

By Jacob M. Appel

MEASURES OF SORROW

I'd taken an apartment on the wrong side of the park. This was pre-gentrification, before community empowerment, when the neighborhood's leading commercial enterprise was No-Eyed Jack, a blind barber who cut hair for tourists. My acquaintances were quick to note other local resources: "a wide array of pawn shops"; "check cashing on every corner"; "national leadership in tire irons per capita." Their warnings didn't faze me. I was a born-and-bred New Yorker, after all, city-savvy as a street urchin, and I looked forward to the cachet that my address—on an avenue named for an obscure president and then renamed for an obscure civil rights leader—might carry with left-wing coeds at Greenwich Village parties. Besides, it was all I could afford.

What I call "an apartment" was, properly speaking, a semi-finished basement in a once-luxurious prewar brownstone. My door opened onto a narrow, pipe-lined corridor; the windows afforded a knee-level view of the sidewalk. Men sent to read the water meter frequently mistook me for the building superintendent. This responsibility actually fell to Hector Acosta, an adult son of the Dominican landlady, who also raised gamecocks on the rear fire escapes. Two dozen roosters crowed me awake every dawn. Otherwise, I had no complaints. My new neighbors saw me as a novelty, rather than a pioneer, so they welcomed me warmly.

Crossing the park proved another matter. That no-man's-land between police precincts offered the only practicable route to the university—no cabbie wanted a cross-park fare—but its deserted trails concealed machete-wielding opium fiends and sociopaths set to garrote me with piano wire. Or so I imagined. My parents had raised

me on the hazards of urban parkland; the revival of *I'm Not Rappaport* rekindled my suspicions. Although I walked briskly—with my right fist in my jacket pocket, where a would-be attacker might mistake it for a handgun—these trips to and from campus framed my days with terror. When other students asked about safety, I feigned nonchalance. My stock reply was: *I've only been axe-murdered twice*. Why admit that in mid-September, I was already alarmed over the shortening days, panicked that my schedule might converge with the twilight? Months of intense anxiety had left me ready to embrace the most ludicrous of alternatives. Which is, more or less, what I did.

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It was a Saturday afternoon—one final huff of torrid Indian summer. I'd just returned from a sidewalk sale, where I'd purchased two small bookcases and a stepladder to use in changing light bulbs. The bookcases were light, but bulky. Exhausting to carry three long blocks. I ditched them in the passage, propping open the door, then retreated into the kitchenette for a root beer. Holding an icy aluminum can to my forehead was far cheaper than air-conditioning. So was soaking my t-shirt in cold tap water and drawing it over my head. When I looked up, sensing a shadow, I found myself face to face with a sharp-featured, cocoa-skinned stranger—a presence as unlikely as the Cheshire cat. The man might have been twenty-five. Or forty. He wore an aloha shirt, sunglasses tucked into the collar. His arrival dazed me so thoroughly that I forget to shout for help.

“The day is very hot,” said the intruder. “Not a day for the transporting of furniture.”

Even by Manhattan standards, this development was unprecedented: A stranger had followed me into my apartment to report the weather. He'd also carried my bookshelves inside and deposited them behind the sofa.

"You are wondering from where I come," said the intruder, who *did* speak with an accent—though his origins hadn't crossed my mind. "I once told people that I come from a nation of which they have never heard," he explained. "But that is not of interest to most people. There are *many* nations of which nobody has ever heard. So now I say that I come from a nation no longer in existence, an island under lava, which is as much the truth. This is of interest to them far more."

I caught sight of a screwdriver on the countertop, and considered lunging for it, but my intruder no longer seemed threatening. Merely inept. Muggers didn't wear open-toed sandals. Nor could I imagine one so self-possessed. You'd have thought that in the man's Caribbean birthplace—which he named and which I *hadn't* ever heard of—the *custom* was to followed strangers home.

The intruder extended a hand nearly as large as a baseball glove, but a bit awkwardly, as though handshakes were not among his island's traditions. "Ollie," he introduced himself. "I am residing on the second floor."

I kept my arms at my sides. "Do you want something?"

Ollie answered with a mesmeric smile—one that announced: *If I do want something, I'll find a way to get it.* He had teeth as white as meerschaum, but jagged, and canines like alabaster stalactites.

"May I sit down?"

I said nothing. My visitor removed a cardboard box from a nearby folding chair and seated himself in reverse, his elbows resting on the squared-off back. He'd brought with him a small stack of books, which he'd placed on the carpet and which he adjusted periodically, maybe to emphasize his ownership.

"I think more clearly when I am sitting down," he said.

"I'm rather busy," I answered.

"The blood has less gravity against which to fight, sitting down."

I walked to the kitchen table—no longer feeling endangered, merely annoyed—and, in an effort to appear busy, sorted through the previous day's mail. "I have a dissertation to write," I said.

"It is for that reason I have come to see you."

Our interaction had advanced from the implausible to the impossible. My dissertation in the Department of Judaic Studies examined two ancient Hebraic commentaries on sorrow. According to Beit Hillel, the precise number of tears to be shed before the Messiah's arrival was fixed. Those not wept in one generation would inevitably pour forth in another. A second school, Beit Shammai, rejected this interpretation. These rabbis maintained it was the volume of tears, not their number, that was predetermined. No layperson in their right mind could have cared less.

"You're interested in *my* dissertation?"

"I am interested," said Ollie, "in your knowledge."

"Meaning?"

"I want you to teach me. To tutor me."

Tutor him? He was lucky I hadn't stabbed him. "In what?"

Ollie paused—either to collect his thoughts or for dramatic effect.

“Everything,” he said. “Everything that they teach at the university.”

I expected Ollie to grin—to reveal a joke at my expense—but he didn’t. He couldn’t have been more serious had he sought religious instruction from a monk. “I have been attempting on my own,” he added, passing me his collection of books. “I have learned that you cannot learn everything on your own. You need a teacher to place your knowledge in order.”

His three books were Heidegger’s *Being and Time*, Packenham’s *History of the Boer War* and *The Complete Short Novels of D. H. Lawrence, Volume II*.

“Order is important,” I conceded.

“So you will teach me?”

I thumbed aimlessly through Heidegger. The dog-eared paperback had lost its cover and the pages flaked easily. Some sentences were highlighted in red. Others in yellow. Question marks cluttered the margins. Although I hoped to avoid bad blood, particularly with a fellow tenant, I refused to yield under pressure.

“*I don’t know you.*” I drifted toward the door, hoping he’d follow. “I’m sure if you phone the university, there are always graduate students looking for money....”

Ollie shook his head. “I do not have that amount of money,” he answered. “I am driving a taxicab.”

“So you want me to teach you *for free*?”

“For trade.” He stood up and rested one of his feet on the chair, his elbow braced against his elevated knee. “I have seen you crossing the park,” he explained. “You move like a fox in a dog pound.”

I snapped shut his book. “So?”

“So I will be your chauffeur. I will drive you to the university and I will drive you from the university.” Now, he grinned. “No more fox-trotting.”

“In return for...?”

Ollie didn’t answer directly. “They say this is the land of opportunity,” he said. “*You* are my opportunity.”

He extended his oversized hand again. “Let us shake upon it.”

“I’ll think it over,” I said.

“No, no. Let us shake upon it and I will drive you now.”

I had no reason to visit the campus on a Saturday afternoon, nor was I clear about my attitude toward this man’s odd proposition, but I am non-confrontational by nature, and a ride in his taxi seemed preferable to further argument. So I shook his hand. He held mine a bit too long, the sort of clasping, fleshy handshake that Bible-thumpers attribute to homosexuals. But there was no hint of the romantic in his smile. If anything, his expression was *too familiar* for romance. *Too confident*. I wasn’t at all surprised when he stepped backwards and sized me up—the sort of “second look” one might give to auction-bought livestock. He nodded. He appeared to believe that he’d struck a winning bargain.

Outside the skies had turned dark. Thunder rumbled in the distance. We found Ollie’s cab blocking a bus stop, a bright orange summons under one wiper blade.

“Do not be alarmed,” said Ollie, as though a parking ticket might presage nuclear winter. He tucked the summons into his shirt pocket. “It is a trick. An empty envelope that I obtained last year from an abandoned automobile.”

“Clever,” I said—although this was an ancient ploy.

“Only when used properly.” He removed a flyer from the windshield. It read: THIS VEHICLE HAS BEEN TOWED TO THIS LOCATION BY THE NEW YORK CITY POLICE DEPARTMENT. DO NOT SUMMONS. The date and a NYPD insignia followed. “I print these in the public library.”

When I settled into the passenger seat, I spotted another of my new acquaintance’s deceptions. Ollie’s taxi was a large yellow Crown Victoria with a service light on the roof—but it was *not* a “yellow cab.” The hood lacked the necessary medallion. In New York City, I warned him, that’s a prison offense. .

“Which is the *true* crime?” answered Ollie. “To drive without a medallion? Or to limit the number of taxicabs by artificial measures? They say this is the land of capitalism. I am capitalizing.”

Ollie rolled down his window and lit a cigarillo. Not the moment, I decided, for a crash-course on market regulation.

“Can I ask you something?” I asked. “What’s this all about? Why this urge to know *everything*? Most people hardly know anything.”

“I will tell you,” answered Ollie. “It is not so remarkable. I am wishing to make an impression upon a woman.”

That I could relate to. I had once memorized all of Shakespeare’s sonnets to win the heart of a folksinger. It didn’t work—but the failure left me with a soft spot for quixotic ventures.

“Who is she?” I asked.

“She is a graduate student at your university. Her name I do not know.”

I responded with matching syntax. “Her name you do not know?”

“Her name I do not know.”

I waited for Ollie to say more, but he didn't. Instead, he honked his horn at pedestrians edging into a crosswalk.

“What *do* you know about her?” I asked.

“I picked her up two weeks ago. I remember the precise date. It is the same date upon which I picked her up last year.”

“Let me get this straight. You want to impress a girl whose name you don't even know because you've given her two rides on the same date.”

“Not at all,” answered Ollie. “I am wishing to make an impression upon her because she is most beautiful woman I have ever seen. That I have picked her up two times on the same date is a sign that I may succeed. You have read the play *Romeo and Juliet*? I believe that Romeo falls in love with Juliet before learning of her name.”

“Jesus Christ. You've got it all figured out, don't you?”

“I have never picked up another passenger twice. On any days.” His expression turned grave, almost wistful. “A beautiful woman is not easy to obtain,” he added. “One must seize one's opportunities.”

Ollie tossed his cigarillo out the window and eased the cab to the curb. Broadway and 116th Street. “As you say in this country,” he said. “Door to the door service.”

Rain was falling in heavy, piercing drops. Ollie let me off and pulled back into traffic. I realized, too late, that I hadn't arranged for a ride home—that I had no choice but to “fox-trot” across the park.

Our first “lesson” took place the following evening in Ollie’s apartment. He occupied a cozy studio overlooking a neglected yard. School kids had appropriated this lot for a battlefield, raising a fort from discarded cinderblocks. There were also two abandoned bathtubs in which an elderly woman cultivated marigolds. What had once been a stockade fence lay rotting in the crabgrass. Inside, Ollie’s quarters were sparsely furnished and so immaculately clean that I’d have licked sorbet off the linoleum. But the room conspicuously lacked personal landmarks. No photographs. No souvenirs. Its most distinguishing feature was a well-manicured spider plant. The sterility reminded me of the model units that resorts use to market timeshares.

Crafting a curriculum that encompassed “everything” posed a challenge, particularly because of Ollie’s haphazard knowledge-base. He could name the popes dating back to Boniface VIII—and their dates of service—but he’d never heard of Annie Oakley or Charles Lindbergh. I joked that he should read all the books in the library alphabetically, like the Self-Taught Man in Sartre’s *Nausea*, but he took my suggestion quite seriously, and rejected it. *If I did that*, he said, *you would be unnecessary*. So we started at the beginning: Homer. Thales. Anaximander. Initially, I had envisioned myself a present day Henry Higgins. In reality, Ollie learned far better than I taught. He read with an intensity that most college freshmen reserve for alcohol—transforming our “lessons” into fast-paced discussions that often left *me* feeling undereducated. In the course of our first week, we ploughed through Thucydides, Xenophon, Aristotle.

The enterprise proved more pleasant than I’d anticipated. Graduate students have few social outlets, and even fewer opportunities to produce anything tangible, so I took pride in Ollie’s expanding knowledge, much as a stonemason might in a rising cathedral.

Also, grudgingly, I grew to enjoy his company. It was impossible not to. My student's homespun theories of justice, as entertaining as they were ass-backwards, rivaled the best of Mark Twain or Shalom Aleichem.

One autumn evening, when we were about six weeks into our survey of all previous thought, a photograph appeared on Ollie's desolate bureau: a candid shot of a brunette smoking in a café. To say she was "beautiful"—you might as easily describe Mozart as "musical" or Caligula as "unpleasant." I have never seen hair so black or skin so white. The girl was laughing, eyes closed, mouth open, like the women in beer advertisements. I tried my best to ignore her, to focus on Seneca's tragedies. I was Ollie's tutor, after all, not his confidante, nor did I wish to give him the satisfaction of showing my curiosity. But even from a photograph, the girl's looks were head-turning.

"Okay, you win," I finally said. "Who's that?"

"Laurah Townsend," Ollie replied—as though the picture had been collecting dust on his dresser for decades.

I'd grown accustomed to these oblique answers, to the cat-and-mouse routine that usually followed. "Who is Laurah Townsend?"

"The woman I am wishing to marry," he said. "She spells it with an 'h.' Laurah. Do you believe one pronounces it differently?"

Somehow the stakes had risen to matrimony. "How'd you get the picture?"

"I followed her from her place of residence," he said. "I was very careful to record the address when I dropped her off."

"That's stalking," I objected. "You can't do that."

“Scouting, my friend. Not stalking. If I had been a Shakespearean hero, I would have sent forward a messenger to make inquiries.”

“If you’d have been Cro-Magnon man,” I snapped, “you’d have clubbed her and dragged her back to your cave. *In this country*, it’s goddam stalking.”

Ollie kneaded his forehead with his fingertips. Then he crossed to the window and began watering the spider plant from a green plastic pitcher.

I found myself second-guessing my outburst, wondering whether he might take it for xenophobia. Or worse.

“This is very healthy,” he finally said. “As in the *Dialogues* of Plato. We are sharing a difference of opinion.”

I shook my raised fist à la Jackie Gleason—but smiled in spite of myself. “Did anybody ever tell you that you’re infuriating?” I asked.

“The watering of plants I find relaxing,” Ollie answered, apropos of nothing. “It is like urinating on an empty bladder.”

“Seneca,” I prompted. “*Hercules Oetaeus*.”

“You have now seen Laurah Townsend. Do you think you will able to help me to date a woman like that?”

“I don’t know if *I* could date a woman like that.”

Ollie looked up from the plant. “You do not have to do so,” he answered. “That is not of importance.”

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While my student/chauffeur knew no shame in flouting automobile regulations—it eventually came out that he even lacked liability insurance—Ollie kept his bargain with

me to the letter. (“*We* have an agreement,” he explained. “With the State of New York, I do not have an agreement.”) Every weekday morning, at precisely eight-thirty, Ollie’s cab pulled up to our stoop. His arrivals were as punctual as Mussolini’s trains, as consistent as Immanuel Kant’s afternoon strolls—which, we read in November, the housewives of Koenigsberg once used to set their clocks. The regularity of our departures contrasted with the timing of my return trips. These grew earlier by the day. I spent increasingly more energy brushing up my Shakespeare (and Milton and Dryden and Swift), concomitantly less quantifying unhappiness. Even in the world of Talmudic studies, my dissertation seemed iconically trivial: Who cared about the relationship between liquid cubits and fluid ounces? Or precisely *how much* Rachel wept for her children? Exposure to the classics had torn off my blinders. I degenerated into one of those ghostly graduate students who publish nothing, yet are passionately engaged in maintaining the illusion of scholarship.

My commercial activity also shifted away from the campus. I washed my clothing at the corner laundromat that doubled as a bingo parlor. I bought groceries from a tiny Korean woman who made change through bulletproof glass. I even registered to vote at the local firehouse, although our precinct hadn’t had a contested election since the days of Father Divine. In a matter of months, freed from the daily terror of crossing the park, I felt more comfortable in my new haunts than I ever had in my old ones. When the animal warden commandeered Hector’s roosters—the same police force that couldn’t keep crack out of our playgrounds—my indignation matched that of the most belligerent community activists. If I’d once been the only graduate student in the Department of Judaic Studies who apologized for Al Sharpton, now I admired him. However, my true

baptism didn't occur until after the New Year—sometime between Mill and Darwin—when I braved a trim at No-Eyed Jack's.

This tourist landmark was located on the far side of the boulevard, sandwiched between a Western Union office and a storefront church. It had only one barber chair. The "hot seat" faced several rows of cushion-lined benches from which, every weekday afternoon, and all day Saturdays, tourists paid to watch the maestro at his craft. (Jack had an arrangement with a sightseeing company that also organized gospel brunches. They provided the audience; he supplied the show.) The walls displayed photographs of the barber in the company of a wide assortment of celebrities, including an enormous portrait of him with his arms draped over the shoulders of Stevie Wonder and Ray Charles. Taped to a support beam, between two sections of mirror, a sign announced: IF I WERE WHITE, I'D BE A SURGEON. During performances, Jack sported garish monochrome suits in chartreuse, mauve and vermillion. On weekday mornings, serving a local clientele, he didn't bother to tuck his t-shirt into his dungarees.

I settled into the barber chair and asked for a trim, hoping the man was a fraud. My stomach quivered when he removed his glasses to reveal two porcelain eyes.

"We was wondering when you'd come in here, Teach," he said.

I wasn't sure whether to answer. I did not want to distract him. "You know me?"

"Everybody knows ya, Teach. You're the guy is teaching Ollie."

Where was this leading? I wondered. Would I end up instructing the barber's children in Sanskrit?

"Ollie comes in here?" I asked.

"Everybody come in here," said the barber.

He ran his calloused fingers over my scalp, my brow, my neck. I'd heard he shaved men with a straight razor, but I wasn't *that* daring.

"My boy Ollie swears up down and sideways you the most excellent thing since Lena Horne. Says ya gonna be best man at his wedding."

"He said that?"

"Uh-huh. Now lean forward." Jack adjusted my head and lowered his open scissors in front of my eyes. Then he drew back swiftly. "Before we start," he said. "You wanna see my collection of ears?"

I told myself I'd survive, because others had survived—no different than air travel or tattooing. My fingernails dug into the leather armrests.

"Don't let me be scaring ya, Teach. You can always trust a blind barber. He's got a lot more at stake."

He snipped the line of hair across my forehead. Straight as a railroad tie.

"Nobody will give you a difficult time in this neighborhood," Jack said—switching abruptly from Newyorkese to the King's English. "You tell them where you live. They will assume that you're much worse off than they are."

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Several months later, Ollie announced that he was "ready to practice." We were relaxing in my apartment—his ceiling had started to leak—after a lengthy discussion of the Boxer Rebellion. (I couldn't imagine Laurah Townsend bringing up John Hay's "Open Door" policy on a first date, but as Ollie insisted, *everything* was *everything*.) "You will be Laurah," he explained. "I will be me." He lit a votive candle in a teacup and set it on the Formica tabletop, apparently to create ambiance.

“How can I be Laurah?” I asked. “I don’t know the first thing about her.”

“That does not matter. I do not either.”

“So you want me to pretend to be a girl I’ve never met and to act as if we’re out on a first date.”

“Precisely,” said Ollie.

“What sort of restaurant is it? What am I wearing?”

These questions were intended facetiously, aimed at exposing the absurdity of such role-playing, but instead they egged Ollie on. He drew me a floor plan of the Italian bistro and described everything from the frescos of Florentine street-life to the specials listed on the chalkboard. When he informed me I was wearing a leopard-print skirt, form-fitting and three inches above the knee, I gave in. “Okay, Okay. I get it,” I said. “Whenever you’re ready....”

Ollie straightened his back, folded his hands. “Laurah,” he asked—as though conducting a job interview, “in what course of study are you at the university?”

“I’m a graduate student in the Department of Judaic Studies.”

“Intriguing,” answered Ollie. “I too am interested in the study of Judaism.”

“Are you now?”

He ignored me. “In which area of Judaism are you studying? Possibly the Mishnah? Or the Gemara? Or Prime Minister Eshkol and the Six-Day War?”

“I’m studying tears. It’s not very interesting.”

“I am certain it is much more interesting than you believe.”

“No,” I snapped. “It’s not.”

Ollie paused and tapped his fingertips together. “If it is not interesting, why have you chosen it as your course of study?”

I pounded my fist on the table. “Jesus-fucking-Christ. You’re on a date, not running the McCarthy hearings. Don’t ask questions with difficult answers.”

Ollie frowned. “I did not understand that inquiry to demand a difficult answer.”

“Well it did,” I said.

“How so?”

I exhaled deeply and thought backwards from ten. “Try to make her feel comfortable,” I advised. “Ask open-ended questions. Let the girl steer the conversation.”

“Let the girl steer the conversation,” echoed Ollie—surprised, as though I’d pitched styrofoam as snack-food. “Very well. Why do *you* not ask *me* some questions? I will practice through observational learning.”

“Okay,” I agreed. “*That* I can manage.”

But formulating questions turned out to be far more taxing than I’d anticipated. I hadn’t been dating much myself that winter—okay, not at all—and my skills were somewhat rusty. I could think only of questions which called for factual answers: Who invented the combustion engine? Where did Stanley find Livingstone? If the goal had been to stump Laurah, rather than to woo her, I’d have hit pay-dirt.

“Tell me about your family,” I finally said. “Do you have brothers or sisters?”

This was the first I’d ever asked Ollie of his past, sensing it was a subject he preferred to avoid, but I wasn’t taking advantage of our role-playing. It was the only question I could think of not suited for a game show.

Ollie's smile never wavered, but the muscles stiffened in his shoulders. "I have no brothers and no sisters," he said.

"And your parents?"

"It is important to be always forward looking," answered Ollie. "That is why I have come to America. A past is not necessary in this country. You can reinvent yourself like Mr. Gatsby."

"But Gatsby failed."

"That is not here, nor is it there. What is important is to look always toward the future. I am also thinking of the Biblical story of Lot. Does not the wife of Lot look backward? And for this transgression is she not turned to salt?"

I cupped my fist in my palm. "Maybe you do need Henry Higgins."

"Excuse me?"

"You can't use the word transgression on a date. You sound like Reinhold Niebuhr. What kind of cockeyed school did you go to anyway?"

"I did not go to school at all," answered Ollie. "I am an autodidact. Like President Lincoln. I taught myself English from a foreign service manual."

What awed me most about Ollie's admission was that, *to him*, this method of education didn't seem the slightest bit limiting. Far from it. I imagine he believed it preferable to learn the language from a government drill-book.

"Other than my use of the word transgression," asked Ollie. "How did I fare?"

"You don't want to know."

"But I do," he said. "And I have one more question. What is this you mean by these McCarthy hearings?"

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That's when my real teaching started. Ollie's greatest hurdle wasn't a shortage of information, but too much of it. Or maybe it's more accurate to say that he lacked a framework with which to distinguish common knowledge from the \$64,000 question. All facts had equal value, to his thinking, until proven otherwise. He did not understand, for instance, that if you quoted Churchill, you were most likely referring to the British prime minister. You might as easily be referring to Arabella Churchill, the mistress of James II, or Canadian actor Berton Churchill. Nor was Ollie bashful about asking: *Do you mean the Augustan courtesan? Or the colleague of John Wayne? Or might you be referencing the eighteenth century general?* With some effort, I trained him to assume Winston without inquiry—a principle that he learned to generalize. Darwin was Charles, not Erasmus. Marx, unmodified, meant Karl—never Groucho. So far, so good. But why didn't the Marx Brothers include Karl, Eduard and Hermann? And was it permissible to ask whether Chamberlain was Neville or Wilt?

All summer I taught Ollie to forget things. “Neville, okay,” I said. “Maybe Wilt. But *never* Owen. As far as you're concerned, there is no Owen Chamberlain.”

“Are you certain?” asked Ollie. “He was a winner of the Nobel Prize. To him we owe our entire understanding of anti-protons.”

“I'm sure we do,” I said. “And for that I'm truly grateful. But he is not important.”

Ollie massaged the bridge of his nose. “If you say he is not of importance,” he agreed without conviction, “then I will speak no more of him.”

Later, of course, he would second-guess my judgment and deliver an impassioned defense of Owen Chamberlain's research on fundamental particles. *How could I not think proton-proton scattering important?* Ollie valued knowledge too much to yield it without a struggle. My task was like spring cleaning with a packrat.

And then—one morning in September—Ollie fired me. He expressed his intentions as we passed behind the cathedral, under the shedding maples, where two priests had recently been stabbed. They'd had no chauffeur. No "door to the door" service. Police barricades still cordoned off the sidewalk.

"This evening," Ollie announced, "I will dine with Laurah Townsend."

"Tonight?"

"One full year has past since she last rode in my taxicab. Two full years have passed since she first rode in my taxicab."

"But you can't. Not yet." My initial objection had been on Ollie's account—to prevent him from acting prematurely. Hadn't Branch Rickey held back Jackie Robison? Then I realized that I stood to lose more than he did: my employer, my chauffeur, my closest friend. Ollie had placed all of his egg's in Laurah's basket. Most of mine had ended up in his. "Trust me," I said. "Let's give it another few months."

"This evening," answered Ollie. "I have already made arrangements. I picked up Laurah Townsend yesterday afternoon and invited her to dine."

"And she said yes?"

"She did not say 'no'," said Ollie. "She laughed. This evening I will pay a visit to her café."

"Uninvited?"

“Not invited,” answered Ollie. “Not *uninvited* either.”

I sensed the futility of objecting further; it would have been easier to postpone a solar eclipse. Moreover, I’d lost track of my loyalties. Didn’t Ollie’s success mean an end to our lessons? And what would his failure mean? My next thought highlighted the absurdity of my predicament. I’d wanted to ask: *Can I come along?* Or, in the least, *Can I watch?*

“Maybe I’ll drop by that café,” I said. “To check up on you.”

Meaning what? To play duenna? To play voyeur?

Ollie nodded thoughtfully. “I would like that very much,” he said. “Like the tourists at the shop of the barber. You will be my audience.”

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The café, Just Desserts, was located on the “right” side of the park. It had replaced Lenin’s & Trotsky’s, a smoke-hazy Kerouac hangout, but had retained the former establishment’s Soviet décor. Warsaw Pact flags hung from the exposed rafters. Behind the cheesecake display, placards advocated for Sacco and Vanzetti. In the men’s room, a flint-faced Stalin glowered over the urinals. But the clientele had evolved: Where denim-clad anarchists had once played darts, junior faculty now rehearsed lectures. Prices had also doubled. On weekends, stroller-fettered couples bought six dollar lattes for takeout. The old and new patrons shared one characteristic: They were almost uniformly white. Not a stamping ground for Caribbean cabbies.

I arrived two hours early, hoping to snag a good seat. Laurah Townsend, as I’d anticipated, had already claimed a chair by the window. The woman was as stunning as she’d appeared in the photograph, but considerably older. Maybe thirty. Even thirty-

five. She wore an angora sweater and a gray linen skirt—a far cry from the low-cut blouse and skintight pants that I’d imagined. She was writing in pencil, gnawing the stub of her eraser. Crumpled balls of yellow paper littered her workspace, and every few minutes, she increased the chaos with a page torn from a legal pad. The table’s perimeter was hemmed with books. I installed myself nearby and pretended to read the newspaper. I was doing nothing wrong, I assured myself. Nothing illegal. I was no different from any other graduate student enjoying an espresso in a public coffee shop.

But I knew otherwise. I was, in Ollie’s language, scouting. At one point, I peered over the newspaper and our eyes met. Laurah smiled: a tender, teasing smile that lingered until I looked away. Scouting might be sketchy; but flirting crossed the line—the sort of transgression that bordered on evil. Fortunately, the rightful suitor showed up before I had a chance to do damage.

I hardly recognized Ollie. My student had shaved his beard, traded in his sandals and beach attire for khakis and a stylish pink shirt. He winked at me, but crossed directly to Laurah—either overenthusiastic or afraid of losing his nerve. When he spoke—deliberatively, as though measuring each word—his voice held the same confidence it had that first afternoon in my apartment.

“Excuse me,” said Ollie. “I believe that yesterday I had the privilege of driving you in my taxicab.”

“Oh, you,” said Laurah. Her surprise reminded me of my own shock at Ollie’s first appearance. She flipped over her pad.

“I know what you are thinking,” continued Ollie. “You are thinking that many taxicab drivers do not dine in this café.”

“No,” said Laurah. “I guess not.”

“I drive a taxicab only to earn my livelihood. To give me leisure time to focus on my studies.” Ollie leaned forward to see the titles of her books. “*Secrets of the Atom*,” he read. “*Oppenheimer vs. HUAC*. You are studying physics?”

“The history of physics,” said Laurah. “You’ve heard of Schrodinger.”

“I assume that you mean Erwin Schrodinger who won the Nobel Prize for his work in quantum mechanics. It is not likely that you mean W. A. Schrodinger, the Bavarian horticulturist.”

Laurah tucked her pad into her backpack—as though preparing to leave. Ollie frowned and then his expression turned unexpectedly gleeful. “Are you, by any chance, familiar with the research of Owen Chamberlain?”

“You know about Owen Chamberlain?” I could sense the girl’s discomfort ebbing slightly, her appetite genuinely whetted. “*You’re* studying physics?”

“Not at all,” answered Ollie. “My interest is entirely avocational. I believe the research of Chamberlain is underappreciated.” I did not see the man move—but somehow he ended up seated. “What I am studying,” he said, “are Talmudic commentaries on tears. My hope is to quantify the sorrow in the universe.”

“Tears?” asked Laurah.

“Tears.”

Ollie served up a cogent, lucid summary of my thesis. He reduced seven years of research into a series of provocative anecdotes, exploring a broad swath of emotion from the humorous to the heartrending. In his voice, the project actually sounded interesting, a

topic worthy of investigation. What stung me most was his self-assurance—that he never once looked in my direction.

“I am deeply interested in misfortune,” Ollie concluded. “That is what happens when one is of a nation which is no longer in existence.”

“Your family....?” asked Laurah.

“All of them. All of my brothers and sisters,” he said. And then he spoke of the cascading lava, of the horrors he had never shared with me, until the girl was dabbing away tears of her own. When I left the café, they were still locked in conversation.

The sun had already set. I drifted toward the park—bracing myself for the passage through the darkness. I carried inside me this story, of Ollie’s education, and my own, but I knew nobody with whom to share it. You can measure a man’s sorrow, and the world’s, in the number of stories that perish unheard.