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R.A.

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The Literarian

R.A.

Fred Leebron

In college there was only so much harm you could do, although freshman year Walter's lab partner, a soccer star, once pulled a knife on a football player who attacked him at a kegger, and was actually suspended indefinitely. Marcus had also cheated on his lab work, which tormented Walter because, since he didn't turn Marcus in, he too was in violation of the Honor Code. This was before laptops and thumb drives, and the work you produced was the only copy you had. When the T.A. began to return lab reports, Marcus elbowed Walter and winked at him. "Watch this," he whispered. "I never gave it to her." After the T.A. had returned all the work, Marcus pushed himself forward. "Mindy," he said, "where's mine? I didn't get mine back." He looked absolutely stricken. "Oh, Marcus, I'm so sorry," the graduate student said. "I must have lost it. Of course I'll give you an A." Walter always thought it fair that Marcus finally had got kicked out, even if he had acted in self-defense. But that was years ago, and he'd recently heard that Marcus had been readmitted, and now Walter was a senior, and his own hearing was in a few hours, and he was too worried to consider the irony, for he himself had been turned in by his fellow resident advisors amid rumors of misbehavior with his freshman advisees, and while he had no idea what evidence was on the table, he understood that he was in real trouble.

"It will be you and the Dean of Student Affairs and the Dean of the Residential College," the Associate Dean had told him in a literal wake-up call. "Eleven a.m., at Professor Steinberg's residence."

"Okay, Leah," Walter said.

"And you and I can talk about it afterward, if you want."

"Thank you," he said, although he and Leah had never gotten along, and she probably could not be happier that it had come to this.

Now it was fall break, the perfect time for a hearing, and he paced the empty campus. It was said to be one of the most beautiful universities in the country, but sometimes that was hard to see. Of his few friends, Clay was at crew, Bob was in the library, and George was back home in Philly. Walter had just slept with Brett the previous weekend—on his twenty-first birthday, yet—but now Brett would have nothing to do with him. He'd been pursuing her since freshman year, he'd even dated some of her friends as part of a strategy of triangulation, but she wasn't interested in him, and as soon as she'd slept with him she told her already graduated boyfriend, and Tom had let him know it was just a mistake, in that nonchalant but derisive manner of his. Those two certainly had a strange relationship.

He felt sure the Deans had him for sleeping with two of his advisees and doing their cocaine with them. What he hoped they didn't also know was that he'd been dispensing valium to whomever wanted it. Maybe he sold some of it. He didn't want to remember. He'd sold drugs in his earlier years at the school. Once he'd had half the football team on the floor of his room frantically tracking down scattered hits of acid. And one of his old high school friends had set him up with a pound of homegrown his first semester to make sure he had enough money for books. But he didn't like selling; it made him nervous. So he wanted to believe he hadn't taken any money for valium. Still, he could feel the tightrope he was walking. He needed a strategy—Leah wouldn't tell him what the specific allegations were—and he thought it had to be admitting what he suspected they suspected and hoping they would stop at that. The girls had slept with him willingly enough—one had stayed behind at a party he'd hosted and then, a few nights later on

another occasion, had had to be pried from under his bed and pulled from his room, and the other had climbed into his bed one night when he wasn't there and waited for him to arrive home. Other R.A.s were busy in their own way, he knew, but he was the only one being tried or heard or whatever they wanted to call it. An envy at the guys who got away with it welled within him so strongly that tears started in his eyes. God damn it. God damn this whole school.

He'd been ambivalent about college in the first place, and at the beginning of every semester, on his way out the door, he'd look at his mother and father and say, "I'm only doing this for you. Tell me that you don't care, and then I can quit," and the two of them would look at him dismally and shake their heads, as if there were some essential truth he couldn't quite grasp. His brother and three sisters had gone to college, and it was understood that out of all of them Walter owed his parents the most, for everything he'd put them through. And it was a lot. And now he had to tell them about this. God damn it.

And to think of all the things he'd done for his advisees! He'd driven a group of them into New York so they could buy secondhand textbooks, and he'd secured tickets for them to the Philadelphia concert of The Who's farewell tour. He didn't lock his room when he wasn't there, so they had an extra place where they could hang out, in case they needed it. He made himself their safety net so that none of them even had to eat a meal alone or sit around alone on a weekend night. He was worried that his grades might suffer from his constantly open door, but it was only mid-term and he couldn't yet tell. "Are you going to make Phi Beta Kappa like your brother did?" his mother goaded him on the phone. "I don't know," he said, but god he wanted to.

It was amazing how empty campus was. He had often stayed through breaks, it was his favorite time, when almost all of the students were gone. He wouldn't waste his breath trying to catalog them—they were who you thought they were—but he wondered exactly who of them had turned him in. As one of the Deans would tell him gravely in just two hours, "You know, we didn't go looking for this."

It was a fact that the administration and the faculty were far more liberal than the students would ever be. Even his closest friends were Republicans. Even his closest friends had applied to and then joined the most selective eating clubs. Even his closest friends had been stricken when Reagan had been nicked by that bullet. That had been a long two years ago, sitting with Clay in his dorm room, struggling to contain his own glee. But he wasn't really a hardcore liberal, he was just a generally negative guy, a sadly typical byproduct of a college filled with people who treated it like an endless Dale Carnegie course.

He'd applied for the resident advisorship because he knew he had to be better at it than those morons and because he needed the free room. It was one of the ironies of his situation that his parents were making him pay for room and board when he didn't even want to be here. He wanted to be out in the world, making a living. Enough of this delayed gratification. So what if he'd made a mess of it during his year off, having affairs with two married nurses and appallingly falling in love with one of them to the point that he'd tried to kill himself. He still had had fun. But that was old news. He wouldn't dwell on that.

And the college—its faculty, its administration—had been awfully good to him. Now he'd have to face their disappointment and judgment. "You do realize," the Dean would say to him in two hours, "that if you slept with them that the only reason they slept with you was because you were their R.A., don't you?" And he would have to nod his head and swallow that. He was pretty sure he'd charged them for the valium. He couldn't afford anything but contrition and remorse.

When he looked up from this realization, someone was racing toward him in a flapping light suede jacket, an expression of pure delight or evil on his face, and quite suddenly there were all these karate kicks and chops flaring at him, seemingly just missing connecting. Was he being attacked? He could barely open his mouth.

"Dude!" The flailing stopped. "Dude, I knew I would run into you sooner or later."

He was grasped by the shoulders and given a healthy shake.

“Marcus,” he said.

“I heard you were a senior already, dude!” Marcus began kicking the air again.

“You good guys always graduate early. Anyway, I’m late for practice.”

“Marcus—,” Walter said, sensing here was a chance for some real advice.

“So how’ve you been? Are you happy? Are you having the time of your life? Come on, dude.” He playfully shook him again. “I want answers.”

“Marcus, I—“

“Got to run, sport. Don’t let this senior-freshman thing get between us.” Off he loped, so fast that for the first time Walter could actually see the athlete in him. Instantly he recognized that the whole martial arts thing was a calculated replacement for the knife that had gotten Marcus into all that trouble. Walter was still shaking, but he was returned to the silent emptiness.

Now there were just ninety minutes, ninety minutes in which to decide whether he would admit anything. Cut your losses, he told himself. Just cut your losses. Admit what they suspected and see what they offered, or admit nothing and risk them finding out even more than they suspected. For once he wished he’d stayed in that nuclear arms race course freshman year. Zero-sum and MAD—wasn’t there a bit of MAD here? Certainly, no one wanted this to go public. It was lonely being accused. It was lonely being guilty. Where the hell was everybody?

“There are two kinds of men,” the Dean of the College would say to him. “Those who think from the waist up, and those who think from the waist down. I don’t have to tell you which kind you are.”

At eleven-oh-five a.m. he was shown into the Dean of the College’s study. The two Deans didn’t rise and there was no handshake. The dark room reeked of dismay. Between the Deans was a small table set with a pitcher of water and two glasses. Walter stared at the arrangement.

“Chinese water torture,” the Dean of Student Affairs joked.

Walter laughed emptily.

“So, obviously,” the Dean of Student Affairs said, “you know why you’re here.”

“Yes,” Walter rasped.

“You know, we didn’t go looking for this. It was last spring when I began receiving reports about you.”

At this Walter blanched. What had he done last spring?

“It seems that one of your classmates was very concerned you had taken the R.A. job only for the room.”

He knew who that was. Jenny Bloom. A fat little bitch who cajoled her advisees into typing her junior project for her. A cunning little bitch who approached him when she’d heard he’d been named an R.A. and said so insincerely, “Oh Walter, that is just so wonderful,” and he’d turned on the little hypocrite and sneered, “I’m just doing it for the room.” That tattling little bitch, who would later become a key economic advisor to an American President, and write in to the Alumni Weekly, “And there I am going into labor with my precious first and the President is calling me about something really important and I’m thinking how ever in the world did I get to be me?!”

“So, that was interesting, but as I told her it was nothing to act on.”

Walter managed a sad smile and shook his head. Jenny fucking Bloom.

“And then this past week some of your colleagues began hearing stories from their advisees about some of your actions with your advisees, and they came and expressed their concern.”

“Yes,” Walter said, because it wasn’t anything that he hadn’t heard from Leah.

“And so here we are, trying to determine all the facts so that we can figure out where we go from here.”

“I understand,” Walter said.

“You do realize,” the Dean of the College said, not bothering to obscure his patronizing smirk, “that if you slept with them the only reason they slept with you was because you were their R.A., don’t you?”

“So is there anything you want to tell us?” the Dean of Student Affairs asked so quietly and neutrally that it was almost not a question.

Was there anything he wanted to tell them? What did he really *want* to tell them? That the first girl had practically begged him to sleep with her, her hands searching for his weakest parts, and that the second had said wide-eyed, “I’m a virgin,” and he immediately answered, “Are you sure you want to be doing this,” and she said, “Absolutely. Very much. I just wanted you to know.” That she kept her eyes open the whole time, and looking into them was like looking out into a whole new dimension, she seemed that authentic and real and, well, just *herself*? That two of the boys had invited him to their room and laid out the lines and urged him to take what was his “due” for “putting up” with all of them? That he’d liked all of them, he really did, he just hadn’t figured out how to navigate this friendship where he was the older one, the one who should know better.

“I mean,” the Dean of Student Affairs said, “we can do it this way, or we can launch a full investigation, in which we call each of your advisees in individually and hear from each of them what exactly has been going on.”

They were appealing to his empathy and his fear, for who wanted to put the freshmen through that?

“I slept with two of my advisees and I did some of their cocaine with them,” he said.

“That’s what we heard. “ The Dean of Student Affairs nodded almost contentedly and leaned back in his chair, put his feet up on the coffee table, and pillowed his head against his clasped hands so that he appeared to be flaunting the unsullied underarms of his shirt. “You’re lucky it was their cocaine, or otherwise we’d be handing you over to the Borough police.”

Walter nodded gravely. The gravity took him by surprise and quite clearly he saw all the crimes of his youth, a youth which was ending today one way or another; today would be the last possible indiscretion. Well, maybe this wouldn’t be his last indiscretion, but it would be the last indiscretion of his youth. After this, he saw, he’d have to be responsible in a world that enabled you as much as you wanted it or allowed it to. Certainly, there were things we all knew we shouldn’t do and must not do, and certainly, we did them anyway. What were yours?

“Is there anything you want to say for yourself?” the Dean of the College asked.

If he thought about it, he was so imperfect, such a blemished citizen, that what was the point of anything?

“I wish,” he said. “I wish I’d understood that I shouldn’t have, you know, or that someone had stopped me.”

“Someone had stopped you?” the Dean of Student Affairs said.

“That you had understood?” the Dean of the College said.

“Well, it’s not like, about the sex, that it was written anywhere.”

“That has got to be assumed,” the Dean of Student Affairs said.

“I know,” Walter said. “I just didn’t.”

“You can’t argue the drugs.”

“They were *their* drugs,” Walter pointed out.

Both Deans shook their heads.

“Is there any way,” one of them asked, in hindsight just for the sake of conversation, “you think you can continue as an effective R.A., given all that you’ve done?”

This would strike him later, much later, as something he should have accepted as impossible, but now he selfishly saw it as a last chance. “I think so. I’d like to.”

The two men looked frankly at each other.

“Okay, then.” The Dean of Student Affairs rose and so did his colleague and then so did Walter. “We’ll let you know what we decide.”

This time they did shake his hand.

“Thank you,” he said.

He hurried from the room and from the residence.

This was 1982, the shame of Nixon still on everyone’s minds, a world of ongoing scandal, scandal since the beginning of morality, the choice we knew we shouldn’t make but made anyway, because we wanted to, because we couldn’t or wouldn’t stop ourselves. It was a charmless existence, really, but you still had to have some fun.

That evening, as for once he did what he was told and waited, the phone rang.

“Hello,” he said, trying to sound positive and subdued at the same time, a tone of penitence and hope.

“Walter, this is Dean Brown. I’m afraid the decision is that you cannot continue as the R.A.”

“I understand,” Walter said, his voice quivering.

“The one thing we can offer is that it is your choice whether you resign or we terminate you from the position.”

“Okay,” Walter said.

“You have to move out by tomorrow evening. We have a single for you in New New Quad.”

The equivalent of Siberia, Walter thought. Well-deserved. Well-done.

“So what will it be?” the Dean asked politely.

“Resigned,” Walter said.

“Very good. Come by my secretary’s tomorrow, and she’ll have the key for you. Goodbye, Walter.”

It all sounded so final that he thought he might never see the Dean again and indeed he hoped he wouldn’t. In the new silence he glanced around his room; he had at most two hikes to New New Quad to get himself moved out and moved in. At least it was all over. At least he was still enrolled. And now he could just concentrate on the work and keep his head down and graduate. He looked at the phone. His few friends were waiting for word, and then they’d want to drink. He didn’t want to drink at all and he wanted to drink a lot. He looked at the phone and wondered which it would be.

Four hours later he was lying on his bed trying to recover from the beer and scotch and green chartreuse at the Alchemist and the Barrister, where Clay had gotten belligerent again and the three of them had been tossed from the bar. At least Clay and Bob had paid his way. Bob in his usual droll manner called it “the price of admission;” Clay had said it was what you did when a friend got fired, and “knowing you, this won’t be the last time either.” At least the room wasn’t spinning. He felt wrung out and full of dread. Of course, he hadn’t told his parents yet. There was a knock at the door. It was one in the morning. That couldn’t be them.

“Borough Police for Walter Miller.”

He processed that. He had nothing in the room that was illegal. He got up and reached for the door. Two officers in caps and uniforms stood facing him sternly.

“We have a warrant for the arrest of Walter Miller, sir. Are you Walter Miller?”

“I am,” he said.

“Could you please turn and extend your hands behind your back?”

He was handcuffed and frisked and read his rights. He had a million things to say and he was sure not to say a word. They led him out of the room, down the short hall, out the door, and down four steps to where their car waited. He could not remember seeing a car on the quad before, not even on move-in day. The university was very particular about its grounds, as if the whole campus were a national monument or a prized garden. He was wondering if he’d ever been this scared before and he was wondering how they’d found out so quickly about the valium and he was wondering if they’d let him delay his phone call until a more decent hour. He’d been pretty frightened when he’d traveled around by himself a few years ago, and he’d found that just staying quiet and keeping your eyes wide open was the best approach. He stayed very still in the back seat of the police car. How big a deal was the “illegal sale and distribution of prescription narcotics” anyway? He might have charged two to five dollars a pill and sold a grand total of twenty pills, and they’d find the remaining bag of fifty, which were his by prescription, thanks to a shady doctor he’d met the past summer, but no doubt they’d make some kind of “intent to sell and distribute” case against him once they had it all in hand. At least college wasn’t a drug free zone the way all the elementary and secondary schools were, or was it? He couldn’t recall seeing any signs posted to this effect, but that didn’t mean it wasn’t. They cut across the late night glow of Nassau Street and soon they were in the nether region of the town, a place everyone at the college was unfamiliar with, past the sullen public high school that spawned the townies and a mall he’d never known existed, and soon they turned into a parking lot protected by a cop and a chainlinked fence, and stopped next to something that looked like a loading dock. He waited until one of the officers opened the door and reached in and took hold of an arm.

“Right this way, Mr. Miller.”

Inside his eyes clenched in the bright fluorescent light and he could feel the back of his head begin to pound as if it were being hammered from within. He remained very quiet and did exactly as he was told, turning left and right against a wall for his photograph, presenting each finger to be inked and recorded. When he asked if he could make his phone call later in the morning, his voice first felt like a flow of water

that you could not see or hear, but the officer seemed to be expecting the request and nodded approvingly. "Sure, Walter. We can do that."

The cell was larger and cleaner than he expected. The two other gentlemen were older, the toilet so public he could not imagine using it. He took a seat on a bench and shut his eyes. Years later he'd spend a lot longer in confinement, when he would get figuratively and then literally carried away at a political protest, but this right now felt like the most endless moment he could ever experience, no kind of horizon in sight, in such a closed-off space. This wasn't even jail, this was just a holding cell. No need to get upset. He'd be here at most a day, if he could summon whatever he had to summon to call his parents. He wondered if they'd take a credit card for bail. Did you have to post a bond or something? That had to involve hard cash. He had about eighty dollars in his checking account, and another sixty due from his job as a bartender at the campus pub. How much could bail be for something like this? At least for the next few days he wouldn't be missing any classes. There wasn't an iota of natural light in the whole place and they'd taken his watch. He'd been reduced to zero personal effects before. This wasn't a big deal. He and the two other gentlemen were stingy with their eye contact, as if it were the only resource they had. Hadn't he read somewhere that America had the highest percentage of incarceration of any democracy? He was still so far out from the rest of his life that maybe this would end all right. Couldn't it?

The problem was we were all human, but only some of us got caught. If all of us did, there'd be nobody left. And then who would run the banks and fly the planes and teach the kids and tend to the ill? Look inside yourself where you don't want to, where you almost always avoid, and what do you see? Was it that time you stole, or cheated, or lied, or did someone else real harm? We're all in there together and yet, as soon as you admit it or are exposed, you are separated out, as if we all weren't the same, as if it is only you who are guilty of *something*. We wish it were different. We wish we were better, you were better, all of us were better. Wish is just another four letter word, as are *hold, keep, hope, want, dick, cunt, hate, fuck, love, care, need*. Get over them.

He would be held another day or two. He would serve three months or six. When he'd re-enroll, some of his old advisees would come visit him in New New Quad, and they'd stand in his doorway transfixed, as if he were an animal in a zoo, and he'd realize in one stunning blow how much he did terrify them. He'd graduate a year late and be free to go on with an almost clean slate, even though he understood he didn't deserve such a second chance. But for this moment when he didn't know how it would end, he was wondering why it had been decided that he had to be the one in there.