

THE CURMUDGEON PROFESSOR

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Our newlyweds, HD and his new bride, Theresa, were spooning in bed on a Saturday morning in New England after an exhaustive session of lovemaking, a cherished habit of their famous “humection” mood, their lingo for being horny. They were spending a weekend visiting their parents on alternate days; they spent the first night at his mom’s house. While resting from canoodling, they were engaging in small talk and needling each other about the noise level during their most erotic spell. They had to indulge in the interesting self-restraint in the heat of passion. Interesting because they had made a science out of onomatopoeia. They could emit a wide range of tones, from a feline's sharp hiss to an elephant's deafening trumpet. Keeping quiet during lovemaking was so against their grain! They couldn’t stop laughing about this whole notion. As a lark, Theresa started leafing through the local newspaper and leisurely looked at the Obituary section while HD took a leak in the john.

“Oh, what do we have here? Klaus Kleinmann, a chemistry professor, was found dead in his chalet in the mountain. An autopsy is pending.”

“Grouchy Kleinmann?” responded HD, “I remember that name.”

“How could I forget him? He was indeed a strange character.”

“So, tell me, how did he get this nickname?” questioned HD, who returned and then sat in bed in the lotus position facing her, his ears ready to listen to one of Theresa’s tales from college.

“How much time do you have?”

“Ok, babe, lay it on me!”

I spent two semesters with this man during my freshman year as a pre-med before switching to Computer Sciences. That was a terrible experience that helped me decide against the life sciences. He was part eccentric but full-time arrogant and brilliant. He definitely was not friendly. His appearance alone was enough to frighten someone. He was medium height, stocky with a baritone voice and large hands and ears. He had thick eyebrows. He looked more like a bruiser than a teacher and came across as the kind of person you wouldn't want to meet in a dark alley. He was a refugee from East Germany just before the fall of the Berlin Wall. He spoke with a strong German accent. In fact, I still remember the two German expressions he had attached to his office door: 'Entgegen und zusammen' and that interesting sentence, 'Nach dem Essen ist vor dem Essen.' After these two sayings, she burst out in a guffaw and paused, then pursued. Of course, we always made the mistake of not paying attention to either phrase until we learned otherwise the hard way. From his perspective, the first stands for 'the same and opposite ilk.' Officially he would describe it as scientific ilk, but practically, this was a code word for his like of the brilliant set and his very strong dislike of the cretin hordes. The second implies that life goes on. Again, from his vantage point, he meant he had little empathy, and one must not expect any break from him. Can you imagine the way he made you feel when you go to his office to ask him a question about a concept in Chemistry that you don't grasp? He treated you

like a cretin! He used the word, too, and pointed to the sign on his door. Only then did you learn that you only went to talk to him if you wanted to start an independent project like doing research. Regarding questions, you went to a graduate student, not to him, and the same applied to exams or grades. He literally meant what he said: life goes on, and he sided with the gifted set in Chemistry; the rest mattered not. I did well in his class, but he was such a turnoff that I decided to change track altogether. He was dour and very opinionated. Some of his strong opinions went way beyond the pale. He frequently commented on the news before starting a lecture. For one thing, he was very misogynous. He had the gall to criticize Marie Curie, joking 'she was not sexy.' The worst part of him was his overt racism. He had a famous confrontation with an African student from Cameroon, Frantz Fanso-Free. We called him F³, 'the most powerful function in math,' as good a student as he was. I remember this like yesterday. As a smart aleck, grouchy Kleinmann observed one day in class that 'Kamerun had its best days under German supervision.' F³ stood up in class and gave him a history lesson that went thusly: 'Your spelling is a deviation of our accepted one. Just like you couldn't bestow Danzig to Gdansk in Poland and expect it to be accepted, this too shall not pass. As far as my country doing well under German occupation, history will retain that Germany committed a lot of extortion and caused hardships to the indigenous population. Fortunately, it lasted from the end of the 19th century to WW1.' Students applauded and embarrassed him. His face became flushed like a tomato. To make matters worse, F³ consistently scored the highest in the class. This infuriated him to no end, to our delight.

“We have encountered a few of those in our lives. However, knowing you, more about him still caught your attention. So go on.”

You know me well, huh? she paused. What I could never figure out was his true allegiance. He left a communist regime and came to America for freedom and so on. Yet he seemed sad about Germany's reunification and was not ready to criticize the Chinese riposte to the students' protest at Tian An Men Square. His idea of freedom is really law and order submission. The establishment always seemed to be correct. He was a throwback to the days before the me-too movement when males appropriated the right to touch females as they pleased, nary any consent. Quite a few students complained about that. He had the 'touchy-feely' itch and always had to make contact by touching one's arm or hand. He had several run-ins with female students. A famous one involved a graduate student working as a lab assistant that he berated publicly using hurtful words like 'stupid' and 'small brain.' She walked off the lab, and students signed a petition to support her claim of male chauvinism. The petition went straight to the Dean, and he had to apologize to her.

He was frequently involved in some mishap. Nonetheless, he had a sterling reputation for being a great chemist; he published many papers and obtained several grants. I truly believe he was a wunderkind but had a personality disorder. As such, people adored his bench work but loathed his social skills. I wonder why they have found it necessary to do an autopsy. Could there have been foul play, and if so, who would want to do him harm?

HD heard three things from this soliloquy: East German refugee with questionable allegiance, a brilliant mind but a lousy personality, and the need to perform an autopsy. Having lived in the cloak-and-dagger world, ideas of a foreign asset living undercover in the US crossed his mind. He even imagined he could have been under the control of the master spy Marcus Wolf, who was notorious for recruiting the inner circle of the West German PM during the Cold War. Theresa must have read his mind, “So tell me, what is going on in that brain of yours? Don’t fool me, I know some alarm bells went off.”

Indeed, they did go off because his mind would look for a pattern in apparent chaos or a trend when others would see a scattershot style. It would be of interest to know if he was doing research for the federal government. That would be a sensitive matter, for he could fall under the influence of a foreign power. The Feds recruit from academia all the time for consultants and research, provided one can obtain a high-security clearance. The more HP thought about this character, the more fascinating he became as a potential asset for either side and even a double agent.

“He certainly had enough to offer both sides to make him a target. I would be cautious and not pronounce myself yet because one of the cardinal rules is that things may not be what they seem.”

“No kidding! That’s the best answer you can come up with? You have to do better than that, buster.”

“Come on, darling, suppose we explore each other’s anatomy instead of wasting time thinking about that grouchy fellow?” HD said this while pointing at his stiffened penis and “this is humection” time, babe!”

“You are just incorrigible!”

“And you are irresistible!” He came close to her, kissed her, and then his tongue went straight to her erect left nipple, gateway to her temple of sensual delights. HD wouldn’t hesitate to go to any length to add gravy to foreplay or gild the lily. Theresa, who first feigned a disinterest, liked nothing better than the look and feel of HD’s eyes doting on her with his craving, his ravenous desire, and lustful longing. He knew that once he lit her spark, there would not be any stopping of her raging, moist devil doorbell. It wasn’t long before each had a hand on the other’s mouth to restrain any suggestive bellows. This went on for a bit, with each one adding a layer of sugar to the other’s sweet bun until his mom hollered, “Ok, lovebirds, come and eat breakfast to replenish the expanded energy you guys have been losing since you went to bed.” The lovebirds sheepishly laughed, for they knew his mom was on to what was happening and maybe even heard the muffled sounds that dissipated.

HD and Theresa did have a memorable weekend of good treats both by each other and at the hands of their respective parents. Try as he might, HD remained perturbed by the professor’s story. After some burrowing, he came up with a dark picture. His status as an asset was classified information accessible on a strict need-to-know basis. His death, on the other hand, was anything but what the sanitized version in the paper reported. He had a heart attack while cavorting with a

hooker and underage at that. HD called one of his buddies. “Look, man, why are you nosing in this?” said his friend with an irritated tone. “Where is the love, bro? He was a professor at the school my wife went to. He was a very strange character, and now we are wondering about the circumstances of his death.”

A silence followed while he was searching for an answer. “Succ chol. Now leave me alone, you turkey.” *Succ chol*, their lingo for succinylcholine, is a lethal drug delivered by injection that paralyzes muscles and is hard to trace unless looked for by a sophisticated lab. HD knew enough to realize he needed to stop because this was an obvious case of a professional hit, and the professor was knee-deep into the cloak-and-dagger world. Whose asset he was made no difference. This dossier belonged to a sensitive branch, counterintelligence, and he had to stay away from that, a situation where trespassing leads to “curiosity kills the cat.” HD also knew not to mention this to anyone, especially not Theresa. She knew enough one day to ask him, “You mean to tell me you never inquired about the facts associated with the professor?” His answer was, “Cold trail. I have better things to do than waste my time with such cases.” Hence, he was able to straddle both sides: the truth and half-truth. He honestly didn’t think he lied. Do you? As for Theresa, she had better things to do with HD than to argue about his investigation of a professor she despised.

“Now, what about some ‘humection’, hon? I could use that later tonight.” She said that while reaching for his crotch in the car during a ride home.