

CRITERIA

by Michael D. Brown

I

The retiree accompanied his younger partner to a conference in yet another city. And had to make himself busy at the hotel for each of the three days that the still working teacher attended different functions.

On the first day, the retiree watched one of his Criterion movies on his portable computer, *Weekend*, and took note at the end that the film was directed by Andrew Haigh. Later when he went downstairs to smoke a cigarette, he overheard a conversation between two middle-aged people. It sounded as if he were trying to pick her up, but when she started talking about the immigrant children being separated from their parents, he appeared to lose interest. She truly believed from her remarks that the current state of the world was such that it was dangerous to let one's children go out of the house. She told him about her nanny, er, housekeeper whose daughter had an ankle bracelet attached to her leg by authorities so that she wouldn't accidentally be picked up again as a suspected illegal, and all the while the guy was saying "Yeah, yeah, I see," without feigning any interest.

The second day, the retiree slept late then used the hotel pool for two hours. At first, he did not enter because there was an event with about forty children in the pool playing games while all the mothers sat at tables around the pool drinking tea or coffee, or having drinks, and he would have been the only adult male in attendance. The event finally ended around 6:30 and he had the pool solely to himself. It rained all day long and was still raining when the other returned from his second function and the dinner afterward. Over the two days they did their separate things but all went smoothly as the situation was understood before the trip was planned. But then when they went to the deli later they exchanged words because the younger has a phobia of people who handle his food and drink who have any kind of scars on their hands or who appear too dirty to be

working in a grocery store. The evening ended badly after cross words.

The third day the retiree again used the pool earlier in the day and again had the place all to himself. The two met in the late afternoon and smoked a couple of cigarettes, and later when the younger went to meet up with an old friend from the conference people, the retiree sat in the room and watched another Criterion movie, 45 Years, not knowing until it was over, that this was also an Andrew Haigh movie, this one based on the story In Another Country by David Constantine. Both movies, though they might be considered a little depressing in spots, have the tone of the novel the two are writing. They have reached 52,000 words, and though they thought they might get some more written on this trip, nothing has been added to the manuscript.

The last afternoon, a Saturday, the retiree again saw the woman who was afraid of letting her daughter go out of the house even to play with friends unless she was supervising. She was talking about another aspect of said fears, but this time to another woman.

The retiree had no children of his own, but nonetheless thought the woman just might be overreacting to news she had only half heard. He looked at her as she stood in profile at the checkout desk. He noted she resembled, remarkably so in her features, the student, Maria, with whom he had crossed paths during his last working days, and who had caused problems for the younger teacher at nearly the end of the semester.

Maria was fairly well-known among several of the staff as a troublesome student. She was the daughter of a top politico, whose patronage was a source of pride and income for the school, and Maria frequently assumed the privilege to which she must have felt, so being, she was entitled. She had once been quite attractive and appeared a young woman, at fifteen, of promise and a bright future, but when her mother died, she grew despondent, lackluster as a student, and put on a good deal of weight, causing her once lovely face to become pudgy and plain.

The words the woman at the counter was now exchanging with the receptionist added a good deal to her resemblance to the student. She was arguing some point of dissatisfaction she had suffered in her stay at the hotel, the receptionist said, "But señora, you should have brought this to our attention when we might have done something about it to make your stay more pleasant." The woman would have none of this. She had been there for five days, and was now seeking remuneration, perhaps a refund or a discount. The receptionist was listening attentively, but shaking her head in a way to show her helplessness, which only served to raise the volume of the other woman's voice amid a great show of frustration.

This kind of drama, too, the retiree had experienced with Maria the student.

She had come to his office complaining that the other teacher had attributed to her too many absences, which was preventing her from sitting her final exam. She said it was unfair because on that last day she had actually been in class, and she had a video of the teacher covering the topic she was said to have missed, on her phone.

"Maria," the then-coordinator said, "You just happen to have recorded the day in question? How likely is that?"

"Oh no," she said, "I record videos of many of my teachers. I do it all the time."

"Without them knowing? That sounds illegal."

"I don't think it is. You see all kinds of video like that on YouTube."

"Well, I'll speak to the teacher, and see what we can do. Perhaps he will reconsider that last absence, and that would allow you to sit the exam."

"That's only fair," she said. "Seeing as how I haven't missed as many classes as he says I have."

"Do you have this kind of problem with any of your other teachers?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I've been sick a lot this semester and missed a lot of days, but nobody else has put down more than ten days."

"And do you have videos of these other teachers?"

She sneered, and then asked, "But you'll talk to him?"

After a chat between the two teachers, dutifully reported to the Principal, it was decided one absence would be stricken from the record so that the student could sit the exam with the rest of her class. Unfortunately, she scored 45 and averaged out with the rest of her marks, she received a 62 as a final grade, where a 70 was required to pass.

The complaining woman at the desk finally finished her confrontation, though the look on her face said it had not ended in her satisfaction. The woman she had been talking with earlier moved forward and was signed out in under three minutes. The two teachers traveling together were next and within another a few minutes all four were standing out in front of the building, waiting, the two men smoking their last cigarettes before boarding the shuttle to the airport.

The pudgy woman said, "Oh my god, it always turns out like that."

The other looking off in the distance at mountains piercing clouds said, "Really?"

II

"I've gotta take a break from this," Hector said. "I'm not feeling inspired right now. I've added about a thousand words. Why don't you look it over and put your changes in?"

"I can do that," said Martin. "Impressive! That brings us up to nearly seventy thousand words. But think where we'd be if we had written some of the story while we were on the break."

"Speak for yourself. You were on a break, a permanent break. I had lectures to deliver and a debate to attend. I'm more tired than I was before we went away."

"Relax for a while. I'll work on this later."

They had been writing and revising steadily since their return. The following week they would be off again to visit the site they were using as the major setting in their novel in progress. This trip

would be purely for relaxation and research into the place, so they would not have to depend solely on the Internet for authenticity.

"You know what I'm gonna do? I think I'll take a run into the school and see what's up with the coming semester. I mean it's July already and they haven't said anything about what classes are on offer next month. It's going to feel strange going in there every day without you or Annie working."

"It's just for a few months. She's having her baby in October. And who knows, maybe I'll be back working part-time in January."

"Yeah, but it won't be the same. Anyway, if we finish this book, maybe we'll have different careers by then. See what you can do with it. I'll be back in a little while."

After Hector took off, Martin made himself a cup of coffee, lit a cigarette, and reopened the document. It was looking good, he thought, and amazingly based on nothing happening in their own lives, although the upcoming trip might change that. They would have to play it out and see how truthful the manuscript was. Perhaps they would have to revise some of it after actually visiting the Baja.

Hector returned crestfallen after forty-five minutes. "Well, that was enlightening," he said. "I've been fired."

He said he had waited outside the principal's office for about twenty minutes while he was talking to one of the parents, and after the man left, he was finally called in.

The principal said, "I'm glad you stopped by, but I'm sorry to tell you we don't have any classes for you this semester." Then, mentioned something about a video that had been sent to the Managing Director.

Hector was taken aback, knowing he had never appeared in any kind of incriminating video and asked what that was all about.

"It was sent anonymously to the Director. It seems one of your students said she had been allowed to take your final exam twice and passed the course while another was denied the same opportunity. The Director was upset because he says the reputation of the school is at stake. What if this thing were to go viral?"

Hector said to Martin, "First of all, this is not the kind of thing that goes viral. Nobody's interested in some student badmouthing a teacher without evidence. And that's not the way things happened anyway. You know who's behind this?"

"I guess I do," said Martin, "But tell me. What did happen?"

"One of the girls who took an extemp in the morning, didn't finish the essay questions because she had another exam to take in the early afternoon and she ran out of time. Later, around three, I gave her the last page only for ten minutes to finish it up. She did not take the test twice."

"I don't understand," said Martin, "I bet that happens all the time. Our tests are so goddamn long, the students frequently can't finish their essays within the hour. Is that unethical enough to get you fired? You know how many would fail if not given an extra few minutes? So, she lied?"

"Yes, and here's the worst of it. The principal said he knew who had sent the quote anonymous video and had spoken to the other girl who eventually admitted she had not actually taken the exam twice, but only been given a chance to finish it. She claimed she said the things she said originally because Maria is her friend, and she's had a lot of problems lately, and they both felt I had it in for her and failed her on purpose by not giving her a chance to take her exam again when chances were given to other students. The director made a decision on this without ever calling me in to hear my side of the story."

"But it's so obvious this thing was created and sent in order to do damage to your reputation."

"Yes, I could have told them how after she received a 45 on her own test, she quietly told me, 'You'll pay for this,' and she had handed me her paper well before time was up, and I had been generous in the grading, so she could even reach 45. But I was never given an opportunity to tell them anything."

"Did you say any of this to the principal?"

"Some. Not all of it I guess. He says he understands how these things can sometimes happen. Like he has experience with this kind

of thing. He says he's got a meeting scheduled with the Director next week. Next week! And he'll put in a word for me."

"I wouldn't hold my breath waiting on a happy outcome to that."

"No, eh? This is a wake-up call for me. How things are done there. I've been there too long anyway, and now that you're gone, and Annie won't be working this semester, I'd feel lonely walking around the campus by myself. Well, you know what I mean."

"The principal said to me, 'Maybe we can punish you with only two classes this semester, and in January when Martin returns, and this has blown over, you can get your usual workload back. Can you imagine? Punish me?'"

"Well, we know nothing will happen to Maria, what with her connections and all. That girl is going to cause her own downfall someday. Was any action taken against the other one who admitted wrongdoing?"

"Nothing I was told about. I asked, but the principal glided over the answer. He said they were looking into it. He says he'll call after the meeting. Hey, I know I'm supposed to be quitting, but let me have one of your cigarettes, would you?"

There were no calls from the school by the Friday before they were set to leave for the west coast, and so they put the unpleasantness out of mind, concentrating instead on writing, getting ready to travel and carefully managing their money. The subject only came up once or twice while discussing that last factor. As the trip was mainly for research, they agreed it would not hurt to do it on a budget.

"Hey," Hector remarked, "If I don't get a job and we're both out for the whole semester, at least it'll give us time to finish the book properly and not have to work on it in fits and spurts."

Martin collected two hundred songs on a USB drive, music they had both heard and liked over the twenty years they had known each other. They flew to Guadalajara and from there to La Paz, where they rented a small Nissan, and then drove for four hours up the Baja peninsula, playing the music pretty much non-stop. As it

had been arranged alphabetically by artist, they were a little surprised that they were only at the Js by the time they had reached their destination.

III

The songs brought us round to a first-person perspective. Jake Bugg had just finished something As Simple as This when we switched off the player and the hotel was looming in front of us.

"I know why, really, I was let go." Hector said. "That business with the student was just a lame excuse to take care of something they had already planned much earlier. Remember how they told me in mid-semester how the budget wouldn't allow them to pay me as much as the doctorate mandated? I think with you retiring and Annie leaving, because we're always hanging around together, they just thought it was an opportunity to sweep away all the old-timers and take on fresh blood."

"You might be right," I said. "They never gave you a chance to defend your actions, so it does sort of sound like the whole thing was preplanned. But then it makes me feel like our association is at fault."

"They just don't like me for some reason. At least the Director seems not to."

"People make assumptions and then stick by them whether well-founded or otherwise. You can't win in a situation like that."

I remembered a time back in New York when I made a detour on the way back from lunch to the office to stop for 'five minutes' in my favorite used book store just to see if they had anything I had not yet read by Dawn Powell. I spent more than fifteen minutes browsing but found nothing. On the way out, realizing I would be late returning to work, I was surprised by the young man wearing heavy black-rimmed glasses behind the counter saying to me, "Hold on, I have something I think you might be interested in." He pulled out a plastic bin of antique postcards and leafed through them, pulling out one which he handed to me. In sepia tones it pictured several people

on a cruise ship but featured a blond man with an overbuilt body standing next to what appeared to be the door to a bathroom and underneath, in script, the words *porte au paradis*. I had no idea at the time whether he was flirting with me or making a character judgment. In any case, except for the nerdy glasses, he was attractive but new to me. I had never seen him in the store before. Glancing at my watch (I still wore a watch at that time.), and figuring I was already going to be quite late, I fished through my pocket change and paid for the postcard. The card said nothing to me, and I could not say, really, why I had bought it, but I wound up using it as a bookmark for several months.

“Well, we're here now,” said Hector, “And I don't even want to think about the school anymore. I'm not going to mention it again. I promise.”

After checking in and finding our room, we were pleasantly surprised to discover it was laid out like a studio apartment. There were two small single beds on one side with a bathroom and a kitchenette on the other complete with a stove and sink, a refrigerator, a microwave oven, toaster, blender, dishes and glasses in the cabinets, and there was a table in the middle that could be used for eating or writing.

“I know it's late, but maybe we could look for something to eat,” Hector suggested, “But let's not take the car. Let's walk around and see what's available.”

We stopped at the desk to ask what was available at eleven o'clock at night and were told, “Not much.” There was a taco stand a few blocks up that stayed open late and some twenty-four-hour convenience stores a little further on, but the practice in this area of town was to close the restaurants and bistros fairly early.

We walked to the taco stand, but Hector with his recently formed leeriness of lax hygiene was wary of attempting any of their tacos or empanadas. The smell of barbacoa, which back in the states might be called mutton and rarely if ever appears on menus, did nothing for me, so we agreed to walk to one of the stores and see if there

were anything else to eat. We wound up carrying back to the room a bag of Cokes and donuts and some cookies. We had arrived in town much later than expected. So, we blamed our misfortune on ourselves, made do with snacks and figured we would have a nice hearty breakfast in the morning.

The beds, though appearing Spartan, were in fact very comfortable and we were soon sleeping soundly. When I awoke it was already nine-thirty and the delicious air-conditioning fooled me into thinking the weather was fresh and accommodating. After showers and shaving, and stepping outside, we discovered it was quite the opposite — hot, though not too humid for a coastal town, but uncomfortable in jeans even with a short-sleeved shirt.

We smoked cigarettes in the parking lot behind the hotel, and then headed off in the car to see what this place was about and to look for some breakfast. Driving down the road adjacent to the promenade with the expansive view of the sea on the one side and pastel-colored homes and hotels on the other and greenery everywhere, we remarked how much more welcoming the place looked in the daytime. Along there most of the eateries appeared not to have opened for business yet and in any case seemed expensive. We stopped to check out one of the menus and were taken aback by the prices for simple chicken dishes. We decided the main strip must be the luxe part of town and we would have to search on the side streets to find something more within our budget. By stops and starts and careful investigation, we finally discovered a place that as in the tale of Goldilocks and the three bears seemed just right for us.

It was a little bistro with indoor and outdoor service, excellent coffee and a menu that went on for days. It was called Café Olé, conveniently located on the tree-shaded side promenade running down from the mission church, and we would visit it several times during our stay.

Hector overheard some men talking at one of the tables outside and learned that one was an American, that is, from the United States, who had invested in local property, and figuring he could get some valuable information for the novel we were writing, he

introduced himself and asked a few questions. The man was very helpful and seemed pleased to be of assistance. Although this kind of thing was our purpose in coming, I was too shy to step forward myself, so, I waited, sitting under a tree, absorbing atmosphere and trying to hear what was being discussed.

I convinced myself that as he was writing most of the content of the book, I mean, the story was his, and each time he finished a chapter, I would step in and polish it up, checking grammar and syntax, correcting spelling and punctuation, adding little bits of prose, he was wearing the reporter's hat. Thus, it behooved him to gather the information necessary to make the story authentic.

One of the first things we learned by actually being in the place was that there were no colectivos in sight. There were taxis, and those who did not make use of them either drove their own vehicles, cars or bikes, or walked to get around. As we had included several scenes on colectivos to advance the action in early chapters and all references to such would have to be edited out, I knew I had my work cut out for me.

"Well, that was very interesting," he said after finishing his conversation with the man from the States. "It seems it's fairly easy to buy property here. It's just a matter of going through the right channels, paying a set fee, and obtaining a license to proceed."

"So, we're pretty much on the right track," I said. "But we will have to do some heavy editing on details. The place is beautiful. We managed to get an awful lot from the Internet before even coming here. But we didn't pick up on how hot it would be."

"Don't forget," he said, "Our guys are coming down here in February. I understand from that man I was speaking to that in the early part of the year this place has a whole different climate. Anyway, let's go check out the mission and the historical museum. I bet it'll be cooler inside those places."

