

What's a Novena?

Just recently, by air mail, I received this year's installment of the annual newsletter my college sends out, this being eighteen years after I graduated. God. Eighteen years. I don't know how they keep track of my address, but they do. Having given the matter some rather considerable thought, I've pinpointed why they put so much effort into getting out those ridiculous newsletters. You know the type. On the inside cover there's a letter from the president saying the school's now on the cutting edge of some new field (I swear they use the line every year). Then there's the section listing what great achievements your classmates accomplished. Unbelievably, they've never thought to mention me, an oversight due to the fact that (as my conscientious husband never fails to remind) they only mention people who have *done* things with their lives. Then there's the obit section, which particularly caught my attention this year, listing the prehistoric professors who finally left for the big college classroom in the sky. But somewhere, somewhere in there, they'll sneak in mention of some alumnus who donated three trillion dollars to the school and in whose honor they've consequently named a campus tree. This, I argue, is precisely why those newsletters keep arriving. They're hoping we'll

once again swipe our credit cards and donate, donate, donate!—because along with our diplomas, we've earned a maintenance bill in perpetuity until *we* leave for the big whatever-you-will in the sky. So donate! You might even get a campus tree named after you. The So-and-So Memorial Eucalyptus.

But really, I don't mind not being mentioned. Bill and I are quite happy here, really. He's in petroleum mining, so there's always work, and I sometimes write community newspaper observation pieces on the Sandhill cranes (*grus canadensis*) nesting in the mudflats at Jewel Lake.

The summer before my senior year, I was in love with school and academia, and visions of me as a studious grad student frolicked in my head. The coming semester, I needed to get a ludicrously high score on the GRE, fill out about three trillion graduate school applications, and get teacher recommendations dripping with gooey, gushy acclamations. Accordingly, I spent the better part of that summer preparing. I memorized GRE vocab like a madwoman (*abash*, *abate*, *abhor*...) and took practice test upon practice test. I nearly gave myself carpal tunnel with all the applications, but the work was certainly manageable for a systematic, hardworking academiette like me. All I needed was to do disgustingly well this semester in classes – give an extra-shiny patina to my already respectable 'B' average, so professors would be ready to gush and goo recommendations. That was all I needed.

With this in mind, I found myself enrolling in a special class I'd spotted in the course catalog almost by chance, buried among the graduate-level English courses. The class was named simply, The Short Story. There was asterisk after the title, which meant that with proper departmental approval, undergraduate seniors could enroll. What an auspicious opportunity to plunk a little something extra on my applications, I thought. Sprinting to Student Services to register, I played grad school interviews in my head: "Acquainted with graduate level work, you ask? Acquainted? Oh, abundantly so. In fact, just last semester I was enrolled in a course called The Short Story..."

Approved and registered, I set out to impress this graduate professor, whoever the heck he was. For the rest of the summer, besides vocabulary (*baleful, banal, bilious...*), I made it my duty to read short stories, gobs of them, before the semester started—much to the dismay of my boyfriend, who believed summer was for beaches and surfing and would rather have my head in places other than books. I told him about the course and said I just couldn't wait to take the class, because it must be some story if people simply referred to it as *The* Short Story. At this he frowned, shrugged, and then scratched his right butt, which I took to mean he didn't get my little joke.

Such were the circumstances which found me, come one fine September Monday, strolling boisterously into my first graduate classroom ever, ready to amaze the world – or at least the professor – with my literary *accoutrements*.

I looked out the corner of my eyes for the professor, in order to get a read on him (well, that's what you're supposed to do when you're setting out to be the most brilliant girl in the universe).

No one at the whiteboard. Apparently he hadn't arrived. I plopped into a nearby desk and gazed at the circle of solemn, pale-faced, disheveled-haired, bi-focalled and tri-focalled grad students. I didn't wear glasses myself, had an adorable head of shoulder-length dark brown hair, and had even managed to pick up quite the respectable tan over summer. I could take 'em.

Just about then I felt the inquisitive eyes of the classmate next to me and turned to put the nerd in his place. Then I froze. What with his prematurely graying hair and aged tweed suit, the person sitting to my right was not another grad student. The face smiling back was undoubtedly owned by my new professor. Above the smile was a wide nose, and perched upon it a pair of thick glasses in need of a good windshield wiping, and above them—I'll never forget it—a set of extremely lively eyebrows that were rising curiously at my frozen stare. I gave a big fake smile and quickly turned to look down, suddenly finding my hands extremely intriguing.

Damn. I'd bungled my first opportunity. I don't know if it was the eyebrows or what, but I just couldn't think of anything to say. I suppose "Hello" would have worked just fine. In any case, my investigation into the state of my hands—and the uncomfortable silence accompanying it—

was thankfully interrupted by a handful of photocopied pages coming into my line of sight.

“If you’ll take one and pass them on, I’d be much obliged.” The professor's voice was deep and rumbly, like a mix between Santa Claus and a '68 Firebird. But here’s something else I’ll never forget: there was also an undeniable, well, shyness to that voice.

The rumble announced that we’d start the semester by reading the story he was handing out and discuss it. I bent over my photocopy to get reading (I’ve never been the most expeditious of readers, and was looking for all the head start I could get), but then I heard the rumble say—almost as if in response to my hunching shoulders, that he thought it was important, quite important, in fact, to read stories aloud whenever possible. He cleared his throat. And yes, he cleared it shyly.

He began reading—as I recall, the story featured an odd Midwesterly middle aged woman and her mother on a cruise—I glanced around the room. All of us sitting in a circle, with our nametags (Oh. The guy had us all make paper nametags so we could call each other by name), listening to this teacher read a story didn’t feel at all like grad school. To be perfectly honest, it felt like kindergarten. Reassured that impressing this professor would be elementary in every sense of the word, I underlined, circled, and marginalized greedily. I figured I’d go with the Oedipal approach. I knew enough about grad school to know you couldn’t go wrong with Freud. I began fantasizing the upcoming discussion: I would

speak, all would listen, dumbfounded by my genius, and then a great wave of voluptuous applause would spill forth and the pale-faced grad students would rise *en masse*, hoist me on their shoulders and sing anthems in my honor.

After the professor finished—the mother had died and the lonely daughter began an affair with the cruiseboat captain or somethingorother—he looked around, scratched his prematurely graying head, gave a shrug and a smile and asked if that wasn't a great story or what.

The girl next to me (nametag: RACHEL) raised her hand, and said something about how the story was an allegory for spiritual salvation, that the author was directly referencing Coleridge, and that the main character, like the albatross in the poem, was a sort of Christ figure. She threw in some impressive GRE words, too, which I scribbled quickly in my notepad. The professor nodded, said yes, but did you consider such and such? Or this and that? I certainly hadn't, and was relieved that Rachel had it wrong. Well, not wrong, *per se*, but you know what I mean.

SEYMOUR, an extremely intellectual-looking student (we're talking binoculars for glasses here) told the professor he had 'something of an interpretation.' Seymour addressed the prof by his first name, one of those graduate-level things to which I simply could not adapt myself. Instead, I came to think of the man with the prematurely graying hair and sparkling eyes simply as Professor D.

Seymour said the story was a *narrenshiff* (at least I think that's what he said), and I narrowed my eyes in order to look

especially profound in case the professor looked in my direction. Professor D gave a sort of grunt, noted the points Seymour had made, but then added mysteriously, “But are you sure you’re letting the story play you?”

I needed to say something. It was the first day of class, and if you know anything about it, you know it’s imperative to speak on the first day. Imperative. Time passed, almost everyone spoke, and then room became silent. Professor D asked if anyone else had anything to say. After a moment’s hesitation, I raised my hand.

(I guess this is as good a time as any to insert some relevant autobiographical background. I’ve never been eloquent when it comes to speaking. When I was younger, Mom often pointed out that I stumbled over my words, or that I said one word when I really should have used another. Mom would shrug her shoulders and say that I simply didn’t have the gift of gab. Now I was pretty sure I could think just fine, but Mom seemed really concerned about all this stumbling and bumbling. Or at least that was her justification for holding me back a year in school. Meanwhile, I became more and more self-conscious about all this bumbling, and it made me stumble all the more. But here I was, honorary grad student, with a vital necessity demonstrate my brilliance.)

“Yes...” Professor D leaned forward to see my nametag. “Catrina. The floor is yours.”

Perhaps it was that desire to be brilliant that did it. As I began to speak, trying to piece together some grand unified literary theory, I felt a weird feeling rise up. I

bumbled over my first point. I stumbled over the second. In my head, a little voice was yelling *Don't say 'um'! Don't say 'um'!* which distracted me all the more. And then, most fatal of all, knowing precisely what was going to happen even before I said it (because who really knows where to put the emphasis?), I fumbled for the word, “the heterog...the hetero*gene*...,” and then gave up saying, “you know, the different mix of stuff.” Oh yes, I was thoroughly aware how perfectly I'd played the grad school idiot.

As I continued, vomiting up half-digested words, I listened to myself in abject horror. It was like watching a tragic Greek play where you know it's just gonna get worse for the poor hero and there's absolutely nothing he can do to stop it.

When I finished, petering out in mid sentence, there was no thunderous applause, no rising *en masse*, no hoisting, no anthems. In fact, it was deathly silent. Even Professor D—who had responded, in some way, to each his students—didn't grunt, didn't nod. The grad students were trying their best not to stare. They had been watching that Greek tragedy, too. I smiled weakly, as only someone who fully understands the epic magnitude of the disaster she's just carved out for herself can. And then I reached into my backpack, took out my trusty hari-kari knife, and with one quick, unhesitating motion, thrust it into my adorable tummy, dying honorably in this moment of epic dishonor. Or at least that's how the tragedy would have ended if the Greeks had known about hari-kari knives.

The final moments of class passed in a haze, and I slithered out of the classroom, dribbling down the linoleum-tiled stairs of the Humanities building like a puddle of vomit, which I realize is a really disgusting and smelly image, but that's quite the best way I can think to describe how I felt. That night, comforting myself at 31 Flavors over two giant scoops of World-Class Chocolate, doctored with consolatory caramel syrup, I decided that I would not be liking this professor. Period. But I knew I'd still have to try for the recommendation.

I say the way to kill a bad first impression is to make a murderously brilliant second one, so the very next day, I wended my way toward the English department for an office hours chitchat with Professor D. As I climbed the stairs to the fifth floor of the Humanities building, I repeated the checklist under my breath: make sure I'm not catching him in the middle of anything (his grad school recommendation would note I was "conscientious"), segue to some flattery ("perceptive, too"), and then artfully interweave a few earth-shattering literary observations ("something of a dangerous intellectual"). So absorbed was I in my clever machinations that I failed to notice I'd walked right through the open doorway of Room 531 and into Professor D's office. He was hunched at his desk, pounding away at the delete key of his state of the art Apple IIe, forehead furrowed in contemplation, or exasperation, I'm not sure which. My heart was beating, *ka-thump, ka-thump* (on account of the stairs, of

course), and I considered whisking back out into the hallway to catch my breath.

Too late. He'd seen me. He glanced up from the screen. His eyebrows peered at me from over the tops of his reading glasses. I tried to return his gaze with a look of aloof intellectualisticity.

"Let's see...Catrina. Catrina Cullen, isn't it? How are you? Please come in. And if you don't mind my saying it, Catrina Cullen, you've got quite the lovely name. Irish, is it?"

In spite of my decision not to like the man, I was fairly impressed he'd remembered my name. I mumbled that it was indeed Irish, at least the Cullen part. Then I launched into my crafty speech, complete with its crafty disclaimer:

"I wish it to be known, sir, that if you are currently addled with other work, I would, with extreme alacrity, be able to return at a later time to discuss..." and so on.

He said he was fairly certain he was not overly addled at the moment and would be nothing less than delighted if I would stay. He gestured to a chair. I sat, on the very edge of the seat, knees together, leaning forward ever so slightly. Professor D's graying hair was rumped, as if he'd been resting his head in his hands. I became aware that, *ka-thump, ka-thump*, my mind had gone blank, and with it, my craftiness.

"Uh...I just wanted to say that I have...enjoyed your class. Really. It's been *ridiculously* profitable."

Looking back, I perhaps could have done without the "ridiculously" bit. And "profitable" wasn't exactly what I

meant, either. Come to think of it, considering we'd only had one class, the whole thing sounded slightly idiotic.

He didn't bat an eyebrow, however. "I'm glad. Truly am. This course—now don't go blabbing this all over campus, Catrina—this course is rather special to me. I've picked some stories that...well, that mean a lot to me."

As he was speaking I suddenly remembered something brilliant I'd planned to say. I blurted it out. The man seemed a bit startled, perhaps wondering where this literary libation had come from (I was wondering the same thing, myself). I tried to sneak in some GRE words to reinforce the effect, at whose utterance Professor D arched a professorial eyebrow, whether out of astonishment at my humongous vocabulary or alarm at my incorrect usage, I'm not sure.

"Yes...I believe I know what you mean. Catrina."

"But what I really wanted to ask you about, sir, was about the final project – about picking an author. Maybe you have some apposite recommendations?"

"Well, who's your absolute favorite writer, Catrina?"

"Um..." I stalled, trying to decide what would be most impressive. "Joyce." I proclaimed. "I find *Finnegans Wake* enormously riveting."

"Joyce. Riveting, eh? Okay. What about short stories?"

"Um....Poe? I like John Updike. And I've only read a couple stories by him, but D.H. Lawrence. I do like Lawrence."

“And what is it you like about the stories?”

What did I like about them? I just liked them. They, they touched me. But I knew enough about grad school to know that you didn’t talk about how stories touched you. I needed something really complex, some grandiose literary thingy.

“They’re terribly Freudian.”

Again a raised eyebrow. “Let’s see. Considering you’re interested in narrative theory,” (apparently I’d said something profound earlier) “perhaps you could trace how a writer treats a short story different from a novel. Toni Morrison wrote a novel, *The Bluest Eye*, awhile back, that grew out of a short story. Have you read Morrison?”

I said I was fairly familiar with him.

He paused for a moment. “Yes. Well, I think that’d be a fun project.” Fun? Graduate professors did not assign fun work. “But since it’s still early, just read around, and whatever seems to touch you.”

Touch me? It was my turn to raise an eyebrow. I opened my mouth to speak but Professor D went on. Maybe he thought I was going to bring up psychoanalysis again.

“So tell me about yourself, Catrina. Where are you from? Enjoying it out here?”

I gave him the story, the typical shtick about working parents, that I was mostly on my own when I was younger, and said yes, I was enjoying it out there. That I was even singing in the church choir. As I spoke Professor D was

utterly silent, which made me extremely self-conscious, and I began to feel on the verge of stuttering. I stopped.

“Believe it or not, the year you were born was the year I started teaching here. And married the year after.” He grinned. “Boy, I must seem prehistoric, Catrina.” Then he paused, and I’ll always remember how his eyebrows sank. I still don’t know what he was thinking right then. I’ll never know, I suppose.

But as quickly as they’d sank, the eyebrows livened up again.

“You know I was raised to be a good Irish Catholic, too. Mother dragged me to church every Sunday. She even got me to sing in the choir, which was a mistake for everyone involved, Catrina, as I couldn’t carry a tune if my life depended on it.” (He wasn’t joking, either. A few weeks later we would read a story whose title came from a song from his “days of youth.” He sang the song, presumably to teach us something, and while he was magnificently sonorous in a rumbly sort of way, he was also magnificently tone deaf.)

“One Sunday, I skipped out on choir. My brother and I snuck out of the house before church to see the Sox play the Yankees for the pennant. We lost, of course.” Professor D grinned to himself, apparently enjoying this reminiscence.

“When I got home, my mother dragged me by my ear to our priest, who gave me my own personal sermon, with extra fire and brimstone thrown in at my mother’s request.” He paused. “But I’m sure you know all about that Catholic guilt, Catrina.”

I wasn't Catholic—Irish Catholic or just regular. I just liked singing in the choir. But I couldn't correct him. I might risk the recommendation. And the funny thing was, even though I'd never attended a mass in my life until I joined that choir, I did know what he meant about that guilt. Like the time Mom found out that I'd plagiarized my sister's essay for the Daughters of the American Revolution contest. Oh yes, I knew about that Catholic guilt.

Professor D ran a rumpled hand through his wrinkled hair.

I shifted in my seat. I uncrossed my legs, and then recrossed them the other way. Professor D suddenly looked up, like an idea had struck him. “Catrina, did you ever hear the one about the man who visited a Jesuit and a Franciscan, wanting to know how many novenas he needed to say to get a Mercedes Benz?”

I shook my head.

“Well, the man first asked the Franciscan how many novenas did he have to say to get a Mercedes. The priest thought about it, scratched his head, then said, What's a Mercedes? Disappointed, the man explained it was an expensive and luxurious automobile and turned to the Jesuit, wondering if this man of God could tell him how many novenas he needed to say. The Jesuit also stood there in contemplation, scratching his head and the rest of it. Eventually the Jesuit looked up, confused, and said, What's a novena?”

For a few moments neither of us said anything. And then, gradually, we both started grinning. Then maybe I made the first noise. And then, all of a sudden, we were both laughing. Here's the odd thing: I don't think we were laughing at the joke. After all, it was pretty crappy. But something had happened.

When we finally subsided into grins, Professor D shrugged his shoulders, cocked his head to the side, and looked straight at me for a time. His eyes were sparkling.

“Will you promise me one thing, Catrina? Promise me you'll never forget how to smile like that?”

“It's a deal,” I said. “It's a deal.”

Know how you remember exactly where you were and exactly what you were doing when certain really important events happen in your life? Like for me, the morning of December 9, 1980. My final in Algebra II was that day. After school, I'd planned to go the mall with my best friend to pick a dress for the formal. I waked to the DJ on my clock radio saying something about Paul and Ringo meeting up, and for a minute I thought my dream had come true, that the Beatles were actually getting back together, but then the DJ introduced me to that tragic name, Mark David Chapman.

Well, there was one day that semester that was one of those moments--but better! It's a good memory, and a very good one at that. The setting? A few weeks into a fall semester, the late October sun slanting toward winter. The

hero? Catrina Cullen, sitting on a bench in the quad, soaking up said sun, reading a short story for a certain short story class she happened to be taking. The story went like this:

It's 1948. There's this guy, an American, an aspiring writer. He's the narrator, and he's telling his time in Europe during World War II. Shortly before his unit was sent for the big Allied push, where lots of young Americans were certain to die, he met a young girl (he heard her singing in a church choir). She was around thirteen and both her parents had died, so she was doing a large part of the caring for herself and her younger brother (and doing quite the admirable job, in my opinion). One thing that particularly struck him about the girl, besides the fact that she was a small-talk detester and had a voice that stuck out in the choir without being pretentious, was that she still wore her father's big wristwatch, which besides being waterproof and shockproof, had many other virtues, including the ability to tell how fast you're walking. She had an impressive vocabulary for a thirteen-year-old, although she was still working out some kinks, and told the soldier she was very interested in "squalor" and wondered if he might not sometime write a story with a lot of squalor in it. She didn't exactly explain what a story with squalor would be like, but the narrator promised he'd write it.

As I kept reading, I couldn't help smiling at the way the girl and the narrator talked to each other. (It should be noted that smiling while reading is not something I do on a regular basis.)

At a certain point, the narrator explains he's at the "squalid" part of his story, and so, for reasons he's not at liberty to disclose, he's going to disguise himself so that not even the cleverest of readers can recognize him.

We've flashed forward. Sergeant X is stationed in Europe, shell-shocked from the Normandy invasion. He's lost weight, he's chain smoking, his gums are bleeding, and lots of other terrible and icky things. He's struggling desperately through each moment of every day, and just when it seems like there's no way this can go on, that something catastrophic *has* to happen, just then—just then!—the narrator happens to see a small package, buried in a pile of unopened letters on his desk. Inside the package, a big, old, shockproof, waterproof wristwatch.

As I reached the end of Sergeant X's story, the autumn sun had just set, disappearing to the west of the Humanities building, and I turned that last page, ever so reluctantly. It was a long time before I could close the book and put it away and get up from the bench. But after a while—I remember so clearly how the sky had grown dark—I wiped my cheeks with the back of my wrist and picked myself up. Note that wet cheeks don't happen on a regular basis, either.

Riding the T to school the following Monday, I considered what brilliant theory I'd offer about the story in class, where I'd hardly spoken a word since that disastrous

first day. The GRE word for this, if it helps, is aphasia. But I really did want to say something about this story. I'd been considering what I would say for a good part of the weekend.

I got to class and, once again, there was that annoying *ka-thump, ka-thump* (too much coffee, obviously). If only someone else would talk I could calm down a bit. Rachel raised her hand (she always spoke first), and I listened, positive that she wasn't giving the story its due. I wondered if Professor D felt the same way. Another student had some complex, well thought-out insight, and Professor D listened and grunted in his usual professorial way. Then he cleared his throat.

"You know, it's funny, but a strange thing happens every time I read this story. I can appreciate the technical things, how everything fits together, sure. But there's just something so...so perfect about the ending. When I get to it I find myself, well, crying. Weeping. And there's nothing I can do. Maybe I'm just a sentimental, middle-aged fool who wishes he had a daughter." He stopped. There was a funny look on his face, and no one spoke.

"Did anyone else..." he started to say, but stopped. This was the part when I was supposed to raise my hand, and Professor D was supposed to say, "Yes, Catrina?" and I was supposed to give my speech. But instead, my eyes dropped to examining the backs of my hands. I heard Professor D repeat his question, giving me one more chance to speak, even simply to say that yes, I had cried, too. But it was too late.

I guess this is the squalid part of *my* story. I'm sorry because it won't have any of the moving war stuff in the other one. Still, for reasons I'm not at liberty to disclose, I must now cunningly disguise myself so that not even the cleverest of readers will be able to recognize me.

It was a day in early December and the snow, while falling upon the entire city of Boston, was falling with particular despondence above a certain college senior who sat in a study carrel on the second floor of the library. A textbook was propped on her knees, her feet were tucked tightly against her legs, her heels at the very edge of the chair. She was rereading a chapter for the third time that day. She bit her lip. She turned the page. She looked out the big glass window, gazing down at the snow and the students walking purposefully to their classes. The chapter just hadn't stuck the first two times, and to be perfectly honest, the way things were going Student X would probably have to read it again. The end of the semester was right around the corner.

Back at her apartment, Student X's desk was littered with about three trillion half-finished applications, which hadn't looked any closer to complete for weeks. Buried somewhere underneath this mound was a lonesome 8 ½ x 11 page, on which was a single poem, in the unmistakable dot-matrix scroll of a state of the art Apple IIe printer. The author of the poem, a professor of Student X's, had given it to his class earlier in the semester. The poem's subject was

baseball, about how good infielders, when they see a ground ball coming their way, let the ball ‘play’ them. But the poem was really about reading, about how good readers let the story ‘play’ them. Something about that, about writing a poem for his class, was what Student X really liked about her professor. Also, she liked that he sang off-key. And there was the fact that he confessed to his class of solemn grad students and one supremely reticent senior that sometimes good stories made him cry.

Student X’s boyfriend was at the apartment for dinner. Lately he was getting rather fed up with Student X in the romance department. Neither of them spoke during dinner, and Student X didn’t really eat anything, either. Student X’s boyfriend looked at her from across the table, and then, with a hopeful look in his eye, went over to the refrigerator.

“I’mma make a screwdriver. Want one?” he asked.

“No, thanks,” Student X said.

“Why are you staring at the floor like that?” he asked. “Don’t be a baby. You like screwdrivers, remember?”

“Yeah, but you need to be careful with that stuff,” Student X said, rather softly. “It’s a dangerous substance, orange juice. In fact, I’ve decided to give it up altogether. I’m riding the orange juice wagon. I’m joining O.J. Anonymous.”

Student X’s boyfriend placed the vodka on the counter. “Why have you become so frigid these days? I mean, no offense, but...”

Student X looked at him. Then she looked back down at the linoleum, with its irritating crisscross pattern. You could only see it in a certain light, and you had to look for a while. Student X had been studying this effect recently to some length.

Later that night, at around three in the morning, Student X's boyfriend woke to a patch of light coming through the bedroom door. He climbed out of bed and stumbled into the kitchen, rubbing his eyes. Student X was standing in the middle of the room, rather close to the coffeemaker.

"I wake up in the middle of the night and you're not in bed. You're standing here. Just tell me what's going on."

After a long pause, Student X said quietly, "I'm making sure no one steals Mr. Coffee." Her boyfriend looked confused. He scratched his right butt, yawned, and looked absently around the room.

"I think the fish died," he said, looking at a small bowl on the counter.

"Rosinante. His name's Rosinante."

"I think you forgot to feed it."

"Him. It's a him."

"It was a him." Student X's boyfriend looked back at her. "You know, you're not looking very good these days."

"Thanks. Really."

"Well, I'm just saying. Maybe you should..." he began. He rubbed his eyes again. He lifted the lid of a pizza

box on the counter and peered inside. He sniffed. He reached for a slice.

“So I think people are afraid of me or something,” he said between mouthfuls. “No one sits next to me on the bus. The other night I was walking back from the library and this guy turned around and saw me and jumped and said Jesus, you scared me. I don’t get it. Am I a frightening guy? I don’t think I’m a frightening guy. I don’t get it.”

Student X didn’t say anything. After finishing the pizza, her boyfriend gave one rather loud belch, bent to kiss her on the forehead, and padded back to the bedroom. After she heard him get into bed, Student X walked to the front door. She would go for a jog. Maybe she could make herself tired enough to get a few hours of sleep this night. Her period hadn’t come regularly this month. She definitely needed more sleep.

At ten the next morning, Student X found herself at school, sitting for the final class of a graduate-level literature course she was taking. The discussion proceeded as normal, one graduate student after another offering up some interpretation of the story being discussed, Student X’s professor each time gently pointing out what they’d overlooked, and as the class progressed, it looked as if Student X would finish off the semester in self-imposed silence. This would mean her grade would suffer, not to mention what it might do to any plans she had for grad school. But that wasn’t what was bothering Student X.

The room lapsed into silence. A chair squeaked against the floor. A student with especially thick glasses coughed. And only then, after a long wait, for what would certainly be the last time, Student X heard the inevitable question rise, along with an eyebrow.

“Does anyone else want to speak?” Her last chance.

Student X watched herself, one last time, become quite fascinated with the freckles on the back of her hand, and even though she was looking down at her hands, she could feel that eyebrow sinking down below the rim of its owner's smudged glasses.

“Well, if that's the case,” her professor said, with unmistakable disappointment, “I'd like to thank you all for a semester that was, quite frankly, as enjoyable and rewarding for me—”

Student X's professor halted in mid-sentence. Student X looked up from her desk. The other students were staring. Student X turned to look, and to her own consternation, realized that what the class was staring at, slowly rising like a wisp of smoke, was her own left hand. She watched the shaky, but nevertheless deliberate fingers. Whatever they were up to, it was too late to disabuse them of their scheme.

“Yes, Student X?”

Ka-thump.

Student X could feel the other students' eyes, some merely curious, others awaiting another Greek tragedy replete with hari-kari knives.

“Uh...” Student X began. She looked at her professor with an expression that can only be described as unmitigated terror. “Uh...”

Then, staring straight at her professor, Student X said, in a firm voice, that she’d really enjoyed the story. One conversation had made her smile. She wondered what had been going through the woman’s mind, and how the author had said one thing but, Student X thought, really meant another. And yes, she agreed, the detail about the onion skins in the wastebasket was just perfect. She said other things, but the particulars aren’t important.

When Student X stopped, there was silence again, but it was a different kind of silence. Granted, there was no thunderous applause, no whispers of being in the presence of genius, but—here’s the point—it was just *like* all that was going on.

Student X’s professor didn’t grunt, didn’t give a professorial nod. He didn’t do anything for a moment. The silence in the room was growing. The girl sitting next to Student X shifted in her seat. Finally, the professor cleared his throat, and even though she wasn’t sure he actually said it aloud, Student X heard him say, “Now wasn’t that *ridiculously* profitable?”

Student X looked down at the backs of her hands clasped carefully on the desk in front of her, and realized that even though the *ka-thump, ka-thump* continued, there really wasn’t anything so special about those freckles.

Student X flew home to her parents at the end of the week. The first thing her mother pointed out was that she looked pale, and downright unattractive, but when Student X went into the bathroom to take a look in the mirror, she found that her smile muscles were still fully functional.

Well, after all, it was a deal.

You ask somebody to make a promise like that, Professor D, and even a bumbling, stumbling, *abecedarian* student can understand—regardless who's decided not to mention her in their ridiculous annual newsletter—you already gave her the recommendation that really mattered.
