

Teacher

by J. Mykell Collinz

I dropped out of college at the beginning of my junior year. After working outdoors all summer with a road construction crew, I couldn't go back inside the classroom. I may never have returned to the university scene, academically or socially, if not for Doreen. When I did the nude modeling job on campus to be around her, it opened doors I hadn't anticipated, and the older man from the coffee shop proved to be more important to my life than I could ever have imagined.

Natalia, the art class teacher, she told me who he was. Professor William Purcell, dean of the university's shrinking drama department. Fifty, tall and thin, always well dressed, usually in a suit, white shirt and tie. Wavy, light brown hair, combed straight back. Long, narrow face, with close set, hazelnut eyes. Straight thin nose, prominent tapered jaw. An actor's face. High energy.

He wasn't happy about Natalia's interest in me. Or the way she gazed at my penis while talking to him in the classroom. A confrontation appeared inevitable. One evening before the art class, I arrived in the crowded campus coffee shop carrying food on a tray from the cafeteria. When I settled into a seat close to Doreen, I also happened to be directly across the table from the professor. He watched me eating for a moment, then he moved forward in his chair, leaned an elbow on the table, and said:

"Who are you? Why am I seeing your face? It's not a face I want to keep seeing. You remind me of that simpleton Baron Nikolai Lvovich Tuzenbach, the young lieutenant from Chekhov's *Three Sisters* who falls in love with Irina. He quits the army to impress her. Gets killed in a duel."

I reflexively visualized myself punching him in the mouth. If he saw that in my eyes, it did not deter his verbal onslaught. Maybe he wanted me to respond violently, to display my immaturity. Earlier in life, I did have an emotional problem. But I learned to separate my feelings from my actions in confrontational situations while keeping

my mouth shut and doing slow, deep breathing exercises through my nose.

"With that sad face you could do a convincing Oedipus. Kill your father, marry your mother, fuck your daughter, gouge your eyes out, and go wandering blindly throughout the world. You're a Stanley Kowalski from Streetcar, rough hewn, brutish, sensual, dominating, physically and emotionally abusive. Some woman like a relationship based on animalistic sexual chemistry. Primal behavior turns them on."

Was that supposed to be an insult? I wondered. He had everybody in the area watching, including Doreen, and he was obviously enjoying himself. His strong, mellow toned voice shaped every word with precision as he spoke. While I continued breathing deeply through my nose, looking into his face, into his eyes, playing his straight man on stage. But I had never been on stage so how should I know what came next?

"We'll be casting Titus Andronicus. You could be one of Lavinia's rapists, who cuts out her tongue and chops off her hands to prevent her from revealing what she knows. A lesser son would better suit your talents, I suspect. You can't be Tamora's lover, Aaron the Moor. He's black. You're not regal enough to play the Emperor of Rome or either of his two sons, Saturninus and Bassianus. Certainly not Titus himself. What does that leave us? Do you have a speaking voice? Let's hear it."

The professor apparently mistook me for a student, a wannabe actor attempting to develop a relationship with him and his exclusive circle of drama department friends and colleagues. Funny thing is, I found myself wishing I was that student. I had never thought about acting or working in theater before but something about the professor and what he said excited me. I held eye contact with him yet I could think of nothing to say. He looked back with a quizzical expression, and said: "I'm waiting."

"He's with me, William," Doreen interjected. The sound of her voice and the meaning of her words electrified me. She smiled when our eyes met and my heart filled with joy. Holding back tears, I bit

my lip and blinked my eyes. Then she added: "He does have an appealing stage presence, however, even with his cloths on."
"You sure know how to pick them, Doe," the professor said as he pushed away from the table, his eyes still directed at me. The look on his face said something very different than his previous looks. It expressed interest, I thought, and I wasn't quite sure what to make of that. He would be the teacher and I would be the student, that much seemed obvious.

