

50. NAMELESS

I was supposed to meet Dr. Briggs to talk about my short story

“I hope that you’ve worked out all the problems from last time.”

“I think that I have.”

“It’s important that you write from your experience. But your portrayal can’t be overly transparent.”

“What does that mean?”

“You have to be creative. You can’t lift tales from your roommate’s emails.”

“I’m not doing that.”

“With the character of Chloe, you have tried to escape the rigid confines of your own world. But she seems very contrived. She runs away from home based on an argument that she has with her mother. That’s not that realistic. She might get angry. Or she might head to her room. But it’s quite a big step to break from her family permanently without more sufficient motivation. It’s almost as if there is something that you’re not saying. Are you trying to hide from something in your own life?”

“It’s not that Dr. Briggs.”

“What is it, Donna?”

“I guess that I identify too closely with Chloe. So if something really traumatic had happened to her, I almost feel as if it happened to me as well.”

I was feeling very uncomfortable. I could feel all these feelings welling up inside me. I didn’t know why I was feeling so strange.

“You shouldn’t be afraid to open up. That’s only natural”

Dr. Briggs gave the weirdest look. I pulled my skirt over my knee.

“I’m not freaking you, am I?”

“Not at all.”

But his questions were becoming very personal.

“It’s difficult trying to be a writer. You are creating fiction, but in other ways you are stripping back layers of the self.”

I felt self-conscious how he was looking at me.

“Maybe we should continue this another time.”

He looked at my legs. Then he looked away.

“Another time would be good. Do you have enough to go on?”

“I think that I do.”

What did he expect? I wasn’t supposed to write for someone else. I needed to write for myself. If I felt that Chloe was a real character, then I had to make her seem real. What was I lacking? I was getting into the scandalous nature of her lifestyle. It allowed me to live vicariously. I wasn’t like that. I wanted to rush back home to Omaha. I was feeling very vulnerable.

When I got back to the house, my roommate had left for the evening. She was probably with a guy. Maybe she was going to stay all night. I could keep working on my story by myself. There would be no interruptions with more heartache. She just set herself up again and again.

Chloe’s strength excited me. She wasn’t transient like my roommate. Dr. Briggs was

wrong. Chloe could see the writing on the wall. She knew that things were going to get worse. She wasn't going to hang around and allow something terrible to happen to her. She'd take her chances on the road.

Dr. Briggs thought that I was short-changing the reader. I wasn't giving her enough information to allow her to decide. Chloe was moving way ahead of the evidence. She didn't allow the circumstances to mold her. Her world was overly abstract.

"If she really lived in her head, Donna, then she could have stayed put. She wouldn't have felt so forced to leave. There would have had to be some event that so ripped at her composure that made it impossible for her to stay."

I didn't say a thing.

"Do you know what I'm talking about Donna. Has anything like that ever happened to you? You weren't able to keep things in control."

"I'm not like that Dr. Briggs."

"And either is Chloe. That is the problem. You are putting yourself too much in the character."

"How do I not do that?"

"You need more experience of life."

"I'm trying."

"You've been with a man before?"

"I went with the same guy through high school. Then we broke up."

"You know what I'm asking you."

"What?"

"Has there ever been a time in your life when your emotions just got out of control?"

"I'm not sure that I want to talk about this."

"I'm not trying to embarrass you, Donna."

But he was. I almost felt as if I was sitting there naked, and he was gawking at me.

"I have to go."

My second meeting about the story had gone no better. He was telling me to do something, and I was resisting.

"I don't want you to take any of this personally. It's all about the story. You're learning how to become a better writer."

I thought that he was telling me that I was learning to become a woman. Was this what really went wrong with Chloe? Someone that she really trusted betrayed her. But I couldn't remember any of those details from her story. I read things over again in the hopes that I could finally get it right.,

"Maybe she doesn't realize what she needs until later."

That was it. Dr. Briggs was the one who was forcing me. Maybe I should talk to another teacher.

Dr. Briggs encouraged us to explore the perversity of our imagination. He believed that it made our writing more realistic.

"You are too used to being polite."

But the degradation became a value in its own right. The intent of the writer was to shock his readers.

“Donna, you shouldn’t feel so prim and proper.”

I didn’t want the other kids in the class to laugh at me. But I didn’t want to write in a certain way just because I was supposed to. That was no better than being a moral conformist. Maybe my parents ways were old-fashioned. I wanted to figure that out on my own.

Novels got us to care about people who didn’t even exist. We remembered their names. And we repeated them over and over again. We lived and died with them. They became part of our dreams. They took over our personalities. Our lives blended with theirs. These characters gave us a purpose. And they allowed us to live more exciting experiences than we could ever imagine. They unlocked a reality that we didn’t even realize was there.

Having written a short stories, I was only beginning to understand the potential that my writing had unlocked. I was stepping into a world of unknown possibilities. It was wonderful. But it was also frightening. It was as if a ghost had come alive inside of me. And it now walked around the corridors of my existence. It’s lonely echoed awakened me from my slumber. I had to minister to its needs. I had to face my fears.

I wanted to run back to a life without such a burden. I had opened a large door. Now, I made every effort to push it shut. Something was taking me over, and it was robbing me of my being. This was too far to turn back.

I was seeing my family in a whole different way. I wanted to blame Dr Briggs for this change. There was something that was so strange about his mannerisms. I hadn’t noticed this before. He was making his criticism of my story so personal. He wasn’t simply being hyper-aware of every detail. He was messing with me. This felt like way more than him playing master. He wanted something from me.

At first, I saw his encroachment as being based on something sexual. But it was more than this. It was almost as if he wanted me to worship him. This feeling was more intense than any characters that I had brought to life. What made it worse was that I didn’t feel as if I could simply dismiss his advances. He had found a way to work himself into my psyche. It gave me the creeps.

I tried to confront him with my misgivings. And he pretended to back off. I understood if I came right out and challenged him, he would deny everything. There was much that seemed unconscious in his actions. But that did not diminish how afraid it made me feel.

Where would these feelings stop? I didn’t want to reciprocate them. But Dr. Briggs had made himself indispensable. This was totally overwhelming. I imagined him appearing in my room when I was alone. I dreaded a knock at my door. I reassured myself that there was no way that he could have tracked me down. This was a small town so anything was possible.

I wondered if there was something that I had done that had encouraged him. I felt guilty for doubting myself. I felt even more ashamed for feeling that I had led him on. I had become so wrapped up in my school work that I had neglected my personal life. There was a part of me that felt flattered by the attention. This was really nasty. I felt as if I was pushing him for even more. I needed this to stop. I didn’t want to become a character of my own fiction.

The scandal made me feel special. Guys had ignored me since I had come to college. I had friends. But nothing like this. I was existing in the shadows. This made me believe that I had an identity.

I had to take it for what it was. He had nothing to risk. He made sure that I wouldn’t

report him. And I was certain that I wasn't the first girl who had felt like this. He had a bevy of woman scattered around him who felt nurtured by his profound commentary. And he had blessed each with his treasured wisdom. I wondered how many had taken it further. He might have convinced them that this was all part of the liberation of the soul. This second-rate poet suddenly became a first-tier Don Juan. At least, that was what he wanted to tell himself. And we all looked on with glee.

Maybe I was wrong. Chloe had emerged in the pages of my fiction full-bodied and ready to do battle. Dr. Briggs acted in a similar way. He never tried to call me after hours. He never touched me physically. After I put my story away, he never said anything that I could construe personally. Everything that I felt was a phenomenon of my own creation. If he was pulling the strings of that process, then that was the culprit. Could I blame him for the fact that he was so wrapped up in his work? As long as my emotions were so intense, I identified more and more with Chloe. Chloe started to become a real person. And Donna was relegated to the pages of my stories. I wondered if I would ever get her back.

In my hands, Chloe appeared as a much more sensual person. Granted her intellect was acute. But her passions were overwhelming. I used their depiction to gratify my own desires. It was difficult for me to light that fire. And my journey took place entirely in my imagination. But once I got it going, there was no stopping the raging river. Chloe would spare no opportunity to express her feelings.

If I had actually based my character on a real model, that connection had been completely transformed in my revision. Chloe did not restrain herself. This made me wonder about the nature of her own formation. I started to believe that her trauma had been a lot more pronounced than in my initial portrayal. I was ready to make the necessary changes to my depiction. Such changes would have pleased Dr. Briggs immensely. I just didn't want him to assume that I had done this for his benefit.

I could barely recognize the old Chloe. This was also troubling. The character bore more resemblance to this libidinally-driven persona who I had repressed than to the actual character who I had originally tried to create. I wasn't being true to my vocation. That could barely restrain me. I was turned on by my new power. Chloe must have encountered the same split in her own psyche. But she did not give in so readily to temptation. I was again afraid. What did this portend for my own behavior?. I fantasized about frolicking naked in Dr. Briggs's chambers. I was the lusty ghost who was prepared to be ravaged by my master. Aghast!

I did my best to snap out of my reverie. But I was writing more feverishly than ever. This allowed me to indulge my fantasy at every turn. I had been so steadfast in trying to maintain a moral tone. Now the flood gates were open. Nothing could be done.

I pushed away the keyboard. I refused to share the latest volleys with my mentor. I didn't want to make him think that he had been victorious in our duel. There must have been some kind of integrity that I could salvage. I felt more than ever ready to accuse Mr. Briggs.

I reviewed our time together. When I replayed the encounters, they seemed much more innocent than I had first envisioned them. I didn't like this fact. I had been more impressionable than I could have imagined. Wasn't this Dr. Briggs's technique of seduction? He would force girls like me to admit our own role in our demise. Dr. Briggs would never do a thing. He wouldn't write the love notes that would be passed under his door. He wouldn't engage in the

amorous glances with his students. He wouldn't inflame the hearts of his admirers. He would make his accusers admit to their own guilt. Then he would lay waste to every one. Where was the wise old soul who could set things right? Dr. Briggs was in for a punishment that would level even the most heroic sort. His timid nature would be cut to threads.

I had enough of short stories to do me a lifetime. If I didn't do well in my Creative Writing class, I would realize that Dr. Briggs had taken advantage of his station. For the time being, I could find more comfort in my Sociology home work. Such miscreants could not hide as easily under the scrutiny of empirical research.

As I fell asleep, I could sense that the pressure of the last few days was getting to me. I couldn't have it both ways. If I was going to convict the good professor, I could not redeem him for my fantasies. I needed a more suitable distraction.

I wasn't sure if I had what it took to be a writer. Worse, I hardly felt like an ideal model for fiction.

"I didn't invite you over. Why did you just show up like this?"

"I was worried about my recommendation."

"I told you to complete your story. But you never did what I requested. Why do you think that I'm going to help you now?"

"I might be able to make a deal with you."

"What do you have that I could possibly want?"

"Does the devil always ask lost souls that question?"

"The devil is permitted to engage in temptation, but he cannot do the actual sinning himself."

"Is this one of those games: I can touch you, but you are not allowed to touch me?"

"Sin cannot enter the body any other way than through the heart."

"And you're the heartless wonder here."

"Call it what you will. You came by uninvited."

"My survival depends on it. You show up in my dreams day after day. And the one time that I need you, you are ready to condemn me."

"Speak or forever hold your peace."

"The devil has my tongue."

"Good answer!"

Dr. Briggs had beat back my challenges. I wondered if he had cameras in his place.

"Do you want to see yourself filmed?"

"I was thinking the same thing. Do you have anything worth stealing here?"

"What did you have in mind?"

"A man who answers a question with a question is insane."

"And the woman who asks the question in the first place is looking for trouble."

"That's reverse logic. It assume that the offended party knows that the offender will reply with an offense."

"Good observation. Any last requests?"

"I want my soul back."

"I think that Lee Tate guards that treasure."

"I thought that you and he were one and the same."

“Wrong answer.”
 “Does that give you the right to do whatever you will with me?”
 “You need to quit this Donna thing. It’s really not flattering.”
 “You need to quit this Dr. Briggs thing. It makes you sound like a moron.”
 “It’s not as if you’re going to go for Lee Tate.”
 “Dr. Briggs hasn’t rolled up any brownie points.”
 “He was doing a pretty good job with Miss Donna.”
 “I think a cocker spaniel would have racked up some points with her.”
 “That seems like quite a low blow even for you.”
 “You’re the one who’s been treating her with disdain.”
 “What do you want me to tell her? You write wonderful stories. They have the erotic content of a Girl Scout manual.”
 I had him on the ropes, “I always thought that you were a pervert.”
 “That isn’t what I meant.”
 “Must we mean what we say?”
 “What we mean is evolving. Like the chicken. Must we be mean when we speak?”
 “Dr. Briggs, you have been convicted on two accounts. So give me my *A* and let me go.”
 “Nothing is easy!”
 “Give me the abridged version.”
 “There was a girl from Nantucket.”
 “Does that one go with the guy who got his dick severed one night?”
 “Yours doesn’t rhyme.”
 “Nor does yours. But guys don’t listen. They only hear what they want to hear.”
 “Girls don’t listen. That’s why they can’t take directions.”
 “I had no idea that you were going to challenge me to a duel. Of course, you’re a little limp to do the challenging.”
 “Nothing that a little passion couldn’t cure.”
 “You could drink a gallon of passion, and you’d still be lying there in a puddle of your own making.”
 “That makes no sense.”
 “Must we make sense?”
 “If we want an *A*.”
 “Once there was a boy from Texas.”
 “This is going to get good.”
 “You should have stuck to poetry. These short story classes are becoming a real distraction.”
 “Do you think that you’ll ever find love in your life?”
 “Weren’t you tormenting Donna with that question? You find the girl who is most weighed down by that question, and you propose yourself as a remedy.”
 “Somewhere in America at this moment, my remedy is working.”
 “Doesn’t Nebraska University have a grievance procedure?”
 “Don’t you need a lawyer?”
 “I’m going to wake up and realize what you’re really up to, and you won’t stand a

chance.”

“I’m glad that you are so sure that you are going to be waking up.”

“Is this another one of Lee Tate’s torture methods.”

“Sleep deprivation has its uses, Chloe.”

“Oh, lovely, you’re going to tell me that love-making is the same thing as sleep deprivation torture.”

“I am glad that liberalism is still in flower.”

“I’m glad that deflowering liberals is still considered a sport at NU.”

“We’ve battled to a draw. One more thing, and you can get that grade.”

“Is Lee Tate going to apply electro-shock?”

“I thought that I was going to get a token of your affection.”

“I left the cattle prod with the Agriculture Department.”

“There goes my Christmas bonus out the window.”

“Fly, robin, fly!”

Toby sat next to me. We were looking at pages full of equations.

“I think that I almost have it. If you take this variable and transfer it over here, then the movement follows a circular path. And it intersects at this point on the line.”

“Read the number back to me.”

I listened carefully and made sure that I was getting each digit correctly.

“I thought that the problem was unsolvable.”

“That’s what the construction said. But we’ve adjusted things. We have Cody’s key code. We can get into all his accounts.”

“Are you sure of that?”

He nodded in assent.

“Damn, are we good.”

We had been trying to discover some flaw in his presentation. This was the subliminal message that virtually guaranteed complete devotion in his followers.

The scene quickly changed. I was not sitting with Toby any longer.

“Do you know what you just did?” It was Lee Tate.

“No!”

You’ve screwed yourself for life. I can break into every one of your accounts.”

“It isn’t as if I own anything.”

“This is more permanent. It is like your code for life.”

“That’s nonsense.”

“We built this whole master story for you. Cody Brainerd in a coma. The chase across the country. All of it was a ruse to get you to do this one little thing.”

“I thought that Toby did it.”

“Toby was a figment that we created. That way we could have you repeat back the numbers to him. You were talking in your sleep.”

“What good are those numbers? It’s not as if I’m someone important.”

“The code represents a scientific regularity that can be inserted into a formula. This result determines a host of different applications from psychology to physics. It’s how the universe works. It’s more potent than mind control.”

“I don’t believe you.”

“There’s a theory behind it. You have all these experiences that are similar to other people. On this basis, you make a series of your own decisions. Those decisions follow the same pattern. These include things as unique as your pass code for your bank account. It’s almost like multiplying all these numbers together.”

“Just because you know the product doesn’t mean that you can determine the individual factors.”

“This is a unique mapping. So we can deduce the whole shebang. Just like that.”

He clapped his hands.

“What about Cody Brainerd.”

“There never was a Cody Brainerd. We just made up this situation for you. It helped you to develop a general pattern of thought. You thought of it as a lesson plan. But it was more like a computer program. Just a giant spreadsheet that you filled in with numbers as you went along. But there were some things that you thought of as private. You wouldn’t share that information. So you needed to feel that you were protecting your life. And that wasn’t even enough. You needed to find someone who you could trust. So we entered your dreams and created Toby. You would have given him the world.”

I didn’t like how any of this sounded.

“In the defamation of character case: Cody Brainerd vs. Chloe Donzenac. The honorable Harriet Fleming presiding. Please rise.”

“Point of procedure, your honor. The case should read Chloe Donzenac vs. Cody Brainerd.”

“Ms. Donzenac, you are making a motion in regards to the criminal case. This is a civil proceeding. Your motion is denied.”

“Your honor, I would like to make a motion to dismiss this case as it coincides with an existing criminal case.”

“Ms. Donzenac, the plaintiff’s complaint applies independently of the criminal case.”

“Your honor, Mr. Brainerd attempted to have me killed.”

“Ms. Donzenac, you are out of order.”

“That seems like a travesty of justice.”

“Ms. Donzenac, you are out of order.”

“Harriet Fleming, I question the jurisdiction that has made you a judge.”

“You are in contempt.”

“I have utter contempt for the authority of this court.”

“Baliff, have the defendant removed.”

“If I’m removed, then there’s going to be no one else in the courtroom.”

“What are you saying? The courtroom is full.”

“And they’re all coming with me. If I leave, everyone leaves with me.”

“Is this a ball game in the schoolyard. A decision fails to go your way, and you take the ball away.”

“I’m just removing myself. That’s how you wanted it.”

“I want you to behave.”

“Everyone asks me to behave. But someone is trying to kill me.”

“That’s not up to me to decide.”

I started to wave my arms in the air.

“What are you going to decide: my guilt or innocence?”

“No. This case is about whether you irreparably insulted Mr. Brainerd.”

“Of course, I insulted him. His henchman was going to shoot me.”

“Did you have proof?”

“I overheard him talking in the next room.”

“That’s hearsay.”

“It’s not hearsay when I heard him with my own ears.”

“But I didn’t. So you are trying to involve me in hearsay. And if you’re lying to me about what he said, then you’re asking me to suborn perjury.”

I heard him with my own ears. He was in the commission of a crime.”

“Did you see the gun? He could have been wondering aloud if he should do something. When he considered the full impact of his actions, he changed his mind.”

“He didn’t change anything. He chased me around the country with one purpose in mind.”

“He never caught up with you, so you have no idea what was his actual purpose. You may have left your wallet behind. And he wanted to get it back to you.”

“Aren’t you going to do anything to help?”

“I’m going to render a decision.”

“And what is your decision?”

“It is the considered opinion of the court to have you taken off of life-support.”

“I’m not dead yet. I have a lot more life in me.”

“We no longer consider it prudent to force Mr. Brainerd to pay for your hospital expenses. And if you can no longer pay yourself, then the only alternative is to have the support removed permanently.”

“I’ll be able to pay when I’m healthy and moving around.”

“You made it to the court, and you still have no means to pay.”

“I don’t want to die, your honor.”

“None of us do. If you can find some way to sustain life, you have our complete support.”

“I want your life-support.”

“You had that opportunity, and you wasted it.”

“I thought that it was simply a stage towards my further development. I never saw it as an end in itself.”

“You are indulging the patience of the court.”

“I need more time.”

“We’ve given you loads of chances”

“Now, you’re working with Cody Brainerd.”

“We are working with the law. And you are still out of order.”

“Then I’m going to take my ball and my life support home. I’ve always wanted a chance to live. And you’ve taken it away from me.”

“You are really callous with respect to the wishes of others.”

“We’ll let you live if you can prove that your life is of worth to others.”

“Is this a future challenge, or do I have to offer past documentation? I threw away all my receipts.”

“Either way, you’re not going to meet the requirements of the court.”

“You are making your decision before I’ve had a chance to do a thing. That is hardly fair.”

“This was never intended to be as fair proceeding.”

“Don’t they call that a kangaroo court. Are you in cahoots with Cody Brainerd?”

“I have never heard of Cody Brainerd. Is he someone that you made up to find pleasure with the court?”

“This was supposed to be a defamation of character case. Then that got put aside to stay to prevent me from being taken off of life-support. Then I was left to fend for on my own. And then you got rid of Cody Brainerd. What is going to be next?”

“You’re guilty. You always have been. And you think that the more that you feel badly, the more you deserve salvation.”

“Your honor, I would like to address the court.”

“You have been addressing the court for the last half hour.”

“Then I’d like to address a higher court.”

“You can’t make an appeal until this court has rendered a decision. Then the higher court will take it under advisement.”

“But you said that you rendered your decision. You want me to die.”

“That wasn’t my decision. You said so yourself. It was Lee Tate.”

The judge hit the gavel and dismissed the case.

I found myself again back in the hotel room.

“Lee, I think that you have it all wrong. You thought that you could ply me with drugs and I would do anything that you wanted.”

“You did enough for me,”

“I still said no.”

“Do you think that made a difference? You might as well have said yes?”

I tried to get up. I fell back on the bed.

“I know that you made things go your way last time. But this time, I’m ready for you.”

“Lee, you are fucked up. Is that what turns you on?”

“The only thing that turns me on is money.”

“Not young girls half-naked on a bed.”

“Is this entrapment. Are you eighteen?”

“What do you want me to say?”

“Are the cops employing women from the sex industry again? Isn’t that illegal?”

“I thought that you wanted to talk about information.”

“Information about sex.”

“I’m not giving it up to you. No time, no way.”

“That’s all that I need to get me going.”

“You perverts are all the same. You think that your imagination rules the world.”

“My imagination does rule the world.”

"It's just that it's rather pedestrian."

"You're part of my imagination."

I needed to figure out how to escape him for good.

"Chloe, didn't Saint Louis prove anything at all to you. If you needed money, you'd do anything. "

"You tried to infect me with that dream. But it never took hold. I couldn't sustain my consciousness to do those despicable acts for you. You could never pay me enough."

"That doesn't mean that you didn't do it. It just meant that you didn't want to remember."

"I remember up until the point that I passed out."

"There's a difference. You blacked out."

"That's how you want to think that it is. It sort of lets you off the hook. You never screwed up. It was the girl. Does Cody know about this?"

"There is no Cody. It was something that you made up so you could make sweet on me."

"In your dreams, loverboy!"

"That's all that there is. Dreams. Like a ping pong match. It's simply a question if I can get inside your head."

"You're doing pretty well to start. But that is where it is going to end."

"What are you going to do? Fly away?"

"What are you going to do? Hurt me?"

"Chloe, you love performing in public. What do you want me to do to you?"

"What's your pleasure? Can you pay?"

"I've got the money if you've got the time."

Could I turn the tables on him at the last minute? There was no way that I was going to get back all my strength. I needed to think really quickly.

"You don't like how the story turned out, Chloe."