

1/ Erase-a-Sketch

Hoot Factor disdainfully showed up at Milforde's hateful graduation ceremony. Showing-up here was against his pissed-off wish to defy any person, any activity he felt like defying. He was in a murderous mood. It was going to be an hour of hate speech, blah-blah-blah. Factor took his assigned seat in the third row. He was dressed in a funereal black gown and a flat dunce cap. Were he to miss this valedictory event, the college threatened, his June and last paycheck was to be delayed. Bratword and Armani sat in the front row. They were giddy, whispering to one another. About him? Baxter imagined a step-by-step scenario in which he murdered each of them.

The pompous tedium of the ceremony paraded two hundred and seven across the grass of the inner quad. Emeritus Peter Carnage slouched on a raised wooden platform in front of the weepy parents and the sweaty well-wishers waiting for the diplomas to be handed-out in ninety-two degree heat. Leaning over the speaker's podium on a stage on loan from the Drama Department, a sweaty Carnage looked like the wet noodle he was. He pontificated at any opportunity, his also sweaty audience today wishing to run under a nearby stand of Western pines for its shade, while Carnage offered a machine gun's rat-a-tat-tat of imbecilic platitudes. 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, while each guest there prayed to his personal divinity, it seemed, for Carnage to get off the stage. Their concern was their twenty-two year old child. The grads dressed in a light blue gown and a poufy cap of the same color. They were marching over Drama's outdoor stage under a desert sun. One grad whimpered a

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scream of joy. A second was all gawky glee. A third gave the world the antagonistic foot stomp of a fug-you.

Factor rached out of bed at eleven o'clock on the next morning. He wore a pair of candy-striped boxers, a plain white tee, and his feet smelled of Lotrimin. He awoke from a bad dream. In it, he held his mother's hand. She was on her deathbed in the hospital, gripping a crumpled piece of paper in her knobby fingers, giving it to her younger son. "Open it. Read it," she said. Factor opened it. The paper was blank. There was nothing there.

Factor by nature was an amiable man. He was a tad grouchy on this morning in late May. He was not feeling pretty, recalling yesterday's rock of a graduation, while it tricked still darker memories of the bad s-h-i-t at Milforde College. Forty-one, Factor had the slim body of a jogger. He was under five feet nine. His hair was dark, straight, and thick. He had an abnormally high forehead, dark eyebrows, and brown eyes. He had grown a scraggly goatee in the last six months that resembled that of Tennyson pictured on the set of Authors' playing cards gifted him by Gramma Factor on his sixth birthday. It made him look less like Poe. Gramma venerated each of thirteen authors imaged on the cards minus one, her respect going past the value of their writing. She admired the way each of them posed head high with a seriousness of purpose like herself. It was gramma's take on these writers that seeded Factor's minor academic, his unrealized literary career. Gramma's outlier? Who else? Edgar Allen.

Factor had a plan for today. This was a guy that planned only when pressed to, it a necessity. He intended to clear out the last items from his academic office, stopping in there for a few uneventful minutes. Factor sat on an unvarnished wooden chair by his waterbed. He was dressed in black jeans and a white-and-blue check cowboy shirt with faux pearl buttons. A pair of fire-engine red Nike's sat on the scratchy oak floor. Factor dragged on a first running shoe,

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trying to breathe deeply. It was impossible for him to breathe deeply. On this Sunday morning, a chronic infection blocked his sinuses. It was no joke. The inside of his face was invaded, occupied by an expanding balloon of toxic air. That's how it felt to him. It blocked more than his pointed nose. It had Factor feeling walled off from the world outside him. He was dealing with illness, the young Dr. Brookwater told him.

Factor's adobe cottage had five large rooms of white walls and a high-beamed ceiling in the Spanish colonial style of Santa Fe. Twelve, his daughter Simpatica typed on a then rare PC in a sunny corner of the living room. Her quiet hands clicking over the white keys as if a piano. She wore a fluorescent long-sleeve shirt, stonewashed Levi's, and purple Chuck Taylor's. Her thick brown hair showed tints of mother's blond. Her skin was freckled, her eyes a marble green. Simpatica wore a mouthful of blue and silver braces, a pronounced over-bite. She was a disciplined, civil child, adventurous by nature.

Daphne the dog sprawled under the computer table. She was a fat and tan Collie mix whose dark ears made her look like a pancake burnt at the edges. Factor had picked up the nearly frozen thing while jogging at the former Central Reservoir (condemned by the city as a source of drinking water). It was in March, three months earlier. A stray is a risk. Daphne peed on Factor's valuable Persian rug twice during her first week with them. The rare hand-woven was a thank-you from a colleague, Zunair Absolon, when Z's book on the Persian Empire (that Factor practically wrote for him) was published, earning him tenure.

Factor wished to dump the dog back where he first spotted it. It was by a patch of scrub pines and scrawny junipers encircling the water. If only he might revert to the moment, set back the world's clocks! He would not save the dog, he told himself, he'd shoo her into the depths of the woods where she might never nose her way back to North Monterey Ave., erasing the flat head

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from his memory, Factor imagined, as he tied the red laces of his second sneaker. The beast waddled around the house, taking up space, a slobbering tongue, a gassy butt. Yet the dog was useful as an easy, not pricy company for his daughter. Simpatica adored the mutt. So Dad stifled himself, cut off his darker impulses.

Factor's long hours of teaching, his research in Milforde's puny library on weekends, the exacting process of writing, kept him away from his daughter in the lonely adobe until eight or nine on many nights. All of this ambitious, climb-the-ladder career boy stuff was done with, *finito*. No more colleagues, few more books, no more student's dirty looks. Factor's time with Simpatica too was nearly done with. She was on loan for the spring term, was to quit Santa Fe in two weeks three days, rejoining then younger sister Patricia and Factor's ex, Bunny, in Dallas.

Baxter's living room had a red and white tile floor, its arabesque design matching the pattern on the window frames and the carved doors of a Colorado oak. One wall showed a color print of Santa Fe's Old Town, an oil of the nearby pueblo of San Ildefonso hanging beside it. A signed photo of Maria Martinez glorified the opposite wall. It was Factor's prize. A shy Maria held one of her uniquely black-on-black pots with a geometrical pattern running diagonally against the pot's curves, creating the illusion of a three-dimensional surface. Just below the photo of the famous potter was a receding niche in the wall, a holy *nicho* to the locals. It was empty. It once likely held an icon of the Christ or of the Madonna and Child, but missing it when Factor settled in three years earlier.

Simpatica typed away under a large window in their tasteful living room. Factor draped arms around his daughter, cuddling her.

"*Hola! Buenos tardes,*" he said. He kissed Simpatica on a freckled cheek.

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“Be cool, Dad. Promise. Each day more precious than the last. *Buenos tardes*,” Simpatica answered.

Factor back peddled, stepping for the casita’s open kitchen. The kitchen was designed to look like colonial Spain. Its plastic trash bin was full, yesterday’s dishes stacked in the sink. With Simpatica having cleaned around the mess earlier in the morning, the talavera tile of the countertops sparkled. It glowed like the floor’s red-and-gold mosaic that Factor polished earlier in the week.

Factor microwaved a cup of instant, pouring the steamy Arabica into a steel thermos. He added a shot of Cuervo to it. Standing over a sink of grungy dishes, he shouted, “Simpatica, listen to me. I’m heading to the office. Be back home in no time. Clearing out the last of my *not* valuables.”

Nothing memorable nor dramatic happened at Milforde College. Never. The place was positively phlegmatic. Why should today be different, not mimic it, Factor told himself? The campus would be empty and quiet, after the grind of the graduation pomp. He had really very few parent worries here at the casita. Simpatica was a mature, responsible kid.

Factor moseyed into the cheery living room. To his charmer of a daughter, he said, “I’m able to trust you and Daphne here in the house, I am thinking. Or do I send the dog into the yard, you across the street to Mrs. Fishtab?”

Typing away at the computer, Simpatica said, “No, p-lease! Don’t 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. It’s outrageous. We’ll be fine, Daphne and I, right here,” said his twelve year old.

“I’m trusting you,” Factor said.

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“Trust me, Dad. No prob. I am not straying far from here. Have an important writing project on which I am laboring,” said Simpatica. It was said in her typical manner, using a flawless, formal grammar and a casual, but a mature diction.

“An important project? Fine. *Soyez prudent*,” said Factor.

“Okay, I’ll be careful,” his daughter said. She was translating her dad’s French. She attended the Montessori School.

“Keep that dog out of the trash.” Factor said. “You know how Daphne loves to feast on garbage. And don’t cut your g-d hand off, hear me, if you make a sandwich for lunch,” he added. He hardly needed to say it, Factor told himself. Simpatica was scrupulous about such things. Factor had witnessed her craft dozens of sandwiches without a hitch. He crashed a rickety screen door behind him, but not before he heard,

“Oui, *toujours prudent*,” Simpatica said next. “My fate is in my own hands, not in the hands of anyone else. I get it. *Memento mori*,” she said, precociously.

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2/ Snail Mail

Factor was hit with the nasty news six months earlier. It was on the day before Christmas, during a vacation taken normally with great pleasure by America's college professors. The news? He was let go by Milforde College as of the close of the spring term. He was stripped of a chance at tenure.

An arctic storm had smashed Santa Fe with twenty-one inches of snow. Snail mail brought the bad news on an icy day, a frozen coat of a wind-drift covering its envelope and every object in town. A hill of snow buried Factor's Land Cruiser in his driveway. Its battery was dead, it sat on bald tires. No matter. Simpatica was sleeping over with her friend Phyllis outside of town. Daphne was with the groomer. Factor was islanded alone at 647 N. Monterey Ave.

It was a long day to stew in his melancholy juices. Factor had the rejection letter crumpled in his hand. He was peering out the kitchen window at the deep snow in his small, fenced backyard. His heart nearly stopped, he had been raped of his post. It thumped him. It sickened his already weak stomach, twisting his thoughts into a boson's knot. Factor dropped into a wooden kitchen chair. His knotty thoughts were flitting from one psychic contortion to the next. The oddest? As if one of the poker-faced fortune tellers in antiquity of whom he'd written so passionately, or one of the inspired prophets that spoke on a burning desert (more the subject of his friend, Charlie Whitman), he had foreseen the bad results of his labors when everyone else predicted the reverse. The guy intuited it, as if a crystal ball. Factor had a prophetic eye for this sort of sucky new, especially after a dozen years of island-hopping job to job in the polluted ocean of American academia. He was, however, no Tiresias, nor Isaiah.

Factor paced the kitchen's rosy tile floor, smoking a ciggy. He entertained an untranslatable

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hatred of the college, was reeling from a prophesy come true. He had seen it coming. A week before Christmas and the snowy letter of rejection, Factor lounged easily on his tan Lazy Boy under the living room's open-beam ceiling. He suddenly doubles over from an vicious uppercut to the groin, he imagines, leaning against the ropes. He's an aging, punchy middleweight past his prime, and here is the scary part. He has seen the punch flashing at him three or four seconds *before* it is launched from his opponent's sweaty glove. He is helpless to stop it, the spectators and judges at ringside blind to it.

A week before the punch below the belt, Factor was fixing a BLT in the kitchen. There he suddenly sees himself driving on a California freeway, heading for Hollywood. He speeds into the fast lane. His SUV is about to be smashed on the driver's door. Factor has foreseen it happening. He is feeling a great thump to his ribs minutes before the barreling eighteen-wheeler actually hurls around a curve, acrobating into sight. His left ribs are broken by the onrushing semi that sideswipes him, and he has the truck's weight of five thousand pounds on his broken spine. It is immovable.

Was it not perhaps Factor's nervous sensibility, his hot imagination that soured no few of his triumphs or else sourced his goofs?

Factor stared at the whiteness of the Christmas snow, wishing to blank the reality of the bad news from his harried thoughts. He was shaking. Sitting at a round wooden table, Factor imagined the snow scape outside to be a sheet of blank white paper. The City Different was to reveal itself, he muttered, once the snow melted cleanly. A late December sunlight slashed through the kitchen window at a low angle, throwing a crooked halo over an empty kitchen chair. It revealed too the phrenology of Factor's head, a pointed chin, high forehead of Poe, a longish

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nose. The infection there pressed against the inside of his cheekbones like the balloon of toxic air of which we've spoken.

The snow melted three days later to a point where it was hard to find. The city was turning into a bare, brown landscape, the image and ghost of nothingness, Factor told himself, while he jogged along San Jacinto Blvd. in a neighborhood of towering firs and of pines roofing its red dirt streets. He wore a green sweatshirt, green shorts, and the red Nikes. He shivered in the cold. The leafless elms and the Western oaks were skeletal and bare. They too, it appeared, were cold. The green pinions and the shaggy junipers looked to've wrinkled with age overnight.

The awkward, embarrassing months of January, February, March, and April that followed Factor's heave-ho from Milforde were a still harder snowbound season. It spoke to Factor of losses greater than his teaching job. It was his career, and his troubles hardly ended there.

A final blizzard swept into town in early May. The temperature rose into the low seventies days later. It was now a month before graduation day. The temperature in mountainous Santa Fe normally dropped twenty to thirty degrees between day and night. The sudden spring warmth had melted the last of the polar-driven snow. The city thawed too quickly. Rivers of its melt gushed into the streets from driveways and from lawns, the quick thaw leaving behind it many streams of icy water and then crisscrossing pools in Santa Fe's labyrinth of narrow streets, swelling the city's arroyos to the limit. An alluvial run-off lifted the muddy former Central Reservoir to the rim in the city's Audubon Sanctuary. It bubbled and gurgled like a primeval swamp, its bushy landscape soon met with a low menacing fog. Fog was all over the city, smothering it in a kind of feral ambiguity, a favaginous obscurity. The fog was lingering day on day, a gray of shifting forms and of shadowy figures half-perceived. The only clear lines Factor might make out here with any accuracy were the points of order he might limn for himself.

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Factor took to jogging around the Central in the spring warmth, despite the recurrent sinus infection. He gasped for air with every step. He wished to be alone with his thoughts, it forcing him to lope along at a hateful seven a.m. when normally few runners showed up here. It took self-discipline. Factor preferred stay in bed until ten in the morning, professor in the afternoon if allowed, book it late into the night. He was in a good mood on this May morning. He hoped to circle the water's edge as long as his lungs allowed. His deeper desire? To get away from anyone and anything that disturbed his meditations. Their subject? Nothing of the past, the present, or the future.

Now Factor suddenly was not meditating. It was a whacky turn-about. He was not in a good mood. He was in a bad mood, a bad spot, a character in a scene from a familiar nightmare. He was not alone on the jogging track. He was trailing behind what? Bratword's fanny. It was plump as a bee's bottom. It freaked him. He stumbled, falling on his face in the mud of the sloshy track circling the Central. He knelt on the watery running track. He looked up. There it was. Bratword's heart-shaped butt in a pair of purple shorts. It jiggled like grape jelly shaken on spoon.

An early morning dew rose from the moist earth, joining the fog. Factor took in the facts of the hour. The queen's muscly legs went with her bee's bottom, he was one of the workers. Her pink Milforde sweatshirt with its raised hood was not hiding a looker's swarthy face and her raven hair. These were the legs Bratword flaunted on the campus daily for the three years that Factor professed there. To sight Bratword on the jogging track jellied Factor, sending him into a series of ghoulish memories. A psychic eeriness washed over him. His home burglary alarm had tripped, after he's been beaten bloody there by a gun-toting thief an hour earlier.

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His eyeing of Bratword said one thing. Factor was to turn tail before he was to murder her, she found dead by drowning in the reservoir. He jogged back to his Land Cruiser parked in one of eight muddy spaces at the water's edge. He jumped into the green SUV. He sped through a twenty-five zone at forty. His friend Charles Whitman (first alternate to the Rank and Tenure Committee) had wised him up on the q.t. It was Bratword's whoppers that did him in. Her exaggerations of Factor's so-called "questionable sense of judgement," her hyperboles of his "stubborn twist of mind" (to quote her), tilted the committee's pooppy decision to phish him.

Briefly, Factor had team-taught with Bratword. It was against his wishes. He debated her in the classroom, only when she insisted. The nature of man -- that is mankind, the species -- changes, is always evolving, Bratword argued. Had they not heard of evolution? It was the reverse, said Factor. The nature of man is not changing over time. We have evolved to what, who we are. He clung to his classical position for some idealistic or idiotic reason as fiercely as a famished stray dog that has incised one end of a long rag. The rag is greasy with pork fat, the dog is licking the fat, not letting go of the rag. What awaits doggy Baxter at the other end of the rag? The dog catcher of ignorance from the Shelter of Stupidity, you guessed it.

Factor might well've dummied up during this debate for practical and for unprincipled reasons, like keeping his job. It would have been sorry for him, but safer. Bratword was vengeful. The private hurt and the public humiliation soured her on Factor. It was however only the superficial side of things, of her ugly. It went deeper than this, as things turned out, when one listened to her speak positively of the villains Iago or Claggert. The brighter students sided with Factor, a hand vote taken. It was, for him, a costly victory. This cerebral triumph (if one wishes to call it this) led to the guy's professional defeat and hi psychic damnation. Bratword never forgave him for it. She was the winner, always would be, when it came to him. She had

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tenure. He was a beggar at its closed iron door. A sign painted in big letters on this door said, “Suck up.” Bratword was one of the guardians of the supposed riches behind it, an act of humility not one of her academic specialties. Her gifts were manipulative, dark, she impossible to pin down.

It was not the first time Factor was denied academic tenure. He had ridden the creaky carousel of the academic job circus like a sugary child for a dozen years. Tenure was the ring of gold for which he had stretched his soul to its limit there, never nabbed. Before tenure? You did anything asked of you. After, nothing. He had been spinning on the circus’s rotting Ferris wheel of fortune, while the academic journals and his senior colleagues turned the wheel. The learned journals took his writing, it was admired by senior colleagues. It was not however the right journals, nor the “in” colleagues, the politicians. Too bad. Factor had taken all the s-h-i-t he was to take, never should have taken the job at Milforde in the first place.

It was five months since Andy the mailman looked like the Abominable Snowman, sliding the snow-covered letter of rejection into his mailbox, Factor told himself, relaxing on his tan Lazy Boy in the living room. He had not changed out of his running clothes or the red Nike’s, after fleeing Bratword at the former reservoir. It was 7:30 am. Simpatuca was asleep. Daphne was in the fenced backyard. Factor looked past a paned window, as a line of sunlight rose over the horizon. He and his daughter were to camp near Chacon Canyon in a week. He looked forward to it. He was feeling neither crushed by a sense of rejection nor deflated by his defeats for the first time in months. It was the reverse. Touched by the sunlight arcing through the window, Factor was triply elated. He was feeling scot free of the poo-poo of the past, of the septic tank of the future, and even free of the crapola of the present. His job at Milforde had kept him in harness for three years. It was the extra class that was added each term to an already heavy

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teaching load, the greater demands to do research, and more of the steam pressure to publish what? A life of this sort was full of *more, more*. How about less and less, Factor asked himself, his hourglass of time on the earth turned over at his birth, its grains of sand dripping through the waist of the glass, mounting at the bottom?

Factor was happily solo dancing across the room's red and white tile floor. He gripped a cup of warm coffee in one hand, his absent dance partner in the other. His joyful mood lasted for a minute or two. It, mysteriously, turned sour. Factor was drowning in a pool of water. In Factor's feral imagination, the pool was looking like the former Central Reservoir. It was filled with his own hypochondriacal juices. A series of mutant monsters soon bubbled to the pool's surface, rising from the splenetic depths of his learned consciousness of things. Factor was no longer solo dancing. He was imagining himself doing some night-swimming in the depths of the Central. He cramps there. He flails under the water with the feeble strokes of a weak swimmer. He is unable to breathe. He thrusts out a water-wrinkled hand for some kind of aid, human or divine, and there is nothing to grasp onto for him except the fragility of his world-weary ego.

In this dreamy vision, Factor is trapped in a swirling vortex that is stirred by the inhumanity of a mysterious someone or something, who knows? He has no clue to whom or what. It is stirred, he guesses, by the pseudo-illuminati. A gang of these intellectual trendies wears the armor of light. It battles the unenlightened ones like himself. Is there more to them, Factor asks himself, than what one sees and hears with only his senses? He is climbing into a dark closet or a cave. A flashlight in hand, he is searching for the helmet of hope, it seems, the breastplate of love, the sandals of courage. Nearby, this gang is breaking camp.

The waking dream was nothing, Factor told himself, but an allegory of his past troubles. Now Daphne scratched at the back door. Factor ignored it. The past! If only I might escape it, he

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wished, and its stubborn burdens. If only he might start again fresh and clean ! Baxter, on this morning, was dead serious about this crazy quest. If he were actually to pull off this escape that would be beyond the great Houdini's of this world, and there were many of them, it should be the *das ding und stich*, the highest of human moments.

Factor slouched in his Lazy Boy. It was minutes after eight a.m. Suddenly, he was to contradict his wish to escape himself and his past. It was a significant moment, it turned out, that needs to be recorded in this narrative. Our past is a Wall Mart warehouse of memories, he told himself, it has value. Why give it up? Why? Because he wished to sleep nightmare-free on this night, and to dream peacefully under a full moon. Factor wished to deplete himself of his past, evacuate it, make a fresh start, however odd or crazy it appears to common sense, while he admitted at the same time to be looking it over with the élan of the scholar he was.

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