



THE PERENNIAL STUDENT





The Perennial Student

Associate Professor William Possum was looking for student Denise Witherspoon, this attractive, slightly overweight, moderately intelligent woman who was destroying his class. Denise had caused five angry letters, two dropouts, and a formal complaint that said she “made an evening of anticipated learning a dreadful experience.”

And it had gone farther than the classroom. Possum’s mentor and department chair, Alice Cherry, had made it clear she was “damn tired” of the “deteriorating” situation.

“She’s impossible,” Possum had countered, and he described Denise’s undeserved pride and unjust criticism of her fellow students.

Finally, in frustration, Possum had argued Denise should be dismissed. “Give her her money back,” he said. He was shocked at Cherry’s lack of understanding. Students paid good money and were entitled to their education, Cherry said. “This is an administrative problem. Talk to her!” Possum had to talk to Denise alone before she got to the classroom.

Possum waited inside the entrance hall of the ivy-coated building that housed the Departments of English and Computer Science. He had a direct view of the front, although he made sure those coming in could not make out his features in the shadow of the backlit, life-sized statue of the school’s founder.

Possum saw Denise entering through the left side of the twelve-foot oak doors. How innocent she looked. “Denise,” he called, “over here.” She squinted toward the sound of his voice.

“Will?” she said. All his other students respectfully called him Mr. Possum.

“Yes. Over here. Behind the statue. I need to talk to you.”

He had practiced word choice and phrasing. Now was the moment he’d been dreading. He guided Denise to the quietest corner of the foyer, next to a seven-foot corn plant and away from the flow of students arriving for the seven o’clock classes. He looked at her directly. The hot summer air seemed to press them together.

“Look, Denise. You have really made a contribution to the class.”

“Oh, thank you,” she interrupted. “That’s so cool.”

“Writing is sensitive business,” he started again.

“Only when you let it all hang out.”

“It’s not particularly an issue of hanging out.”

“You got to tell it like it is. Tell the truth.”

He tasted the first sourness of defeat. How could this mundane woman with her formidable convictions force him to feel so hopeless?

“I did not mean that we should not tell the truth. It is a question of adjusting to the sensitivity of the writer.”

“I know sensitivity. You teach us real good.” She smiled. “It’s all about no pain, no gain.”

Was she mocking him with her stare of excessive interest? He worried someone might overhear. My God, how she made him flounder under this silly corn plant, as awkward as an armadillo in a swimming pool.

“Each creative composition is so personal it makes a writer vulnerable,” he said.

She nodded in full agreement.

He decided to be direct. "I must ask you to be considerate of other class members in your comments."

She recoiled slightly, frowning. "Shutting me down?"

"No. Not 'shutting you down.' Just soften your comments."

She looked away. "You've had complaints, haven't you? Well, it's not fair for them to come down on me. They're not good writers."

"Just go a little easier on the approach."

"It's the men, isn't?" she asked.

Possum swallowed. "No. It's not just the men!"

Discrimination, he wondered? Was she thinking of filing a complaint? His tongue stuck to the dry roof of his mouth. Where was his carefully planned congenial discourse that would lead to an open exchange of ideas on common ground?

"I wish you . . . I mean we . . .," she seemed uncomfortable with her thought.

"Just try. Okay?"

--

Without a word she hustled away, the strap of her large carryall swaddled in the cleavage of her breasts. There were still ten minutes before class. She did not go up the spiral staircase that led to the classroom. She went to the rest room. She closed the door without looking at him. Even though to see him, she would have had to move her head in a breakneck quick twist to the right, he saw significance in the fact that she didn't look.

He worried their talk had been too short. He had wished for the slightest apology. And why go to the rest room? To relieve herself? She'd just arrived! Or had she been devastated? Of course not! Not Denise. And he had been extremely gentle. But he pictured

her in an emotional crisis, huddled in a stall with the sliding metal bolt on the door in the locked position.

In the classroom, Possum chatted with the other students and waited a few extra minutes beyond the hour for Denise to return. Finally he began without her. Ten minutes after class started, she entered. She was transformed--proud, demure, vulnerable, injured. She walked erect around the table to her chair holding her carryall and note pad until all the students' gazes were on her. No one spoke. Her lids were swollen. Her eyes rippled with the pinkness of a good cry. Her sweeping gaze of the room locked on Possum, unyielding. My pain caused by him, she did not need to say aloud. William Possum, cruel Associate Professor of English.

Possum got the class going again. Denise sat motionless and silent as the first two students read. The discussions were lively and informative. Possum relaxed a little. He may have lost a skirmish, but he felt he had won the war. Everyone, even Denise, had benefited. And Possum refused to worry about Denise's psyche. Denise was resilient. Even if in learning about herself she had been hurt a little, which Possum doubted, it wasn't as if she were going out to hang herself from a telephone pole. Maybe Alice Cherry had given him valuable advice.

Possum placed Denise's work on the bottom of the stack and silently prayed she would pass her turn to read. Her writing was terrible without exception. She had no concept of revision; a first write was a final product for her. She presented fragments of ideas that were totally unrelated as a finished story.

She loved to describe her work as spontaneous, insisting a lack of continuity among ideas was avant-garde. When asked what an incomprehensible paragraph meant, she said it was a "stream of consciousness," and she believed it jacked up the reader's need to discover

his own creativity. She simply ignored constructive criticism or argued the critic couldn't understand. In essence, critics were stupid.

But even worse, her tidbits about humanity were crude and offensive. She was fond of dildos, intercourse in impossible positions, snuff sex and the like. Dreadful, Possum thought. When she read her work, the class sank into a silence of the tomb.

After two hours, he came to the last manuscript for the evening. "Denise. Would you like to read?"

"Oh, yes."

Possum struggled to find some theme in her 4000-word manuscript. Incestuous longings acted out in amazing detail.

Possum interrupted before Denise finished. "Time's up." He thanked Denise for her contribution.

"Hey. I'll finish next class," she said.

--

Possum blamed himself. His inability to control Denise exposed his lack of teaching proficiency, and Denise had become a turning point in his career. He believed a full professor could handle Denise. She demanded both experience and the professorial talent that led to promotions. She was one of the difficult challenges that everyone must meet on life's road to a full professorship, and he refused to let her defeat him. He didn't cherish another conference with Alice Cherry, but he saw political advantage to keeping her involved. So he reluctantly asked her again for help.

"Maybe you need to explore the dynamics of your students," Cherry said.

"Dynamics?" Why did Cherry, a chairperson, give him such vague instructions?

"What makes them tick. Why you react as you do."

"Where do I do that?"

“Look to a professional. Someone with insight. Roger Ownings, maybe.”

So Possum invited Roger Ownings, the sociology teacher, for a beer and pizza at the local university pub. Roger was a long-time acquaintance and a man-about-town. “I’ve got a few things to talk about,” Possum had said.

“I must say,” Roger said after listening to Possum’s overview of the problem, “you seem fascinated by this Denise.”

Possum blushed and wished he had gone to a psychologist or a psychiatrist, although that would have required a two-hour drive to a bigger town. Clearly, Roger was untrained in these matters. And Cherry didn’t know Roger lusted after every good-looking female student in his classes. Thoroughly unprofessional. But Possum must do what Cherry required, so he told Roger the details of how Denise managed to humiliate and anger his students.

Roger listened. “You have a like for her, William. I can hear it.”

Possum suppressed his need to damn Roger’s advice. Try to see his point! he thought. But Roger was wrong.

“I do not have a like for her,” Possum said. “She ignores her lack of talent with total belief in her superiority. She has never taken one suggestion for improvement in her writing. She’s really irritating.”

“Well said, Possum. You’re crazy for her.”

“Stop it.” Possum wished he could leave gracefully. He had never realized how much he disliked Roger. “She has this cocky attitude. The worst I’ve ever seen,” he said.

“Correct me if I’m wrong,” said Roger. “I bet she’s young, well built, smiles widely with good teeth.”

“She’s overweight. She has absolutely no class. And she grins!” Denise loved to wear jean skirts to class, her soft flesh bulged over her waistband like bread dough

expanding over the edge of a baking pan. Her form fitting shirts displayed overripe breasts spilling over the limits of a bra that struggled to contain them. Her nipples were always visible through the sheer elastic fabric, and their erectile activity, Possum believed, was positive proof of her unchecked passion. He was chained to wonder when they would pop out again with determination and suggestion, flooding him with embarrassment he could not suppress.

“What does she say?” Roger asked.

“She crucifies the language,” Possum said in his lecturing tone. “Uses the ‘f’ word whenever she wants. And she is full of misinterpretations. She believes men who say ‘hello’ really mean, ‘Hi, let’s procreate.’”

“Let yourself go,” Roger said. “It’s fuck, William, not procreate.”

Possum sipped his beer, the liquid, bubbleless surface rippling from his tremor of anger. Roger refused to understand that Denise was destroying his career.

“Why don’t you just date her? Tell her to quit coming to class so you can have a legitimate friendship,” Roger said.

Possum leaned back aghast. “That’s the worst advice. I can’t date students. She’s ten years younger. I’m up for promotion.”

“She’s not a real student. Not an undergraduate. This is adult education. Noncredit.”

“I’m not attracted to students,” Possum insisted.

“You could get to know her outside of class. You don’t have to marry her.”

“She’s not my type.”

“It might be worth a try. You’re our most eligible bachelor.”

“You’re way off here, Roger. Way off.”

They sipped their beers in silence. A tune on the jukebox started and finished.

“Great looking babes don’t have problems in sociology. We get the unfortunate uglies with no appeal.”

“You haven’t listened to a word I’ve said.”

“Got to go, my man. But listen to old Roger. Give her a chance.”

“Roger,” Possum said, “everything is not about sex.”

“You’re wrong, William. Without sex the sun would never rise.”

--

The next day, Alice Cherry called an emergency meeting. An adult student, Maybelle Rather, had come to discuss Possum’s teaching skills, and Cherry wanted Possum there.

Maybelle Rather, who matriculated under the senior citizen’s discount rate, sat in Cherry’s office, her back as straight as a ruler. “I can’t stand anymore of her acid comments. Your class is a shambles, Mr. Possum; there is no organization. You return our stories two weeks late. And you refuse to curb that Denise person. She is beyond human courtesy. I don’t see how you can let her go on.”

Possum shuddered. “Please don’t give up,” he urged. “I’ll talk to her again. See if I can’t get her to temper her approach.”

Maybelle looked in doubt.

“Learning should be fun,” Cherry said vaguely, but Possum could tell she was angry.

“There is no enjoyment when that woman is around. And she never misses a class!”

Maybelle closed the door with a firm hand, and Alice Cherry turned to Possum.

“Why can’t you solve these student problems?”

“I talked to Denise.” He told her how it worked for most of one session. But that by the next session, she was right back to her insulting ways.

“What about Roger Ownings?”

Possum nodded. "He thought I should set up private meetings. Tutorials." He felt a twinge of guilt at his euphemism for Roger's suggestion of a date. "As an alternative to coming to class."

"Do it here in the department during the day. And keep me informed."

"Could someone else do it? Elsie or Harold?"

"You do it, William. You teach creative writing."

--

Denise was ecstatic about personal tutoring. Possum had been careful on the phone. He told her the class had continued to complain and, to please everyone, he thought that he should arrange special teaching sessions for her. He didn't fully agree with the class assessment, he said, but it seemed practical and, in addition, he could give her intensified instruction to help her writing. She agreed for sessions at 11:00 AM on Wednesdays.

She came dressed in a demure, white sleeveless dress and white flats. Her legs were bare and her skin glowed with perspiration. She had tied her hair back with a red ribbon. Possum thought the effect was a little childish and gave her the air of a farmyard maid.

"I think this is going to work out fine," Possum said.

"I want to write something really great."

"You're coming right along."

"The class is doing super. I mean, after our little talk and all. They're getting better."

"It's your education that is important to me," Possum said.

"You know, Will. You're a great teacher. You have what I like. With you everything is so . . . so big." She laughed.

Possum smiled through his apprehension of her crass double entendre. "Thanks. I think I know what you mean."

"Why did you say that? 'You think you know what I mean.'"

"I wasn't sure about the 'big' idea." He smiled weakly.

She moaned. It was as if he'd rubbed a brass vessel and some hostile genie had emerged in a vapor cloud. She pouted. She put on a petulant ingénue sort of look. "I know I'm not polished. No one knows what it's like."

"You're..."

"It's like I'm talking to stones or something."

"You do just fine," he said, but he feared to encourage her too much.

She looked on the verge of genuine tears. Suddenly Possum felt his resistance collapsing.

"That's pure shit," she said.

"No, Denise. You're making progress."

"The class zeros out. Whacko. They think I'm some fucking freak."

Possum handed her a Kleenex from his desk drawer. A few large tears rolled down the edge of her cheeks. Now he felt responsible for her pain.

"Why don't you read now," he said.

"You really want it?" she sniveled.

"Yes," he said. "Read to me."

She crossed her legs and her skirt slipped up her thigh. Slowly and deliberately she began to pulsate the free foot up and down.

"Read it all the way through. As we do in class."

She read, holding the manuscript in front of her and occasionally glancing over at Possum, who sat rigidly.

She had written a set of loosely connected scenes for the session. As she read, Possum took notes on a yellow lined legal pad. He dared not interrupt.

After twenty minutes she stopped abruptly. With her never-ending sewer of sexual exploits, Possum wasn't sure whether she had finished.

"It's good?" she asked after a long pause.

Possum swallowed and stared out the window for a second. "I like the character . . ."

"Buster?"

"No. The third one. Evan."

"You mean Sean."

"Yes, Sean. But I did think the rape of a nine-year-old was jarring. I didn't see his motivation. If it were my story, I'd make the rape victim older and not so empty, change it so it's not an act of random violence."

"But Will, men are brutal. It's universal, like you're always talking about."

"I believe it's important to use universal themes. But the good story shows a character by a logical progression of acts and thoughts." He prayed she might be receptive to instruction.

"He had a thought. He wanted to ram it too her."

Possum shifted, the chair seemed too small for him.

"Maybe the victim could be flushed out a little too. More detail and something about her feelings."

"She's a victim. Not a perp."

He felt he was on a steeply sloped tin roof in the rain and his rubber-soled shoes were slipping. "Well, enhancing the reader's knowledge about characters can make their victimization even more dramatic."

"You think this is all shit, don't you?"

"Not at all," Possum said quickly.

"Don't lie, Will. The class said the same thing. It's all just shit."

"You have a wonderful gift for detail."

"Don't dig for something good."

"You shouldn't feel down. Every writer has self doubt."

"Why don't you just shove it up your ass."

"Denise, I didn't mean . . ."

"I'm tired of fucking flatheads telling me what's good and what isn't."

"Please, Denise . . ."

"Fuck you." She was flushed. She picked up her manuscript that had fallen to the floor. Possum tried to help but she pushed him away.

"Denise . . ."

"I trusted you. You twerp."

She put her mechanical pencil in her purse, extended her middle finger, and stalked out.

"Please, Denise . . ."

--

That evening, it took Possum until bedtime to calm down. He analyzed every detail of the session as if he were searching through his office jar of mixed jellybeans for those with the red cherry flavor. But he could not find where he went wrong.

The next day he didn't hear from Denise, and each hour he agonized over his responsibility. Should he try to contact her? He decided not. She was too unreasonable.

Denise did not show at the four Wednesday sessions she was entitled to. He waited the entire hour each time. She didn't call. Possum saw no success in teaching at their last meeting, but he felt he had achieved a resolution to her disruptive class habits. Not a crisp resolution. But at least final.

He told Alice Cherry that Denise had dropped out. His creative writing class emerged into less chaos, as if the students savored the contrast of their tranquil Denise-deficient sessions. Then, the summer session was finally over.

--

Three weeks later, Alice Cherry called Possum to her office. "I don't like to have to tell you this, but your promotion was turned down by the committee."

Possum thought he'd been prepared for it, but the reality turned his interior into a vacuum. It was seconds before he could reply.

"Did that creative writing class thing have anything to do with it?"

"No. Not just that. All your evaluations are terrible. I get complaints about your classes raging out of control. Your publications are non-existent. I don't think you'll ever make it."

Cherry's attack was too strong. She must have some other reason for not supporting him. "I'll never give up," he said forcefully.

"And William . . ."

"Yes . . ."

"Here is a list of the registrants for the upcoming creative writing class." She handed a sheet with a column of names. "Get a grip on this one, okay?"

Now he was thinking Denise had sunk him. She was a teacher's worst nightmare.

Possum scanned the list, numb with the reality of his failure. Seventeen students. Alphabetically listed. His gaze froze at the very bottom, stuck on the name--"Witherspoon, Denise." My God!

Of course he was not totally surprised. She always signed up for everything. But how odd he felt, and he turned his head quickly away from Cherry. With his eyes closed, he searched the absurdity of this sea of dread that Denise's name brought on. And over that

vast expanse soared an albatross of expectation. He could not deny it; he was glad Denise was coming back.

He looked at Cherry who stared at him relentlessly. She had seen his albatross before. Would she ever let him be a professor of English?

“Do you want that Denise person in your class?” Cherry asked.

He considered his response carefully. “I can handle her,” he said.