

## The Irascible Pedagogue

It was the year 1881. Lilith, like many of her female friends and acquaintances, felt that with the onset of the suffrage movement, perhaps women would be allowed to have a new, welcome sense of freedom. Unbeknownst to Lilith the right to vote would be far in the future; in fact, the passage of the 19th Amendment did not become law until 1920.

Lilith, I would later learn to my distress, was not naive; she understood that women of a certain age and disposition had finally begun to seize well-deserved rights. The nascent movement gave her a giddy sense of liberation. She must have mused that perhaps females were finding a place in the world beyond the oppressive domain of men, and I expect she felt heartened by that thought. Maybe this newly discovered freedom is what caused her, on that first lonely evening, to partially undress in front of her bedroom window--with the curtain open, naturally. The only one who witnessed this most indelicate disrobing wasn't her carefree and dull husband, James, who was at a Grange Hall meeting in this frontier area in the heart of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. No, indeed no, she reserved this silent exposure for me, a bachelor pedagogue and her former fiancé.

My name is Horace Nelson, or as I always instructed my pupils to call me, Professor Nelson. I lived directly up the hill from Lilith in a small, but tidy yellow clapboard house. It was

## The Irascible Pedagogue

apparent to all who knew the exacting details of our former relationship that I had built this house on the crest of the hill overlooking her farmstead not out of indifference but out of a sense of spite. After many long decades I can admit to myself that yes, that was the case. I suspect that Lilith might have candidly admitted to herself--with some minor reservations, mind you--that she had thrown me off, the rather ill-suited pedagogue, for her future husband, James. In truth, I believe that Lilith was impressed by his very pastoral and profitable farm and that she did not see herself as mercenary, but perhaps more as practical.

I am certain that in the immediate distance she could see my shadowy silhouette, standing there in the smoky kerosene lamplight of my stark bedroom, and felt my uncomfortable stare as if I were committing a nefarious act of some sort. This temptress--she probably laughed out loud to herself; I recall, as if it were yesterday, that as she stood facing my window, the only illumination was from the eerie harvest moon, which seemed to drift around her comely visage like an errant cloud. Lilith let one strap of her rose-colored chemise drift off her shoulder, revealing her full, round breast. "Horace, look and be aroused," I could almost hear her say. She turned away in what I thought was a deliberate sensuous display, her back to the window, and blew out the lamp, as if extinguishing not only the light but my immediate temptations as well.

Late autumn, James was at another "meeting" and had left her alone, as was often the case. In the flickering lamplight Lilith taunted me again, as if amused by my deepest longings. Shamelessly, she turned away seductively from the window and in the dim light stepped out of her chemise. She must have thought that the gentle curve of her hips and the small of her back might entice even me, a stolid man, to warm emotion, and some inner need must have compelled her to do so--leaving me bereft and breathless and having to quench my own carnal desire.

## The Irascible Pedagogue

She and James, like myself, had only oil lamps in this rugged area of the Northwoods; no, I had to imagine her in the dim lamplight augmented softly by the faltering sliver of moon. She must have imagined, and rightfully so, that I stared in a sort of awe, trying to envisage what would come next, and over an agonizing period of months she revealed to me more than I could have ever craved. Toward winter, one moonless evening I gazed at her in the dim light of the Aladdin lamp as she slowly undressed; she closed the curtain as if she were turning the page in an alluring French novel. She then doused the sensuous flickering lamp. I am sure Lilith, felt aroused and that perhaps any man would have also; the smell of musk, intoxicating; alone--but I am certain in her mind, not alone. She must have sighed, as women in these times were wont to do.

Looking back in time, I was comfortably in my early thirties when I escorted Lilith to that disastrous dance at the Grange Hall. She had been the brightest student I had ever instructed in the one-room schoolhouse. But perhaps that really wasn't much to be admired, as many of the local students were dolts and would only be suitable fodder for the destitute farms and logging camps in this rugged land. Regardless, the beautiful and intelligent Lilith was an exception and made up for the sundry others I was required to instruct. She had wished to read *Les Misérables* in French, a request that required a significant effort and fortuitously allowed us to engage in private after-school tutorials. She was an able student and easily advanced. Like the coming of an electrical storm, we would casually touch, all in the manner of educational pursuit, of course. That is until she reached for my hand one day, and as she applied her lips to my angular face, Lilith, astonishingly, placed my hand on her right breast. I quickly retracted my hand, flummoxed. "Lilith, we must not," I said nervously. "Unless, and until, we become engaged."

## The Irascible Pedagogue

“I really don’t see that as necessary,” she said matter-of-factly. “But I will agree, at least for the time being.”

And that was how it all began. I gave her a ring, which, I related patiently to her, was not an engagement ring but a possible sign of my future intentions--after a suitable period of time. At least that was what I inferred. Lilith expressed, with some unhappiness, that she felt I had left her in a quandary, not clear of what I intended. The calamitous dance came later.

On the Saturday of the dance, out of the corner of my eye I quietly watched her sip a cup of punch--sans alcohol, as the Grange Hall encouraged the temperance movement sweeping the country. I cringed as a fiddler scratched out an off-key waltz by Strauss.

She was just sixteen and had recently finished her education at the schoolhouse where I was the sole teacher, although I much preferred the title professor. She had hoped to matriculate to a university in lower Michigan, an admirable and lofty desire, I thought, for a poor country girl raised in this desolate back woods. I hadn’t encouraged her, not because she wasn’t bright enough; no, that wasn’t the case at all. It was my unsaid intention to marry her, and a lofty degree of some sort was not needed for matrimony and the bearing of children.

I admitted, but only to myself, that marriage was necessary to eliminate the stain of expulsion that had occurred at Yale. I shuddered, remembering the formal charge of immoral turpitude with a very young and precocious lass, the daughter of my headmaster. The charge finished my career. This blemish, that is what I silently called it, was the cause of my downfall as a budding professor of French Literature and my subsequent inability to obtain a professorship anywhere in the country. I knew my banishment was a rebuke that I could only cure by demonstrating strict moral behavior--and marrying the young and lovely Lilith would be my first step back to civilization and redemption. Furthermore I looked forward to returning to proper

## The Irascible Pedagogue

society, and to the time when I would no longer have to endure the intellectual wasteland of the Upper Peninsula of Michigan.

“Would you dance with me please?” Lilith cooed. “I so love Strauss, don’t you, Horace?”

She wore a charming blue dress that fit her pleasant form nicely; tasteful. I thought at the time that she was without guile and false pretensions. My impressions would change later. Lilith told me that she thought that I was almost gallant for a starched collar pedagogue. This seemed a rather backhanded compliment. At the time I was tall and dark, both in countenance and manner.

She laughed, perhaps comically. “You remind me somewhat of Ichabod Crane, the antihero of Washington Irving’s classic short story.”

Picturing that black-garbed scarecrow of a schoolmaster, I felt offended. Still, I could see her point.

“A dance, please?” she asked.

“I’m really a poor example of proper footwork, two left feet,” I replied. I was aware that Deacon Elwood Martin, from the Evangelical Lutheran Church, was present, and that this stoic parishioner frowned on dancing of any sort. Elwood was also the president of the school board such as it was in this illiterate county and so I chose to not have a conflict with him, I always refrained from controversy if possible. “Sorry, Lilith.”

Deacon Martin would later become my nemesis, but that was later.

“I will have to find another partner then,” she remarked coyly.

“As you please, my dear. After all, it is only a dance.”

I was to realize later that my words were more than fateful.

Despite accepting the ring, I had given her, she danced, and she danced, with a young man named James--a handsome, displaced Irishman who grew tons of potatoes on his fertile

## The Irascible Pedagogue

farm. I desperately wanted to rebuke Lilith, but had no chance. She left the dance with James, and my fate was sealed. Lilith married James in the following spring. She never gave the ring back, which I decided resentfully was part of the female character.

Lilith must have felt, a year after her marriage and the subsequent death of her young infant, that time parcels out opportunities begrudgingly. In my own life I have come to the conclusion that what initially looks like a boon, often over time is revealed as a bane. The world is dark and barbaric as Deacon Martin suggested in many of his sermons--we could not afford a parson willing to take a charge in this desolate county--so I felt compelled to listen to his inarticulate ramblings. Though Deacon Elwood was my junior by slight years he always fostered a paternalistic attitude toward me which I found particularly irritating and condescending. I have come to the conclusion that most dabbling poets and simpleminded deacons deliver pabulum only fit for the likes of children.

I knew from gossip that James, though purportedly a patient and loving man, drank to excess. After the end of his long days in the potato and hay fields, he would harness up his buggy and head to the local tavern, several miles down the road. From my porch window I was able to observe that James rarely came home early, unless, I assume, it was to grope her like a mating bull, which I am sure Lilith found unacceptable.

Once a month he attended the Grange Hall meetings and was, as far as I knew, a competent officer, though I later found out that his "meetings" were really romantic liaisons with a female in the organization. The following year Lilith confided to a mutual neighbor that she had come to accept the sterility of her marriage and, ironically, of her husband as well, as no

## The Irascible Pedagogue

other children graced their household. From my vantage point on the crest of the hill, I was delighted, certain that Lilith felt gentle stirring for me that she could not easily resolve.

At the time of her marriage, I had been gravely wounded and embarrassed by Lilith's public rejection, and although the two of us never spoke I grieved, certain that she should have been betrothed to me, and that I had been betrayed. As if in almost direct opposition to Lilith's marriage to James, I resolved to be wedded to the wretched northern wilderness, angrily giving up entirely my dream to regain decent society in the east. I was later to regret this decision.

I can't extinguish a night that is branded into my brain, as if a hot poker seared my very flesh. Through the curtainless window I stared in disgust as James, drunk I suppose, ripped Lilith's chemise from her slight-frame. At first, she seemed to resist, but later, perhaps in quiet defiance of her husband, Lilith appeared to return his forced desire with a sense of intimate, but violent sensual pleasure. I remain revolted both by her husband's crude advances and later, by Lilith's worldly response.

As time wore on, perhaps she experienced a seething anger, and that is what impelled her to return partially naked to her bedroom window. Over a period of several months, she seductively undressed for me in the dimming light. This seduction was almost a sequential affair, as initially she would only show one breast, which filled my senses for months like a smoldering ember. In truth, I coveted what James so cavalierly cast aside. As time went by, I ached--later she would uncover both breasts before dousing the lamp.

In my mind I could almost hear her whisperings: "Horace, come watch. I am still capable of quenching the fire of your loins." I imagined she said these words softly in French to my shadow up the hill. Unable to divert my eyes, I felt obsessed with diametrically opposing

## The Irascible Pedagogue

feelings. I harbored both a need for diminution of my pleasurable longings and at the same time I felt a sense of repulsive guilt. Why did I covet her so? To this day I wonder.

Sometimes the raw passage of time resolves issues of the heart; and sometimes not. Gradually I became infected with the inflammation of jealousy, which was not assuaged by either time or the subtle growing carnal desire I felt for Lilith. It was not pleasure that inhabited my mind, but anger and ultimately, jealous outrage. For a brief period, Lilith suspended her ecdysiast display, which drove me further to despair. Later, after several months of modest propriety she again returned to her window and resumed her wanton displays, I deeply suspected for my benefit. This vacillation between her seemingly need for vulgar display and on the other a need to seem discreetly virtuous drove my mind, like a raging torrent, between covet and craven disgust at her depravity.

While I hadn't initially quite wanted her, had she not been promised to me? Chosen *me*? Was she not taunting *me*, revealing her all to *me*? I believed that she was my lover, even though this desire had never been consummated. In retrospect, the situation of all involved might have been predictable, as the jealousy that I felt was putrefying and spreading--an infection I harbored like an untreatable disease, a building craze that I seemed incapable of reversing. One night, as James staggered drunk out of the tavern, I attacked him with my cane. The cudgel cracked his skull like a broken melon, and horrified I gazed down on my own baseness. He survived; an invalid. A crowd gathered at the scene, and I was promptly arrested and later tried for attempted murder. Deacon Elwood Martin testified at my trial that I had a flawed character as I had on occasion questioned the sanctity of holy communion; which as an agnostic was accurate but hardly a worthwhile argument in a legal proceeding. While this religious indictment seemed inconsequential to me it seemed relevant to the mostly pious jury of uneducated dullards. I was

## The Irascible Pedagogue

found guilty and received a sentence of twenty years of hard labor with a possible chance of parole--given good behavior.

James, or what remained of the broken man, required a lengthy hospitalization. He was later confined to bed in their homestead, where he lapsed into a permanent coma and had to be ministered to night and day by Lilith.

While in solitary confinement, I was later told by a guard that her invalid husband lay unconscious in the marital bed near the window. One might hope that this was the ending of this traumatic triad, but that was not the case. For after a long period, perhaps two years or more, Lilith, exhausted by her role as a constant and obligatory caregiver, informed his doctor that James had passed. My silent speculation to this day is that she had smothered James with a pillow. She remained mute at the inquest, and the coroner ruled that her husband's final demise probably resulted from injuries from my vicious attack.

Lilith sold the profitable farm for cash, a most propitious move, considering that the entire farm economy collapsed in the Panic of 1893. She sailed for France shortly after settling her affairs.

Already incarcerated, I was tried for a second time and this time found guilty of first-degree murder. As a result, I was sentenced to life in prison at hard labor without any chance of parole. I only know the truth of Lilith's heartfelt confession of her husband's murder from a letter I received from one of her former lovers. According to this monsieur she had passed quietly in the town of Giverny, France, in 1897, twelve years after her husband's untimely demise at her own hands. Later, producing the damning letter to the court, implicating Lilith in her husband's death, I would argue vehemently for a retrial but was refused.

## The Irascible Pedagogue

I still possess this lover's letter, as if in describing her state of mind I am able to exhume a work of buried art. This letter, evidently a promise monsieur had made to Lilith shortly before her death, often keeps me awake at night in my dank cell. Lilith confided to him that she hoped the letter, a confession of sorts, might exonerate me for the death of her uncouth husband, for whom she had felt nothing but scorn.

The monsieur confided that Lilith had resided in relative comfort in Giverny, the robust city of the great artist Monet and other famous French Impressionists. According to him, she was a frequent and welcome guest in homes of this influential group, and her gaiety and joie de vivre were highly regarded by her friends and associates. This monsieur wrote longingly of Lilith, a mutual feeling I admit I still carry, relating that Lilith was a most admired model and contributed to many artistic works. He wrote with a sense of passion, a deep and abiding longing, I presume. This man related that Lilith contributed mainly by modeling as a nude--of course, what else was I to assume? And that she had even posed for the likes of Degas and several other famous artists. Unfortunately, he lamented she had recently died from complications related to syphilis and was buried, per her request, without ceremony in the town cemetery in Giverny.

I suppose the notorious nature of my crime, featured in the state's only prominent paper, the *Detroit Free Press*, captured the salacious interests of its readers. As I lay rotting in my prison cell, a village sprang up around the old schoolhouse where I had formerly taught, a putrid curse of sorts, as the village became known as Nelson, for my now-infamous surname. Now in advanced years, I garden for the warden, flowers, yes flowers, many roses which fill my days and bring some small comfort.

In the prison darkness, sometimes when the diaphanous moonlight filters through the iron bars of my cell, I think I see Lilith's visage as she steps out of her nightgown--and I weep.