

Forevergrad

by Matt Rowan

The man was sitting at his makeshift kitchen table. He was forty-five years old. He wore his mortarboard with tassel whenever he left his home. Once inside either a reputable establishment or one generally considered less so, he was sure to take off his mortarboard, tassel and all, because it seemed impolite, if not bad luck, to leave it on. Occupying at present the latter of the two heretofore named locales, the man had hung his mortarboard and tassel on his coat rack — where, limp and without purpose, they waited.

Most important to the man's ensemble was his gown, though, the lone article of clothing he wore with no diminished partiality indoors or outside. It seemed impolite, if not bad luck, to completely remove his gown at any locale in which others would be present.

He probably wore pants beneath his gown, but wasn't completely sure, it having been so long since he last checked under there, which was another good reason to keep his gown on — since he certainly did not wear any underwear, under there.

Contributing greatly to his forever-unchanging wardrobe was his insistence that this, the outfit he graduated in long ago, was the cleanest outfit he owned — which was basically true. It certainly held the fewest stains, or looked as though it did. Since it was black. That helped to cloak the past's fried sandwich greases and beers, whose juices and other low viscosity liquids had gotten slovenly rerouted in transit to his digestive tract.

“I have no regrets,” said the man, dolefully, eyes brimming like a stopped-up toilet.

“How exactly does that help you?” the tenable inquisition of Professor Hampton, who was evaluating the heaps of trash and mostly empty canisters of Skoal strewn without favor across the kitchen floor — arguably the tidiest room in the man's house, the professor surmised.

The man remained lackadaisically seated at his makeshift kitchen table. The table could be easily folded over to allow for more efficient transport. This, the man thought, was its most appealing feature, among its many features which appealed to him.

Over and over and one by one, his fingers drummed lightly against the table's particleboard surface. The man was hunched over awkwardly, shoulders nearly parallel with the tabletop, which he aimed his rheumy diffident eyeballs at with somnolence. He was by the language of his body displaying a kind of tacit deference to the figure of Professor Hampton, as if his manner were meant to reverentially kowtow to the professor's imposing stature, the man who in turn loomed threateningly over him.

Then without warning the man visibly tightened, frozen by an imperceptible force. He remembered how he'd kept busy all day, and all day the day before that, and how he had begun this engaging activity the day before that.

"I've been reading a lot about Stalin lately," said the man, raising his body to better, though still crooked, posture. "Say, did you know that Stalingrad was named after Stalin, and before 'Stalingrad' it was called 'Tsaritsyn'? I always thought it was just a weird coincidence: the city's being named Stalingrad and the man Stalin leading the country. Uh-uh, I was wrong, though, boy."

"You don't have to only wear your cap and gown all of the time. Yes, you see? What I'm saying is that you shouldn't."

"And then they changed the city's name to Volgograd, Stalin having fallen pretty far out of favor, dead too, by 1961, which was the year they renamed it. Volgograd is located at the confluence of the Volga and Tsaritsa rivers, hence Volgograd. When you really sit and think about it, calling it 'Volgograd' makes a lot of sense. There's a lot of logic in there."

"Can I assume that's why you've strewn a banner across your front

door reading: 'Forevergrad' in big block letters?"

"I thought it was a pretty good pun, a nicely adorned pun, says something about Ruggles J. Grad, TU class of '83, says something else about grads, or 'cities', I believe, in the English."

"It says nothing about cities, except maybe that they're forever, which I am certain makes no sense. I can only deride you for so long before I grow tired and bored by it, and must return home to my luxury for rest. Oh the waste Ruggles, the sheer and sum waste of it all."

As the professor's diatribe lengthened, on and on, the redness of his face betrayed the fact that he'd let himself become overly emotional and aggravated, like a pouting infant with no words to turn to, "You had a good clerical job for god's sake, up the ladder, climb the steps, and you could have been something by now. Stop thwarting, stop sabotaging every chance you're given, Ruggles. You're not Edgar Allan Poe. You'll remember life didn't go that well for him, for Poe."

"Why don't you come down to the University in the morning and I'll see if I can't fix you up with something? I am greatly admired and accomplished, after all."

"I'm not sure that I believe Stalingrad wasn't always called Stalingrad. I certainly can't remember a time when it wasn't called Stalingrad," Ruggles supposed somewhat obstinately. "Most people don't remember Joseph Stalin affectionately. *But* he was evil, so I don't blame them."

"You're not listening! Don't you hear me? I can get you a job. Not a great job or one necessarily worth having by most people's standards, but please, compared to this? What isn't better than this? You'd have to wear a uniform, not your horrible graduation gown, an added bonus, if you ask me."

At last considering Professor Hampton's proposal, Ruggles got up from his seat at the table and sulked over to the kitchen sink. He turned the cold-water valve gingerly and splashed himself with the awkward trickle that flowed from it. He considered the water for a moment, and then returned his thoughts to Professor Hampton's offer. Then he returned his body to its previous spot upon the chair. All of this took about five minutes.

Ruggles asked, "Can I be a professor? Nothing major or anything. I'd start out small. I'd be, like, a professor of snakes. I know a lot about snakes, and I could probably teach a class or two on them, just so long as I'm not asked to toe the line of popular opinion. There's a lot of stuff about snakes I don't particularly like. There's a lot of stuff about them people do not want you to know."

"Of course you can't be a professor, though I hope by saying that you don't think I'm taking your words seriously. A professorship requires years of training, a great pool of erudition filled with years of hard study, soul-searching and fact-finding. And drawn from which are deep buckets of incisive composition for the world to see and marvel at. Not to mention a creative mind, such as the one I possess.

"Speaking of which, do you know what I do with my students? Let me just say it. I've developed a learning environment that's not only conducive to their intellectual growth but also allows for me to take something from the experience as well. I have them write every one of their assignments with the narrative description of an erotic romance novel. It's partly because I like reading and grading papers in my bathtub, surrounded by lit candles, yes, but also I do it because it fosters creativity. Young people are always looking for fresh, inventive paths to greater knowledge. I'm only too happy to oblige them in this pursuit."

"Stalin wouldn't have approved, probably," Ruggles said, seeming not to have paid any attention to the professor's monologue. Then adding, "But the kids do?"

“Well no, a lot of the students have complained actually, arguing that the exercise departs too pronouncedly from what I outlined as the goal of my course — and that I expressly stated it would never be required of them in any assignment to write in the peculiar style of a romance novel. Sort of shot myself in the foot with my own backsliding. But truly there's so much more to my teaching methods than what their uncultivated minds would eagerly deem 'bombastic misuse of authority.' I am confident that eventually my students will see I knew what was best for them.

“However, the head of my department is now closely monitoring everything I do and say, in class and in public. I know she's just following the mandated procedure for these situations, when a disproportionate number of students review a professor's assignments as unfavorably as mine have been, but I have a sinking feeling about the damage this will do to academic freedom.

“And there were, also, a few tiny discrepancies in my most recently published scholarly work.”

“If I wrote my thesis right now, say on something near and dear to me, something untainted by dishonest minds — something not unlike Stalingrad, and not excluding analysis of Volgograd — then would you award me a professorship at your university, Professor?” “Oh we're not going to rehash that topic, Ruggles? Please! No, I don't think so; although do not take that to mean it is beyond my abilities to award such a prestigious thing as a professorship. It's far from beyond my means, I assure you. But get the idea, which is laughable, out of your head.”

“Damn,” Ruggles said halfheartedly, and spread his slender upper frame as a child might in complete defeat over the tabletop. “I'm all out of ideas.”

“You don't have to have any ideas, do you still not get it? I'll help find a job for you, maybe the right job for you. There has got to be something, someplace out there that will accept a man in your position: horrifying and lowly. Step in line, man. Is there

nothing you want to give back to this world which you are so fulsomely indebted to?"

"I suppose I have taken a lot — the wasted effort of good people like you, Professor."

"Look at me, Ruggles," Professor Hampton said, gesturing with his index and middle finger to his eyes and then to Ruggles' eyes and back again to his, repeating this motion for too long. "I have given back to the noble field of academia. Some academics think my work is polemical, and misleading, and lies, and so it adulterates all legitimate study merely by its presence. I have endeavored to crush the careers of ignoble people who perpetuate shameful untruths like these, but there always seem to be more who come and take up the mantle for the ones I've crushed. Perhaps in hearing this you better understand the stress I'm faced with day in and day out. But it's all for the noble pursuit of enlightening those who wish to be enlightened."

"Why don't I kill myself? What's left for me? Obviously I don't have the initiative that you've got. Try as I might, I don't know if I've got energy enough to pretend I do, even."

"You're flawed Ruggles. That's all. I can teach you how to better yourself. I can teach you how to be satisfied with a productive lot in life. Not this, what you've got now, never this."

Ruggles raised a finger in the air, pointing abstractly and upward, "Discordant chimes ring for tomorrow, and I will tell you professor, I will teach you something professor," Ruggles said.

"Sure, sure, discordant chimes or what you say. I'll see you at noonday tomorrow? We've recently let a useless, old janitor go and I'm sure you couldn't foul up the position any worse than he has. Just imagine!"

Scanning the kitchen, Ruggles' gaze fastened to the corner of the room, and he followed the corner down to the floor. He slowly shook his head when he saw how badly his floor's tiles had fallen into disrepair: a couple missing, others cracked and their cracks filled with mire of unnamable origins, a bacterial verdigris of some kind, most likely.

Mumbling incoherently to himself, Ruggles Grad slunk further in his chair and said:

“Yes, tomorrow. Discordantly.”

Professor Hampton cracked his knuckles and smiled, then hastily exited the premises, feeling greatly admired and accomplished.

