

## 10. FOOD FOR THOUGHT

For once, my efforts in the classroom seem to be working. Spurred on by my comments about fast food franchises, students have organized an educational outreach program on health and diet. There has been a petition to have all franchises removed from the student union. And sales at fast food restaurants are down. Suddenly the chair of my department is taking a renewed interest in what we are talking about in the classroom.”

“Your future is tied to revising these statements of yours.”

“I’m not a politician who simply yields to interest group pressure.”

“But you do need to be more responsible in the classroom.”

“Fast food really doesn’t lead to a healthy body. There’s too much fat and sodium in the foods. Students are at an age where we can actually influence their behaviors. This is not about changing the world. This is just a simple thing that one person can do for his own well being.

“You’re not paid to have an opinion. You’re paid to teach English.”

“But moral and political choices are the core of any artist’s endeavor.”

“Artists pursue beauty. They make us feel better about ourselves. They don’t get us preoccupied with life’s problems.”

“Is that what you told yourself when you were in graduate school.?”

“I realized that I needed to finish my thesis quickly so I could get a job and get on with my life.”

“This is an infringement on academic freedom.”

“Evan, who are you kidding? I just want to give you some advice. Friendly advice. This is about your tenure. And there are irregularities.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I’ve talked about some of your female students. There could be a law suit.”

“For what?”

“You know what! You’re not dealing with children here. These women know what they saw.”

“There going to have a lot of trouble proving it.”

“That’s pretty nasty. What is that supposed to mean?”

“I never did anything. I’m the teacher.”

“What is going on?”

“Somebody has a grudge.”

“And?”

“I think they are being put up to it.”

“Out of the blue. How would anyone know which women to talk to if there wasn’t already a problem?”

“You tell me. There just seems to be too much of a coincidence here.”

“You know it. That’s what I’m afraid of. Where there’s smoke, there’s fire.”

I want to focus on the boycott. Something has gotten out of hand. I use the weekend to collect myself.

On Monday morning, the smiling faces are looking back at me. I’m trying to figure out who might have reported.

“Kind of inexperienced. And someone more experienced leads them on. Tells them what to do.”

“What are you talking about, Olive.”

“The movie.”

I stop Olive after class.

“Do you have a problem with something?”

If she is the one who reported on me, this could get really tricky.

“Everything is fine.”

Would she really tell me if she something was bothering her? I can feel where this is going.

“You show these movies in class. People are having sex. None of this is natural.”

“I just want to get you thinking about things. Real things that might happen to you.”

“I’m not that kind of girl.”

“Are you with a guy?”

She looks at me. She wonders for a second what I am asking her.

“Not in that way.”

“Maybe this is too much to think about at this stage. Forget about the movies. Just read the book.”

“I don’t like to read.”

“That’s why I show the movies. To get you thinking.”

“I don’t like to read. But I could try.”

“Good!”

“There’s something else that I want to say. Need to say.”

“OK!”

“What’s so bad about all these stores? People have to make a living.”

“A lot of times when we purchase things, we don’t think about why. It is a good idea to think about how we spend our money. Do our purchases improve our health?”

“That sounds reasonable. But we all can’t become revolutionaries. There are a lot of good things in our world.”

“Yes, there are.”

She is moving very haphazardly from subject matter to subject matter.

“Is there anything else that you were wondering about?”

“There is. But I need to figure it out. I need to write it down.”

“I’m open to discussing whatever.”

“In your office?”

“That would be good.”

“There’s nothing else that you need to bring up now?”

She can’t be the one who reported on me. She is too abstract in her questioning. I could take this as a warning to back off on my method. But the class would lose its effectiveness. The students need to understand that knowledge is a powerful force in effecting change. The tired and true approach gets nowhere. Students hardly retain those lessons. It is important to shake them up. Get them to see new perspective for their life.

I am becoming such a militant for social justice. Perhaps, this is not the best forum.

“Knowledge freaks me out. There is so much to learn. And I just lose myself in all of it. I have trouble figuring out what I really think.”

“You have to learn to let go!”

“I’m trying. I’m trying so hard.”

“Entertain yourself. Don’t think that you have to have all the answer.”

“But I have class assignments. I have deadlines.”

“Take some time just to relax. Time where you aren’t doing anything at all.”

“I don’t want to get overwhelmed.”

“You will if you don’t step back from it all!”

Olive is making such strides. But she has to watch out that she doesn’t get crushed by the process. If she can step back and see the overall picture. My idealism won’t be enough. She needs to be guided. At the same time, she has to make up her own mind. I can’t be underhanded in my approach; giving her the opening but tricking her with regards to the final result.

“You can’t expect to learn everything all at once. Look for patterns that make sense to you.”

“I feel as if I am being transformed into some new kind of being.”

“Welcome the change.”

“This voice keep me up at night with all these questions.”

“Keep the questions going. But take care to get enough sleep.”

“Can I?”

“The most effective way to learn is to think practically. Short term goals. Actual results. It may not be perfect. But it’s real enough. And you can build on that to tackle the more difficult problems.”

“I don’t even know who I am anymore. My friends look at me weird.”

“Don’t get carried away.”

“A lot of them think of college as an excuse to get high.”

“Everyone has their own path. Contentment is important.”

“Should I go party with them?”

“All school and no play makes for a dull Olive.”

“That sounds silly!”

“You can’t worry about school all the time.”

“It’s no longer about school. It’s the adventure of learning. That’s the thing that I don’t want to stop.”

“But if you’re really learning, you understand that you can learn from everyone.”

“My friends don’t like to read.”

“You didn’t like to read when you started the class.”

“I guess that I’ve changed.”

She leaves the classroom with a sense of purpose.

“It wasn’t actually one of the women.”

“No, it was a male student. He said that he didn’t like the way that you looked at the women. It was as if you were trying to stalk them.”

“You took that seriously.”

“Sometimes girls won’t say what’s on their mind. They’ll let their prof get away with a

lot. He may have seen something that was irregular!”

“That’s all.”

“He felt that it was serious enough to put it in writing. I thought that he might have talked to some of the women in the class.”

Why do some people feel the need to interfere with a good thing?

“Reading is so new to me. I don’t think that I read a book before I took this class.”

“It’s important to learn to get out of your own world. To question your preconceptions.”

“Knowledge is so important. Taking in all the facts and making sense of them. Why do I have to read fiction?”

“It’s one thing to read about an argument that you’ve never seen before. A toxic dump that’s forty miles from your house. Cuts in funding for the neighborhood school. Sometimes new information can get you to switch your opinion. That’s how science works. But we see cases where people try to skew scientific research to benefit their political position. So it’s just not about information. Our personalities have such an influence how we process new information. We turn off an opponent’s argument because it is convenient for us. Fiction works to paint the whole picture. How we use story-telling to support what we’re after.”

“Don’t we fall in love with story-telling for its own sake?”

“So be it. We do that anyway. When a story fits our pre-ordained idea.”

“Does that happen with our love life. We fall for those people who promise us comfort. Who delight us with something that we’re used to.”

“Or charm us with the appeals of the unknown.”

“Wow!”

“This seems like a topic that is close to your interests.”

“That guy that I told you about.”

“And?”

“He’s getting envious of my learning. It’s not going to work out.”

“Too bad! Reading good novels can’t substitute for living. But it can provide a solace that might not exist anywhere else. They show us how to step out of our situation. How to become someone new!”

I am already seeing such a change. She describes how she has started reading novels to make more sense of it all.

“Even if I can’t figure it out, I feel better just trying.”

She hands me a copy of her essay. This is not the same girl who started in my class. Her voice has authority.

“Do you like it?”

“It’s a great essay.”

“Wow!”

“You did some great research.”

“I wonder if we’re doing enough in this class. I read all about what happened in Seattle. Is it enough just to protest? The corporation still go on.”

“What is your suggestion? We were able to get the fast food out of the student union.”

“Something more.”

“We can learn from our successes. Expand the scope of our demonstrations. We can link

up with groups in other cities.”

“Is that enough?”

“Maybe it isn’t enough to change everything right away. But we are moving in the right direction.”

“We have to stop them. We’re going to lose our planet.”

“Yes, we do have to stop them.”

“There has to be some other way. Something that just stops them in their tracks.”

“If people stop buying, it’s a significant step.”

“But we can’t stop buying from everywhere.”

“So what do you propose?”

“Direct action. Shutting them down.”

“It is important to get the workers involved. They have the real power to make a difference.”

“No, a total shut down.”

“How do you make that happen?”

“As I said, direct action.”

“Some actions may be counterproductive.”

“But if the companies are just making things worse, they shouldn’t be able to continue acting like the do.”

“You are right. But some kinds of action just play into their hands. If you are ineffective in accomplishing your goals, you are just going to make people angry.”

“That sounds so conservative. You’re supposed to offer leadership.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Destroy the system.”

“But *the system* is all about destruction. You don’t want to condone its methods.”

“Destruction is the only thing that it doesn’t know how to deal with.”

“It will just turn society into an armed camp. The people who you need to support you will fail to see your aims.”

“We are already an armed camp.”

“We have to break down the militarism. And we have to take advantage of the democratic means at our disposal. That’s why I’m a teacher, not a street fighter.”

“Sometimes you have to take it to the streets.”

“You have to assess the distribution of force. You have to organize more effectively. You have to offer a clear program. Otherwise, you’re just provocateurs who aggravate the situation. You give the powers that be an excuse.”

My arguments seem to make sense. She has come a long way. Now she is impatient. She wants to make up for lost time. I am a teacher. We are applying the lessons. That is great. I just don’t want people to get the wrong idea.

“You told one of your students that it was a good idea to blow up a building.”

“Who said that? It wasn’t me.”

“You explained the motives of some people involved in one of those demonstrations.”

“That wasn’t a demonstration. It was an act of sabotage. And I never justified the arguments of those involved. I explained how frustration by the principles had led to those

actions. And the company had only aggravated the situation. But I never said that the sabotage was a good idea.”

“We have a report to the contrary.”

“This is still a democracy. I have a right to question my accusers.”

“Everything in America can’t follow your ideal of democracy. We have rules here.”

“I’m pretty good at following them. But if we go along with your arguments, we can’t even teach about the Spanish Civil War, the Russian Revolution, or the American Revolution. What kind of college is that?”

“Restrain your radicalism.”

“Do I need to get a lawyer?”

“I’ll take care of it.”

I wonder who is the student that is trying to interrupt our lessons.

“There is so much to learn. I feel that I’m never going to catch up.”

“Look at your progress in a couple of months. A year or two from now, you will be running this school!”

“Quit playing with me.”

“I’m serious. You’re even embarrassing me now.”

“Maybe you should do your homework.”

“Trying to teach me a lesson.”

“I feel as if you have this power over me. It’s freaking me out.”

“It’s not me. It’s the books. Since I’m the one who got you started, you attribute all these magic powers to me. I’m a pretty average guy.”

“Are you sure that it’s not you?”

“I wish that it was me.”

“I don’t know what else that I can say.”

“Keep up the good work. That’s all you have to say.”

“I want to do more for you.”

“It’s not about me. And you know that. If you get too sentimental, you are only going to slow down your progress.”

“That guy that I told you about. Things aren’t going so well with him. He blamed you for making things worse.”

“Both you and he know that I have nothing to do with it.”

“I told him as much. He didn’t believe me. And now I don’t either.”

“It’s a terrible time for you. And you need something to hold it together. But I’m not the one.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I’m a guide. I’m not the purpose for the journey.”

“You know that you are.”

“Step out of the story. That’s the best part of the lesson.”

“You could be right. I still owe a lot to you.”

“You’re way beyond me now.”

“Don’t say that!”

“Keep up the good writing!”

“Quit going sentimental on me.”

The complaints seem to have subsided for the time being. And Olive is doing wonderfully. I know that she helps motivate the other students. Maybe she has tamed the traitor in our midst.

“You wonder if you can really do anything to stop the process once it gets going. Every emotion gets turned into a product. Every product is the basis for a new franchise. All our emotions are colonized. All our dreams catalogued.”

“You sound more cynical than usual.

After class, even Olive questions me.

“The cards aren’t turning up your way.”

“I don’t know why?”

“You could be trying to sabotage your own success.”

“I wish I had an explanation. I should go home and think about it.”

“You should have some coffee with me before you end up doing something stupid that you can’t fix.”

“Like what?”

“I could tell you over a harmless cup of coffee.”

“This wouldn’t be a good idea for us. I really am proud of your progress. But that’s why I teach. It’s not as if I’m looking for anything in return.”

“That isn’t what I mean.”

I try to put Olive out of my mind. The pest seems to have gone away. So I am having difficulty creating a distraction.

She is working on a major essay so I guess that I won’t see her for a little while.

“Our bodies exist in this hell of our desires to consume. We burn with this incredible fire that we satisfy with a cola. Or by a trip to an early morning shopping spree. Anything to get that satisfaction that is so worry free. What do we share? Our biologies—no. We’ve all been hard-wired by that same maze of consumerism.”

“You seem to be giving in to the language of crass materialism.”

“What would be better?”

“Quit the language of science-fiction. The hard-wiring. The product identification. You are creating a link that can’t be broken.”

“What are the options?”

“Not playing along!”

“Is it that easy. Hasn’t the mass media so conditioned us?”

Olive stops by for one of her sessions.

“If you know that someone’s a real jerk, why do you want him to succeed?”

“That’s the skill of a good writer. He makes you love people that you really hate.”

“That seems like cheating.”

“There is a deviousness to a good writer.”

“I’m trying to learn about that.”

“Here is the tricky part. Once the protagonist gets what he wants, he overshoots. His contentment is never enough to satisfy him. He wants more. And in that process, he aims for even more.”

“So you get taken in by all this.”

“I want to scream at the writer. Say nasty things to the main character. But I let down my guard.”

“Are you working on fiction now?”

“I have an idea for a short story.”

“That sounds pretty marvelous. I wouldn’t mind reading anything that you have.”

“I need a little time to get it all together.”

I can’t wait to see her stuff. I have to back off. Let her discover who she is. It would be so easy to destroy all that.

“Come out with me for a drink.”

“Don’t you have to work on your story? I want to see something next time that we get together.”

“I’ve been working all day.”

“You need to get interested in boys your age.”

“What’s that about? If you want to play hard to get, don’t feed me such a weak volley.”

“I’m not playing a game. I’m not playing this. I really want to see your story.”

There’s only a couple weeks left in the semester. After that point, I won’t see Olive that much. I just have to let all of this pass. Let her put all her energy into her writing.

“We’ve had another complaint. It’s about that female student of yours. Have you been giving her special treatment?”

“I’ve been helping her with her writing. That’s all.”

“That’s all that you’ve been doing, or all that you’ve been feeling.”

“I can’t be guilty for my feelings.”

“You can if you can’t keep them to yourself.”

“I haven’t done anything wrong. Not a thing.”

“We’re going to have to look into this.”

Who is playing this game with me? One of the other girls?

“I finished the story.”

“I thought that you were going to take until the end of the semester.”

“I had some inspiration.”

“Great. I’m looking forward to reading this!”

“Let’s go celebrate!”

“We’ll do that after I take some time to read the story.”

“Later this evening?”

“No, I have a big meeting tomorrow morning.”

“OK, I can wait!”

I dodge this bullet. But I know that there is a canon shot ahead.

Her story is a thinly-disguised tale of her crush on me. I’m not sure how I’m going to handle this. It is distracting me from my morning meeting.

“I really think that it’s your own fault. You pretend that you’re giving your students freedom. You just want devotion. And you get surprised when you get it.”

“What are you telling me?”

“She could have told her own story. Instead, she just fell into the trap. She wrote the



story that you wanted to hear. You just wanted her to flatter you. Your great method. You over-the-hill rebel.”

“I never told her what to write.”

“You needed to tell her what not to write. She just played into your megalomania. She worshiped you.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“Now you ask?”

“I am asking?”

“Tell her that the story is derivative.”

“That is going to break her heart.”

“Everything else is flattery.”

I can’t follow his advice.

“If you don’t follow my advice, you won’t be able to resist her.”

I have really fucked up this situation. I let Olive get this close. Now I want to blame her for what has happened. This is crazy.

“So you’re taking back the things that you said last class.”

“Some of the things. The blatant struggle against consumerism. I realize my own mistake. I abandoned the guerilla technique for this silly attempt to bring down the monolith. I was just adding to the mess with my weak protest.”

“What is the guerilla technique: blowing things up?”

“No, it’s changing the small details in your everyday life. Trying not to play along. But not getting obsessive about. Learning to strike the enemy at its source. Not along its various arms.”

“You continue to support the demonstration against fast food restaurants on campus.”

“That was a total success. It went way beyond the initial goals.”

“Didn’t it put students out of work?”

“It substituted meaningful work in its place. That was part of the strategy.”

When it comes time to talk to Olive, I try to be delicate.

“I like the story. I think that it’s time to celebrate.”

I ask Olive to come out with a couple of other students. After a couple of drinks, they get me talking about my own writing.

“You wanted to be a novelist.”

“Professor Evan, you’re kidding.”

“I tried. I wrote more than one book. I sent them out. But I sucked. They were all these randy sex tales. My heroes were the total opposite kind of guy to me. They could get girls at the drop of a hat”

Shelia looked me in the eyes, “Evan, you’re lying. You know that you’ve got the power.”

I could see Olive blush. She laughed a lot. She didn’t say a lot. I made the toast: “To Olive, for a great beginning.”

Shelia and Sara leave early. Even Doug only hangs on a little longer. I feel this intense pressure.

“You taught me something tonight.” She moves close to me as if she wanted to kiss me. But it isn’t that. She is a little upset. She continues, “I wanted my story to be this profound

romantic story. But it didn't work the way that I wanted it. I didn't mean it to be like that."

"What?" I want to let her speak.

"It was like one long love letter. There was no author's voice. Just the voice of a young girl who wanted easy answers."

"Don't be so hard on yourself." I am trying to comfort her.

"You told us about your writing. That is just what I did. I put myself too deep into the story."

"What else are you supposed to do?"

"I'm learning my lesson so early in the game. That's the best part. But I wasn't writing for the truth of the story. I was writing to impress you. I hate myself for doing that. I am sorry. That won't happen again."

She is very nervous. She takes a sip from her drink. She catches her breath.

"I'm not sure if I should be angry with you. Or give you a big hug."

"What do you mean?"

"You made all of this happen in this way. You wanted me to fall in love with you so that you could teach me some big lesson. What do they call it? Transference."

"How so?"

"I wrote this story. And it was bad. But I had to see it myself."

She jumps up and bends over to kiss me on the cheek.

"Where are you going in such a hurry?"

"I've got an idea for a story. I better write it while I have the chance."

"A love story?"

"Not at this juncture," she smiles.

I get the resolution that I want. But I still feel cheated. The process has always been about her. But I had tried to mess with its progress.

Before I go to bed, I think about my short career as a writer. Should I have taken more chances? Why had I let my hunger die, while Olive has learned the lesson so early. I want to wind back the clock.

"What happened?"

"I told her about my life. And in that brief moment, she realized that she didn't want to become the failure that I was."

"You're taking it pretty good."

"I guess that she confirmed my faith in humanity."

"So you do have a heart?"

"What about your damning judgment of me the other night?"

"I guess that I was trying to motivate you."

"You struck the fear of the lord in me. Am I that terrible an influence?"

"You have to be more attentive. You're not a rock star."

"What if I was?"

"We wouldn't need this discussion."

This has been an incredibly tumultuous semester. I am going to have to top myself next time out.

I continue to wonder if I have really done enough to subdue the monsters that have

haunted me. I started out with a real mission. Everyone welcomed my zeal. But I did get side-tracked by playing the cult leader. It had been too easy. Thank goodness, there were some real independent voices in the classroom.

I have the copy of Olive's story on my desk. I relive how my heart had raced as I read the prose. There was no holding back. She cruised through the preliminaries. Her heroine was sexually frank. Not afraid to show herself. Maybe this would be a new blueprint for Olive.

I am tempted to look up my own stories. But I can't get the motivation. My past is better left that way.

I have learned how to deal with the administration. And my lessons have become more focused. Even my occasional critics were silenced. Much of that anger was more due to envy.

I wish that Olive really had the voice to tell the whole truth. I am still flying too high. Someone needs to bring me down to earth.

I have a couple of weeks off. Time to put the books away. I have some critical essays to finish. I decide to leave them until later. I need to put all of this out of my mind.

When I wake up the next morning, I am satisfied. I will turn in my grades, and then I will leave the city for a while. I can worry about next semester as it rolls around. For the time being, I am no longer a teacher. Just an adventurer in the ether of life!