

Eleanor realized only much later that Professor Tseng's nickname had suggested the strategy she eventually adopted. Not consciously, but unmistakably, not decisively, but decidedly. And she had felt so creative and cunning, so original! And yet she had been influenced under the hum of her thoughts by a simple nickname and its associations.

One warm February Day, with temperatures in the 60s just a single day after a blizzard that loaded shovels in the morning then melted into optimism in the afternoon, she arrived at Professor Tseng's office to find him pouring brandy into a Dixie cup the color of a fresh pea. "I've been saving this bottle for over twenty years for the right occasion," he growled. "Today is the day."

The college had just been notified that Dean Cooper had been struck with a heart attack and dropped dead. Eleanor had never before seen someone drinking to another man's death.

Professor Tseng's nickname stemmed from an elaborate tattoo on his back, of a tiger. Its paw was raised in menace, and the claws could be seen above his collar if he leaned over. When he was intoxicated, a state in which he could be witnessed at the occasional departmental party, she had seen him take off his shirt to show the whole expanse of it, which was an impressive sight. No matter how inebriated, he never was heard to speak of where the tattoo was administered, or why. Thus, the students referred to him as "Tiger Tseng."

"I have been an indentured servant for all these years," Tseng continued. His real first name was Artemus and he had invited Eleanor to call him by his first name several times. This was customary for grad students like Eleanor, yet she was acutely aware of a consistent low undercurrent of sexual interest on his part, always present and unspoken like a disfigurement. Tseng was very careful of the line that had to be avoided – he had been chastised harshly for crossing that line with a prior grad assistant and now he practiced the line every day, practiced stepping as close as he could without trespassing.

The administrator who had rebuked him for his prior transgressions was Associate Dean Poe, who was now the Dean as of dawn that morning, and thus Eleanor was doubly surprised of her mentor's glee.

"Simon is a bastard, but he is honest and scrupulous. He is not arbitrary or devious. He will never make me sell out or cooperate with something that shames me. And if he is not chosen to be the permanent Dean, the memories will disappear. No one new will ever be able to have a hold on me. I am now a free man, Eleanor, bound only by my long-suffering conscience. And that is why I celebrate the death of Dean Cooper."

Poe also had a nickname among the grad students and the old-line faculty: Poe the Puritan.

Eleanor suspected that Tseng, when it came to her, was engaged in a lengthy, patient campaign to come to fruition when her career at this school was over. When her defense was done and her thesis approved, when the dissertation committee accepted her document and sent it to be archived, when she attended her first conference as a newly-minted Assistant Professor working for some place not yet dreamt, she expected to see him appear at the same conference and show her some moves. This had happened to her friend Hina a year ago, though Hina had not succumbed to the charms.

"I have already made an appointment with Coach Cremoni," Tseng continued. "He is the first and most important person whose hold on me died this morning. I will tell him that I am now a free man and his players can start studying or drop my course because there will be no more of what Cooper forced me to do. I am nothing if not a generous man – I will let any of them drop the class even now, no questions asked, even though it is far past the deadline, as you know. I am nothing if not a generous man."

Eleanor thought about Dr Cooper, the wife of the Dean, who was a beloved member of the Nursing faculty, even pitied for both the harsh personality and the philandering of her husband. Now he was at peace and she was in pieces. Now Dr Cooper would raise three spoiled teenagers by herself, and try to pay for a two-income lifestyle with one salary, while some of her colleagues would take subtle vengeance on her, for past actions of her husband that they had

been afraid to repay in person. They would not recognize this as the source of this or that petty meanness to the widow – each small revenge would be clinically rationalized.

“I wish I could be there to see his face when you tell him,” Eleanor heard her lips saying.

She thought that Tseng would be likely to consent to this, all part of the slow plan to bed her when their supervisory relationship was over and it would not be harassment. She also knew that she was exploiting this scheme of his for her own gain, and felt guilt. She doubted that Tseng even knew that he bestowed any particular little favor on her for any special reason.

For certain, he did not know that she had spent the night with one of Coach Cremoni’s players, and that this player was one of those in his class, and one of those whose academic fate would be far grimmer if he was to stand or fall on his knowledge rather than the former Dean’s extortion on his behalf. They had spent the night in the dorm room of a friend of hers who was an RA. Eleanor had emerged disheveled and confused and wondering how she would face her friend again. It had not been the first or the fifth time she had been with this player, whose name was Raymond. It had been the first and only time they would use the RA’s room.

“Coach Cremoni agreed to meet with me Wednesday, after the service. I will enjoy thinking about him spending his morning at the chapel, wondering why I am not there and what is in store. You would be most welcome at that meeting, as a witness to keep everything above board. Wednesday at 11 o’clock.”

Raymond’s game that night was nationally televised, and the team won handily over a tough league opponent. Eleanor watched the entire game on the big-screen TV in the lounge in the grad dorms. At one point she got up to use the ladies’ room and a student from Museum Studies had changed the channel to the six-part miniseries on the evolution of the sophet. Eleanor snarled the interloper away and changed back in time to see Raymond take a seat on the bench, in foul trouble. Late in the game when the opponent started to close the gap, Raymond made a three-point basket that demoralized the other team, and the camera cut to the

cheerleaders. The cameraman seemed to linger particularly on the little redhead who Raymond admitted to sleeping with, when Eleanor had confronted him the week before with the gossip she'd picked up from a writing tutor. Could the camera crew possibly know there was a connection between one specific cheerleader and one specific guard? The redhead was also the prettiest, so it could be coincidence. On the giant screen the girl looked almost large as life in the cushioned nineties mulberry of the lounge. The commentator mentioned that the team would be a high seed in the league tournament and was expected to receive an at-large bid to March Madness even if they did not win the league. Eleanor was not sure what an at-large bid was, but from conversations with Raymond she knew it was very desirable.

Later, Eleanor parked where she knew the team bus would let off. She wore only a beige raincoat, her favorite tight red capris, and red flip-flops. It was a chilly drizzly night and she shivered as she waited, wondering if the team had stopped at a bar or strip club on the way from the arena. When the bus moaned to a stop, Raymond was the last to step off, and his eyes met hers as soon as he stepped into the dark – she felt like he saw her before he even saw the ground.

They spent some time in Eleanor's car before speaking much; once there was time to talk Eleanor gave him a beer from a cooler she had bought that morning. Technically Raymond could not buy his own beer though there was not a bar or liquor store in the county that would think about carding him, even some where the bartender might know Raymond's age more precisely than his own mother's. Earlier, Eleanor had tried to educate Raymond about micro-brews, Asian beers, lambics. Eleanor's parents had never touched a drop of alcohol in her sight, and Eleanor treated each drink like a book, to be lingered over and absorbed. Raymond was still in a phase where each drink was merely an installment and he preferred the brands for which he could imagine someday being in their commercial.

"You have to do me a solid in your class," Raymond said after drinking half of his first bottle. Eleanor had a weird fleeting sensation that both of them simultaneously believed they were bestowing sexual favors on the other for some ulterior motive. This was illogical; only one of them could be the bestower and the other had to be the bestowee.

“That’s my job, of course. I help all the students in my class.”

“You know what I mean. Coach said that there’s a chance we won’t get special tests in the Tiger’s class. Something about somebody who dropped dead this morning.”

“The Dean.” Raymond understood the concept of a Dean about as well as Eleanor understood the concept of a pick-and-roll – i.e., both were aware of the construct and felt some anxiety about not understanding it better.

“Yeah, him. If anything changes about that you have to help me. I can’t risk anything stopping me from going to March Madness.”

“I have been thinking about that,” she said. “It can’t be anything crude, because he sees everything. We would never get away with it. But I may have a way to make him think he decided to keep helping you out.”

“Whatever. I trust your plans. I just got to go to the Tournament.”

Eleanor gazed at the window and was aware at the same time of the reflection of her body in the glass, the dim shapes of other cars seen through the window, and the rain limned dimensions of the window itself.

“Will you stay overnight if you go to the tournament?”

He guffawed. “It won’t be played here. That’s what’s great about it, it’s a real event. If we win the first game we’ll be there for a whole week, like a real team. No sneaking back for dorm check-ins or philosophy quizzes.”

“Will the cheerleaders stay the whole week, too?”

“Except for the ones who are studying for their LSATs. Of course they will. What, are you worried about Tamara? I’ve never hidden anything about her, and I never said we were going steady. It’s not 1960.”

“I know. I never said I was exclusive either.”

Raymond tipped his beer to that thought gallantly with an edge of mockery.

“Did you spend time with her today?”

“There’s no time at a normal game. There’s no time for anything – you go there and you practice and you play and then you go home. That’s what is so great about a weekend – you

have time for the other stuff like a real person. I'm not just talking about girls, you know – it's the whole feeling of it.”

Eleanor sifted through a few responses she was considering but the rain was calming and she drifted for a while, not asleep but not occupied in her mind. She began to feel cold – Raymond was sound asleep and had dropped his empty bottle on her coat. She arranged a semblance of decency and drove him back to the athlete's dorm.

Dr Tseng actually had some subtle incense smoldering in his office during his summit with Coach Cremoni. The coach did not comment on this or seem curious, apparently believing the incense was some sort of tribute to the departed. Eleanor, knowing it wasn't that at all, wondered.

The harsh news was delivered without harsh words – Coach was intelligent enough to have guessed that Tseng would no longer assist with the cheating. The coach, tall with gray hair, cut military style, paced around the uncluttered space while the professor sat as still as a book, and Eleanor began to worry that she would never have an opportunity to speak. Had Tseng expressed or evinced any impatience whatsoever, the coach might have left without protesting, but given enough time he finally spoke some objection.

“It's not right to cut the guys off all at once,” he argued. “I've always heard that you're very fair. OK, the athletes are going to have to perform in your class from now on with no privileges. I agree that's fair – with enough notice. But to go there so suddenly with no warning is not right.”

“My midterm is two weeks from now,” Tseng stated quietly. “That's enough time to prepare for a test.”

“No one is prepared for a test until they've taken a test, Doctor, you know that. Even the smartest of my players is going to need one test to burn, you might say, because they have not had any chance to get used to it. Don't forget, none of these players invented this system. This

predates them and even predates me. We can all adjust because we're winners, but we need more than just the first test."

"I don't give drop tests," said Tseng.

"Perhaps you would be willing to take your time grading the midterm?" the coach suggested. "if the grades aren't in till after the tournament, it won't affect the players."

"I believe that would be a waste of everyone's time," was Tseng's response.

"If I could suggest something," Eleanor interrupted. Tseng did not turn his head but Cremoni stared at her intently, with an expression as though he was watching a talking statue. "Perhaps Dr Tseng would be willing to provide one special test, just one. The rest of the players would take the same test as the other students in the class. But there would be just that slight compromise of mercy from a total change."

"But miss, that's still unfair to the rest of the players. How can I pick just one to survive this test?"

"It would be random. That's my proposal anyway. So it would be fair. All the players would have an equal chance at the special test, but each would have to prepare nonetheless for a real test. All would need to be prepared but then one, and only one, would be spared."

Cremoni crossed his arms over his chest. "It doesn't seem like very much. Are you even willing to do that?" he asked Tseng.

Tseng nodded slowly. "I did not plan to offer any mercy, but the small measure that Eleanor suggests is acceptable to me. Certainly no more." Cremoni was silent, and a moment later Tseng spoke again. "I believe the situation has been described with completeness and mutual respect. We have no more to say to each other."

The coach went on his way and Eleanor wondered if Tseng would comment about the proposal, something approving or something complaining that she had exposed him. But instead, Tseng retrieved a text they had been analyzing together for his research, and they got to work.

There were eight basketball players in Tseng's course, and thirty regular students. Two of the basketball players dropped the course the first week, but the others had only twelve credits so they could not drop a class and yet remain full-time. By the Friday before the midterm, a third student had lined up a soft touch in the History department for an independent study past the deadline, and that student dropped Tseng's class as well.

One of the remaining student-athletes caught swine flu and though it was a mild case that only last three days, the school had adopted a policy that semester to encourage infectious people to stay home, and Tseng was forced to arrange for a makeup. He scowled and walked a complete circuit around the campus after this bitter concession. A fifth player broke his leg in a nonleague game and once he knew he was out for the season, he lost interest in Tseng's class. A sixth player adopted the most unusual strategy of all. This player, a sophomore, decided for unexplained reasons to attend a workshop about Rhodes scholarships, and for the first time realized that he currently had straight As. Coach Cremoni cultivated a certain haughty indifference toward grades that his players were happy to adopt regardless of their native intelligence. The sixth player thus acquired a fixation with the idea of winning a Rhodes scholarship. He came to Eleanor several times for special help but it was clear to her that once he had actually started studying he knew the material thoroughly and he was in little danger of a poor grade on the midterm. Raymond described to her in disgust how this other player had abandoned their usual amusements and now spent all his time studying for various midterms. This studying behavior was described by Raymond as one would describe something exotic like cliff diving or walking on coals.

That night, after their usual entertainment, Eleanor asked Raymond if he wanted to study. He said he did not. "You said there's gonna be one special test, right? Who would you give it to except me?"

"I won't be able to give it to anyone. It will be shuffled in with all the tests we will give to the players. I told Professor Tseng it would be random and I can't lie to him. Anyway, the tests

will all be in their own envelopes. The envelopes will all be identical. If I put a mark on one, Tseng will see it.”

“There’s only a couple guys left who need the test. Me and Tayshaun and Ennis. Ennis barely needs it any more.”

“No, Ennis will be getting an A, he doesn’t need the special test.”

“So, ‘K, me and Tayshaun. You could give me a little signal so I know which envelope is my test.”

She chuckled. “Isn’t Tayshaun your friend?”

“It’s not about friendship. I got to go to March Madness, I’m telling you!”

So to encourage him, Eleanor asked him what it would be like. Raymond was a junior, but the team hadn’t qualified the year before and as a freshman he hadn’t played much and wasn’t included in the revelry. He described where they would eat, the social events, the excitement of the game or games, the media coverage. Many of the vignettes involved some sort of female attention, from hot reporters, interested hospitality workers, fans, attractive alumni, and of course cheerleaders, not only Tamara but cheerleaders from other teams that noticed him even though their own players were right there.

“Do you still plan to spending time with Tamara?”

“Hell, maybe she don’t like me any more. I haven’t even talked to her in a week. Maybe she won’t have me? But there are other cheerleaders, and other girls. It isn’t about spending time with one particular girl there.”

“So you’re sure you’re going to spend time with girls there?”

Raymond grinned. “Ask me no questions and I’ll tell you no lies.”

But she did ask again, and he asked her why she never thought about anything else. So she changed the subject and prodded him to talk about how he first decided to ask her out.

“Well, you know, you’re so hot, and smart, too. I’m not smart but I like a smart girl. I like that you’re a little older, you’re sophisticated.”

“But I mean, how did you decide to ask me on a date?”

He sighed, humoring her. “Well, I know that girl you know Teresa, you know the girl from Math. She was my tutor two years ago. I was looking for her and I found her in the grad lounge. And you were there and I asked Teresa where you were. And that was that!”

Eleanor heard the rain starting up again outside the window, which was open a crack. It sounded like someone drumming his fingers, maybe an assassin.

“I thought you asked Teresa who I was.”

“That’s what I said.”

“No, you said you asked her *where* I was. I thought you said you asked her who I was. Which one is it?”

“Girl, it was weeks ago! Women with their details. How do I remember what exactly I said? I don’t remember every word.”

“Where or who matters a lot. It makes it a completely different question. You ask where someone is if you already know about them and don’t know what they look like. You ask who someone is if you like how they look and want to learn about them.”

“Do you want me to leave?” he asked. “You said you won’t even give me a signal, so what do I have to lose?”

“I don’t want you to leave,” she said. She asked him no more questions.

A while later when he was asleep and she was awake, she wondered to the accompaniment of the rain why she even cared if he was with other girls. She harbored no images of her and Raymond together years into the future or even months or even weeks. She told herself it should make no difference whatsoever if he went to March Madness or what he did there. She adjusted her thoughts to align with this good sense, rearranging her mental furniture like Tangrams.

The players were not the only students stressing about the Tiger’s midterm. When she first arrived at the library after dinner for her own research, some of the advanced students were

holding a loud study group in one of the community study rooms and waved to her as she passed. Their group broke up around seven but two hours later Eleanor stumbled across Ennis and two girls who had seen her after almost every class agonizing over some philosophical detail. The three undergraduates were silently highlighting one of the assigned texts, concentrating grimly on the task like monks illuminating a Bible. Eleanor spoke to them for a few minutes about the relative effectiveness of highlighting compared to almost anything else and they hung on her words like converts. She left the library at fifteen past midnight and passed Tayshaun, who asked if she had seen Ennis, desperation in his face.

When she arrived at Dr Tseng's classroom the next morning to prepare the room, she saw a handful of commuters who had arrived early and now pored over photocopies of each other's notes, each gray page looking as unintelligible as ancient scrolls. The whole room smelled of strong coffee and shampoo.

Eleanor opened her briefcase and looked at the stack of manila envelopes. She had lied to Raymond, of course; she was fully capable of marking one of the envelopes in a way that Tseng would not notice, and she had done so. She separated the envelopes into two stacks with the special test on top of one of the stacks, so she could control who got which just by which stack she chose to deal from – if she wished.

Tseng arrived with five minutes before the exam to find all but four of the students in their places. Eleanor had already arranged them in alternate rows and instructed them to leave their bookbags against the side wall. Tseng looked at Eleanor's briefcase and then settled heavily behind his desk, booting his laptop. "The special test is on the second pile?" he asked in a low voice. She nodded, keeping an eye on the classroom to ensure that none of the students were watching their conversation. "When the players take a test, let them choose the pile. Don't hand them the test."

She nodded again. She noticed Ennis looking over his notes and mentally decided that he didn't count since he didn't need the special test. The deal with Coach Cremoni applied to students who needed the special test. That left Raymond and Tayshaun. If Raymond arrived first, he would get his choice of piles.

“Professor, should I text the missing students and remind them that no one will get a test after the first student has finished?”

He chuckled. “It seems like coddling to me. They aren’t children. But do what you want.”

She hastily typed out a text to the four students unaccounted for, reminding them about the policy but also throwing in a reminder of the policy against leaving the room to get a drink of water. Most students had water bottles or Red Bull on their desks already and many had coffee or tea, but the basketball players in Tseng’s class rarely did because they had not heretofore felt that kind of pressure during a test. She looked up at Ennis’ desk and saw that he had a venti Starbucks – he had cast his lot with the studiers. She looked down and hit “send”, knowing that Raymond rarely read his texts and Tayshaun always did. But even having done this, she was aware of a burnished voice in her heart that wanted Tayshaun to arrive first and leave Raymond and her with no choices.

The students lined up at the signal and accepted their envelopes from Eleanor, one by one. Two of the erstwhile absentees arrived during this ceremony. When both of these were seated, Eleanor was left with two envelopes only, one in each pile. Tseng never printed spares but always instructed Eleanor to make exactly as many copies as students who were expected. The room fell very silent, aside from furtive scratching, the businesslike flipping of pages, and some sounds from a student in the back who grunted every time he shifted in his seat, and shifted in his seat every time he started a new question.

After ten minutes a blonde in an inside-out sweatshirt came up to Eleanor to ask a stupid question. Eleanor triaged her and Tseng looked on approvingly as the girl returned to her seat. Eleanor noticed that Raymond had finally arrived – he slapped hands with a couple of the other students as he hung his coat over one of the empty chairs.

As he walked to the instructor’s desk, Eleanor experienced a strange warm feeling, an ozone of possibilities, an ammonia mist of power, and it wasn’t necessarily pleasant, feeling like she had opened a pigeonhole to find a cavern behind it. She considered turning the envelopes over and shuffling the two tests so she would not know which was which and there would be no

decision to make about whether to signal Raymond and toward which version. She would just shrug helplessly when he was at the briefcase. But it was clear she would be seen if she rearranged the envelopes, and thus she easily cast aside all excuses and opportunities for avoidance and readied herself to act deliberately and with full will. She beamed in Raymond's direction.

Raymond approached Dr Tseng's desk with an expression halfway between a smirk and a leer. He carried nothing with him but a pen and a pack of gum; if he had been studying, he had left his textbook in his dorm. Dr Tseng did not look up, but continued at his computer, occasionally instructing it with some impatient gesture that looked like an incantation. Eleanor saw Tayshaun appear at the door of the classroom, and notice his teammate at the desk, and sit down near the front. He, likewise, had only writing implements with him, though he had two pens instead of one. And a bottled water the size of a fire extinguisher. Tayshaun had a crestfallen expression as if, in just a single glance, he had absorbed the entirety, that he knew that Raymond and Eleanor had been lovers (that would not surprise Eleanor in the least, as Raymond seemed unaware of the concept of discretion), that he knew Eleanor really did know which test was the special one (had Tayshaun been this savvy about academics he could have spared himself from the danger, as Ennis did) and that he assumed she would steer the good test to Raymond (but if Tayshaun assumed that he was foolish, for how could he know what Eleanor would do before she had even decided?)

When Raymond was right at the desk, Eleanor crossed her legs, right over left. She noticed with satisfaction how good her legs looked and she did nothing when her skirt slipped down to nearly the top of her thigh. Twenty-five years old and she still had the legs of a teenager. She kicked her foot slightly and her flat came off her heel though the toe of the shoe stayed on. With her shoe dangling from her foot, she kicked in the direction of the envelope that was to her left, Raymond's right. He winked at her as though the professor was not just distracted but blind, and took the test she had indicated. When he sat down at his seat, she winked back, though his head was down and he didn't see.