

The Spring of My Stalin

Or

A Case of Grade Deflation

by

Ashly H. Woo



*If you have friends
you have lived for love
If you have enemies
you have lived for ideas
If you have both
you have lived a full life*

*This modern fable
describing my enemies
was written with love
and whoever reads and understands it
would be
a friend*

*This is a fable
like all life is a fable
containing a greater truth
such as
the eternal conflict
between
Institution
and
individual...*

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Penny-Anne Inkisink
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Normal College
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Dear Dean Inkisink:

First of all, I would like to thank you for taking the time out of your busy schedule for me. I understand how unusual it must be to have a student contest a grade of A-, but I do believe that mine is an unusual case.

For a long time I had felt that something was terribly amiss without being able to put a finger on it exactly, and the events which transpired in the final few weeks of the semester confirmed my worst fears: I was unable to eat anything solid for a week, and even lost my voice. My family and friends started to worry about me, and I realized that unless I became strong enough to report my story to someone of importance at school, I would never free myself of the nightmare. Indeed it was most important for me to know that someone there cares, and I am most grateful for your kindly attention.

It is a difficult story to tell, for it concerns actual professors at the Thomas Hunter Honors Program who must have done a lot of good for many other students in their own way. I would never have had the courage to put all this in writing if not for the conviction that it would be important to do so in order to make the school a truly great institution of learning in which truly original thinking is encouraged and is allowed to flourish. Indeed, I have reason to believe that sometimes students are singled out to be punished for being independent enough not to simply accept what they are told nor back down when they are assigned their limits: it is what has happened to me.

I do not make these accusations lightly. A number of people with whom I had discussed the matter have also been convinced that something was seriously wrong, and suggested that I write a detailed account of all that has happened in the last few years.

In the fall of 1996, I took my second required Honors Colloquium, Art and Politics in 19th century France. Of all the paintings discussed, I found myself more and more drawn to Manet's Olympia, this nude painting of a rather common Parisian prostitute posing in that almost regal supine antiquity manner that so enraged the 19th centu-

ry French public. So much so, that when a student argued that according to the Baudelairean theory, which holds that there is eternal and ephemeral beauty in art, the eternal beauty in Olympia is this very classical Greek pose, I even painted myself after Olympia producing the painting *Ash Olympia*, and asked: When I, a woman of Asian descent, paint myself in this classical pose, the effect resounds with all manner of cultural and political implications. Why is the effect different from when Olympia struck this pose, if there is something inherently eternal about the pose itself? My own theory became the basis for my final essay, *A Case for Olympia*. It was also my first feminist paper, for I was sickened by how women were treated in 19th Century France. Indeed, to me, a feminist essay and an essay on art could easily be one and the same, for ultimately art has to do with the dignity of human spirit, as is feminism.

Naturally I was disappointed that it was not my essay, but the essay of the aforementioned student that was published in the first issue of the *Normal Normal Honors Review*. Heartbroken but not yet defeated, I submitted the paper for the Class of 1984 award for the Best Paper written for an Honors Colloquium, and was immensely gratified when *A Case for Olympia* was chosen for the award by the Normal Honors Council, headed by Professor Goreripple and Professor Bridour. They were most kind to me at the ceremony, and I felt happy and vindicated because I believed that they really must have understood what my essay was all about -- the eternal beauty of the ever-evolving presence of humanity in art. Professor Goreripple even confided that she did not think much of the theory of the essay which was published. I was initially encouraged, then puzzled by the remark, since she and Professor Bridour were the very editors of the *Review*.

There were further indications that things were not quite right when Professor Goreripple told me that she was sorry that my essay was not published, but that in effect, it was not publishable, for it could not be published without the painting *Ash Olympia*, and it would not be feasible to consider publishing the painting. Needless to say, I was not only in disagreement with this kind of argument, but I was in shock, considering the fact that my essay was all about the validity of such paintings as Manet's *Olympia* as well as my own *Ash Olympia*. It occurred to me that although Professor Goreripple might have appreciated the scholarship in the essay *A Case for Olympia*, she was -- perhaps unconsciously so -- against true artistic and intellectual freedom; that she may be okay with it theoretically, but when faced with the reality of it, she would balk without even realizing that she was doing so. This was an unexpected blow; I was unable to deal with the very idea, for it would have been too depressing, so I chose to look upon it as some kind of prudishness on her part.

About a year later, the essay *A Case for Olympia* found its way to the hands of Cary Bassatt, the editor of a campus magazine *Some Women*. As a playwright -- that is to say, an artist in her own right -- she loved the essay. Indeed, she not only published it, but put the painting *Ash Olympia* on the cover. I thought that it was only polite that I tell Professor Goreripple beforehand that the painting would be published after all, and she told me to let her know afterwards how it made me feel, as if it might be a bad thing. Of course, when the magazine came out, I was very happy, contrary to her warnings. The readers -- students and professors alike -- were very complimentary, to the extent that Cary even pronounced that the very issue of the magazine was the best ever.



Ash Olympia, by Ashly H. Woo, 1996, oil on canvas

One might say that Professor Goreripple's claim that the painting was unpublishable was effectively proven wrong, and in asserting my artistic and intellectual independence by allowing it to be published, I had unwittingly undermined her authority.

But that was not my intention. All that I ever wanted to do all my life was to write and to paint (and also to sing), and to be published was one of the most wonderful things that had ever happened to me. On the strength of the publication, I was given a Special Art Grant by Dean Whaler so that I may be able to work on a life-size painting as had been my dream, and the much respected Professor Bromberg from Normal Ivy League University wrote me to congratulate me, ending his correspondence with "And bravo for the painting!" I had started corresponding with him when I made an exciting discovery concerning the title of Stendhal's novel *The Charterhouse of Parma*. In fact, this discovery was one of the starting points for my Independent Project *Mirrors & Butterflies*, which is the subject of my

appeal. I had submitted Professor Bromberg's letter -- which confirms that the discovery is indeed a discovery -- to the Council with the proposal for the project. The success that I had with my first publication even inspired me to design my own major Art Philosophy, so that I may be freed from any would-be methodologies of any one discipline for the Independent Project, and write about art the way it would really count for something, even as did Baudelaire when he wrote his essay *The Painter of Modern Life*.

Meanwhile I had written another essay on art, *Art as Private Property*, for the Honors Colloquium *Art and Revolution in Russia* that I was taking with Professor Goreripple and Professor Balk. Even as I had been indignant over the women's lot in 19th Century France, I was horrified by all the terrible constraints that the Stalinist Soviet Union had placed on its artists, and was inspired to write this piece which, in effect, claims art for artists. That is to say, that I make the stance that they need to be allowed to be true to themselves -- as Shakespeare said, "To thine own self be true" -- for that is the only way in which life is truly lived and great art is created. In other words, the essay was all about the importance of artistic and intellectual freedom.

We had to discuss the topic of the final essay with one of the professors, and when I went to see Professor Goreripple about it, she was not very encouraging, being rather uninterested and unconvinced. This was disappointing, but made me more determined than ever to write the best essay I could, so I went to see Professor Balk, who listened to my ideas earnestly, got excited about it, and wished me a lot of luck. When it was finally written, he was most enthusiastic about this essay, telling me that I had chosen "a very difficult topic and really pulled it off." He wanted me to submit it for publication in the *Normal Honors Review*, and when I told him that students could not nominate themselves, and that the professors had to do it, he gladly nominated the paper for me. He also submitted the paper for the *Normal Normal Library Research Paper Award*.

Art as Private Property was not chosen by the Review's Editorial Advisory Board -- headed by Professor Goreripple and Professor Bridour -- to be included in the magazine. This time I was not only disappointed, but also felt guilty towards Professor Balk who had displayed so much confidence in my work. That is why I felt so relieved when I received a phone call from Professor Strayer earlier this year that I had won a *Normal Library Research Paper Award* for the essay. When I e-mailed Professor Balk, he replied that I deserved that award -- "and more" (item 1). He repeated this in front of Professor Goreripple and Professor Bridour at the ceremony itself. It was a strange gathering, for my essay had somehow beaten the essays that were published in the *Normal Honors Review* to win the

award, making the two professors look as if they had somehow "made a mistake" in not choosing my work. Indeed, it reminded me of the Honors Program ceremony in which I had won the Class of 1944 Award for A Case for Olympia, except that the rôle played by Professor Goreripple and Professor Bridour then, was now played by Professor Balk, and Professor Goreripple and Professor Bridour were somehow playing the rôle of the professors who had taught the Honors Colloquium Art and Politics in 19th Century France (at the time only one of the professors was present at the ceremony, and she had completely avoided me). Being familiar with my history of "vindicating" myself this way, the two professors were polite and correct, but did not seem entirely at ease. Even Professor Balk was not untouched: his face was red as he congratulated me. I have been wondering about it, and realized that it must have been difficult for him to assert himself like that before the two chairpeople of the Honors Program, for he is only a part-time teacher without any political clout. Indeed, he had once been Professor Bridour's student himself.

Partly to put everyone at ease, and mostly because I was really preoccupied with the Independent Project that I was working on, I started to chat with Professor Bridour about it. He told me that the absolute last day that the project is to be handed in is the 28th of May, and that I only had to hand in one copy, for they could make extra copies for the Council. At the time I had completed the first 35 pages, and was still fired up with all the ideas in it, so I mentioned a few of these ideas, when Professor Bridour snapped and harshly criticized them as being "unclear" without giving me a chance to explain myself, and turned away.

It was the first time that Professor Bridour had ever been unkind to me. In the past he had always gone out of his way to support my original projects, so I was completely taken aback. I even told Professor Balk that I was afraid Professor Bridour did not like my ideas. Professor Balk assured me that there was no cause for worry, that I could not possibly explain in a few words what took me 35 written pages to develop. Still, Professor Bridour succeeded in planting a horrible seed of doubt in my mind -- for one is so vulnerable when one has been writing in solitude for days -- and I went to look for Professor Plottel. She was one of my three readers for the Independent Studies. The readers are supposed to read the thesis, give advice, make necessary corrections, and present the Council with a written evaluation as "experts" which would be used as a guideline for the final grade. Professor Beautemps was my "main" reader, for out of all the readers I had at the time, her area of expertise was most pertinent to my project, since she is a professor of French Literature and in my thesis I discuss Balzac, Stendhal and Flaubert in depth.

Professor Beautemps stopped everything she was doing to read the first 35 pages that I gave her to read, and when she was done, she looked up with her eyes sparkling and said that she was very very happy with what I've done, and that it was really a first-rate work. She said that there was so much in it, but that I had such a strong sense of theme that holds everything together in all sorts of unexpected ways, and that it was wonderful. When I told her that there was more to come, she wished me luck, but said that it was not even necessary, for those pages were more than sufficient in themselves for the course. This reassured me -- made me very happy in fact, for I had really been killing myself over those pages -- and since the Honors Program Office was just one floor above, I went up to see Professor Bridour to let him know that his fears were unfounded, and to relay Professor Beautemps's enthusiasm. I must admit that I was laughing for I was still extremely happy and relieved...

Looking back, I can't help but wonder if he saw it all as pure "gloating."

I had almost finished the 80th page when I attended another ceremony -- the Women's Studies Award ceremony -- to receive Olive Overdown Oscar Award for A Case for Olympia and Nancy Weir Award for a short story. I saw Professor Goreripple there, and spoke briefly with her. Afterwards I spoke with another award-recipient who was also from the Honors Program, and when she told me that Professor Goreripple had told her to make sure that she let Jill (administrative assistant from the Honors Program) know that she had won the award for their record, I felt again, the sense of something being amiss, for she never said any such thing to me. I am just being paranoid, I told myself, and tried to make light of it.

Indeed, something unexpectedly good happened to me at the ceremony: I met Professor Torres from the library who had been one of the judges. He was not only widely read in art, literature and philosophy, but was also a published writer on these topics. This was most interesting, for my own writings about art are not only about painting, but about literature as well, and are largely philosophical in nature in the sense that I believe art ultimately springs from life, and I take life and everything in it as being relevant to the discussion. Professor Torres was good enough to let me know that A Case for Olympia was unanimously picked as the winner by all the judges, and, emboldened by his kindness, I told him that I was working on a larger piece which picks up where A Case for Olympia left off. He said that he would be happy to read it when it is finished. At the time, little did I know how much this would mean to me.

I went home and worked and worked and worked. There were seven essays to write altogether (excluding the Addendum), most of them as long as a regular Honors Colloquium term paper. There was not much time to lose. It was as if I was sprinting down a marathon track.

When I took the completed bundle of papers to Professor Beauteemps her verdict was more than favorable. She is widely read in art criticism, and I was delighted to learn that she was familiar with all the works that I cite. She said that what I had achieved was more than a mere student's work, and suggested that I try to get it published: she even asked to have a copy of her own as a keepsake, for she loved it so much. That, indeed, was a wonderful experience for a writer.

Professor Compromesso, who was my second reader, also said that the work was remarkable, even though it was somewhat unusual -- indeed, because it was so unusual and creative. I do not have a copy of his recommendation letter to the Council, but he had assured me that he would write an unequivocally positive letter.

Then he said something quite puzzling: he said that Professor Goreripple wanted him to pass the work-in-progress to the Normal Honors Council, rather than returning it to me. He said that he did not see much sense in doing that, so he was returning it to me. The irregularity of Professor Goreripple's request troubled me, for it seemed to be another indication that "something was not quite right." When I told my friends about it, they would not take me seriously. They said: you are one of the valedictorians. You are winning all kinds of awards. You are a feather in her cap, she is probably trying to give you another prize.

A feather in a cap that is too independent and would not sit where it is placed, could serve to make the wearer look more ridiculous than anything else.

There was something else which bothered me. A few days after the Library Award Ceremony, I had gone to see Professor Balk to thank him again. At the meeting, he was so kind, encouraging me to go to graduate school and telling me that I should try to go to the best graduate school out there where my talent might really be appreciated. At the time he said that he would be happy to read my Independent Project when it is finished. That was about one month before I e-mailed him to let him know that it was finished. He never e-mailed me back. This was so unlike him -- I had e-mailed him just a few weeks before to let him know that I was going to be one of the valedictorians in June, and he had responded right away as usual (item 2). I could not help feeling that something had happened in the

interim. I even wondered whether it had been made clear to him that it would not be good for his career to associate with me. But then again, most likely he was just busy.

Meanwhile, time was passing and my third reader, Professor Scotch, still had not gotten back to me. I became rather frantic and e-mailed him, begging him to get in touch with me as soon as possible, for I only had until the 28th (Friday) to hand in the thesis: I even e-mailed Professor Balk again on the 22nd, in case I would need an emergency-replacement reader, but he still failed to get back to me. Subsequently, my paranoia deepened.

It was the 25th (Tuesday) when Professor Scotch finally called and left a message telling me that he was deluged with work and he did not have time to read my work. I panicked for I did not know if I could find someone else at such a short notice, when I remembered Professor Torres's kind offer to read my work. It was Tuesday night that I went to the school library (it was during exam time and the library opened until midnight) to give him a copy of the 130 page manuscript. Professor Torres read the whole thing on Wednesday, had a meeting with me on Thursday, and then wrote the recommendation letter on Thursday evening. He turned out to be more-than-qualified reader, for, like Professor Beutemps, he was completely familiar with all the major writings that I discuss in the thesis. Indeed, he had really saved my life, or so I thought. Until I had a meeting with Professor Bridour to explain everything on Wednesday.

As was mentioned earlier, he had always been kind to me, and I was completely unprepared for what would come to pass.

At first it was barely perceptible, the animosity. A paranoid mind might inflate it, but it was not really significant in itself. That is to say, Professor Bridour seemed ready to put down any aspect of my paper which might be considered impressive or positive. For example, when I told him that it was 130 pages, he replied: That's not a book, that's just a long paper. I flinched a little. He was apparently referring to Professor Beutemps's letter. In it, she had described my essay as being "almost a book." I knew, because she was good enough to CC her generous assessment of my work to me (item 3), and her words had so touched my heart that I had practically memorized them.

Professor Bridour did not even comment on how hard I must have worked to write 130 pages. A friend told me that an MA thesis is only required to be 80 pages long. Most people that I had talked with have never heard of a Normal College student, from Honors Program or otherwise, embarking on anything as ambitious as what I have done. A professor is almost like a parent-substitute at school: students want to get noticed and praised when they work extra hard.

Not even to get one kind word about my efforts, after all the hard work, was disappointing, but I told myself that I was being overly sensitive. Perhaps he does have students writing 130 page papers all the time.

Professor Bridour smiled meaningfully when I told him that there was a problem with my third reader. Indeed, he was expecting it, for why else would I have made this emergency appointment? He must have known that the problem had something to do with the third reader, for only two readers had e-mailed their evaluations so far.

In fact, it was not the first time that I had gone to see Professor Bridour with a problem about Professor Scotch. The popular philosophy professor had been most accommodating when I first approached him about being one of my readers. He did explain, however, that he knew very little about art or literature, and I had told him that that was okay, because I just wanted a philosopher's input and that if he could recommend some philosophical writings on art and literature, that would be invaluable. He did in fact eventually give me a reading list which included writings by Cavell and Danto that proved to be most helpful in presenting my own theory -- but our first meeting had been awful, for we ended up having a heated argument about art. This was caused by nothing more serious than differences in definitions of certain words, as is so often the case with such arguments, but it made me uneasy and I had gone to see my Honors Program advisor Professor Bridour about it. At the time (fall of '98 when Professor Goreripple was away on leave) there was no reason for me not to confide in him, since he had always been extremely nice and avuncular. Indeed, he reassured me that everything would be alright, that Professor Scotch was not one to hold grudge, and that even if he gave me a less than favorable report, the Council would ultimately decide the grade, so it would not really matter.

-Who was your third reader? Professor Scotch or Professor Strosch? Professor Bridour asked in an off-handed type of way. This took me by surprise, for it was not likely that he had forgotten the problem I had with Professor Scotch. We had not only discussed it several times, but apart from the aforementioned matter, there was also the Heidegger problem: many people had recommended that I read Heidegger's *The Origin of the Work of Art*, and Professor Scotch had pronounced Heidegger to be "so wordy and in the end so obscurantist" (item 4). When I told Professor Bridour that Professor Scotch did not seem to be a big fan of Heidegger, Professor Bridour had even suggested that I write to another faculty member, who had been Heidegger's pupil, and have her be my reader instead of Professor Scotch. However, I felt that I had made some kind of a commitment with Professor Scotch, and decided to stay with him. Meanwhile Professor Bridour got to thoroughly memo-

size all my readers' names -- especially that of the third reader -- and earlier in the semester when I bumped into him, he had said: you are doing your Independent Studies this semester right? With whom? And proceeded to give the names of all three readers before I could even get in edgeways with the first name. He had even jokingly added: How come I know your affairs better than you?

And it turned out that Professor Bridour still maintained a very good memory of all that had happened.

I explained that in fact there was a problem because Professor Scotch bailed out at the last minute, but as luck would have it, I had been able to find a replacement reader right away. I proceeded to give all the pertinent details as to how I met Professor Torres from the library, and how he was, in fact, a most suitable reader as he was knowledgeable about art and literature as well as philosophy. I had been so busy telling my story that I had not realized how Professor Bridour had transformed before my eyes, his smile long gone from his face.

He had leaned back, pulling himself away from me and against me like a strange, distant lump of ice with two splintered holes for eyes.

-We'll still have to work with Professor Scotch after you graduate, he hissed, you have not considered our position.

I was puzzled by this, for it was not I who had dropped Professor Scotch as a reader. In fact, I had been the victim in all this, and I had not even reproached him for putting me on the spot. When I asked him to deliver his copy of the essay to Professor Torres at the earliest possible date, he had seemed relieved that the 130 pages on a topic he was not familiar with would soon be off his hands, and gave me a resounding "It's a done deal!" I was trying to explain all this when Professor Bridour continued.

-The original contract had been with Professor Scotch. We'll take Professor Torres as the third reader for the time being, but you must also get something in writing from Professor Scotch at some point in time, so that if you get a bad recommendation letter from him, we could lower your grade.

I was dumfounded.

-You would actually lower the grade you have already given me?

-Yes, because if Professor Scotch gives you a bad recommendation letter, we would know that we had made a mistake.

My blood froze. Making a mistake. The Library Award ceremony where it looked as if they had made a mistake.

Perhaps it was not an accident that Professor Bridour asked me whether my third reader was Professor Strosch: I had taken Art and Politics in 19th Century France with her, and she was the professor who was present at the awards ceremony when I won the Class of 1984 Best Paper Award, the very professor whom I had mentioned previously as having walked away stone-faced without acknowledging my success -- which, after all, was the success of one who had been her student -- in any way. A year or so later, when I bumped into her, she was nice enough to me, but at that very moment, she apparently could not bear looking as if she had somehow made a mistake. Professor Bridour, of course, was aware of my history with her. She might have given me a bad recommendation letter.

That chilling moment, I realized that Professor Bridour must have been counting on Professor Scotch giving me a bad recommendation letter, something which would counterbalance all the great letters I have been getting so far so that they could really lower my grade accordingly. That must have been why he was smiling when I told him that there was a problem with the third reader. His disappointment must have been too much for him when he realized that Professor Scotch had bailed out and was to be replaced by Professor Torres. That must have been why he blurted out this strange, cruel threat about lowering my grade -- the ultimate abuse of power for a professor -- and thereby revealing his desire, intention and expectations to lower my grade somehow. This, indeed was a fatal mistake on his part: he had given me the truth. I had been suffering from a curious sense of malaise for a long time, and suddenly I was staring at the awful truth -- that was at its source -- in the face.

-We have to take bad recommendation letters seriously, he said, otherwise you might get all your friends to write you good ones.

My head was spinning. Was he insinuating that Professor Beautemps or Professor Compromesso were my friends? Or that Professor Torres, whom I had just met, was my friend? It was just too ridiculous that I could not bring myself to stoop low enough to actually address the charges. So I turned to the other matter at hand.

-Okay, if that is what you want, I'll get Professor Scotch a copy of the thesis as soon as possible.

-What?! He does not have a copy? You took his copy away from him already?

Suddenly Professor Bridour lunged forward, both hands on the desk, full of angry indignation. I felt as if I had committed a mortal sin. That moment he frightened me so much that I actually lied: I told him that he still did have his copy, but that I had to give him the illustrations, for I had just gotten the illustrations put together.

-You mean you had given the paper to your readers without the illustrations?

His splintered eyes were jutting out like daggers through the glasses. I had never seen him like this. I could not believe how he was picking on every single little thing.

-They did have the illustrations, it is just that they were not properly bound. I mean, they were not in order. And the bibliography. The illustrations were not with the bibliography.

He had reduced me to a babbling idiot. This was intolerable. He was pushing me down a tub of water and would not let me come up for air. But I would come up for air. This is just a tub of water, Peda, I told myself, you will not drown. Fight back.

Then I remembered the Heidegger problem. I took a breath, and asked:

-How can you be so sure that Professor Scotch would give me a bad recommendation letter? Because of Heidegger? Well, I know that he could not possibly give me a bad recommendation letter. It turns out, we are not in too much disagreement after all. I have read Heidegger and I, too, have found him wanting. In the essay about art, he just goes on and on, and most of the time he says nothing at all.

Of course I was exaggerating: I barely knew what I was saying, but now Professor Bridour became really indignant, veins popping out of his face, as if somehow I had no business questioning what he considered to be one of the pillars of modern Western philosophy. He snapped: Some people would say that that's because you do not understand what it is that he is saying.

But now I was not as afraid of him as I was just a moment ago. Now I knew my opponent better: I expected him to come at me like that, and knowledge was power.

I replied evenly:

-Those were Professor Scotch's words. I on the other hand, do think that he is saying something. Otherwise I would not be able to argue against him. And I do.

In fact, Professor Scotch's precise words were "wordy" and "obscurantist," but I thought the meaning was close enough for the purpose of self-defense.

Professor Bridour fumed, but he soon composed himself enough to tell me how much Professor Compromesso loved my work. He could not have failed to realize the mistake he had made in lashing out at me like that, and was, no doubt, trying to make up for it. He no longer insisted on getting Professor Scotch's letter, but he said that I

needed to hand in 2 copies of my work instead of one. He said it was because I was handing it in so late. But I was not. I was handing it in on the 28th, as he said I should. He might have said that it was because a 130 page thesis was too much to photocopy, but he did not, because that would be tantamount to acknowledging that I had worked extraordinarily hard. I did not argue with him. I was too exhausted to argue. Indeed, I would not have known what to argue about -- the fact that I have to make two copies, or that the thesis would not be read by the entire Council, but only by Professor Goreripple and Professor Bridour. So instead, I thanked him, and left.

I was in denial. In fact I was catatonic. I was sitting in the Normal West first floor lounge without moving, wondering what had just happened.

That very evening the Dam Normal Honors Program Graduate School Soirée was being held in the Faculty Lounge. I went, not only to get information, but to see Professor Bridour again and to reassure myself that what had just happened, had not really happened, that it was all a bad dream, and everything was as it was before.

There were not too many people at the meeting so everyone present ended up fitting in the rectangular arrangement of sofas. I was one of the first to arrive, and sat on one end of a four-seater sofa. Professor Bridour arrived soon after, and when I greeted him, came and sat next to me, talking to me more or less congenially. I too, tried to be conciliatory, making small talk about how it would indeed be better to have Professor Scotch read the paper and things of that sort. Another girl came in and sat on the other end of the four-seater sofa we were sitting on, so that there was a full space between this girl and Professor Bridour. Then Professor Goreripple entered the room. I remember turning around (since the sofa had its back towards the door) and greeting her. I believe that it was around this time that the move started.

That is to say, Professor Bridour pulled a move. It was the kind that men pull on women in whom they are interested, except that it was done in reverse in this case. Reverse or forward, the move is always significant: there is no accident in such moves.

There was a table full of food in front of us, and Professor Bridour leaned forward and reached out for some. He did this several times in a row. And each time he leaned forward, then returned to the seat, he inched away from me, so that by the sixth or seventh time, he was sitting a full seat away from me, next to the other girl. And I was sitting all alone.

Why? Because Professor Goreripple had come in?

All at once I remembered Professor Bridour's words:

We'll still have to work with Professor Scotch after you graduate. You have not considered our position.

Then it occurred to me: the one person with whom Professor Bridour works very closely is not Professor Scotch: it is Professor Goreripple. He must have been considering his own position with her. It was possible that he was being loyal to her in turning against me. Because I shall graduate, and I will be gone, but he will still have to work with Professor Goreripple. Professor Goreripple, known among the students in the Program as the master dissimulator of emotions (most common remark about her: "I don't know what she is thinking, I don't even know if she likes me.") must have communicated something to Professor Bridour so that somehow he had felt uncomfortable just sitting next to me in front of her. A chill went down my spine. And these were the very two people who would grade my work, the work into which I had put so much of my very being... I shuddered. The way that Professor Bridour was jumping on my throat about the most innocuous things before, it was obvious that they would try their best to discredit my final work on whatever grounds conceivable. My work, which to me was the most precious and significant achievement not only of my college years, but of my life thus far, was about to be sent to the slaughterhouse.

Then there was a practical matter to worry about: getting an excellent grade for the independent studies would be crucial for getting into the most competitive graduate schools, for they are very much concerned with one's ability to work independently.

I was like a detective solving her own eventual murder. She knows that she is targeted, but is helpless to stop the course of events.

I was in much pain that night and cried and cried. These people, who were supposed to help me, were out to punish me. They were fully poised to put me down any way they can. How did this happen? I was just doing my work, trying to do the best work I can, and to realize my dream of becoming a writer. How could I have gotten mixed up in so much political nonsense. Something had gone terribly wrong.

I began to relive every moment, trying to figure out what had gone wrong. Indeed, since that night, I have been reliving everything over and over again every night. That is one of the reasons why I have decided to write it all down. Because writing is the best remedy for a writer in distress.

When I went to see Professor Torres the next day to get his comments, he innocently enthused: Your paper is fantastic. It's brilliant. I can't see how they can ask for more. You should be happy. You are a great writer. What's really wonderful is that you have all these apparently disparate entities and you are able to make unique and

original connections. Whether or not these connections really exist is secondary to the matter. The thing is that you are able to see the connections, and that you are able to communicate what you see to your readers. This is an example of real thinking, and it's remarkable.

His kindly, comprehensive words made me burst into tears, for it contrasted so that I was simply overworked and that my nerves were on edge.

I handed in the two copies of the thesis on Friday, with a note asking them to e-mail me about when I can pick them up.

That weekend was a Memorial day weekend and I spent it with friends. Early afternoon on Tuesday, one of my French friends had called me, and I was chatting with her when I got another call. It was Professor Bridour. He was calling me to tell me that Professor Goreripple and he had decided to give me an A- for the paper. He said that it was "good," but there were all sorts of mechanical problems with it -- for example the footnotes were all wrong -- (apparently I had failed to put a comma after the name of the author in four or five instances -- out of 260 footnotes) and some of the arguments did not work, and that it was altogether too phantasmagoric. And you shouldn't have discussed Monica Lewinsky, he said, you absolutely can't mention Monica Lewinsky when you are discussing Madame Bovary -- it just isn't done. Not in the main text at any rate. You should know what you can and cannot do.

I was wondering why he was calling me at all. No teacher I ever had ever called me at home to give me my grade before.

He said that he had e-mailed me, but I had not responded. I told him that I did not have e-mail at home, that I usually went to the school library to check the messages. He said that he wanted to see me and go over my work "page by page" so he can tell me what was wrong with it.

The sky went yellow. I imagined him attacking me on every single comma, every single full stop, every single word, every single phrase, every single idea... even as he had tried to do during our last meeting on the matter concerning Professor Scotch. Had he not intimidated me so much that I had actually lied about giving Professor Scotch' copy to Professor Torres? How much more damage would he be able to do to my psyche concerning my own work! Indeed, it is always easy to ridicule and attack an original work, because part of what makes it original, is precisely that it is somewhat different from anything else that has gone before, and when something is different, it can always be pronounced: "and therefore wrong." In fact, the way the very polite Japanese people say that something is wrong, is to say that it is different. I thought of Mayakovsky being heckled and attacked by RAPP (Association of Proletarian Writers) in the Soviet

Union in 1928. In the end, his answers to heckling from the floor at public meetings were "often contradictory, even incoherent," just as my own responses to Professor Bridour's interrogation on Professor Scotch's copy of my work, had been. Indeed, I felt as if I had been under a subtle form of mental torture for some time. And this was not the early 20th century Soviet Union. This was almost-21st-century New York, the freest place in the world, the worldwide symbol of individuality as well as artistic and intellectual freedom.

Could you come tomorrow, or may be Thursday at 3:30? Professor Bridour asked. I told him that I was busy on both days. I remembered vaguely that I was really busy on Thursday, that there was some kind of an appointment that I had that day.

Then I remembered my French friend and told him that I had to go, at which point, he got angry that I would not spend more time on the phone with him when he had spent "twelve hours poring over my work." I could not help thinking "you mean twelve hours finding fault with my work," and got off the phone, after promising to get in touch with him later.

I decided to go to the school library to check the e-mail messages, and there I saw Professor Torres. His face dropped when I told him that they had only given me an A-. But your work was like an A++! he said. Then he printed out his letter for me (item 5) so that I would see how highly he had recommended it. He told me that if he were me, he would definitely appeal. He thought that I should also get in touch with my other readers, but I thought better of it: both Professor Compromesso and Professor Beautemps work closely with the Honors Program Chairpeople, and I did not want to cause any potential trouble between them. Indeed, I would soon be gone, but they would still have to continue to work together, as Professor Bridour put it.

The e-mail that Professor Bridour had sent me actually read: "Both Professor Goreripple and I have read your paper. We both feel it is a good paper. The final grade will be in the A range (perhaps an A-). I would like to meet with you about this paper and return it to you." I wondered whether he took the fact that I had not e-mailed him right away as another effrontery to their authority and had decided definitely on an A- when he called me on Tuesday. It was odd that he would insist on a meeting to explain the grade. It appeared that it was important to them that they convince me that my work was not up to par despite the glowing recommendation letters that I had received and the success that my writings have had all year. They had to cover up the "mistakes" they had made regarding the "publishability" of Ash Olympia and the merit of Art as Private Property by turning the table on anyone who had ever given Mirrors & Butterflies high praises, and making them wrong by giving the work an A-.

I finally remembered what I had to do on Thursday: I had to graduate. I was also supposed to go to the Spring Commencement Breakfast as one of the valedictorians. I was so stressed that I had almost forgotten all about it. Then I shook my head in wonder. He actually wanted me to go see him on the day of my graduation. Of course I cannot, I will be with my mother all day after the graduation. I started to e-mail him to that affect, when I had another idea. I would take my mother with me. With my mother there, hopefully he would not drag on the interview forever, page by page; with my mother there he would not be able to lash out at me unreasonably; with my mother there I would not be afraid of him. I really did not want to be left alone with this professor – by now he seemed like some kind of a monster to me.

I e-mailed him very politely asking him if I could bring my mother to the meeting with me on Thursday since it would be just after the commencement and we would be together. He could not very well say no.

My goal for our meeting was to remain calm and to say nothing. I told myself that I shall listen to his criticisms, make meticulous notes, and defend myself in writing later. To argue with him there and then would have been too much, and I was already worn out from the day. Indeed, I had not slept a wink the night before, worrying about the meeting, and was feeling more than a little woozy. I'm afraid I was reticent to the point of vexing him a little.

As may be expected, Professor Bridour did not seem entirely at ease during the interview, especially with my mother sitting there. He seemed particularly taken aback when I asked him if he might give me a written evaluation of my work, as had done all my readers. He said that he was "under no obligation" to do so. I pressed on, telling him that since his opinion differed so signally from that of my readers, it would be most useful for me as a writer to have a written record of it, and he responded by saying that it would be difficult for him to do so since he was "not an expert on content" of my work, notwithstanding the fact that it was he who graded it!

However I have gathered enough information to make the following analysis of Professor Bridour and Professor Goreripple's criticisms of my work for Hons. 781.91 Advanced Interdisciplinary Studies: Mirrors & Butterflies (enclosed as was submitted to the chair people of the Honors Program).

* * *

End of Part One.

