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Burning Bridges As We Go

25 October 2022

6, 059 Words

Lessons to Live By

Brian Severs bit his bottom lip hard enough to break the skin, trickling blood down his chin. All because Professor McGill was scowling. Reading his essay aloud and scowling. And looking more than a bit confused. Which was unnerving.

Professor McGill slid a box of Kleenex across the desk before continuing. *"You can't always get what you want? Take the long way home? Isn't it ironic? I'm a loser, baby, so why don't you kill me?"* I'm sorry, Mr. Severs, but what kind of essay are you writing? I don't understand the context surrounding these sentences?"

"They're lyrics, Professor. From songs."

"Ahh. Then my next question is why are you writing clichéd platitudes expressed in song lyrics as your personal essay?"

"I was trying to connect those song lyrics to my life experiences. Explain sorta like who I am versus how the world sees me, you know? It was supposed to be all pithy or something."

"Really? You were trying to be forcefully expressive? Or possibly a fruit with too much pith?"

"Umm, well..."

“Yes, well, it was a valiant undertaking and I applaud your effort. But this essay is a bit confusing to the reader. Especially us old teachers who aren’t up on the current music trends. And you didn’t include a thesis sentence at the end of your first paragraph to let us know what your paper would be about.”

“I’m sorry, Professor.”

“Well, you still have time. Why don’t you take another pass, only this time use your own words, Mr. Severs. I find them far more interesting and a better way to communicate than song lyrics. You’ll find an example of how to write a personal essay and outline on page forty-seven in the text. And, if you like, make a quick video explaining the event you’ve chosen to write about and I’ll give you credit. Then write your essay using clear, solid sentences. And don’t worry about being pithy. I assure you your writing is of interest. Please email everything by Friday. At least five hundred words, please.”

“Thanks, Professor McGill.”

“Alright Brian. See you Friday. Keep up the good work.”

For Professor McGill — Steve to his friends -- freshman English classes at the University of Maryland had long ago become an exercise in suspending disbelief -- simply because so few students arrived with any competence in the principles of writing. Sure, most had heard of punctuation and could even spell a few words correctly -- when they weren’t shortening sentences into initials, “btw.” And some students occasionally reproduced a decent introductory thesis statement, but Steve suspected that had more to do with Microsoft’s writing database than any particular student’s ability to properly format an essay.

“Most of these kids, if you ask me,” growled Professor Talabani during their weekly English department meetings, “are fucking illiterate morons. I don’t understand what’s

happened to our country. We've gone from Sontag and Rand to Pokey the Clown in less than forty years."

Professor Talabani – Sue to her friends – often complained in vulgar and graphic terms about students during their weekly English department meetings. Students, the state of education, society -- it was all fair game to a National Book Award winning author who was on the Modern Library's 100 best nonfiction list. Which certainly endeared her to Steve, but didn't do much for the others on the faculty who were equal parts frightened by her acid tongue and attracted to her beautifully exotic looks. Nor did the administration ever intervene. Sue published regularly and exclusively under the university's press banner, which Steve was editor for, which made her nearly untouchable.

"I thought I would love teaching. I really did, but these ridiculous students aren't shit," Sue raged. "They scroll their damn cellphones like surfers hitting the pipe, whining the whole time about their bullshit feelings till the live long day. But you ask them to explain the difference between expository, descriptive, or persuasive writing and they shit a brick. Like you'd slapped them in the face for even asking and need to apologize. The sad part is, most won't even try. I mean, where the fuck were all their high school English teachers when this was going on? Were they off browsing Snapchat or trolling Tinder for their next underage date to groom. You'd think at the very least one of them would've taught their students that the word "literally" means precisely verbatim and not some metaphoric punctuation about nothing for fuck's sake! If I hear "literally" used incorrectly one more time in my classroom I swear I'm gonna rip that person's tongue out! Metaphorically speaking of course! Am I alone here in this?! Do any of you neutered, cowardly lions of education want to chime in on this?"

Sue did have a point, made in her own garrulous fashion. Over the last decade, fewer and fewer freshmen arrived to college prepared. Or even knew how to wrestle their

loosely tangential thoughts into a disciplined, cohesive narratives. Ironically most new students actually loved creative writing and had hopes they could be the next David Foster Wallace on their way to writing *Infinite Jest*. Without realizing, of course, their adjective heavy, overly emotive pieces were academically illiterate, painful to read, and incredibly boring.

Steve knew it would be easy to blame public education, but he didn't. Nor the private school system nor charter schools either. Because every teacher from middle school to high school to college knew, with each successive generation of social media obsessed young students, discipline was viewed as abuse and constructive criticism as bigotry. Not to mention, the internet deconstructing and desensitizing nearly everyone to the printed word.

"Do you realize this generation can't read cursive!" Sue ranted. "The other day I wrote a note to one student in cursive, but she claimed not able to read it. When I the class if they could, not one, not a single one knew how. Nor could write it. When did that happen?"

Steve already knew about cursive. He'd discovered this anomaly a few years earlier and already adjusted his student communication style accordingly. But more disturbing than the passing of a written language was how Steve realized students matriculating to the U of M had undergone a more dramatic shift in expectations. Students used to arrive hoping to learn academics skills sufficient to earn academic degrees which would, in turn, help them achieve success "in the real world." No longer. This current generation still wanted the degree, sure, but they didn't expect to learn anything in return. Oh, they still expected to be given high marks. And actually believed colleges were obligated to pass students through every chosen class simply because they, or their parents really, had paid "good money" for them to attend. Those fees, to them, guaranteed not only passing grades, but a degree at the end of four years

spent “finding” themselves. As though colleges had become societal Rumspringa’s rather than bastions of higher education.

“It’s not just a millennial issue either, you know,” lamented Sue, “These parents are just as delusional as their offspring!”

Steve *DID* think it was a millennial problem. At first. An entitled laziness on the part of each student. But he soon discovered parental guidance was more the directing issue -- most parents *DID* believe they were purchasing a degree for their children even if their child did the work or not. It was a cultural hypocrisy of apathy in education parents demanded, with college campuses becoming a place to “find yourself” and “party while you can” rather than gain a higher education.

“If I didn’t think the administration would strip me of my tenure,” Sue growled, “I’d fucking make a point to tell each and every fat ass parent who drives up in their pretentious Tesla or Prius or Humvee, who drop off little Susie or Johnnie or whomever, to log out of their social media accounts, shut the fuck up for once, and learn to read a book written by a classic author. Their kids might find purpose and meaning they didn’t know existed if their parents would learn to set better examples.”

Steve agreed in principle, and he certainly had his own opinions on the matter, but rather than pointlessly complain about the state of education during their weekly faculty meetings, he decided to change his teaching style and see if he couldn’t raise his students’ expectations. He believed, at heart, once you got through to the them, students still wanted to learn. But instead of insisting freshman learn the “old fashioned way” -- through lecture, study, and testing -- he decided to put the whole semester in their hands and ask how they wanted to gain an education. Most students, except for the apathetic or academically sheltered, responded well to the changes.

Here's how he set it up. On the first day of class, when nearly all registered freshman were sure to show up, Steve eschewed the traditional rollcall. Instead, he held his hand high like he was asking a question, introduced himself quickly with "Hello, I'm Professor McGill and this is English 1A," and then pointed to a blue file cabinet sitting at the back of the room.

"The syllabus," Steve explained, "along with all course requirements including every test question and answer, is in the top drawer of that blue file cabinet. Any student can access that file during class time whenever and peruse the material at their leisure. If you want an A, then everything you need is in that file cabinet under the class heading, 'McGill's English 1A.' If you submit all your assignments, complete every test, and attend the final you will receive an A for this course. As simple as that."

Here Steve always paused to give each student a chance to process what was being explained.

"To be clear," he continued, "You don't need to come to class unless you want to. And everything you need to learn over the course of the semester regarding the principles of English composition is in that file cabinet for you to have, in totem, today. There is a workbook with a chapter test at the end to be completed. And you are required to write five essays: Personal, Argumentative, Expository, Descriptive, and Narrative. You can do the work over the course of the semester, one piece at a time, or all in the first week if you choose to. You can turn in assignments one at a time, or all together if you prefer, at any point during the semester. In order to pass this course, all you have to do is complete the workbook and writes five essays, returning them here to me at any point. If you do that, you will receive an A."

Some students were starting to catch on. Others still looked unsure.

"You should know, I will not grade your work. You're A is assured simply by completing each assignment to the best of your ability and turning them in. However, if you would like me to review any essay you've written, or cover any workbook assignment with you and make recommendations, I would be happy to do so. My goal is for you to determine how you want to learn and at what speed suits you. Then apply it for yourself. I am here to assist where I can."

Another pause. Most students getting it and beginning to buzz like bees in a hive with the expectation of an easy A and additional free time.

Once their surprised comprehension sunk in deeper, Steve continued, "I will be in this classroom every week on the scheduled Monday, Wednesday, and Friday during the times noted for this class, as well as assigned office hours after, for those who would like additional instruction. Attendance will not be taken, nor mandated, for any class except one - on the last day, which is the Final. Familiarize yourselves with that date. Every student must present themselves here at that prescribed final date and time as mandatory to pass this class. Other than that, your time is your own to invest in whatever way you deem best to acquire the knowledge needed to pass this course."

Steve always took this moment to look out at the student faces, wondering who would stay, who would leave, and which student would, at some point, become a problem. There was always one though he never quite knew who it might be. Many students were predictable at this age, but there were always a few surprises in the bunch.

"Let me say in conclusion," Steve finished, "For those who wish to improve their knowledge and skills in English composition, it would be my honor to provide the instruction needed to challenge yourselves. For those who just wish a rudimentary A, then make your way over to the blue file cabinet, remove a syllabus, a workbook and

any additional, appropriate materials named. I look forward to collaborating with each and every one of you over the course of the semester. Thank you. Class dismissed."

Five minutes start to finish.

After a few semesters, Steve always recognized the lazy students simply because they had the biggest smiles on their face when they jumped up to rush over to the blue file cabinet.

The average students, fearful and hesitant at first, didn't charge right away. They usually waited and followed suit till each had collected what they needed and left. The few students who stayed behind were generally split between two types: the more academically obedient who felt confused as to what to do with the free will granted for the first time in their young adult lives. And the few genuine, education-minded students who wanted to learn and improve their writing skills. The latter being, by far, the most rewarding group to teach.

And so each semester generally went until the Final. The average and apathetic student doing whatever - usually showing up during the last week trying to turn everything in at the last minute just before the final. The dogmatic, sheltered student showing up every week expecting traditional lecture, quizzes, and tests and remaining confused when Steve simply asked them to discuss their learning process. And the genuine student who was excited to earn well written victory after victory through hard work, trial and error, and as much inspiration and teaching skill Steve could bring to the task at hand.

Steve always hoped one of his students would one day write their own *Infinite Jest* though he knew most wouldn't. Still as long as they tried, he was happy.

On the week after Finals, before his winter break began, Steve usually received one or two calls from helicopter parents whose children had either failed because they forgot

to attend the final or failed to turn in work during the course of the semester. It boggled the mind, but it happened.

This semester's helicopter parent was courtesy of a freshman named Bridget – a very uninspired, apathetic, and entitled young woman whom Steve hadn't seen since the first day of class. Nor received any course work from. Come the day of the final, Bridget surprisingly had shown up, but completely late with barely five minutes left till class ended. Steve wondered why she even showed in the first, since she wasn't carrying any work and, up to this point, had failed to provide a single essay or workbook assignment. Something even Roy, the not so bright All-Star football player who walked in with her, had managed to pull off simply by copying answers provided by his tutor and writing five sincere, if not particularly skillful, essays at the beginning of the semester.

Steve generally used the finals as a medium to talk with the class about the process -- what worked for them, what could be improved. How they could apply their learning efforts to the rest of their college courses. But with Bridget, Steve wasn't sure what to say.

As he wrapped up class, Bridget perched haughtily in the front row using the last few minutes to file her nails, all while side-glancing Steve's way and sigh-moaning to make sure he understood she was the one being put out. Not him. Her. It was a spectacularly entitled performance and quite possibly the most insulting Steve had witnessed in all his years. Apathy, to Steve, being the most cardinal sin in academia. An entitled laziness disrespectful to professors who loved teaching.

"Thank you, everyone," Steve concluded. "I'll be seeing some of you next semester in English 1B. And for the rest of you, enjoy your holidays. Thank you for your time and efforts. Class is now concluded."

Several students came up after to briefly chat with Steve. Bridget waited till she and Roy were the last in the classroom before approaching.

“Hello, Bridget. How are you?”

“Look, Prof,” Bridget jumped right in, forgoing niceties, “I’m, like, totally like an Omega Nu this year and totally legacy, but I still have to like totally follow the pledge rules and be on call and stuff like that to my sisters. Which I’ve been doing all semester. So like I was literally so busy all semester. And then this week has been a bear. A real monster. I mean like Sister Kiki - she’s not really a sister in the catholic nun way or anything - but totally a Sorority sister who literally keeps us busy 25 hours a day. Well, she was all, you guys have to decorate for the Alpha Betas this week for their big homecoming event. And me and the other pledges were literally super busy and didn’t even get to sleep our needed ten or anything. So, I just didn’t get the chance to turn in any assignments. I did them, of course, but I’ve just been like totally busy with my Omega Nu responsibilities. That’s like why I didn’t even get to the final on time because, like, I literally had to drop a night to the Alpha Betas and couldn’t say no. You understand, Riiiiigghhheett?”

“You still have till the end of this day, Miss Ashbury. Do you have your assignments or essays to turn in now that you’re here?”

“Like I just explained I did them, I swear. And I’ll get them to you as soon as I can, but like Sister Kiki is expecting me and the other pledges to be at the Alpha Beta event tonight. It’s a must, must, must. So I have to go, but I’ll get them to you when I can. Promise. Riiiiigghhheett?”

Of course, humans being human, such things invariably happened and the student tended to make promises they had no intention of fulfilling. Especially when their

experience with adults had consistently been adults rarely enforced accountability in the face of juvenile protest.

Later, in his office at the end of visiting hours, Steve recorded Bridget's final grade as an F, then sent her the official email notification, including the required addendum all grade decisions could be appealed within a week's time before being forwarded to the college administration. Steve wasn't particularly surprised Bridget turned out to be this semester's problem student. But he was taken off guard when she presented herself to his office early Monday morning looking a bit disheveled, at least as far as a sorority girls tended to allow. Wearing a thick Omega Nu sweatshirt over jeans, her hair pulled back in a ponytail, and white shoes, which signaled her "serious study" affectation.

"Like here," she spat dropping a stack of crumbled essay papers and class workbook on his desk then taking a haughty stand across from him, hands on her hips.

Curious, Steve started looking reading the essays. But halfway through, he realized they weren't hers. Sure, they were written with the fluid curves, turns, and hearts he associated with female handwriting. But the essays struck him as very similar in unskilled quality to another student - Roy, the All-American football player on scholarship. One essay even referenced skills learned at a young age in Pop Warner football. An activity Steve doubted Bridget had participated in.

Ahh, Steven realized. Bridget had copied Roy's own work to complete her assignments. Or Roy had copied his work for her over the weekend. "Is this your work, Miss Ashbury?"

"Like totally yes, of course. I like just gave it to you, didn't I?!"

The funny part was cheating with all the answers available seemed ludicrous to Steve. But, instead of being contrite, Bridget had resorted to rationalizing and using one the oldest trick in the books – having the boyfriend do the work.

“Like, it’s really important to my mom and dad, you know,” Bridget informed him, “I can’t get an F when I’m like supposed to get an A. Which is kinda what you promised everyone on the first day of class. That’s like literally what you told us. Plus, I already told my parents I was getting A’s in all my classes. So here’s your papers. I did it. So you have to give me the A like you said. If you don’t, then I’ll tell my parents you like totally cheated me.”

Could this degree of disconnect be possible? Steve wondered. *Well, maybe. It wasn’t that difficult to believe.* “I’m sorry Ms. Ashbury, but any and all assignments for the fall semester’s English 1A class are now past the due date. I cannot offer you an A grade. Not to mention, the work itself looks very similar to another student who was in this semester’s class. I believe you might know him.” *Now que the protest and complaint,* Steve thought.

When students who failed his class came to his office at the end of the semester, Steve knew from experience they would fall into one of two categories: the first would beg. And when that didn’t work, they’d try coercion – sometimes even involving the “oldest” profession. After a little bluster, the student might, in as smooth a manner their experience allowed, offer sexual favors - sometimes full liaisons – boys and girls alike in exchange for grade improvement. A few just blatantly offered to “blow” him right there in the office.

Lord, this generation is so quick to compromise and mitigate their disappointments, Steve always thought. *Without any shame. Like they were simply offering you a piece of gum from the store in exchange.*

Steve always, with the most gentle and non-judgmental grace he could afford, turned the student down. After being rejected, some students threatened to “expose” him even if they had to make up false accusations. It never worked because Steve was careful to

show them the open office door, the secretary sitting outside, and the video and audio recordings he used with every student meeting for just these sorts of occasions. If that didn't work, though mostly it did, he knew the chancellor had his back. And to help the student save face, he would offer them the opportunity to complete the course over winter break, by which they could improve their grade standing before next semester. Most were only too glad to accept.

The other student tactic involved the threat of lawsuit, which often came from the more affluent students who were raised to see staff and educators as their personal servants assigned to fulfill their least demand. The greater the affluence, the more the demand. And the stronger the opposition. Affluent students were seldom dissuaded by preventative video or audio or extra credit. They wanted something for nothing. And even the university chancellor couldn't protect Steve when those students enlisted their parents' lawyers for help.

Bridget, in expected fashion, didn't take rejection well. "I don't, like, think you know who you're talking to, Professor McGill," Bridget stated. "I like did the work and you're not giving me the grade you owe me. That's totally fraud and I'm gonna like totally sue you and get you fired. My dad's like totally a lawyer, you hear! You're so like totally fired! He won't let you take advantage of me like this."

A few days later, Steve received a call from Bridget's mother, Abigail Ashbury.

"Let's be realistic, Mister McGill," Abigail condescended during her prearranged call on behalf of her daughter, "College is a time for our children to find themselves. To experience the world away from their parent's and develop those long lasting friendships that will serve them well in the life ahead. It's what we did when we went to college. It's what they are supposed to do now that they have the opportunity. This is

what college should be. But when you fail to regard Bridget's important extracurricular activities and penalize her for taking part in them, it seems capricious."

"I understand," Steve replied.

"Do you?" Mrs. Ashbury asked. "Because Bridget wasn't in a position to refuse her sisters. Nor should she have to. I believe you put her in that unfair position and so I expect you to restore her grade to a justifiable A. You should know, Bridget explained all about your first day of class speech. I don't know what you're on about, but as far as I'm concerned, Bridget confirmed she did the work, yet you still failed to give her an A. She thinks you might have something against her. I assured her, of course, that was not the case, but she is a beautiful girl and I know how you professors are with impressionable young girls. I experienced my fair share of discrimination when I went to university."

"I assure you Mrs. Ashbury, that was not the case."

"Well, I am glad to hear that. But it still doesn't correct the issue at hand or how capricious you've been."

Steve wondered if Abigail had looked up the word *capricious* in the dictionary before deciding how to best to work it into their conversation. Most parents, even the affluent ones, wanted professors to think they were smart, even when they weren't, and became defensive if suggested otherwise.

Ironically, in Steve's many years of experience, he did find affluent parents believed wealth was equal to smart -- an education by sheer benefit of financial sufficiency. And being financially sufficient meant being right. And being right meant they believed they were smarter than everyone else who was less wealthy. Even professors, doctors, and clergyman, who worked diligently to acquire their doctorate, were only thought of as a

slightly elevated class of blue-collar worker and not in the same league as those with generational money.

Steve understood, like many of his colleagues, any person could be smart without being educated, but only the discipline of education made a person educated. Few people with elevated finances understood this.

“Mrs. Ashbury, your daughter, Bridget, is...well, she’s an ‘energetic’ girl who could have easily received an A had she even remotely applied herself to the course dictum provided on the first day of class. I understand your concern, but I do not believe it would be fair to the other students in the class, namely those who did the work and completed the final, to have Bridget’s grade elevated above theirs when she did not earn the higher grade. It would also be unethical considering Bridget simply did not earn a grade higher than F. But it is only one class. With a little extra work over the winter break, before next semester, Bridget can complete all assignments and receive an A. I trust you understand.”

“Oh, I do, Mister McGill. I do. But I am not sure you do. Bridget needs to receive an A for her required classes now so she can maintain her eligibility to be an Omega Nu. An F jeopardizes that. Nor do I want her burdened with unfair requirements, especially since she completed the work required, and needs to move forward. She will be focusing on other, more important matters. I am sure you understand. If not, I would, unfortunately, be required to engage my husband and have him contact the chancellor directly. That would certainly not look favorable on you. But, we don’t have to let it come to that, do we?”

“I understand.” He did. Steve knew how far entitled and affluent people were willing to go for their own purposes. And how willingly the current academic administration would allow them to when money, threats of liability, and image were at stake.

"Do you?"

"I do. I will rectify the issue immediately."

"I am glad to hear you say that. Thank you for being reasonable. That will be all, Mister McGill."

Steve noticed she ended the call not with "professor" but "mister" and hung up on him like he was the butler.

Steve did as he promised. He elevated Bridget's grade to an A knowing it wouldn't make any difference to her education or his ethical integrity. Such issues, he had long ago reconciled, would never become "the hill you die on" as his mother used to intone. She'd been a high school English teacher who taught Steve a few tricks along the way. Like never openly exposing yourself or getting into a power struggle when other means were available.

After elevating Bridget's grade, Steve put a call in to one of his "other means available."

"West End Bar and Grill," Joey shouted into the phone so he could be heard over the clinking of beer glasses, the football game on the tv, and the rowdy laughter coming from his patrons.

"Hey Joey, its Steve."

"Steve-O! Where you been, buddy? Missed you at the card game last month."

"Sorry, academic life. Mid-terms were in full swing and I picked up a couple of new freshman classes to my teaching load. Speaking of loads, is Bobbie around?"

Laughing, Joey set the phone receiver down and went to get his wife, Bobbie, from the back.

Bobbie, aka Bernadette. Aka Joey's wife and Steve's one time girlfriend from high school. If you could call a few movie dates and the beginning of a lifetime friendship, girlfriend. More like big sister for life. Bobbie, for some reason, had taken a liking to Steve right from the start and really looked out for him – from bullies, teachers, anyone who looked down on Steve. She encouraged his “book smarts,” was the first girl he kissed, and the first to stay with him the night he learned his parents were killed by a drunk driver on their way home from the movies. The drunk driver, a sixteen year old kid from a rich family, was blatantly at fault, but still let off with a warning after his affluent father called in several favors to the Chief of Police. Who determined the incident to be a “no fault” traffic accident and dismissed the whole thing as closed. And no one, except Steve and Bobbie, cared enough to challenge the injustice of it all. Steve planned to quit school after that and get a job to support himself, but Bobbie wouldn't hear of it. At her insistence, her family took him in, even though it stretched their meager financial means, and treated him like one of their own. Steve would do anything for them. Since that day and forever.

“Steve?”

“Hi, Bobbie.”

“Hey Sugar, what's up? You doing okay?”

“I am, thanks for asking. Cindy and I are planning on attending your mom's 75th birthday party next week. Let me know what we can bring. Otherwise, I'm just gonna show up with condoms and flowers and flirt my ass off with her all night long.”

“Sure, sugar. She'd love that. You know her. We'd love to see you, too. But that's not why you called. Cindy and I already spoke about the party yesterday, so I know you got something else on your mind.”

“No, of course not. You're right. I do. I was hoping to enlist a complete surrender.”

“Oh yeah? It’s been a hot minute since you asked for one of those. This one must be really rich, and a really big bitch.”

“Well, she ain’t Mother Theresa that’s for sure.”

“She got a name?”

“Bridget Louise Ashbury, 19. Bastion House on Faber Ave where the Omega Nu’s live.”

“Omega Nu’s, huh? I knew a few of those self-righteous little sluts back in the day. Think their shit don’t stink. Okay, Sugar, I’ll pass it along to Joey’s crew. Talk soon. Say hi to Cathy.”

“Will do. Hey, tell Joey I won’t skip his next poker night. I might need a down payment for a new car or something.”

“Funny man. Bye Sugar.”

A month later, after the semester ended and winter break officially began, Steve sat down to his morning coffee and his beloved Maryland Gazette newspaper. On this particular morning, the picture of Bridget being arrested, in the seen and heard around town section, caught his attention first. He read the full article -- enjoying every detail about how a well-known lawyer/politician had to bail out his Omega Nu college freshman daughter out of jail after she was charged with criminal breaking and entering at a local dentist’s office. Drugs were suspected to be the primary motive.

Two local boys, who witnessed the break in, claimed the girl had picked them up at a nearby west end bar because she wanted to “party” and took them to get some “really good blow.” They didn’t know what she was planning till she drove them down the street, parked her Mercedes in front of a dental office, and used a hammer she retrieved from the trunk to smash the front office door open.

“Wait here,” she told them before going into the dentist office through the smashed front glass door. One of the local boys immediately left to call the police because he thought she was “crazy” and didn’t want to get blamed for the burglary. He was on probation, you see. The other stuck around simply because he’d never seen a more crazy, rich chick and wanted to see what she’d do next.

The case, the paper reported, seemed solid. Your classic “open and shut.” The responding officers arrived while the alarm was still sounding to discover the front glass door shattered and the politician’s daughter passed out on the lobby floor inside the dentist office -- with the hammer in one hand and two sealed packages of dental cocaine powder, worth around \$25,000 each, in her other. Of course her family had connections, the article surmised, ensuring she would only get probation as punishment and a stay in rehab, rather than suffer jail time. Which was pretty standard for rich socialites with a drug problem these days. And, naturally, a call to be expelled from the University of Maryland. Though the paper doubted this would occur once her father made additional contributions to the college.

Interestingly, at the scene of the crime, the article included, after being woken up and arrested, the 19 year old politician’s daughter could be heard yelling, “But, I didn’t do anything! I don’t even remember how I got here. It’s not right. I didn’t break into, like, any dentist office. And I don’t own, like, any hammer. Look at me! Like I would even touch some dirty hammer from some dirty carpenter or whatever. Like literally look at my nails. You think I did this? If you don’t let me go, you’re gonna be in big trouble! Do you know who my father is?! I’m gonna call my dad and he’s gonna have you all fired.”

She was partially telling the truth. At least about her lack of knowledge and culpability. But fair turn around was fair turn around.

Steve put the paper down, smiling, and poured himself another cup of coffee before moving on to the book review section of the paper. Pete Hegseth had a new book, *Battle for the American Mind, Uprooting a Century of Miseducation*, out and Professor Talabani had recently published an article reviewing his work. Which Steve had helped to edit of course.

As a last thought, Steve wasn't concerned whether Bridget would return to school or not. And, if she did, seriously doubted he would see her in any more of his classes. Not to mention, the lesson had been imparted. But Steve would be returning. He liked teaching students lessons to live by.

The End.