Supposition Error: a novel

Prologue

FADE IN: a beach & ocean scene at sunset. Daylight quickly fades and northern constellations appear in the night sky. We see an ancient Greek sailing ship near the horizon.

Cue Commander North:

Cygnus, Draco, Ursa, Polaris—stars Men always steered by—now we sail among them in the endless expanse; now we join the eternal endeavour...

Scene pans upward to the sky, stars move towards the viewer, slowly at first, then faster. Screen fills with a moving starfield. Fanfare. Spaceship rises into view from below.

Voices of the Endeavour crew answer in unison:

We are the crew of the Union Altership Endeavour:
We Prosper the Peace, We Serve the Star Union, We Enter the Infinite...and Embrace It!

Play main title theme; roll main titles and credits. Spaceship streaks ahead and vanishes into the star field.

FADE OUT.

There are 95 old television episodes of Northstar in all, filmed between 1969 and 1974. I've seen each one at least ten times, a very conservative guess, so call it about a thousand times that I've seen the opening credits. There is a ninety-sixth episode I know of. It was never filmed but, in a sense, it too plays in endless rerun...

Let the teaser scene begin with the Big Three standing on some distant planet, out in the open on a barren hilltop, looking out over a dead inland sea the color of lead. They make a tempting target. Not for the first time or the last, I'll wonder why the captain always orders his key officers to take the dangerous landing missions, and then even more stupidly, he comes down to lead the group himself. I'd have supposed that in reality there'd be regulations against this sort of thing.

The man there playing the part of Commander North wasn't known for his acting skills, but, in a sense, he was born for this part.

“What’s keeping them?” this man with the commander’s bars and captain’s pins would ask.

“They’ve been scanning the planet long enough to spot us down here.”

“Our waiting for a possible confrontation is part of the Oskap’s ritual of final surrender to us, Captain, sir,” Tactical Sergeant Karpak would reply. “More than words, it matters to all Oskaps that the True Conqueror follows custom. Otherwise their act of surrender will not be valid. They will fight on until they find one who

Revised and Updated Version (2015)

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You’d think, in reality, there’d be regulations against this sort of thing.

The man there playing the part of Commander North isn’t known for his acting skills, but, in a sense, he was born for this part.

He turns to his alien companion, Tactical Sergeant Karpak.

“What’s keeping them? They’ve been scanning the planet long enough to spot us down here.”

The big Orionid furrows his brow, wrinkling dark skin beneath the already convoluted bony ridges of his high forehead.

“Our waiting for a possible fight is an Oskap ritual. It’s
will honor the forms and symbols.”

The big Orionid habitually furrowed his brow, wrinkling dark skin beneath the already convoluted bony ridges of his high forehead. “Shall we review your lines again?” the sergeant would ask his captain politely.

“Our captain knows the surrender ritual, Sergeant,” Lieutenant Savan would reply brusquely. With an IQ pushing 200, young Savan had qualified for Starcom academy when he was eight. Discrimination against age (high or low) was only an artifact of the twentieth century after all. Still, the kid had poor social skills, even by adolescent standards. Being outranked by a fourteen-year-old kid always bothered Karpak but the stoicism his people are famous for mostly kept him from showing it. The Orionid stood even straighter and fixed his eyes on the horizon.

Commander North’s uplink cylinder ba-beeped. He flicked out the antenna, thumbed the scramble-code key and answered the call from his ship. The executive officer’s feminine but business-like voice emerged from the uplink. “The Imperator’s ship is finally moving into missile range, sir,” she said.

“Acknowledged, Mister Ciccone. What about our transportal team?”

“They are monitoring your position and standing by with the cargo Gate, also as ordered. The only bad news so far is that Monty is still working on our port dissipation fields.”

“Understood, Commander. Tell the drivemaster to pick up the pace a little. Hold your planned positions and let the Imperator’s ship move into Gating range, unless of course it starts shooting at you.”

The man playing the part of the captain then would close his uplink and check his chronometer yet again, looking concerned. Let the teaser scene cut away and end thus: Back aboard the Union Altership Endeavour, Miguel “Monty” Lermontov would be cursing in three languages under his breath and wiping sweat from his right hand. His left hand—sweat-free prosthetic alloys and plastic—would probe the mess of burned circuits inside the field-control computer.

Several leads would chitter and spark where they’d been fused by leak-through charges from the enemy Oskaps’ last plasmmer bursts. Either Monty would find the two surviving connectors he needed to rig a bypass and charge up the dissipating fields manually, or the Oskaps would atomize Endeavour’s hull, if (or rather when) they should happen to change their mind about surrender and fire on her aft port quarter again.

So, probably, the drivemaster’s success or failure would affect the destiny of three quadrants, countless solar systems and five human colonies. A rather typical day, really...

the only way they know how to surrender, sir. The ritual must be followed. Otherwise they reject you as True Conqueror.

"Shall we review your lines again?"

"The commander knows the surrender ritual."

Lieutenant Savan’s voice broke a little. He’s maybe thirteen when this episode happens.

He had qualified for Starcom academy, with an IQ pushing 200, when he was eight. Age discrimination (high or low) was only an artifact of Earth culture, centuries dead now. Still, the kid had poor social skills, even by adolescent standards.

It bothers Karpak being outranked by this kid but his Orionid stoicism keeps him from showing it. He stands even straighter and fixes his eyes on the horizon.

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"Understood. Tell the drivemaster to pick up the pace a little. Hold your planned positions and let the Imperator's ship move into Gating range. Unless it starts shooting at you."

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Back aboard the Union Altership Endeavour, Miguel "Monty" Lermontov curses in three languages and wipes sweat from his right hand. His left hand—sweat-free prosthetic alloys and plastic—probes the mess of burned circuits inside the field-control computer.

Several leads spark where they’ve been damaged since the last battle that had defeated the Oskaps.

Either Monty will find the two surviving connectors he needs to rig a bypass and charge up the dissipating field manually, or the Oskaps will atomize Undertier’s hull, if (i.e. when) they happen to change their mind about surrender and fire on her aft-port quarter again.

So, the whole crew’s success or failure here will affect the destiny of three quadrants, countless solar systems and five human colonies.

A typical day, really.

Chapter ONE: Cast of Characters
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Nothing much depended upon the late 20th-century computers I once worked on myself, nothing at stake except a university career important to no one but me. My teaching style wasn’t that scintillating and students’ evaluations of me had been lukewarm at best. Nor could I publish article after article, and then recycle those as books, like Preston or Riley could. "Outstanding service to the department" was the only officially justifiable reason that I’d keep my job, even at a sorry little place like the University of Eastern Idaho English Department. The senior faculty knew it and rode me like a rocking horse:

"Dr. Bolton, could you help Dr. Winston out with the composition committee? We know Preston was supposed to, blast him, but he’s gone to a conference..." and

"Paul, we need two more questions for this year’s M.A. exam," and

"Could you drop what you’re doing and show the secretaries how to run the new budgeting program?" and on and on.

I’d been hired in the first place not so much for my literary talents as for my knowledge of computers, rare in an English department, as you might expect. My job was safe enough as long as I was the only one who knew how to install and troubleshoot a new video card and monitor, but just the same I didn’t dare risk offending anyone who might sit on my promotion committee later that year. But so help me, if and after I got tenure they could figure out how to change the ribbon in their printers or how to mail merge in LetterPerfect on their own.

That glad day would have still been at least a year away, as I sat behind the head secretary’s desk in the department office, sweating and swearing over the exposed and partially disassembled innards of her PC clone. Every twice in a while she’d appear in the door and ask me how much longer I’d be.

"Well, Sharon, it’s still hard to say." I replied, for the third time that hour, as pleasantly as I could manage. Offending senior faculty is risky, but to offend the head secretary—excuse me, I mean Executive Assistant to the Chair—well, let’s just say you’re better off cutting your own throat right then and there.

I had already guessed the most likely problem, and silently wished boils and hemorrhoids upon the arses of the schlocky electronics distributors that had usurped our low-bid state contract. Yet another hard drive we’d ordered from them was probably defective, but before I went through the bureaucratic hassle of

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"Well, Sharon, it’s still hard to say.” I resisted a harsher reply. Offending senior faculty is risky, but to offend the head secretary—excuse me, I mean
returning this one and ordering another through Purchasing, I was going to be sure, which meant checking the initialization routine, the SCSI connections and the throughput on the motherboard, all amidst interruptions by Sharon, plus every other chucklehead who came in to check their mailbox and had to know what I was doing. On top of these and worse, there was the laughter, a virtual uproar, coming from the classroom across the hall, which lately peaked and fell every thirty seconds or so. Somebody was really working a crowd over there.

Near the top of the hour the crowd noise ebbed somewhat, to a general hubbub, and spilled into my view in the hallway. After a moment the flood outside parted to reveal none other than Dr. Felix Preston. Besides old Dr. Schuyler who had lapsed, or as the local Mormons say, gone “inactive,” Preston was the only one of THEM now on the faculty, which made him an outsider two ways with the rest of us. Rumors circulated that he had never taken a formal literature course in his life; a Ph.D in linguistics rather than English literature, he had been hired to teach grammar, and medieval English, courses none of the rest of us would willingly touch. But all of the faculty were required to teach introductory literature, and so Preston also took his turn, in spite of his lack of credentials.

Oh, he quickly became conversant in the standard modes of criticism--but he also allowed students (and the rest of us suspected that he actively encouraged them) to interpret texts from their mutual Mormon background, even such progressively anti-religious authors as Blake, Kafka, or Twain, to find in them affirmations of their creeds, which seem ridiculous even by fundamentalist Christian standards, as rationally undemanding as those are. If non-Mormon students in his classes had complained, we might have made a case against him, and blocked or at least delayed his early tenure and promotion to associate professor over several other people’s heads, including mine. But in their evaluations students consistently praised his apparent pluralism.

Preston entered the department office packing some silvery blue sculpture under his arm, vaguely like a street lamp plus the jet-powered boomerang that had split it amidships. I recognized it on my double take, his model of the Union Altership Endeavour. He also had the familiar trefoil insignia pinned to his sweater. Normally both sat in his office on a shelf next to a plush Felix-the-cat, between an autographed photo of Lauren Bacall and another framed picture, a print of M.C. Escher’s Drawing Hands.

Preston peered into his mailbox, retrieved the Executive Assistant to the Chair--well, let’s just say you’re better off cutting your own throat right then and there.

I had already guessed that the most likely problem was the hard drive, another defective unit from a low-bid state contractor. But I needed to be sure before I went through the hassle of returning this one and ordering another from university bureaucrats. That meant checking the initialization routine, the USB connections and the throughput on the motherboard. This all had to happen between questions from Sharon, plus every other chucklehead who came in to check their mailbox and had to know what I was doing.

These questions were punctuated by laughter, a virtual uproar, coming from the classroom across the hall, which lately peaked and fell every thirty seconds or so. Somebody was really working a crowd over there.

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Preston peered into his mailbox, retrieved the university newsletter, his latest issue of MacUser (he wouldn’t think of using a cheaper PC clone like everyone else, oh no), and a couple of fat envelopes, no doubt correspondence with his publishers.

"Making progress on that PC, Bolton?"

"No, thanks you. Were you reenacting the 'Fertile Flatcat' episode in there or what?"

"Oh..., sorry about the noise." He slow-blinked once
university newsletter, his latest issue of MacUser (he wouldn’t think of using a cheaper PC clone like everyone else, oh no), and a couple of fat envelopes, no doubt correspondence with his publishers. "Making progress on that PC, Bolton?"

"No, thanks to you. Were you reenacting the 'Fertile Flatcat' episode in there or what?"

"Oh... sorry about the noise," he replied, then after a slow blink he looked at me for the first time since coming in. His dark eyes typically had a disconcerting far-away look, but just now he focused them sharply on me, equally disconcerting. I had suddenly become an interesting specimen. "No flatcats... but ah... if I’d known you were a Norther, I’d have invited you in to observe."

I had to admire Preston’s panache. With a straight face he would compare M*A*S*H to Shakespeare, Joyce’s Araby to Madonna’s Like a Prayer, or Tennyson’s Ulysses to the later Northstar films. I myself had been a dedicated Northstar fan, a hard-core Norther in fact, since I was seven. However, as a still-untenured assistant professor of English literature, a would-be guardian of cultured intelligence, I did my best to hide this from my colleagues: Northstar was not on the informal list of approved literary topics.

But Preston had caught me out with that flatcat remark.

Professors Sykes and Winston walked in for their mail too. Given that audience, I thought it best to take up the party line against him. "Since when is Northstar in the Intro-to-Literature text you’re supposed to be using?" I asked Preston critically.

Preston replied, "Well, we weren’t doing Northstar per se, just the psychoanalytic criticism section, you know, spotting Freudian symbolism and such. That material’s always good for a laugh or two with college students."

"All that sexual tension," Sykes broke in.

"Repression even, in the local Mormon students." Winston pointedly added over Sykes’ shoulder and then continued, uninvited as always, "The Oedipal conflict in Northstar is fairly obvious; consider Commander North’s usual dilemma, to follow Starcommand regulations, or act on his own better judgement; consider the quasi-incestuous undertones in Donna Ciccone’s mentorship of the young Lieutenant Savan; figuratively mother and son, they..."

"You mean you’re agreeing with me," Preston interrupted him in turn, "that the Northstar characters illustrate useful points in literary criticism." He said it looking directly at me though.

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"No flatcats... " He paused. "But if I’d known you were a Norther, I’d have invited you in to observe."

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"All that repressed libido," Sykes broke in.

"Particularly in the local Mormon students." Winston added. "The Oedipal conflict in Northstar is fairly obvious; consider Commander North’s usual dilemma, to follow Starcommand regulations, or act on his own better judgement..."

"You mean you’re agreeing with me, that the Northstar characters illustrate useful points in literary criticism."

Preston said this looking directly at me.

"Well...ah, the briefest mention."Winston lifted his nose a bit. "But why do you bring in that spaceship, Felix? There’s not a masculine symbol anywhere on the old Endeavour that I can see. Surely the Discovery from 2001 would be more appropriate, or if you must descend into mass culture, even Luke Skywalker’s
"Well...ah, the briefest mention I suppose, but why do you bring in that spaceship, Felix?" Winston said, lifting his nose a bit. "There's not a phallic symbol anywhere on the old Endeavour that I can see. Surely the Discovery from 2001 would be more appropriate, or if you must descend into mass culture, even Luke Skywalker's X-fighter and lightsaber better illustrate the phallic assault on outer space."

Winston was a pedantic old fart, but to his credit he detested Preston as much as anybody, and he was plainly having another go at cutting him down to a more comfortable size.

"Of course you're quite correct in that, Harry; our culture normally figures spacecraft as thrusting swords or club-like affairs, masculine icons all," Preston parried with a small smile, and then grinned widely as he countered, "and yet, the most successful design of all is this— and how jealously Paragon Pictures guards its copyright on it—the very non-phallic Endeavour here. It certainly poses an interesting puzzle for your standard psychoanalytic approach to science fiction, doesn't it?"

"Ah...well, yes, it bears some thought. More than, ah... your first-year students are probably capable of. Well I must be off. You have some time now to discuss your graduate seminar, Sandra?" Winston then motioned Sykes out of the office with him.

Winston knew he'd been touché, and at that time of day I suppose he wasn't up for prosecuting the match, not with the live opponent, and not without a couple of beers down anyway. Like me, Sandra would soon be up for promotion; no doubt she would presently humor Winston, her acting as a softer target for his practice responses.

Winston was a fool, though, for not taking Preston on then and there. Here he was hinting that he knew something as transcendent as the secret of Endeavour's magical, hypnotic design. He might as well have claimed he knew the location of some Philosopher's Stone, or the Holy Virgin's ticklish spots. Preston still stood there, with that grating smirk of his, absentely looking at the newsletter. I was on the verge of pressing him myself for his supposed insights when he broke into a wide grin.

"Hey, Bolton, speak of the devil! Did you see this?" He asked, waving the newsletter at me, which interrupted my train of thought.

X-fighter and lightsaber better illustrate the phallic assault on outer space."

"Of course you're quite correct in that, Harry; our culture normally figures spacecraft as thrusting swords or club-like affairs, masculine icons all..."

For a split second, I could picture Preston with figurative sword, batting aside Winston's weak attack, jamming his answer now, with a smile, into Winston's heart:

"and yet, the most culturally-compelling design of all spaceships is this— and how jealously Paragon Pictures guards its copyrights on it— the very non-phallic Endeavour here. It certainly poses an interesting puzzle for your standard psychoanalytic approach to science fiction, doesn't it, Harry?"

Winston only answered as he made his retreat. "Ah...well, yes, it bears some thought. More than, ah... your first-year students are probably capable of. Well I must be off. You have some time now to discuss your graduate seminar, Sandra?"

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"Does it look like I've had time?" I pointed at the hardware scattered across Sharon's desk. Still, I
"Does it look like I've had time?" I waved at the hardware scattered across Sharon's desk.

"Oh, yeah...well anyway, check it out," Preston said, pointing at the column of interest--

UEI PHYSICS PARTICIPATES IN INEL 'ALTERSPACE COMMUNICATION' TEST

John Stanton, Chair of the Department of Physics reports that the university's test reactor will be operated at its full 1000 watt capacity early next week, to help monitor the Idaho National Engineering Laboratory's ongoing directed neutrino emissions (DNE) tests.

Neutrinos are tiny, chargeless particles that can penetrate matter over great distances. Theoretically, particles produced 70 miles away by INEL's new proton collider should modulate the output of the UEI reactor at regular, detectable intervals.

According to Dr. Rupert Prakash, who will be monitoring the test here, "such tests may allow us one day to send signals directly to astronauts on the far side of the moon, or the other side of the Sun, which is now impossible with radio." UEI students and staff will be perfectly safe during the test. The university's reactor is buried in a shielded bunker thirty feet beneath the north campus lawn, next to the Physics building...

"Well, whoever wrote the headline is a dunce," I replied after scanning the article. "Neutrinos travel at the speed of light, the same as radio. Alterspace emissions travel thousands of times faster than light...er, I mean they're supposed to...in Northstar's universe. Nothing does in reality, you know."

"Yes, yes, but that's part of my point." Preston responded, making animated staccato gestures with his hands. "Here we have some university affairs staffer, who is obviously ignorant of Northstar, and yet she or he correctly sensed that this headline would grab attention to the article, and used the term in a sort of accurate sense anyway: a form of space communication more efficient, somehow, than radio."

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he correctly sensed that this headline would grab attention to the article, and used the term in a, well...sort of accurate sense anyway: a form of space communication more efficient, somehow, than radio."

"Sort of accurate?... It’s still wrong if you ask me, and I still don’t see what you’re getting at," I said, tapping my screwdriver on the desk irritably. "It’s still wrong if you ask me, and I still don’t see what you’re getting at."

"Does everyone who uses the phrase, ‘more in sorrow than in anger’ fully understand its original context?" Preston countered. "What I’m getting at is the way Northstar has so thoroughly soaked into our culture over the last twenty years; no other work of dramatic art since Shakespeare’s has had this kind of effect on the English vernacular. Surely a creation like that is worthy of our respect, if not our close analysis?"

Preston was really on a roll now; he snatched up his copy of MacUser and began flipping through it. "There’s bound to be something in here too... Here, look."

I suddenly envied Harry Winston his quick retreat, while I was trapped behind this desk. I looked at Preston’s magazine. He pointed to an ad for a computer upgrade circuit.

"Our accelerators boost performance to ALTERSPEED !!!" it boasted.

"There’s more." Preston leaned over and pointed again. "Check out the modem ad inside the back cover."

On the back of the magazine was a half-page, full color frame of a scene directly from Northstar, a standard shot of “The Three”: North, Savan, and Karpak, with old Doc Lazarus in the background, all of them stepping into the transportal frame, with this caption:

If only YOU could just "GATE OUT" for a hands-on interface with YOUR coworkers... The new InStyx® 3.0 is so fast and reliable, it’s just like going there in person, at the speed of light!

"O.K., so Northstar allusions make for effective ad copy. I’m sure these InStyx guys paid the Paragon Pictures people dearly for the privilege."

"No doubt they paid for the video frame." Preston replied, "but they didn’t pay anything extra for the

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"No doubt they paid for the video frame," Preston said, "but they didn’t pay anything extra for the phrase 'Gate out' in the sense of moving around, or for 'alterspeed' in the sense of being extra quick.

"Vocabulary like that slipped by their lawyers years ago into public domain, and they could never litigate every would-be infringement anyway."

"Like all those cheesy bumper stickers you see," I added. "GATE US OUT, MONTY--THE INHABITANTS ARE HOSTILE, and stuff like that."

"Exactly right," Preston pulled a dog-eared notebook out of his shirt pocket. "Anyway that makes three new
phrase 'Gate out' in the sense of moving around. And CodeCache Upgrades didn't pay Paragon a dime for 'alterspeed' in the sense of being extra quick. Vocabulary like that slipped by their lawyers years ago into public domain, and they could never litigate every would-be infraction anyway."

"Like all those cheesy bumper stickers you see, GATE US OUT, MONTY--THE INHABITANTS ARE HOSTILE, and stuff like that," I said.

"Exactly right," Preston replied, pulling a dog-eared notebook out of his shirt pocket. "Anyway that makes three new Northstar allusions so far, and the day is still young."

"Three what, when?"

"New uses of the old TV show's vernacular, especially appropriated vocabulary like we've just been talking about. It's a rare day that goes by without my finding at least one, on TV, or in print, or in passing conversation. Of course, here on a college campus it's almost too easy, what with students flashing the Oskap submission gesture at each other, saying they used 'Elven sense' to survive exams written by 'butthead' professors and the like. If I don't get one then Dana Cooper usually does, on any given day. We're collecting them with an eye to co-authoring a paper on it."

Looking back, I rather wish Preston hadn't started talking about his graduate assistant, Dana Cooper just then. If he hadn't, I might've let myself off with something vaguely complimentary about his project. But on top of the rest of the morning's frustrations, this wore through my already-threadbare civility, the idea that even the graduate students around here would get published before I did. Two conference papers I had given in the last couple of years sat in my word processor, much revised but still unpublished. Frankly I was blocked and didn't like writing much to begin with, a surprisingly common affliction among English professors, something we carefully hide from our writing students. So I threw it all back in Preston's face.

"Doesn't it bother your wife, your hanging out with pretty young graduate students, or have you mainstream Mormons taken up polygamy too...again?"

That brought Preston up short. "Ah, no, we haven't...yet, but I'm afraid Ms. Cooper wouldn't be...eligible for that arrangement in any case; she's not a member of the Church."

"And you couldn't charm her into joining? I hear your missionary service is especially expert at persuading young ladies. You spent two years in South America doing it yourself didn't you? Surely you haven't forgotten how?"

"Not that you'd approve if I did." Preston again wore that meek smile, the same one he'd given Winston before figuratively stabbing him.

"Of course not. You step out on your wife, that's your business. But professors who sleep with their students are the lowest form of life in my book."

"Be careful who you say that to, Paul. It's been known..."
a member of the Church."

"And you couldn't charm her into joining? I hear your missionary service is especially expert at persuading young ladies. You spent two years in South America doing it yourself didn't you? Surely you haven't forgotten how?"

"I take it you wouldn't approve if I did?" he asked, with another deceptively meek smile, the same that he'd used on Winston.

"Of course not. You step out on your wife, that's your business. But professors who sleep with their students are the lowest form of life in my book."

"Indeed? Well, be careful who you say that to, Paul. It's known to happen around here; somebody might be offended. So...I'll let you get back to work now...ah, sorry for interrupting you. Oh and...good luck with that bad hard drive," he said with final emphasis.

Preston gathered up his fan mail and model and made his exit.

I spent several minutes congratulating myself on getting the best of him for a change, as I reassembled Sharon's machine. She reappeared just then, like clockwork.

"How much longer will you be?"

"Almost done, Sharon, but you're going to have to get by with floppy disks; the hard drive definitely was the problem." Funny, I couldn't remember telling Preston that, though...I might not be as indispensable as I thought, but since he was already tenured he could refuse to do chores like ... then I cursed myself, out loud, I guess, because Sharon jumped back, a shade more pale than before. "Paul!... Did you break something else? How long will it take to fix it now?"

"No, I...no, the computer's okay. Forget it...and pardon my French. Just give me a few more minutes and I'll be out of your hair."

I'd forgotten that Preston was senior faculty now. Easy to do, since he had been hired two years after I was. Finally here I was up for tenure too, and I'd gone out of my way to slur the religion and the private
to happen around here; somebody might be offended. So...I'll let you get back to work now...ah, sorry for interrupting. Good luck with that bad hard drive."

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"How much longer will you be?"

"Almost done, Sharon, but you'll have to use the computer in the chair's office; the hard drive here definitely is the problem."

Funny, I couldn't remember telling Preston that, though... I might not be as indispensable as I thought, but since he was already tenured he could refuse to do chores like ... then I cursed myself, out loud, I guess, because Sharon jumped back, a shade more pale than before.

"Paul!... Did you break something else?"

"No. Forget it. Just give me a few more minutes and I'll be out of your hair."

I'd forgotten that Preston was senior faculty now. Easy to do, since he had been hired two years after I was. And I'd just gone out of my way to slur the religion and the private morals of someone who would probably have a say in whether I'd keep my job.

It was past noon now. I went upstairs and headed down the long hall towards my office. Looking ahead I saw none other than Dana Cooper waiting by my door. That semester Cooper had sat in the back row of my seminar on genre theory, but only for a week. When she had participated in class discussion, it was just to make trouble, demanding to know the point of my lectures long before the class was over, to know why writing theorists write such unreadable articles, and such like. Then she dropped the class.

She and Preston thus vied for first place on my personal wish-they-were-dead list. She had made herself Preston's de facto apprentice, taking every upper-division class he taught. His tutoring methods were apparently more her style.

Not a beauty exactly, but as grad students go Cooper
morals of someone who would probably have a say in whether I’d keep my job.

It was past noon when I turned the last screw on Sharon’s machine, booted it with a floppy, packed my tools and got out of there. I went upstairs and headed down the long hall towards my office. Looking ahead I saw none other than Dana Cooper waiting by my door. That semester Cooper sat in the back row of my seminar on genre theory, required of all graduate students; she almost never contributed to class discussion, but when she did it was to make trouble, demanding to know the point of my lectures long before the class was over, to know why writing theorists write such unreadable articles, and such like. She and Preston thus vied for first place on my personal wish-they-were-dead list, which was only appropriate, since she had made herself Preston’s de facto apprentice, taking every upper-division class he taught, with independent study credits on top of that. His tutoring methods were apparently more her style.

Not a beauty exactly, but as grad students go Cooper was prettier than most, with her part-time swimming instructor’s figure. Her hair was naturally on the auburn side of red, but lately she’d had it blonde and not quite shoulder-length, a Madonna-wannabe. Both archetypes matched her reputation: she was a bit shopworn, or such had been her reputation anyway. In the first two years of her M.A. program, she was said to have dated and bedded every available male grad student, some undergrads, and even a couple of professors. In her second year, Dana wrote a very promising master’s thesis, a model piece of feminist criticism Sandra Sykes had said, which fairly roasted T.S. Eliot, that old misogynist, over a slow flame.

Dana was admitted to our doctoral program then, and fell under the influence of Preston shortly thereafter, to everyone’s disappointment, having abandoned literature and feminism for linguistic analyses of discourse, and even, heaven help her, popular culture. A year later she had stopped headlining or even making appearances at the unofficial department beer busts; nobody saw her at the local pubs anymore either. Naturally we suspected Preston’s influence.

was prettier than most, with her part-time swimming instructor’s figure. Her hair was naturally on the auburn side of red, but lately she’d had it blonde and not quite shoulder-length. People used to say that blondes have more fun, but Dana Cooper was not fun anymore.

For the first two years of her M.A. program, she was a regular participant at unofficial department beer parties. Near the end of that second year, Dana wrote a promising master’s thesis, a model piece of feminist criticism Sandra Sykes had said.

She was admitted to our doctoral program then, and fell under the influence of Preston shortly thereafter, to everyone’s disappointment, having abandoned literature and feminism for linguistic analyses of discourse, and even, heaven help her, popular culture. She stopped coming to the parties. She was never seen anymore at local pubs with other students or professors.

Naturally we suspected Preston’s corrupting influence.