

The Man Who Couldn't Speak His Love

by Gita M. Smith

There is a tender moment at the beginning of every semester when a professor faces a classroom of new students and each has high hopes for the other. This occurs before the students cheat on exams or plagiarize or make up lavish excuses for poor work or the professor turns out to be boring or jaded or incompetent.

It was Orson's experience as a professor of physics that his hopes and those of the students were — and always would be — at odds. Whereas he wished for curious minds and intense enthusiasm, the heads turned toward him in expectant attention wanted an easy grader and someone (please God) without a foreign accent.

Sometimes, just to fuck with them, he'd open the first class session with a thick Nigerian accent and while doing so, warn about the dismal pass/fail rate for his class.

But then, speaking in a friendly Southern dialect, he would toss around a little poetry by Tupac Shakur and illustrate modern physics in terms of the energy waves that make cell phones work.

While his students filed out of the first-day lecture hall, he would pretend to himself that a boy or a girl was that rarest of creatures, a budding and brilliant physicist who one day would rise to glory and mention his name in thanks from a stage in Sweden.

As an adult living with Asperger's Syndrome, Orson did not read his students' faces well, but he had memorized certain body language cues that, if he employed them consistently, helped him navigate the choppy emotional waters of a college campus.

Orson was halfway through a lecture about the physics of weather, reviewing the way that an object's mass (a thunderhead, for example) ties force and acceleration together. He moved on to open a discussion about lightning and how a magnetic field has lines that reach out beyond the rainclouds so that

lightning can actually strike a city far, far from the original storm. "As a matter of fact, a thunderstorm raging in Cyprus, in the Mediterranean Sea," he said, projecting a map on the front wall, "struck in Madagascar, under clear skies, one sixth of the way around the world!"

A forest of arms go up in the air, and Orson feels a slight pulse of hope beating in his neck as he points to a student waving her hand. "Sir," she said, "Will the stuff you tell us, like, out loud, be on the exam or is it just, like, gonna be the stuff in the textbook?"

Orson related that experience as well as another over a rare lunch in the faculty cafeteria with his colleague, lit professor Sheila Searcy.

They called their classroom stories, collectively, "The horror, The horror." Orson told his in a flat voice with deadpan expressions, but Sheila liked to act hers out.

As a Southerner, Orson had been reared to know the dangerous waters of a conversation about religion with anyone but immediate family. But as a scientist down to his marrow, he wanted to lobotomize the 'Young Earth Creationists' because, as he told Sheila "They won't miss brains that they're not using."

So, he went on, he had been teaching chaos vs. order to a class. "This one girl said she doesn't believe in the Big Bang Theory, and I asked her why not. She said, 'If you set off a bomb in a junkyard, *BANG*, the result wouldn't be a smooth running, perfectly formed car, right? So why do you think the universe could have started with a bang and now be perfect?'"

Orson looked at Sheila who was rolling her eyes.

"I considered explaining that the universe is *still* junk that's evolving and changing, millions of years later, but the look on her face said GENESIS ONE, and scaling that wall just seemed too exhausting."

Orson and his sister Alana had enjoyed a running joke, some years back, about Hawaiians hoarding all the vowels and the Serbs hoarding all the consonants. He'd make up names of Yugoslavian war criminals, like Brdyzstan Krmudgnlik, and she would reply with the names of their beautiful mistresses, like Aloanauiala Holaoli,

though how the two lovers happened to be in the same country was never stated.

But then Orson fell into physics and went away to graduate school, and the romantic fate of the Serbo-Pacific lovers was never settled. He had spent many years studying the behavior of neutrinos and just as many years reading all about genetics and the occurrence of Asperger's Syndrome in non-twin siblings like Alana and himself. But the inability to change is hardly ever due to information deficit. No amount of books or scholarly journals could help Orson overcome his complete indifference to all human emotions save that of ironic humor.

It was as if love were a vowel belonging only to some people who hoarded it away, and he was a man caught in wintry Serbia, destined to forever mete out his feelings through consonant-clenched teeth.

