

"Acceptable," Paula Ticks said without even a pause for consideration. She closed her laptop and stood.

"Quite fine," The Wizard said, taking his small rock pick hammer in his hands and pocketing it.

"Adjourned then."

"Oh, hi, June," Utap said as he left the Conference Room, seeing one of his former students sitting on a bench at the front of The Department with a binder held tight to her almost but not quite flat chest.

"I have a meeting with The Wizard to talk about my Project," June said. "I brought him a gift for agreeing to be my Sponsor, I hope he likes it." She opened her purse and revealed to Utap a porcelain figurine replication of Norman Rockwell's painting, *Teacher's Birthday*. Utap had once seen the original in a traveling exhibition. "I never told you, but I really enjoyed your class I took."

Utap then realized that he could not recall which of his courses June had been enrolled in, nor could he remember her surname. All he could say was, "That pleases me, and I am sure The Wizard will appreciate your gesture." He adjusted his jacket and scarf knot, smiled and walked into The Tower Stepwell. But the moment he lowered his right foot he instantly tripped and fell.

Clump clump clump...

"Oh," Secretary called out. "I forgot to tell you, *Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor. They are adding a half step to The Tower Stepwell every day before noon for the next week as part of maintenance."

Knees aching on high Steps behind him, Utap looked up—down more accurately—and saw little drops of red blopping between his hands holding him steady on the step before him. He picked himself up and by the time he was on his feet Secretary was standing on the step above and behind him holding out The Department tissue box. Utap looked to the box, then the bloodied floor and gave Secretary a quizzical stare.

“To stuff up your nostrils again to stop the bleeding,” she said, seeing his reaction. “Don’t worry about The Steps, I shall have Male Student Assistant eradicate your spilled DNA.”

As Utap descended the final Steps to the ground floor of The Tower he could feel his tissue-stuffed nostrils going numb. He caught a slight glance of his image in the reflection of a windowed doorway, but quickly turned away.

He had originally intended to purchase a sandwich at The Tower’s Student Union but for some reason chicken broth was the only edible item that seemed appetizing at this point.

“Just the broth?” Work Study Student asked across the counter, looking at Utap’s tissue-stuffed nostrils.

“Yes,” Utap said, knowing just the way the student was looking to him, appearing not to be examining his damage while irresistibly doing just that.

“No chicken?”

“No, thank you, just the broth.”

“No carrots or celery?”

“No, just the broth.”

“But you do want noodles, right?”

“No.”

“Oh, if you don’t like noodles I have rice over here. I can add that. Or, do you maybe want lentils?”

“Just the broth?”

“Crackers to crumble into it?”

“No.”

“Why nothing else?”

Utap did not say anything more.

Work Study Student shrugged, took a Styrofoam take-out bowl and began skimming chicken broth from the top of the canister of soup. “It’s pretty salty already but I’d at least add pepper, unless you’re allergic to that, too.”

Utap had not recalled mentioning allergies. He took the soup after removing the bloodied tissues from his nostrils and placing them on the order counter, where he left them.

With his Styrofoam take-out bowl of chicken broth and plastic spoon in hand, Utap ascending The Tower's Stepwell. And when he reached the top he once again tripped and fell forward. Sacrificing his knees again, as well as his elbows this time, Utap made sure that his broth did not spill. Had he been reading his own day's story in one of The Hopeful's creative portfolios and the soup spilled everywhere it would have been an instant rejection. It would have been too obvious of a plot point. Utap's broth did not spill.

Oh," Secretary called out from the Welcome Reception Counter of The Department to The Stepwell. "Maintenance added another half step while you were away to make up for campus being closed tomorrow on account of Something Day Holiday."

Utap picked himself off the cold tile of the landing and walked into The Department with his soup broth. As he strolled by the faculty mailboxes he saw Paula Ticks pouring herself a cup of coffee. Utap took note that the coffee fund donation tin was completely empty. He put his head down slightly but it was no use.

"Oh, *Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor," Paula Ticks said as he walked behind her. She turned, coffee in clasped hands, the cup tight with her long, pointy blood-red painted fingernails jutting outward. "A word, please, one Water-Seeker to another."

Water-Seeker? Utap wondered, but simply said, "Sure."

Paula Ticks closed the already thin space between them. Even on break she carried herself impeccably. Utap had in fact known that she was the scorn of The Tower's entire female population for supposedly committing the crime of not once having had a bad hair day since the day she arrived.

She was about to speak then clearly saw the soup broth. "*Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor, are you not feeling well? A man of your rank must be diligent in health consciousness, especially a fellow Water-Seeker."

Once again, Utap ignored the Water-Seeker comment that bound him to Paula Ticks, but he considered his health for a moment then said, "I shall contemplate that. Thank you, Paula Ticks."

"Yes, well then," and she lowered her voice and leaned over him. Paula Ticks was easily a good four inches taller than Utap without heels, eight when wearing them like today. "I want you to know that I will be supporting your championing of this strange K applicant."

Utap tried to contain his elation. "I appreciate that."

"But we need to proceed with caution. I hope you understand."

He paused for a moment and looked to Paula Ticks. He had never considered her particularly attractive in the way he found Secretary to be pretty, but at this moment he found

her round brown eyes inviting. "I do."

She smiled. "Very well then. It has been decided." And she proceeded with her coffee to The Department chair's office, where she shut the door behind her after entering with a thundering *clank*.

Utap sat in his office at his desk with his computer turned off and the applications of The Hopeful in a pile before him. He blew softly from his lips upon the surface of the soup broth in the plastic spoon before him, the Styrofoam cup resting atop the applications pile. His office door was open, as was his custom. Aside from the books he taught there was nothing in his office of any import that would declare who he was other than the abundance of half-drunk plastic water bottles. He had been told by The Department's Victorian upon his first day of work to not make his office his own until he had completed at least one year of servitude.

It was a warm spring day and his tiny little office window was darkening from the pollution of The Urban but Utap knew it would be clean the next morning, as it always was. He was occasionally compelled to open the window but it was strictly forbidden by The Education, and Utap was not one to disobey the law.

Just as he was about to take his first sip of broth he heard from only four doors down the open thrust of The Wizard's office. He could hear its door's knob collide with the concrete walls of The Department hallway, the knob breaking and rolling about the tiled floor.

Echoe...

Ting ting ting...

The Accusation...

"You pervert!" It was the voice of Utap's former student, June, from a forgotten class he once taught. "He groped my breasts, he groped my breasts! He put his paws on me!"

Shaken, Utap, jerked to the right and his elbow caught the soup bowl and it went tumbling over the applications of The Hopeful. But he sprung from his chair and darted out of his office to the hallway, turned and saw The Wizard, one hand clasped to June's right breast over her hoodie sweatshirt with "The Education" embroidered over its chest, and the other yanking tight on her long strawberry blonde ponytail. June was much taller than The Wizard but he demonstrated great strength Utap had not predicted. The Wizard swung June around hard and she collided into the concrete wall of the hallway. Then, The Wizard removed his small rock pick hammer from his pocket.

"You dare to give me an idol to worship?" The Wizard snarled, and held before him the

small porcelain figurine replication of Rockwell's *Teacher's Birthday* painting June had shown Utap earlier. The Wizard held the statue against the concrete wall and smashed it with his little rock pick hammer, the pieces littering the tiled floor. He then threw the little hammer like a baseball and it impacted with June's nose. Blood splayed over the wall. It clanked to the tile floor and echoed along with June's piercing screams.

The Wizard's eyes were wild and red. June was huddled in a fetal position against the hallway wall. Now The Wizard, with his little hands raised high above his bald little head, screamed, "You're nothing but a little tease that worships idols! You are an idol-worshipping tease bitch cunt whore slut!" He paused, looked up and turned around. He stopped and stared directly at Utap. "The Idol Box should give you pause and warning, *Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor." He then spit to the hallway tile, returned to his coveted corner office and slammed the door.

Utap looked again to the blood-splattered wall where June was curled into a fetal position on the tiled floor, now with Paula Ticks crouched beside her, arms around the young girl's hoodie-snugged shoulders. Utap could easily see that June's nose was broken. Paula Ticks stopped *shushing* June for a moment, looked up and said to Utap, "It is time for you to see the Idol Box. Secretary shall assist you, fellow Water-Seeker."

Paula Ticks had suggested that The Committee dispense with the admissions decisions for the day after campus police convened upon The Department, broke open The Wizard's office door after he refused to open it, arrested him and took him away, never to be seen again. Archie *Proscenium* added that he though the three of them should take the next day off for *Something Day Holiday* and reconvene the day after that.

*It was agreed upon.*

*But before they departed company Paula Ticks placed into Utap's hand the Broken Bits of that little porcelain Rockwell reproduction figurine The Wizard had destroyed with his rock pick hammer. "We are all shattered at times," she said, and left his presence. He saw that The Wizard's little rock pick hammer was protruding from her purse.*

The Department was going dark for the day and Utap hesitated, but he approached Secretary as he was leaving and told her that Paula Ticks had said he needed to see some type of Idol Box.

Secretary nodded and said, "I see. One moment."

She went into The Department chair's office for a moment. Utap heard the opening and

closing of what he thought might be a drawer, then she returned carrying a large wood box in both arms. It appeared very heavy for her small frame and Utap motioned forward to assist her but she shook her head in rejection. She set the box on the front Welcome Reception Counter of The Department.

“Wait,” she instructed, and then walked to where the faculty mailboxes were located. She looked down the hallway and then returned to him. “I believe we are the only ones that remain this evening,” she said, and lifted the tiny key from around her neck that was suspended between her bosom by a silver chain. She slid it into the keyhole in the center of the box and turned her wrist.

Click.

Open

Inside Utap could see that the innards of the box were completely filled to the rim with Broken Bits of an uncountable assortment of...

“What are they,” he asked.

“The Wizard never saw his family or his job as an asset. We shall never see him again for his transgression today. This will be all that remains of his many decades of servitude to The Department.”

“But what are they?”

“Look to your pocket. They are broken idols, *Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor.”

Utap fingered his pocket with his left hand and revealed the Broken Bits of Junes porcelain figurine gift to The Wizard. “May I touch them?” he asked, looking to the Broken Bits of the Idol Box.

She nodded and smiled.

Utap could not once recall Secretary’s ever smiling to him or anyone else. She then took his right hand in both of her quite warm palms and set it atop the pile of Broken Bits. Utap took note that Secretary was clearly a biter of nails.

The Broken Bits were cold to his touch. He randomly tweezed one at the top between his thumb and forefinger and lifted it to his eye.

“Is this the head of the image of a rabbit?” Utap asked quizzically.

“Yes, it is,” Secretary said. “The remains of the little porcelain Easter Bunny figurine Female Student Assistant placed on the countertop here last spring—before your time.”

“What happened to this?” He placed it back atop the pile of Broken Bits, shook his head. “What happened to all of this?”

“*Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor,” Secretary said, placing her hands atop his in the Idol

Box. They were warm again and the Broken Bits were cold. "The Wizard has never tolerated idol worshipping of any kind. Nothing in his mind can be in the image of any graven image. It has always been a very serious matter to The Wizard. Sometimes he has not noticed, but most of the times he has over the years. Each of these was broken by The Wizard's small rock pick hammer that Paula Ticks has agreed to discard. If he saw the mold of a living image he feared we would all become idol worshippers. It has been tradition in The Department for each consecutive worker in my position to collect the pieces and for them to be housed in the chair's office."

Utap began fingering random pieces of the Broken Bits. There were pieces of various Santa Clauses and more Easter Bunnies, leprechauns, jack-o-lanterns and ghosts, groundhogs, garden gnomes, Barbie dolls, teddy bears. Utap then looked to a peculiar green-faced object with a white underneath, cracked at the bottom.

"The remains of a statue of Nessy, the Loch Ness Monster," Secretary said. "It had briefly belonged to our now deceased department chair, Professor Smolder; a gift from his daughter after she had returned from her honeymoon. I was a young girl way back then. It was the first of the supposed idols I ever saw The Wizard annihilate with his small rock pick hammer. Quite unfortunate. It unsettled me at the time but I adjusted because a job like this in The Urban should not be taken for granted."

Utap returned the remains of Nessy to the box and looked to Secretary's face. The first thing that came to him was that she was a woman who would most certainly look quite beautiful with gray or silver hair in her old age and he was hopeful she would never succumb to a dye job. She bent her head and pressed her lips together into a very inviting smile and then placed just one of her delicate hands atop his again. She was very close to him now and he thought he could smell feline hair.

"Why all of this?" Utap asked.

"Because it is so," she said.

Utap pulled his hand from her and the Idol Box. "I must depart," he said, swung his teaching bag over his shoulder, dropped the remains of June's *Teacher's Birthday* porcelain figurine replica atop the pile of Broken Bits in the Idol Box, and left The Department for The Stepwell of The Tower.

"You must wait, *Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor!"

But Secretary's plea was not enough. The moment Utap set foot to The Stepwell his foot caught and he descended step-by-step, bone-by-bone, until he crashed to the landing between the topmost floor and the next of The Tower.

Everything about him ached.

Within moments he could feel warm hands to his backside and hot breath that smelled of sugar, which Utap never ingested.

He turned around slightly.

"Oh, Utap," Secretary said. "I am so very sorry for not warning you about yet another extra half-step being added since you last entered The Stepwell."

It was the first time in almost nine months on the job that Secretary had not referred to him as "*Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor."

Utap was pleased by how Secretary appeared without her clothes on. It was a warm evening and they both spread out over the comforter of her bed in her assigned single-room dormitory domicile of The Urban. She had not removed her eyeglasses once, though. And her feline was perched upon a shelf against the wall beside an operating humidifier that was dispensing mist. The feline was routinely looking to the filter and then to Utap.

"She too is a Water-Seeker, like you and Paula Ticks," Secretary had told Utap before they had removed their clothes earlier to share Pleasure.

"I am quite satisfied that you Pleasured me and yourself with courage and conviction this evening, Utap," Secretary now said as she stretched out on her belly still naked, looking over one of the applications for The Hopeful from Utap's teaching bag. "I am particularly impressed considering your condition. All this time I thought you were instead attracted to sports for the privileged and pampered, like downhill skiing. That you are one for Pleasuring is encouraging."

To Utap's surprise, his body no longer ached from his many trips of The Tower's Steps after having shared Pleasure with Secretary. He was enjoying her company after Pleasure more than he had expected. There was no impulse to leave her presence. Typically, when he shared Pleasure he would have one of his *episodes* following the act, but not tonight. Secretary's domicile building floor was not too high into the polluted skyline of The Urban and was relatively quiet, except for the continuous sounds of the woman assigned to the domicile beside hers who was clearly enjoying multiple Pleasure this evening. Utap leaned himself up against two pillows and took a sip from the glass of single malt on the rocks Secretary had provided him. He had not expected this situation from her and in fact he had not intended to complicate his employment by sharing Pleasure with a co-worker. Because years before when he was first a graduate student teaching his own *Composing Your Thoughts* course he went home with one of his undergraduate students and almost spent the night with her until she requested to role play in Pleasure with her as the *Virgin Mary* and he as the *All Mighty* helping her to conceive *Jesus*. Explaining to her that



*he was not of that belief system had been his subtle way of excusing himself from the encounter. He wondered if Secretary had shared Pleasure with any other employees of The Education.*

"I am pleased to no longer see you in your uniform, Utap," Secretary said without removing her eyes from the application she was perusing.

"Uniform?"

"The khakis and little brown shoes and checkered cotton dress shirts, like you are from the Northwest Region of The Urban."

Utap looked to the floor of the room and saw the exact clothes she had mentioned and did conclude that he wore something similar to work each day, but he had never been to the Northwest Region of The Urban and therefore deferred to her judgment.

"Truly, Utap, I no longer see you as false. You have shown counter-qualities tonight."

He had no idea what she meant but took it as an invitation to partake in post-Pleasure discussion. "So, were you always in the employment of The Education?"

"Oh no," she said, emotionless. "I originally worked the assembly line in the Circles Factory with Forewoman next door." She bent her head to the wall from which behind Utap no longer heard the sounds of multiple Pleasure.

"Why did you stop constructing Circles?"

"It plagued me with Fever-Dreams. I am still cursed with at least one per month as a result of my servitude there, but it's manageable compared to the one per week after I left the Circles Factory to secure employment with The Education and at least one, if not more, per evening when I was on the assembly line. Let me tell you, building Circles is very difficult and exhausting employment, Utap. It's an exercise in struggling to mend one's life, if you know what I mean?"

"Is your feline aggressive?" he asked, sipping his single malt. The feline had turned from the humidifier for longer than usual and was gazing right at him.

"Not usually."

"Not usually?"

"Not usually. She is a Water-Seeker like you and Paula Ticks. But I am certain this K applicant is not. You do realize that he most likely thinks like a planet, don't you?"

"I suppose he does think like a planet. But he is the male applicant I have chosen to champion. Perhaps now that The Wizard has been taken away K's acceptance shall be simplified."

"Don't be so certain, just because Paula Ticks told you one thing, that she supports your enthusiasm for K, does not mean she shall vote that way in the end once in session with your

committee. Still, it is strange that you have an applicant from outside The Urban. Even if he is accepted you will need to also champion him being granted a visa to study Writing Creatively at The Education."

"True." Single malt sip, the sound of the rain of The Urban tapping against the window of Secretary's domicile.

"There is a counter-quality in K's prose. I do enjoy it."

"I am so happy you say such things." Utap was eyeing the small of Secretary's back, which he had put his fingers to when she had been atop him when they had shared Pleasure. Now she turned from K's application and looked back to him. When she saw he was looking to her form, her lips were straight for a moment. Then she smiled and returned to the application.

"The writing is impressive," she continued. "That said, are you not concerned about the content of his Statement of Purpose to your committee?"

Utap had to admit that it was a deeply held concern of his. Only a page or two double-spaced was required. K had submitted over ten pages single-spaced. "I would agree that there are some issues there."

"Issues? Utap, he has provided way too much personal information. This K suffers from headaches, he broke off a second engagement, he clearly hates his job working in insurance even though he says he has a law degree, the father problems are undeniable, he suffers from tuberculosis—I mean who the hell has TB these days? I can't believe he openly favors one of his sisters over the other two. But nothing's as odd as that crazy diet he says he adheres to where he has to chew every bite of food thirty-two times before swallowing. That's just weird. And I don't like to be in stories that are weird."

"But his work itself is so original, wouldn't you agree?"

"Oh, most definitely. I strongly support you championing his application."

Single malt sip.

"Tell me, Utap," Secretary said after a short silence and turning a page in K's application portfolio, "have you ever wondered how your life might have been different if it had worked out with that very pretty girl you went on one date with in college who eventually discovered the cure for The Disease?"

Utap did not recall having ever told anyone about that date.

"Do not worry, Utap," Secretary said. "You are a Water-Seeker. It was obvious from the moment you set foot in The Department." She tossed K's application to the floor and turned over, exposing her front. "Now, shall we Pleasure again?"

Final single malt sip. He set the glass on the shelf beside Secretary's feline.

"We must re-enter The Department separately," Secretary said as they stood before the opening to The Tower. "I assume you are taking The Stepwell, yes?"

Utap and Secretary had not seen each other since he left her domicile the morning of Something Day Holiday for which he spent from morning to evening swimming laps at the Jewish Community Center of The Urban, but they had arrived in front of The Tower at the exact same time this Wednesday as the sun began to rise. He was surprised to now see Secretary's hair completely silver and cut to her chin. She looked as he expected her to appear in twenty years, as an older woman with very good hair not dyed. Only now he found it strange that he had unconditionally wanted her two nights before but had no desire for her after waking beside her the morning of Something Day Holiday with her feline liking his eyelids.

When Utap reached the top of The Stepwell he was cautious to be mindful of increased Steps, yet he once again fell. Only this time he did not clip his foot on an extra step or half step. Instead, the slick bottoms of his little brown shoes slipped and skidded upon the watery surface of the top of The Stepwell, scooting his body out from under him, causing him to fall to his bottom instead of his knees for the first time since his employment.

Cringing, he rose from the landing with water seeped into his khakis and wiped his palms to his thighs. He collected the soggy applications of The Hopeful into his leather teaching bag—it really didn't matter anyway since he already knew which applicants he was championing—and stopped at the Welcome Reception Counter of The Department where Secretary was already tapping away at her computer keyboard. Male Student Assistant was present, caressing the writing marker that was assigned to Female Student Assistant by The Education for her use only.

"Yes?" Secretary said, not looking up from her computer screen, her now silver bangs falling over the river of wrinkles that only moments before had been a smooth forehead Utap had given a lip-peck of a kiss to good-bye Tuesday morning.

"The Steps, they—"

"Yes yes, *Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor, they added another half step, you should have been mindful and have know that—"

"No, they're now wet!" He paused and realized she was no longer calling him "Utap," as she had in her domicile.

Secretary had stopped tapping her fingers to her computer keyboard and closed her eyes for a moment before looking up to him. "The Steps naturally and organically self-hydrate on an

annual basis, but the moistening does not usually occur until after the academic year has concluded and the faculty, staff and administration have departed until the summer session. It is most abnormal for it to be now that the moistening begins.”

“Begins? There’s more coming?”

“*Un-Tenured* Assistant Professor,” she said. “Ask yourself how much love there is that remains in the world and you will not need to pester me with such things. You are dismissed.”

In his graduate school years Utap’s mentor, the great Professor Fill In The Blank told him to always be aware that secretaries run departments, not chairs. Utap thought fondly of Professor Fill In The Blank, and turned for his office down the hallway.

As he passed the faculty mailboxes, Utap saw a tiny piece of paper in his own. He adjusted his soaked teaching bag over his should, tweezed the little paper in his fingers and read.

Un-Tenured Assistant Professor, although The Wizard is no longer with us, we shall take his already expressed feeling regarding The Hopeful into account and consideration when reaching our final acceptance decisions. I thought you should know, one Water-Seeker to another.

—P. Ticks.

“I told you so,” Secretary called out in Utap’s direction.

He folded the small piece of paper with Paula Ticks’ message precisely four times in exactly the same space and way, placed it in his damp pocket and walked down the hallway. As he passed The Wizard’s office door he saw that it was now replaced with a brick wall. Across the top of it he saw that the word “Justice” had been written in the color of The Education, but it was crossed out with an ashen marker and the word “Revenge” was scrawled below it in that same ashen tone. The Wizard definitely had his detractors throughout the years, but he most certainly also garnered a loyal flock of disciples.

After teaching his final class sessions of the semester and collecting term papers, Utap proceeded to descend The Tower’s Stepwell, both hands clasped tight to the railing as his feet slid over the moistened Steps, unable to get a real footing even though he was only going down one floor. Once there he went to Instruction Space 2716 and took a seat in the back of the room with an opened pad of note-taking paper before him and his assigned writing marker in hand. The students remained silent as *Second Year Writing Creatively Female Poet* came to the front before

*the wipe board to teach her final session of Composing Your Thoughts for Utap to officially review for The Department.*

This seemed to be an odd session for *Second Year Writing Creatively Female Poet* to request Utap review her for. It was, after all, the last day of instruction even though there did not appear to be any. She collected term papers, placed them in a pile on the table at the front of the room, then lifted herself onto that table and sat cross-legged in her very high-fitted skirt, folding her black knee-high riding boots over fishnet stockings atop each other. She palmed the center of the skirt as best she could over her crotch but the argyle fabric could not reach the table. She adjusted her horn-rimmed eyeglasses to the bridge of her nose and leaned herself back on her other arm not at her crotch. "So, pupils, what did you learn this semester?"

*Hands in the air.*

*"I loved that you didn't care about our spelling and punctuation and all that."*

*"I really liked that there were no prompts and we could write about whatever we wanted."*

*"You're so cool for not making us go to the library and look shit up. Oh, I mean things."*

*"Other professors should be like you and stop caring about taking attendance."*

*"Don't think of this the wrong way, but you have the smoothest, milkiest skin I have ever seen."*

"It was great that you opened up about your break up with your long-term boyfriend and how he never satisfied you sexually like your new guy you told us you're now seeing; so many professors don't let us know anything about them."

"It would have been nice if you had actually handed back our assignments graded so we could see how we did. Just saying."

As *Second Year Writing Creatively Female Poet* shifted herself off the table at the front of the room, Utap briefly saw that she was not wearing underwear beneath that high-fitted argyle skirt.

At the end of the fifty-minute session Utap realized that he had not taken one note. He would have to come up with something to report back about her the following week. *Second Year Writing Creatively Female Poet* did not say a word to him, only smiled as she caught his eye just before he left the room to ascend the slippery, moistened Stepwell to meet Paula Ticks and Archie Proscenium to complete the acceptance process for the applications of *The Hopeful* to the Program in Writing Creatively.

*"Most unfortunate about The Wizard's untimely departure," Paula Ticks said.*

*The Conference Room still had the now cold coffee and stale bagels and spoiled cream cheese from Monday. Archie Proscenium had taken the coffee without even heating it in the microwave unit beside the spread. Paula Ticks sipped on a diet soda. Utap stuck to bottled water, the only thing that appealed to him at the moment. It was actually the only thing that appealed to him most of the time.*

*"What are we going to do about the poets?" Archie Proscenium asked.*

*"We shall adhere to The Wizard's judgment," Paula Ticks said.*

*"Yes, well, he always had trouble deciding upon the Female Poet, that's for sure; he probably would have admitted all of them if he could. But I do know he was pretty adamant about the Male Poet when I discussed it with him privately last week." Archie Proscenium fiddled with his keys. "The Wizard felt quite passionate about this Charlie Bukowski."*

*"The applicant is a misogynist pig and he shall not receive my blessing."*

*"Well, how about this Czesław...how do you pronounce it, Coleslaw something? I really like his work, especially this 'Faith' poem."*

*"It's pronounced Miłosz. Un-Tenured Assistant Professor?"*

*"I am partial to this Delmore Schwartz applicant." Utap thought to reach for his teaching bag to retrieve the application but remembered that it was completely soaked, the printed ink smeared and illegible. "That said, Mr. Miłosz would also have my support."*

*"I too like Mr. Miłosz," Paula Ticks said. "He shall be our new Male Poet. "Now, the Female Poet? I am deeply moved by both Sylvia Plath and Emmie Dickinson."*

*Archie Proscenium coughed. "Well, I found Ms. Plath to be horrifically depressing. I wanted to kill myself after reading that poem about, well, all of them really."*

*"But they are of outstanding achievement. I'm not even sure there is anything we can teach her."*

*"But isn't the point for the applicant to grow Writing Creatively over the course of the program? Un-Tenured Assistant Professor, help me out here."*

*Paula Ticks gave Utap an uncertain lowering of her chin.*

*"I guess, for me," Utap said, and then took a very long gulp of water from his plastic bottle, "It's just that, as much as I like Ms. Plath's work, I think Ms. Dickinson's is a bit more hopeful. That thing about hope being something with feathers, well, it kind of touched me."*

*Utap looked to his two senior tenured colleagues who remained stone. He got an uneasy feeling, the same one as when he had completed his on-campus interview for the position over a year before and was convinced he had blown the entire thing when finally questioned by the*

*chair about how he would modify his teaching for students of color and he responded that he saw no reason to do so at all.*

*"Oh, Un-Tenured Assistant Professor," Paula Ticks almost whimpered. "That is exactly what I was trying to articulate and just couldn't see it through. Your insight is profound. Would you not agree, Archie Proscenium?" She rubbed away a tiny tear from the corner of her left eye with an index finger.*

*"I am quite taken by our un-tenured junior colleague's argument. Shall Ms. Dickinson then be our choice Female Poet?"*

*"I believe The Wizard would be in favor of such a decision. Now," Paula Ticks said, and for the first time, closed down all of her electronic devices, "last, the Creative Nonfiction to be accepted."*

*"And then a return to K's application and the Male Fiction to be accepted," Utap snapped. He startled himself with his unmeasuredness.*

*Paula Ticks paused for a moment and said, "But of course, Un-Tenured Assistant Professor. However, for now we shall evaluate the Creative Nonfiction applicants."*

*"Tell me again," Archie Proscenium said, "why do we offer a degree in this track, why should I care about people just writing about themselves?"*

*Utap dreamed of the day he would be tenured and afforded the opportunity to express such sentiments.*

*"That is an offensive way in which to consider the genre, Archie Proscenium," Paula Ticks said in as calm a tone as possible—for her.*

*"No, seriously. And I mean, am I the only one who noticed all of these dubious minority memoirs? Seriously, just because you're parents were immigrants doesn't give you the right to write melodramatically and, might I say, badly about crap nobody but you gives a shit about. That Woman Warrior thing was the most self-indulgent piece of shit I've read in ages. But the immigrant ones are the worst. That Frankie McCourt's babbling and overly sentimental Irish-Catholic rant made me want to puke."*

*"Archie Proscenium!" Paula Ticks put her fist to her mouth. "You unnerve me."*

*"Okay, fine, but nothing was as bad as this Johnnie Krakauer's Into the Wild or World or Woods or... Whatever it was. Good God, glorifying a spoiled little rich kid; talk about pathetic material. I wanted the little fucker to die."*

*"Un-Tenured Assistant Professor," Paula Ticks said. "Please help us regain some perspective."*

*Utap guzzled the last of his drinking water. "I respect Archie Proscenium's perspective*

*and I do agree on some level. That said, I thought this Truman Capote's In Cold Blood showed some superb mastery of craft."*

*"Oh, agreed," Archie Proscenium said. "At least that one knows how to put a sentence together."*

*"Yes, impressively written," Paula Ticks said. "But isn't it just straight journalism. Where is Mr. Capote's story? He just tells somebody else's, if you ask me"*

*"Really, you think that?"*

*"I kind of liked the Toby Wolff applicant."*

*"Drivel, just another 'My Bad Childhood' sob story."*

*"For the Female Nonfiction candidate my favorite is definitely this Julie Child," Utap said. "The whole life abroad thing was engrossing."*

*"A less irksome rich spoiled brat story," Archie Proscenium said. "My only concern is that I get hungry while I am reading her work. And there is something covert in her work, something sneaky I can't put my finger on just yet."*

*"Perhaps she could be told that her acceptance to the program is conditional on her bringing to workshop any dish or recipe she mentions in her submitted work for that week to share with the class," Paula Ticks said.*

*"That idea appeals to me greatly," Utap said, and saw Paula Ticks smile his way.*

*"Fine fine fine," Archie Proscenium said, "Let's settle on Ms. Child so long as she agrees to that condition. She will most likely make a fine workshop member, especially based on her fine Statement of Purpose that she came to writing later in life and isn't some career scribbler. I appreciate that. Now, back to the Male Nonfiction slot?"*

*"Which one was the applicant who wrote that Tuesdays With Monte or Murry something?" Paula Ticks asked.*

*"No, absolutely not!" Archie Proscenium shouted. "At least let us accept an applicant who has not relinquished both his testicles to science."*

*Paula Ticks sighed and leaned back. "How about we just accept this Capote character, hope he has the potential to write with substance and not just style and move on."*

*Archie Proscenium nodded.*

*"I would like us to now return to our weighing of the merits of Ernie Hemingway and Franz K," Utap said.*

*"The Wizard definitely seemed to favor Mr. Hemingway," Archie Proscenium said.*

*"But he is no longer here," Utap said. "And besides, he is a poet, not a real writer."*

*"True, but he is part of this committee."*



*"Was part of this committee."*

*"Gentlemen, colleagues," Paula Ticks said. "Come now, some civility, some collegiality, some professionalism." Everyone quieted. "Now, both are quite good candidates. But I am concerned that K might have some, well, instability."*

*"Are you saying Mr. Hemingway does not have problems?" Utap asked.*

*"No, I did not say that. They are only, well, different. That said, we do not know what K's legal status will be if he decides to accept an offer from us to study here since he is coming from abroad outside The Urban, as you came to us from outside our boundaries, Un-Tenured Assistant Professor. And of course The Wizard did prefer Mr. Hemingway."*

*"But The Wizard will not be here to work with either Mr. Hemingway or K," Utap insisted.*

*Both Utap's senior colleagues contemplated this for a moment. Paula Ticks finally let out a disgruntled sigh and said, "Have it your way, Un-Tenured Assistant Professor. But you might keep this little committee outcome in mind when you apply for renewal again in the fall. K will be our Male Fiction entry this year. However I will do everything in my power to make sure he is never offered an assistantship. We are now adjourned." Paula Ticks then quickly scooped all of her electronic devices into her arms and made a beeline for the Conference Room door, muttering under her breath, "I expected more from a fellow Water-Seeker."*

*"Does anyone mind if I take the remaining bagels and cream cheese and coffee home with me?" Archie Proscenium asked.*

*Paula Ticks simply waved a hand over her shoulder, not turning back as she left the Conference Room.*

*"Do you mind, Utap?"*

*"No, Archie Proscenium, I do not."*

*"Good. And don't bother fretting over Paula Ticks. After all, she is a Water-Seeker, so what can one expect, know what I mean?"*

Utap spent the majority of the remaining hours of the day in his office with its door closed, something Archie Proscenium had told him was unacceptable behavior from an Un-Tenured Assistant Professor. He passed those hours wondering why his employment had made reading, the activity he had always found solace in, a detestable burden these days. All he really found enjoyment in were the laps he swam at the Jewish Community Center of the Urban when he could find the time.

*He was tired.*

*Outside his one small office window The Urban had gone to darkness. And from the little slivered space between his office door and the carpet he finally saw The Department hallway light dim. He collected his jacket and pulled it on, noticing that he was essentially wearing the same "uniform" he had two days earlier, only with a different colored checkered shirt. And although it was forbidden by The Education, he opened his office window and left it as such. He then swung his teaching bag over his shoulder, turned off the light to his office, closed the door behind himself and walked down the hallway towards the front of The Department to leave for his assigned domicile.*

*The quiet of the hallway was refreshing, as was its emptiness. That was until he turned and faced the front Welcome Reception Counter and saw Secretary. She was slipping her own jacket on, ready to leave, purse in hand. He noticed that she was now walking with a cane and her posture had relegated her to being hunched over.*

*"Good evening, Un-Tenured Assistant Professor," she said with a gravely throat and ran her wrinkled fingers through her now very thin silver hair that had grown in length to the small of her back since Utap last saw her.*

*"And a good evening to you as well, Secretary."*

*Utap said no more and left The Department, going directly to The Tower's Stepwell.*

*But standing upon the landing, he saw that The Steps were now completely gone and in their place was a long, spiraling waterfall descending all the way to the ground level of The Education, far far below. Utap felt the rush of the water at the top glide over his little brown shoes, soaking his matching socks.*

*Patiently, he closed his eyes and took in a deep breath, released it and dropped his shoulders. He stared for just a bit at the waterfall, then turned and went back to The Department where Secretary was preparing to bolt the entry gate.*

*She stopped and saw he was there. "Yes, Un-Tenured Assistant Professor?" she said in that unfamiliar graveled throat.*

*"I, I, well, I would like to share something with you tonight."*

*"Oh, I am so terribly sorry Un-Tenured Assistant Professor, that was a one-time occurrence two nights ago. I am now too old and tired for the sport of Pleasure."*

*"No, not that. Something else. Something now. Something here."*

*"Very well," she said, and left The Department gate unbolted. He turned and she followed him to The Stepwell now containing the spiraling waterfall, holding one hand to his elbow while balancing her delicate and frail frame to her cane in the other.*

*"I should have told you about this, but I know how frightened you are of the elevator."*

*"No, I am not upset. But I want to share something with you."*

*"Okay."*

*Utap took his leather teaching bag from his shoulder and opened it as they stood together on the landing. He then removed the entire stack of applications from The Hopeful. He swung his arm back, ready to toss them to the water falling where The Steps had once been.*

*But Secretary shook his elbow with a little turn of her wrist. "Wait. What are you doing?"*

*"What should have been done all along."*

*"But they are The Hopeful."*

*"They won't be after time has done its work on them, as it has already done its work on me."*

*"Oh, Utap." She smiled, leaned up and kissed his cheek with her cracked lips. "Wait here. We shall share a moment together one last time. Please, do not leave, I will return momentarily."*

*Secretary went back through the open gate of The Department, her cane clicking to the tiled floor. Utap saw the light of the chair's office flicker then go dark again. She emerged from The Department and as she entered The Stepwell Utap could see that she was holding the Idol Box with The Wizard's Broken Bits in one arm, her cane in the other.*

*"If you insist on washing away the dreams of The Hopeful, let us then return them with what should be mended. Go ahead, Utap. I think we are doing a good thing."*

*And with that, Utap tossed the bundle of printed applications to The Stepwell waterfall. They did not float away, they simply sunk into the water and disappeared, and the moment they did so, Utap felt content for the first time in a long while, more content than even after he and Secretary had shared Pleasure two nights before. He now felt Secretary leaning her warm body into his side.*

*"You were correct, it was the right thing to do." She turned to him and opened the Idol Box and revealed all the little Broken Bits The Wizard had inflicted upon inanimate figurines over the years. "Please, I think we need to do this together." She dropped the cane.*

*Utap drew his hands to the Broken Bits only to have Secretary pull the box back.*

*"No," she said. "Together."*

*Utap smiled and she smiled to him in return. He brought his hands to one side of the box and she moved hers underneath to the other side, and together they tossed the Idol Box entirely to the waterfall of The Stepwell. The Idol Box instantly sunk and Utap expected its contents to go the way of the applications for The Hopeful.*

*But after a moment Secretary took his hand in hers as they watched one-by-one*

*manuscript sheets no longer with ink smeared rise to the top of the water of The Stepwell, each with a now unbroken inanimate figurine of living image, imagined or not, firm atop the paper and riding down the spiraling waterfall and out of sight.*

*"Now, there there," Secretary said. "Don't you feel better?"*

*As he saw the now reassembled Teacher's Birthday porcelain replication riding atop the title page of K's bug story, Utap truly did feel better than he had in quite some time.*

*His teaching bag light on his shoulder from being relieved of the burden of The Hopeful, Utap held Secretary's hand after she bolted The Department gate and they walked down the hallway. When they stopped she pulled her away hand from his and pressed the button to bring the elevator to them.*

*"You will be descended this way now, and you shall have no fear, for you shall never again have one of your episodes," she said, leaning on her cane again. "Yes, I know."*

*"I believe you might be right," he said.*

*The elevator rang and its doors opened. Utap stepped inside and pressed the button for the ground floor of The Tower to deliver him into the Wednesday rain of The Urban. And when he turned around there was Secretary, remaining in the hallway outside the elevator. She nodded to him as the doors closed upon her face.*

*And Utap knew.*

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