

1/ Erase-a-Sketch

Hoot Factor took his assigned seat in the third row directly fronting the stage, the section reserved for the faculty of the college. Bratword and Armani sat side by side in the front row. They were giddy, whispering to one another. About him, Factor guessed?

Factor imagined a step-by-step scenario in which he was separately to do away with Armani and Bratword. He had read his share of murder mysteries, watched dozens of the film noir flicks. He knew exactly how to execute each of his plans. Were these imaginative plots by Factor to become a reality or merely to remain in his thoughts? The answer to this question stands at the heart of the following narrative, and it also answers a number of questions about Factor himself, an individual worth understanding, in so far as he resembles the rest of us.

Factor was an amiable man. He was normally was easy to talk with. He was by nature a kindly soul, going out of his way not to step on an ant. He was in a murderous mood, though, when he showed up at Milforde College's graduation hoopla. To sit through its tedious pomposity amounted to being sent back into prison, tortured there. The ceremony was to be an hour of hate speech, blah-blah-blah, aggravating his already pissed-off wish these days to defy any person or activity he felt like defying, yet were Factor to miss this valedictory event, his June and last paycheck was to be delayed, the college threatened. "We know you by now, Factor," Dean Malarky informed him.

Factor was dressed in the day's professorial costume, the funereal black gown, the flat dunce cap. Factor stood at five-feet-nine in the slim body of a jogger. Forty-one, he had an abnormally high forehead, a pair of keen, but tired eyes, dark eyebrows, a strong nose, and a head of thick, brown hair matching the color of his eyes. Over the last six months, Factor added

a scraggly goatee to the conspicuously dark mustache on his friendly face, losing some of its closeness to the face of Poe.

A saggy wooden platform stood six feet above the crowd of sweaty parents and the other well-wishers. It was the stage for today's outdoor graduation ceremony. Seated in front of the wooden stage, the dressy crowd had grown impatient for the diplomas to be handed out under a high New Mexico sun, afraid the jerry-rigged platform might collapse at any time. A similar platform had collapsed during the ceremony a year ago, the event in all of the newspapers, a national feel-bad story.

Emeritus Peter Carnage was today's graduation speaker. Carnage had a dry face and a dimpled chin. Two stands of transplanted blond hair rose from the crown of his otherwise balding head. The sweaty pedant leaned weakly on the speaker's glossy wooden podium on loan from the Drama Department. Cooking in the ninety-two degree heat of early June., Carnage looked like the wet noodle he was. The guy pontificated at any opportunity. A series of imbecilic platitudes came from his dry lips, as if he were a rhetorical machine gun rat-a-tat-tat, while a dozen or so members of the crowd slid under a stand of Western pines for its shade, ignoring Carnage. He suddenly tripped over his sixty-eight year old feet, while stumbling over his words.

"Their feature ... no, no, sorry about that," he said. "Let me start again. Their *future* was in their own hands," he told the grads, "like a game of erase-a-sketch."

The stupidity of the metaphor brought neither laughter nor applause from the baking crowd. The concern of the guests here today was a twenty-two year old, period.

The pompous tedium of the festivities paraded two hundred and seven across the grass of the inner quad. Under the desert sun, the ornery or innocent students marched one-by-one. They dressed in light-blue gowns and poufy caps of the same color. One grad whimpered a sigh of

relief, waving her diploma. One tall boy was all gawky glee. A third wore a conspicuously large button on the chest of her gown. The button spelled “gay rights” in reverse in large, unpronounceable letters, STHGIR YAG. She gave the world the antagonistic foot-stomp of a fug-you.

Factor witnessed the light-blue parade on the stage from his un-cushioned wooden chair. He took the ceremony for the little it was, ignoring the clichés of the student speakers, while he more seriously recalled a controversial text on which he lectured from time to time. Once the show was over, Bratword and Armani climbed the six steps onto the elevated stage. They solicitously shook hands with Carnage, then with each other.

At eleven o’clock on the next morning, Factor rached out of his saggy waterbed. He wore a pair of candy-striped boxers, a plain white tee shirt, and his feet smelled of Lotrimin. He had awakened from a troublesome dream, not feeling pretty. He, out of character, was feeling grouchy from recalling yesterday’s rock of a graduation, while this memory then tricked several of Factor’s darker memories of the three years of bad s-h-i-t at Milforde College. On this night, Factor’s strange dream featured his mother, Sylvia. She was sitting up in bed in her hospital room. Factor lovingly gripped his mother’s small hand. Her knobby fingers held a crumpled piece of paper. She handed “this treasure,” she said to her younger son. “Open my note. Read its message,” she said. Factor opened the note. He read his mother’s words, the text handwritten in pencil. The message said, “Hold on. You are in for a ride.”

In his austere bedroom, Factor sat on the unvarnished wooden chair by his waterbed. He dressed in a pair of black jeans and a red-and-white check shirt with a set of faux-pearl buttons. A pair of fire-engine red Nikes rested on the scratchy oak floor. Factor slipped on one of the running shoes. He tried to breathe deeply. To breathe deeply was impossible for him, when a

deep, radical infection blocked his sinuses. The sinus infection was no joke. The interior of his pale face, he sensed, had been invaded and inflamed. A balloon of fiery-hot, toxic air pressed against the insides of his cheek bones and his forehead. It was ever-expanding, blocking his nose from breathing, making Factor feel as if he were walled off from the world outside of himself. The mental and physical anguish caused by the severity of his sinus infection described here had Factor, at times, imagining that some sort of a malevolent demon had attacked and albeit possessing him, had helping him thus to sympathize with the suffering of our ancestors when they understandably felt haunted, body or brain, by the powers of a dark and obscure spirit. Factor was dealing with an empirically-identified illness, the young Dr. Brookwater announced. The infection might go straight to Factor's brain, if it were not taken care of, said the physician, hyperbole or not, who knows? Factor was taking his antibiotic pills, waiting for them to kick in.

Despite feeling poorly, Factor had an actual plan on this late Sunday morning. He normally was a guy that planned only when pressed to do so, but then to plan exceptionally well. Today he expected to clear out the final, few items from his academic office that were worth keeping, stopping there for a few uneventful minutes.

Factor excitedly first rented his adobe cottage three years earlier. The cottage had five rooms of white walls and high-beamed ceilings in the Spanish colonial style of Santa Fe, including a bright kitchen, two small bedrooms, a furnished living room, and a study. His daughter Simpatica sat before a metal table in a sunny corner of their spacious living room. She typed away on the computer keyboard. Factor draped his arms around his twelve-year-old daughter, cuddling her as if she were a younger child.

He kissed her freckled cheek. "*Hola! Buenos dias,*" he said.

Simpatica turned her head away from the computer screen. Raised to be a civilized

individual and a mannerly young lady, she answered, “*Buenos dias, senior*. Each day more precious than the last. Be cool, Dad. Promise.”

A soiled Persian rug covered the center of the living room floor’s red-and-white tiles. The tiles’ arabesque design matched the exotic pattern carved into the room’s heavy doors and its window frames of a Colorado oak. One of its two doorways led to the kitchen, the second in and out of the casita. The living room was a perfect square. One of its white plasterboard walls displayed a rare color print of Santa Fe’s Old Town during the 1920s. Hanging beside this picturesque scene from the past was an oil painting of the pueblo of San Ildefonso. A signed photograph of the pueblo’s world-famous potter Maria Martinez glorified the opposite wall, Factor's prize. In the photograph, a shy Maria held up one of her uniquely black-on-black pots with its geometrical pattern that ran diagonally against the pot’s curves, the design magically creating the illusion of a three-dimensional surface. Below the photograph of the potter was a recessed niche in the wall. The recessed space was roughly six inches deep, twelve high and wide. Its terracotta platform was empty. Many of the locals would recognize this aperture in the wall as a holy *nicho*. Its platform may well have held the icon of a Madonna and Child at one time. If so, the image was missing when Factor settled into his adobe home.

Under a tall paned window, Simpatica typed away in the living room’s sunniest corner. She was feeling happy there, she said. A home PC was rare in the eighties. Simpatica’s hands excitedly clicked over the pale keys, as if the keyboard of a piano. She wore a fluorescent, long-sleeve cotton shirt, a pair of stonewashed Levis, and her favorite purple Chuck Taylors. Her straight brown hair showed a few tints of her mother’s blond. Her face was freckled, her eyes a marble green. Simpatica was a disciplined and civil child, yet adventurous by nature. She smiled a mouthful of blue and silver braces.

Daphne the dog sprawled under the computer table, looking like a large pancake burnt at the edges. She was a fat, tan Collie mix with a set of dark ears. Factor kindly rescued the nearly frozen thing three months earlier while jogging at the former Central Reservoir inside the Audubon Sanctuary. The reservoir had recently been condemned by the city as a source of drinking water. A stray is a risk. Daphne was to go pee-pee on Factor's valuable Persian rug during her first week in the house, typical behavior almost to be expected, if you know dogs. The rare handwoven rug was a thank-you gift from a colleague, Zunair Absolon, when Z's book on the Persian Empire (that Factor practically wrote for him) was published, earning him tenure. Daphne was a dull, untrainable dog, Factor soon learned. She neither sat nor fetched nor obeyed. She constantly begged either for comfort or petting. She looted the kitchen trash at any opportunity.

Dump the dog back where he first spotted the mutt, one side of Factor said on this late morning, while he prepared his coffee in the kitchen. Send her deep into the woods that surround the scrub pines and the scrawny junipers that encircle the Central's pool of water. If only he might set back the world's clocks, so to revert to the moment he spotted her, not save the dog, he told himself. He listened to Simpatica's typing, finally tying the red laces of a second sneaker, kneeling on the kitchen floor. The beast waddled around the house, taking up space, a slobbering tongue, a gassy butt. Simpatica, however, adored the beast. Adoration in itself was a big plus in the dog's favor. Daphne furthermore was useful, Factor more pleasantly told himself. The dog was easy, not pricy company for Simpatica, when he was absent from the adobe. So Dad stifled himself here. He reversed his lower, darker impulses. He lived with the dog. There was no such thing as a bad dog, Factor tried to believe, only bad dog owners.

Factor peered over his daughter's shoulder at the computer screen. He back pedaled from the

computer space, keeping his daughter in sight. He awkwardly turned himself around, stepping back toward their small, open kitchen. The kitchen's open-beam ceiling and its weathered wood gave the room the rustic look of Old Mexico. The talavera tiles of its countertops were shiny, Simpatica cleaning there earlier in the morning. The red-and-gold mosaic of the kitchen floor glowed, Factor doing the labor earlier in the week. One kitchen wall showed a retro black and white poster that said, "Free Huey Newton." The poster's eponymous protagonist carried a threatening army rifle in his hands. On an adjacent wall, a similarly dated poster said, "Don't Trust Anyone Under Thirty." The quiet kitchen was only halfway picked up. Its trash bin was full, a potential feast for Daphne. Yesterday's few dishes were stacked in the sink.

Factor leaned a rib against the stylish kitchen counter. He had lost a bit of weight from his sturdy frame, was getting thinner. He removed a cup of instant from the microwave on a shelf above the metal sink. He poured the steamy Arabica into a steel thermos, adding a shot of Cuervo from a bottle on the counter by the sink. He inserted the plug into the thermos' top. Factor reviewed his fully-conceived plans to lose Armani and Bratword. His plans (again) were to be executed separately. He pictured the when and the where exactly as he had previously configured the approximate time and place, remembering the example of Hamlet, he muttered, while he stared at the unwashed dishes in the sink, remembering too his own ill-timed, dangerous, and damning lecture on the Shakespearean hero.

Factor's time with Simpatica was nearly done with. She was on loan only for the spring term. His daughter was to quit Santa Fe in two weeks and three days, rejoining her younger sister Patricia and his ex, Bunny, in Jackson, Mississippi, home to her family.

Factor's long hours of daily teaching, his committee work, his research in Milforde's puny library on the weekends, and then the exacting process of scholarly writing kept him away

from his daughter in the lonely adobe until eight or nine o'clock on many nights. No more. All of this ambitious, climb-the-ladder, career-boy stuff was to be done with as soon as possible, *finito!* No more colleagues, a few more choice books, no more student's dirty looks? No, not quite yet, but eventually. He had made a wrong, if necessary turn into Academia in order to support a family of four, putting aside his own writing career that was less than lucrative. He had published two, pretty good short stories years ago that were widely admired both in the American and British literary world, the protagonist in each story a woman so fully imagined, many of its readers assumed the author, R.E. Factor, to be a woman, while one of his literary friends jocosely nick-named him Transgender, or "Trans," for short.

Factor shouted, "Simpatica, listen to me. I am heading to campus and to my office. No big deal. I need to clear out the last ... and I do mean the last of my *not* valuables," he said, trying to be funny, saying next, "I expect to be back at home in less than an hour. I then wash the dishes piled in the kitchen sink. Leave the work to me," he said. He screwed the plain metal drinking cup to the top of his green thermos.

Nothing memorable nor dramatic happened at Milforde College, Factor told himself, especially on the Sunday following the graduation ceremony. Why should today be different? The place was positively phlegmatic. Today's campus would be as quiet as his kitchen or his beautiful, grown child. Factor had few parental worries here at the house, he trusted. Simpatica had a mind of her own, but was a mature and a responsible kid.

Factor moseyed from the kitchen into the cheery living room. To his charmer, he said, "Am I trusting you and Daphne here in the house alone, I wonder? Or do I send the dog into the fenced yard, lead you across the street to Mrs. Fishtab?"

Simpatica halted her typing at the typically flesh-colored keyboard. Turning her head in the direction of her dad, she said, “No, p-lease! Not today. Do not oft me to that old crab, Mrs. Fishtab. Come on, Dad, you must be joking. She charges the Santa Fe gouge of fifteen dollars an hour. The fee is outrageous. We will be fine, Daphne and I, right here,” said his slim twelve-year-old.

“I am trusting you,” Factor said.

Simpatica looked her dad straight in the eye. She said, “Trust me, Dad. No problem. I am not straying far from this very spot. I have a serious writing project on which I am laboring,” she added. Neither the noticeable formality of Simpatica’s syntax nor the maturity of her casual diction were the typical talk of a pre-teen.

“You are laboring on a significant writing project? Fine. But if you should happen to take a break from the creative composing, and eventually get up from that chair? *Soyez prudent*, whatever else you might be doing,” Factor said.

“*Soyez prudent*? Okay, I will be careful,” Simpatica answered, translating her dad’s French. She attended the Montessori School.

“You try to keep that dog out of the trash, please,” Factor asked, standing on his red-and-gold Persian rug. “You know how Daphne loves to feast on garbage. Then, do not cut your g-d hand off, if you make a sandwich for lunch,” he added.

Factor hardly needed to broach this sandwich subject. Simpatica was scrupulous about such things. Factor had watched her craft dozens of sandwiches and wraps without a hitch. He grabbed his set of car keys and a leather wallet from the kitchen counter, stuffing them into the front pocket of his black jeans. Factor was about to crash a rickety screen door behind him, when he heard,

“My fate is in my own hands, not in the hands of anyone else. I get the point,” said Simpatica, precociously. “Momento mori.”