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Office Hours: Spring Semester, Week Two

The Saab complained all the way to campus, something about its front end and potholes. Mark countered that noise with a radio broadcast of a White House press briefing staged to retract and reiterate the lies tweeted out overnight by the president. The emotional effort required to believe the country could survive Trump was just about equal to the self-deception involved in speeding down Route 1 in a collection of aftermarket parts slapped onto a rusty chassis manufactured by a car company that had gone bust.

Mark was already twenty minutes late for office hours when he got to the garage, so he left the recycling box full of NEPCAJE books in the back seat and vowed to devote Thursday and Friday, and the better part of the weekend, to those antimagnetic tomes about teaching. When he got to the second floor of Hum Hall, three guys in parkas and gym shorts were huddling beside his office door. Before Mark said a word, the nearest one unfolded a Drop-Add form and said they were all seniors and had been trying to get into the workshop for four years.

Mark stuck his key in the door. "I didn't see you at the first two class meetings."

"I can explain." This was the shortest of the three, and he patted his pockets in search of something.

The third guy tipped his headphones off his ears. "We're desperate. The thumping music got a nod of approval from the first guy, who was clearly in charge. "We're basically here to beg."

The short one said, "We're at your mercy, sir." He'd started to pump his fists like pistons in time with the music. Soon, the beat got to the hips and heads of the other two.

Mark said, "You're not getting into the class, but you'd make a great boy band."

"We can do that." This was first guy, who sprang to attention. "We'll be your opening act for every class. Please, Professor? We've heard great stuff about you."

Mark opened his office door. "You can come in and finish your pitch, but the class is full. And the waitlist is full. And more than a dozen seniors who have attended both class meetings are already not getting in."

They did persist. After a round of introductions and a rambling complaint about the lack of creative outlets on campus, the lead guy finally explained their plight in two words. "Restoration Comedy." All three of them had signed up for that class to complete their Humanities requirement. "Not funny."

The short kid added his two cents. "Tragic mistake."

"Nice try," Mark said. "Not happening."

The music man flipped his headphones back into place.

The group spokesman said, "Foiled again," and led the other two down the hall to the next office door.

As Mark sat at his desk, a young woman poked her head in. He recognized her from class and ventured a guess. "Wendy?"

"Yes! Hello. Are you free?" She was wearing an ankle-length blue coat and a cowboy hat, and she immediately shrugged off a backpack that banged down like an anvil. "How are you?" She flipped off the hat and kicked it under the unoccupied chair next to Mark's desk.

Mark said, "I'm happy to see you."

This seemed to confuse her. She reached up and tugged at her hair, as if it were a curtain she could pull down over her shoulders. "I guess I'll just sit here? I don't know why I cut my hair. I'm in your creative-writing class. Is this an okay time to talk?"

"It's perfect," Mark said. She wasn't making much sense, but her voice had a flat Midwestern plainness that made everything she said seem reasonable.

"I guess I just wanted to say how much I am enjoying the course." She was still standing, still worrying at the ripples of brown hair that seemed to be pasted to her head and neck. "That's lame—exactly what I didn't want to say. One of my housemates gave me this creme to stop my hair from springing out, and now I feel like one of those ducklings. You know, the ones you see after an oil spill? I'm Willa, by the way. I'm usually not like this." She waved her hands around to make it clear she wasn't just talking about her hair.

Mark said, "I'm really happy to know the course is making sense to you."

By the time Willa sat down, she'd told Mark she was pre-med, had early acceptance to Johns Hopkins for the fall, was an only child, lived with five other seniors in a three-bedroom apartment with no stove, wasn't sure she wanted to be a doctor, her parents were divorced and both taught biology at the University of Kansas, and a chemistry professor had given her two electric hotplates to use until that no-good stove was repaired or replaced, which is why her bag was so heavy. "I guess I wanted to know if you think it's something about me, or it might be something else, like that instead of using traditional books, we just read what other kids in the class write for our assigned reading, maybe? Also, I guess I was wondering, do other kids talk to you about this? I mean, is this normal?"

Mark smiled. He had no idea what Willa was trying to ask.

"I'm sure they do." Willa performed a quick hair check. Verdict: not great. "It's just I want to be sure it's not just me, that I'm, you know, not freaking out or something. Like just now. I see myself saying, It's not just me, and I wonder why she—why I—didn't say, It's not just I. Because *I* is correct, right? Even though it sounds odd? But the point is—who is that looking at me and thinking about what I just said? The whole time I worked on my first story, it was just like that—that's what I wanted to ask you about. It's like I'm reading over my own shoulder. Do you think that's, I don't know, pretty normal for someone who hasn't done anything creative before?"

"I think medicine is creative," Mark said.

"Well, thanks, but not really. It's mostly been memorizing so far. Writing that first story felt much more—well, not the same."

"That's great." This seemed to relax her, so Mark carried on. "You're feeling what you're meant to feel. That was the spirit of the monosyllabic limit. To make you self-conscious, to make you think about every word you write. Does that make sense?"

Willa nodded. "Self-consciousness—but doubled. Right? I mean, literally times two. Or, squared, maybe."

Mark didn't say anything. He was recalling her first story, which they would talk about in class today. In Willa's imagination, the woman who'd been instructed not to open the window was a trainee at a fast-food restaurant, stuck in a tiny glass booth. "Here's what I know. You wrote a superb first story. I love that she opens that window, and all those cars zip into line before the manager has anyone at the grill to fill the orders."

"And *mic* was okay? I mean, would you consider that natural language? Am I loving the limits like you said we had to love them? Or would you say I was gaming the limits with a word like that?"

“People refer to microphones as *mics* all the time.” To Mark’s surprise, this seemed to satisfy Willa. She really was worried about one word. “*Mic* is a standard noun—as familiar as, say, *phone*. Right?”

A loud knock at the door brought Willa to her feet. “Telephone,” she said. “Right. I mean, no one would say, ‘Stop checking your telephone while I’m talking to you.’” As if she were at home, Willa opened the door and ushered in another student from the workshop.

“I can come back,” he mumbled. He was memorable—a somber towhead who always pushed his chair back a few feet from the table, keeping his distance from most of what went on in class. He was wearing a puffy white ski parka bedizened with about \$5,000 worth of lift tickets.

Before Mark could speak, Willa had shoved her backpack into the hall. “Your turn in the chair,” she said as she returned to collect her hat and coat, and then she hollered, “See you both in class,” and slammed the door.

“She’s in our class?” The somber guy didn’t move. “I’m Mark.”

Mark said, “So am I.” This didn’t impress the kid. “Have a seat.”

He ignored the invitation. “You probably heard about what happened. Which is why I might not make it to class today.”

“I didn’t hear anything about you.”

“You will. It’s all over campus. There was an incident. Last night.” He was staring past Mark, out the window, over the pond, and deep into the rocky hills of the reservation land. “My car was stolen.”

Mark said, “On campus?”

“Yeah. Well, nearby. Two guys from not around here, but they come around a lot, selling—they deal. Drugs, I guess. That’s what I’m hearing anyway.”

Mark said, “So they’ve been caught?”

“No, but we have witnesses.” He sounded like someone who’d already talked to his father and his father’s lawyer.

“Listen, you don’t owe me any details. I’m just glad you weren’t hurt. Let’s talk about what this means for you in the workshop.”

“There’s not much to tell.” He unzipped his parka halfway. “Me and a buddy wanted to go snowshoeing in the Breakheart hills while there was still snow, but there wasn’t much. But anyway, I’d said I’d give a few other guys a ride out there, and those two black guys showed up with them, but for some reason the other kids decided they weren’t in the mood, so those two black guys said they’d go with us for the hell of it. There was a big mix-up about what to do next, and I guess they ended up stealing the Audi.”

Mark sincerely hoped this kid was a good skier because his story was going downhill really fast. “So you won’t be in class today?”

He narrowed his gaze. It was the first time he seemed to be genuinely thinking before he spoke. “Probably not. Probably never again.” He looked directly at Mark. “I am so fucked. Sorry.”

“Is there some way I could be of use?”

“I doubt it,” he said. “Thanks, anyway. I gotta go Skype with my parents again.”

Mark said, “Send me an email when you feel up to it. We can meet to talk about your status in the class.”

He zipped up his jacket, but it was too late. All the air had already gone out of him. “I can do that,” he said, though it was obvious that neither Mark believed him.