

HISTORY NEVER FORGIVES

By Michael Washburn

WHY WE LIKE IT: *The dashing silver-haired alumnus Costello is enjoying a couple drinks at 'a popular student hangout' when events take an unexpected sour turn. Irony plays a strong hand in this involving story in which he is suddenly forced to confront his 'ideological foil' from a past he'd rather forget. Behind the author's breezy prose and light touch lies a penetrating portrait of human frailty in which we witness Costello's descent from prideful swagger to wrenching humiliation. A well-paced, effortlessly entertaining 'good read' that pushes all the right buttons. Quote:*

He knew that a touch of *Schadenfreude* wasn't wholly absent when he read about someone who'd been a Big Man on Campus all those years ago and today worked as an assistant librarian somewhere.

And this powerful evocation:

He thought he heard "system," "framework," "unifying principle," "hoax," and "Tremblay" here and there around the place, the aural equivalent of tiny will-o-wisps.

History Never Forgives

Costello enjoyed the attention he was getting from a few of the ladies in the tavern.

Despite his latest resolution to lose weight, he'd been indulging rather liberally in beer and wine again this week. But he knew his limits, he was in control of himself, and he had no doubt that when they glanced over at him with mischievous smiles, they relished the sight of a handsome silver-haired man who projected both erudition and warmth.

Tonight he wore a spiffy, pristine light beige jacket and pants, with which his coils of thick silver hair contrasted agreeably. His waves of thick hair were his selling point. If

George Clooney was a gray fox, why then he was a rare, refined, melanin-endowed silver fox.

Fancying himself stylish and eligible, Costello was in a fine mood this evening. An edition of the alumni magazine of Prescott College, his alma mater, would be out in a day or two and he looked forward to finding out what his classmates were up to, what jobs they'd taken, what they'd published, what unions they'd made or dissolved, and who had passed on. He knew that a touch of *Schadenfreude* wasn't wholly absent when he read about someone who'd been a Big Man on Campus all those years ago and today worked as an assistant librarian somewhere.

The bar where he sat was a square enclosure in the middle of the tavern. He looked around at the gathering crowd as Duke Ellington's "Mercy, Mercy, Mercy" flowed from the speakers. It was impossible to forget for very long that this place was basically a student hangout, not for kids from Prescott, thirty minutes from here, but for those from Westhaven College, whose campus lay a few hundred yards away. Costello didn't mind the clientele at all, in fact he rather liked being one of the few adults in the room. It sure helped him stand out.

As if to reinforce this impression, a blonde in a denim jacket came up to the bar and slid onto the stool to Costello's right. She had pale smooth skin and a slender form, and in her eyes he detected a bit of the ingenuousness of a kid who arrives at college full of curiosity and wonder about the decades of accumulated wisdom and knowledge that professors have to share.

"Evening, miss. How're you?"

"I've had a stressful week."

“Tommy!” he called to the bartender, who sauntered over. Then to the girl:
“What’re you drinking, dear? It’s on me.”

Her deep brown eyes widened, naked orbs of wonder and vulnerability.

“That’s awfully kind of you.”

“Why so much stress, if you don’t mind?”

“The usual. Exams and papers. I guess I’m still not used to thinking so hard.”

“Oh, it’ll come more easily, believe me, dear. Your tolerance builds over time,
kind of like with drinking.”

Her smile was truly beautiful.

“Were you at the talk this evening, sir?”

“The talk? No. I’ve been here for a few hours now.”

“Well, I just attended Paul Tremblay’s talk in the Harris Auditorium. You
should’ve been there. It was so packed people were standing at the rear and in the aisles.
The Q&A went on for, like, an hour.”

Costello pitched his head back and gave a long, caustic laugh.

“Paul Tremblay! Really? You gave up a couple hours of your life to hear a talk by
that guy?”

“So you’ve heard of him.”

Costello laughed again.

“Heard of him. He’s a classmate of mine!”

“You’re kidding. When was this?”

Costello told her about the college thirty minutes away. Prescott was in a slightly more rustic part of the state, yet as boldly progressive as any institution of higher learning in America. The girl's eyes widened further with wonder.

“Really? The two of you were friends back then?”

“Ah, no, not exactly. Tremblay was quite the public figure, quite the celebrity even back in those days, and I followed his antics pretty closely. But, you know, now that you raise the subject, we *were* friends, for a while, before his outsized ambitions got the better of him and he made a total ass of himself in front of the whole campus.”

Her eyes glittered.

“How'd you guys meet?”

“We lived on the same dorm floor our freshman year—sorry, people say ‘first-year’ these days, don't they—and we had a fair number of discussions about various issues. Even then, I could tell here was a guy with a severely inflated ego, one of those pseudointellectuals running around under the notion that they really have something to impart about human history and psychology. I'll tell you, it's sad to watch someone like that rise so far on hot air, knowing he's going to plummet to the earth and it will be brutal and humiliating for him when he does.”

Though she must have sensed the playfulness in his voice, her mouth widened.

“Wow. What's his, like, big weakness?”

“His Achilles heel?”

“Yes! Exactly. His Achilles heel.”

“Look, dear, Tremblay's fatal flaw isn't hard to identify. The man's grasp of history is negligible. Ask him to set forth a theory, an interpretive framework, a unifying

principle, and watch his face turn red as he fumbles and stammers. I don't think he's ever read more than a few words of Hegel, or Marx, or Engels, let alone Trotsky or Gramsci or Bakunin or one of those guys. He's a poseur and a pseudointellectual if I've ever met one. What's really tragic is that a couple hundred people just gave up two irreplaceable hours of life to hear the guy propound his silly ideas."

She nodded earnestly, leaving no doubt that his critique had persuaded her.

"Why do you think there's a market for that kind of silliness?"

"Some people just lack the knowledge and the critical faculties to see through a slick presentation that pretends to be politically incorrect. It's a damn shame. If it were up to me, I wouldn't even give a huckster like that a platform."

Something about these remarks didn't sit quite so well with the girl, who failed to smile or nod as she'd been doing. He wanted to offer her another drink, but right then a young guy, strikingly handsome in a flannel shirt and jeans, came over and touched her shoulder. She reacted with joy at meeting her boyfriend. With perfunctory thanks to the middle-aged stranger who'd entertained her, she followed the boyfriend to a table where they joined four other young people. Straining his ears, trying hard to hear above the chatter, Costello got the impression they were talking about what he'd told her.

"Hey, Tommy!" he called to the bartender.

With a fresh drink in hand, he began to share with the bartender his thoughts about the fraud visited on an audience near here this evening. In his peripheral vision, he began to notice something surprising. Though he couldn't be sure, it appeared that people at points around the bar overheard bits of his monologue and found it captivating. He thought he heard "system," "framework," "unifying principle," "hoax," and "Tremblay"

here and there around the place, the aural equivalent of tiny will-o-wisps. So people took note of Costello's words. Even if he hadn't pursued a career in academia, his opinion carried maybe more weight than Tremblay's. He drank some more, listening to the chatter.

A pair of women in their mid-twenties, whom he recognized as regulars though he forgot their names, moved past the bar toward a table. Feeling bad about blanking on their names, he signaled to the bartender that he wished to get them drinks. Tommy knew what they liked to order. A server brought drinks to the table where the women sat, indicating the silver-haired man who'd shown spontaneous kindness. They gave effulgent smiles and made gestures of thanks.

As the server moved among the other tables, Costello thought once again he was picking up on phrases from his discussion with the girl. He heard the name of his alma mater a few times. But he tried to shut out the chatter as he downed more beer. Then, as if in confirmation of his suspicions, a kid, twenty-two or twenty-three, got up from one of the tables and came over.

"Hey, man. I was talking to Rich, the server, and he said you went to Prescott. My name's Kevin. Class of 2018!"

"No way! I graduated before you were born."

"Gosh. I don't know if you'd recognize the place if you went back there now."

"Oh, yeah, I know. A lot of newfangled buildings and computer stations everywhere."

"That's not even half of it, man. Did you ever write anything for the *Standard*?"

“The *Standard*? The student paper? I was never a regular contributor, but I pitched in with a story here and a letter there. I’ll tell you, Kevin, that rag was never going to win a Pulitzer. Those old issues must be gathering dust in a basement or a warehouse somewhere, and I very much doubt anyone has the time or interest to dig them up.”

Kevin held up an iPhone.

“Guess again. They’ve scanned every issue of the paper and uploaded it to a digital archive. Didn’t you get an email about this a while back?”

Feeling little interest in or accountability for those distant days, Costello tended to delete the college’s periodic email. He shook his head.

“No, Kevin. If I tried, I don’t think I could remember exactly what I wrote for that rag or what the gist of a given piece was. I guess I am a bit curious now.”

The kid began fiddling with the iPhone. As Costello gulped down more beer, he noticed that half a dozen people had just entered the place and were working their way toward one of the last unoccupied tables. One of them, a middle-aged man in a white blazer, was his old nemesis, his ideological foil, Paul Tremblay! It was only logical that Tremblay would end up in this bar, a popular hangout, the only watering hole within walking distance of the auditorium where Tremblay had just spoken.

Kevin didn’t appear to notice the little troupe’s entry.

“What’s your surname?” the kid asked.

“Costello.”

The boy pressed buttons, looking down at the little screen with fascination. Through this sorcery, Costello thought, Kevin was bringing to life the mummified

thoughts of a younger version of himself, whose passion he'd never lost though his opinions today had a broader and firmer factual base.

Over at the table on the far side of the place, Tremblay held forth to his audience of five young people, his crisp voice distinct above the chatter.

"E.H. Carr's a brilliant historian. He really does a job on the concept of historical inevitability. Read his little book, *What Is History?* Frankly the guy packs more insight into a couple hundred pages than some academics achieve in many volumes."

Costello did his best to ignore his nemesis for now. The tips of Kevin's fingers worked aggressively on the buttons in the little frame until it appeared he'd found something.

"Look, here's a letter of yours! You're blasting the administration for dragging its feet on multiculturalism! This polemic has some pretty colorful language."

"Oh, for Christ's sake, delete it."

Kevin searched a bit more, then said, "Look, here's another letter. You're attacking none other than Paul Tremblay for some stuff he wrote in the same paper!"

"Let me see."

Kevin placed the device in Costello's hands. Costello read words he'd typed and fired off to the *Standard* at a distant time of life when he could drink two six-packs a night and not gain weight.

The letter from decades ago stated, "Ostensibly, Paul Tremblay is sharing his views about the Cold War and the 'inevitable' fall of communism. But if you read his opinion pieces over time, a lot of his analysis lands right at the nexus of Cold War politics and anticolonial struggles in the developing world. Tremblay is much less

interested in the Berlin Wall than in the ongoing struggles in Angola. His identity as a privileged white westerner, and a neo-imperialist attitude with a strong odor of racial condescension, are evident time and again. I wonder why more readers haven't picked up on this."

He handed the phone back.

"Well, Kevin, what I observed back then is true today. The guy's journalistic tropes are a code for certain bigoted attitudes."

Over at the far side of the bar, the talk didn't seem even implicitly to touch on racial politics. Tremblay and the others were having a lively discussion about Sartre's play *Les Mains Sales*. Costello caught a few of Tremblay's comments about philosophical themes in the play.

"So here you have bunch of doctrinaire Marxists in Illyria, or Yugoslavia in other words. These are people who believe in a highly rational, scientific approach to understanding historical developments. Everything unfolds inexorably according to a set of laws or principles. The irony here is that all the action in the play flows from petty personal motives like vanity, jealousy, anger, status anxiety, unrequited love, or from pure chance. *Les Mains Sales* really drives that home. If Hugo went through that door five seconds earlier or later, he might not have seen Hoederer and Jessica embracing and might not have assassinated the party secretary. The course of history would be different!" Tremblay told his little audience.

These words were a catalyst to discussion at the table, but Costello tried to shut out the talk coming from over there. Kevin had found another little jewel in the paper's archives.

“Here’s another letter. I guess you did take a certain pride and pleasure in running down uninformed blatherers.”

Kevin handed him the device again.

The letter stated, “Tremblay’s criticisms of the anti-apartheid movement smack of racism. One does have to wonder how Tremblay dares to offer any advice to South Africa on how to resolve its dilemmas when our own country’s racial problems are so severe. This is the definition of hypocrisy.”

Kevin watched with interest as Costello read the text on the screen.

“I see you weren’t immune to bouts of self-righteousness yourself,” the boy said.

Costello laughed, though he wasn’t sure it was a joke.

“But, I mean, like, weren’t you anti-apartheid activists all doing the very thing you accuse Tremblay of in this letter?” Kevin added.

Costello was too deep in his cups just now to have an argument with this kid. He dropped the phone, which clattered loudly on the ground.

“Oops. Sorry.”

Kevin bent down, retrieved the phone, and dusted it off with a perturbed look. Costello wanted to shut out the talk coming from Tremblay’s table, and focus on drinking, but it wasn’t working.

Tremblay was eloquent. “Of course I don’t know all the historical antecedents Sartre had in mind, but a somewhat important event in the history of our civilization, the Great War, began after a somewhat inexplicable blunder. An Austro-Hungarian officer decided that the archduke’s car should take a roundabout route to the hospital and avoid the center of Sarajevo, but forgot to relay this decision to a driver, who took the archduke

right into Gavriolo Princip's path. Princip! A young man whose mental state arguably puts his actions far outside the scope of any discussion of historical laws. The latter don't account terribly well for the role of pathologies in human affairs."

This set off another round of chatter.

Meanwhile Kevin fiddled again with the phone, seemingly having detected no malice on Costello's part in dropping it. The older man raised his glass of beer to his lips again, wishing the kid would go away.

"Here's another one. Ho, boy," Kevin said.

This piqued Costello's interest, and not in a good way. When he reached for the device, Kevin jerked it away.

"Lemme see."

Kevin's eyes roamed over the little screen.

"Wow. Maybe you were upset when you wrote this."

"Give me the fucking thing!"

Something in his tone compelled the kid's obedience. Costello read the letter with none of the indulgence one extends to juvenilia, though he wasn't sure whether he disagreed with his younger self or just wished the polemic had taken a form others wouldn't be able to seize on later.

"Many of us on this campus are wondering why someone as reactionary and racist as Paul Tremblay deserves a platform at all. He doesn't know the first thing about the ideologies he thinks he's critiquing. It should be clear by now that his ignorant, poorly reasoned opinion pieces are desperate pleas for attention from someone with no social life. He's truly the epitome of a sick, alienated person posing as a commentator."

Kevin looked at him expectantly, as if to say, *Do you stand by what you wrote?* The boy had been away from his friends for some time now and Costello wondered who he really was.

“I was drunk,” Costello said.

“Oh, I see. And there was no time at all between your drunken state and the letter going to press. Wow.”

“It’s true, you know, Kevin. The guy was a nerd. He barely had *any* friends at Prescott.”

From the far side of the room, Costello heard: “E.H. Carr understood the fickleness of human actors, and pointed out instances where even Marxist historians acknowledged it. Like when Lefebvre characterizes Napoleon was a rogue acting on his own peculiar psychology and not in accordance with any overarching principles. History—meaning the study of events no less than the events themselves—won’t forgive and forget.”

Again Tremblay sparked bursts of animated talk. The undergrads at his table were *so* into him. Costello could only imagine the audience in the auditorium earlier tonight.

“Fuck it,” Costello said.

He tossed Kevin’s iPhone across the room. It landed near the two women for whom he’d ordered drinks. They looked up in surprise. Before Kevin could process what was going on, Costello got up and strode across the place toward his nemesis’s table.

When he arrived there, he thought all eyes would immediately be on him. But to his surprise and dismay, only a couple of the young people at the table even

acknowledged him, with the irritation they might show a panhandler. Tremblay had really got going. The talk went right on.

“Anyone who talks about the role of individual actors is throwing rocks in the glass house of theory, and, if you’ve ever wondered, that’s really why postmodernism is so defensive and nasty. One voice can set back generations of painstaking work on the part of theorists. Not to mention—”

“Paul,” Costello said.

“—jeopardizing the stature of not a few tenured militants.”

“Paul.”

Still Tremblay didn’t acknowledge him, didn’t even make eye contact.

“Hey, Paul. Remember me?”

But Tremblay was listening to one of the kids now. Maybe, just maybe, Costello had been a bit unkind to the man in his remarks here this evening.

“Hey, Paul. I know we didn’t always see eye to eye on everything in the past. But I dissented in good faith, out of my deepest convictions. You can at least acknowledge me, Paul.”

It was if he were talking to himself. The two students who’d briefly looked at Costello had now joined in the discussion.

“Paul, you presumably wouldn’t have written all that stuff in the *Standard* in those days if you didn’t want it to generate spirited discussion. I exercised my right to free speech, just as you did yours. Fuck, you could at least acknowledge me, Paul!”

Costello felt fury rise in him as the party went right on talking and laughing. He turned 180 degrees and took in smiles and smirks all over the place. People were making light of him, Costello realized, they found him ridiculous and pathetic.

He raised his voice. “Do you all see the fraud who’ll get a huge check from Westhaven for the nonsense he delivered tonight? Do you see him? Look over here, everybody, at Paul Tremblay! A neo-fascist who tries to dress up his repulsive opinions in scholarly discourse. A stain, an anachronism, a criminal who will go to the bank with a big check drawn from your tuition! The man shouldn’t get out of here alive. Look—”

A hand seized him by the elbow. It was the young server, slender but strong. Quietly but resolutely, the server moved him back toward the bar. As the server dragged him across the floor, he twisted his neck for a look back at the interloper’s table. Tremblay and the others still carried on as gaily as ever.

At the bar, Tommy brought him another drink with a surly look. Costello felt too humiliated to speak. He resumed drinking.

Kevin came up, seemingly devoid of anger if perhaps not of other negative feelings.

“Hey, man. Sorry. Your phone okay?” Costello asked through a fog of alcohol fumes.

“It still works fine. You know what? I found yet another intriguing little item. It was a bit of a surprise to find out that you tried to defend yourself in the paper from charges of plagiarism. I gather that your roommate during your final year was a guy from India, a Sikh, and one of your profs got two copies of the same paper, one with your roommate’s name on it and one with yours. You tried to claim that he copied your paper

while you were sleeping, and that he thought he could get away with it, coming from India where the educational system is so corrupt. But there were red herrings in the paper, things that you as a native English speaker almost certainly would never write. ‘Carriers’ for ‘careers,’ ‘play the fuel’ for ‘play the fool,’ ‘zoan of influence’ for ‘zone of influence,’ ‘Raygan’ for ‘Reagan,’ and such. You couldn’t refute the charges and your letter is basically an ad hominem attack on those members of the judicial committee who voted for your expulsion, even though that didn’t end up happening. They sure should have kicked you out.”

Costello grabbed the boy by the collar with both hands, head-butted him, spat in his face, and gave him a mighty shove. Kevin went flying and landed on his ass. The server appeared at Costello’s side and told him to leave at once.

“All right, all right,” Costello said, but first he went over to the two young women and demanded that they produce money to cover the drinks he’d ordered for them.

AUTHOR’S NOTE:

I think this story speaks for itself and I don’t want to overanalyze it. Some of us remember how tough high school can be. And some are aware of how little the world of high school, and people’s status therein, has to do with “real life.” All too often, the prom king and the prom queen don’t end up where they might have liked, and the so-called nerds are ruling the world. College, of course, is supposed to be different from high school, but as we all know, the temptations of dogmatism can sometimes be inversely proportionate to how much real knowledge and wisdom young immature minds possess. Bullying and ostracism shouldn’t happen, but they do. But there are no prom kings and queens in college, right? What exactly is the dynamic and how does it play out? Imagine if people could have the perspective to step back, assess their actions soberly, and understand their own relationship to historical forces and phenomena they have passionately argued for or against.

AUTHOR'S BIO: *I am a Brooklyn-based writer and journalist and the author, most recently, of *When We're Grownups* (2019) and *Stranger, Stranger* (2020). My story "Confessions of a Spook" won Causeway Lit's 2018 fiction contest.*