An MFA Creative Writing Essay Question

by Frank Hinton

An MFA Creative Writing Essay Question for Professor Spekkins Plenary 141.

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7. Using Cohen's Method of Structure craft a piece of fiction featuring unexpected conflict. (12 points)

In an artsy cafe with a lot of unique shit on the wall. The picture should be clear: The sound of machines turning milk into foam, a girl with a scarf and black un-prescribed glasses, a vacant stage occupied only by an acoustic guitar and stool. People aren't talking loud, conversations seem introspective and and garish. I step past and people look at us and don't look at us; judging by not judging.

I'm with a girl. We find a seat and sit down. We remove our coats and hats and look at each other. This is a girl I met in class. My real girlfriend is somewhere back on campus, studying for exams. The girl across from me has red hair. The simple fact of it all is that I have never slept with a red-headed woman and something deep down compels me to do so. I love my girlfriend very much, but I have a checklist.

"Nervous for the exam?" I ask her.

"Not really," she says.

She pulls a clip from her head. Red hair spills over her shoulders in loose curls like spoiled Christmas ribbons from a torn package. She

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swipes at her head getting all the strands into the right place. The gesture seems so natural, her expression is unaffected.

"I don't really know what you can do wrong on a creative writing exam," she says.

"Spelling mistake," I say.

"I haven't made one of those in three years. I edit tests more thoroughly than I edit my own writing."

"Spekkins probably wants formulas. He'll ask us to write a story using his method."

"Ugh. Method writing. He thinks it's like method acting. They don't relate," she says. Her name is Erin, by the way.

"Yeah, they don't. I don't really see how you can use any kind of formula for writing. How is it authentic?"

"It's not, that's the trick," Erin says. "Spekkins is so paranoid about his own fame as a writer that he is trying to poison us with methods. The last thing he wants is for one of his students to get published before he does."

"I thought he had a book published?" I say.

"Self print."

"Did you study his method anyhow?"

"What's to study?" She says. "You lay the setting in the first paragraph, you present a problem in the second, you describe a character in the third, you add two layers in a conversation and then use action to come to a meaningful conclusion. It's a joke. I'm gonna

try and do the exact opposite on his exam, see how he likes that. My advice for the exam would be to study Rohmer. Spekkins loves that guy. Reference Rohmer in a story, I bet you get a 90."

I stand up. She is so hostile, fiery. I can smell her shampoo and her deodorant. I imagine her spreading the deodorant stick over the creases beneath her underarms. I want this red-head.

"What do you want," I say. "I'm buying."

"Oh. Okay. Ah, get me a...," (she looks at the drink menu hanging above the counter for a long time), "...Pumpkin Spice latte. Large."

"No problem," I say.

I go to the counter. The waitress has no tits. She has a green apron covered in buttons. One of the buttons has the word "whore" on it, but the word is crossed out. I wonder what that means. Is she against whores, or one in particular? Is she a reformed whore? Maybe she just doesn't like the word.

I decide not to ask her about the button and order a black French Roast and Erin's Pumpkin Spice. The waitress tells me she will bring the drinks over in a minute. I return to Erin.

"They'll be ready in a minute," I say.

"Good," Erin says. "You know I thought of a neat idea. What if we wrote the same, exact story for our essay?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, instead of studying we sit down and sketch out characters and a plot. We will like, really flesh it out. Then on the essay we write the story our own way."

"So we could see where each of us goes with it," I say. My eyes must light up.

"Yes! Exactly." Erin leans in and chops her hands onto the table. "We plan it, write it and then we can post the stories side-by-side on my blog. We'll scan them. We can even analyze how Spekkins marks them. It's an art project. We can call it *How MFA Professors Analyze Exam Essays, A Crisis* or something like that."

"That's really smart," I say.

"I think it's the only thing that would get me excited for this exam."

Our drinks come and we begin to drink them. We pull out notebooks and we plan our story. We get into it, we flesh out as many details as we can.

I watch Erin as we plan. She is hard-edged but calm. She wants transcendent ideas, she wants new genres. Her writing is so neat and concise. Her ideas spring forth without effort. She references authors I've never heard of. Soon we have a plan. It becomes a plan within a plan. She is into fiction stories as if they were pieces of display art; objects larger than the words themselves. Her idealism makes me horny.

We finish our coffee and look over our notes. We twirl pens and put them in our mouths. When we finish she gives me a high-five, but our fingers interlock and she grabs my hand and pulls it close.

"Hey, I want to show you something I wrote," she says.

"Okay."

"It's in my room. I think you'll like it."

"Okay," I say again.

"You have strong hands," she says.

I feel it, the lightness and the gulp. My girlfriend of six years means nothing. I love her, but who cares? I need to do this red-head. I nod and we both stand up.

Erin packs her notes into her bag and I do the same. I try not to look like I'm rushing. I can see the box in my mind being checked off. I imagine Erin's room filled with hardcover books and lit mags. There is a poster of *Amélie* or some shit on the wall and a typewriter in place of a laptop.

Erin smiles at me and goes to put the cups in the cleaning tray. I go to put my jacket on. Somehow one of the sleeves is inside out. I put my hand in the sleeve and try to push it out but something is caught. I push harder and the fabric untangles, sending my fist through the tunnel of my jacket and out the wrist hole where it then connects directly with Erin's cheek. I hear a little crack.

"Ahhhhh!" she says and holds her cheek.

"Oh, shit. Sorry Erin!" I say. I step close and make the gesture like I'm going to touch her. I don't touch her. She moves her hand from her cheek. Her freckles pulsate. Is that possible? She wiggles her jaw to a crack.

"What the fuck was that, Frank? You punched me."

"I, I didn't see you! I was trying to put my jacket on, my sleeve was stuck. You know when the sleeve gets caught inside of the arm-thingy? It was really stuck and I just pushed really-"

"That was a hard punch! I felt it all over my body. I think-" Erin moves something around in her mouth,"fuck! Frank one of my teeth is loose."

I don't say anything. I feel terrible. My jacket hangs over half of my body. My knuckles are sore.

"I have to go find a dentist," she says.

Erin walks away from me in disgust. I finish putting on my coat and leave the cafe. I call my girlfriend and tell her I'm sad. Whenever I do this, she knows it's code for making out. No need to blow the energy.